



# Investment in Language Learning: an Investigation of Iranian EFL Learners' Perspectives

語言學習投資研究: 以伊朗英語學習者的觀點為例

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## Abstract

The qualitative study presented in this paper uses the construct of investment, developed by Norton from the mid-1990s, to interpret data obtained from English language learners in Iran. Through the qualitative analyses, it examines the underlying factors that affect Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' investment in learning English. Semi-structured interviews, which allowed for deep exploration of the learners' investment, were conducted with 20 male and female EFL learners. The data indicated that Iranian EFL learners valued English due to the economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital that this language could bring for them. The findings also revealed that Iranian EFL learners could have a higher level of investment in language learning if some discouraging factors in the process of language learning were eliminated or changed for the better. The article argues for the significance of understanding EFL learners' investment in language learning in the classroom. Pedagogical implications of the study are discussed, and some suggestions are made for future research.

## 摘要

本文以Norton在1990年代中期提出的語言投資理論為基礎，使用質性研究方法分析伊朗英語學習者的數據。筆者首先對20名男性和女性外語學習者進行半結構式訪談，旨在深入探索學習者的語言投資。並透過質性分析，研究影響伊朗英語學習者投資學習的潛在因素。研究數據顯示，伊朗外語學習者之所以重視英語學習，是因為他們相信英文可以促進自身之經濟資本、文化資本、社會資本與符號資本四種優勢的發展。研究結果還表明，如果能夠消除或改變語言學習過程中的一些阻礙，伊朗英語學習者將願意提高在語言學習方面的投資。本研究結果支持外語學習者在課堂上對語言學習投資的重要性。文章最後討論了研究之相關教學意涵，並對未來的研究提出了一些建議。

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This study is a part of first author's dissertation.

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## Introduction

Norton Peirce [32] argues that a language learner's identity is shifting, multiple, and a matter of struggle. Understanding identity as a dynamic concept has resulted in introducing the closely interrelated construct of investment in language learning which implies the learners' commitment to learning a second language (L2) and incorporates their imagined identities, hopes for the future, interest in practices of a language class or community, and ensuing improvement in language learning [27].

The construct of investment in language learning was proposed by Norton Peirce [32] in her research on adult immigrant L2 learners in Canada in place of the psychological construct of motivation. In her study, Norton Peirce [32] complemented the notions of motivation in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) [28] and argued that the psychological construct of motivation is insufficient to clarify how a learner may be highly motivated, but may nevertheless be resistant to opportunities of speaking in contexts where he/she experiences inequality. According to Norton [27], a student may be highly motivated to learn a language, but if the practices of the classroom or community are racist, discriminatory, sexist, or homophobic, or if the learner is positioned as unworthy or incapable, he/she may have little investment in those practices and make little progress in language learning. On the contrary, if the learners can claim legitimate positions in these learning contexts, they are able to invest in learning [3].

The construct of investment has a significant place in applied linguistics since it reflects the socially and historically constructed relationship between the language learner's identity and commitment to learning [4]. Hence, further research in this regard is essential to reveal the impacts of the learners' investment on their L2 identity construction and language learning.

Drawing on the construct of investment developed by Norton Peirce [32], researchers have investigated the sociocultural nature of language learning in relation to identities in different situations (e.g., [5, 31, 34–36]). However, there is still a dearth of research that uses this construct to explore language learning in EFL contexts. Considering this point, we aim to conduct research on investment among Iranian English language learners to capture an image of their investment in English language learning.

## Literature Review

### General Understandings of the Construct of Investment

Informed by poststructuralist theories of identity, Norton Peirce developed the construct of investment, in opposition to motivation, to better appreciate the relationship between language learner identity and learning commitment [21, 32]. Whereas motivation is known as a psychological construct [8] and has originated from the field of social psychology [3],

investment is considered in a poststructuralist and sociological framework and makes a meaningful relationship between the learners' aspirations and commitment to language learning and their continual shifting identity [29].

As Darvin [3] states, motivation research deals with individual differences such as learning style, language aptitude, and ability for self-regulation; however, investment takes language learning as a social practice and considers the performance of multiple identities, the negotiation of linguistic and cultural capital, and the enactment of an individual's agency [3]. Although these two constructs have different epistemological concerns, they are theoretically complementary and enrich each other, and the point they have in common is their interest in recognizing the extent to which L2 learners commit to learning [3].

In her research, Norton Peirce [32] criticized the reductionist, binary, either-or approach to the study of motivation in individual learners. She believed that it is not true to say that motivation is a character trait of the learner and that those learners who do not succeed in learning an L2 do not display sufficient commitment to the learning process [24]. Moreover, she argued that the psychological theories of motivation did not consider the intricate and complex identities of the language learners and did not make a meaningful relationship between the learners' variable desires and commitment to language learning and their shifting identities [24].

According to Darvin and Norton [5], motivation is known as a unitary, coherent, fixed, and ahistorical "personality" which classifies the learners based on the traditional dichotomies of the learner (good/bad, anxious/confident, introvert/extrovert, motivated/unmotivated). The inequitable relations of power the learners negotiate in different situations are not recognized comprehensively in these theories [21, 32]. Skilton-Sylvester [35] also argues that these theories do not consider the complex relations of the learners' changing identities, the context of the classroom, the social contexts of the learners' lives, and their cultural experiences. Based on these arguments, Norton and Toohey [30] state that the question of "To what extent is the learner motivated to learn the target language?" should be complemented by the instructor with "What is the learner's investment in the language practices of this classroom?" (p. 421).

In contrast to Dornyei and Otto's [10] process model of L2 motivation that organized sequences of action into preactional, actional, and postactional levels, Norton [21, 24] considered investment as nonsequential and changing across various contexts of power. In other words, the learners have different investment or involvement in diverse contexts, and the extent of the learner's investment in L2 and claiming legitimacy as speakers is based on the dynamic negotiation of power in various fields. Moreover, investment is different from instrumental motivation in that investment is not restricted to the learner's desire to obtain a tangible reward. In fact, this construct considers how learners invest in their learning when they engage in different social interactions and try to find material and symbolic resources [3]. Norton states that the learners invest in learning the target language if it results in achieving a greater value of material (capital goods, real estate, money) and symbolic advantages (language, education, friendship) that will raise the value of their social power and cultural capital [27]. The learner's cultural capital enrichment can result in the re-evaluation of their understanding of themselves, their identities, and various chances for the future [25].

Different endeavors were made to explore language learners' investment in language learning in various contexts. For example, McKay and Wong [19] utilized investment as the main construct to study the language development of four Mandarin-speaking students at a

school in California. They explored the degree to which the learners invested in the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Findings indicated that different skills had different degrees of importance for the learners and that they invested differently in those skills based on the values given to them.

Drawing on the work of Norton Peirce [32], Skilton-Sylvester [35] investigated the experiences of four Cambodian women in English as a second language (ESL) programs in the USA. The findings demonstrated that the learners' shifting identities at home and work and the ways these identities were related to the classroom activities affected their investment in participating in ESL programs.

In another study, Lee [15] drew on Norton's [23] conceptualization of motivation as investment to investigate how a Korean international MA student's motivation theorized as investment influenced her English language development, learning strategies, and L2 communication. Using data obtained through ethnographic emic interviews, Lee examined how this student's investment assisted her in gaining legitimate peripheral participation in academic and non-academic contexts. The participant's investment and strong desires to acquire English were significantly effective not only in her learning strategies but also in her identity construction as a legitimate member of the American society and of various communities within it.

Norton developed her early theories of investment in the 1990s. However, in the past two decades, globalization, advancements in technology, and shifts in the global economic order have revolutionized the social world dramatically. Therefore, Darwin and Norton constructed a new model of investment in 2015 by taking into account the requests of a more fluid, changing, and mobile world [4]. In the following section, this model is briefly explained.

## **Globalization and Technology in the Twenty-First Century and Developments in Investment**

In the 2015 model of investment, Darwin and Norton drew on the theoretical advances, which appeared since the construct of investment had been developed and placed investment at the intersection of the three elements of identity, capital, and ideology (see Fig. 1) to provide information on how structures of power function, and present a better understanding of the opportunities for L2 learners to practice agency [7]. Recognizing how L2 learners claim their right to speak was the other purpose of the expanded model.

Considering the point that the 2015 model's principal interest is in the greater appreciation of the connections between identity, capital, and ideology and the vital circumstances for language learners to invest in the language and literacy practices of the classroom, it can be argued that this model can provide a more complete investigation of the relationship between identity, investment, and L2 learning [4, 5].

Based on the 2015 model of investment, the learners have the agency and power to invest in specific practices since they desire to achieve particular material or symbolic resources. They also recognize that their already available capital can function as affordances, rather than constraints, to their learning. The appreciation of the learner's capital confirms their identity. Their identity, in turn, makes them legitimate speakers in numerous learning contexts [4]. The value of a learner's economic, social, or cultural capital shifts across time and place. This value is probably affected, but not entirely restricted, by the ideologies of various fields or groups [26].



Fig. 1 Darwin and Norton's 2015 model of investment [4]

Drawing on the expanded model of investment, Norton [26] attempted to show the ways in which this model could be influential in issues on learning English in the international arena. The new model helped her to improve the analysis of the research she had done with English language learners in Iran, Pakistan, Canada, and Uganda. Findings indicated that English language learners' imagined identity was that of an international multilingual citizenry in which individuals were informed about other nations and tried to find cooperation across borders. This imagined identity was more complex in some countries like Canada. The findings also demonstrated that the benefit of learning English for all the learners was increasing their cultural, social, and economic capital and that it could provide a brighter future for them. However, the capital which the students already possessed did not always function as affordances to their learning. Norton [26] recommended language teachers to make use of the capital that the learners already possess and employ it as resources for their learning.

In a recent study, Darwin [3] reported a brief case study of an immigrant high school student, John, learning ESL in Canada. He discussed how the two theoretical tools of motivation and investment could be employed to approach this case in different ways. He believed that different questions could be posed for such a case by considering these two theoretical approaches. A sample of these questions can be seen in Table 1.

Considering the point that few studies have been conducted on investment in languages other than English (LOTE) learning contexts, Lu, He, and Shen [16] drew on the model of language learning investment to examine LOTE students' learning motivation in a Chinese foreign studies university among a group of 35 second-year undergraduates (9 Hindi majors, 11 Persian majors, and 15 Thai majors) from three LOTE programs. They intended to investigate the reasons why these LOTE learners invested/did not invest in learning their target language(s). Based on their analysis of observation and semi-structured interview data, the researchers found that although the majority of the participants were involuntary applicants at the beginning, they invested in their target language learning since they had adequate affordances (resources relevant to LOTE learning), perceived sufficient benefits (economic, cultural, or social ones attainable through the LOTE learning), and/or identified themselves as legitimate

**Table 1** A comparison of investment and motivation [3]

Investment	Motivation
What material and symbolic resources does John want to acquire by learning English? [21, 24]	What are John's integrative and instrumental motivations to learn English? [11]
To what extent is John invested in the language practices of his classroom and his community? [21, 24]	How do the teacher, the curriculum and the learner group play a facilitative, neutral or inhibitory role in John's L2 learning? [18]
In what way do the material conditions of John's lived existence shape his investment in learning? What conditions of power in different learning contexts shape his investment? [4, 21, 24]	What cultural and historical contexts have shaped John's identity and his motivation for learning English? [38]
What imagined communities does John want to be part of? How does this imagined identity enable him to invest in learning an L2? [14, 22]	What are John's ideal and ought-to selves that shape his motivation? [9]
Under what conditions can John claim the right to speak? In what way should he reframe his identity so that he can claim a more powerful position? [21, 24]	What psychological, linguistic and communicative variables would influence John's willingness to communicate? [17]

speakers of the target language(s). The findings also indicated that the students were demotivated to invest in learning their target language(s) and simply tried to accomplish their program demand(s) when they lacked affordances, perceived few benefits, or even when they were devalued by the in-context ideologies. According to Lu, He, and Shen [16], to help LOTE learners become motivated in their target language investment, teachers should attempt to find out about the capital the students already have since it can subsequently be changed into capital for investment in learning the target language.

Investment is known as a construct which recognizes language learning as a social practice [7]. The investigation of learner (and teacher) investment and its connection to identity, capital, and ideology can be helpful in shaping language education policy [6]. From an empirical perspective, relatively little is known about Iranian EFL learners' investment in learning and how it affects their language learning practices. Taking this point into consideration, the present study employed a qualitative approach to examine the factors that affect their investment in English language learning. It addressed the following research questions:

1. What motivated the participants' investment in learning English?
2. What inhibited their investment in learning English?

## Method

### Participants

This study focused on deep exploration of the learners' investment. To this end, interviews were conducted with 20 EFL learners. These participants were randomly chosen from among those who were willing to be interviewed. The interviews with the

participants (eleven female and nine male learners) were conducted between December 2019 and February 2020. They had different academic degrees and belonged to different language proficiency levels and age groups. The sample was comprised of eight teenagers and twelve adults, and their age varied from 11 to 39 years ( $M = 22.95$ ). The length of learning English varied between 5 and 14 years. Four teenage interviewees were learning English in a private language institute, two teenagers were learning it at their schools, five adult interviewees were university graduates in different fields, and the remaining nine interviewees were university students who attended language institutes to learn English.

The authors followed ethics approval based on informed consent measures and notified the learners that they participated on a voluntary basis and that they could withdraw at any time they liked. Furthermore, they were ensured that their recorded information was strictly confidential. To assure complete confidentiality, the researchers utilized symbols (e.g., L1, L2, L3) instead of the learners' real names.

### Instrument for Data Collection

**Semi-structured Interviews** In order to collect the data, a group of 20 learners were randomly chosen to be interviewed face-to-face. The interview questions (asked in Persian; see Appendix for sample interview questions) aimed at tapping the language learners' internal conflicts and struggles, feelings, hopes, and desires related to learning English both inside and outside the English classroom.

Each participant had one face-to-face 70- to 90-min semi-structured interview. To check the clarity of the interview questions, they were initially piloted with two language learners from the target population. To be sure about the validity of the interview, the researcher sought the critical judgments of three experts. In addition, the reliability and response consistency was enhanced by asking similar questions in different forms during the interview.

The principle of "an extended series of question/answer sequences comprising the interview" [37] was followed in this study to identify the major themes. In the present study, the interviewer was an insider, i.e. she was an Iranian English language teacher who was aware of the language, culture, and foreign language education system in Iran, so it could be easier to overcome the nuances of research issues pertinent to the study.

### Data Collection

Considering the complex nature of the construct examined in this research and the research questions, the researchers adopted a qualitative approach. The participants were asked whether they preferred to be interviewed in English or Persian; all of them selected Persian. The interviews were audio-recorded, translated, and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis. They took place individually and were conducted in a quiet hall at the coffee shop, university, or language institute venue. The interviewees were allowed to add their comments while being interviewed and make some digressions. Eventually, original transcripts of interviews were sent to the interviewees for member checking and inclusion of further possible comments.



## Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis of the interviews started during the interview process via the authors' continuing reflection on analytical points and detailed notes on the interviewees' responses. The authors used thematic analysis [1]. The scripts were coded for units of meaning. Coding let the authors recognize the major categories. The authors initially recognized and analyzed recurring themes across the individual interviews. Some relevant themes emerged out of the data. During the interview process, the themes were identified through reflecting on the interviewees' recurring accounts in their responses. These themes were refined through repeated reading and coding process during data analysis. It should be mentioned that the two authors conducted data analysis independently and discussed the findings collectively until consensus was reached. The researchers employed such procedures to follow the rigor required in qualitative research and to obtain more valid results. The identified major themes, learning English and gaining capital and inhibiting factors for Iranian EFL learners' investment, were also shared with the participants to validate the data analyses and get more insight from them via sharing comments on the interpretation of the data.

## Results

Responses to the research questions of the study are given in the following subsections according to the two main themes emerging out of the data, revealing how the participants were motivated and inhibited to invest in learning English.

### Learning English and Gaining Capital (Research Question One)

In all the interviewees' comments, it was obvious that they valued English due to the numerous advantages that they could gain from learning English language. Generally, four main patterns of hopes and desires were identified based on the data: economic, cultural, symbolic, and social capital.

Many of the interviewees made frequent references to the extensive economic value of English in the globalized world. They valued English language like an item or a commodity which could pave the way for them to obtain financial resources. They referred to the English language as a gate to the international business, an effective means of applying for well-known universities across the world to study in money-making fields, and finding lucrative jobs which require communication in English abroad and even within Iran, all of which imply the economic advantages. Excerpt 1 has been selected from the interviewees' responses to demonstrate the economic value associated with English language for these interviewees.

#### Excerpt 1

The major reason why I am still learning English is that I see it like money. I have attended English classes since I was a child. At that time, I liked to learn it due to its attraction. Gradually, my opinions changed. I remember, once I translated a text for my cousin and she paid me well. Since then, I have earned money through my knowledge of English. This has motivated me to learn more. I can



say, more English proficiency, more money. Although some people may not agree with my slogan, at least it has been true for me. (L18)

The participants stated that English language could in many cases, whether directly or indirectly, bring them better job opportunities in the world and prepare the ground for better chances of success in the economic world as a result. For example, L12, who was at the upper intermediate level of language proficiency, stated that “I will be successful in the English section of the university entrance exam. This helps me to be accepted in a good field and, of course, a good job in the future and the most important thing, money.” The importance of English in numerous educational settings in Iran is an undeniable fact for many Iranians. L12’s response indicates the good future economic position that this interviewee can have in his job. In his opinion, he will have this job thanks to his English knowledge.

One adult interviewee, L10, considered English proficiency as an advantage for national economic growth. He believed that one requirement for a country to be considered a developed one is English competence. He expressed that “knowing English could result in using state-of-the-art technologies and this could contribute to transforming the country to a developed one.” He desired easy access to English and technological advancement to become involved with the global community from a position of strength.

In these selected excerpts, the interviewees showed their strong inclination to improve their English knowledge due to the financial benefits they could gain through English knowledge. This finding is partly in line with the findings of Norton Peirce’s [32] study in that some of the participants in her study were trying to improve their English proficiency for different reasons, one of which was having a better job and earning more money in a society in which knowledge of English was necessary for having a good job and life.

The other advantage of English language proficiency, as pointed out in the interviewees’ responses, was gaining the cultural capital. Cultural capital is an important legacy associated with English language. As Norton Peirce [32] notes, cultural capital is knowledge, skills, educational credentials, and appreciation of particular cultural items. English, in the interviewees’ opinion, was the main language of intercultural communication among different countries. This is shown in an excerpt selected from the interviewees’ responses.

#### Excerpt 2

Through English, we can make ourselves familiar with different cultures around the world. Once I had to do research on marriage in different cultures. Though this information was available in Persian, there were some English sites through which I could find much more information about this topic. But, I couldn’t translate the English information well. Then, I was sad I did not know English well. (L14)

Interviewees also associated English with education and knowledge production. They believed that English was valuable for all, especially for the educated people. L16 noted that she aimed to write a book in English to introduce Iran and Muslims to the world. This is shown in excerpt 3 below:

## Excerpt 3

I love English for the sake of intercultural communication. Many good books in the world are in English. This language can help us introduce our country and our religion to the world. Currently, many people in the world do not have good opinions of Iran and Islam. One reason is the cruelty of the so-called Muslim terrorists (e.g., Isis) in the world. This group does everything with the name of Islam. We can use English language to write books and articles to show the real nature of Islam and Muslims.

L11, a Ph.D. candidate of Mathematics, believed that English brings cultural knowledge and that not knowing English could endanger educated individuals' progress in Iran. He expressed that knowing English helped him have access to the cultural capital (e.g., knowledge production) by "publishing his papers in top foreign journals."

Symbolic capital (e.g., distinction, prestige, honor, and friendship) was another resource reflected in the interviewees' responses. Most of the participants expressed that English brings prestige with itself. Excerpt 4 is the view of L13 in this regard.

## Excerpt 4

I am a university student. I am not fluent in English, but I know it at the level of survival. It has helped me to find friends all over the world via chatting in English. I have friends, males and females, in Africa, Europe, and the USA. They have invited me to their countries. Having native-speaking friends is prestigious. They will be helpful someday. Could I have such friends without English? Of course not!

Generally, teenagers put a higher value on this type of capital gained through English learning than adults. For example, one of them, L4, talked about his desires to have a job which would give him a great deal of reputation, honor, and prestige. "I learn English because it will help me have a prestigious job. The important criterion is that it must be prestigious. It is honorable to speak in a foreign language in your job," said L15. Most teenagers, especially female ones, agreed with L15's view.

In L7 and L8's view, knowing English could help them have access to the symbolic capital they required to "enter the social network in the workplace" (L7). Their comments reflected an image of respectability and honorability which could be obtained through learning English. They believed that this image could give them legitimacy and the right to speak.

The final advantage gained through English language proficiency mentioned by the interviewees related to the social capital. The interviewees' responses implied that they desired to find opportunities that gave them access to the social networks they sought membership. As an example, L1 stated that improving his English proficiency would cause a change in his working condition. He had decided to "achieve connection to networks of power via his knowledge of English" since any promotion in his job, which dealt with foreign contracts, was dependent on competency in English.

Among the adults, the educated individuals believed that English language could promote their social status. In their view, it could help them get scholarships from famous universities, join professional groups in their related fields, and do research with well-known professors. L9 saw English as a gate to social inclusion and having membership in significant educational groups and associations. L19 and L3 had the

same view. With these views, they did their best to improve their proficiency in English.

L5, a female interviewee, was of the opinion that through English proficiency, she could be a more powerful individual in the society. She equated English proficiency with gaining power in the society and being included in influential groups. According to L5's comment, by being bilingual, especially if one of those languages is English, females could have the feeling of being more influential in the society. As Mohammadian Haghighi and Norton [20] report, women in Iran experience a different world in English language classes. They state that in this country many young females have restricted mobility, and English classrooms are assumed as a desired form of outdoor recreation for them. Such classes, in comparison to classes of other subjects, can provide Iranian EFL females with a situation in which they can develop their knowledge of various cultures across the world, socialize with their peers, and expand the scope of their imagined identities [14, 24].

Generally, the interviewees emphasized four types of capital gained through learning English and the English proficiency programs they were part of appeared to provide a stepping stone in fulfilling those desires. This drive encouraged them to do their best in learning English. The interviewees were determined to make the most of every opportunity available to them both in and out of the classroom and considered the English-speaking environment of the class as a precious opportunity that would let them practice and improve English.

### **Inhibiting Factors for Iranian EFL Learners' Investment (Research Question Two)**

During the interview sessions, the researchers aimed to find out how much individual language learners were eager or unwilling to invest their time (and money), as discussed by Norton Peirce [32] and Norton [21], in English language learning. Most of the interviewees were motivated enough to spend time and energy on learning English. But, they believed that there were some discouraging elements which caused them not to be highly invested in language learning. In fact, none of the interviewees considered the current language education system in Iran, especially at schools and universities, to be satisfactory. They explained why they did not sometimes like to participate in the language classroom. There were different reasons for their non-participation including the teacher himself/herself, teaching methods used, boring textbooks, classroom environment, family, peers, culture, and society. The learners' non-participation had different forms; they either did not attend the class regularly or did not engage in the classroom activities. The following excerpts show the interviewees' responses.

#### **Excerpt 5**

I remember one of my English classes with an excellent teacher. She handled the class in a fantastic way. Everyone who was in that class could learn a lot. I wish I could continue learning English with her. What a pity; she went to another city and I did not see any other professional English teacher like her afterward. (L9)

## Excerpt 6

I think in the Islamic society of Iran English is considered to be less important than Arabic. Even some authorities express strong disapproval of using English. At one time, they wanted to ban teaching English at schools. Why should we have such a view while we know English is the international language? (L6)

## Excerpt 7

I have not gone to any language institute so far. My father does not like me to learn English because he thinks it will not be useful. I am very willing to learn it at private language institutes. I think if a person wants to learn English, he cannot learn it at school. (L17)

One interesting point in the present study was that the teenage interviewees were more invested in learning English. L20, as a teenager who was very interested to learn English, expressed that “I like to converse with all people in English not Persian, but many of them giggle at me. I use many English words when I speak, and it is surprising for me that Iranian culture does not like this.” Although what is expressed by this participant is not typically practical in Iran, at least it shows his high level of interest in learning English. Some other teenagers liked to use English in their daily lives, but they referred to this point that they could not since the Iranian society and culture preferred using Persian.

Some adults said they were highly motivated to learn English, but they were critical of some social factors which were barriers to learning. One adult who was proficient in English said:

## Excerpt 8

My English is good and I used to communicate all through English, online and text-messaging. Once I went to a job interview, I talked about my abilities. The first one mentioned by me was English proficiency. Do you know what the interviewer said? ‘it is not important at all in this country to know English.’ What should I say? Many different job interviewers disregarded my English proficiency too. I do not recommend learning English to any Iranian person who intends to live here. (L7)

The above excerpt shows how this individual has been discouraged from learning English. One painful statement he said was that he did not encourage anybody in Iran to learn English for the sake of progress within Iran.

These excerpts, which show the importance of the teacher, society, family, and culture in the learners’ investment in language learning, were repeated in many other excerpts. One participant also referred to books as a factor which could encourage a learner to learn English. Along with the book, the way that book was taught and the classmates were also mentioned to be significant in their commitment to learning English.

## Excerpt 9

I am learning English at a well-known language institute in Mashhad. I love the books there. At school or university, I could learn just grammar and a list of

words, but not conversation, listening, or writing. The books here are interesting. They have been designed communicatively. Of course, the teachers are different here too, more professional and more disciplined. Our classmates are fantastic here too. They come to the language class just for learning English professionally, not passing a course. This is what I expect from a language class. (L10)

In the above excerpts, the interviewees referred to the factors that inhibited achieving a high level of investment in language learning. In their opinion, if these discouraging elements turned to encouraging ones, they could have higher levels of investment in learning. As an example, L17 stated that “I am really motivated to learn English, but what should I do when my father hates it and does not spend money on learning English.” L10 expressed that “my desired English class familiarizes me just with how to communicate in English, not teaching vocabulary and grammatical points. This class will really push me toward foreign language learning.” L14 and L2 also noted that English classes should be technologically advanced, student-centered, and reflective of their needs. They needed an English class where learning English took place with up-to-date technologies and innovative English teaching methods.

Given the opportunity to talk about their investment in English language learning, the interviewees wished for a change in the language education system. The interviewees indicated that they were dissatisfied with the language education system in Iran, especially at schools and universities, since in these contexts, they could not learn English for the goal of having communicative competence. This issue limited their willingness to invest in learning. It was implied in the interviewees’ excerpts that besides individual factors, various social factors were significant in the language learners’ desires and commitment to learning a foreign language. Seen in this light, it can be argued that particular positive social and educational factors that the learners desired could create an inspiring situation for them to make a more balanced investment in learning English.

## Discussion

The learners in this study believed that they would invest in learning English because they would gain advantages by learning this international language. This point is consistent with what Norton and Toohey [30] state. They argue that learners “invest in the target language at particular times and in particular settings because they believe they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will, in turn, increase the value of their cultural capital” [30, p. 420].

The findings obtained in this study are partly compatible with those of Norton Peirce’s [32] research. In her study, the language learners were not highly invested in learning. While they were highly motivated to learn and speak English, they were frustrated and uncomfortable to speak to individuals in whom they had economic or symbolic investment. The ways in which these female participants responded to opportunities to speak English intersected in important ways with their investment in English language learning and their shifting social identities. Likewise, in the present study, although the learners were motivated enough to learn English, they were not highly invested in learning. Their desires might have been in open conflict with

different hindrances including teacher or class practices. If the circumstances of their language education changed, there might be changes in their opportunities to practice English. The findings concerning the inhibiting factors for the learners to be highly invested in language learning corroborate those found by Norton Peirce [32]. In her research, one of the participants left the class because her teacher degraded her home country, Peru, by not considering it a major country in the world. Based on this, Norton [21, 24] argued for being sensitive to the L2 learners' struggles which were assumed to be related to social environments.

The findings of this study are also in line with those of Chang's [2] research in that they both conveyed the point that the learners invest in learning based on their needs and desires. Chang [2] found that the professional backgrounds and the imagined identities of two Taiwanese doctoral students studying in the USA were deeply effective in their selections in learning investment. These students did not attempt to improve all language skills. In fact, they exercised their agency and had specific investment in enhancing language skills that could "generate the most profit valued in their imagined communities" [2, p. 225]. For example, Hou, a student who had a strong desire to achieve an academic teaching position in Taiwan after getting his Ph.D. degree in the USA, made great investment in developing academic English writing skills and improving communicative competencies like speaking was not important to him. However, the desire for a position in the US industry persuaded the other student, Burnerman, to be invested in English communicative competence. The results obtained in this study are also consistent with those of Haneda's study [12] in that EFL learners in Iran invest their time and energy in L2 learning in different ways, as Haneda found in an advanced Japanese literacy course in Canada.

The reasons mentioned for learning English in this study can be compared with the findings of Hu and McKay's [13] study since the themes referred to in their study were pointed out by the interviewees in the present study too. In their study, different reasons have been expressed by the participants for the spread of English in China, South Korea, and Japan. They state that China needs English for integration into the world, modernization, recruiting talented individuals, cultural enrichment and intellectual development, and its subsequent status and power. Park [2009, as cited in 13] notes that English has found a special status in South Korea due to the "government policies, social and economic exchanges, and the increased influence of communicative teaching methods" (p. 350). Other reasons for the significance of English in South Korea include providing better job opportunities, being successful in university entrance exams, and gaining social status. Several reasons are mentioned by Hu and McKay [13] for the betterment of English education system in Japan. Kubota [1998, as cited in 13] believes that the two factors of internationalization and the economic rise for international communications have stimulated Japan to improve English language education. Moreover, to uplift the position of English in Japan, the Japanese government has nominated English as a key item for the university entrance exam.

The results of this study are also consistent with those of Lu, He, and Shen's [16] research, which aimed to explore the factors that motivated or demotivated LOTE students' investment in China, since the factors mentioned by the participants were similar to what the learners referred to in this study. In Lu, He, and Shen's [16] research, in spite of their involuntary decisions at the beginning, some students enhanced their investment in learning their target language(s) as they recognized that

they could achieve benefits, including economic, cultural, and social resources from learning the target language(s). The perceived benefits and affordances connected with LOTE learning were the preconditions for their investment, whereas systemic patterns of control undermined their investment when their affordances were devalued or when they had limited access to their perceived benefits and could hardly see themselves as “legitimate” speakers.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study investigated the factors which motivated or inhibited investment in learning English among Iranian EFL learners. Different patterns of hopes and desires in terms of the resources gained through English language proficiency were recognized in the interviewees’ responses including economic, cultural, symbolic, and social ones. As the interviewees mentioned, English could provide them with these four types of capital and broaden their worldviews. Their strong desires to achieve them had substantial effects on their investment and served as drives guiding them in the path of English language learning. The findings also revealed that there were some factors impeding their investment. As the participants pointed out in their responses, if these factors changed to encouraging ones, they would become more willing to promote their investment in English language learning.

The current study provides EFL teachers with information on the subtleties of the language learners. It demonstrates a general picture of the Iranian EFL learners’ investment in language learning and puts emphasis on improving teaching practices via changing fixed attitudes toward language learners since language learners have their own understandings of themselves and the activities they are engaged in. In the Iranian context, for instance, individuals have numerous reasons for attending English classes, and they do language practices with different conceptions in mind. It can be argued that the teachers’ fixed attitudes prevent them from providing any pedagogical support for the learners’ struggles.

This study draws EFL educators’ attention to the point that individual learners’ needs, desires, and hopes regarding their use of the target language must be respected since they try to use the opportunities in the best possible way to become their desired individual. The findings encourage language teachers to probe into the learners’ investment and do not assume that silent or inactive students are unmotivated since they may be motivated but are not invested in the practices of the language classroom [24].

The teachers should highlight the significance of language learners’ investment and adjust classroom practices in response to the learners’ investment because if the learners understand that their investment in language learning is not going to pay them back, they will either give up (as in the case of adults) or pay less attention (as in the case of children). In a metaphorical expression, Pittaway [33] compares the instructor of the class to a broker in the stock market and the students as the investors in this market. This direct comparison clarifies the significance of investment in language learning. Similar to financial investors, language learners require support and guidance in the process of learning. Hence, the relationship of the instructor with the learners is important for engaging investment [33].



The present study researched investment among Iranian English language learners in different learning contexts through interviews. Other studies can do a case study research with a smaller number of language learners. This construct can also be explored through a longitudinal qualitative ethnographic approach to generate more informative results. Future studies can conduct research on investment in language learning just in one learning context, e.g., private language institutes. Future research can also examine the effect of different variables, e.g. ethnicity, economic status, and place of residence, on investment in language learning. The urgency of longitudinal research is felt to examine how paying attention to language learners' investment, especially low-invested L2 learners, in the language practices of the class can affect their language learning and offer them possibilities for the future.

Investment has a significant position in language learning theory and has become an important construct with implications for language policy [6]. The learners' investment in language and literacy practices that can form the basis for their cosmopolitan future is the utmost hope of language education [5]. Hence, if they are not provided with proper chances to take part in ways that are pleasing to them, their progress in the target language will not be as good as what educators may desire [34]. In closing, it should be restated that in EFL classrooms, the challenge of the teacher should be the endeavor to recognize what investments a learner has in a given class, what their imagined identities may be, and how the teacher can help the learner navigate his/her experiences in the most satisfying and enriching way possible. It is hoped that EFL teachers attempt to reflect on the ways in which their classes can be seen as contexts of possibility for learners who have a broad scope of histories, investments, and hopes for the future.

## Appendix. Sample Interview Questions

1. Talk about your interest to learn English language. What are your reasons/motives for learning English language?
  - Share your personal, academic, and career aspirations with me and tell me how learning English can play a role in achieving them.
2. Talk about your English language learning process. What is one memory, positive or negative, from your English language learning process that stands out? It may be from long ago or fairly recent.
3. What are Iranians' attitudes towards learning and using English?
  - What perceptions do you think they hold of English language learners?
  - Some persons experience non-acceptance and resentment in certain local groups when they use English words and behave in a direct, assertive, "Westernized" manner. Have you had experiences like these? Try to analyze why you think such a thing occurred, how you felt about it, and what you might do about such situations in the future.

4. What were your initial perceptions and feelings about learning English? Did they stay the same during the years?
  - Has studying English changed your attitude toward Persian? (e.g., Do you think English is more prestigious than Persian and can bring more respect for you in the Iranian society?)
5. Has English impacted your thinking?
  - How has being an English language learner influenced your sense of self (your idea of who you are)? Did it change with the passage of time?
6. What factors do you think make substantial differences in one's English learning trajectory?
7. How does Iranian educational system consider English language? How do you think the English course might be changed to help students learn English better.
8. Talk about your English language learning progress. How do you assess it?
  - Talk about your language learning experiences in the class. I would like to explore what opportunities you have to use English and the degree of being active or passive in the English class. Has it changed during the years about you?
  - Talk about the extent of English usage and your English contacts. It will be interesting for me to know how often you use English at home or work; which activities you enjoy most, and which you enjoy least.

### Probes:

Could you help me understand what you meant when you said \_\_\_\_\_?

If I understood you correctly, you said \_\_\_\_\_?

Will you expand on your discussion of \_\_\_\_\_ a little bit more?

### Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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