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NEOLIBERAL PERSONHOOD OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY'S PROGRAM

Hoang Thi Hanh*, Nguyen Nhat Lan Huong

Faculty of English Language and Culture, VNU University of Languages and International Studies, No. 2 Pham Van Dong, Cau Giay, Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract: Universities in Vietnam, under the influence of neoliberalism on higher education, have been redesigning programs to prioritise market-oriented skills and employability. This study examines how Vietnamese English majors engage with neoliberal discourses and the extent to which they embody the ideal neoliberal subject. The participants include 10 sophomore English major students recounting their experiences through in-depth narrative inquiry interviews. The findings show their considerable alignment with the ideal neoliberal self, viewing English education as an investment and English as a measurable, commodified skill, sometimes at the expense of intrinsic educational values. They strive for self-responsibility and autonomy in learning practices, while some participants reflect a more nuanced embrace of intrinsic educational values. The data unveil the struggles of students, especially of those disadvantaged, on the journey to realise their neoliberal projects, and the negative impacts on their well-being and self-perception, indicating a need for further critical treatment of this phenomenon.

Keywords: neoliberalism, neoliberal subject, language learning, English as a Foreign Language, Vietnam

* Corresponding author.
Email address: hanhht1976@vnu.edu.vn
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CHỦ THỂ TÍNH TÂN TỰ DO CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TRONG CHƯƠNG TRÌNH TIẾNG ANH TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

Hoàng Thị Hạnh, Nguyễn Nhật Lan Hương

Khoa Ngôn ngữ và Văn hóa Anh, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội,
Số 2 Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Việt Nam

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Tóm tắt: Các trường đại học ở Việt Nam, chịu ảnh hưởng của chủ nghĩa tân tự do, đã thiết kế lại chương trình đào tạo nhằm ưu tiên các kỹ năng phù hợp với thị trường lao động. Nghiên cứu này xem xét cách sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tương tác với các diễn ngôn tân tự do và mức độ thể hiện tính chủ thể tân tự do của họ. Đối tượng tham gia gồm 10 sinh viên năm thứ hai ngành tiếng Anh, chia sẻ trải nghiệm của mình thông qua các cuộc phỏng vấn tường thuật chuyên sâu. Kết quả cho thấy họ có sự tương thích đáng kể với hình mẫu "cái tôi tân tự do" lý tưởng, khi nhìn nhận việc học tiếng Anh như một khoản đầu tư và xem tiếng Anh như một kỹ năng để tham gia vào thị trường lao động. Họ cũng nỗ lực hướng tới tự chịu trách nhiệm và tự chủ trong quá trình học tập và một số có hướng tới các giá trị nội tại của giáo dục, nhân văn. Dữ liệu cũng chỉ ra những khó khăn của sinh viên, đặc biệt là những sinh viên có hoàn cảnh tài chính khó khăn, trong hành trình hiện thực hóa các dự án tân tự do của mình, cũng như những tác động tiêu cực đến sức khỏe tinh thần và nhận thức về bản thân, qua đó cho thấy cần có những cách tiếp cận cẩn trọng hơn đối với ảnh hưởng của tân tự do lên giáo dục.

Từ khóa: tân tự do, chủ thể tân tự do, học ngôn ngữ, tiếng Anh, Việt Nam

1. Background: English Language Education in Vietnam

The shift to neoliberalism in higher education in Vietnam redefines education as a private rather than a public good, hence governments' defunding and students being viewed as customers (Mintz, 2021). The newly launched Circular 23 program was designed and developed based on the Circular No. 23/2014/TT-BGDĐT on the implementation of high-quality university programs. The program aimed to develop a competitive workforce for regional and global economic integration, with universities permitted and supervised by the Ministry to set tuition fees commensurate with the perceived training quality (Ministry of Education and Training, 2014). This means government defunding, and students would pay all the cost of the education. In the university X chosen for this study, the fees of the English major program under Circular 23 were five times higher compared to partially subsidised programs. Thus, this English program can be seen as a manifestation of neoliberalism in Vietnam's higher education despite its proclaimed foundation in socialist ideology.

Despite the symbolic power of English and its pervasive effects on the learning beliefs and practices, the link between English education and neoliberal agendas in Vietnam remains underexplored. Existing studies indicate some consequences of neoliberal English education. In more disadvantaged areas, Bui and Nguyen (2016) critically examine how English language policies in Vietnam created barriers and constraints for linguistically minority students, whose first languages are not Vietnamese. In more urban centres, Hewson (2018) finds that the Vietnamese private profit-driven English education industry sometimes caters to parental

demands at the expense of educational principles and often applies a racialised and profit-driven approach to recruitment. Due to the state's minimal regulation, the commodification of English education exacerbates the inequalities among students (Hewson, 2018).

The neoliberal English education industry has been found to constitute part of the neoliberal project of self-development expected from an ideal neoliberal subject with its effects and implications (Highet, 2024; Manan, 2024; Park, 2015). At the individual level, neoliberalism frames English competence instrumentally, associating it with better income, security and happiness. Despite these observations, how English-majors position themselves within these dominant neoliberal narratives and what neoliberalism means for their English learning remain underexplored. This gap is especially significant in Vietnam, where neoliberal ideals intersect with socialist ideology.

Given these dynamics, this study seeks to investigate: (1) the students' stated reasons for studying English at university, (2) their experiences and expectations related to their English learning and (3) through which, their alignment with neoliberal discourses and their construction of an ideal subject position.

2. Neoliberalism in Education

Neoliberalism can be understood as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Under neoliberalism, education is characterised as an individual good to be purchased, rather than a public good with inherent value (Mintz, 2021). Neoliberal influences promote a shift in policies and practices in education systems toward privatisation, marketisation and accountability, emphasising efficiency and measurable outcomes, sometimes at the expense of intrinsic educational values (Ball, 2012). At the institutional level, neoliberalism entails the alignment of policies with corporate principles that focus on the competitive market (Klein, 2007). Neoliberalism has reshaped global education systems, including America, Australia and Europe, influencing policies, curricula, and governance through market-driven principles (Nikpouya & Zareian, 2024). Such values like efficiency and competitiveness continue to dominate educational reforms, affecting institutions, educators and individual students worldwide.

Through the neoliberal lens, education is meant to enhance human capital, to make people productive in terms of value and cost (Holborow, 2018). This study focuses on interpreting neoliberalism at an individual level, considering neoliberalism as a hegemonic, pervasive mode of discourse embedded into the way we interpret, live in, and understand the world (Harvey, 2007). The generalisation of economic rationality thrives under neoliberalism, becoming "a principle of decipherment of social relationships and individual behaviour" (Foucault et al., 2008, p. 262), permeating its influence over non-economic phenomena and domains. Neoliberalism could be understood as a form of governance, involving mechanisms and techniques to orient people's behaviours and practices to the best economic interests (Choi, 2021). This produces a new ideal subject: homo oeconomicus, defined as "an entrepreneur of himself [...] being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings" (Foucault et al., 2008, p. 226). This subject is expected to be rational and sensitive to the environmental changes, and know how to adapt systematically, which makes him easily manipulatable and governable (Foucault et al., 2008). The traits like being autonomous, flexible and innovative are valued (Besley & Peters, 2007). They are

expected to continuously improve themselves to enhance their human capital, and fully be responsible for their success and failure (Ratner, 2019).

3. Neoliberalism, English Language Education and Neoliberal Personhood

Under neoliberalism, the 'resignification of language' (Flubacher & Del Percio, 2017, p. 7) strips language from its traditional roles of meaning making, communication and identity expression, access to and appreciation of culture and ideas. Language is increasingly seen through a symbolic lens and assessed based on its utility, thus prioritising market considerations in decisions regarding when, where, how, and to whom language is taught and learned to provide learners with a competitive advantage (Bernstein et al., 2015; Highet, 2024; Manan, 2024). The global spread of the English language teaching industry has led to the valorisation of English in national education systems around the world (Gray et al., 2018).

As learning a language being considered an investment rather than a desire to explore new languages and cultures (Bernstein et al., 2015), language learners and their personhood are turned into entrepreneurs and consumers, and through the management of their "enterprising-self", learners contribute to the economy with their language skills and work towards maximising their self-interests (Choi, 2021). Thus, language education has not only been influenced by neoliberalism but has also been reproducing many of its ideologies and narratives (Bernstein et al., 2015; Manan, 2024).

In state language policies, the neoliberal agenda could be seen in the government's association of economic value to English, as opposed to the cultural values assigned to other local languages (Highet, 2024). Textbooks used globally and domestically are found to propagate neoliberal values, including entrepreneurship, self-responsibility, consumerism and competitiveness, embedding a hidden curriculum that aligns with neoliberal governmentality (Daghigh & Rahim, 2021; Farsani & Rahimi, 2023).

Language is viewed as a means to unlock opportunities, realise potential, and maximise human capital across geographic and cultural boundaries (Park, 2015). The efforts and investments in language learning display the alignment with the ideal neoliberal subject - one who constantly works to improve oneself and maximise their human capital value. Learners are seen as "linguistic entrepreneurs" having "linguistic entrepreneurship" "aligning with the moral imperative to strategically exploit language-related resources for enhancing one's worth" (De Costa et al., 2016, p. 1). Linguistic entrepreneurship manifests the commodification of language (Heller, 2010). Thus, neoliberalism transforms our view of language as a resource to be exploited, and "makes such exploitation an ethical imperative where becoming a linguistic entrepreneur is seen as the responsibility of an ideal neoliberal subject" (De Costa et al., 2016, p. 2). Language learning is for material gains, and the act of learning demonstrates how one is a good neoliberal subject, an "entrepreneur" who takes initiatives in cultivating their human capital. Traces like resourcefulness, active risk-taking, persistence, and eagerness to overcome difficulties in the learning journey can be found in a learner who embraces linguistic entrepreneurship (De Costa et al., 2016).

However, viewing language learning under the neoliberal lens can be problematic. First, language is not an abstract and neutral communication system. Ideologies like linguistic instrumentalism are "folded in complex and contradictory ways into social stratifications between men and women, regular workers and non-regular workers, native speakers and non-native speakers, and white people and people of colour" (Kubota, 2011, p. 259). Language is bound to contribute to indexing and perpetuating the social constraints and disparities that the

neoliberal subject is expected to transcend (Highet, 2024; Manan, 2024; Park, 2015). Access to English language learning opportunities is conditioned by socioeconomic class structure and geographical space. Downplaying this social embeddedness of language may obscure inequalities that neoliberalism brings. Neoliberal discourses of language learning and personal development shape subjectivities, hyper-individualise and depolicise social mobility while obscuring broader structural inequalities (Highet, 2024).

Besides, those who internalise the logic of neoliberalism may see any difficulty they experience in the harsh job market as their own fault (Park, 2010, 2011) rather than their sociolinguistic histories. Neoliberalism, through its emphasis on individual responsibility, could rationalise the perpetual pursuit to better one's English, justifying the endless investments poured into the process (De Costa et al., 2016). These neoliberal language ideologies normalise immense stress and competitiveness, causing anxiety, suffering and diminished self-worth due to an overemphasis on the ability to overcome challenges in language learning (De Costa, 2015).

4. Methodology

The research was conducted at University X, a foreign language institution in Vietnam transitioning to financial autonomy. It focused on the newly launched Circular 23 English program, developed under neoliberal policies impacting Vietnamese higher education (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2018). This program enabled universities to set tuition fees to maintain training quality, with students bearing all expenses. To attract students willing to pay five times higher fees, the university extensively promoted its "superior" program across various channels, emphasising modern facilities, real-world experience, and a curriculum focused on essential competencies and skills. During the academic year of the study (2020-2021), this financially autonomous program operated alongside the traditional government-funded program. The context of the dual programs would provide background for students' comparison, highlighting the differences between the two programs and the consequences of the students' choices.

The study employed data from narrative inquiry of the students' experience. The participants were ten sophomore students (aged 19-20; seven females and three males) in the first cohort. Eight participants were from lower to higher middle class and two from poorer families (Chi and Van). The participants were selected from the second author's personal contact and recommendations from other participants, ensuring inclusion of learners from diverse school settings, including rural, urban, and remote regions, as well as mainstream and gifted schools (Patton, 2002). All participants were provided with information about the purpose of the study, ensured the confidentiality of their personal information, and signed informed consent forms to participate. All the participants' names cited in this study are pseudonyms.

The narrative inquiries were conducted in Vietnamese to reflect their English learning, their reasons for choosing university major, their experiences and expectations. Narrative analysis through open, in-depth interviews allows for investigation of the dynamic interplay between personal experiences and larger social context. This aligns with the life-story research tradition, highlighting the intertwining of individual narratives with societal contexts, providing insights into how social and personal influences shape the development of identity (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

We transcribed interview recordings verbatim and read the data many times. The initial codes generated include reasons, motivation, experiences, expectation and neoliberal subjectivity. Codes were then categorised and refined into the emerging themes and patterns compared with the concepts and themes reviewed from literature including competition,

comparison, pressure, insecurity, measurable skills, economic benefits and intrinsic educational values through an inductive, iterative process (Lichtman, 2023). While comparing and contrasting the accounts of the participants, we identified repetition including recurring themes such as human capital investment, an instrumental view of English learning and the pressure associated with the learning and investment process. The emerging themes reveal how the limited and limiting aspects of neoliberalism interact with the intrinsic and extrinsic educational qualities of the program to shape the learners' neoliberal personhood.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1. Choosing English as Human Capital Investment

From the participants' accounts, their motivations and reasons for pursuing an English major at university are strongly tied with employment and economic benefits.

> I just wanted the choice that would be best for my future employment, and the name of this program sounds much more superior, since it is 'high-quality.' I read some advice from the online comments. [...] no matter what job you do, you will need English anyway. (Hoa)

> I was not that interested in English; it was just that the university is very well known. Some others in my place studied at this university. […] my parents said if I could not enter the economics program, English would be fine. (Chi)

The decision to major in English at university is primarily driven by future job prospects, a perspective widely shared by participants' social circles and online networks. Economic considerations, rather than intrinsic qualities of the profession, dominate decision-making, with factors like university reputation and potential return on investment. This economic rationality prevails over Chi's personal interests, reflecting alignment with the neoliberal subject ideal. Most participants show their alignment to the ideal neoliberal subject, strategically weighing advice and information to optimise their career prospects, showcasing rational and calculated decision-making.

> I read about the scholarship opportunities of the Circular 23 program online, and that was the marketing of the university… from the "ambassadors." (Cuong)

> I put a lot of hope in this program, like having some extra-curricular courses, that was what the university advertised back then. I remember reading it on the webpage. Also, the Rector mentioned it in the Facebook livestream. (Van)

The ways that the university promotes their new program to prospective learners are similar to how businesses compete for customers. The participants use the words "advertised," "marketing" - the language of business - to refer to the university's practices. The promotion of this new program mostly focuses on opportunities and benefits for skill development. This indicates that the university itself tries to appeal to the students by evoking their economic rationality to influence their decision.

However, this decision puts pressure on less privileged students, who must carefully consider high tuition fees, like Chi, who needs her parents' assurance of affordability before choosing the program. Thus, their choice implies risk taking, reflecting the image of ideal neoliberal subjects, who engage in ventures to cultivate their economic worth. Interestingly, the final justifications for the participants' concerns are that the money would indicate the quality of the program. They take the risk, and hope that what they could gain, as promised by the "advertisement" of the program, could be worth the financial investment.

Consequently, they have greater disappointment when their venture does not turn out as

expected. Six participants express their dissatisfaction with the program. While some complaints are related to learning and teaching programs, most of their frustration stems from how it is not worth their money. The frustration is evident in the participants that are under more financial constraints like Chi, Van, Hoa, compared to the rest.

> Talking about the tuition fee is like rubbing salt into my wound. [...] I felt that I threw my money away for others to pick up. (Chi)
>
> My biggest regret was not choosing the mainstream program back then. There are several times I think of quitting because of the tuition fees. (Van)
>
> They should cut down on their advertising, advertisement should be real. (Hoa)

The feelings of betrayal and disappointment show how the imperative to act as ideal neoliberal subjects does not always bring out good outcomes. Van faces the dilemma of whether to quit learning, which clearly reflects the immense financial pressure she experiences. Van's story underscores the challenges faced by less privileged individuals, who must bear the financial burden of pursuing education in "superior" places to fulfil neoliberal projects.

5.2. English and Credentialism

As learners become investors, English proficiency and degrees become human capital metrics. Participants prioritise the instrumental value of English, emphasising its role in employment and career advancement (Ha, Hoa and Trung). Hoa clarifies on her point:

> Usually people say English is a tool that the companies will train you for job skills, yet they wouldn't train you in English; therefore, we should know English first, and other skills we could learn later. (Hoa)

More explicitly than Hoa, Chi claims that for her, English means money. If not directly related to economic benefits, English is tied to opportunities, like studying abroad or pursuing a Master's degree overseas (Uyen, Trung, Phuong, Van). These viewpoints show how English is reconceptualised and reduced to only a skill, rather than a language, which aligns with the 'skill discourse' popularised under neoliberalism (Urciuoli, 2010). In these answers, English is perceived in its exchange value in the market and proficiency in a language, can be commodified and transformed into human capital.

Together with English being treated as a skill is the increasing interest in the metricisation of language competence. As Chi recalls her family's belief: "[they said] I could easily learn at English centers to take some proficiency tests like IELTS". While the participants care about improving their English competence, they show their preoccupation with the test scores as its symbolic representation. Seven participants specify their English learning goals in terms of score, like a high GPA score, and especially a high IELTS band score. The word 'IELTS' is mentioned 55 times in the data corpus of 47,295 words. Uyen stresses its significance: "If you say you are good at speaking, you cannot just say so, but have to show it with your speaking score". Interestingly, Tra expresses her doubt "even a 9.0 IELTS band would not mean much for real-life use," but when asked about her aim, she replies frankly "just IELTS score". Chi even complains that some of her courses or assignments are "meaningless", since they take away her time spent on preparing for a test to accumulate C1 scores for graduation. The meanings of the educational experiences seem to be reduced to scores, and other learning experiences that do not contribute to students' necessary credentials are seen as disruptive and unnecessary. While metricised exams were one peripheral element in traditional education, they are now the central tenets of neoliberal discourses (Do & Hoang, 2024), disrupting the intrinsic learning and teaching experiences.

5.3. English as Intrinsic Educational Values

While economic rationality is seen as the norm, the natural and inevitable way of thinking, some do not actively embrace this thought process. These participants are subject to macro-level narratives, yet able to exercise their agency to steer their thoughts, actions and decisions somehow against the dominant ideology.

The participants start learning English for instrumentalist goals; however, five of them grow interested in the intrinsic aspects of learning English, for example, Cuong and Van like the sound of the language and different accents. Uyen, Kien, Trung, Cuong share stories about how they like English thanks to the fun, interesting, creative lessons in the English centers. They praise their teachers for making lessons enjoyable and creative through unique teaching methods, drawing from their travel experiences and lifestyles, and captivating students with engaging stories.

Their construction of the goals, the values of English learning differs significantly from the previously mentioned accounts. Those with intrinsic motivation do not pay much attention to the attainment of high scores as their learning goals, but wish to expand knowledge of the language (Kien, Cuong) or to apply the knowledge to real life (Trung). The value of the English language is constructed not only within the instrumental framing, but also for meaning making, identity expression, communication and appreciation of culture and people. Trung credits English for fostering more tolerant attitudes, appreciating LGBTQ+ people, challenging prejudices: “I think when we learn languages and get exposed to other cultures, we also understand their different viewpoints, and probably hold less judgement towards it”. His transformative experience and his satisfaction demonstrate the potential for English teaching to foster critical engagement with the world and promote social justice and personal growth.

Four participants’ university major choices are made not solely on economic reasonings. Trung, Uyen, Cuong and Kien’s family members advise them to follow Business or Technology-related programs for future employment. However, they pursue English, because “Even though some people think I am crazy… I want to learn what I like” (Trung) and “This university provides a large background [liberal arts] knowledge” (Uyen). They resist the direction given to them, making their own choice, despite being a minority voice, and not without moments of doubts and hesitation. Kien recalls: “I was just afraid that the job is poorly regarded by other people. What if I cannot find a job or the salary is too low?” In the end, despite these concerns, Kien follows through with it.

While seven participants emphasise their English career prospects in terms of economic gains, some embrace the intrinsic value of the profession. Kien and Trung, who seem genuinely interested in the profession, talk more about the vision of English teachers they want to be - “who can make creative and fun lessons”. Trung’s vision is to change the current landscape of English education in Vietnam: “I realise that our country is severely lacking high-quality English teachers. I think I might have some new methods to help, maybe I could set up a company to enhance the English proficiency of the people”. Trung takes pride in the intrinsic value of the profession for society, about the possibilities of creating positive changes. He highlights the importance of English proficiency for Vietnamese, aligning with the neoliberal ideology of linguistic instrumentalism. He embodies the entrepreneurial spirit of the ideal neoliberal subject, albeit directed towards community benefits rather than personal gain. These instances show a broader perspective of the intrinsic values of educational experiences intertwining with a sense of economic values.

5.4. The Valorised "Self-Responsible" English Learners

The participants' emphasise personal qualities in describing an ideal English learner. The frequently mentioned trait is being "an active learner", having clear English learning goals, strategies and plans to achieve those goals, and knowing their strengths and weaknesses (Cuong, Uyen), and actively seeking opportunities outside the class, or part-time jobs to enhance one's English level (Hoa). Other traits include "hard-working", "self-motivated", and "confident". Cuong, Hoa, and Tra emphasise the "constant and regular practice" and "devotion". Meanwhile, Trung specifies his reasoning: "If they are not hard-working, they have to at least be able to motivate themselves. There are down times obviously, yet after that they have to find ways to lift themselves up, have some rest and then continue". Interestingly, Ha, Hoa and Van make some casual remarks that they themselves are not very good English learners, which they attribute to their own subjective qualities, like laziness, failure to curb impulses and procrastination, failure to look for new methods to study. Chi describes her roommate, whose language practices she wishes she could do herself:

> She can wake up early and read articles in English, which I can't do. She sets the limits and follows exactly. She even deleted her Facebook and other apps. She also loves reading American novels, even though it costs her money. I wish I could have her passion to read such a thick book. She uses Google so that she can learn more new words. She is like a "monster" ("quái vật"), not human anymore. (Chi)

Chi valorises her roommate for her "extraordinary" efforts in learning English, while she herself embodies similar qualities. Chi herself is diligent (doing ten mock tests a day), actively finds resources for learning (reading English newsletter), invests in learning (Netflix subscription to watch movies in English). Even though she is not different from the ideal image she described, she finds her learning efforts lacking.

In their accounts, the strategic, resourceful and self-regulating efforts are framed as a moral responsibility of a good, ideal liberal subject, manifesting linguistic entrepreneurship (De Costa et al., 2016). The success, or the lack thereof, in learning English is linked to the possession of subjective personal qualities and the moral character, which is deemed extraordinary or bordering on irreplicable in other learners.

While strongly emphasising self-responsibility, the participants acknowledge the external factors, like the quality of their teachers, curricula or the structural constraints (Van, Ha, Chi). Chi mentions her disadvantaged background in the countryside: "I wish my parents had known back then. I wish they had installed some English TV channels so I could have such a nice accent". Hoa complains about the ineffectiveness of her current English courses in improving her English ability, yet her solution revolves around her own responsibility to study harder and in better ways, rather than any changes from her university courses. Therefore, despite their awareness of these structural barriers, they radicalise the imperative to act as neoliberal subjects, focusing on individual responsibility to work harder on their English, or their own self-development, as the way to overcome these barriers, rather than expecting outside help.

5.5. English Learners in the Classroom Competition: Motivation, Stress and Insecurity

Another aspect of the neoliberal self involves self-regulation and skill improvement in response to the demands of the competitive and unstable market (Olssen, 2006). This competition seems to be tougher for those in big cities (Tra, Uyen). Tra compares with her peers: "the English level of others in my English Specialised Class surpassed mine by a wide reach, when I saw I was no longer at the top of the class, I realized I have to study". She recalls

that what most influenced her decision to study for the IELTS is because "everybody else around me did so". Uyen's sense of competitiveness is so palpable when she talks about her whole English learning journey. She, who was confident at English back at primary school, recalls: "When I entered Grade 6, my classmates had a very good background in English, sometimes I got fed up with learning it because I would never catch up with them". When she entered an English specialised class in high school, she commented about her inability to compete in the national exam for the gifted "like other excellent friends", which propelled her to pursue an IELTS test score instead. At university, she expresses how she feels worried to be selected into a fast-track class, afraid to study with "other too excellent classmates".

For Phuong, Hoa and Van, the most memorable experiences are the embarrassing and negative memories that remind them of how bad their English was, in comparison with others.

> My speaking skill was really terrible. That was the first time when a friend who was worse than me in other skills got a better prize than me. (Phuong)
>
> Meeting and getting to talk with them made me realise my English level was much lower than what I thought. When they talked back to me, I realised how many mistakes I made. It seemed to give me more motivation to work on my English. (Hoa)
>
> I don't understand why I couldn't utter anything, I couldn't say it out loud, while other friends could already speak some simple sentences. I realised I was just almost a zero in English, no matter what grammar and vocabulary I had learnt before. (Van)

These narratives portray the participants' learning experiences as being influenced by comparison and competition. They position themselves as neoliberal subjects as they become aware of the competition around them, and how they feel the imperative to improve their English skills due to that competition. They clearly have the motivation to focus and invest more; however, these stories also touch upon moments of frustration and stress, as Uyen admits "sometimes I got fed up with learning it because I would never catch up with them". There are also traces of insecurity and invalidation about their ability (Phuong, Van). Van's traumatic account and her evaluation of her English as "almost a zero" show how she invalidates all the efforts put on learning English before only because she is not as good at pronunciation as others.

Since these stories recount experiences from their youth, as secondary school students (Tra, Uyen, Phuong) or high school students (Hoa, Van), they indicate that their unconscious or conscious alignment with the neoliberal self has been instilled quite early. Understandably, Trung, Kien, Tra, and Uyen, who grew up in urban areas, were often enrolled in English centers or private lessons from a young age. Engaging in cultivating their human capital as guided by their parents, they were already expected to embody neoliberal ideals in their English learning, prioritising instrumental goals and competitiveness. Almost all the participants' narratives are filled with accounts of their extra efforts in learning English at school and in private classes, participating in various competitions to secure spots in prestigious schools, or to achieve special awards and standardised certificates, contributing to the enhancement of their human capital.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Though the study is limited in the number of participants and institutional focus due to its qualitative and in-depth nature, its findings help shed light on how Vietnamese English majors engage with neoliberal discourses, how they embody the ideal neoliberal subject and how the neoliberal discourses and practices interact with students' personhood. The participants' accounts indicate that different facets of their English learning have been increasingly constrained and controlled by narrow tenets of neoliberal forces. First, their

reasons for choosing English as their university major are mainly driven from neoliberal discourse of human capital investment and the hope for the economic benefits and opportunities. Economic rationality, informed by the various advertisements, plays an important role in this decision-making process. The impacts of metricisation in the neoliberal agenda are evident on students' expectations and experiences of their English learning, given the strong focus on having high scores and standardised certificates at the expense of the intrinsic meaning of education. Students emphasised individual responsibility and ideal personal characteristics as the major contribution to English learning success. These narratives illustrate how participants' learning experiences are shaped by comparison, competition, and the pressure to excel within a neoliberal framework, leading to both motivation and moments of frustration, stress, insecurity, and invalidation regarding their language abilities. These display the strong alignment to the ideal neoliberal subjects, reinforcing findings by other studies in neoliberal contexts, characterised by their investments and efforts devoted to English learning as part of the self-development projects. However, contrary to mostly negative findings of other studies investigating neoliberalism influence, the findings of this study do reveal the continued embrace of the multiple, intrinsic values of education, identity development in some, but not all, students' accounts, with the showcased personal interest, meaning making, identity construction and expression, as well as civic and political engagement.

The study highlights the intricate connection between English learning and neoliberal values, the normalisation of neoliberal principles, the internalisation of neoliberal notions, such as viewing learning as investment and aspiring to be self-responsible and proactive learners. This internalisation of neoliberal principles as imperative through the government of the self (Foucault et al., 2008; Manan, 2024) could reinforce and reproduce the neoliberal narratives, making it even more difficult for alternative discourses to penetrate (Bori & Canale, 2022). The study points out how this responsibilisation to study English (Choi, 2021; Foucault et al., 2008; Highet, 2024; Miller, 2016; Ratner, 2019) especially in this high-quality program is a form of risk-taking for less privileged individuals, and adds nuances to the picture by showing their struggles and hardships. Their disappointment shows that the ideal neoliberal self is not reproduced consistently without obstacles, reinforcing finding of previous studies when social differentiation is taken into account (Gao, 2016) and that low-income students suffer more negative impacts from neoliberal trends (Giroux, 2002) as it adds financial struggle to the already high study pressure.

Besides, striving to become a proactive and self-responsible model learner is not that straightforward. The findings reveal some signs of stress and low self-validation due to overemphasis on competition, adding nuances to the negative impacts of linguistic entrepreneurship suggested by De Costa et al. (2016). In their self-development project (Choi, 2021; Foucault et al., 2008; Highet, 2024; Gao, 2016; Ratner, 2019), the struggling students regard the difficulties as their sole responsibilities to bear. Their tendency to regard moral qualities as determinant factors for their learning success aligns with the ideology of language as pure potential observed by Park (2015), indicating the challenge to counter matters of inequalities and the pressure on individual learners (Highet, 2024), which are concealed when language learning is confined to an individual responsibility.

The frame of English as a technical skill, a commodity represented by a test score demonstrates the naturalisation of the commodification process, including the commodification of self, the reimagining oneself as a bundle of skills, whose worth is decided by their work productivity as described by Urciuoli (2008). Since it could potentially rob the students of other subjectivities, this way of thinking might place limits on their future self-actualisation. The

attention to grades and professional credentials can be seen as a direct impact of education driven by free-market logic (Giroux, 2002). This focus on scores raises concerns about the diminishing importance of intrinsic values in language learning, such as communication and knowledge expansion, which are overshadowed by English's function as a key indicator of ideal workers. We can see how universities and colleges are perceived as "training grounds for corporate berths" (Giroux, 2002, p. 435) under neoliberal agenda.

However, this study finds that not all students' perception of their learning experience and personhood are narrowly constrained by the metricisation discourse of neoliberalism. Some students show they are aware of the power dynamics associated with language learning, how English is linked to employability (Bacon & Kim, 2018), and how different social backgrounds contribute to the learning success. The learning experience and the curriculum provide them with chances to develop their thinking, enrich their cultural understanding, and embrace differences. The findings make it evident that "learning a dominant language can be both oppressive and liberatory, empowering and threatening" (Bernstein et al., 2015, p. 12). With these students describing their identity development and their imagined identity of enriching the community, evidence is found of the intrinsic role of university as "a site of critical thinking, democratic leadership, and public engagement" (Giroux, 2002, p. 428). The contrast in identity and value construction related to English between those who fully subscribe to the economic and metricised dimensions of neoliberalism and those who do not in this study suggests possible alternatives for disrupting neoliberal hegemony in the classroom, for more positive influences on students' identity and self-perception.

Nevertheless, the complexity of neoliberal positioning, which places significant emphasis on English proficiency as a symbol of enhanced life opportunities should be acknowledged. Neoliberal values are deeply entrenched in different facets of our life, with concepts traditionally considered neutral and beneficial, such as learner agency and autonomy, being closely aligned with the neoliberal self (Miller, 2016). Certain elements that constitute its ideal subject are not exclusively neoliberal (Park, 2010). Neoliberal discourse does not necessarily disregard traditional educational values; it acknowledges that education can cultivate holistic qualities, including those essential for the market. However, this study indicates that overemphasising economic values in education at the expense of intrinsic ones can limit students' learning, identity development, and personhood. Therefore, while we do not necessarily disregard of neoliberal values completely, we need a careful, thorough evaluation of our language teaching philosophies and practices. The findings suggest that students' awareness of power dynamics in English learning alone may not be sufficient to challenge hegemonic discourses, especially considering the social constraints they face. However, contrasting with the negative accounts of the influence of neoliberalism, in this study, the participants' recounting of learning enjoyment, inspiration from teachers, and widened perspectives underscore the potentially crucial role of language teachers and curriculum in fostering intrinsic educational values and broader, richer identity development.

The above findings suggest that language education programs and curriculum could balance employability with intrinsic educational values like critical thinking, cultural understanding, civic engagement and personal growth. Teacher training could empower teachers' role in challenging neoliberal discourses by fostering critical awareness, discussion on power dynamics, societal implications of language learning. Institutions and governments need to support marginalised students through financial aid, counseling and mentorship. Learning achievement could be reframed beyond grades and certifications to emphasise more holistic development, reducing stress, insecurity and vulnerability from excessive competition.

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