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Navigating critical literacies in academia: identity exploration among international doctoral students in the UK

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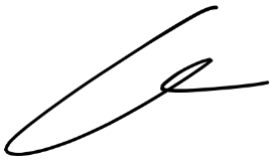
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Abstract

The internationalisation of UK higher education has led to a significant increase in multilingual international doctoral students; however, academic literacy practices are predominantly shaped by Eurocentric epistemologies and monolingual norms. This places multilingual international doctoral students in a precarious position, as they must navigate academic systems that may not fully recognise, legitimise, or value their linguistic resources, epistemic traditions, and ways of meaning-making. This thesis examines how multilingual international PhD students negotiate identity, voice, and critical literacy practices within UK doctoral education and how they position themselves within, against, and beyond institutional expectations of academic knowledge production.

Critical literacy is an approach to text that encourages individuals to question how texts relate to power, inequality, and social contexts, rather than treating them as neutral (Freire, 1970 & Luke, 2012). It positions learners as active meaning-makers who analyse whose voices are represented or excluded and how texts can challenge or reinforce existing social structures (Janks, 2000; Vasquez & Comber, 2019). The aims and objectives of this thesis are framed to explore how these participants engage with academic reading and writing as socially and culturally situated practices. The research is situated within a critical literacy framework informed by Freirean notions of reading the word and the world. It further draws on Moje and Luke's metaphors of identity and literacy, positioning literacy practices as sites where identities are constructed, negotiated, and contested. Drawing on a

poststructuralist understanding of identity as fluid, relational, and discursively constructed, this perspective enables an understanding of doctoral reading and writing not merely as technical competencies but as social and discursive practices through which students author themselves as legitimate knowledge producers. The data from this study also pointed toward the embodied nature of meaning-making and power. This study, therefore, also brings Ahmed's critical affective literacy into conversation with scholarship on critical literacy in higher education. Together, the concept of critical affective literacy focuses on the emotional and embodied dimensions of academic practice. These theoretical perspectives frame doctoral literacy as a space of identity negotiation, affective investment, and epistemic positioning within internationalised higher education.

By integrating critical discourse analysis and narrative inquiry design, the study offers a layered methodological approach to examining doctoral literacy practices as sites of identity formation and transformation. Using a qualitative approach, 6 pieces of academic writing, 48 narrative interviews, and 24 written diaries were collected from 6 international PhD students across multiple disciplines in the Social Sciences and Humanities at UK universities. This thesis then examines how participants discursively constructed voice, authority, and belonging in their literacy practices. Findings demonstrate that participants' reading and writing practices extend beyond technical skill acquisition; rather, they involve ongoing negotiations between comfort and discomfort, compliance and resistance, and monolingual and multilingual epistemologies. The establishment of voice and academic identity has been found to involve conflicting layers of postcolonial hybridity, as students navigate inherited

epistemic traditions alongside the normative expectations of UK doctoral discourse. Participants' reading and writing practices have been shown to involve critical engagement with dominant knowledge structures, yet these practices are frequently shaped by affective tensions, including doubt and ambivalence. While spaces for critical affective literacy have been shown to be essential for enabling authentic intellectual engagement and identity formation, such spaces are often institutionally constrained and limited.

This study contributes empirically, theoretically, methodologically, and at policy level to research on critical literacies, higher education studies, narrative analysis, and doctoral education. Empirically, it foregrounds the lived literacy practices, demonstrating that doctoral academic literacy is an ongoing, ideological, and affective process shaped by institutional and transnational power relations. Theoretically, this study extends critical literacy into doctoral contexts and advances critical affective literacy by highlighting the interplay of emotion, identity, and epistemic authority. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of poststructuralist critical narrative inquiry for analysing how students are positioned and how they reposition themselves through language and meaning-making practices. By integrating reflective interviews and creative writing diaries, the research illustrates how structured critical literacy activities can support researcher development and agency. At a policy and practice level, the findings challenge instrumental views of international doctoral students and argue for recognising them as knowledge producers whose perspectives can enrich and transform academic cultures, with implications for supervision, curriculum design, and doctoral training.

Overall, this study argues for the creation of institutional spaces that recognise multilingualism, hybridity, and affective experience as central to doctoral learning, thereby challenging predominantly narrow conceptions of academic legitimacy within internationalised UK higher education.

Chapter 1

Introduction

I arrived in the UK as a student of colour expecting to learn how to do research; I did not expect to learn so quickly how inequality is lived in everyday academic life. Experiences of racism, often subtle, sometimes overt, shaped how I spoke, wrote, and positioned myself within the university. This has made me aware that academic spaces are not neutral. These encounters became the starting point for my questions about voice, identity, and power in academia. It is from this position, shaped by the lived experience of internationalisation and racialised academic norms, that this study emerges.

This study set out to explore how multilingual international doctoral students make sense of, navigate, and respond to the conditions of internationalisation in the UK higher education with particular attention to how these encounters inform their identity exploration. Drawing on critical literacy as a theoretical lens and on critical narrative inquiry alongside critical discourse analysis, the research explores the lived experiences, literacy practices, and meaning-making processes of international multilingual doctoral students. It reveals how power, inequality, and belonging are negotiated in everyday academic life. My aim is also to identify, expose, and reframe key tensions that are often glossed over in higher education research and policy. My research exposes how celebratory discourses of internationalisation such as diversity, inclusion, and mobility mask the structurally contradictory realities experienced by international doctoral students.

My interest in the study of critical literacy and multilingualism has its roots in my Master's research and has since deepened through my academic trajectory and lived

experiences. During my Master's programme, I became increasingly aware that dominant approaches to literacy in higher education often prioritised technical competence, linguistic accuracy, and academic convention, while paying limited attention to the social, political, and affective dimensions of meaning-making. My Master's dissertation, which employed a mixed-methods approach to examine international students' academic engagement, revealed that students' literacy practices could not be adequately understood without considering how power, identity, and institutional expectations shape their participation. This work marked my first sustained engagement with critical perspectives on literacy.

Alongside this academic development, my experiences as an international student in the UK have significantly shaped my research interests in identity and literacy. Navigating academic life in a language and educational system that is not my own, I become increasingly aware that literacy extends far beyond reading and writing academic texts. It involves interpreting institutional norms, understanding unspoken expectations, and negotiating how one's voice could be recognised as legitimate within academic spaces. As a foreign citizen, my identity in the UK is mediated not only by university policies but also by broader migration regimes, social attitudes, and public discourse surrounding international students. These experiences highlight how literacy practices are embedded within power relations that determine who is heard, who is valued, and whose knowledge is deemed credible.

Over time, I began to recognise that my experiences were not isolated but reflective of broader structural conditions shaping multilingual students' participation and

identity in higher education. And, at the same time, I develop an awareness of my own practices for positioning and repositioning myself within this dynamic. I encountered moments where academic feedback focused narrowly on language form, where critical insights were overshadowed by concerns about linguistic performance, and where institutional support framed international students as needing to adapt rather than as contributors to knowledge production (Canagarajah, 2022; Kubota, 2012; Mittelmeier et al., 2025). While students might be encouraged to be 'critical', this expectation often aligns with specific cognitive norms that privilege particular ways of thinking, writing, and speaking. Such norms may obscure other forms of critical engagement that emerge from lived experience, political awareness, and ethical positioning.

These reflections led me to Freire's (1987) conceptions of critical literacy, particularly the notion of reading both the word and the world. Freire's work resonated with my experiences as it articulated literacy as a socially situated practice through which individuals come to understand and challenge the conditions shaping their lives. Through this lens, literacy became a means of recognising power relations embedded in academic practices, language norms, and institutional expectations (Bishop, 2014; Janks, 2010; Luke, 2014; Vasquez, 2019).

My positionality as both a researcher and an insider in the context of internationalised higher education shaped the design and focus of this study. Having occupied multiple roles: as a multilingual student, a researcher trained in Western academic traditions, and a foreign citizen navigating migration and belonging, I was

particularly attentive to how international doctoral students articulate their critical engagements and establish their identity – because I had been doing something similar. Rather than approaching the participants' narratives through predetermined theoretical categories, I sought to adopt a data-driven narrative approach with critical narrative analysis that allowed their voices, reflections, and meaning-making practices to guide the analysis. This methodological choice reflects my commitment to resisting deficit framings and recognising participants as knowledgeable agents.

Importantly, my interest in critical literacy, multilingualism and identity is not solely rooted in personal experience but is also informed by a broader commitment to equity and social justice in higher education. International doctoral students occupy a complex position as both learners and members of the research workforce. They contribute significantly to institutional research output while experiencing marginalisation (HESA, 2021; UK Parliament, 2025). My research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how internationalisation of academia is experienced from the perspectives of those who are frequently positioned at its margins and offers insights and recommendations for how it might be done more equitably.

This doctoral study emerges from these intertwined influences and is guided by a commitment to making visible the critical literacy practices of multilingual international doctoral students. Through this work, I seek not only to advance scholarly understanding but also to contribute to more inclusive and equitable research environments in internationalised higher education.

This chapter begins by outlining the context of migration and multiculturalism in the UK**,** situating international doctoral education within broader social and political conditions. It then examines international doctoral students within the UK research landscape, highlighting the opportunities and challenges shaped by internationalisation and global knowledge hierarchies. Next, the chapter focuses on the identity of multilingual international doctoral students, examining how language, race, and mobility intersect in doctoral study. This is followed by an introduction to critical literacy, which provides a conceptual lens for examining power, identity, and meaning-making in academic contexts. The chapter then articulates the research aim, before outlining the study's methodological orientation, grounded in poststructuralism, discourse, and narrative inquiry. Finally, the chapter concludes by presenting the research questions that guide the study.

The context of migration and multiculturalism in the UK

Immigration has played a central role in shaping the social, cultural, and economical aspects of the UK. Immigration becomes not only a demographic phenomenon but also a symbolic issue through which ideas of Britishness, race, and belonging are negotiated. Despite policy restrictions and public controversy (Favell, 2020), immigration has profoundly shaped British culture. Migrant communities have contributed to linguistic diversity, religious pluralism, culinary practices, music, literature, and everyday social life (Vertovec, 2007).

Cultural contributions from migrant communities have often been accompanied by struggles for recognition and equality. Movements for civil rights, anti-racism, and multicultural education emerging in response to discrimination and exclusion have shaped public discourse and institutional practices. For example, since 2016, the Black Lives Matter movement has renewed public debate around systemic racism, colonial legacies, and representation in British institutions. While multiculturalism gained prominence in the late twentieth century, it has remained contested, with critics arguing that it undermines social cohesion (Keddie, 2014) and supporters emphasising its role in recognising diversity and addressing inequality (Vertovec, 2007).

Importantly, immigration has also reshaped the UK's higher education and research sectors. Universities have become increasingly internationalised spaces to host students, academics, and researchers from around the world (Bolton et al., 2025; Mittelmeier et al., 2025). This has contributed to global knowledge exchange, research capacity, and economic growth, while also raising questions about inclusion and equity.

Post-Brexit immigration policy has emphasised skills, salary thresholds, and labour market needs. While the UK continues to attract migrants in sectors such as healthcare, education, and research, the new system has increased uncertainty for many migrants, including students and early-career researchers (Portes & Springford, 2023). Visa costs, sponsorship requirements, and restrictions on dependents have

become significant barriers in reshaping who can access opportunities in the UK. At the same time, Brexit has intensified debates about national identity and belonging. Migrants who had lived in the UK for decades found their status questioned (Farrell et al., 2020). This episode emphasised the fragility of belonging for racialised and migrant communities.

Recent policy announcements have further tightened migration routes (Restoring Control over the Immigration System, 2025), particularly for students and dependents, which has indicated an emphasis on reducing overall immigration numbers. Policies announced in 2025 have intensified controversy and public debate in the UK, particularly around the balance between economic priorities, social cohesion, and ethical responsibility. Government statements have framed the tightening of migration routes as necessary to reduce overall immigration and prioritise domestic labour (gov.uk). However, universities, research organisations, and sector bodies have raised concerns that increasingly restrictive measures, especially those affecting international students, risk undermining the UK's global competitiveness in higher education and research (Universities UK, 2025). Spencer (2011) has further argued that these policies reinforce an instrumental view of migrants as economic resources rather than as long-term members of academic community andsociety. The controversy surrounding the 2025 immigration agenda thus reveals a persistent tension within UK migration governance: while internationalisation relies on global mobility and diversity, immigration policy continues to operate through logics of restriction, control, and national prioritisation. This has resulted in a decline in international student registrations (Research

Professional News, 2025; UK Home Office, 2025). In this sense, internationalisation is framed as 'responsible recruitment' that seeks to ensure international students come to study before being required to leave again.

Immigration debates in the UK are not solely about movement across borders; they are deeply entwined with questions of power, representation, and knowledge. Power operates not only through policy but also through the discourse of whose voices are heard and whose experiences are marginalised. Migrants are frequently spoken about rather than listened to, positioned as objects of regulation rather than as agents with social, cultural, and intellectual contributions (De Genova, 2002). This dynamic is particularly noticeable in debates about international students and researchers, who are simultaneously valued for their economic contribution and subjected to suspicion and control (Mittelmeier et al., 2025).

Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond simplistic narratives of benefit or burden and recognising immigration as a process shaped by historical, political, and institutional forces. For universities, this context has significant implications, as international students and researchers navigate academic environments structured by both global aspirations for knowledge exchange and national constraints imposed through immigration governance. Situating individual experiences within this broader historical and policy framework enables a more nuanced understanding of immigration. It is within this context that international students and, particularly, international doctoral researchers must be understood as

key actors in the UK research landscape, whose mobility, labour, and knowledge production are deeply entangled with these wider immigration dynamics.

International doctoral students and the UK research landscape

International doctoral students thus occupy an important yet increasingly complex position within the UK research landscape. The UK has positioned itself as a global hub for research excellence, innovation, and knowledge production, with universities playing a central role in sustaining international research collaboration and competitiveness. In the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021, 84% of UK university activity was rated as world-leading or internationally excellent (Universities UK, 2023). Within this context, international doctoral students are not only learners in advanced training programmes but also key contributors to the research workforce and participating in transnational academic networks (Shen et al., 2021). Their presence is therefore integral to the functioning of the UK research ecosystem, even as their status remains shaped by immigration regimes and institutional hierarchies. National bodies such as UK Research and Innovation (2025) have repeatedly emphasised the importance of global talent to the UK's research ambitions, framing international doctoral recruitment as essential to maintaining international standing, innovation capacity, and economic growth. Yet, while international doctoral students are discursively positioned as assets within research policy, their everyday experiences often reveal a more ambivalent reality, shaped by conditional belonging and uneven recognition (Mittelmeier et al., 2025).

The internationalisation of doctoral education has also transformed the demographic and linguistic composition of UK research environments. Doctoral cohorts increasingly include students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds (Zhao et al., 2024). These students bring diverse epistemological traditions, research practices, and intellectual orientations. This diversity has the potential to enrich knowledge production and challenge monocultural norms within academia. However, research suggests that academic cultures often continue to privilege dominant Western norms of scholarship, shaping expectations around writing, supervision, criticality, and academic voice (Udah, 2023). For international doctoral students, navigating these expectations requires not only technical competence but also sophisticated forms of literacy that involve interpreting disciplinary conventions, institutional cultures, and unspoken power relations. These forms of meaning-making are central to doctoral success, yet they are rarely acknowledged explicitly within research training frameworks.

Despite these challenges, international doctoral students are not passive recipients of policy and institutional conditions. Research increasingly recognises their agency, resilience, and capacity for critical engagement with the structures shaping their academic lives (Kokotsaki, D, 2023; Wu, 2022). International doctoral researchers actively interpret and respond to their positioning through everyday practices including how they approach research topics, negotiate supervision relationships, engage with academic writing, and form solidarities with other marginalised groups. These practices reflect forms of critical awareness that involve ethical, political, and relational dimensions of knowledge production. However, such forms of engagement

often remain under-recognised within institutional frameworks that prioritise research outputs and standardised notions of excellence as key criteria for institutional funding and reputational ranking (Pinar & Horne, 2022).

Understanding international doctoral students within the UK research landscape therefore requires moving beyond deficit-oriented approach (Kubota, 2020; Mittelmeier et al., 2025). Rather than framing international doctoral researchers primarily in terms of skills gaps, adjustment challenges, or economic contribution, there is a need to examine how they experience and navigate the power relations embedded in internationalised research environments (Choy et al., 2017; Othman & Lo, 2023). This perhaps also requires moving beyond existing reports of students' experiences and perceptions of higher education toward a more nuanced understanding of their actions, practices, and motivations. This includes attention to how immigration policy, institutional practices, and disciplinary norms intersect to shape whose knowledge is valued and whose voices are amplified. In this sense, international doctoral students offer a critical lens for examining the contemporary UK research landscape. Their experiences sit at the intersection of inclusion and exclusion, aspiration and constraint. By foregrounding their narratives and literacy practices, it becomes possible to explore how their identity is lived and negotiated at the level of everyday academic life, rather than assumed as a coherent process. Such an approach not only deepens understanding of doctoral education but also raises broader questions about equity, recognition, and power within internationalised higher education systems. By focusing on their lived experiences and meaning-making practices, this research seeks to illuminate how international doctoral

students read, interpret, and respond to the conditions of internationalisation in the UK research landscape.

Multilingual international doctoral students' identity

Multilingual identity is central to understanding the experiences of international doctoral students in UK higher education. In this study, *'multilingual'* refers to individuals who use more than one language in their everyday and academic lives (Valdés, 2022). For international doctoral students, multilingualism is not merely a linguistic characteristic, but a core dimension of identity shaped through prior educational trajectories, cultural histories, and transnational mobility. Engaging in doctoral research in English while drawing on additional linguistic perspectives, they simultaneously navigate multiple linguistic, cultural, and academic worlds. Despite the prominence of internationalisation discourse in higher education, research that explicitly centres multilingual identity in doctoral education remains limited (Lomer et al., 2024).

Studies often emphasise the challenges multilingual students face in academic reading and writing, particularly in relation to publishing in English-dominant scholarly spaces (Sinnasamy & Karim, 2016). Within this framing, doctoral identity is frequently constructed as something to be achieved through conformity to standard academic English and Western epistemic traditions (Dryden & Dovchin, 2022; Singh, 2019). While these studies highlight real structural pressures, they risk

positioning multilingual doctoral identities as incomplete or deficient and reinforcing a narrow view of what counts as a legitimate academic self.

Rather than conceptualising identity development as a process of overcoming linguistic inadequacy, this study foregrounds the richness, complexity, and creativity of multilingual doctoral identities. Multilingual international doctoral students bring diverse intellectual traditions, cultural frameworks, and epistemic orientations that shape their understanding of research, knowledge, and academic belonging. Identity is an ongoing process of negotiation through which students learn to survive, adapt, and thrive within Western academic spaces while maintaining connections to other linguistic and cultural worlds.

A key dimension of multilingual doctoral identity lies in how students mobilise their multiple languages in research practice. Multilingual individuals possess 'knowledge of more than one language in the same mind' (Cook, 2012, p. 1). However, the value attributed to these multilingual identities is uneven. Dovchin (2020) demonstrates that the linguistic identities of transnational students are frequently racialized and ranked, with certain language practices being legitimized while others are marginalized, depending on geopolitical and institutional settings. Dryden and Dovchin (2022) further demonstrate how multilingual identities, particularly those associated with the Global South, can be subject to translingual discrimination, affecting students' sense of academic legitimacy and belonging.

Identity is deeply intertwined with academic literacies. Literacy research has increasingly emphasised that reading and writing are not neutral skills but sites where identity is performed, negotiated, and contested (Barton, 2000; Kim & Cho, 2017; Moje & Luke, 2009). Hall (2012) argues that reading identities are shaped by learners' histories and experiences, influencing how they engage with texts and knowledge. Similarly, Burgess and Ivanič (2010) assert that writing is always an act of identity, as writers position themselves in relation to disciplinary norms, audiences, and authority. For multilingual doctoral students, academic literacies become key arenas where linguistic identity, academic identity, and personal identity intersect.

Critical literacy theory further deepens the analysis of multilingual doctoral identity by foregrounding the relationship between language, power, and social positioning (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Critical literacy conceptualises identity as socially constructed and historically situated, shaped through engagement with dominant ideologies such as monolingualism and academic priority (Janks, 2000; Leu, 2020). Through critical engagement with texts and practices, individuals may begin to recognise how they are positioned within academic structures and how alternative identities can be articulated. Goodman and Cocca (2014) argue that such critical engagement enables learners to reconstruct identities in more agentive ways, particularly when dominant discourses have marginalised their voices. In multilingual doctoral contexts, critical literacy highlights how academic identities are continually negotiated through reading, writing, and research practices. Rather than viewing identity as fixed or purely cognitive, this perspective positions multilingual

doctoral identity as fluid, embodied, and relational. Reading and writing become sites where identity is contested and reimagined. This space allows multilingual doctoral students to draw on cultural and linguistic resources to assert agency, resist marginalisation, and claim academic voice.

Critical Literacy

In this study, literacy is understood as more than the technical ability to read and write texts; it is a social and political site where power is encountered, interpreted, and negotiated (Street, 1984). Literacy practices shape how inequality is read, felt, and responded to in everyday academic and social life (Street, 1984). From this perspective, literacy becomes a means through which individuals come to recognise how knowledge is produced, whose voices are legitimised, and whose ways of knowing are marginalised. Power operates not only through what is written and spoken, but through what is authorised as legitimate critique.

Critical literacy provides a theoretical framework for examining these dynamics. The theoretical roots of critical literacy lie in sociocultural and critical theory traditions, most notably in Freire's (1970) conception of 'reading the word' and 'reading the world'. Freire conceptualised literacy as a process through which individuals develop critical consciousness by recognising the links between personal experience and structural conditions. This orientation positions learners as active meaning-makers capable of questioning oppression rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Vasquez et al. (2019) state that critical literacy is not just a topic to teach but a way

of seeing and engaging with the world. Placing the word '*critical'* before 'literacy' indicates a deliberate move to question what is often taken for granted within dominant academic and disciplinary traditions. It encourages individuals to critically examine everyday texts to uncover hidden messages and power dynamics. It draws on students' cultural and linguistic knowledge and emphasises using real-life and meaningful issues. Rather than treating literacy as a neutral skill, critical literacy foregrounds the relationship between language, power, and social structures, emphasising how reading and writing are always embedded within broader cultural, historical, and political contexts (Luke, 2012; Vasquez & Comber, 2019).

Janks (2000) frames critical literacy as a shifting, embodied social practice that recognises the dynamic constitution of identity across complex, multimodal social spaces. It therefore confronts issues of injustice related to gender, race, social class, language, religion, sexuality, and other social formations. Critical literacy asks not only *what* texts mean, but *who* they serve, *who* they exclude, and *how* they sustain or disrupt existing power relations (Freire, 1993). In contemporary contexts, critical literacy also requires engagement with multiple and often conflicting forms of media and discourse (Bacalja et al., 2021).

Within this study, critical literacy is not treated as a predefined set of skills but as an interpretive lens through which participants' research practices and identity negotiations are examined. The analysis attends to how individuals read the political and institutional dimensions of their academic worlds, how they recognise inequality and marginalisation, and how they use language and research practices to act upon

these understandings. In doing so, the study highlights how critical literacy can exist in lived, embodied, and relational forms that may not always be explicitly named or institutionally recognised (Janks, 2000; Kim & Cho, 2017; Luke, 2012; Vander, 2016; Vasquez & Comber, 2019).

Research aim

The overarching aim of this doctoral study is to explore whether or not and how multilingual international doctoral students in UK higher education enact critical literacy in making sense of, navigating, and responding to Western academic norms with particular attention to how these encounters inform their identity exploration. It investigates the practices of critical literacy that emerge. Drawing on a Freirean understanding of critical literacy as the capacity to read both the word and the world, the study examines how international doctoral students interpret their academic, social, and political environments through lived experience and literacy practices. The research moves beyond institutional and policy-level accounts of internationalisation to foreground how power, inequality, and identity are understood and negotiated in everyday doctoral research life.

This aim is informed by the recognition that much existing research on multilingualism and doctoral education has prioritised mobility patterns, skills development, or institutional strategy (Kim, 2017). Such approaches tend to conceptualise literacy narrowly as academic competence and criticality as a cognitive skill to be acquired, rather than as a socially situated practice shaped by history, power, identity, and lived experience. On the contrary, this study positions critical

literacy as a central concept through which international doctoral students' experiences can be understood as forms of political and ethical meaning-making. The research therefore aims to reconceptualise international doctoral students as critical readers whose literacy practices reveal how their knowledge is lived and contested.

A key objective of the study is to examine how international doctoral students narrate and make sense of their experiences of cultural background, doctoral study and research work. This involves examining how participants connect personal trajectories to broader social, historical, and political contexts, including migration regimes, disciplinary norms, and institutional expectations. Through critical narrative inquiry, the study seeks to understand how meaning is produced through storytelling, reflection, and interpretation, and how these processes involve acts of critical reading of the world. This objective not only reflects an understanding of critical literacy as emerging from lived experience rather than formal instruction but also raises the question of the role of critical literacies in researcher development programmes, such as doctoral studies.

A further objective of this study is to examine how international doctoral students understand, negotiate, and narrate their identities within the context of UK higher education. This includes exploring how participants' identities are shaped by the intersections of nationality, language, and migratory status, and how these dimensions become salient in their doctoral and research experiences. Rather than treating identity as a fixed or individual attribute, the study investigates identity as a relational and dynamic process, produced through engagement with institutional

expectations, disciplinary norms, and broader discourses of internationalisation and migration.

Another objective is to explore how international doctoral students enact literacy practices that involve questioning, interpreting, and responding to power relations embedded in internationalised higher education in the UK. Drawing on critical literacy theory, the study examines how participants read academic texts, institutional discourses, and social narratives alongside broader political realities such as immigration and global inequality. Particular attention is paid to how participants use language, writing, and research itself as tools for interpretation and action, whether through reflexive positioning, ethical judgement, or expressions of solidarity with marginalised groups. In this way, the study aims to demonstrate that critical literacy operates not only within classrooms or curricula but also within the everyday practices of doctoral research and academic life.

In line with the scope of this study and the depth of qualitative inquiry required, the research focuses on a small group of six international doctoral students within the social sciences, specifically from disciplines such as Education, Law, and Gender Studies. Rather than aiming for broad generalisation, the study seeks to develop a nuanced understanding of how participants within these disciplinary contexts experience and negotiate academic literacy practices (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). These fields provide a particularly relevant site for investigation, as they involve intensive engagement with critical reading, writing, and argumentation, often shaped by implicit epistemological and linguistic expectations. Accordingly, the aims and

objectives of this thesis are framed to explore how these participants engage with academic reading and writing as socially and culturally situated practices, how they draw on multilingual resources in meaning-making, and how they negotiate voice, identity, and knowledge production within their doctoral journeys. This focused sample enables an in-depth exploration of lived experiences, aligning the study's qualitative design with its aim of generating rich, context-sensitive insights rather than statistically generalisable claims (Cresswell, 2014).

Taken together, these aims and objectives position the study as a contribution to scholarship on critical literacy, internationalisation, multilingualism, identity and doctoral education. Rather than treating critical literacy as an outcome to be measured or taught, the research conceptualises it as a lived practice through which international doctoral students read, interpret, and respond to the conditions shaping their academic lives. By foregrounding international doctoral students' narratives and literacy practices, the study aims to expose how academic practices are experienced as a power process and how critical literacy operates as a means of navigating and contesting inequality within the UK research landscape. Ultimately, the research seeks to advance more inclusive and theoretically grounded understandings of both critical literacy and international doctoral education in internationalised higher education contexts (Kaura & Sidhub, 2013; William, 2006). Given these core objectives, this study is underpinned by the following core research questions, which are discussed in more detail in the section on research questions: 1. What are the experiences of international PhD students in navigating their individual voices in research in an English-speaking host country such as the UK?; 2. How are the

academic identities of international multilingual PhD students performed and constructed through their English second-language research practices? 3. How is international multilingual PhD students' awareness of critical literacy manifested in higher education research practice?

Methodological Orientation: Poststructuralism, Discourse, and Narrative Inquiry

This study is informed by a poststructuralist perspective, which views language, meaning, and identity as socially constructed rather than fixed or stable. From this standpoint, texts are not neutral representations of reality but sites where meanings are produced, negotiated, and contested through language, power, and social norms (Given, 2008). Poststructural research, therefore, involves close attention to how language is used to construct particular versions of reality and particular understandings of self, knowledge, and experience.

Guided by this perspective, the study draws on critical discourse analysis to examine the relationship between participants' linguistic practices and their social practices. Rather than treating language as a transparent vehicle for conveying meaning, critical discourse analysis allows exploration of how participants use language to position themselves, make sense of their experiences, and respond to the institutional and cultural conditions of UK higher education. This approach aligns with the aims of the study, which seeks to understand how multilingual international doctoral students navigate identity, voice, and power through their research-related literacy practices.

In this study, the analysis focuses on both content and form, treating texts as social resources that reflect and shape participants' experiences, identities, and relationships. The aim is not necessarily to analyse language at the level of grammatical detail, but to critically examine how language is used to construct meaning within particular academic contexts. Although, as we will see, the linguistic choices participants make help to demonstrate that even the structure of language can be used in empowering and disempowering ways to position oneself in the academy.

The primary methodology employed in this study is narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is particularly suited to research that seeks to understand lived experience, identity, and meaning-making over time. As defined by Lieblich et al. (1998), narrative research encompasses studies that collect or analyse narrative materials, including interviews, written reflections, field notes, or personal documents. These narratives provide insight into how individuals organise experience, interpret events, and construct a sense of self. Narrative inquiry is widely used in educational research because it captures the complexity of educational experiences as they are lived, told, and reflected upon (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Smith (2008) describes narrative inquiry as a methodology that integrates theory, practice, and reflection, making it particularly appropriate for studying doctoral education. Rather than isolating variables or testing hypotheses, narrative inquiry focuses on understanding experience in context and recognising participants as meaning-makers. By telling their stories, participants reveal not only personal experiences but also the cultural, institutional, and social contexts that shape them. In this study, participants' narratives illuminate how multilingual international doctoral students encounter

opportunities and barriers in developing academic voice and identity within UK institutions. By interpreting these narratives, the study is able to provide a nuanced qualitative account of how identity is negotiated at the intersection of language, culture, and academic practice.

This focus on narrative aligns closely with a poststructuralist perspective. Narrative research recognises the multiplicity of meanings and the importance of context, emotion, and subjectivity. Bold (2012) emphasises that narrative research supports interpretation rather than explanation, offering insight into how individuals make sense of their lives. This methodological approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how participants make sense of their doctoral journeys and how their identities, voices, and practices evolve within the changing contexts of higher education.

This qualitative study employed multiple means for participants to express their identities and experiences with language as emerging researchers, collected through three main research instruments: 1) participants' academic writing, 2) participants' digital solicited diaries and 3) diary interviews. Data collection took place over an eight-week period. To begin, participants submitted a sample of their academic writing, which served as a baseline artefact for subsequent analysis. Over the eight-week period, each participant completed one semi-structured interview per week (a total of 8 interviews per participant), each lasting approximately 45 minutes. In addition, participants completed reflective diary tasks at four key points (Weeks 1, 3, 5, and 7) to elicit written reflections on identity, literacy practices, and academic writing experiences.

Methodologically, this study aims to demonstrate the value of narrative, data-driven qualitative approaches for researching critical literacy in international doctoral contexts. By prioritising participants' voices and allowing analytic categories to emerge from the data, the research resists imposing predefined models of criticality. An explicit objective is to show how critical literacy can be identified and analysed through participants' narratives, reflections, and everyday practices, even when it is implicit or embodied.

Research questions

The research questions guiding this study are designed to explore the experiences of international multilingual PhD students in research, identity, and critical engagement within the context of English-dominant higher education in the UK. These questions reflect the study's central concern with how academic voice, identity, and critical literacy are lived, negotiated, and enacted within internationalised research environment. Rather than approaching international doctoral students' experiences as linear or uniform, the questions are intentionally exploratory and interpretive to allow space for complexity, contradiction, and change over time. They move analytically from participants' lived experiences of research practice, to the construction and performance of academic identity, and finally to students' awareness and enactment of critical literacy and power in higher education. In doing so, the research questions provide a coherent framework for examining how

international doctoral students read, make sense of, and respond to the academic and social worlds they inhabit. Below is the explanation for the three main research questions.

Research Question 1

What are the experiences of international PhD students in navigating their individual voices in doing research in an English-speaking host country such as the UK?

This question examines how international doctoral students experience the process of developing and asserting an academic voice within an English-dominant research environment. Academic voice is not treated as a purely linguistic or technical competence, but as a socially situated process shaped by institutional norms, disciplinary expectations, and students' positionality. By focusing on navigating individual voices, the question acknowledges that academic voice is negotiated rather than given.

1.a What are the students' experiences in becoming an academic author?

This sub-question examines how international PhD students understand and experience as academic authors. It focuses on practices such as writing for thesis and publication, positioning in relation to existing scholarship, and claiming authority in academic texts. The question allows exploration of how authorship is learned, supported, or constrained, and how students perceive their right to contribute knowledge within English-medium academic discourse.

1.b How do their prior knowledge and cultural background affect their engagement in research activities?

This sub-question investigates how students' prior educational experiences, epistemological traditions, and cultural backgrounds shape their engagement with research practices in the UK. Rather than treating background as a deficit, this question recognises prior knowledge as a resource that may both enable and complicate participation. It allows analysis of how students draw on, adapt, or suppress prior ways of knowing when engaging in research activities such as reading and writing.

1.c How confident are students in claiming their (emerging) academic voice?

This sub-question focuses on affective and relational dimensions of academic voice. It explores how students' confidence develops over time and how it is shaped by broader power relations. This question is important for understanding voice not only as performance, but as something deeply connected to identity, belonging, and perceived entitlement within academic spaces.

Research Question 2

How are the academic identities of international multilingual PhD students performed and constructed through their English second language research practices?

This question shifts the analytical focus from experience to identity construction. It examines how academic identity is enacted through everyday research practices conducted in a second language, including writing, presenting, and participating in academic discourse. This question allows exploration of how language mediates identity formation in internationalised research environments.

2.a How do the students establish their (hybrid) identities in relation to their established defined identities and ideological subjectivity?

This sub-question explores how students negotiate hybrid identities that emerge from the intersection of past identities and new academic positions. It attends to how students reconcile or hold in tension their established sense of self with the ideological expectations of English-dominant academia.

2.b What strategies do the students adopt in order to negotiate and create their emerging identity?

This sub-question focuses on agency and strategy. It examines the conscious and unconscious practices students use to manage identity negotiation. By focusing on strategies, the question avoids portraying students as passive and instead highlights how they actively navigate identity formation within constrained institutional contexts.

2.c How have the students' perceptions of their academic identities changed since the beginning of the data collection process, if at all?

This sub-question introduces a temporal dimension to identity construction. It explores whether and how students' understandings of themselves as researchers evolve over time, particularly in response to shifts in confidence and recognition from the beginning to the later stages of the study. Its aim is to examine whether engagement with questions informed by critical literacy prompted shifts in their understanding of their academic experiences. It seeks to determine whether making critical literacy concepts explicit contributed to heightened awareness, reinterpretation, or new perspectives on the identity construction process among the students.

Research Question 3

How is international multilingual PhD students' awareness of critical literacy manifested in higher education research practice?

This question explicitly foregrounds critical literacy as a central theoretical lens. It examines how international doctoral students understand, enact, or implicitly demonstrate critical literacy in their research practices. Critical literacy is conceptualised not merely as a learned academic skill, but as an awareness of how knowledge production is shaped by power, ideology, and social positioning. The question allows exploration of whether and how students critically read the research world, even when such practices are not explicitly named or institutionally recognised.

3.a How can critical literacy be beneficial to multilingual PhD students?

This sub-question explores the perceived and enacted value of critical literacy for international doctoral students. It examines how critical literacy may support students in interpreting academic norms, questioning power relations, and asserting agency in research practices.

3.b What are the possible issues in the enactment of critical literacy practices among the students?

This sub-question attends to constraints and tensions. It explores the challenges international doctoral students face in enacting critical literacy, including institutional expectations, linguistic norms, immigration regimes, and fear of risk-taking.

Chapter 2

Literature review

This chapter critically reviews the body of literature that informs this study. It is situated within the intersecting fields of higher education, doctoral research, internationalisation, multilingualism, identity and critical literacy. The first section offers a global perspective on UK higher education, with particular attention to the changing landscape of doctoral education in the context of increasing internationalisation. The second section explores theories and perspectives on the identities of international doctoral students, shaped and negotiated within this evolving context. The third section examines the dynamic relationship among identity, multilingualism, and literacy practices, emphasising the significance of linguistic diversity and its influence on academic engagement, with particular attention to the researcher's identity and practice. The fourth section outlines the core tenets of critical literacy theory that underpin this research and focuses on its potential to interrogate power, positionality, and meaning-making in higher education. Finally, the chapter concludes by identifying key research gaps and outlining the study's direction for addressing them, particularly through a focus on critical literacy practice and the identity work of multilingual international PhD students.

1. UK higher education and doctoral education: A global perspective

This sub-chapter provides an overview of the context surrounding internationalisation and doctoral education in the UK. It begins by examining the landscape of international student recruitment within UK universities, followed by a discussion of the key dimensions of internationalisation in higher education. The

section then explores how globalisation strategies have been developed in response to these internationalisation trends. It concludes by considering the specific role and positioning of doctoral education within the broader UK higher education system.

1.1 Context

Despite Brexit, which is likely to have an impact on the decreased number of enrolments from overseas students (Peter et al.,2021; Amuedo-Dorantes and Romiti, 2024), the UK is introducing a number of strategies to attract international students. In the report of international education strategy in the UK (2021), new policies have been introduced to recruit and diversify foreign students, such as international Home Office communications, new Student Route, and alternative student finance, including an increasing number of scholarships and bursaries. In addition, from December 2021,a new Turing scheme, which values £110 million, was launched to foster international education (gov.uk). The strategy aims to sustainably recruit at least 600,000 international students to the UK by 2030. In the report, it is acknowledged that international students contribute to the social, cultural, and economic value of UK campuses.

According to HESA data, in 2020/2021, the largest proportion of full-time postgraduate students in the UK came from non-EU countries. Between 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, international student enrolments increased by 48,500, with the majority of this growth driven by non-EU students. Chinese students represented the largest international student group, with enrolments rising sharply by 48,225 (a 50%

increase) between 2016 and 2021. Indian student numbers also grew substantially during this period, increasing by 67,660. By 2020/2021, students from China and India accounted for 32% and 19% of the non-EU postgraduate population, respectively. Looking specifically at the research landscape, HESA figures from 2016/2017 show that 13% of doctoral students in the UK came from other European countries, while 29% came from the Global South. It can be seen that non-UK students take up nearly half of the doctoral research population (42%), which is a mix of nationalities, cultural and language backgrounds. From the cohort, we can see that there is an institutional diversity in terms of languages, cultures, and ethnicities and the changes in student population have become more significant in recent years. This suggests a diverse research culture and research outcomes in UK higher education.

The numbers show visibility (large enrolment), but not necessarily inclusion. Being present in large numbers does not mean that multilingual doctoral students' voices and knowledge are valued. Instead, their contributions may still be marginalised within dominant discourses (Kubota, 2020; Mittelmeier et al., 2025; Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2017). It is important to embrace diversity in the research workforce and establish an inclusive research environment, which is considered part of the process of internationalising higher education. Almost all universities in the UK publicly articulate commitments to diversity and inclusion. For example, the University of Cambridge states on its website that: *"*The University of Cambridge is committed in its pursuit of academic excellence to equality of opportunity and to a proactive and inclusive approach to equality, which supports and encourages all

under-represented groups, promotes an inclusive culture, and values diversity." (University of Cambridge, n.d.).

Paradoxically, in 2025, the UK Prime Minister announced plans to tighten migration rules, aiming to prioritise British workers and reduce overall immigration (UK Government, 2025). This act might delegitimise the presence of international students and position them as economic resources rather than valued members of the academic community. These political moves risk reinforcing colonial logics in higher education, where non-UK perspectives are marginalised and assimilation into dominant norms becomes even more expected. Accordingly, Gopal (2021) argues that the project of decolonising Western universities, especially in Britain and Europe, is both necessary and deeply political. She emphasises that decolonisation involves more than superficial representation; it requires a fundamental reappraisal of how Eurocentric value systems, knowledge hierarchies, and institutional practices shape what counts as legitimate scholarship. She highlights that meaningful decolonisation must address not only curricula but also the deeper structural and ideological legacies of colonialism embedded in the modern university.

The concept and different motivations for internationalisation will be discussed in the next section.

1.2 Internationalisation

Internationalisation is widely recognised as a defining feature of contemporary higher education, closely intertwined with broader processes of globalisation (De Wit, 2020; Majee & Ress, 2018; Proctor & Rumbley, 2018). Drawing on Knight's (1997) influential formulation, globalisation can be understood as the intensified flow of technology, knowledge, people, values, and ideas across national borders, while internationalisation refers to the ways higher education systems respond to and are reshaped by these global flows. Rather than positioning nations as discrete or autonomous actors, internationalisation operates through interactions among institutions, languages, and knowledge systems that are structured by unequal power relations. In practice, this means that internationalisation does not simply reflect national individuality, but often privileges dominant languages, epistemologies, and academic norms, particularly those associated with Western higher education, while marginalising others (Stein et al., 2016). Understanding internationalisation in this way foregrounds power as central to how global knowledge circulates, how academic legitimacy is produced, and how different national and cultural factors are positioned within higher education.

Possible motivations for internationalisation in higher education have been highlighted by Knight (1997) and Qiang (2003). The academic motivation is associated with the aim of achieving an international standard for teaching and research, promoting internationalisation across teaching, research, and service activities, resulting in improved quality of higher education (Knight, 1997; Qiang, 2003). Knight's (1997, p.11) view about 'homogenising effects of globalisation' provides the argument for the cultural/ social rationale that cultures and languages

need to be understood, the country's culture needs to be preserved, and diversity needs to be respected. English often becomes the dominant medium, pushing other languages to the margins and flattening multilingual richness into monolingual conformity (Knight, 1997; Qiang, 2003). Lastly, in order to help the country to remain internationally competitive, economic rationale targets at enhancing the human resources/ capital. It aims to boost the institution's income through the provision of education abroad and greater international student attraction (Knight, 1997; Qiang, 2003). Thus, internationalisation in higher education is an attempt with different rationales. In particular, Kreber (2009) and De Wit (2020) argue that economic force has become the primary motivation for internationalisation.

Universities recruit large numbers of international students not only for the intellectual or cultural value they bring, but also as a critical source of revenue, particularly in the context of Brexit, reduced government funding, and broader financial pressures (Universities UK, 2025)**.** In recent years, international student tuition fees have grown into a major source of revenue for UK universities. This amount of money accounts for a substantial proportion of total income and helps to offset declining public funding and capped home student fees (UK Parliament, 2025). It is reported that 'international students make a £58 million net economic contribution to the UK economy per parliamentary constituency across the duration of their studies' (UK Parliament, 2025). The financial aspect seems to be the key motivator for internationalisation in the UK rather than talent or diversification.

In the context of internationalisation and diversity in higher education, the concept of identity is often discussed (Henkel, 2005; Kim, 2017; Zembylas, 2022). Individuals bring a multiplicity of identities, cultures, languages, and experiences to the university environment. The different motivations for internationalisation is likely to have a certain impact on an individual's identity formation in education. This research aims to qualitatively explore how an increasingly diverse and international student population navigates UK higher education, and to what extent UK higher education adjusts to, or fails to adjust to, this diversity, particularly where this diversity represents an established academic tradition. This echoes the concept of coloniality which is discussed in the 'International doctoral students' identity' section. Inclusive education approaches are discussed in the next section.

1.3 Global pedagogical approach in response to internationalisation in higher education

A growing body of literature has investigated globalisation strategies in higher education. Fujikane (2003) put forward two crucial educational changes: a new curriculum and education for new world citizens. In the same vein, Schoorman (2000) suggests that the new approach challenges conventional ways of learning, that the representation of perspectives from around the world should be equal, and that education should help students demonstrate their own social and cultural backgrounds in their learning. Similarly, Clifford and Joseph (2005) maintain that the internationalisation of the curriculum entails the development of global perspectives and cross-cultural competence so that students can perform competently in a

multicultural environment. Rizvi and Walsh (1998) point out that the aim of internationalisation is to acknowledge and appreciate cultural differences and diversity in response to globalisation, which reforms identities and the social imagination of students. Therefore, learners should have space for diverse approaches and for exploring values and identity. These approaches build on Freire's work of critical pedagogy which is discussed later.

Bourne et al. (2006) create a global perspective framework as educational principles and practices in higher education:

- Understanding our situation in a wider context,
- Making connections between local and global events,
- Developing skills and knowledge to interpret events affecting our lives,
- Learning from experiences elsewhere in the world and,
- Identifying common interests and exploring wider horizons.

Such approaches, however, seem to have failed to take into account the crisis of identity change among students in education. Identity 'only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent, and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty' (Bond, 2020, p.43). A sense of academic identity is highly important here because, according to Bond (2020), responding to and building work around others' needs and reacting to extrinsic policy decisions can easily erode a sense of agency. Also, although Rizvi and Walsh (1998) mention that there should be space for identity and value exploration, they did not specify what that process entails or what should be considered. In this study, I explored how much

space an international postgraduate student has for identity (re)formation and the positive and negative crises of multiple academic identities.

1.4 The roles of doctoral programmes in the UK

Deem and Dowle (2020, p. 8) discuss how 'legitimate knowledge production' in doctoral programmes should extend beyond pure academic thinking to encompass real-world utilisation. In STEM disciplines, PhD students should promote non-academic impact for their research from the outset (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council 2018, cited in Deem and Dowle, 2020). In social sciences, arts and humanities disciplines, there is an expansion in designing programs to produce knowledge dealing with real-world issues. Moreover, the development of human capital has become an increasingly central feature of UK doctoral programmes, with a growing emphasis on the individual doctoral graduate as a key outcome of the doctorate, rather than on the thesis alone (Deem & Dowle, 2020; Hall & Burns, 2009). Doctoral graduates should be able to not only produce new knowledge but also proficiently adopt the knowledge and transfer it to a commercial or socially viable enterprise (Hancock et al., 2015; Neal et al., 2023). This suggests that doctoral outcomes are linked to higher education's financial dependence on international student fees. To add on, Bond (2020) affirms that in the changing global higher education landscape, 'if we are who we are because of what we care about most and the commitments we make accordingly' (Arche, 2003, p.120, cited in Bond, 2020), we need to give the main attention to the care for students and their voice.

When discussing the role of a doctorate in society, Deem and Dowle (2020) affirm that doctoral education serves to nurture an equitable and unbiased society. However, when it comes to economic motivation, profit-making driven research seems to work against the goal of doctoral education for social good, particularly with respect to social mobility and a fair society. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, there are issues arising when educational initiatives are predominantly economically driven, especially in the context of internationalisation. According to Kreber (2009), developing countries will continue to incur the greatest losses when utilising internationalisation as a strategy to enhance the economy and address other development needs, such as sending students abroad or attracting overseas capital. As Murphy (2007, cited in Kreber, 2009) pointed out, there are three possible consequences for developing countries: the imposition of foreign and inadequate models to solve domestic problems, the potential loss of human and intellectual capital, and, connected to the previous two, the weakening of the domestic university system as it plays a marginal role in the development of the country. China, for example, which is a developing country, sends the most students to the UK to study. Given the three possible consequences for developing countries, as Murphy has pointed out, it is important to consider the extent to which Chinese students have responded to their country's development needs and how they apply their educational knowledge in national and local contexts. In this research, I explore what factors determine students' research motivation, which affects their identities in research and whether they are aware of developmental gaps.

At the same time, Kahane (2009, p.49) argues ‘for many educators,… a key reason for internationalisation is ethical: It helps students to examine their implicit and explicit beliefs about whose wellbeing matters, and to develop a more globalised sense of responsibility and citizenship.’ Regarding doctoral education in the UK, we need to question whether the imbalance in motivations for internationalisation and outcomes for doctoral education can result in a crisis in academic identities for international research students or vice versa. And what research motivations are the UK universities trying to aim their research students at? The next section discusses these students’ complex identities within the context of internationalisation.

2. International doctoral students’ identity

This subchapter critically reviews the existing literature on the identities of international PhD students within the context of internationalisation in higher education. It begins by introducing the key concepts of identity that underpin this study, followed by an exploration of two central theoretical frameworks: poststructuralism and positioning theory. The discussion then synthesises key research on international doctoral education, highlighting prominent themes and identifying gaps in current scholarship. The subchapter concludes by examining the concept of coloniality in relation to international doctoral students. This opens an exploration into how issues of power, representation, and epistemic hierarchy shape their experiences within the global academic landscape.

2.1 Concept introduction

This section outlines definitions of key concepts used throughout the thesis, including identity, academic identity, cultural identity, linguistic identity, and researcher identity. It also explains how these understandings inform the way I framed and approached the study of identity in this research.

Identity is a complex idea that means different things to different people. In fields such as social science and philosophy, it is often described as shaped by both how we see ourselves and how others see us (Erikson, 1968; Henkel, 2005; Mead, 1934). It includes a balance between being unique as an individual and being part of larger groups, such as cultural, national, or communities. Erikson (1968) claims that identity is not something we are born with, but rather something we build and reshape throughout our lives. However, this does not occur in isolation or solely through individuals' personal choices regarding their identities. Rather, Mead (1934) connects the idea of identity to the concept of the self, arguing that the self emerges through interaction with the surrounding environment. It is situated within and shaped by social, cultural, political, and geographical contexts. He argues that a person's sense of self only develops within a social context. Through communication with others, we learn to take on their perspectives and reflect on our own behaviour. Therefore, the concept of identity in this study is examined as the participants engage with diverse social and cultural contexts to reflect on their roles, decisions, and identities within the academic community.

Next, to define cultural identity, it is important to first understand the concept of culture. Altugan (2015) explains that culture plays a key role in shaping the structure of a society. It can be understood as the way of life of that society, influencing all aspects of individuals' experiences and relationships from birth to death. He lists the usual aspects of culture, including ethnic or national origin, religion, race, gender, language, country, education, occupation, age, family, and status. He concludes that learners' cultural backgrounds matter because variations in ethnicity, language, religion, social class, or economic status can lead to feelings of disconnection, which can negatively affect their motivation to learn. Therefore, when exploring cultural identity, it is essential to consider these various aspects. Given the breadth of the concept of culture, this thesis focuses specifically on participants' ethnic origin, race, and linguistic identity, and how these relate to their experiences of academic literacy and identity negotiation in doctoral study.

Linguistic identity is deeply entangled with questions of power and politics, as languages often function as markers of belonging or loyalty within particular communities (Rajagopalan, 2001). Yet, it is increasingly recognised that no individual can be reduced to a single ethnoracial or linguistic category, since identities are complex, shifting, and intersecting (Kubota et al., 2021). As Bhatia (2017) notes, multilingual individuals often select particular codes to convey messages across contexts, either to affirm their identity or to align themselves with specific social groups. These processes illustrate how language use is both a means

of communication and a powerful way of performing and positioning identity in diverse social and academic spaces. For example, a multilingual doctoral student may choose to write formally in English when producing a thesis chapter and to switch to their first language to express uncertainty, emotion, or culturally specific ideas more precisely when discussing the same research with peers from a shared linguistic or cultural background.

Additionally, academic identities are often shaped and maintained mainly through two key structures: academic disciplines and higher education institutions. Henkel (2005) adds that academic identity is often formed either by internalising certain values, goals, meanings, language, theories, and knowledge, or through interaction between how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others, thereby balancing personal identity with external influences. In this thesis, I explored researchers' identities by examining how they position themselves at the intersection of personal values shaped by cultural perspectives and experiences of external challenges and contrasts.

Building on a foundational understanding of identity concepts, I introduce and explore two theoretical perspectives in the next section that offer deeper insights into how identity is formed, negotiated, and experienced.

2.2 Theoretical perspectives on identity

This section presents frameworks from the literature relevant to contextualising and analysing identity in the study. These includes postructuralist views on identity and positioning theory.

2.2.1 Poststructuralist views on identity

Identity is seen as flexible, made up of multiple aspects, and shaped by social interactions. (Baxter, 2016). Rather than being fixed or stable, identity is seen as dynamic, context-dependent, and subject to ongoing negotiation. Social theorists such as Block (2007) describe identity not as a coherent or unified state, but as a continuous process shaped by interactions, language, and discourse. This perspective resists essentialist or static definitions and instead embraces complexity, contradiction, and change, which have been evident in this study's data. Poststructuralist scholars argue that identity is co-constructed and reconstructed in social interactions. Miyahara (2010) emphasises that identity is not pre-defined but emerges through discourse and within specific interactional contexts. From a social identity perspective, Luk and Lin (2007) argue that individuals hold multiple identities that are fragmented, inconsistent, and sometimes conflicting. This explains the growing preference among scholars to speak of identities in the plural, reflecting their shifting and intersecting nature.

In this research, I drew on poststructuralist perspectives to explore how international multilingual doctoral students' identities are shaped and reshaped through academic practices, particularly in their reading and writing across languages and cultures. I

am especially interested in how their multiple, shifting identities as multilingual researchers are negotiated within the discursive literacy spaces of UK higher education. By applying this lens, I highlighted the complexity of the international multilingual doctoral students' identity construction and how power, discourse, and social interaction shaped their academic and personal positioning.

2.2.2 Positioning theory

Positioning theory is closely aligned with poststructuralist perspectives, particularly in how it conceptualises identity, subjectivity, and discourse. Both approaches reject fixed or essentialist views of identity and instead emphasise its dynamic, socially constructed nature (Lehman, 2022; Luk & Lin, 2007). This theoretical lens is especially relevant for exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of international doctoral students, whose identities are shaped and reshaped through discursive engagement within diverse academic and cultural contexts. Positioning theory centres on the idea that individuals construct the self and others through discursive practices such as speech, written texts, and social interactions. As McVee (2011) explains, positioning is a complex and multifaceted process involving the ways people engage in meaning-making and identity work through language. This framework draws attention to how positions are enacted and negotiated through discourse, which not only reflects but also constructs identity.

At the heart of positioning theory is the positioning triangle proposed by Harré and van Langenhove (1999), which consists of three interrelated components: positions,

speech and other acts, and storylines. Positions are the roles or identities that individuals take up in interactions; speech acts refer to the discursive practices through which these roles are communicated; and storylines provide the broader narrative context that gives meaning to those positions. Importantly, positioning theory considers both individual agency and social structure, acknowledging that identity is co-constructed through personal and cultural dimensions. This theoretical approach also underscores the relationships among discourse, culture, identity, and literacy (McVee, 2011). It offers a valuable framework for investigating how individuals navigate culturally situated practices and how identity is negotiated in complex, shifting contexts. These insights are especially important for examining international doctoral students who operate across linguistic, academic, cultural, and national boundaries.

In this study, positioning theory is used to understand how international multilingual PhD students construct their identities through their engagement with academic reading and writing. By attending to the discursive practices that shape their narratives, the study reveals how students actively position themselves, enact agency, and at times resist dominant structures. Furthermore, positioning theory is deeply connected to narrative identity, which informs the methodological approach of this research (discussed further in the Methodology chapter). By tracing how students narrate their experiences and position themselves within those narratives, the study highlights the interplay between critical literacy and identity. I explore how doctoral students make sense of themselves through their academic practices and transnational experiences, and how they actively negotiate and navigate doctoral

researcher development, even in contexts where particular cultural and linguistic norms are dominant.

In this study, poststructuralism serves as the overarching theoretical paradigm through which identity, knowledge, and power are understood as fluid, contested, and discursively constructed. Poststructuralism foregrounds the broader dynamics of power and discourse that structure the possibilities of identity. Positioning theory makes visible the micro-level enactments of these dynamics. In this way, positioning theory can be understood as a subset of poststructuralist thought.

2.3 Research of the identity of international PhD students

While much of the existing research in higher education has concentrated on undergraduate students' motivation, achievement, and well-being (Douwes et al., 2023*;* Laitinen et al., 2024; Passeggia et al., 2023), the specific experiences of doctoral students, particularly international PhD candidates, have often been overlooked. The doctoral journey is widely acknowledged as both intellectually stimulating and personally demanding. In their review of 163 empirical studies, Sverdlik et al. (2018) identify seven key factors that shape the doctoral experience: external influences such as supervision, personal and social life, departmental support, socialisation, and funding; and internal factors such as motivation, writing competence, and academic identity. Among these, literacy skills and academic identity are especially relevant for international PhD students navigating complex academic literacies in multilingual contexts. However, reading skills among research

students remain underexplored. Reading and writing are understood as being entangled with issues of power, identity, and culture (Vasquez et al., 2019). This study addresses that gap by foregrounding critical literacy practice, particularly in students' engagement with academic texts, institutional discourses, and social power relations.

Mittelmeier et al. (2025) critique the dominant approaches to international student research, noting that much of it lacks critical depth and instead relies on deficit narratives. These perspectives frame international students primarily through the lens of ‘challenges’ or ‘problems’, often leading to pedagogical interventions that aim to ‘fix’ perceived shortcomings. Mittelmeier and colleagues argue for a shift toward criticality that recognises power, positionality, and structural inequities as a necessary foundation for future research. This study, in part, responds to that call by adopting a critical approach to understanding the identities and academic literacies of international doctoral students, particularly within multilingual and multicultural settings.

In the context of doctoral research, researcher identities are not fixed but continually negotiated through social practices, institutional discourses, and the relational spaces of fieldwork. Giampapa (2011), for example, shows how researcher identities can be influenced and even redefined by their participants during the research process, highlighting the complexity and fluidity of identity formation. In this study, identity is explored through the lens of how international doctoral students engage with academic texts, research materials, and their own participants as part of constructing

meaning and positioning themselves as researchers. These lenses are crucial because such interactions are not merely technical but formative moments where students negotiate voice, authority, and belonging within dominant academic discourses.

2.4 International research students and coloniality in research

Despite increasing globalisation and nations' prioritising the internationalisation of higher education, research conducted by and with international students remains largely underrepresented (Mittelmeier et al. 2025). This lack of representation is linked to their vulnerable position within Western institutions. Their non-citizen status and the dominant discourse often diminish their academic contributions and lived experiences (Tran & Hoang, 2024). Singh and Meng (2013) argue that knowledge produced by international postgraduate students, especially those from non-Western or Asian contexts, is frequently overlooked and not recognised as meaningful within Western academic traditions. This reflects wider systems of coloniality that continue to shape how knowledge is produced and valued.

Colonialism refers to the historical projects of conquest, domination, and occupation of the concrete political, military, and economic control exercised by European powers over colonised territories. It is tied to specific events and processes (Mignolo, 2007). Coloniality, on the other hand, refers to the enduring logic, structures, and worldview that outlive formal colonialism and, in part, constitute a legacy inherited from those past conquests and the ideologies that underpinned them (Mignolo, 2007). The concept of coloniality refers to the lasting influence of European colonialism on

modern structures of knowledge, identity, and power (Quijano, 2016). These influences are embedded in everyday academic practices, including research methods, curriculum content, assessment criteria, and institutional values. Udah (2023) emphasises that the dominance of Western ways of thinking and doing marginalises other underlying assumptions, beliefs, and frameworks that guide the creation, validation, and communication of knowledge. Indeed, this statement is connected to Mittelmeier's (2023) findings of deficit discourses being associated with international students. As a result, international doctoral students often experience exclusion, limited support, and a sense of disempowerment within higher education institutions (Udah & Francis, 2022).

In addition, Montgomery (2019) highlights that although many international PhD students conduct research on internationalisation and related global themes, their work is rarely seen as part of a significant body of scholarship. Students from the global South are particularly encouraged to adopt Western theories and methodologies, leaving little space for Southern perspectives (Montgomery, 2019). In my research, the participants' projects often focus on their home country context. While such work is sometimes perceived as overly local, it also opens space to explore how these students navigate and question in between cultures and languages. This research builds on such insights by exploring how international doctoral students understand and enact critical literacy skills in their reading, writing, and research practices across cultures and languages, and how these might disrupt any colonial assumptions at work in/through higher education. In line with Udah's (2023) call to begin the process of decolonisation by rethinking our research approaches and

assumptions, this study examines how these students engage with power and representation in academia. It investigates whether they view themselves as capable of challenging dominant discourses or whether their engagement is shaped by compromise and adaptation. Inspired by Montgomery's (2019) suggestion that the doctoral journey can serve as a space for postcolonial reflection, this research examines how international students' experiences contribute to the development of more inclusive and plural understandings of knowledge production in higher education.

The next chapter examines how international doctoral students' literacy practices shape and reflects their evolving sense of self. Reading and writing are not simply academic tasks. They are meaningful acts that reveal how identity is formed and expressed.

3. Identity, multilingualism and literacy practice

Since this study examines identity through the lens of literacy, this chapter discusses the literature around identity and multilingual literacy practices. It begins by exploring the notion of multilingual identity among international PhD students. It then turns to the concept of doctoral research literacy. Finally, the chapter introduces a conceptual framework for understanding identity and literacy, drawing on Moje and Luke's (2009) synthesis of five metaphors of identity. These perspectives serve as a foundation for analysing how literacy practices contribute to identity construction in the doctoral context. Specifically, I engage explicitly with the

differences between critical, poststructuralist, and decolonial perspectives to ensure that their distinct insights inform the analysis.

3.1 Multilingual identity among international PhD students.

'Multilingual' as used in this study refers to persons who use multiple languages (Valdés, 2022). In this context, international multilingual students are those who use English as an additional language while pursuing doctoral studies in the UK. Despite increasing attention to internationalisation in higher education, research on multilingualism and language diversity in doctoral education remains limited. In particular, there is a lack of asset-based approaches that draw on multilingual doctoral students' experiences and perspectives to illuminate their critically literate practices for negotiating UK doctoral programmes and researcher development. Lomer et al. (2024) suggest that future research on international students should begin by recognising their autonomy and critical capacities, framing inquiry to create space for decolonial perspectives in both design and interpretation.

Much of the existing research tends to frame multilingual doctoral students in terms of the challenges they face, particularly around academic reading and writing in English. For example, Sinnasamy and Karim (2016) concludes that English continues to be the main language in peer-reviewed academic publishing. This can present challenges for multilingual students with limited English vocabulary or reading comprehension, as they may find it difficult to locate and understand relevant scholarly work texts (Sinnasamy & Karim, 20016). Other studies have concentrated

on academic success and integration into Western academic institutions and often framed students' efforts in terms of conformity to standard academic English (Singh, 2019; Sinnasamy & Karim, 2016; Dryden & Dovchin, 2022).

This study moves away from such perspectives that see multilingual students primarily in terms of their struggles or the need to assimilate. Rather than measuring students against a monolingual norm, this research explores the 'colourfulness and uniqueness' they bring into their academic journeys. While integration into academic communities is important, this study focuses more on how international doctoral students survive and thrive in Western academic spaces through the richness of their multilingual identities and practices. One of the key aims of this study is to explore how multilingual doctoral researchers incorporate and mobilise their multiple languages in the process of doing research. These students possess 'knowledge of more than one language in the same mind or the same community' (Cook, 2012, p. 1), which enables them to draw from a wider range of cognitive, cultural, and linguistic resources. However, this multiplicity is not always valued equally. Dovchin (2020) highlights that transnational students often face systemic inequalities, with their language practices either validated or marginalised depending on their backgrounds. Similarly, Dryden and Dovchin (2022) report instances of translingual discrimination, particularly targeting students from the Global South.

Despite such challenges, scholars like Choy et al. (2017) have noted the transformative potential of translanguaging and transculturation practices. These practices not only allow students to navigate across languages and cultures but also

position them as active contributors to knowledge. This aligns with Li's (2011) perspective that translanguaging goes beyond switching between languages. When students engage in translanguaging, they draw on their personal histories, experiences, beliefs, ideologies, and capacities; thus, they are 'going beyond' linguistic boundaries in ways that resonate with poststructuralist views of language and identity (Li, 2011). For example, Zheng and Lawrence (2023) find that teachers and students navigate (and sometimes resist) language ideology embedded in institutional policies. According to them, translanguaging is positioned not just as a teaching technique but as a site of ideological tension where cultural, political, and language hierarchies clash and become a means to negotiate or challenge them.
In the next section, I turn to doctoral academic discourse, particularly reading and writing, and examine how these practices intersect with the concept of 'going beyond' a single language in doctoral research.

3.2 Doctoral academic literacy

Academic literacy in doctoral education has received considerable attention, particularly in relation to writing (Canagarajah, 2022; Dixon et al., 2011; Wu & Buripakdi, 2021). However, the role of reading remains significantly underexplored, especially among international doctoral students who use English as an additional language. While academic writing is affected by language background, reading comprehension and research engagement also pose substantial challenges (Singh, 2019).

Existing research on academic reading has primarily focused on undergraduate students (Metruk &Kováčová, 2025; Phillips Galloway & Uccelli, 2019), with limited attention to doctoral learners. Grabe (2009) emphasises that reading is the most critical skill for academic success, particularly in multicultural and international contexts. Yet it is often treated as a neutral, already acquired skill rather than as a complex, situated literacy practice (Rajab et al., 2012). This study understands academic reading as a socially and culturally mediated process that shapes and is shaped by doctoral students' multilingual identities. Rather than solely investigating reading difficulties, it seeks to examine how students' diverse linguistic and cultural repertoires influence their engagement with academic texts, particularly their interpretation of meaning, critique of knowledge, and stance-taking. This perspective extends beyond deficit views to acknowledge multilingual readers as active agents in constructing meaning through their own epistemic frameworks.

Writing at the doctoral level is viewed as a process of knowledge transformation, involving reflection, negotiation, and identity construction (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Lavelle and Bushrow (2007) argue that flexible and intuitive approaches to research writing are often more effective than rigid formulaic methods. For multilingual doctoral writers, however, engaging in disciplinary writing presents challenges related to authorship, voice, and institutional expectations. Wu and Buripakdi's (2021) mixed-methods study in Thailand revealed that many EFL doctoral writers lacked exposure to the concept of authorial identity, resulting in passive adherence to disciplinary norms rather than confident knowledge-making.

Alongside these concerns, academic publishing has emerged as a critical site. Canagarajah (2022) warns that although diversity in scholarship is increasingly recognised, dominant publishing institutions may appropriate it for commercial gain, thereby weakening its transformative potential. He calls for multifaceted scholarly action, emphasising that structural change in academia can be initiated through critical and resistant writing, particularly from scholars in the Global South. This research draws inspiration from such critical and decolonial perspectives to explore how international doctoral students resist normative pressures and assert their linguistic and epistemological agency through their writing practices. The findings contribute to the conditions of possibility or impossibility for doing and disseminating research in the UK and globally. It thus influences what languages and literacies remain dominant and can be used to shape emerging researchers' academic literacy skills and practices in higher education.

Importantly, this study does not treat reading and writing as separate academic skills but examines their dynamic and interconnected relationship. In contrast to traditional approaches that privilege writing alone, this approach considers both reading and writing integral to identity formation and academic meaning-making. To ground this dual focus, the following section introduces the theoretical model of identity and literacy proposed by Moje and Luke (2009), which underpins the study's examination of multilingual doctoral literacy.

3.3 Identity and literacy

Barton (2000) defines literacy as the ways individuals engage with reading, writing, and texts in real-life contexts, as well as the purposes and motivations behind these practices. The relationship between identity and academic literacies has gained much attention in literacy research (Altugan, 2015; Burgess & Ivanič, 2010; Henkel, 2005; Miyahara, 2010; Moje & Luke, 2009). Scholars argue that identity is not merely a backdrop to literacy but central to how individuals interact with and through texts and produce knowledge (Ivanič, 1998; Moje & Luke, 2009; Rajagopalan, 2001). Hall (2012) emphasises that students' reading identities are shaped by their personal histories and prior experiences. Similarly, Burgess and Ivanič (2010) assert that identity is not optional but an essential component in the act of writing.

Moje and Luke (2009), in their comprehensive review, outline five metaphoric conceptualizations of identity that offer valuable insights into literacy research: 1) identity as difference, 2) sense of self or subjectivity, 3) mind or consciousness, 4) narrative, and 5) position. Each metaphor reflects a distinct theoretical orientation and has implications for understanding literacy as a space of identity construction:

1. The metaphor of *identity as difference* is framed as social group membership, such as national, racial, or cultural background. Literacy practices are understood to be shaped by group affiliations: a person from one group may engage in literacy differently from someone from another group.
2. *Identity as sense of self or subjectivity* highlights identity as how individuals understand themselves including beliefs, values, and emotional experiences. Literacy becomes intertwined with personal consciousness and the development of self.

3. *Identity as mind or consciousness* is connected to cognitive and internal mental processes. The focus is on how the mind shapes meaning-making in literacy, positioning literacy as a space where one's intellectual self is enacted.
4. *Identity as narrative* is constructed through storytelling. Literacy enables individuals to narrate their life experiences, allowing them to represent and make sense of themselves over time.
5. Finally, *identity as position* views identity as discursively constructed through language, whereby individuals take up and negotiate roles within particular social and institutional contexts.

These metaphors serve as analytical lenses in my investigation of international doctoral students' academic literacies. For example, *identity as position* illuminates how multilingual students navigate academic power structures and represent themselves through discourse. *Identity as narrative* helps explore how students articulate their researcher identities over time. Meanwhile, *identity as difference* foregrounds the influence of cultural and linguistic diversity on literacy practices, and *identity as self and mind* offers insight into the internal processes of motivation, reflection, and voice formation.

Together, these perspectives underscore the complex and dynamic nature of identity in academic contexts and provide a rich framework for examining how reading and writing serve as sites for identity (re)negotiation among international PhD students. The following subchapter delves into the central theoretical framework guiding this research: critical literacy.

4. Critical Literacy

This sub-chapter outlines the foundational principles of critical literacy theory that inform this research. It begins by exploring key interpretations of critical literacy across existing literatures, then focuses on Freire's influential concepts of the oppressed and the oppressors. The discussion then turns to the intersections between critical literacy and identity studies. The section concludes by introducing the concept of critical affective literacy with the aim of expanding the framework to include the emotional dimensions of critical engagement.

Bringing critical literacy as a theoretical and practical approach into dialogue with poststructuralist and decolonial paradigms allows the study to capture intersecting dimensions of power, identity, and knowledge-making. The critical literacy theory foregrounds agency and the ethical dimensions of literacy (Luke, 2014); poststructuralism explains the fluid and relational nature of identity and subjectivity (Delamont, 2020); and the decolonial paradigm situates these struggles within global structures of historical and epistemic inequality (Majee & Ress, 2018). Together, they all attend to issues of power and provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how multilingual doctoral students negotiate voice, authority, and positionality in academic writing and research engagement.

4.1 Key aspects of critical literacy

Critical literacy has evolved through decades of theoretical debate and educational practice. As Luke (2014, p.21) puts it, critical literacy is 'the object of a half-century of theoretical debate and practical innovation in the field of education', with no fixed or universal definition. Its roots can be traced to adult education, particularly the pioneering work of Paulo Freire in 1960s Brazil, where he led literacy programs for sugarcane workers, employing critical pedagogy to foster social and political empowerment. Freire's broader philosophy, as emphasised in 1987, holds that reading the word also means reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) and continues to influence critical literacy pedagogy today (Janks, 2010; Johnson & Keane, 2023; Luke, 2012; McLaren, 2000; Vasquez, 2017). While earlier contributors such as Weber and Heinen (1980) laid important groundwork, it was Freire's work that brought the idea of literacy as a socially mediated, transformative practice to prominence.

Freire and Macedo (1987) famously articulated the idea that reading the word is inseparable from reading the world, suggesting that our interpretations of texts are always influenced by our lived experiences, the sociocultural spaces we inhabit, and the languages we speak. This perspective lies at the heart of critical literacy, which examines how language and discourse are embedded within structures of power and inequality. Critical literacy is, therefore, not limited to individual comprehension but is deeply connected to broader questions of social justice and equity. As Vasquez et al. (2019) argue, critical literacy has been theorised and applied in multiple ways: as a pedagogical framework, a conceptual lens, and even a stance or orientation toward teaching and learning. Importantly, these interpretations remain relevant across

educational contexts regardless of learners' linguistic backgrounds. Critical literacy is therefore not confined to a single language or level of proficiency but is deeply concerned with how individuals engage with texts, power, and meaning across diverse linguistic and cultural repertoires.

Critical literacy has been widely implemented in early childhood and primary education settings (Janks, 2013; O'Brien, 2001; Vander Zanden, 2016) and has also informed the development of pedagogical approaches for teacher education (Kim & Cho, 2017; Mora, 2014). However, its application within the context of doctoral education remains underexplored. Despite its potential, little research has investigated how critical literacy can support the academic journeys of international multilingual PhD students. This study addresses this gap by examining how critical literacy can serve as both a space and a strategy for these students to engage critically with academic discourses and navigate the complexities of Western higher education.

Despite facing critique (Ellsworth, 1989; Jackson, 2007), Freire's work was pioneering in foregrounding critical pedagogy as a means of uncovering and interrogating power relations. In particular, his emphasis on language and meaning-making highlights their central role in challenging and transforming unequal social structures. Vasquez et al. (2019) conceptualise critical literacy not as a discrete topic to be taught, but as a way of seeing, interpreting, and engaging with the world. From this perspective, critical literacy encourages students and teachers to examine everyday texts in order to uncover underlying assumptions, power relations, and ideological positions. Central to this view is the understanding that texts are never

neutral; they reflect particular perspectives and actively shape how meaning is produced and understood (Vasquez, 2019). At the same time, readers bring their own subjectivities to texts, informed by their identities, experiences, and cultural and linguistic resources (Janks, 2013). Critical literacy, therefore, involves analysing both the text itself and one's own reading position, questioning taken-for-granted social norms, and interrogating whose voices are included, marginalised, or silenced. By emphasising real-life, meaningful issues and drawing on learners' lived experiences, this approach extends beyond written texts to view the social world itself as something that can be read critically, challenged, and potentially rewritten.

In practice, critical literacy is enacted through academic activities that encourage learners to engage actively with texts by questioning meanings, perspectives, and underlying power relations (Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012). For international PhD students, these practices extend beyond classroom contexts to include reading critically, selecting and evaluating academic sources, and conducting and writing research. This involves analysing whose voices are represented or marginalised in scholarly work, connecting texts to personal and sociocultural experiences, and engaging with real-world issues through academic writing. Such practices often involve dialogic discussion, multimodal meaning-making, and the use of diverse cultural and linguistic resources, positioning learners as critical participants who recognise texts as both positioned and positioning, and who actively interrogate and reshape the meanings and power relations embedded within them (Janks, 2000; Luke, 2012; Vasquez & Comber, 2019).

Critical literacy is an approach to text that encourages individuals to question how texts relate to power, inequality, and social contexts, rather than treating them as neutral (Freire, 1970 & Luke, 2012). Therefore, by engaging in critical literacy practices, students develop awareness of social inequalities (e.g., around race, gender, and class) and learn to challenge these through transformative action, such as producing petitions or redesigning texts that promote justice and equity (Janks, 2000). Ultimately, critical literacy aims to empower students to think ethically, act democratically, and contribute to a more equitable world by reconstructing texts and practices to convey more inclusive and socially just messages. Critical literacy offers a powerful lens for exploring how multilingual international PhD students engage with academic texts and practices. It emphasises that reading and writing are not neutral but socially situated acts shaped by power, identity, and ideology. Next section, I discuss the concepts of the oppressor and the oppressed by Freire that will be used in this study.

4.2 Concepts of the oppressor and the oppressed by Freire

Freire's most influential contribution to critical pedagogy was his development of literacy campaigns aimed at cultivating critical consciousness, among what he termed 'the oppressed' (Freire, 1993, p. 44). He believes that those who deny their full humanity due to systemic and dehumanising conditions held a unique responsibility and capacity: to restore both their humanity and that of their oppressors through acts of critical reflection and transformative action. According to Freire, true liberation can only occur if it is initiated and led by the oppressed

themselves. He argues that the oppressors tend to objectify others and perceive freedom as a threat, while the oppressed often become alienated from one another and may even idealise or identify with their oppressors. In the same vein, Fanon (1970) clearly demonstrates how colonial domination produces desire for the oppressor's recognition**,** even at the cost of one's own identity. This conceptualisation of oppression holds relevance for the multilingual doctoral students in this study who often encounter marginalisation through dominant academic norms and monolingual ideologies. In these contexts, they may feel pressured to internalize deficit perspectives about their language, identity, or cultural background. Freire's insistence on liberation underscores the importance of these students' agency reclamation. Through critical engagement with academic discourses and practices, they can begin to assert their voices and challenge the ideologies that render them invisible in the academy. Freire (1993) argues that genuine freedom or liberation occurs when oppressed people learn to think critically about their lives and the world around them. This critical reflection, he suggests, enables a shift from a superficial understanding of reality to a deeper awareness of the structural causes of their oppression.

However, Freire's idea has faced criticism for potentially portraying the oppressed as inherently naive or incapable of critical thought without external guidance (Jackson, 2007). Such a view can be particularly problematic when applied to indigenous communities, who have long resisted colonial domination and do not require Western frameworks to validate their knowledge systems (Jackson, 2007). In addition, while Freire aims to challenge colonial structures, Jackson contends that his

vision remains shaped by patriarchal assumptions and fails to account for the gendered, racialised, and classed realities. Jackson questions the role of the teacher as the sole emancipator, which may promote idealistic notions of transformation without adequately addressing the depth of structural inequality or the impacts of globalisation. Moreover, Jackson critiques Freire for generalising the category of the oppressed and overlooks the complexity and diversity of social identities and positionalities in a globalised, technologically advanced world. Acknowledging the complexity of identity navigation through a colonial globalised period, I unpack different layers of literacy moves among the participants in this study.

Also, with the caution in mind, my research approaches international PhD students not as passive recipients of academic norms, but as active agents who bring rich intellectual and cultural resources to their studies. While they may face challenges within Western academia, they are not simply striving to 'fit in'; rather, they are continuously negotiating, resisting, and reshaping academic discourses through their multilingual and multicultural lenses. They are caught in a double bind where they may also be selecting, applying to, and actively seeking UK higher education because they are perceived as global leaders of academia. Recognising this avoids framing them as deficient and instead values their capacity to critically engage with and transform their academic environments. This is connected to Mittelmeier and colleagues' (2025) findings of deficit discourses being associated with international students. It is possible that the students are functioning within a colonial framework because it has become normalised globally. Decolonial thinking also emphasises that meaningful engagement in academia does not require the erasure or translation of

difference into a single dominant form. Instead, it values epistemic plurality and recognises how scholars' everyday language choices, rhetorical strategies, and identity performances challenge the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2011).

4.3 Critical literacy and identity

Critical literacy theory provides a valuable framework for exploring identity by emphasising how language, power, and social context shape individuals' self-perceptions and others' perceptions. It encourages learners to interrogate dominant ideologies such as ableism, racism, and monolingualism (Leu, 2020). As students critically examine the historical, cultural, and institutional forces that shape their experiences, they often begin to reconstruct their identities in more empowering ways (Goodman & Cocca, 2014). Phelps (2010) argues that critical literacy reveals the ideological and political nature of texts and how they position individuals and social groups. Similarly, Janks (2000) frames critical literacy as a shifting and embodied social practice that recognises the dynamic constitution of identity across complex and multimodal social spaces. When applied to this study of multilingual and multicultural identity, critical literacy highlights how academic norms and dominant discourses can marginalise or questionably strengthen linguistic diversity. Therefore, critical literacy repositions identity as fluid and negotiated through reading and writing practices and emphasises the role of cultural and linguistic resources in enabling agency, self-representation, and resistance.

4.4 Critical affective literacy

Recent studies in critical literacy have increasingly drawn on affect theory. Ahmed (2015) argues that it is essential for critical literacy to engage with the affective turn to more fully address the emotional dimensions of learning and social justice. This section discusses the affect aspect of literacy and decolonisation in higher education by two authors: Ahmed (2015) and Zembylas (2022). Both scholars foreground the significance of emotions and affect in reshaping our understanding of critical literacy and decolonial practices within academic institutions.

Ahmed (2015) critiques the rationalistic orientation of traditional critical literacy. He argues that such approaches often obscure our ability to comprehend the suffering of others. He suggests that critical literacy, when overly focused on logical reasoning and cognitive critique, may fall short in responding to the ethical complexities embedded in human experiences of pain, oppression, and marginalisation. To address this limitation, Ahmed calls for the incorporation of affect theory into literacy education. He points out that while fields across the humanities and social sciences have increasingly embraced the 'affective turn', literacy studies have lagged behind. He stresses the importance of recognising how emotions are not simply private or psychological states but are shaped by language, power, and social relations. Instead, Ahmed advocates for an approach that sees emotion as deeply social and political, shaped by collective histories and discourses. He proposes a pedagogical framework including four principles for critical affective literacy:

1. “Examining Why We Feel What We Feel” (Amed, 2010, p.10)

   This principle encourages learners to analyse not only what they feel but why they feel it. Drawing on Ahmed’s relational view of emotion, it emphasises how emotions involve orientations (towardness/awayness) shaped by social context, language, and metonymic associations. Critical affective literacy examines how emotions like ‘love’ and ‘hate’ are used rhetorically. Pedagogical practices should interrogate how emotional language signifies and influences orientation toward others.

2. “Striving for Affective Equivalence” (Amed, 2010, p.11)

   Aligned with the idea of ‘standing in the shoes of others’ (p.11), this principle critiques superficial compassion. Drawing on Butler’s concept of recognisability, it stresses that not all lives are equally framed as grievable. Critical affective literacy calls for a move beyond sympathy for others' suffering toward fostering relationships of equivalence, in which learners see themselves in solidarity with the marginalised rather than as superior benefactors. This principle challenges dominant emotional frames and urges critical awareness of how suffering is represented and received.

3. “Interrogating the Production and Circulation of Emotional Objects in Politics” (Amed, 2010, p.12)

   This principle focuses on how emotions like fear are strategically produced and circulated in political discourse to justify actions and orient public opinion. Using examples such as post-9/11 U.S. politics, it highlights the use of conditional logic (‘what could have happened’) to legitimise fear-driven decisions. Critical affective literacy pedagogies should examine how emotions are manufactured, circulated, and

erased in daily politics, and the socio-historical processes underlying emotional responses to objects, people, and events.

4. “Focusing on the Performativity of Emotions to Achieve Social Justice” (Amed, 2010, p.13)

   This principle emphasises the transformative power of language, grounded in speech-act theory and the idea of performativity. It explores how utterances can enact change when aligned with legal, cultural, or institutional norms. Critical affective literacy seeks to create the conditions for speech to be performative where words not only describe but do. The goal is to empower learners to use language critically and emotionally to challenge oppressive norms and support social justice.

Although this model was developed over a decade ago, recent scholars have continued to adapt it into critical literacy pedagogy in the current context of higher education (e.g., Keegan, 2021; Mendelowitz & Govender, 2024), which proves its enduring relevance in the field.

Building on the affective turn in education, Zembylas (2022) introduces the concept of affective decolonisation, which complements ongoing efforts in intellectual decolonisation within higher education. While intellectual decolonisation focuses on challenging the Eurocentric foundations of curricula, knowledge production, and pedagogical practice (Moosavi, 2020), affective decolonisation turns attention to the emotional dimensions of colonial power and their lingering influence on academic spaces, particularly in institutions in the Global North.

These affective dimensions are often internalised and reproduced in the ways in which knowledge is taught and in who is recognised as a legitimate knower (Zembylas, 2022). Zembylas (2022) draws on Worsham's (1998) work to argue that decolonisation must attend to the affective structures. This includes examining how emotions such as discomfort, fear, or pride are evoked and circulated in institutional responses to diversity, decolonial calls, and student activism. By foregrounding the affective dimensions of coloniality, Zembylas urges educators and researchers to pay closer attention to the 'visceral logics' (p.307) that shape everyday encounters within universities. These logics are not neutral; rather, they are inscribed within relations of power. Affective decolonisation, then, becomes a call to make visible and challenge the emotional underpinnings of coloniality, creating space for more ethical, relational, and justice-oriented practices in higher education in this study.

In summary, both Ahmed (2010) and Zembylas (2022) bring affect to the fore in reimagining literacy and decolonisation in higher education. While Ahmed (2010) reframes critical literacy practices through the lens of critical affective literacy, Zembylas (2022) extends the decolonial agenda by examining how emotions are implicated in the reproduction and potential dismantling of colonial power in academic institutions. Together, their work offers a compelling vision for integrating emotional and political consciousness into educational practices aimed at equity and transformation. Drawing on the affect theories adapted by Ahmed (2015) and Zembylas (2022) can powerfully enhance this research by opening dimensions that are often overlooked in critical literacy and decolonisation debates, particularly in

relation to multilingual doctoral students' identity, experience, and engagement in higher education.

5. Restorying Critical Literacy: Reimagining Its Practice in the Context of Internationalisation for Multilingual International PhD Students in Higher Education

Figure 2.1 shows how four main theoretical frameworks—internationalisation in higher education, identity, multilingualism, and critical literacy—intersect to influence the identity development of multilingual doctoral students. Rather than operating as separate lenses, these frameworks overlap to foreground how global higher education structures, language practices, and identity formation are entangled with power. The diagram highlights the central analytical focus of this study: how multilingual doctoral students' identities navigate, negotiate, resist and position through everyday literacy practices within internationalised higher education contexts.

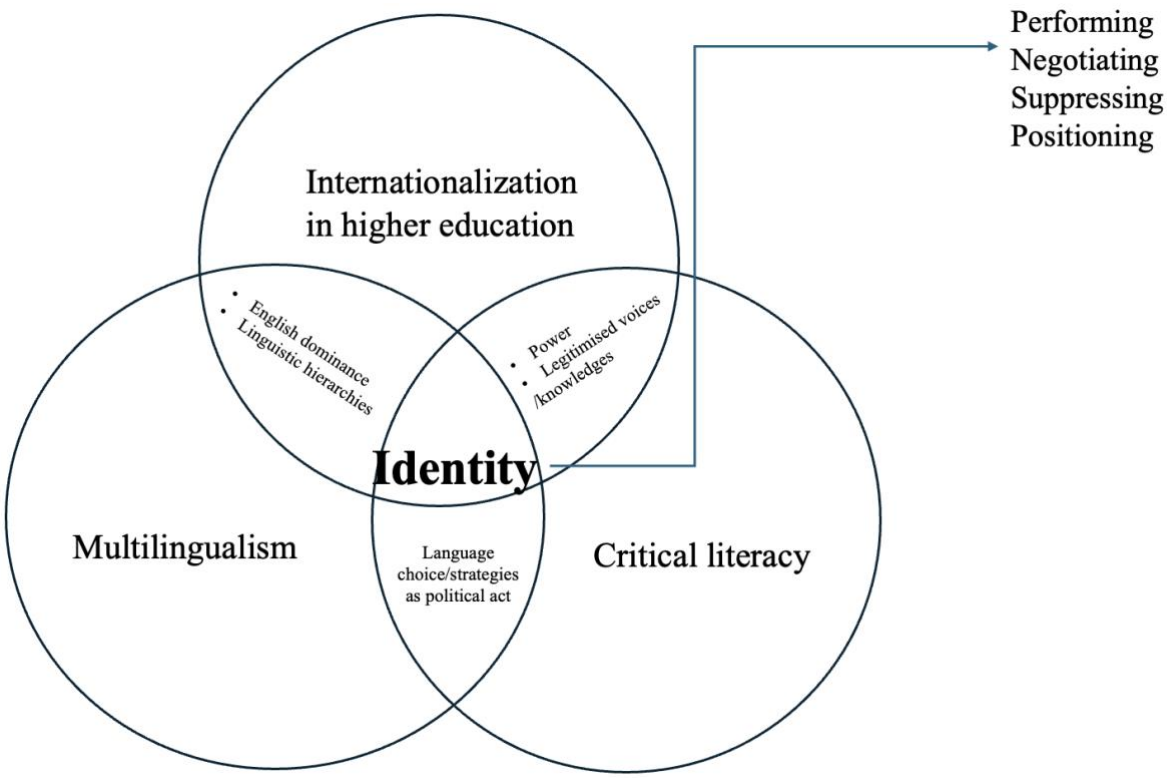


Figure 2.1: *Conceptual framework illustrating the intersections of internationalisation in higher education, multilingualism, critical literacy, and identity.*

While these theoretical perspectives provide valuable insights into multilingual doctoral experiences, they also highlight significant gaps in the examination of academic literacy, multilingual identity, and power in current scholarship.

Research gap and direction

Firstly, despite the intensifying internationalisation of higher education in the UK (Bond, 2020), a critical tension remains between institutional motivations for internationalising doctoral education and the lived experiences of international PhD students (Choy et al., 2017; Deem & Dowle, 2020). While universities often frame

internationalisation in terms of economic gain, global competitiveness, and research output (Proctor & Rumbley, 2018), the deeper implications of this agenda for academic identity formation and skill development among international doctoral researchers have received limited scholarly attention. This research explores how an increasingly diverse and international student population navigate UK higher education.

Furthermore, existing research in higher education has largely focused on undergraduate students, particularly on motivation, well-being, and academic achievement (Dryden & Dovchin, 2022; Passeggia et al., 2023; Phillips Galloway & Uccelli, 2019). In contrast, the nuanced experiences of doctoral students, particularly international candidates, who are navigating multilingual and multicultural environments, remain under-researched. This oversight is especially problematic given that doctoral education is a site of intense identity work and knowledge production (Kokotsaki, 2023). International students are not just consumers of education but also active contributors to the research landscape (Mittelmeier et al., 2025). Literacy skills and academic identity are central to the process of identity formation. This study foregrounds critical literacy as an active, socially mediated practice that shapes and is shaped by doctoral students' interactions with academic texts, institutional discourses, and power relations.

Mittelmeier et al. (2025) argue that research on international students is often shallow and problem-focused, and that deficit narratives frame students primarily in terms of their struggles, limitations, or 'lack' of Western academic norms. Such

perspectives have led to pedagogical responses that aim to ‘fix’ students through additional support or remedial measures rather than questioning the structures and assumptions that marginalise them in the first place. Mittelmeier and colleagues call for a more critical approach which recognize the roles of power, positionality, and structural inequality in shaping student experience. This study aligns with that call by adopting a critical lens to examine international doctoral students’ engagement with academic literacies, particularly within multilingual and multicultural contexts.

Further contributing to the gap in the literature is the relatively limited attention to research led by or conducted with international doctoral students themselves. This study therefore not only addresses an empirical gap but also extends and builds upon existing scholarship by foregrounding international doctoral students' own perspectives and contributions. Despite the prominence of internationalisation discourses, these students’ voices and perspectives remain marginal in shaping how doctoral education is understood or reformed. Inspired by Montgomery’s (2019) suggestion that the doctoral journey can serve as a site of postcolonial reflection, this research investigates how lived experiences of international students may contribute to more plural and inclusive understandings of knowledge production. Multilingualism and language diversity are central to this inquiry, yet the literature specifically addressing these issues in doctoral education and English Language Teaching context attract less attention. When language diversity is considered, it is often framed in terms of deficit, support needs, or linguistic assimilation (Rajab et al., 2012; Sinnasamy & Karim, 2016). This study moves away from such perspectives and instead conceptualises literacy as a culturally and politically situated practice. In particular, there remains limited attention to how multilingual doctoral students experience academic literacy as an affective, situated, and meaning-making process, including how they engage with reading practices, negotiate voice and identity in writing, draw on multiple linguistic resources, and navigate tensions between differing epistemic and interpersonal, and discursive traditions.

Further contributing to the gap in the literature is the relatively limited attention to research led by, or conducted with, international doctoral students themselves. While

internationalisation has been widely discussed, these students' perspectives are less frequently foregrounded in shaping how doctoral education is understood or reformed. Inspired by Montgomery's (2019) suggestion that the doctoral journey can serve as a site of postcolonial reflection, this research explores how the lived experiences of international students may contribute to more plural and inclusive understandings of knowledge production. In particular, aspects such as how multilingual doctoral students engage with reading and writing practices, navigate linguistic and epistemic expectations, and negotiate their identities within academic discourse remain insufficiently examined. Although multilingualism and language diversity are increasingly recognised, existing literature often frames these issues in terms of deficit, support needs, or linguistic assimilation (Rajab et al., 2012; Sinnasamy & Karim, 2016). This study moves away from such perspectives and instead conceptualises literacy as a culturally and politically situated practice.

While the primary focus of this thesis is on academic literacy and identity, the affective dimension offers an important complementary perspective. Theories of affect, particularly those of Ahmed (2015) and Zembylas (2022), help illuminate how emotions such as discomfort, shame, pride, or belonging are not merely personal feelings but are socially and institutionally produced. These theories open new ways of understanding how students experience literacy and identity not just cognitively but also emotionally. Zembylas's notion of affective decolonisation, for instance, provides a valuable lens for considering how international doctoral students confront and resist the emotional legacies of colonialism embedded in academic institutions.

Similarly, Ahmed's emphasis on how emotions are shaped by orientations, histories, and social relations enriches the understanding of how students engage with texts and institutional discourses.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a more nuanced and critically grounded understanding of doctoral education in the context of a globalised higher education. By foregrounding academic literacies, multilingual identity, and the socio-political context of internationalisation, it centres the students' perspectives as agents of knowledge, reflection, and transformation. The findings of this study are expected to inform not only academic theories but also the practices and policies that shape doctoral education, making it more inclusive, responsive, and attuned to the diverse realities of an international research community. Table 2.1 outlines key implications and directions for future research and practice in international doctoral education, highlighting the role of critical literacy in understanding international doctoral researchers' identities, agency, and literacy practices.

Table 2.1: *Implications for Research and Practice in International Doctoral Education*

Area of research	Action
Internationalisation	- Recognise the deeper implications of academic identity and skill development among international doctoral researchers as a key lens for understanding higher education internationalisation.

Research with international students	- Examine the nuanced experiences and literacy skills of doctoral students, especially internationals navigating multilingual and multicultural environments. - Adopt a critical lens to explore international doctoral students' engagement with academic literacies, moving beyond problem-focused and deficit narratives. - Conceptualise literacy as a culturally and politically situated practice for postcolonial reflection in international doctoral research practices
Critical literacy theoretical framework	- Place student agency at the core of critical literacy pedagogical approach to highlight learners' ability to understand and shape their world. - Acknowledge that literacy and identity are shaped by both intellectual and emotional processes.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter presents the study's methodological approach, grounded in a poststructuralist perspective that views knowledge, identity, and meaning as socially constructed, fluid, and contingent (Belsey, 2002). The chapter begins by outlining the research design to situate the study within a postructuralist and qualitative perspective. It then introduces the critical narrative research framework that underpins the inquiry. This is followed by a detailed account of the research methods, including the research questions and methods employed. The chapter then turns to the analytical strategies, drawing on both critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis. The chapter then addresses issues of validity, credibility, and reliability, and concludes by acknowledging the methodological limitations of the study.

1. **Research design**

1.1 Poststructuralism approach

Poststructuralism is a theoretical movement that examines how humans re-create meanings through language (Belsey, 2002). According to poststructuralism, reality is socially constructed, which leads to questions about the origin of knowledge. Poststructuralism approach has become popular largely due to research methods focusing on text analysis and studying discourse (Delamont, 2020). According to Strega (2005), poststructuralism pays particular attention to the composition of language as discourse, with the recognition that language shapes lives and vice versa. Thus, critical literacy draws heavily on poststructuralism as a core theoretical basis, making it an appropriate focus for my study. Furthermore, a poststructuralist lens informs my methodological choices by encouraging an open and non-linear approach to data collection and analysis which values multiple interpretations and resists imposing fixed categories on participants' experiences. This is reflected in my use of narrative interviews, reflective diaries, and iterative coding, which allow space for participants' voices to shift, contradict, and evolve over time.

Foucault's (1971) concept of power and knowledge has also helped to form poststructural perspectives. According to Foucault, power operates in low-profile manner in daily social relations; therefore, to comprehend how power operates, everyday social relations need to be viewed in their discursive contexts. Power is embedded in our daily social interactions through the language we use, the norms we follow and the roles we play. Foucault (1971) argues that by studying everyday talk, texts, and practices in context, we can see how power operates in hidden, ordinary ways. All of these contribute to the ethos of this research. I examine how

participants' linguistic repertoires are shaped by power relations in their daily lives, their positions, their language, and institutional practices, thereby opening up identity exploration that might have been neglected. Given (2008) confirms that poststructuralist perspectives seem to focus on the language operation, meaning production, and how knowledge and power combine to create accepted or taken-for-granted forms of knowledge and social practices. Poststructuralist scholars like Miyahara (2010) and Luk and Lin (2007) also argue that identity emerges through discourse and within specific interactional contexts.

1.2 Qualitative research and poststructuralist perspective approach

In social sciences, qualitative methodologies have been increasingly employed to respond to considerations of power and the investigation of relationships between language and meaning, as found in poststructuralist and postmodernist literature. Additionally, Hodgson and Standish (2009) describe narrative qualitative research as a methodology widely used in educational research to foreground participants' voices and present experiences in their own terms. Crucially, narrative inquiry does more than simply represent experience; it offers a means of challenging dominant accounts by centring perspectives that are often marginalised within institutional and academic contexts. From a social justice perspective, this emphasis on voice is significant because it creates space for underrepresented groups to articulate how power, inequality, and exclusion are lived and negotiated. Accordingly, this study adopted a qualitative narrative discourse methodology to foreground the experiences

of multilingual international PhD students in UK higher education, whose voices and knowledge are frequently marginalised within Eurocentric academic structures.

Maynard (1994, p.23) shares a view of how poststructuralists think about data: "There is no such thing as 'raw' experience." Poststructuralist thinking clearly demonstrates that the very act of speaking about experience is to culturally and discursively constitute it. People's accounts of their lives are culturally embedded. Maynard's (1994) argument reflects a core poststructuralist assumption that experience does not exist as a transparent or unmediated reality waiting to be captured by research. In this sense, participants' narratives are not neutral reflections of reality but situated interpretations that reveal how meaning is made within particular social and historical contexts. Mindful of these considerations, this follows from Freire's notion of reading the word and the world, which I employed as part of my analysis.

In terms of the analytical approach, Given (2008) suggests that a poststructuralist analysis will yield different readings of texts that focus on recurring themes, contradictions, and patterns in how participant experiences are expressed. Accordingly, in this study, over 8 weeks of data collection, I collected oral interview extracts and written texts, which allowed me to observe patterns in participants' experiences and to formulate hypotheses.

1.3 Researcher position in poststructuralism research paradigm.

In poststructuralist research, the researcher's position is not treated as neutral or detached, but rather as an active and influential part of the research process. Reflexivity**,** which is the practice of continually examining one's own role, assumptions, and influence, is therefore essential throughout data collection and analysis (Given, 2008). This requires an ongoing interpretative process in which the researcher reads and re-reads the data and reflects not only on what the participants are saying but also on how their own positionality shapes the interpretation. Poststructuralist researchers often draw on methods from phenomenology and ethnography to pay close attention to the subjective meanings that individuals construct. This means recognising that people adopt multiple roles and may express different, even contradictory, meanings depending on the social situation (Given, 2008).

In adopting a critical narrative inquiry approach, my positionality as a multilingual doctoral researcher with a background in language and literacy education inevitably shaped both the design and the data collection process (Holland and Leander, 2004). My own experiences of navigating academic reading and writing in a second language informed the development of the intervention and enabled me to build rapport with participants, facilitating more open, reflective, and nuanced narratives. This understanding led me to adopt a research design that incorporated dialogic discussions, reflective diaries, and participants' own academic texts, creating multiple opportunities for reflection, meaning-making, and identity exploration. Rather than treating data collection as a process of extracting information, these activities created a pedagogical space in which participants could critically engage with their literacy

practices, question dominant academic norms, and reflect on how they positioned themselves within the academy. This insider perspective served as a methodological strength, allowing for empathetic engagement and a deeper understanding of the affective and epistemic dimensions of participants' experiences (Finlay, 2002). At the same time, I remained critically aware that my interpretations could be influenced by assumptions and experiences, and therefore adopted a reflexive stance throughout the research process.

One key assumption underpinning this study is that doctoral research in the social sciences often involves engaging with complex interpretations of human experiences, social phenomena, and knowledge claims. Such work requires doctoral researchers to navigate diverse perspectives, evaluate competing arguments, and position their own voices within ongoing scholarly conversations. Therefore, student's works often includes intensive reading, writing, and argumentation shaped by implicit epistemological and linguistic expectations. The social sciences were therefore considered a particularly relevant site for exploring how multilingual doctoral students negotiate academic literacy. This assumption informed the purposive selection of participants from disciplines such as Education, Law, and Gender Studies. While recognising that all academic fields involve forms of literacy and critical engagement, this study did not include STEM disciplines, as their research practices are often more structured around technical, quantitative, or formulaic modes of representation, which may offer fewer opportunities within this study's design to explore reflexive engagement with language, identity, and discourse in

depth. This decision was not intended to position social sciences as inherently more critical, but rather to ensure alignment between the study's theoretical framework and a disciplinary context in which critical literacy practices are more explicitly enacted and accessible for investigation.

A limitation of the sampling strategy also lies in its focus on a small, purposively selected group of seven international doctoral students within the social sciences. While this approach was appropriate for generating in-depth, contextually rich insights, it inevitably constrains the transferability of the findings to other disciplinary contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2010). In particular, the exclusion of participants from STEM fields means that the study does not capture how critical literacy may be enacted in disciplines with different epistemological traditions and modes of knowledge production. Furthermore, the participants were self-selecting and volunteered to engage in an intensive two-month intervention, which may indicate a pre-existing interest in reflection, literacy practices, or personal development. As such, their experiences may not fully represent those of doctoral students who are less inclined to engage in reflexive or critical approaches to academic work. While these limitations do not undermine the study's interpretive aims, they highlight the importance of situating the findings within the specific disciplinary and participant context in which they were generated.

In my study, I treated my participants' narratives as a starting point rather than as objective accounts to be 'collected'. My position as an international bilingual PhD

student gives me an affinity with my participants' experiences, concerns, and perspectives, which inevitably influences how I listen, interpret, and engage with their stories. Rather than attempting to erase this connection, I see it as a resource that helps me to both empathise with and critically analyse their accounts. Essentially, hearing what the participants had to say through the narrative construction of their experiences helps to support or reject certain assumptions and to understand the participants' social realities in context.

The data in this study can be interpreted in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways. The aim was not to fix meaning, but to explore the rich textures, tensions, and multiplicities of participants' experiences. In practice, this means I engaged in iterative readings of the interviews, diaries, and academic texts, each time attending to new angles, connections, and affective resonances. Interpretations were refined until patterns and themes emerged as recurrent across sources and analytical lenses, producing meanings that were stable enough to be credible, well-grounded, and theoretically coherent while still acknowledging their 'tentative and open to change' nature. This approach is particularly suited to explore the multilingual and multicultural identities of international doctoral students, where complexity and plurality are integral to the phenomena under study.

Lastly, to effectively recognise and manage personal biases, I consistently documented my reflections in a journal after each participant interview and briefly during data analysis. This activity offered a clearer perspective on my thought

processes and allowed for critical review and providing validation for my thoughts and decisions (Finlay, 2002; Karcher et al., 2024).

In the next section, I introduce critical narrative analysis models that are grounded in a poststructuralist perspective.

1.4 Critical narrative analysis research

1.4.1 Critical narrative research

Narrative research involves any study that utilises or examines narrative materials. Data can be gathered in the form of a story (provided in an interview or a literary work) or through other methods (field notes written as narratives or personal letters). (Lieblich et al., 1998). According to Bickman and Rog (1998, as cited in Lieblich et al., 1998, p.5), narrative methods can be seen as 'real-world measures' for investigating 'real-life problems'.

Poststructuralist understandings of experience and data resonate strongly with critical literacy theory and practice. Critical literacy similarly rejects the idea that texts, meanings, or experiences are neutral or transparent, instead emphasising that they are produced within relations of power, history, and ideology. From a critical literacy perspective, participants' narratives are not simply accounts of what happened, but sites where meanings are actively constructed, identities are performed, and

dominant discourses may be reproduced or contested. In practice, this means attending not only to what participants say, but how they say it, whose discourses they draw on, and how their accounts position themselves and others within broader social and academic hierarchies. Together, these approaches enable the study to treat participants' narratives as critical texts through which inequalities are revealed, negotiated, and, at times, resisted.

Given's (2008) work becomes a particularly useful source for understanding the researcher's position and the narrative enquiry method. Drawing on poststructuralist understandings of narrative, identity, and research methodology, he argued that poststructural researchers need to conduct a detailed examination of texts, with attention to language, meaning, power-knowledge frames, and the construction of self. Taking this approach into consideration, I integrated critical discourse analysis into my study to explore the relationship between the participants' linguistic practices with their social practices.

Linguistic forms, including grammar, cohesion, styles, rhetorical choices, and linguistic contexts, are emphasised differently by researchers, as long as meanings are context-specific and relate to varying discursive practices (Given, 2008). Analysis approaches can focus on content and form or form and content (Given 2008). This analysis focused on content and form, with an emphasis on language, treating texts as linguistic resources and practices accessible within social and cultural contexts. Given (2008) also emphasises that the key aspect is to question social relationships and social practices critically and rigorously, rather than focusing

on a repertoire or conversation analysis, or on the functioning of discourse within grammar. In addition, in poststructuralism, researchers do not attempt to analyse participants' responses to identify or discover 'the truth' of a situation. Accordingly, my approach is to attend to the participants' diverse voices expressed in the text and to adopt poststructuralist perspectives, which hold that meaning is not fixed or stable but is always changing and fluid. As Given (2008) claims that poststructuralist analysis concentrates on dismantling unlimited layers of social reality formation.

Generally, research employing narrative aims to hear people's voices, particularly those of vulnerable young children and those with special needs or illness (Bold, 2012). Smith (2008, p.55) states that narrative inquiry is a prominent research methodology in education as the 'theory/practice/reflection cycle of inquiry'. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) also argue that narrative inquiry incorporates theoretical concepts about educational experiences as lived and told stories. Importantly, the use of narrative in educational research helps organise human experience, as humans lead storied lives, both individually and socially (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). This PhD research is collaborative and self-reflective, in which my participants and I seek to understand and improve literacy practices and identity development in our PhD journeys. This research positions both the participants and I as active collaborators in investigating and enhancing the literacy practices and identity development that unfold throughout the doctoral journey. Through ongoing dialogue and mutual reflection, the research foregrounds participants' lived experiences and scholarly perspectives, ensuring that knowledge production is co-constructed rather than imposed.

My research on identity, from a poststructuralist perspective, uses narrative as central to human lived experience. Narrative research does not aim to test a hypothesis but helps to interpret the self and personal identity (Bold, 2012). This is also in line with poststructuralism perspective which does not attempt to identify or discover 'the truth' of a situation. Spence (1986) shares similar views on the narrative approach, arguing that it involves particularities, analogies, and metaphors that go beyond the facts and rules. Applying this view to my research, I sought to identify different reactions, feelings, and explanations in the narratives. Human beings perceive or discover themselves and reveal to others by the stories they tell (Lieblich et al., 1998).

This study employed a critical narrative inquiry in which participants engaged in a series of structured activities over a two-month period, including dialogic discussions, reflective diaries, and engagement with their own academic writing. Rather than being intentionally designed as an intervention, the methodological approach was developed to generate rich, longitudinal accounts of multilingual doctoral students' literacy experiences. However, as the study progressed, it became evident that the research process itself functioned in ways that extended beyond data generation. Participants repeatedly described the activities as being markedly different from their usual supervisory experiences. This highlighs how the opportunities for sustained reflection, dialogue, and engagement with critical literacy practices enabled them to reconsider their reading, writing, and researcher identities. In this sense, the intervention qualities of the study emerged through participants'

own understandings of the research process and the value they attributed to it, rather than through a predetermined intention to produce pedagogical change. The two-month duration supported this iterative process by allowing participants to revisit experiences, develop their reflections over time, and engage with multiple dimensions of critical literacy. Similarly, through evaluating a pre-designed instructional intervention, Lehner et al. (2017) provide empirical evidence that educational approaches grounded in critical literacy can generate measurable academic benefits.

1.4.2 Temporal aspects in narrative research

Temporal aspects are particularly paid attention by many researchers in narrative research. Lieblich et al. (1998) argue that life stories evolve over time. A recorded and transcribed piece of story is a single, frozen and still text, but carries a developing, changing identity that is continuously in flux. This reflects the poststructuralist idea in my research that 'truth' is not a fixed concept but rather constantly changes. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also state that narrative inquiry acknowledges that events have a past, a present, and a potential future. Bold (2012) agrees that because events unfold over time, narrative research accepts the change process and records and analyses its impact. Kim (2016) extends the same view that narrative thinking uses stories to understand human actions through changes and challenges of life events. Narrative approach attempts to locate events into stories to

put experience in time and place. Taking temporal elements into account, I asked my participants to reflect on various stages of their lives, with particular attention to their origins and motivations at different points in their educational journeys. And therefore, the discourses they produced were subject to change over time. Over the course of eight weeks, we engaged in conversations that provided a space to share and explore our experiences. As these discussions progressed, diverse stories emerged, revealing different aspects of our lives at various points in time.

In analysing these narratives, I placed temporality at the core of my analysis, which means changes over time as a key dimension through which the narratives were interpreted. I paid attention to how participants' accounts shifted when they recalled experiences from different points in their academic and personal trajectories and recognised that each story was situated in a specific moment and shaped by present concerns, memories, and anticipations of the future. Rather than seeking a single, fixed 'truth', I outlined how meanings, identities, and interpretations evolved across time and compared earlier and later reflections to identify patterns of change, continuity, and re-interpretation. This approach acknowledged the multilayered nature of the narratives, where past experiences were constantly re-storied in light of new events, and future aspirations inflected present understandings. By reading across temporal layers, I captured the dynamic interplay between lived experience and its ongoing reconstruction.

The use of qualitative narrative research requires careful consideration of certain challenges and cautions, which I address in the following section.

1.5 Crystalisation

This study adopted an interpretive qualitative approach, which recognised knowledge as partial, situated, and co-constructed rather than singular or objective. As such, the study drew on crystallisation as a methodological principle to enhance analytical rigour. Crystallisation involves engaging with multiple sources of data, perspectives, and analytical lenses to illuminate the complexity of the phenomenon under study, rather than seeking a single fixed truth (Richardson, 2000). By bringing together interviews, diary entries, writing artefacts, and reflexive journaling, crystallisation enabled a richer and more nuanced understanding of multilingual doctoral students' experiences, while acknowledging the researcher's positionality and the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry.

Kim (2016) highlights that it is unavoidable to have ambiguous and complex stories since narrative research includes the feelings, goals, perceptions, and values of the participants. This supports Bold's (2012) argument that individuals observing the same event tell somewhat different stories, shaped by what attracts their attention and by how they interpret the event based on their own experiences. She further comments that a personal narrative is not a precise account of events, nor does it reflect the broader world. It is inherently tentative and cannot offer certainties due to its multilayered meanings. To be more specific, Lieblich et al. (1998) explain that people construct stories from the elements of their life histories and cultural backgrounds. These stories, in turn, shape their lives, impart meanings and goals, and

connect them to their culture. Consequently, no story has a single voice. A story can have various dimensions, relate to melody, pitch, and loudness, or, in my context, content and form.

Crystallisation (Richardson, 2000; Ellingson, 2009) embraces the partial, shifting, and sometimes contradictory perspectives that emerge from different data forms, methods, or researcher interpretations. This approach recognises that participants come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which significantly shape their worldviews and their ability to read, question, and analyse texts in ways that uncover hidden meanings, power dynamics, and social influences. In this study, crystallisation allows for a richer and more nuanced representation of multilingual doctoral students' engagement with academic texts, writing practices, and research participation, and captures the emotional, cultural, and cognitive dimensions of their experiences while acknowledging the inherent ambiguities and tensions in their narratives.

In my research, I contend that employing a narrative approach has enabled me to capture and present the rich and varied stories of these individuals. I believe that embracing the ambiguity of the data helps me capture the moment when participants express their emotions and values. As Bold (2012) argues, the narrative approach supports researchers who doubt the conventional notions of truth, reality, meaning, and knowledge. Through a narrative approach, I sought to examine and understand power relations embedded in narratives and stories. At the same time, Lieblich et al. (1998) do not agree to treat all narratives as texts of fiction. They conclude that

stories are often built around a core of facts and life events, while allowing for freedom of individuality and creativity.

In addition, to address the inherent complexity of narrative data, I adopted a reflexive and iterative analytic process to ensure that my interpretations were grounded in both the participants' accounts and the wider socio-cultural contexts in which they are situated. This involved repeated readings of transcripts, close attention to language choices, tone, and contextual cues, and revisiting emerging interpretations over time. Reliability was also enhanced through internal participant-led cross-checking, whereby participants reviewed and commented on their own narratives to confirm or clarify meanings.

In this qualitative research, triangulation (Denzin, 2009; Creswell, 2004) involved comparing and cross-checking data from different forms of evidence, such as interviews, diaries, and written texts, to identify convergences, contradictions, and deeper insights. With this, researchers can capture the complexity of participants' experiences while minimising the influence of bias or single-source limitations (Creswell, 2004). In this study, triangulation enabled a more nuanced understanding through diverse insights while respecting the unique and situated nature of each story.

By combining these strategies with a commitment to transparency in documenting my interpretive decisions, I ensured that the findings remained faithful to the

participants' lived experiences while recognising their multiplicity and evolving nature.

2. Methods

2.1 Background

With 46,350 foreign PhD candidates, Britain's doctoral education landscape would seem to be flourishing (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022). According to the latest report from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2022), the highest percentage of full-time postgraduates enrolling in UK universities was from non-European Union countries. Between 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, non-UK student enrolments increased by 48,500, which was mainly made up of non-EU student group. Chinese students are the dominant group of foreign students going to the UK, outnumbering any other group. From 2016 to 2021, there was a sharp increase of 48, 225 or 50% in the group of Chinese students. At the same period, there was also a noticeable increase in Indian students of 67,660. In 2020/2021, 32% and 19% of non-EU students were from China and India, respectively. In terms of the UK research landscape, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, in 2016-2017, 13% and 29% of doctoral students in the United Kingdom were from European and non-European countries, respectively.

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore in depth the literacy practices of a small, purposively selected group of seven international doctoral

students within the social sciences, including disciplines such as Education, Law, and Gender Studies. The decision to focus on this specific disciplinary grouping reflects the shared emphasis on critical reading, writing, and argumentation within these fields, while also allowing for variation in epistemological orientations. A small sample size was intentionally selected to enable rich, detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences, consistent with the study's interpretive and exploratory aims. Rather than seeking generalisability, the research prioritises depth, complexity, and contextual understanding, examining how participants engage with academic reading and writing, mobilise multilingual resources, and negotiate identity and knowledge production within their doctoral work (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach ensures alignment between the study's aims, its qualitative methodology, and the scale of the participant group.

The participants I selected for the study (See participant recruitment) are from six universities in England and Scotland. This afforded me opportunities to converse with research participants and to network with additional participants as the research progressed. According to my participants, their universities are culturally diverse, particularly within their fields of research. Some of these universities are members of the Russell Group, which some of my participants consider 'prestigious'.

Through this investigation, the following research questions have been explored:

Question 1: What are the experiences of PhD international students in navigating their individual voices in doing research in an English-speaking host country such as the UK?

1.a What are the students' experiences in becoming academic authors?

1.b How do their prior knowledge and cultural background affect their level of engagement in research activities?

1.c How is the students' confidence in claiming their (emerging) academic voice?

Question 2: How are the academic identities of international multilingual PhD students performed and constructed through their English second language research practices?

2.a How do the students establish their hybrid identity in relation to their established, defined identities and ideological subjectivity?

2.b What strategies do the students adopt in order to negotiate and create their emerging identity?

2.c How have the students' perceptions of their academic identities changed since the beginning of the data collection process, if at all?

Question 3: How is the international multilingual PhD students' awareness of critical literacy manifested in higher education research practice?

3.a How can critical literacy be beneficial to multilingual PhD students?

3.a What are the possible issues of the enactment of critical literacy practices among the students?

3.b What are the students' perceptions of power in academia in the UK?

2.2 Recruitment process and population sample

This investigation utilised convenience and targeted snowball sampling to recruit participants. An initial invitation to participate was advertised on social media platforms for PhD students, such as X and Facebook, and potentially via email to the researcher's professional contacts. My insider status as a researcher in the UK enabled me to recruit participants. I sent invitations to interested participants, who could then choose to participate. Potential participants were not coerced or pressured to participate and were assured that they could withdraw at any time before data were anonymised for analysis. Informal conversations with every potential participant had taken place before consent was obtained. These conversations provided my participants and me with opportunities to build rapport and gave participants the chance to learn more about the project before making an informed decision to participate or not. The potential participants had the freedom to choose (or not) to agree to start data collection with me after that.

I interviewed eleven participants. Five PhD students dropped out after the first few weeks because of their busy schedules and difficulty in managing their work-life balance during their PhD programmes.

Each participant identifies as an international PhD student and is currently registered on a doctoral programme at a UK university. Their genders, nationalities, research topics and stages of study are shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: *Participants' Background Information*

Name (anonymous)	Gender	Nationality	Research area	Research Topic	Stage of study
Lee	female	Chinese	Education	The use of dating apps among international Chinese students in the UK	3rd year
Chan	male	Chinese	Linguistics	Chinese hegemonic masculinities among international Chinese male students	4th year
Pham	male	Vietnamese	Law	Approaches to efficiency considerations in merger control in US and EU	2nd year
Lim	female	Malaysian	Education	The use of picture book in teaching English in Malaysian classroom	4th year
Bakhshi	male	Iranian	Education	The use of humour in teaching immigrants English	1st year

Huang	male	Taiwanese	Education	Global education for indigenous Taiwanese	1st year

Participant Narratives and Bio-poems

The following narrative extracts introduce each participant through a biographical profile and a bio-poem. Each profile begins with a short paragraph that presents participants' backgrounds, research interests, and self-positioning as doctoral researchers. These narratives are drawn from the first diary entry and the first interview and have been summarised in the first person to foreground participants' voices and to create a more direct, personal account of who they are and how they situate themselves within their research and doctoral journeys. Each profile is then followed by a bio-poem, completed in response to a structured bio-poem prompt adapted from Laura Candler's Bio-Poems Made Easy resource (Candler, n.d.). The bio-poems offer a more creative and affective form of self-representation, enabling participants to express identities, values, aspirations, and concerns that may not surface through conventional academic writing. Together, these narrative forms function as key data artefacts that illuminate identity work, voice, and positioning at the early stage of the study.

Below is the prompt from Laura Candler's (n.d.) bio-poem:

First name:

3 words describe you:

Who loves:

Who hates:

Who is able to:

Who feels:

Who wonders:

Who cares about:

Who fears:

Who would like to:

Who dreams:

Participant: Lim

An English teacher striving to create more equitable English education in Malaysia

Narrative profile:

I was born in Malaysia and spent most of my education there. Before starting my PhD in the UK, I worked as a primary school teacher in Malaysia for ten years. Both of my parents are English teachers. Growing up, however, I did not speak English very well. In my context, it is common for people to make fun of those who speak English 'incorrectly' or with non-native fluency, even though native speakers are not necessarily more proficient. My mother often said, "How can you not get it right? I'm an English teacher—how can you not speak English?"

In Malaysia, English teachers are trained using a monolingual approach, with a one-language policy. This made me feel very restrained when teaching. How do you ask a seven-year-old to express opinions if they are not allowed to speak their mother tongue? I decided to break the rules and allow my students to use whatever language they felt comfortable with. Surprisingly, they produced many brilliant ideas that would not have emerged through traditional methods. I began teaching English using picture books instead of textbooks, allowing discussion in any language—including a mixture of English and Bahasa. I really enjoyed this approach, and it became the foundation of my PhD proposal. My research now explores the benefits of combining wordless picture books and translanguaging approaches in English teaching and learning in Malaysia.

I also realised that being a good English teacher does not require speaking with a standard British accent. I do not need to sound like a White person. I have accepted my own variety of English as Malaysian English.

Lim's bio-poem:

Three words that describe me: adaptable, curious, tenacious

Who loves: arts (illustrations, children's drawings, picture books, pottery, clay figurines), international cuisine, desserts, travelling

Who hates: bigotry, power distance, misogyny

Who is able to: persevere through hard times

Who feels: calm and accomplished, but sometimes lost and melancholic

Who wonders: what education would be like if schools centred play,

creativity, and picture books

Who cares about: humanistic education, fun learning, equal teacher–student relationships

Who fears: that my daughter with ADHD, autism, and dyslexia may struggle in a fast-paced world

Who would like to: finish my PhD, create a teacher module, run weekly picture-book workshops

Who dreams: that children will receive the respect they deserve from adults

Participant: Chan

A Chinese male researcher challenging traditional gender norms

Narrative profile:

I was born and grew up in China. I completed my undergraduate degree at a UK China-based university and then pursued my Master's and PhD in the UK. My research explores masculinity among international Chinese students in the UK. As a Chinese male international student, I embody many elements of my research topic.

Growing up, I felt different from other boys and men and often felt excluded. I chose to study linguistics, a field with more women than men. I do not agree with traditional gender expectations in my culture, such as women staying at home or emotionally expressive men being mocked. I believe men can cry and like pink.

Gender studies are popular in Western academia but marginal in China. Much research on Chinese masculinity has been conducted by English-speaking scholars. I want to provide my perspective as a Chinese man and a Chinese researcher.

Chan's bio-poem:

Three words: PhD, feminist, man

Who loves: ground-breaking theories and immersive writing

Who hates: sexism and racism

Who is able to: research gender equality from men's perspectives

Who feels: tired and anxious

Who wonders: how to complete a high-quality thesis

Who cares about: raising gender equality awareness among men

Who fears: criticism from other Chinese men

Who would like to: promote gender equality

Who dreams: of developing new theory and writing an excellent thesis

Participant: Lee

A Chinese female researcher uncovering international students' hidden voices

Narrative profile:

I am from China and came to the UK for my Master's and PhD. My research focuses on international students' use of dating applications in the UK. I became interested in this topic after noticing how lonely many international students were and how they used dating apps to seek connection.

Existing literature focuses heavily on academic performance, but intimacy and relationships are vital to students' mental and physical wellbeing. Chinese international students are a large group in the UK, yet their voices are often silenced when it comes to intimacy and relationships.

Lee's bio-poem:

Three words: Chinese, researcher, bisexual

I love equality

I hate patriarchy

I am able to research and write

I feel satisfied but confused

I wonder how gender equality can be achieved

I care about minority lived experiences

I fear indifference

I would like to learn more about international students' lives

I dream of a world without racism or gender inequality

Participant: Huang

A Taiwanese researcher advocating for Indigenous recognition

Narrative profile:

I was born and grew up in Taiwan and worked in education for 20 years. I recently came to the UK to pursue my PhD. Although Mandarin is widely spoken in Taiwan, it is not my mother tongue; mine is Hakka. Due to historical

political rule, Mandarin was imposed, and many people, including myself, lost fluency in their native languages.

I worked in a remote area where many students were Indigenous. Through this experience, I became aware of how Indigenous cultures are underestimated and discriminated against. My research seeks to reveal Indigenous achievements and challenge discrimination in Taiwan.

Huang's bio-poem:

Three words: Activist, awakener, learner

Who loves: challenging inherent values

Who hates: inequality

Who is able to: recognise power imbalance and racism

Who feels: challenged yet energised

Who wonders: how to break fatalism

Who cares about: revealing diversity

Who fears: over-homogeneity

Who would like to: celebrate difference

Who dreams: of dignity and joy for all

Participant: Bakhshi

An Iranian researcher integrating humour into ESOL

Narrative profile:

I was born and raised in Iran and have taught English in multiple countries. I believe teaching is an art and that humour creates effective learning

environments. I use stand-up comedy in my teaching and aim to support migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers—particularly in Glasgow—through storytelling and dark comedy.

Given political unrest in Iran, higher education and migration are pathways to a better future. I seek to combine humour and language teaching to empower displaced learners.

Bakhshi's bio-poem:

Three words: Iranian, joker, passionate

Who loves: diversity and inclusivity

Who hates: discrimination

Who is able to: use comedy as pedagogy

Who feels: empowered

Who wonders: how to support refugees with trauma

Who cares about: safe learning spaces

Who fears: humour being misunderstood

Who dreams: transforming ESOL through creativity

Participant: Pham

A Vietnamese researcher committed to positivist inquiry

Narrative profile:

I was born and raised in Vietnam and studied Law at undergraduate and Master's levels before beginning my PhD in the UK. My research examines mergers and acquisitions law across multiple jurisdictions. I approach research

through positivist, empirical, and logical frameworks, aiming to address unresolved contradictions in this field.

Pham's bio-poem:

Three words: genuine, careful, hard-working

Who loves: rationalism

Who hates: greed

Who is able to: observe reality

Who feels: lonely and isolated

Who wonders: about truth

Who cares about: realism and liberalism

Who fears: unknown unknowns

Who dreams: of becoming a good researcher

These texts are not neutral self-descriptions but socially and discursively constructed narratives. Presenting participant biographies and bio-poems as narrative extracts is methodologically significant because it foregrounds participants' self-positioning, identity claims, and research motivations in their own terms. These narratives recognise them as meaning-makers whose experiences are culturally, linguistically, and discursively situated. By situating these narrative representations early in the study, the research makes visible the positionalities that shape participants' engagements with academic literacy and knowledge production.

2.3 Data collection

This qualitative study employed multiple means for participants to express their identities and experiences with language as emerging researchers, collected through three main research instruments: 1) participants' academic writing, 2) participants' digital solicited diaries and 3) diary interviews. Data collection took place over an eight-week period and involved six multilingual international doctoral students, introduced in the previous section.

The use of critical narrative inquiry as an intervention in this study is designed as a cohesive and structured process, functioning as a complete programme with a clear narrative arch with beginning, development, and endpoint (Kim, 2016). Rather than a series of isolated tasks, the eight-week sequence of diary activities operates as an integrated framework in which each stage builds upon the previous one. The programme begins with activities that foreground participants' identities and lived experiences, establishing a foundation for critical reflection, and gradually progresses towards more complex forms of engagement with academic reading, writing, and knowledge production. This temporal and pedagogical progression allows participants to move from self-awareness to critical analysis and ultimately to the active reconstruction of meaning. Early accounts from participants in this research are characterised by increasing awareness of their own literacy practices and assumptions. As the research progressed, they increasingly questioned disciplinary norms, epistemological assumptions, and their positioning within academic communities. For most of the participants, these reflections culminated in a reconstruction of meaning, whereby they described changes in how they understood their identities, approached academic reading and writing, or positioned themselves

as knowledge producers. The sustained duration of the intervention also enables iterative reflection, where participants revisit and deepen their understandings over time, creating continuity across the data collection process. In this sense, the methodology functions not only as a tool for generating data but as a coherent learning journey, within which participants engage in evolving practices of critical literacy Taken as a whole, the research design generated data that captured not isolated moments of reflection but an evolving process of dialogue, reflexivity, and meaning-making over time. As the findings demonstrate, this process also revealed pedagogical and intervention potential, with participants describing benefits that may have relevance beyond this particular study and across a range of educational contexts.

To begin, participants submitted a sample of their academic writing, which served as a baseline artefact for subsequent analysis. Over the eight-week period, each participant completed one semi-structured interview per week (a total of 8 interviews per participant), each lasting approximately 45 minutes. In addition, participants completed reflective diary tasks at four key points (Weeks 1, 3, 5, and 7) to elicit written reflections on identity, literacy practices, and academic writing experiences. Below is a table summarising the data collection timeline over 8 weeks.

Table 3.2: *Data collection timeline (8 weeks)*

	Activity	Details
	Academic writing submission	Participants submitted a sample of their academic writing after the consent was obtained.
Week 1	Interview 1 + Diary 1	Interview (45 minutes); reflective diary task
Week 2	Interview 2	Interview (45 minutes)
Week 3	Interview 3 + Diary 2	Interview (45 minutes); reflective diary task
Week 4	Interview 4	Interview (45 minutes)
Week 5	Interview 5 + Diary 3	Interview (45 minutes); reflective diary task
Week 6	Interview 6	Interview (45 minutes)
Week 7	Interview 7 + Diary 4	Interview (45 minutes); reflective diary task
Week 8	Interview 8	Final interview to reflect on the academic writing that the participants sent in the beginning (45 minutes).

By engaging participants in structured, reflective, and multimodal activities over an extended period, the activities created a space for learning that goes beyond conventional doctoral training. Drawing on principles of critical literacy, the activities were designed to create opportunities for participants to interrogate

academic norms, reflect on their positionality, and engage with different ways of reading and writing. This design provided a theoretical and pedagogical framework through which participants could explore questions of knowledge, power, language, and identity within their doctoral literacy practices. As discussed in the findings, participants' narratives suggest that these opportunities extended beyond. Many described developing greater critical awareness, a stronger sense of authorial voice, increased confidence in engaging with academic discourse, and, for some, new ways of approaching their research and writing. The methodology therefore not only generated rich longitudinal data but also, as evidenced by participants' accounts, demonstrated pedagogical and interventionist qualities that emerged through the research process itself.

What follows is a detailed explanation of data collection activities from Table 3.2.

2.3.1 Collecting participants' academic writing

To gather their writings, I requested that participants submit one to two examples of their favourite academic writing, such as their research proposal or reflective writing on their research, at the beginning of the data collection process. A preliminary analysis of this written data, for each participant, then formed the basis for developing the digital solicited diary and diary interview schedule. For instance, when there was a tendency among the participants to submit writing which relied heavily on formal, impersonal academic language and minimized references to personal motivation or positionality, subsequent interview prompts and diaries

(Diary 3: Write a letter to your participants; Diary 4: Write your research differently) therefore served to invite reflection on how their research interests were shaped by lived experience, if at all.

2.3.2 Digital solicited diary

Solicited diary methods require participants to create written or multimodal entries in response to researcher-provided prompts over a specified period (Alaszewski, 2006). In educational research, this approach is commonly employed to document learners' ongoing experiences, reflections, and sense-making in daily academic settings, rather than relying solely on retrospective interviews (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). Solicited diaries are valuable for identity research, allowing participants to articulate self-positioning, negotiate expectations, and respond emotionally and discursively to learning environments over time (Riessman, 2008).

The design of the diary activities in this study is explicitly informed by a critical literacy framework, which conceptualises literacy as a socially situated practice shaped by power, identity, and meaning-making (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Each diary prompt was therefore developed not simply as a reflective task, but as a critical space through which participants could interrogate their own positioning within academic literacy practices. For example, the first diary entry, which involves identity mapping and a bio-poem, draws on the critical literacy emphasis on connecting personal experience with broader social and structural conditions (Freire, 1970), enabling participants to reflect on how their identities as multilingual

researchers shape their engagement with knowledge production. The second diary entry, which uses the metaphor of a dinner party for the literature review, foregrounds issues of power, voice, and inclusion by inviting participants to consider whose knowledge is legitimised, whose voices are centred or marginalised, and how they position themselves within academic debates. Similarly, the third and fourth entries extend critical literacy practices into narrative and multimodal forms, encouraging participants to engage affectively and reflexively with their research, to recognise the relational dimensions of knowledge, and to experiment with alternative ways of representing meaning across audiences and languages. In this way, the diary activities operationalise critical literacy by creating structured opportunities for participants to question taken-for-granted academic norms, draw on their multilingual and cultural resources, and exercise agency in constructing and expressing knowledge, rather than reproducing dominant academic conventions.

This research instrument involved international PhD students completing digital solicited personal diaries over 8 weeks (one diary every two weeks) to capture their feelings, thoughts, and significant experiences they believed had an impact on their emerging researcher identity and academic voice. This activity took place after the researcher collected their academic writings.

Figures 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4 are 4 diary prompts across 8 weeks:

Diary Entry 1 (week 1): Expressing individuals; Mapping your identity

Task 1: Bio-poem: describe yourself as a researcher.

Write in any format you like.

You can use the template example below to finish your poem. Keep adding more as you like!

Bio poem: (Created by Laura Candler)

First name: …

3 words describe you: ….

Who loves: …

Who hates: …

Who is able to: …

Who feels: ….

Who wonders: …

Who cares about: …

Who fears: …

Who would like to: …

Who dreams: …

Task 2: How do you see yourself as a researcher? How do others see you as a researcher?

Write words or phrases inside the outline that relate to your own identity or how you see yourself as a researcher. Use the space outside the drawing to write down

words or phrases that describe how you think people might see and expect you as a researcher?

Many of the decisions you will make in your research may be influenced by your identity.

Use this guidance to think of the factors that show your research identity:

Race, gender, nationality, language, family background/ origin, ethnicity, research interest/ motivation, religion, cultural background, institutional demand, academic demand, academic challenges, academic network, academic experiences, relationship with supervisors, ….

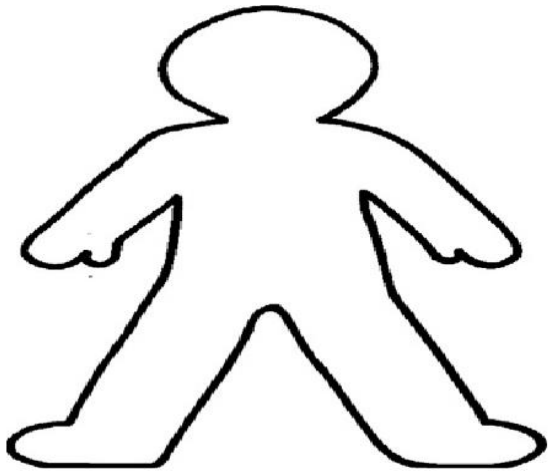


Figure 3.1: *Diary Entry 1 – Week 1*

Diary Entry 2 (week 3) :

Metaphor of table and dinner party to do the literature review

Imagine you are holding a party in your house and you as a doctoral researcher (host) invite to the party the scholars who you want to join you for a conversation about your research topic. You may as the host make space for guests to talk about their work, but in relation to your own work. And you may not invite everyone because they will not all fit at the table which is your research. Also, leading the conversation and making an argument at the dining table should be done by you as researcher.

Imagine and draw a party table map:

(Using these prompts as guidance)

How big is the party? How many people are invited? How will you seat your guests? Who will sit with you at the head of the table? Who do you most want to engage in conversation? Whose work has most influenced you [your topic, or your decisions regarding your topic choice]? Who do you want to speak back to? Who are you happy to acknowledge and greet, but seat further away from you? Are there any guests who don't get along and should not sit next to one another?

Reflective questions:

1. Where does your party take place? (Inside or outside UK? Your home country?)
2. Are there any international scholars? Are all/ most the scholars from the UK dominant? How diverse are the guests? From what areas are the authors from?

3. Why do you invite those scholars?
4. To what extent do you feel you get involved in the conversations?
5. Who do you enjoy talking to the most?
6. What are the most interesting conversations? What do you enjoy discussing most?
7. How relevant is your research to the debates?
8. Did you have any difficulties in understanding these scholars when you first started your PhD?
9. What is the topic you bring to the table? What is new about it?

The benefit of this metaphor is that it emphasizes the agency you have as the host of your own party – you are not a passive bystander reviewer. You cannot invite everyone, because they would not all fit around your table. As conversations and relationships develop, you can decide who to invite back later.

Figure 3.2: *Diary Entry 2 – Week 3*

Diary Entry 3 (week 5):

Write a personal letter to your participants or to the marginalized group(s) in your research.

Reflecting question:

In what way has this group of people affected how you see yourself as a researcher, if at all?

Figure 3.3: *Diary Entry 3 – Week 5*

Diary Entry 4:

Choose one 1 your favourite aspect in your research. How would you write it differently to different audience? How would you write in the way you want?

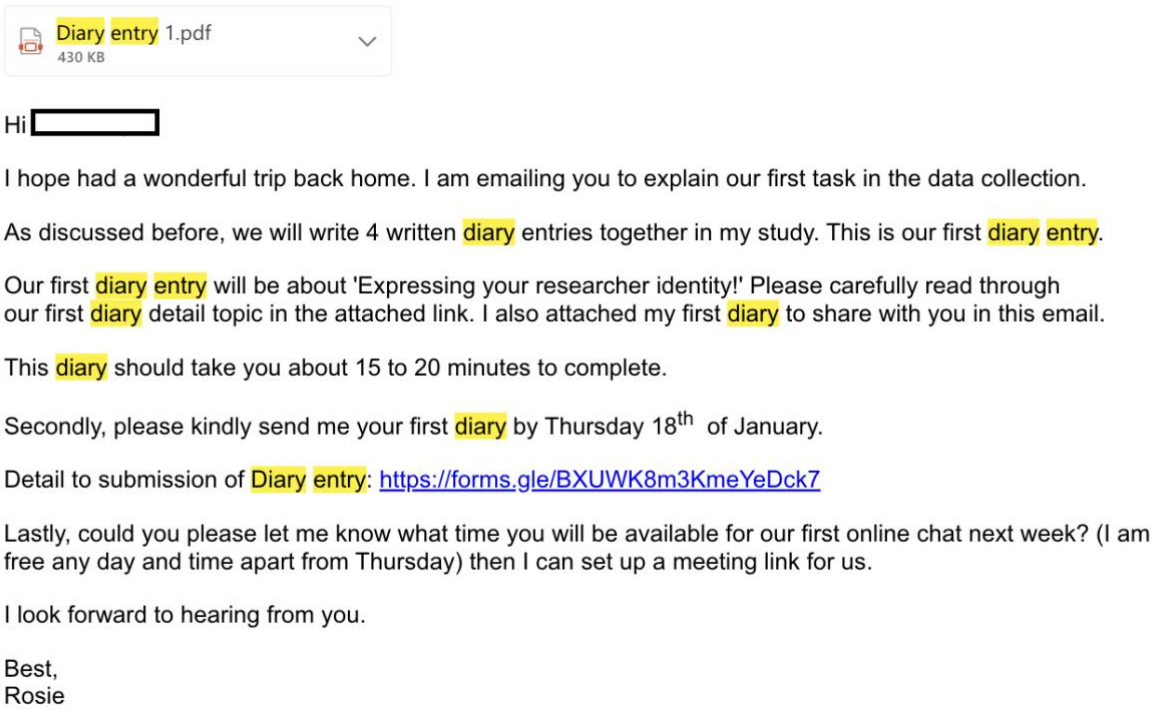
As an emerging researcher, do you ever see yourself as a writer? Why or why not?

Writing your research in different languages

As a PhD student, you must have presented and explained your research to different audiences. Now can you try to talk about your research in different languages? Write a short abstract for your PhD thesis in different languages including English and your mother tongues.

Figure 3.4: *Diary Entry 4 – Week 7*

Participants received a weekly email with a personalised link to an online diary entry form.


Diary entry 1.pdf
430 KB

Hi [redacted]

I hope had a wonderful trip back home. I am emailing you to explain our first task in the data collection.

As discussed before, we will write 4 written diary entries together in my study. This is our first diary entry.

Our first diary entry will be about 'Expressing your researcher identity!' Please carefully read through our first diary detail topic in the attached link. I also attached my first diary to share with you in this email.

This diary should take you about 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

Secondly, please kindly send me your first diary by Thursday 18th of January.

Detail to submission of Diary entry: https://forms.gle/BXUWK8m3KmeYeDck7

Lastly, could you please let me know what time you will be available for our first online chat next week? (I am free any day and time apart from Thursday) then I can set up a meeting link for us.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,
Rosie

Figure 3.5: *Example of an email with a personalised link to an online diary entry form.*

These emails (as in Figure 3.5) served as a friendly reminder of the weekly journal entries, helping to sustain participants' engagement with this phase of the data collection process. Only one reminder per week was sent to avoid any researcher coercion. Participants had flexibility in how they told their experiences. The form prompted participants to share their stories using text and/or images. Therefore, my participants had the opportunity to provide written narratives about their experiences. As Bold (2012) comments, visual data can be interpreted more effectively to understand what young people have to say and their innermost thoughts.

Participants had access to all their own previous entries. At the end of the 8-week period, a final email was sent out to encourage participants to review their

submissions and make any final edits before it was collected as a final data set. This enabled internal participant-led cross-checking (Birt et al., 2016), which was important because it gave participants control over how their experiences and perspectives were represented. This helped ensure the data was accurate, authentic, and aligned with their intended meaning.

2.3.3 Diary interviews

30- to 45-minute diary interviews were conducted weekly for 8 weeks. The solicited diary method is typically used alongside interviews in qualitative research (Bijoux & Myers, 2006; Corti, 1993; Milligan et al., 2005). The combination of these methods created triangulation, which enhanced rigour, breadth, complexity, richness, depth, and creativity in the research (Bijoux & Myers, 2006).

The sequencing of the interview questions was also theoretically informed by a critical literacy framework, particularly Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of 'reading the world before reading the word' and the subsequent process of recreating both the word and the world. This theoretical orientation guided the progression of tasks across the eight-week intervention. In the initial stage (Week 1), participants were invited to reflect on how they 'read the world' through identity-focused activities, foregrounding their lived experiences, sociocultural positioning, and personal meanings as researchers. The subsequent stages (Weeks 3–4) shifted towards how participants 'read the word,' encouraging critical engagement with academic texts and literature through activities such as the metaphorical dinner party, which

prompted reflection on voice, authority, and knowledge hierarchies within scholarly discourse. From Week 5 onwards, the focus moved towards 'recreating the word and the world,' where participants engaged in writing practices, including academic writing and digital forms such as social media, as a means of expressing, negotiating, and transforming knowledge. This progression reflects a deliberate pedagogical and methodological design that aligns with critical literacy principles, enabling participants to move from reflection to critical analysis and ultimately to active meaning-making and knowledge production.

Items and extracts from participants' academic writing and their digital solicited diaries were used as prompts for discussing their experiences, practices, dispositions, and reflections on doctoral study within English-medium UK higher education. For example, when early diary entries and submitted writing revealed frequent use of impersonal language and strong orientation towards rigid academic language, interview prompts invited participants to reflect on who they imagined as their audience and how this shaped what they felt able to say.

The diary interviews were recorded using an iPhone digital recorder application on the researcher's mobile phone, and transcription was carried out using Teams recordings. The documents were titled with the participants' pseudonyms.

A pilot study was carried out before the actual data collection with 4 international PhD students to examine the validity and reliability of the research methods and question items.

3. Analysis approach

Souto-Manning (2012) argues that combining critical discourse analysis with narrative analysis enables a more comprehensive analytic approach that addresses key methodological dilemmas in discourse-oriented research. Building on this perspective, this study adopted critical narrative analysis to examine interview and diary data, attending to how participants constructed, positioned, and repositioned themselves through their stories over time. In parallel, critical discourse analysis was used to analyse participants' academic writing samples, focusing on how language choices, genres, and rhetorical conventions reflected and reproduced broader institutional power relations. In addition, drawing on Ahmed's (2015) work on the affective turn, the analysis treated emotion as socially and politically produced. Bringing these approaches together enabled the analysis to capture how discourse, narrative, and affect intersected in participants' meaning-making, providing a coherent framework for interpreting both the data and the analytic procedure.

3.1 Preliminary approach

In narrative research, the analysis process has been emphasised to be immensely exhaustive by many researchers. Bold (2012) outlines how researchers analyze narrative data through a process of reordering, interpretive analysis, and resynthesis. In the same vein, Lieblich et al. (1998) observe that rich data can be generated after many hours of listening and transcribing. The continuity of text analysis demands

self-awareness and self-discipline, which makes it highly time-consuming for the researchers. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that narrative research depends heavily on the interpretation of vast amounts of data and the meanings attached to it. Once all interviews were complete and transcribed, I began reading the transcripts several times and listening to the audio recordings to identify key themes across the full interview narratives. Undoubtedly, organising and synthesising data was time-consuming, but I was also able to navigate and identify the significant parts and begin to shape the analysis.

Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest an interactive process in which the researcher becomes sensitive to the narrator's voice and meanings. Initially, I spent considerable amount of time familiarising myself with the interviews and paying attention to what seemed important and what attracted my attention as meaningful or connected to other participants' transcripts. Based on the outstanding themes that emerged from multiple readings and listenings of the interview, I developed a basic coding system to highlight meaningful and emotive words, themes, and phrases. These initial codes allowed me to identify and organise sections of each narrative thematically. For example, expressions such as "I don't belong", "I have to be careful", "It's risky", *and* "I write for my examiner" were initially coded as risk awareness and examiner-oriented writing**.** These codes were used to bring systematicity to my overall interpretive approach to the analysis. NVivo coding was used to identify potential relationships among the narratives collected. NVivo was chosen as the primary tool for data analysis in this study because of its capacity to manage, organise, and systematically code large volumes of qualitative data from multiple sources. Its

flexible coding functions allowed me to apply and refine my initial thematic codes and ensured that both anticipated and emergent themes could be captured with precision.

3.2 Framework of narrative data analysis using CDA features

In this study, I employed the framework of Lieblich et al. (1998) to analyse narrative data.

Lieblich et al. (1998) propose a framework comprising four approaches: holistic-content, holistic-form, categorical-content, and categorical-form. In this research, I combine two approaches, namely categorical form and categorical content, to make sense of my data, since the other two approaches seem to focus on whole, complete life stories of people. The categorical-content approach is generally seen as content analysis when groups of topics are navigated, and different utterances from data are extracted, sorted and put into these groups. The categorical-form mode of analysis pays attention to linguistic characteristics of defined units of narrative, such as metaphors and passive voice. Both approaches involve breaking the text into small units in terms of content categories and linguistic devices.

I first identified subtexts directly linked to my research questions, focusing on themes of (multilingual) literacy practices, multilingual identity negotiation, and critical engagement with texts in the participants' doctoral journeys. The data corpus, comprising interview transcripts, diary entries, and academic writing samples, was

repeatedly reviewed to extract sentences or utterances addressing these topics. These excerpts were then sorted into thematic categories such as ‘navigating academic discourse’, ‘emotional responses’, and ‘negotiating multilingual identity’. This thematic grouping allowed me to compare and contrast experiences across participants and time points.

I paid particular attention to approaches that use linguistic features of the narrative to recognize and assess its emotional content. This is in line with affect approach that I introduced in this research to explore how different layers of emotions are reflected in the act of telling stories among international PhD students. Lieblich et al.(1998) suggest that the most direct way of evaluating an interviewee’s emotions is to listen to the expression of feeling. The most direct method of assessing an interviewee's emotions is to listen for direct expressions of feeling, whether in content (“I am sad”) or in paralinguistic terms (tears). Careful reading for content can also say about the speaker's feeling. In this case, conclusions were based on the narrative’s linguistic features, including lexical, grammatical, and structural aspects of discourse. These devices involve (but not limited to) mental verbs (I thought, I understood, and I noticed), denotations of time and place, past, present, or future forms of verbs and repetitions of parts of the discourse (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1989, cited in Lieblich et al., 1998). For example, in one interview with Lim, she did not explicitly state an emotion, such as ‘I am anxious’, but instead repeatedly used mental verbs and temporal markers to describe her writing experience: “I kept thinking that my writing was not good enough. I noticed that every time I sent a draft.” Although no direct emotional label is used, the repeated use of mental verbs (*thinking, noticed*), the past

tense, and the cyclical structure of the narrative signal self-doubt and anxiety. Similarly, Lee shifted between present and future tense when describing her experience “I feel I am not good now, but I hope that I will be able to publish and become more confident” indicating an emotional movement from frustration to cautious optimism. In such cases, emotional interpretation was grounded in close attention to lexical choices, verb tense, repetition, and narrative structure rather than relying solely on explicit emotional statements.

While other linguistic researchers might examine the duration of silences, intonation, and other nuances, I chose to use comprehensive protocols without extraverbal details in this instance, given the extensive narrative texts I obtained.

3.3 Narrative selection approach

In this section, I provide a justification for my critical narrative selection approach. In this qualitative study, selected cases and narratives were examined rather than all cases for several methodological and practical reasons. These rationales include in-depth, focused analysis; relevance; a theoretically grounded framework; avoidance of data saturation; and logistical constraints.

The data collection took place over 8 weeks, involving six participants and three different datasets: 48 hours of interviews, 6 pieces of academic writing, and 24 written diaries. This extensive dataset provided a wealth of detailed information, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. Given the richness

and complexity of the data, my focus was on uncovering deep and meaningful insights rather than aiming for broad generalisations. By focusing on key cases, I was able to thoroughly analyse the intricacies of individual narratives and capture the nuanced ways in which participants constructed and interpreted their experiences. This approach enabled a more comprehensive understanding phenomena and underlying meanings embedded in their stories. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) emphasise that qualitative research focuses on depth, context, and meaning rather than broad generalisations.

In addition, the most representative, information-rich, and unique cases were examined across different themes. Particular cases can be both representative and unique at the same time. For example, Huang recognised how Western frameworks shaped scholarly discourse, which reinforced a common trend observed among participants. Huang's case was also distinct and complex due to his strong determination to emphasise the presence of indigenous Taiwanese perspectives in research. His struggle highlighted a deep personal commitment to maintain his cultural identity within an academic system that often prioritises Western frameworks. His contrast makes his case not only representative of a broader trend but also uniquely insightful in understanding how individuals navigate and challenge dominant ideologies.

The approach allows me to focus on individuals' rich narratives and explore the distinctive perspectives that each participant brings to their experiences. Participants naturally emphasised different aspects of their experiences and chose to elaborate

more on certain topics while providing limited insights into others. For instance, Chan, who was in the final stage of his PhD, had extensive academic writing experience, primarily in English, with little prior experience writing in Chinese or in a Chinese cultural context. As a result, his reflections on cross-cultural or multilingual writing were limited. Given this, I chose to analyse his reading experiences in the chapter 'Reading the World Precedes Reading the Word', in which he articulated his perspectives through the identities of a Chinese individual and a Chinese researcher studying in the UK. Similarly, Huang, who was in the early stages of his PhD, had limited experience with academic writing, as he was still in the process of reading and gathering resources. However, his experiences in reading provided valuable insights into cross-cultural and multilingual literacy. As someone newly exposed to English-language academic texts and norms, he offered a rich perspective on how an early-stage researcher navigated and adapted to these challenges. Therefore, I chose to analyse his reading experiences in greater depth in the chapter 'Decolonial Reading with Affect' to explore the complexities of language and cultural transitions in academic literacy.

Furthermore, this research focuses on critical literacy practices among multilingual international students in the UK. Given this conceptual framework, I excluded cases or narratives that do not provide relevant insights. For instance, Pham, a Vietnamese PhD student in Law, primarily discussed his reading experiences from a legal perspective, focusing on how to read as a lawyer. Since his insights did not align with the study's focus on critical literacy practices, I chose not to include his narratives in the analysis of reading practices.

In addition, this approach of selecting cases aligned with the critical discourse narrative analysis employed in this study. Critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis requires detailed examination of language, discourse structures, and socio-cultural contexts. By focusing on a small number of specific cases, I had a detailed and in-depth interpretation of how stories were constructed and conveyed rather than spreading analysis. Moreover, Van Dijk (1993) highlights that focusing on a few strategically selected texts enables deeper exploration of how power, ideology, and social structures are embedded in discourse. Gee (2014) explains that narrative analysis examines how language is used to construct identity, experience, and social positioning**,** requiring close attention to specific stories. By focusing on a smaller number of cases in each category, I was able to explore complexity, contradictions, and individual perspectives in greater detail.

Furthermore, being case-selective helped avoid data saturation, which occurs when no new themes, insights, or patterns emerge from data collection and analysis (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Analysis of additional cases in each category might not add significant value to the research findings. I believe that, through the analysis of two cases in each theme category, I have achieved a comprehensive understanding that captures the most valuable insights into multilingual and cultural critical literacy practices among my participants.

Finally, due to the constraints in terms of time and the length of a PhD research, I needed to consider practical limitations. A PhD thesis should not normally exceed

100,000 words, and the duration of my PhD program was 36 to 48 months. Thus, I needed to prioritise cases that provided the most meaningful insights within these constraints.

4. Validity – Credibility – Reliability

General rules for assessing research focus on reliability, validity, objectivity, and replicability, which, according to Lieblich et al. (1998), are at odds with the very nature of the narrative approach. Narrative texts can be read, interpreted and analysed in immensely various ways. Furthermore, no prior hypotheses were formed during the reading process. During this process, I embraced and was open to the ambiguity and changing realities.

Triangulation (Denzin, 2009; Creswell, 2004) was achieved by drawing on multiple data sources, including participant digital solicited diaries, weekly diary interviews, and samples of academic writing. This combination allowed me to cross-verify emerging themes and interpretations. For example, ideas expressed in diaries were compared with interview accounts to identify consistencies or shifts in perspectives, while academic writing provided an additional lens on participants' literacy practices in formal contexts. This process enhanced the credibility of my findings by confirming patterns across different forms of evidence and by highlighting contradictions that necessitated deeper analysis.

5. Methodological limitations

While this study was designed to capture rich and nuanced accounts of multilingual doctoral students' literacy practices and identity development, certain methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, the participants' cultural and linguistic diversity meant that nuances of meaning could be lost or altered in translation or in how participants expressed themselves in English. To mitigate this, I encouraged participants to draw on their full linguistic repertoires in diaries and interviews and clarified meanings through follow-up questions and member checking. Second, as a bilingual international doctoral student, my positionality may have influenced my interpretation of the narratives, potentially introducing bias. I addressed this through reflexive journaling, maintaining a clear record of my interpretive decisions, and seeking peer debriefing to challenge and refine my readings of the data. These steps helped to reduce the impact of these limitations and strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, while recognising that qualitative research is shaped by its contextual and relational nature.

In addition, given the small sample size and the specificity of participants' disciplinary backgrounds and research topics, there is an inherent risk that individuals could be identifiable, particularly within closely connected academic communities. This study addressed such risks through several ethical safeguards. Firstly, participants were actively involved in a process of member checking, whereby they were given the opportunity to review their data and the researcher's interpretations prior to inclusion in the thesis. This approach aligns with BERA's

(2024) emphasis on respecting participants' rights, promoting transparency, and recognising participants as active contributors rather than passive sources of data. This process ensured that participants retained a degree of control over how their experiences were represented and helped to minimise potential misinterpretation or unintended disclosure. In addition, pseudonyms and the removal or modification of identifiable details were employed throughout. These measures reflect the principle of minimising harm and protecting confidentiality, particularly in small-scale qualitative research where anonymity cannot be fully guaranteed (BERA, 2024). It is also important to note that participants were at different stages of their doctoral journeys, ranging from second year to final year at the point of data collection. By the time of thesis completion and publication, most participants will have already completed and disseminated their own research, which may reduce the immediacy of identifiability concerns. In qualitative research, anonymity is not always a fixed condition but can shift over time, as contextual relevance and recognisability evolve (Kaiser, 2009). In this sense, temporality can function as an additional, though partial, layer of protection, as the likelihood of identification may diminish as participants move beyond the specific context in which the data were generated.

Chapter 4

Data analysis

There are six main themes: Reading the world precedes reading the word, Decolonial reading with affect, Writing in and out of the comfort zone, ‘Small narratives’ in writing practices, Unpacking writers’ positions through writing, and The Exception that speaks. The themes are identified based on an eight-week data collection timeline. The first theme, ‘Reading the world precedes reading the word,’ is analysed using data from the first written diary entry and interviews conducted in weeks 1 and 2. The second theme, ‘Decolonial reading with affect’, is derived from interviews in weeks 3 and 4, along with the second written diary entry. The third theme, ‘Writing in and out of the comfort’, is analysed using data from weeks 5 and 6, as well as the third and fourth diary entries. The fourth theme ‘‘Small narratives’ in writing practices’ is analysed using data from weeks 6 and 7. The fifth theme ‘Unpacking writers’ positions through writing’ is analysed using the data from academic pieces

of writing from participants and interview data from week 8. The sixth theme 'The exception that speaks' is analysed from data about one specific participant across 8 weeks of data collection. Guided by Paulo Freire's critical literacy framework and Moje and Luke's metaphors of identity, the sequencing of themes reflects the idea that 'reading the world' precedes and shapes 'reading the word, emphasising that literacy involves ongoing engagement with and reflection on the world to allow individuals to 'recreate the word.'

In this qualitative research, certain cases and narratives are selected for analysis rather than all cases for several methodological and practical reasons. These rationales include in-depth and focus analysis, relevance, theoretical focused framework, data saturation avoidance, and logistic constraints. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the six main themes, including overarching questions for each theme, selected participants and data.

Table 4.1: *Summary of main themes, selected participants and data*:

Theme	Overarching questions	Selected participants	Data
Reading the world precedes reading the word	How do the participants perceive their world around them and how do they approach texts?	Lee and Chan	Diary entry 1 + Interview week 1+ Interview week 2

Decolonial reading with affect	How do the participants navigate cultural, intellectual, and emotional experiences shaped by colonial legacies?	Huang and Lim	Diary entry 2 + Interview week 3 + Interview week 4
Writing in and out of the comfort	What are the 'comfort zone' and 'non-comfort zone' in writing and how do they form, sustain, and suppress participants' identity?	Bakhshi and Lee	Diary entry 3 + diary entry 4 + Interview week 5 + Interview week 6
'Small narratives' in writing practices	What are the 'self' and the 'non-self' in the process of research writing?	Chan and Lim	Interview week 6 + Interview week 7
Unpacking writers' positions through writing	What linguistic choices emerge in the academic essays and what underlying intentions or reflections shape these choices?	6 participants	Participants' written academic texts + Interview week 8

The exception that speaks	How can critical literacy manifest in alternative forms that do not rely on personal narratives or visible identity negotiations?	Pham	Interview from week 1 to week 8

These themes address my three research questions in relation to academic identities, individual voice navigation, and critical literacy awareness. Across these themes, the research questions are addressed in a way that builds on one another to create a cohesive understanding of the topics.

The first theme is ‘Reading the World precedes Reading the Word?’. I conducted a critical narrative analysis to identify the main narratives that reveal my participants’ processes for perceiving their world and for approaching texts. This section focuses on the narratives of Chan and Lee, whose experiences and perspectives provide valuable insights for analysis. Both participants are from China and maintain strong ties to their home country, which significantly influences their research motivations. Their identification with marginalised groups is deeply shaped by how they were treated within their own society. Chan grew up feeling excluded as a boy/man engaging in activities that were different from traditional expectations. Lee, on the other hand, views her experience as a Chinese international student as central to her

understanding of marginalisation. By focusing on these two cases, I demonstrate how critical literacy is enacted through the participants' academic reading practices, influenced by their personal histories and educational journeys.

The second theme is ‘Decolonial Reading with Affect’. In this sub-chapter, I attempt to analyse my participants’ narratives, revealing the layered struggles, tensions, and negotiations they face. Huang and Lim are the primary participants for the analysis because the written diaries and the stories they shared are exceptionally captivating. Both participants bring a wealth of professional and cultural experience to their current practices. Huang, who completed his education in Taiwan a decade ago, has since worked as a teacher and a column writer for a Taiwanese magazine, while Lim has spent 15 years as an English teacher in Malaysia. These experiences have deeply affected them on their linguistic and cultural identities and provided a rich foundation for their academic journeys. Now pursuing their PhD research in the UK, they are navigating a new phase marked by exposure to new environments, ideas, and perspectives. The fusion of past and present experiences not only informs their academic perspectives but also inspires unique layers of stories.

The third theme is ‘Writing in and out of the comfort’. I examine data from interviews and diaries centred on my participants’ general writing practices, including their preferences, challenges, and experiences with multilingual writing in academic research contexts. Bakhshi and Lee’s narratives are highlighted in this section because they offer the richest insights into general academic writing practices. Bakhshi is working on his literature review, while Lee is starting her

findings chapter. Despite being at different stages of their writing, they both share significant reflections on their struggles with writing. Bakhshi, whose first language is Farsi, is researching the use of comedy in English language teaching for refugees. Lee, who speaks Chinese as her mother tongue, is examining the use of technology in dating among Chinese students in the UK. Both participants offer valuable yet contrasting perspectives on navigating academic writing in English language.

The fourth theme is 'Small narratives' in writing practices. In this section, I focus on presenting and analysing stories of 2 participant: Chan and Lim. The interview data focus on their perspectives of academic writing and writing practices. I conducted critical narrative analysis to identify the main narratives showcasing multiple experiences. Both Chan and Lee, nearing the final stages of their PhD journeys, have accumulated extensive and diverse writing experiences. They are both from different Asian countries and write their research in the UK. Unavoidably, there are many conflicts in their ongoing formation of research identity. Their stories illuminate their specific struggles and the identity-protective strategies they have developed over four to five years of doctoral study. By centring on Chan and Lee, this theme offers nuanced insights into the lived realities of international PhD students that are often overlooked or undervalued within institutional discourses.

The fifth theme, 'Unpacking writers' positions through writing', examines the diverse rhetorical choices adopted by these multilingual writers for voice in relation to their identities. In this chapter, I analyse the texts produced by all six participants to gain insights into their firsthand academic identities as expressed through their

writing. I focus on linguistic choices emerging from academic essays. Focusing on texts and literacy practices, I identify the manifestation behind the linguistic acts by the writers.

The final theme ‘The exception that speaks’ presents an in-depth analysis of one particular participant in my study who stands out as an outlier. I consider this participant an outlier in my research because his experiences, beliefs, and academic choices stand in clear contrast to the broader patterns I observed among others in the study. His case complicates my assumptions about the nature of critical literacy. Drawing on various theories and concepts, including the five metaphors of identity (Moje & Luke, 2009) and theories about affect by Ahmed (2015) and Zembylas (2022), I explore the complexities of identity negotiation and aim to uncover the nuanced processes involved.

1. Reading the world precedes reading the word: Authentic examination of critical literacy

Participants in this study demonstrate awareness not only of their research contexts but also of how their upbringing shapes how they read the world and connect the ‘word’ with the ‘world’. This section presents two case analyses drawn from the narratives of two Chinese participants, Chan (P02) and Lee (P01). However, the focus here extends beyond the individuals themselves. Chan and Lee are selected because their narratives also reveal particularly strong emotional connections to their lived worlds. Their identification with marginalised groups is deeply influenced by

their position within their own societies. For Chan, feelings of exclusion emerge from engaging in activities that diverge from traditional expectations of boys and men. For Lee, experiences as a Chinese international student form a central lens through which she understands marginalisation.

The use of diaries and interviews create two distinct narrative spaces through which participants engaged in meaning-making in different ways. In this study, the diary task invited participants to write a letter addressed to their own research participants or to the marginalised groups at the centre of their research, enabling more reflective and affective forms of expression. The first and second interviews focus respectively on participants' personal and research backgrounds, and on their academic reading practices. Rather than seeking convergence across these data sources, the analysis employed a critical discourse narrative analysis lens to examine how different narratives construct, reproduce, and contest power relations. A more nuanced understanding of participants' identity work and experiences of marginalisation is explored.

The analysis unpacks their authentic enactment of critical literacy through emotional involvement. The analysis starts with their narratives of how they view their world evolving around family, friends, school and politics. Then the discussion moves on to how they read, examine and interpret the texts and their desire to 'recreate the world'.

Lee and Chan are both final-year Chinese PhD students conducting their studies at UK institutions. Lee is doing a study about 'The use of dating apps among international Chinese students in the UK', and Chan's research topic is about 'Chinese hegemonic masculinities among international Chinese male students.' These two participants are the focus because they most clearly exemplify how participants negotiate literacy as both a textual practice (i.e., reading the word) and a social practice (i.e., reading the world). I conduct critical narrative analysis to identify the features of their process of perceiving their world and of approaching texts. This conceptualisation of critical literacy is rooted in Freire's concept of 'Reading the world always precedes reading the word' (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 135). For Freire, this perspective on literacy means that students not only engage in reading and writing texts, but also stay conscious of how their world shapes their literacy practices and vice versa.

Freire's work is highly political, social, and relational**,** but he does not necessarily explicitly theorise emotion as part of literacy. However, his emphasis on lived experience, oppression, and humanisation provides a foundation to highlight the affective aspects of becoming critically literate. While the analysis is informed by critical literacy theories, it is data-driven to allow themes and narrative patterns to emerge from participants' stories. Adapting and extending this concept further, I explain Chan and Lee's strong emotion to their marginalized group's suffering and emotional attempt to dismantle complex structure of society.

To further describe and explain these students' critical literacy skills, Morrel's (2004, p.57) tenets of critical literacy are adopted:

- The ability to challenge existing power relations in texts and to produce new texts that disrupt these relations;
- a consciousness of the relationship between the dominant culture's use of language, literacy and social injustice;
- the ability not only to read words but to read the world into and onto texts and recognise the correlation between the word and the world;
- and the ability to create political texts that inspire transformative action and conscious reflection.

1.1 Reading the world

This subchapter explores how these two participants perceive and engage with societal issues that directly impact them. By examining their observations, emotions, and personal experiences, I explore their understanding of the world around them and how they identify as members of a marginalised group. Special attention is given to the emotions surrounding their group's struggles and how these emotions shape their perspectives on social issues.

Chan's narratives of the 'world'

Chan identifies himself as different growing up:

> When I was young, and until I'm teenager…. I don't have that … many friends and I feel I'm excluded. I'm not sure I'm just saying that. And I'm the Art student from high school. And as you can imagine, there are more women than men in Art. In the university I chose linguistics, still part of art science, right? There are still more women than men. (P02-INT1-p2)

As a child and throughout his teenage years, he often felt excluded due to having few friends. He experienced a sense of being left out by others. During high school, he studied art, a field where women outnumbered men. Later, at university, he chose to study linguistics, which still has a higher proportion of women than men.

He goes on to say:

> So that's why I chose this topic, because I just don't like how they talk about them. Like, women should just stay at home and look after their children. They don't need to work… they don't need to be very smart. They don't need a PhD. They're Chinese man. They are talking about this. So that's how I find my topic is about my culture. (P02-INT1-p2)

He reports feeling excluded during childhood and adolescence, which may have contributed to a sense of isolation. This also suggests that he may have been trying to find a place where he fits in. Therefore, his perception of the world around him has motivated him to choose his PhD topic. Chan finds it unfair how his society holds certain stereotypes about men and women. His statement shows his frustration and

disappointment about how men and women are perceived in his culture which leads to his determination to explore his topic further.

Chan shares his general opinions about the marginalised group:

> The marginalised group, it's very obvious that they are gay men, the homosexual group or what we call gender minorities, the LGBT group in China, …, But also, men who don't meet the criteria or hegemonic masculinity, they are also a marginalised group. In high school there are some boys bullied by other boys, because they think these boys is not man enough. They are also marginalised. (P02-INT1-p10)

According to Chan's observation, in high school settings, some boys are bullied by their peers for not appearing 'man enough'. These individuals are often ridiculed and excluded because they do not fit society's rigid expectations of masculinity. Rather than using derogatory labels, it is important to recognise that both LGBTQ+ individuals and men who do not conform to dominant masculine ideals face similar patterns of marginalisation. He recognises the unfair sufferings of LGBTQ+ individuals and men who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity. At this point, he is able to identify the injustice and his concern with the way society enforces rigid gender norms, leading to bullying and exclusion. This is the 'problem statement' that he seeks to investigate, using research to address the inherent the inequality.
Chan draws not only from wider social dynamics but also from his personal experiences and connections. He also shared his personal story of his girlfriend being discriminated against due to her gender in China. This is the point when the story

from close people around him has touched his heart, and he expresses a sense of anger and disappointment.

> My girlfriend, she's perfect for this job. But then she was rejected. The reason is that girl is better not doing work in the evening, behind a jury during the night. She said she won't apply for PhD program. I said why? And she said her parents were angry and shocked to her and said “You're already a master degree student. That's enough. Stop here and stay in the country. Don't go up. Invest in our family, job, and getting married.” Yes, tthat's what urged me to do this topic.’ (P02-INT1-p10,11)

Chan sees his girlfriend as highly capable and deserving of opportunities, yet she faces societal and cultural barriers that prevent her from advancing and attributes this to gender-based discrimination. There is also a sense of helplessness from the fact that her rejection was based on gendered expectations rather than merit. In addition, the fact that her parents pressured her to stop pursuing higher education in favour of marriage and family responsibilities likely adds to his frustration with traditional norms that limit women's ambitions. His statement shows clear motivation and determination, as he is driven to explore this topic further: ‘My [research] topic is about my culture’ (P02-INT1-p10). His personal connection to the issue has fuelled his desire to challenge these restrictive societal expectations and advocate for change. Chan’s research therefore seeks to look at the masculinity among international Chinese students in the UK and how their notions of masculinities might change due to their experiences abroad. Personal experiences shape what Chan

considers meaningful or problematic, and social perspectives orient him toward social problems and theoretical traditions. Therefore, his research begins with 'reading the world' that transforms into a scholarly inquiry. Both the social and the personal work as catalysts for devising and conducting research. From a critical literacy standpoint, 'reading the world' provides the impetus for inquiry.

The next section of Chan's narratives is analysed through the letter that he writes to his participants (Diary Entry 1). He expresses deeper in written language in his letter to his participants:

> Extract: Chan's letter to his participant
>
> My gut feeling for this document is to write it in Chinese. However, considering the researcher who wants me to write this is not a Chinese speaker 😊 I will write it in English.
>
> For those who have been described as 'not manly', 'sissy' or 'gay' in China. This is not your fault. It is not about right or wrong anyway. We are born with biological sex, or let's say, man or woman, but it does not mean there are a set of 'born' definitions or requirements for being a man or woman. Men can cry, be weak, use make-up, hate to be dirty and clean themselves with skincare products as much as they want, as long as they want to. Same for women; women can wear whatever they want, do whatever they want to do, and say whatever they want. They can be muscular, tough, and also swearing if they wish to. Think about it, it makes no sense for a woman should give up an excellent job opportunity just because 'her kids will need a

> mother to look after them at home'. For men, looking after your children won't make you 'effeminate' or not manly.
>
> I am researching to help unmask the 'mystery' of masculinity. As a man, I was also told, taught and even forced to be 'strong'. We were forced to bully other not 'manly' boys when we were young. And the reason is only because of the mysterious term 'masculinity'. What is masculinity, and why must we be 'masculine'? This is what I am doing, and I could be one hundred per cent sure there is no such thing as 'masculinity', or if you want, any good and bad characteristics can be 'masculinity', depending on our choice. Yes, you don't need to be. Or perform to be brave, rational, and intelligent just because you are a man. And you also don't need to be afraid to be bold, logical, and intelligent just because you are a woman. I am saying this because we have seen enough stupid scenarios that we performed to be someone we don't like, just because we don't want to break some 'social norms'.
>
> I know it is still challenging to be the true self, but we are working on this. Gender studies researchers and feminist activists are trying to unmask masculinity and the unequal gender order in society. They also need your support and your voice. So don't be the silent majority.

The extract expresses a range of emotions from Chan, conveying different levels of connection to his participant/marginalised group. These layers of emotion suggest how he perceives the power structure in his society and how he positions himself

within it. By analysing the range of emotions, I can examine power relations and how societal norms shape his world. Chan shows his ability to challenge existing power relations in the tenets of critical literacy (Morrell, 2004).

As in the interview, his frustration is again expressed in this letter; in the second paragraph, he is highly critical of traditional gender norms. Chan is also deeply passionate about gender equality and self-expression**.** By addressing those who have been labelled as 'not manly', 'sissy', or 'gay', he expresses solidarity with marginalised individuals**.** He seems to aim to offer reassurance and encourage the marginalised to challenge the idea of conforming to masculine ideals. He writes long sentences giving examples of what man and woman can do, suggesting his rejection of rigid gender roles: 'Men can cry, be weak, use make-up, hate to be dirty and clean themselves with skincare products as much as they want, as long as they want to. Same for women; women can wear whatever they want, do whatever they want to do, and say whatever they want. They can be muscular, tough, and also swearing if they wish to.' He appears discontent with societal norms that constrain both men and women, conveying a desire for freedom in which choices are based on personal preference rather than gender-based obligations.

Language use in this letter is emotively strong such as 'it makes no sense for a woman should give up an excellent job opportunity', 'We were forced to bully', and 'stupid scenarios', which makes a difference in terms of language use from Chan's academic writing. A new identity emerges as Chan writes this letter expressing his connections to his participants. This letter strong confidence in rejecting traditional

gender norms as he said ‘I could be one hundred per cent sure there is no such thing as ‘masculinity’’. His confidence is particularly expressed strongly in the third paragraph, suggesting a strong sense of purpose in advocating for change. His writing tone is declarative in ‘you also don’t need to be afraid’, conveying encouragement and empowerment for others to resist society pressures.

How Chan perceives the world indicates how he positions himself in societal structure. Chan seems to see him in the marginalised group, which is positioned as victims of rigid gender expectations in China. Stating “this is not your fault” constructs them as passive recipients labelled by societal judgment. Although he considers himself an insider, *“*As a man, I was also told, taught, and even forced to be ‘strong’ among the marginalised group”, he also acts as a critic. Asking a rhetorical question, *“*What is masculinity, and why must we be masculine?” shows a shift of identity from a victim to a reflective researcher in deconstructing masculinity. This identity shift is not evident in his academic writing, which presents a fabricated identity as a confident researcher.

Chan positions the society around him as the enforcer of gender norms: **“**We performed to be someone we don’t like, just because we don’t want to break some ‘social norms’.” The word ‘forced’ implies coercion, framing masculinity as something imposed rather than chosen. More importantly, towards the end of the letter, he positions the marginalised group as agents of change. He encourages the audience to challenge gender norms *“*don’t be the silent majority” *and “*they need

your support and your voice" instead of being a passive norms receiver. The phrase *"*we are working on this*"* constructs gender deconstruction as a collective effort, inviting the audience to participate. It is indicated that Chan started his research with the aim of making an impact rather than merely recognising and responding to social issues. Chan's idea of solidarity, in being positioned by gender as a social force and in enacting social change, is two critically literate moves in reading the world. Both are hallmarks of critical literacy because they involve reading and responding to the world in transformative ways.

Lee's narratives of the 'world'

Lee shares her stories from the perspectives of a Chinese international student in the UK:

> So I went to the UK to do my master's program. And at that time, I found most of my classmates and my friends were really lonely. And they tried to use dating application to find some friends and to find romantic relationships on that. So I was very interested in this point at that time. (P01-INT1-p1)

During her time as a Master student, she noticed that many of her classmates and friends felt lonely. Many of them turn to dating applications to seek companionship and romantic relationships. This observation sparks her curiosity and interest in the subject.

She takes notice of the problem that badly affects the students, explaining that:

> These students, they felt really helpless when they encountered such active things because they didn't know how to deal with that, how to report that. And I think this is what higher education institutions should be responsible for. Because academic is not the whole story of student's life in the UK, they also need to make, like make friends, they also need to find partners. (P01-INT1-p3,p4)

She observes that intimacy has largely been overlooked, and serious issues such as sexual harassment and sexual violence have also been ignored. Many students who experience these negative situations feel helpless. The responsibility for addressing these concerns, she believes, lies with higher education institutions:

Lee then discusses the marginalisation of Chinese international students and LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly lesbians, in the UK:

> Their voices [Chinese international students]are silenced when talking about their intimate relationships, and they are our minority group, they are marginalised group… lesbian, lesbian group, they are largely ignored in previous literature, previous literature mostly focused on straight people and the gay men, so they ignore lesbian and queer women. That's what I think is marginalised. (P01-INT1-p3)

Lee argues that although Chinese international students form a significant group, their voices, especially regarding intimate relationships, are often silenced. This makes them a minority group in this context. In addition, she highlights the

limitations of lesbian and queer women in academic literature. She points out that previous research has largely focused on heterosexual individuals and gay men, leaving lesbian and queer women's experiences overlooked. She seems to emphasise the need for greater recognition and representation of these marginalised groups. Lee is highly aware of the social dynamics that contribute to the marginalisation of specific groups and perceives an issue of underrepresentation and lack of voice for her community.

Lee then explains how Chinese international students struggle with adjusting to the dating culture in the UK**,** which is significantly different from what they are accustomed to in China:

> They suffered from difference between dating culture in China and in the UK. They dated some British men, but really confused about dating culture in the UK. And they felt 'so what shall I do? Am I wrong?'. They felt really confused and they nervous. They felt really nervous when they date British men, and some of them also mad, Asian fetish.(P01-INT1-p8)

Lee not only conveys deep confusion, frustration, and emotional distress about her participants' experiences regarding dating culture differences between China and the UK, but also expresses the dangerous and prejudiced ideas about dating culture. She makes a strong statement afterwards: "That's when I try to do something." This suggests a strong desire to raise awareness and challenge these problematic dating experiences. This reveals a transformation from personal pain and collective struggle to activism**,** indicating resilience and determination**.**

Lee discusses further and shares her story about her close friend:

> ‘One of my friends just experienced very serious sexual harassment when she met her partner's online partners offline. And she just met him in the apartment. Then she was raped by [him]. And she just felt really helpless. Because she was an international student in the UK. And she didn't tell anybody about this thing after it happened. Because she felt it was not a good thing to let other people know that you have been raped. So she felt shameless. And she just kept to silence. Just half a year later, when we chatted with each other, she just told me about this thing. So I think maybe some people also encountered such negative experiences in the UK. (P01-INT1-p6,p7)

Lee recounts a deeply painful experience involving her friend. She describes how her friend felt ‘really helpless’ and suffered in silence for six months**.** That Lee tells this story now suggests she empathises with her friend and acknowledges that other international students might also face similar experiences, adding to their sense of helplessness in the face of a broader social issue. This experience extends beyond a feeling of helplessness; it is lived, embodied, and constitutes a genuine threat to safety. The incident inflicted severe and lasting harm on her friend. Consequently, the impetus for her research is not solely scholarly but also driven by concerns about livability and a commitment to reducing gender-based violence. Lee’s emotions shift between sadness, frustration, anger, and determination. She is deeply affected by her

friend's experience and possibly feels compelled to speak out, raise awareness, or challenge the social issues.

The next section of Lee's narratives is analysed through her letter to her participants. Her strong emotions are expressed similarly in her written language:

> Extract: Lee's letter to her participants
>
> You are not lonely, my friends. I am also a Chinese international student in the UK, who is described as shy, rich and lack of critical thinking. I know there are voices that describe a fake us. I know you have experienced racism and discrimination when studying here. Don't be scared, I can feel you and I use writing to let others hear your voice.
>
> As a student in the UK, academic performance and degree is important. However, I know that intimate relationships also play a pivotal role in some of your lives. Love makes you feel warm and energetic. However, love hurts sometimes. With the advancement of technology, establishing a network in the host country is not a hard thing. You can meet new friends and invite people to grab a drink in a minute. However, you may also experience confusion, identity crisis, Asian fetish and sexual harassment online. Your love stories need to be heard, which are part and parcel of your physical and mental health. I feel sad when I hear about your awful dating experiences and your hopeless feeling after that happens.
>
> I may write messy but I want to let you know that I stand with you and I will let more people know about your dilemma in dating in the UK. It is not your fault and don't blame yourself, darling.

Overall, this letter from Lee also conveys a range of emotions, including empathy, sadness, reassurance, and solidarity**.** Lee starts the letter with “You are not lonely, my friends” which expresses her deep connection with her marginalised group straight from the beginning. She establishes her participants as her ‘friends’. In the first paragraph, the sentences have similar pattern starting with ‘I know’ and ‘I can feel’, which conveys her understanding in validating their experiences and her reassurance to her participants. Through this paragraph, Lee perceives herself having strong sense of connection with the marginalised group. Additionally, “There are voices that describe a fake us" indicates her awareness of stereotypes and misrepresentations of Chinese international students.

Emotions play a vital role in the creation of the psychological and the social (Zembylas, 2007). Lee directly mentions the current problems of ‘Asian fetish and sexual harassment online’ not only to show her empathy but also to show her awareness and frustrations with serious social issues affecting her community. **“**I feel sad when I hear about your awful dating experiences and your hopeless feelings” explicitly conveys her sadness and concern over the struggles of others. Lee acknowledges her participants’ struggles with their relationships.

She finishes the letter with a tone of reassurance and emotional support “It is not your fault and don’t blame yourself, darling.” In this sentence, she makes it feel more personal and affectionate, with a more solidary attitude towards her participants.

Lee's critically literate moves have position herself in the societal stereotypes and issues. The sentence 'I know you have experienced racism and discrimination' highlights her acknowledgment of Western stereotypes of Chinese students as passive, wealthy, and lacking independence. She describes further by using the word 'fake' in 'voices that describe a fake us'. This suggests these stereotypes are constructed and misleading, rather than reflecting true identities. By exposing these issues, Lee demonstrates her attempt to deconstruct dominant discourses that shape perceptions of Chinese students in UK society. Besides, by mentioning Asian fetishisation, Lee challenges the normalisation of racialised dating discrimination**.**

Lee positions herself as an insider who understands the social issues around her participants deeply, an emotional supporter who expresses empathy and care and a voice for the community to empower the marginalised group. This position gives Lee both credibility and authority to allow her to speak on behalf of the group while fostering connection**.** She expresses her action "I use writing to let others hear your voice", which frames language as a tool for resistance and empowerment. She emphasises at the end of the letter "I want to let you know that I stand with you and I will let more people know about your dilemma in dating in the UK" which strongly shows her confidence and persistence. This aspect of Lee's identity is not revealed in her academic writing, which maintains a consistently neutral tone. Her discourse in this letter, which fosters solidarity, validation, and empowerment, reveals her as an insider and a fighter against discrimination. In the next sub-chapter, I discuss how Chan and Lee approach the texts with the way they have lived and read their 'world'.

1.2 Reading the word - Conscious viewpoint of critical literacy skills.

Before sharing how my participants read their 'word', I discuss briefly about their viewpoints of what being critical is to them and how they assess their critical skills. This helps me to draw a connection to compare their conscious ideas of being critical and their unconscious enactment of critical literacy.

My participants appear to understand criticality primarily as a cognitive or analytical skill, such as evaluating evidence, questioning arguments, or thinking logically, rather than as a form of critical literacy in the Freirean sense. Although they articulated 'criticality' primarily as a cognitive and analytical skill aligned with academic expectations, their narratives reveal practices that strongly resonate with Freirean critical literacy. They demonstrate a sophisticated ability to read the political world, recognise marginalisation, and use text as a means of social awareness and action. Their narratives reveal how higher education trains students to think about 'criticality' in narrow and cognitive ways and how students' cultural and social identities and political commitments shape critical practice even when the institutional system seems not capture it.

For example, in articulating the idea of criticality, Chan and Lee hold different views. Chan shares his view on being critical:

> When you look at a piece of, I don't know a paper or whatever. I think I'm trying to be objective. I mean, try to get rid of my own bias when I read something. I think it's just another way of saying being critical, right?

> But maybe, maybe not totally, I think we should try to be objective, although we can be subjective when we are reading something. We are more subjective than we thought. So I think we just trying to be 100 percentage objective, because we can't get rid of our own belief our value, our bias, we can only try our best to do that. We should be objective if we want to be a text critic. If we want to be a text critic, the second question is who can be a text or who should you be? So trying to be more objective is of course being rational, being a logic and being critical. (P02-INT2-p1)

To Chan, to be critical is to be objective. He considers being objective to be critical and rational. In his reading practices, he aims to minimise personal bias, which he regards as a key part of being a critical thinker. While he believes objectivity is important, he acknowledges that people are more subjective than they realise. Personal beliefs, values, and biases cannot be fully eliminated, only minimised. This is surprising because he is full of emotions when reading his 'world'. However, he chooses to limit his own personal beliefs and values to read the word.

Lee holds a different opinion in terms of critical reading:

> Sometimes we need to distinguish the fact and the assumption, and we also need to think about the background of that author and how he or she tried to organise his writing… I think different people have different ways of doing that (expressing opinions) and because we are born in different countries with different cultural backgrounds. So sometimes we have different opinions about the same point and we need to be aware that. (P01-INT2-p1)

Lee stresses the importance of understanding the author's cultural and personal background, as this influences how they write and structure their arguments. She is aware that people come from different cultures and backgrounds and therefore naturally have different ways of expressing opinions and interpreting information. Lee's idea of being critical entails being mindful of these differences, as her understanding is shaped by personal and cultural contexts.

Additionally, Chan and Lee express their struggles with being critical in their academic writing, particularly in a literature review:

> I think I'm being a text critic. But when my supervisor reads my literature review, they'll say, OK, you are merely summarising, you should be critical…My supervisor keeps saying OK, you are not being critical enough…. That's just summary, just a literature summary… So they push me to be more critical. (P02-INT2-p4)

Chan expresses frustration because he perceives his work as critical, yet his supervisor repeatedly suggests that it lacks sufficient criticality. This tension points to uncertainty in Chan's ability to assess his own critical engagement in the literature review. It also reveals a disconnect between Chan's self-perception as a critical researcher and his supervisor's evaluation of his work.

Similarly, Lee shares the same difficulty in doing critical literature review:

> I'd say that I'm better than before because when I was in China, I didn't realise about critical thinking. And I did not critique my readings, but after I went to the UK, I started to realise that, and I tried to critique the readings I read every day.
>
> But I still feel it's hard for me to do that because sometimes I feel this article, it writes really great and it's true. And then I read another one, which is maybe hold the opposite view or opposite opinion and also think ohh that is also true, sometimes it's hard for me to critic something. (P01-INT2-p1)

Lee reflects on her growth in critical thinking and the challenges she continues to face. She finds it difficult to criticise articles because all the articles with different views are often well written and feel convincing. She implies that critical skill is a learned skill, which was not emphasised in her previous education in China, and she is making an effort to improve.

Later in the interviews, they discuss similar aspects related to external factors that affect their critical skills. Institutional factors are mentioned such as supervisors and publications.

Chan discusses how his supervisor helps him to direct the way of being more critical:

> She gave me like a section comment, she said focusing on the big bigger picture or focusing on the big picture. (P02-INT2-p4)

However, he finds it hard to comprehend this instruction:

> For me, they still rubbish talk. I don't know. What do you mean by big picture? So I think I don't know the answer. I don't know, but maybe to be a text critic, it's focusing on the big picture, the bigger picture. But I don't know what is bigger picture. The only thing I can do is keep reading and trying to find more different opinions from the academia in this research area. So that's what I'm doing now, but I don't know. I still don't know. (P02-INT2-p4)

Chan expresses confusion and frustration about feedback he received regarding 'focusing on the big picture'. He seems to feel lost and unsure of how to apply this advice. Since he has no clear answer, engaging with more academic sources and reading widely is his only action. Despite his efforts, he still feels uncertain about whether he is improving or understanding the concept correctly. Although Chan recognises the importance of critical thinking, he struggles to understand how to apply it in a broader academic context. With his supervisor's vague feedback, he is still uncertain about what he is looking for.

Lee emphasises her effort in being critical to serve the purpose of publication:

> I think it's like a rule we were pushed by external rules. First, if we want to write and publish our academic work, we need to be critical. We need to critique something. So, because of that, I need to be aware of critical thinking. I need to critic something and I think that's one of my motivations to be like that because I need to publish my writings and to find a job. I try to critique what I am reading so I can, umm, like I said, so I can publish

> something because that is the skill PhD researchers need to have in your in their PhD journey. (P01-INT1-p3)

Lee discusses how external pressures (publication expectations and job expectations) from institutional academic system influence her approach to critical thinking and academic writing. She feels that being critical is not necessarily a natural choice but imposed by academic standards. To publish academic work, one must be critical and engage in critique. She recognises that publishing is essential to their academic and professional success, including securing employment.

Both participants feels that critical skill is an obligation. They acknowledge the importance of critical thinking in academia but regard it as a structured skill rather than as a natural capacity developed independently. Their motivation for being critical is driven largely by practical concerns such as satisfying supervisors, publishing work and securing a job. This creates a disconnection between critical thinking as performance and critical literacy as empowerment. The gap between reading the word and reading the world (Freire, 1970) manifests in their hesitation or inability to politicise their critique. Their 'criticality' becomes confined within academic boundaries to evaluate methods or arguments. 'Criticality' then is rather a cognitive skill expressed rhetorically through language. In essence, the move toward a social and political understanding of criticality is constrained by the institutional framing of what counts as 'critical'. Participants' positioning within academic hierarchies means their critical acts are often self-regulated, aiming for legitimacy rather than disruption.

When discussing being critical in reading different resources in their mother tongue and in English, Lee and Chan convey different views about their ability:

> I will say I can do better in English. I learned everything in English. I think I can't be better in terms of being a text critic in Chinese. (P02-INT2-p3)
>
> I think I will be a better critique when I read Chinese articles. I read Chinese so I can reflect on what I read. (P01-INT2-p2)

Both indicate that, when they position themselves as Chinese readers of English-language materials, they can evaluate the text. Chan shares his viewpoint on reading his research topic written by Western scholars:

> It makes a difference. I'm a Chinese researcher; I could research some topic related to Chinese. It's important because I remember I first read literature or articles about Chinese masculinity; I noticed that a lot of them are done by English speaker. So that's weird for me. So let's say British or American, or, I don't know, English speakers, they doing research or Chinese masculinity
>
> I think there are cultural differences. So I want to provide my perspective as a Chinese man. As a Chinese researcher. I think that's important. Use this as a symbol. I'm doing this research also because I have read so many things that native speaker English and English speaker English scholars, they are doing research on Chinese and Chinese masculinity. And okay, they can do that of course. I'm not saying only Chinese people can do Chinese research. But the problem is when I read what they have written, I think they're rubbish. It's just given me feeling that they think they knew about China's power. They

> actually don't. They just derive something from what they believe as what is happening in China. (P02-INT1-p4)

Chan emphasises his identity as a Chinese researcher and how this influences his research choices. He sees his perspective as valuable and unique, particularly in contrast to Western scholars studying Chinese masculinity. By stating “I want to provide my perspective as a Chinese man, as a Chinese researcher”, he asserts the legitimacy of his viewpoint and positions himself as someone who can offer insider knowledge on the topic. He highlights that some literature on Chinese masculinity is produced by English-speaking (Western) scholars, which he finds ‘weird’ or problematic. He discusses a cultural divide between Western scholars' writings about China and their personal experiences experience: “The problem is when I read what they have written, I think they rubbish.” He suggests an argument that these scholars impose their own beliefs rather than truly understanding his Chinese culture. He criticises Western researchers interpreting China through their own biases rather than engaging with authentic Chinese perspectives.

Here he challenges the authority of these scholars by questioning their understanding: “It's just given me feeling that they think they knew about China's power. They actually don't.” This reveals a tension between academic authority and lived experience, where he feels that Western research lacks authenticity. Chan implies a power dynamic in academic knowledge production**.** He positions himself as an insider with authentic knowledge, while positioning Western scholars as outsiders whose research is detached or misinformed**.**

Although Chan expresses his limits in being a critical reader when reading Chinese text, he is able to use his Chinese identity connecting to his 'world' in his reading practices. This process reveals his moment of reading his world into text to create conscious reflection (Morrel, 2004). Despite his viewpoint of being critical as being objective, at this moment he is enacting his subjectivity (connecting to his world) to engage with critical literacy.

Lee explains her experiences in reading in different languages:

> I'm more familiar with Chinese language and I can understand the text and the context. And I think, something written in English, they are based on Western culture and Western politics or something, some Western things, but I am not very familiar with Western history to some extent. I'm not very interested in that, so I think I just escape. Language barrier and background information, the British politics or their history may prevent me from critiquing. (P01-INT2-p2)

Lee finds herself a better critical reader when she reads in Chinese, not only because of the language but also because of the familiar context. As a non-English speaker, she believes that texts written in English are often rooted in Western culture, politics, and history, which makes it difficult for her to fully grasp the underlying assumptions and arguments. This practice suggests that Lee strongly positions herself as a Chinese person who tends to avoid engaging deeply with such texts.

Lee also shares that she is able to validate the academic texts written by Western scholars living in China for many years:

> Umm to be honest, what I have read is written by some White scholars who have been living in China for many years. Actually, they were in China and they learned a lot of things about Chinese culture and customs. So what they have read is what they have written, really. I think it's really great. I think they really understand what Chinese females are thinking about. They're not assuming this because they did something in China; rather, they are assuming it because they conducted extensive years of research on the Chinese context. So I agree with what they have written. (P01-INT2-p7)

By connecting with her world, Lee is able to assess Western scholars' work on Chinese culture, particularly Chinese women's perspectives. She validates that these scholars did not merely assume knowledge about Chinese society; rather, they conducted extensive research over many years, which makes their findings credible and reliable in her view. Unlike Chan, Lee challenges the common critique that Western researchers cannot accurately represent non-Western cultures. She expresses her t**rust and acceptance** these scholars' work.

1.3 Reading the world to recreate 'the world'

In this section, I present the narratives focusing on Chan and Lee's observation of the marginalised group and their perspectives on power dynamics. The discussion begins with an exploration of how their group is portrayed in the materials they engage with,

followed by their insights into who holds the most power in their society. The questions I asked Chan and Lee were “How are your marginalised group depicted in your readings?”, ”How do you feel about it?”, and “Who plays the one having the most power in those readings?”. Their responses about social problems reveal their commitment to take action to ‘recreate the word and world’

Chan shares that his marginalised group is the one that is generalised and stereotyped in the text.

> They are not exactly the same. When we are talking about the marginalised Chinese men, they are not a single group. We have gay Chinese. We have a labour class Chinese, we have a remote area Chinese. They can be divided into so many different groups, and the marginalised group. And women as well, labour class women, remote area women, lower educated women, low income women, right? I can't do anything for them because you know it's a societal level. (P02-INT2-p6)

Chan emphasises that marginalised Chinese men and women are not a single, homogenous group but rather a diverse population with different experiences based on factors like sexuality, class, and geographical background. By stating *“*I can't do anything for them because, you know, it's a societal level”, he seems to express a sense of helplessness or limitation in addressing these structural inequalities. He acknowledges that these issues are deeply embedded in societal systems, making it difficult to change on an individual level.

Chan reveals who holds the most power in the readings that he engages:

> Hegemonic masculinity is just some ideal. It's just a masculine ideal. Let's say, from recent papers in China. Uh, the rich people are empowered, of course. The government, of course… You know, I won't say the name, but you know the man, the whole system with him being in the country. And I think even the scholars are somehow empowered in China because always [the country is] impacted by the Confucius culture, right?.They respected scholars, so I think scholar is still empowering China. (P02-INT2-p8)

Chan reflects on the concept of hegemonic masculinity as an idealised version of masculinity rather than a reality. Chan is not merely describing social conditions; he is positioning himself in relation to them. He makes explicit connections between cultural ideals (hegemonic masculinity), structural realities (power concentration), and historical influences (Confucian legacies). This is an enactment of critical literacy, involving learning to read and write while recognising how personal experiences are influenced by historical contexts and power dynamics (Anderson & Irvine, 1993). By using Western academic metalanguage such as ‘hegemony’ and ‘ideology’, Chan reveals these concepts in practice, demonstrating his rich historical-political awareness.

From reading the world to reading the word, Chan shows his desire to recreate the world through his word:

> I hope I can at least I could say increase the gender equality in society. And, and let other Chinese men know that something isn't right. We just think it's

> normal that the man should work and have a women should stay at home, actually [it] is constructed by bias by the tradition, right? I hope from my PhD, I could tell this man, no, it's not normal is it's not a good way to do. You should have a cover awareness of that. That's the impact I want to bring to my man companions. (P02-INT1-p9)

Chan feels a strong sense of responsibility and determination to challenge traditional gender norms, although he shows his frustrations in the persistence of these biases. He also hopes that his PhD research can make a difference. This shows his critical skill in reading society and literature and his desire to construct society in a different, better way. He shows his genuine care about the gender issues and hopes to bring about real social change. This moment represents a potential turning point for Chan to develop a more critically literate research practice.

Lee shares her observation about her marginalised group, described as having different characteristics:

> When I was in the UK, and when I read something that was written about Chinese international students, which said we are really fragile and we are unprivileged in that context. And then I started to think… Ohh yeah, that's true…. When I read some other articles, Chinese students are not just fragile, they also have their own agency to do something. Sometimes they are depicted as, like I said, fragile groups, unprivileged groups and passive groups like they are shy, they don't speak English, they are rich. And they gave lots of money to educational institution in the UK. Sometimes, articles

> try to argue that Chinese international students are diverse. They are not same group. They are not homogenic group. They are diverse, and they have different cultural backgrounds. Umm, I think they are both true to some extent. (P01-INT2-p1,2)

Lee reflects on how Chinese international students are portrayed in academic literature and how her perspective has evolved after reading various sources. Initially, she encountered writings that depicted Chinese students as fragile, unprivileged, and passive. This made her question her own experiences and consider whether these descriptions were accurate. However, after reading further, she realised that some scholars challenge this stereotype by highlighting the agency of Chinese students, who are not merely passive but capable of shaping their own experiences. She recognises that both perspectives hold some truth, suggesting that while certain stereotypes may have some basis, they do not fully capture the complexity and diversity of Chinese international students.

Lee then discusses about Western man holds the most power from her readings:

> Umm, I would say White man. Lots of things are being talked about the racial hierarchy in the UK and in America. So it is true that White people are the most desirable among all racial group. Yeah, because [of] their racial status, their social status, their economic background and because of their appearance like the white skin. It is kind of the most beautiful thing in some people's eyes. And this is actually shaped by internalized of racism or the white dominance in in the contemporary world. (P01-INT2-p5)

Lee expresses about racial hierarchy and how whiteness is often positioned as the most desirable racial identity in research. She mentions factors such as racial status, social and economic background, and physical appearance (white skin) as reasons why Western-looking people are often seen as the most desirable. She acknowledges that this perception is shaped by internalized racism and white dominance in the contemporary world, aligning with findings from previous research.

Lee expresses frustration and a sense of injustice about the difficulties Asian women face in both China and the UK:

> I feel that is not fair. It is really not fair for, you know, especially for Asian women, it's really hard for Asian women to live a great life in actually in every corner, even though I am in China, sometimes I still feel that I am not privileged in this society due to the patriarchy and when I was in the UK, I also feel the same way because, you know, there is an intersectionality of my race and my gender. I am female, and at the same time I'm Asian, so I just faced a lot of racism and inequalities during my studies in the UK. (P01-INT2-p6)

She mentions ‘intersectionality’, meaning her experiences of discrimination are shaped by both her race and gender combined. Overall, she feels marginalised and faces challenges wherever she is. In this moment, Lee is living her ‘world’ in the ‘word’ reflecting her society in the text, which strengthens her perception and

reflexivity. This is a complex internal process in which she critically questions her own beliefs, viewpoints, and research judgments.

From reading the world to reading the word, Lee shares her desire in making difference to the world:

> I want to emphasise the migration status of Chinese international students. There are different from British people. They are also different from Chinese people who always stay in China. They have very temporary experiences, and their experiences conflict between Chinese culture and Western culture. I think the most important impact is I try to draw attention to international students' intimacy, such as their friendship or their romantic relationships, and try to draw attention to let more and more researchers to focus on this point, and focus on students' mental health and well-being. (P01-INT2-p6)

Lee highlights the unique experiences of Chinese international students, who differ from both British students and Chinese students who remain in China. Lee's focus is on the emotional and social aspects of these students' lives, particularly their friendships and romantic relationships. This practice highlights her strong emotion and understanding for her participant group who have inner sufferings. Therefore, Lee wants more academic attention on these topics, especially regarding students' mental health and well-being. Her tone suggests concern and a desire to raise awareness of issues often overlooked in research.

Lee also expresses reassurance and encouragement directly to her participants:

> It's normal to feel insecure or to just get lots of conflicts between different cultures. I want them to know that and to be like, calm down and try to understand that, accept that and then maybe we can just try to find some solutions together. (P01-INT2-p6)

The statement feels personal as she understands deeply and acknowledge such struggles. Her tone suggests empathy and a desire to provide emotional support to those facing challenges with cultural adaptation. A critical literacy lens helps uncover how texts serve social functions by shaping the roles and perceptions of individuals and groups (Phelps, 2010).

Both Chan and Lee share similar connections to their deep cultural roots in their practice of reading. Although they read in the English language, their Chinese reader identity stays strongly in the process of receiving messages from the text. This is the process of living their 'world' to assess the 'word' they read. Living the 'world' in the 'word', they can feel the unfairness and identify individuals in power. Layers of emotions are involved; therefore, they can determine the sufferings of their marginalised group to act on the power imbalance. This is when critical literacy is enacted. Critical literacy does not advocate a single reading of any group; rather, it seeks to critically examine which groups and ideas are privileged or marginalised in mainstream narratives, historically and in the present (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). It seems that when Chan and Lee deeply feel their participants' sufferings in the texts, they are actively constructing their critical literacy skills. Critical literacy entails engaging with print and digital media through reading, creating, and sharing

to empower marginalised groups. Its aim is to identify, challenge, and disrupt existing power structures while encouraging personal expression and freedom (Morrell, 2007). However, based on their earlier discussion, Chan and Lee view themselves as having been ineffective in critical reading. They express their struggle with being critical in their academic writing, particularly in a literature review. It can be seen that critical literacy can operate implicitly even when the participants do not identify as such. They have enacted social and political forms of critique without using institutional language. Moreover, higher education's framing of criticality may obscure more transformative and socially engaged practices.

I discuss further how my participants read their 'word' in the next chapter 'Decolonial reading with affect'. I also discuss their practices in the attempt to create the 'word' in the chapter 'Small narratives in writing practice'.

1.4 Discussion

Both Chan and Lee express strongly how they critically read their 'world' and examine their 'word'. The first section explores how effectively they can implement critical literacy. Next, I argue that critical literacy enactment would benefit from turning to emotion. Critical literacy skills cannot be stimulated by rigid academic rules. It is naturally and authentically ignited and motivated by the emotional connection to their real-life problems and their marginalised group. Students need to see this skill as a personal intellectual pursuit rather than institutional conformity.

1.4.1 To what extent have the principles of critical literacy been put into practice?

Morrell's framework of critical literacy tenets (2004) are useful to analyse Chan and Lee's performance of critical skill.

*The ability to challenge existing power relations (*Morrell, 2004*)*: Chan and Lee show their understanding of society around them strongly. In their journey of growing up and education, they have experienced themselves and have witnessed society's bias, gender issues and discrimination. These sufferings have led them to adopt a critical mindset and challenge the social hierarchy. Therefore, students should be encouraged to talk openly and directly about their negative experiences and suffering so that educators (i.e., supervisors, institutional staff) can understand their motivation for engaging in critical literacy. As Janks (2010, p.207) confirms language is 'always loaded with issues of power, hierarchy and dominance, as well as contestation, resistance and transformation'.

*The ability to produce new text that delegitimises the power relation (*Morell, 2004*)*: This chapter does not primarily focus on writing skills, as that is covered in the next chapter. However, the letters my participants wrote reveal that they feel empowered and motivated to challenge the legitimacy of social structures. Janks (2010) emphasises the importance of taking action rather than just thinking about the power issues. Chan positions the society around him as the enforcer of gender norms**,** framing masculinity as something imposed rather than chosen. He positions the marginalised group as agents of change rather than as passive norm recipients. He

hopes to present gender deconstruction as a collective effort. Lee highlights her acknowledgement of Western stereotypes of Chinese students as passive, wealthy, and lacking independence. By exposing these issues, Lee shows her attempt to deconstruct dominant discourses that shape how Chinese students are perceived in UK society. Critical literacy has an explicit aim of 'the critique and transformation of dominant ideologies, cultures and economies, institutions and political systems' (Luke,2012, p.5)

*The ability to read the world into and onto texts and recognise the correlation between the word and the world (*Morrell, 2004*)*: Both suggest that when they see themselves as Chinese readers of English materials, they can understand and assess the text effectively. Engaging with their perspective allows them to evaluate Western scholars' research on Chinese culture. They show their critical skill in reading society and literature, and their desire to construct society in a different way. Luke (2012, p.5) stressed that reading and writing are about 'substantive lives and material realities' that are 'goal and problem-directed'.

1.4.2 How has critical literacy been authentically enacted?

Critical literacy has been practised among participants through the reading of academic texts, as discussed above. However, they struggle with confidence to authentically enact critical literacy. They mention similar aspects related to external factors that affect them, such as supervisors and publications. Despite Chan's efforts in practising criticality, he still feels uncertain about whether he is improving or

understanding the concept correctly. Lee emphasises her effort to be critical in serving the purpose of publication. Lee discusses how external pressures influence her approach to critical thinking and academic writing. She feels that being critical is not necessarily a natural choice but is imposed by academic standards. The academic system requires critical analysis; therefore, she needs to adhere to these standards expectations. They acknowledge the importance of critique in academia but see it as part of a structured rule rather than a natural skill they developed independently. Their motivation for being critical is largely driven by practical concerns, such as satisfying supervisors, publishing work, and securing a job. Therefore, traditional, rigid academic rules can affect participants' confidence because they are directed primarily toward strict conventions. In research by Jin and Cortazzi (2006) to study Chinese learners in higher education in the UK, they observed that even when students were asked to do 'reflective thinking and independent interpretation', the main purpose was to achieve a deeper understanding rather than to display individual voice (p.12). This is when critical literacy cannot be enacted or enacted unauthentically. According to Ahmed (2016), a rationalistic approach to critical literacy may be insufficient for navigating ethical dilemmas when responding to human suffering.

It is demonstrated that critical literacy is strongly shaped not only by academic discourse but also by lived experiences, political awareness and cultural histories. However, their critical skills have been misinterpreted as 'lacking' as the students only see the cognitive understanding expectations of Western academia. The two versions of 'criticality' have not been correctly nurtured in educational practices. It is

indicated that institutions may need broader ways of recognising and fostering students' critical capacities.

In addition, through the letter-writing activity, it is suggested that encouraging students to write more non-academic, research-related text can help them develop a connection to their marginalised group and engage more deeply with power relations. Wang's (2020) study examined the cognitive processes among Chinese international students when they engage in online, non-academic reading and writing. The findings indicate that these students drew on specific academic literacy skills in these contexts and demonstrated the capacity to develop as competent readers and writers beyond formal educational settings. In this research, when writing non-academic text, my participants naturally express their emotion strongly to individuals' suffering. Thus, they can position the oppressor and the oppressed, enabling them to enact critical literacy authentically. Similarly, Ahmed (2016) argues that it is essential for critical literacy to incorporate and build upon the affective turn, and that the rationalistic approach of critical literacy often distorts our ability to fully grasp others' suffering.

2. Decolonial reading with Affect

This subchapter discusses participants' engagement with literature through creative activities, such as mind mapping in their written diaries, and reflections on their formal literature review processes. These processes uncover rich and often

conflicting layers of emotion and identity as participants navigate the tasks of selecting sources and reading critically.

This subchapter presents two case analyses of Huang (Taiwanese, P03) and Lim (Malaysian, P04). I focus on 2 interviews and 1 written diary entry for each participant. the diary describes designing the dinner table as a small visual display representing their literature review. The first interview focuses on participants' general reading practices for their research, and the second interview allows participants to verbally explain their dinner table designs.

I conduct a critical narrative analysis to identify the main stories that reveal conflicting emotions and experiences. My analysis is further informed by the concept of affective solidarity as decolonising solidarity by Zembylas (2023) in his article: "Toward effective decolonization: Nurturing decolonizing solidarity in higher education". Affective solidarity is based on "feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odd." (ibid., p.158, cited in Zembylas (2023). However, in this paper, Zembylas focuses only on nurturing affective practices among White settlers, describing in detail the discomforting and unsettling process that the colonisers must undergo. Adapting and extending this concept further, I explain the discomfort and conflicts that the minoritised academics feel and the shift in their mindset in attempt to dismantle complex structure in their Western dominant research practices.

To further describe and explain these students' varied experience, I combine with the concept 'identity as layers of positions as lamination' (Holland & Leaner, 2004, as cited in Moje & Luke, 2009, p.430). Identity lamination helps to explain how identities appear stable yet also multiple, at times, conflicted. These layers 'can be stripped away, reapplied, nicked, scratched or even gouged' (p.430). The analysis unpacks the affective dissonance across layers of identity lamination.

Huang and Lim are intentionally focused as the main two case analyses because their dinner table designs, the stories, and the reasons behind their choices offer particularly valuable insights for critically examining how international doctoral students navigate academic literacy, identity, and Western ideologies. During the interview, they offer thoughtful reflection, particularly their reading habits, which are heavily influenced by Western ideologies, alongside a deliberate effort to embrace greater diversity. Identity and identity lamination, as well as questions about the role of Western ideology, are explored in more detail in this chapter.

The two case analyses show their different attempts and different extent of being colonised and decolonising. These participants have varied beliefs and feelings when it comes to cross-language and cross-cultural reading. Sometimes these feelings are multifaceted and contradictory, resulting from their perceptions of how they feel and how they think they should feel about decolonisation. Both participants bring a wealth of professional and cultural experience to their current practices. Huang, who completed his education in Taiwan a decade ago, has since worked as a teacher and a column writer for a Taiwanese magazine, while Lim has spent 15 years as an English

teacher in Malaysia. These experiences have deeply affected them on their linguistic and cultural identities, providing a rich foundation for their academic journeys. Now pursuing their PhD research in the UK, they are navigating a new phase marked by exposure to new environments, ideas, and perspectives. The interaction between their established cultural roots and their current practices inevitably yields dynamic narratives about identity. The fusion of past and present experiences not only informs their academic perspectives but also inspires unique layers of stories. The process reveals how their evolving identities navigate the complexities of a globalised world.

2.1 Huang's story

2.1.1 Cross-language and cross-cultural reading

'I don't think I'm quite Westernised at all'

In the interview in the second week about the reading activities, our discussion began with Huang's resource choices, when he said most of his reading materials are in English:

> For me, it's much more easier to read Chinese, but I just trying to, you know, use English as more as possible because I still need to write in English. But I will use both languages, but mainly probably 95% still in English. (P03-INT3-p7)

Huang shows his familiarity and tolerance towards the two languages Chinese and English. He finds it easier to read in Chinese, which is his native language. He also has greater familiarity with Chinese reading and writing because he is a Chinese news writer. Although Chinese is more comfortable for him, he is making a conscious effort to use more English to sharpen his English writing skills. By saying '95%', he shows his apparent preference and the need to use mainly English in his research.

Another identity comes into play when Huang talks about academia back home in Taiwan, he gives an observation:

> 80% of the scholars, the ideas (in Taiwan), it's still quite westernised, yeah... the reason is that most of the professors in Taiwan have graduated from the Western world, and then they choose to go back home, so they all went through the same process like me. I mean 90% of them, I think so…(P03-INT3-p13)

Huang reflects on Taiwan's academic culture, noting its Western influence. He believes that the dominant academic ideas in Taiwan are heavily influenced by Western perspectives, despite its location in East Asia. He attributes this influence to the fact that most professors in Taiwan finished their education in Western countries, then returned to Taiwan and brought back the Western academic ideologies they were exposed to. By saying "same process like me", Huang feels related to this phenomenon and implies that he and other Taiwanese professors are bringing back Eurocentric ideas to shape the academic environment in Taiwan. He becomes

complicit in sustaining patterns inherited from previous generations of scholars and is, to some extent, embedded within the same cycle. This statement is the mixture of reflection and critique, implying that Taiwanese academia is losing its authentic features. This statement reveals two conflicting perspectives in Huang's approach. On one hand, he critiques Taiwanese academics; on the other, he acknowledges his own place within that system. Both perspectives expose the broader issue of Western academic colonialism, in which Taiwanese scholars are not only shaped by Western influences but also disseminate these influences within their own academic environments. Taiwanese scholars can be understood as both positioned by dominant Western academic discourses and as positioning others by disseminating and normalising these influences within their local academic environments.

Furthermore, commenting about Taiwanese higher education, he claimed that:

> The Taiwanese government just spend lots of money and trying to make the higher education in Taiwan to teach everything in English. So anyway, they just pull in that billions of dollar... It's more like a goal of the Taiwanese government is trying to make everyone to be as white as possible. (P03-INT3-p13)

His observation of the Taiwanese government's initiative to promote English-medium education in higher education reflects a critical awareness of the ideological dimensions underpinning language policy. By recognizing the significant financial investment in this shift, he highlights not only the focus on English proficiency as a key to academic and economic success but also the wider cultural effects of making

Taiwanese higher education more aligned with Western systems. His critique highlights a central paradox: while English is often positioned as a resource for global participation, its promotion risks Westernisation, particularly when it marginalises other languages, knowledges, and cultural identities. In this sense, his observation signals an understanding that language policy operates as a site of power rather than as a purely technical educational reform. The observation exposes internationalisation as a process that can reproduce global hierarchies of knowledge and culture.

This second layer of identity is similar to the first one, showing his colonised situation of the educational environment around him. However, his attitude in this layer is different when he shows more critical attitude. By saying 'trying to make everyone as White as possible', Huang is referring to his criticism and scepticism about his government's policy. An overemphasis on English presentation and Westernisation might result in the loss of local cultural values (Kubota, 2020; Flores & Rosa, 2023). Huang sees this situation as a priority of Western ideals and Westernised identity assimilation and is aware that Taiwan's unique cultural and linguistic heritage is being threatened. Despite recognising his government's excessive emphasis on promoting Western ideology within the education system, Huang appears resigned to this reality. He seems to be unable to challenge the situation, which he deemed to be 'colonised'. Huang shows his unwilling acceptance of his colonised position at this stage of our interview, which resonates with the 'uncomfortable engagement with the persistent effects of coloniality' mentioned by

Kluttz et al. (2020, p.55 (see also Zembylas, 2023). This is the resisting attitude to the legacies of colonialism.

Further in our interview, another layer of identity is exposed. Huang's statement here is that, despite the colonised settings in Taiwan and the UK, he does not feel colonised by Western ideologies: "I don't think I'm quite Westernised at all." He is seeking to distance himself from the notion of being heavily influenced by Western ideologies, which indicates his strong pride in his cultural identity and his desire to remain connected to his unique Taiwanese values. Even though he states earlier that he is receiving Western education, he does not see himself having adopted Westernized mindset. The statement conveys his belief that his personal identity is not defined by Western influences and suggests he still remains grounded in his own cultural background. Huang's beliefs resonate with the metaphor of 'identity as difference' (Moje & Luke, 2009, p.419), showing his stable psychological presentations of himself in terms of his origin and his beliefs as a Taiwanese.

The figure 4.1 illustrates Huang's identity as three overlapping layers that coexist and sometimes conflict. This reflects the concept identity as layers of positions as lamination (Holland & Leaner, 2004; Moje & Luke, 2009). These layers represent distinct facets of Huang's sense of self, shaped by various cultural, historical, and personal experiences. The first layer highlights Huang's commitment to the practices shaped by colonial influences. Huang's discomfort is evident in his reluctant acceptance of Westernised practices at the second layer. The third layer demonstrates his strong awareness of returning to his roots. Huang's racial awareness is deeply

influenced by the cultural and ethnic power dynamics between the West and Asia. This has positioned Western ideologies as dominant in his academic practices, therefore marginalising Asian cultural and intellectual contributions. Cushing and Govender (2024, p.5) state 'The shape of anti-racism will necessarily be different as it becomes formulated, applied, co-opted, and negotiated in relation to existing cultural, religious, and ethnic structures of power'. These intertwined layers reveal a deeply affective process involving a willingness to conform and discomfort with following colonial ideologies. This dynamic speaks to the complexities of Huang's identity. Figure 4.1 provides a visual illustration of the layered nature of Huang's identity laminations.

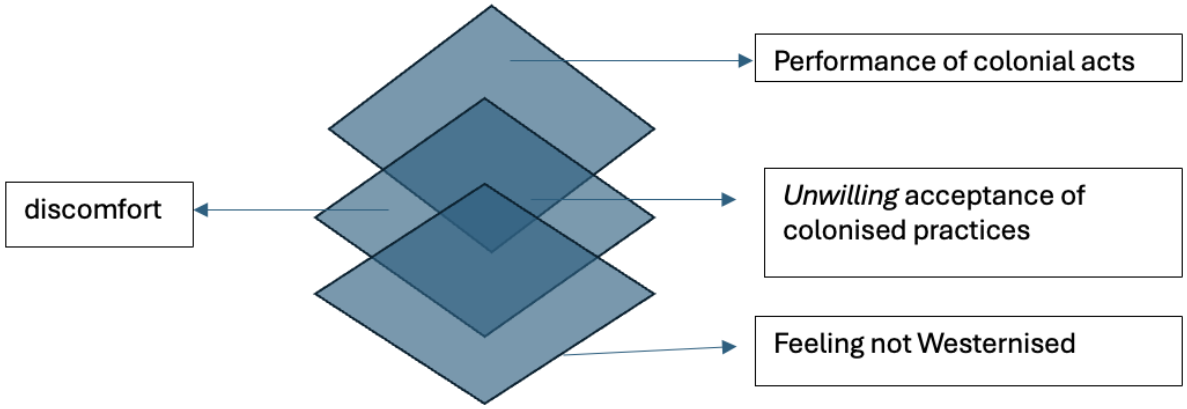


Figure 4.1*: Huang's layers of identity laminations*

2.1.2 Metaphor dinner table

In Week 3, the discussion shifted to participants' dinner-table design (Kamler & Thomson, 2006), developed in Diary Entry 2, in which they were asked to imagine hosting a gathering of scholars in their home. Participants designed a dinner table

and determined the seating arrangement of their guests. Huang's design, in particular, reveals layered and entangled identity positions shaped by colonial discourses surrounding English as a language of power and the global hierarchy of higher education. While he demonstrates an explicit awareness of power and coloniality in relation to English and academic knowledge, drawing on historical and identity-based reflections, these tensions become more pronounced through the visual and metaphorical representation of his dinner table. Although the dinner table metaphor does not originate from critical or decolonial scholarship, Huang's case illustrates how it can nonetheless function as an analytical tool for grappling with issues of power, coloniality, and identity within qualitative research practice. Figure 4.2 is Huang's table dinner design.



Figure 4.2: *Huang's dinner table drawing*

It can be seen that Huang invites eight authors from various countries, all of whom have written exclusively in English, highlighting a common linguistic thread among the invitees despite their diverse backgrounds. In arranging the seating, he places himself alongside a Taiwanese professor and his participant, implying the importance of these two individuals on the table. Their proximity to him suggests that they hold key roles as co-hosts for the dinner, playing a significant part in facilitating discussions and setting the tone for the gathering. Furthermore, beneath each author's name, Huang provides detailed explanations of their respective works, demonstrating his familiarity and deep knowledge of the individuals he invites. His attention to background underscores his preparation and respect for the expertise and contributions of his guests for the dinner discussion.

Huang expresses that he especially invites an indigenous Taiwanese to the table because he believes:

> He will be one of my main interviewees, which means he will be the knowledge provider for my research. For me, he is even more important than the rest of those, like people who got their education from the Western world. You know, I admire his knowledge more than others I will say. And the reason he sat next to me is because … the people who sit next to me are also the host. So I'm trying to make sure the host will sit from, you know, at the same side of the table. (P03-INT3-p34)

This statement reflects Huang's appreciation of the significance of his participants in his research and of the dynamics of their interactions. This comment about the presence of the indigenous Taiwanese strongly builds up and clarifies the layer of 'feeling not Westernised' of Huang. He emphasises that Sakinu is not only just one of his participants but also a critical source of knowledge for his research. This implies that he values Sakinu's insights and expertise more than those of others, particularly those educated in the Western world. Sakinu's knowledge appears more relevant, valuable, and authentic to Huang's research needs. Sitting next to each other at the same side of the table symbolises a sense of equality and shared authority between the Huang and the Sakinu.

Huang initially emphasised his dependence on English-language resources. However, in the subsequent interview, he demonstrates greater confidence in asserting his knowledge heritage, as evidenced by his admiration for indigenous knowledge. In this space, Huang demonstrates that he feels more powerful than those who 'got the education from the Western world' because his indigenous participant is the 'knowledge provider' for his research. This practice shows Huang's strong attempt to affirm the valid knowledge from indigenous resources. The action of 'admiring' typically contains a blend of positive emotions including appreciation, respect and gratitude. Therefore, the basis for affective solidarity is not only 'affective dissonance' as Zembylas (2023) suggested, but also the positive emotions that inspire a desire for transformation. This marks an effort to dismantle the structures of colonial violence through a practice of positive affectivity. Within the context of Huang's dinner table, this appears to be a justified political action,

suggesting a decolonising solidarity move as it shows his ‘political commitment to Indigenous people’s struggles against colonisation’ (Zembylas, 2023, p.311).

However, when talking about the confidence of criticising the scholars’ ideas on the table, Huang expresses:

> Some of the indigenous researchers, they are problematics. Actually, they are trying to make the colonisation. I really think if I mention that, that's a little bit offensive because I’m questioning their identity. So I don't think it's OK for me to say my ideas. I admit that yes, I will try to avoid it. I think that's because the Taiwanese personality. (P03-INT3-p53)

This suggests that Huang is experiencing conflict over sensitive issues related to indigenous researchers, identity, and cultural dynamics. He specifically uses the strong word ‘problematic’ to describe the researchers to criticise their tendency to accept colonisation rather than resist it. However, he acknowledges that expressing such opinions might be ‘offensive’ and chooses to avoid voicing these thoughts openly. He explains this behaviour is due to his ‘Taiwanese personality’. A cultural tendency is reflected here in the prioritisation of harmony and the avoidance of direct criticism. The context of ‘dinner table’ also makes him feel uncomfortable confronting the colonial challenges. Therefore, this metaphor prompts participants to reflect on the ideologies they adopt in their research and to confront the legacies of colonialism.

He continues to share:

> I mean on the dinner table, it's face to face, I definitely will talk less because I believe if I talk more it will make me be so stupid. So I will definitely try not to talk too much and to address the topics. I think I will ask the professor, the Taiwanese professor next to me, to bring up something to share about the experience in Taiwan. She will be the one to start it and then just trying to find out what others think about it. So if I only put their words in my research, I'm pretty sure they will never have any chance to read my article. (P03-INT3-p47)

Huang shows his caution and strategic approach in terms of interacting with other scholars at the table and in academic settings. He intentionally chooses to talk less during face-to-face interactions with scholars because he worries about showing his unintelligence ‘‘it will make me be so stupid’. He sees his Taiwanese professor sitting next to him as more experienced and authoritative; as a result, he lets her initiate discussions. He also shows his preference for hearing multiple viewpoints as an input for his research. He seems to suggest that he will raise more voices in his own writing because these scholars would not read his work. At this point, Huang presents himself as the oppressed and lacks the power to stand up to others’ ideas. He has more courage to put his power into writing and hopes “they will never have any chance to read.” Through this metaphor activity, Huang’s discomfort and unsettling feelings are fully exposed, and oppression and injustice are recognised. Nonetheless, Huang’s insecurity can also be understood as characteristic of early-stage academic

identity formation. His perspectives and confidence may continue to evolve as his doctoral journey unfolds. At this stage, such uncertainty can be seen as part of the ongoing work of finding his scholarly voice in relation to more established voices in the field.

On reflecting the dinner table activity, Huang comments:

> Some of your questions just give me reminders. So actually, for the past four days, I've just tried my best to read as many works by Taiwanese authors as possible. Actually, the two Taiwanese people are invited [in the dinner table activity]. I didn't really read their article before. You know, that's such a shame.
>
> I'm still somewhat within Western Eurocentric ideas. In my brain, automatically, I just sort of black out that information, although I really enjoy talking to them. I will also say, probably the reason is that I decided to come to the UK, so somehow there is a stereotype for me inside my brain or my heart. That's I should start from, to include more like English literature first. (P03-INT3-p50)

Huang reflects his self-awareness and reflection on his academic and cultural biases. This is a critical reflection of his academic journey, acknowledging the influence of Western-centric education on his thinking. He admits that his academic focus has been shaped by Western ideologies. He expresses a desire to overcome these biases and include more diverse perspectives in his work, particularly from his own cultural background. The questions posed to him are considered a reminder that he has

overlooked the works of Taiwanese authors. This acknowledgement reveals his internal conflict between his appreciation of non-Western perspectives and his prioritisation of Western literature.

2.2 Lim's story

2.2.1 Reading across languages and culture

'You can't help having a bias. The bias of preference for native speakers is still there'

In the week 3 interview on general reading preferences, Lim expresses complex practices regarding material reading choices.

Lim is doing her PhD on picture books for children; therefore, our discussion firstly focuses on her practices of reading wordless picture books and on academic resources. In terms of wordless picture books, Lim has an evident preference for Western published picture books:

> The book publishing industry in the West is Umm, it's more thriving than the ones back home… They value individuality and creativity, and about being able to express your feelings… They talk about how to manage your big feelings. They talk about diversity because you will see that in these picture books, they include children of all races. They will include children in wheelchair. They will include children with a bossy hair. They will include

> children and then hijab. So they're all about diversity, about creativity, about being yourself. I think it's the value that the society wants to put forward defend you that this is the one the children to embrace.(P04-INT3-p1)

In a few seconds, Lim listed an abundant number of values from wordless Western picture books. Lim highlights how the Western publishing industry emphasises individuality, creativity, emotional expression, and diversity. Her tone suggests she admires these values and finds them compelling, particularly the way they are represented in children's literature. She seems to appreciate that diversity and self-expression are valued and celebrated in Western children's books. This has evoked Lim's desire for similar creative and inclusive developments in children's book publication in her home country. She might feel that her home country could benefit from adopting similar approaches to publishing. According to Lim, picture presentation from Western picture books is more diverse and conveys meaningful messages for children, whereas Malaysian picture books do not bring the same values "Whereas back home, umm, the major theme that I can see is doing the right thing, being disciplined, working hard."

She shows her awareness and desire that Malaysian picture books should bring the same values:

> We have no choice but to use the Western Book and adapt it and into our own setting, but I think it would be better if one day we have a thriving book publishing and then if we can have a lot of locally produced books that talk about being diverse, books that talk about being imaginative and creative,

> written and drawn by local writers, I think that would be better. (P04-INT3-p2)

The statement expresses a combination of frustration with her reliance on Western books and a wish for more books to thrive locally, reflecting her own aspirations culture. Saying ‘have no choice’ suggests a sense of frustration. When discussing her choice of picture books for research, Lim expresses a clear preference for Western picture books by praising their qualities. Meanwhile, she criticised Malaysian picture books for failing to embrace similar values. It is important to note that these picture books are wordless, meaning they lack verbal textual elements. Therefore, this argument focuses on cross-cultural reading rather than cross-linguistic reading. Lim's preference lies in the visual presentation of Western books, which she finds better represents diversity and individuality. This indicates her strong awareness of diversity. Thus, the first layer of Lim’s identity is her recognition of diversity and decolonisation.

When it comes to academic reading, Lim shows her acknowledgement of literatures from the West and the limitations of Malaysian or Asian resources:

> Because a lot of literature on similar research that has been done on picture books is Western-centric, they're based on the Western classroom. A lot of research is done on picture books, and wordless picture books are done in the UK or Europe, and then a big portion of my study is also done on Translanguaging, and Translanguaging originates in Wales, UK. So yeah, and if I were to relate it to my local contacts, there isn't much. So whenever I'm

> reading whatever ideas that I'm getting from all these researchers that has been done before, I have to remind myself that these are not from and Asian contexts. So there are moments when I question if this is gonna work? Yeah, maybe the contexts that you're working on are dominated and thriving in the Western context, but in my case, even though it's initiated like I said in Wales, it's doing really well and thriving in the Western context. I already know that, but I'm also looking what is happening within that context in my own country. (P04-INT3-p6)

This acknowledgement shows her easy reliance and acceptance of bringing Western research into her research and remote awareness of her own Asian context, where she still has little knowledge. Lim explains Western-dominant resources and critically questions their applicability to her own context, which she seeks to bridge by contributing Malaysian, locally relevant insights and practices. She acknowledges that much of the existing research on picture books and related fields is rooted in Western contexts, particularly classrooms in the UK and Europe, but they are often accompanied by suspicion regarding its universality. Her statement reflects a critically literate stance, as evidenced by this suspicion. While Lim predominantly relies on Western English-language resources, she acknowledges the need to challenge and transform fields dominated by Western ideas. Her reading practices are strongly influenced by Western scholarship, although she actively seeks to engage with more Asian sources. She continuously questions how Western ideologies operate, often contrasting them with the context of her own country. Her comment “I have to remind myself” reveals a strong determination to remain

cautious of what she is adopting. This suggests her awareness of the power imbalance among the ideologies.

Despite the dominance of Western-centric research, Lim is committed to understanding how these concepts can be adapted and applied to her Malaysian context.

> I would need some in my Malaysian context in my local context too. Back me up so that I can brush up on my literature review. I need to know what's happening worldwide and also I need to know what's happening at the national level. (P04-INT3-p6)

Overall, there is a responsibility to address knowledge gaps to ensure that her work is contextually grounded. She shows her understanding that both broader international research and localised nuances are crucial for meaningful research. The word ‘need’ shows that although she is aware of the need for reading materials from the local context, she has not done much of it. This is her feeling about what should be done in her research. The second layer of her identity is an easy acceptance of Western ideologies within Lim’s Asian research context and a vague urge to seek her own contextual materials. This literature review practice has maintained the particular way of relying heavily on English materials. Because Western research publications are dominant, researchers from the Global South have no choice but to begin where more information is available. Accordingly, research knowledge originates in the West and is then applied in other parts of the world.

Further in our interview, she also recognised the benefits when she read the English papers written by Malaysian teachers:

> I get really impressed by them because it just happened that a lot of the articles So I found it relatable. I found that they use terms that only I can relate. I found that Western scholars do not use that kind of thing. The use succinct words to describe the learners only in a way that only Malaysians can understand. So I have a collection of thesis done by Malaysian students. They're really good. There's something that I use as a benchmark. (P04-INT4-p14)

There are a few emotive words here, such as ‘impressed’ and ‘relatable’. Even though the texts are in English, they bring her different feelings that Western scholars cannot deliver. There is a sense of relief and understanding when encountering relatable terms in Malaysian scholarship. She also feels proud of the quality of Malaysian academic work and is validated by the relevance to her own context and experiences. The use of terms and expressions specific to her cultural and educational context resonates with her experiences, providing a sense of connection that she does not feel with Western scholarship. She appreciates the unique perspective offered by Malaysian writers, which suggests a sense of confidence in value in Malaysian academic contributions. The relevance of these works strengthens her belief in the importance of integrating local perspectives into her own research. Using the word ‘benchmark’, Lim indicates that she holds these local works in high regard.

However, these emotions seem not to be enough to generate decolonising solidarity because when it comes to action, she again only made a vague statement “there’s something that I use as a benchmark.” Therefore, the third layer of her identity is the recognition of the Malaysian authors’ values, but with discomforting feelings.

Later on in our conversation, Lim comes back to her strong belief about her preference and reliance on Western materials.

> I mean, you can't help having a bias. The bias of preference for native speakers are still there. That's what they're trying to do, decolonising education. Yeah, so far I agree with them. I agree with the colonisers. I feel like I consume a lot of Western texts. But as I answered just now, it has kept me open-minded, meaning that I love what I'm reading now. What I have now, but it doesn't mean that I'm rejecting the Asian text. (P04-INT4-p17)

The statement reveals a combination of self-awareness of her biases, appreciation of Western texts, and a desire to remain open-minded and value non-Western perspectives, suggesting an internal conflict. This awareness stems from reflection on her academic experiences and the dominance of Western perspectives and publications in her field. Lim reveals a tension when she calls the Western authors ‘colonisers’ while taking the bias against them. She appears to grapple with the complexities of enjoying and valuing Western literature and perspectives, while also recognising the need to embrace and uplift non-Western or Asian voices.

The two seemingly contrasting statements, “I agree with the colonisers” and “It doesn’t mean that I’m rejecting the Asian text”, reflect Lim’s complex and dual state of being both colonised and decolonised. These parallel perspectives significantly shape her research practices, highlighting her navigation between two intellectual worlds. On the one hand, she relies heavily on Western resources, which confer substantial benefits. On the other hand, she remains aware of the power imbalance that arises. This duality creates a space of constant negotiation where identity, culture, and power intersect. Lim recognises that her reliance on Western resources strengthens her research but also realises the importance of maintaining her cultural and intellectual heritage. She understands that to preserve this heritage, she must actively remind herself not to reject Asian resources. This statement suggests her efforts to navigate the complexities of academic power dynamics while striving to remain connected to her roots.

This point is coming back to Lim’s first layer of identity which is openly accepting Western resources. This also means that she makes a deliberate commitment to colonial logics ‘agreement with the coloniser, but at the same time she shows the awareness of the dismantling of the colonial structure. In Lim’s narratives, her discomfort is not as transparent as Huang’s. Her unsettling feeling instead lies at the layer of realising the value of her Malaysian resources. Since she acknowledges the fact that she is following the ‘colonisers’, she feels the need to involve more Malaysian authors in her research reading (but still fails to take specific action), which indicates that she does not have a genuinely profound belief in indigenous

resources. Figure 4.3 provides a visual illustration of the layered nature of Lim's identity laminations.

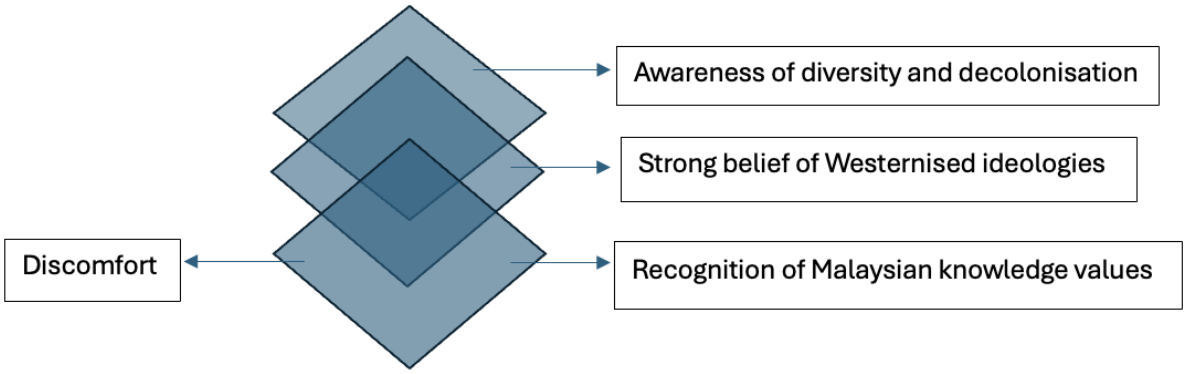


Figure 4.3: *Lim's layers of identity laminations*

2.2.2 Metaphor of dinner table

Lim's various layers of thought are more evident in her 'dinner table' design, where she positions many different authors to 'sit along' her. Through the activity of this metaphor, Lim's layers of identity are further elaborated and supported. Figure 4.4 is Lim's dinner table design.

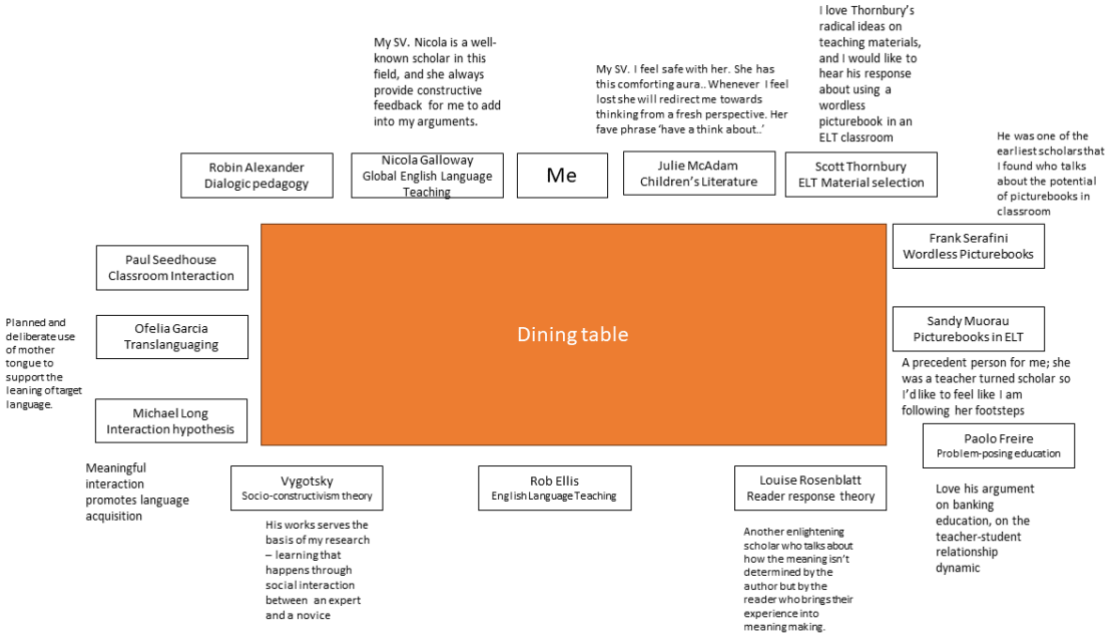


Figure 4.4: *Lim's design of dinner table*

The dinner table features 13 authors, predominantly from Western countries, each of whom is widely recognised as a leading figure or pioneer in their respective fields. Most of these scholars write exclusively in English (apart from Paulo Freire), reflecting the dominance of the language in Lim's research. Lim also includes a personalised description beneath each author's name, detailing her perception of their work and the critical role their contributions play in shaping and enriching her research. The authors are seated at a long rectangular table that emphasises a structured and professional arrangement. These attendees collectively represent a wealth of expertise across various disciplines.

When commenting about her dinner table, Lim admitts:

> These people are the big names in each discipline, like Robin, like Alexander, … It seems like we glorify whatever the Westerns are doing. The research

> world is dominated by them. But like I mentioned before, if locals were to emerge in all the fields and the disciplines that I mentioned, I would probably consider Asian scholars. I mean, right now, there are only White scholars at the table because I only know them, and they're not there because they're white. They are only there because they're the only ones who dim to be the big names in in the discipline right now. (P04-INT4-p1)

Lim expresses a mixed awareness of Western dominance, frustration with the lack of Asian representation, while maintaining respect for the scholars currently recognised as leaders in her dinner party. She acknowledges the dominance of Western scholars in the research world, particularly those who are ‘big names’ in her disciplines. This recognition reflects an accepted awareness of the structural and cultural biases that prioritise Western contributions. The statement further supports the layer of Lim’s identity about her strong beliefs in Western ideologies. However, her acknowledgement: “we glorify whatever the Westerns are doing” shows her own criticism towards accepting Western knowledge.

Talking about the attempt to criticise these scholars’ ideas, Lim expresses:

> *Question: Umm, so do you criticise then?*
>
> Answer: No, never. Maybe, you know, because we are Asians and we tend to be a bit more humble. I think I don't even fully understand my own thesis, so I am not in a position to criticise them. My criticism is against more on the system.

> I realized that now most of my criticism is in my thesis is, uh, education, culture, the teaching approach back home. So that's where my criticism lies. So partially my literature review, I criticize the language ideology that we have back home. (P04-INT4-p5)

Lim demonstrates a humble, cautious approach to critiquing Western scholars, grounded in her cultural perspective and self-perceived limitations. Understandably, this experience can result from her process of 'becoming' a researcher. In addition, she shows her critical awareness and responsibility in addressing systemic issues in her local educational back home. While she refrains from criticising Western authors, she directs her critical focus toward the system within her own country. This statement further elaborates on the layer of identities about her discomfort in recognising Malaysian knowledge values. As Hemmings (Hemmings, 2012; Zembylas, 2023) pointed out the embodied knowledge is at the heart of affective solidarity. Since Lim appears to position Western knowledge at the heart of her ideology and belief, she shows her uncomfortable and distanced engagement to Malaysian resources. Lim takes her empowered move by positioning Western ideology at heart to criticise the situation back home. In other words, to Lim, conforming to Westernise ideologies is powerful.

This metaphor activity has also helped Lim to reflect on her reading practices and face directly with her identity layer of strong belief of Westernised ideas:

> Before I did never really pay attention to who I'm reading, who I'm citing.

> I realise that after the table, it is very white-centric. It's because, like I said, lack of Asian scholars in the disciplines that I'm working on, which is not fair because ELT is quite a worldwide field, I mean, we have many experts from Asia. It's just that I haven't gotten into their work yet or maybe I forgot. (P04-INT4-p8)

Lim reveals a mixture of self- reflection, regret, frustration with her internal biases, and an attempt to seek out more diverse voices in her academic work. She admits previously being inattentive to the diversity of authors and sources and acknowledges the 'white-centric thinking'. This has resulted in the absence of Asian scholars in her work. This demonstrates a systematic issue that, despite Lim's awareness, she still seems to 'forget' about non-Western resources. It can be assumed that one may need to enact critical literacy all the time because issues of power can be insidious and entrenched. However, it should be noted that this process can be exhausting. She admits taking accountability for embedding the imbalance, which reflects a willingness to change her approach moving forward. Lim finally admits her negligence in taking up more Asian works into her research, which shows a shift in her mindset that decolonising solidarity requires (Zambylas, 2023). This 'dinner table' has activated her thought of dismantling the hidden structure of colonial systems embedded in her research production, which aligns to her first layer of identity about her awareness of diversity and decolonisation.

2.3 Discussion

Although my questions are not explicitly designed to explore the topic of decolonisation, and the participants' research does not directly engage with this theme, their responses have inadvertently shed light on the decolonisation process. Through their reflections, decolonisation is not a straightforward or isolated concept but rather displays in complicated ways within their lived experiences and intellectual engagements. Their narratives reveal the layered struggles, tensions, and negotiations they face as they navigate cultural, intellectual, and emotional experiences shaped by colonial legacies. This underscores how decolonisation often operates beneath the surface, interwoven with the identities, and emerges even in contexts where it is not explicitly addressed.

These practices can be understood through multiple dimensions of critical literacy, particularly in relation to power, identity, and knowledge production. This aligns with the critical literacy focus on examining how texts and knowledge systems privilege certain voices while marginalising others. The participants' engagement with literature, as illustrated through the dinner table activity, demonstrates their emerging awareness of authorial positioning and the selective nature of knowledge construction, reflecting the dimension of critical literacy concerned with questioning representation and authority. Furthermore, their narratives highlight the role of identity as an embodied and negotiated practice, where multilingual and cultural identities intersect with academic expectations, resonating with critical literacy's emphasis on identity and subjectivity. The tensions they experience between embracing dominant Western frameworks and seeking epistemic diversity also point to the transformative potential of critical literacy, where learners move beyond

passive consumption towards critical engagement and, in some cases, attempts to reframe or expand dominant discourses. At the same time, the varied depth of these reflections suggests that critical literacy is not uniformly enacted, but emerges in complex and uneven ways across participants' experiences, shaped by their individual histories, disciplinary contexts, and levels of reflexive engagement.

Huang's narratives in certain ways are interestingly contrasted to Lim's in terms of their affective dissonance and their unsettling discomfort. While these participants hold different beliefs and face different struggles toward decolonisation, affective dissonance is evident in a series of small stories that attempt to decolonise solidarity. In this section, I present my core findings of the use of affective models to effectively elaborate understanding of students' experiences of decolonising research practices in higher education.

2.3.1 The process of becoming academics requires affective understanding to thoroughly capture every corner of the journey

The journey of doing research involves complicated and conflicting beliefs and choices of actions. It is not a straightforward adventure but full of tensions and confusion. These complexities often reflect the nuanced layers of identities that researchers must navigate as part of their intellectual and emotional experiences. The concept of 'affective solidarity' elaborates the nuances between different layers of conflicting identities. This is evident in Huang's discomfort exposed not only at the layer of his unwilling acceptance of colonised practices but also in the moment of his

refusion to challenge Westernised ideas. This duality highlights the intricate emotional struggles.

These conflicting layers of emotions show his desire for transformation for equality. Huang and Lim appear to have a strong desire for change, yet they are constrained in their ability to act by external constraints. Their research remains inextricably tied to Western ideals. Crushing and Govender (2024) argued that achieving linguistic justice requires an extensive termination and complete redesign of existing systems. It's not enough to merely offer marginalised communities a seat at the table; instead, the very concept of the table must be reimagined to ensure true inclusivity and equity. Offering marginalised communities a seat at the table is insufficient; the table itself must be transformed.

For individuals like Huang, the responsibility to challenge and create change is immense and burdensome. Despite efforts to redefine and find their identity across different contexts, they are still caught within a colonial framework (Quijano, 2000) that is strongly shaped by English linguistic imperialism (Canagarajah & Said, 2011). Even when the imbalance of power is recognised, escaping these structures or finding the confidence to confront them is not always possible because they are systemic. Huang's experience highlights the tension between acknowledging problematic dynamics and being unable to fully transcend them. Similarly, Lim describes her experience of colonial power as a form of forgetting. However, it may be more accurate to understand coloniality as a systemic, taken-for-granted logic of power, even within academia and academic practice in the UK.

This has further developed ways to truly understand student's strategies in making their empowered move in research practices and their hesitance in taking action towards colonial acts. Huang's journey is not merely an identity conflict but also an active engagement with the larger issues of oppression and injustice. It underscores a desire to release these tensions and seek paths for change, even within a system that often imposes different contradictions.

2.3.2 Decolonisation is multifaceted and fluid due to affective dimension

Decolonisation is never transparent and stable, which makes it difficult to grasp a full understanding. Deconstructing the affective aspect of decolonisation enables us to identify the hidden struggles and explain the powerful and powerless moves behind every action.

According to Canagarajah and Said (2011), the dominance of English is no longer tied to any single country; rather, it is upheld by global processes and transnational institutions. This reality is evident in the experiences of Huang and Lim, whose academic journeys to English-speaking countries have shaped their research perspectives and decisions through the influence of English convention. Throughout their journey, locating themselves within these complex power relations has been fluid and multifaceted. They constantly swing back and forth between reconnecting with their cultural heritage and striving to align with the dominance of standardised English and Western academic ideals in the context of higher education. This

ongoing negotiation reflects the tension between personal identity and external expectations particularly in relation to their multilingual and transnational identities.

Effective elements of decolonisation, therefore, reflect a range of embodied emotional experiences, encompassing both positive and negative feelings. These include pride when incorporating indigenous perspectives into research, as exemplified by Huang and Lim, frustration when unable to rely on heritage knowledge, confidence in using English resources, resistance to colonised practices, hesitation to initiate change, and discomfort in navigating in-between spaces. Together, these emotional layers characterise the complex and multifaceted affective dimensions of coloniality and decolonisation. These examples highlight the profound influence of linguistic imperialism on individuals, shaping not only their emotional experiences but also their sense of agency and capability. Historically, the emotional expressions of those seen as different from white colonisers have often been racialised, dismissed as overly reactive, impulsive, or exaggerated (Guilmette, 2019; Million, 2008, 2009; Palmer, 2017, as cited in Zembylas, 2023). This research reframes these emotional expressions, shedding light on their depth and significance in navigating power, identity, and resistance. These expressions have been examined and depicted in various ways, eliciting mixed reactions that enrich existing intellectual decolonisation efforts.

It is interesting how the two participants enact affective moves across different layers of belief. Huang demonstrates his reluctance to accept Western ideologies, whereas Lim shows her uneasy engagement with Asian ideas and authors. Despite these

differences, both participants share a noticeable hesitancy to directly confront colonial logic, revealing the influence of colonial systems on their research processes. These examples illustrate that the process of decolonisation is neither singular nor static but rather multifaceted and fluid, reflecting diverse experiences and emotional complexities. By examining affective dimensions, we can unpack their discomfort and understand their process of decolonising solidarity.

2.3.3 Talking metaphorically to expose more tangible affective move

While affective moves are taken up by the participants in every moment of research, they are trivial, intricate and ravelled. The dinner metaphor activity has helped to reveal these moves in between the emotion and perception layers.

In comparison with literature review writing activity, this metaphor activity has further pushed the participants to disclose the different feelings they have towards the authors. Huang shows the desire of decolonial acts but has a hesitant attitude when he needs to talk ‘face to face’ at the dinner table. Lim realises how ‘White’ her dinner table is and the lack of engagement with Asian authors. This activity was not originally designed from/by decolonial scholarship (Kamler & Thomson, 2006). But, given the right critical attunement to power and identity, it can be made to do decolonial work.

This activity has provided participants with a meaningful opportunity to openly discuss the tensions they experience in their research practices. Participants have

reflected on how deeply reliant they are on English-language resources, which often reinforce colonial structures (Bhambra et al., 2018) and began to consider strategies for altering their reading habits to include a broader range of voices and perspectives. It fosters a deeper awareness of how academic practices, such as resource selection and knowledge production, shape inequalities. It is worth noting that, on the one hand, the practice of relying on English resources is reasonable given that the context of their degree/program is set in an English-medium institution within an English-speaking country; on the other hand, it is the dominance and perceived superiority of English that reproduces the colonial relationship.

Kamler and Thomson (2006) reframe the abstract idea of joining a scholarly conversation/ literature review into a concrete design task. This was created originally as a practical and pedagogical tool for doctoral writers, but has demonstrated its benefits through a critical literacy lens. It takes students' lives, identities, and experiences seriously and examines how they navigate language and culture as they build researcher identities and practice. By engaging in this activity, participants are not only able to pinpoint their own roles within these power structures but also begin to explore ways to navigate and challenge these imbalances. The activity enables them to explicitly articulate the struggles they face in navigating a colonial context, giving voice to challenges that often remain implicit or unspoken in academic settings. The concept of the 'dinner table' emerges as a tangible, approachable metaphor, serving as a space where they can connect with their circle of authors. Therefore, they become increasingly aware of the power dynamics involved in their academic work. This metaphor prompts participants to think

critically about their position at the table, their interactions with others seated there, and how these dynamics reflect broader issues of identity and power.
Ultimately, the activity enables them to draw valuable conclusions about the systemic power imbalances that influence their research and provides them with the tools to question and reimagine their academic practices in more inclusive and decolonised ways. While this sub-chapter attends to their thinking about research, particularly the literature review, the next sub-chapter considers whether or not and how these practices surface in their writing. Aspects of these perspectives solidified in/ through academic writing are investigated.

3 Writing in and out of the comfort

In this subchapter, I examine interview data from weeks 5 and 6, centred on my participant's general writing practices, including their preferences, challenges, and experiences with bilingual writing in academic research contexts. Based on the data, I categorise their experiences into a 'comfort zone' and a 'discomfort zone' of writing. Following this analysis, I present and analyse a piece of their writing where they were invited to write more freely, in their own voice, to explore what new expressions of identity emerge beyond the constraints of formal academic writing. I integrate the metaphor of identity as mind or consciousness, drawing on Moje and Luke (2009), with particular emphasis on Anzaldúa's (1999) concept of identity, mind, and consciousness. Anzaldúa suggests that consciousness is born and shaped through the struggle of living between different worlds. Scholars like Degollado et al. (2021) have drawn extensively on Anzaldua's work to discuss social justice, anti-

racist, and anti-colonial practices in schools and society. In this context, I highlight how writing becomes the medium through which my participants' identities are formed, sustained, and suppressed.

This chapter employs the metaphor of identity as mind or consciousness (Moje & Luke, 2009) to further elaborate and interpret the participants' narratives. The identity-as-mind metaphor views identity as emerging from consciousness shaped through human activity, rooted in Marxist and Vygotskian theories (Freire, 1993; Marx & Engel, 1973; Vygotsky, 1986). Marx emphasises the dialectical relationship between activity and consciousness, where each shapes the other in a continuous cycle. Vygotsky extends this by highlighting how tools, especially language, enable abstract thought, making consciousness and identity possible.

Scholars like Anzaldúa (1999) offer a more nuanced view, seeing identity as complex, contested, and shaped through writing. For her, writing is not just a tool but a medium of self-construction and resistance. Literacy practices are both reflective and generative of identity, offering individuals ways to navigate tensions, express hybrid selves, and resist dominant narratives. Thus, identity as mind is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process involving cultural tools, social interaction, and evolving consciousness. The current study by Othman and Lo (2023) also reveals that doctoral students' narratives illustrate negotiation of their autobiographical, authorial, and discursive selves in academic writing. Viewing identity through the lens of mind or consciousness is useful for unpacking the participants' complex struggles and

conflicting experiences. It also enables a critical evaluation of whether their access to hybrid identities is facilitated or constrained.

Bakhshi's (Iranian, P05) and Lee's (Chinese, P01) narratives are highlighted in this section because they offer the richest insights into general academic writing practices. Although they are at different stages of their writing, Bakhshi is working on his literature review, while Lee is beginning her findings chapter, they both share significant reflections on their struggles with writing. Bakhshi, whose first language is Farsi, is researching the use of comedy in English language teaching for refugees. Lee, who speaks Chinese as her mother tongue, is exploring the use of technology in dating among Chinese students in the UK. Bakhshi presents himself as a passionate English-language teacher, which makes him particularly reflective about his English writing practices. In contrast, Lee expresses a strong dislike for English writing due to the numerous limitations and barriers she encounters. As a result, both participants offer valuable yet contrasting perspectives on navigating academic writing in English language.

The findings in this chapter draw on data from Interviews 5 and 6, which focus on participants' general academic writing practices. The following interview questions informed the analysis presented in this chapter:

1. Describe a time when you felt that you resisted English writing conventions in your academic writing.
2. Both writing and cooking can involve varying degrees of preparation. Some people like to use recipes, while others do not. How does this metaphor

relate to your writing practices?

3. Do you have any ‘recipes’ or ‘formulas’, general rules that you follow when writing?

4. Do you think that following such ‘recipes’ or strict rules helps you produce good academic writing?

5. What things (or ‘ingredients’) do you need in order to get into your writing?

6. Do you always follow these ‘recipes’ strictly?

7. What do you enjoy most about writing?

8. Are these practices your own, or are you following someone else’s (or both)?

9. What non-English language ‘ingredients’ could you substitute or add to give your writing more ‘flavour’?

Following the analysis of the interview data, I also present and analyse a piece of participants’ writing produced as part of the final diary entry.

Participants were invited to complete one of the following two tasks:

Task 1:

Choose one aspect of your research or an abstract from your study. Write a short paragraph for different audiences. How would you write in the way you personally prefer? How might you make it more engaging? How would you adapt it for social media or news audiences?

Task 2:

As a PhD student, you are likely to have presented your research in English to

> a range of audiences. In this task, write about your research in your mother tongue(s). Produce a short abstract or describe a favourite aspect of your research in your mother tongue(s), or across multiple languages, including English.

This diary invites participants to experiment with more flexible and creative forms of academic expression, enabling reflection on audience, language choice, and the constraints of English-dominant academic writing.

In the next section, I examine Bakhshi and Lee's zones of comfort and discomfort in academic writing. I then explore how their diary entries reveal new expressions of identity that emerge beyond the constraints of formal academic conventions.

3.1 Bakhshi's writing zone

Bakhshi's comfort zone in writing stems from his enthusiasm for the English language, where he experiences moments of empowerment. In contrast, his discomfort arises from a sense of injustice in relation to 'native' English speakers and the challenges he faces in adhering to academic writing conventions.

3.1.1 Bakhshi's writing comfort zone:

Bakhshi displays a love for free writing and comedy writing:

> In free comedy writing, it might be a wonderful opportunity for your creativity, …to somehow nurture your creativity to nourish your creativity. (P05-INT5-p5)

He sees free writing opens a space rather than constraining him. By saying this, Bakhshi emphasises that free comedy writing gives him a space to practice, strengthen, and grow his creative powers. He considers this process of nurturing and nourishing essential to the active development of his creative mind. This is evident in the Vygotsky's perspective of 'Literacy is a tool for development of mind' (p.426, 1934/1986 as cited in Moje & Luke, 2009). According to Vygosky, symbolic tools like language mediate human thought to allow humans to engage in abstract and complex thinking**.** Therefore, Bakhshi perceives the act of free writing allows him to operate at a higher cognitive level. This comfort zone of writing allows him to forge his identity.

In terms of English and academic writing, he also expresses his enthusiasm for the language choice:

> I like academics; sometimes I use academic jargon even for myself because I find it exciting. And together with that, I use some idiomatic expressions or some slangs as well. I find it really exciting whenever I see English letters. I feel whenever I am writing in English I can indeed exactly help myself to be powerful in writing. (P05-INT5-p7)

Bakhshi expresses enthusiasm**,** confidence, and empowerment through writing in English. He not only shows his excitement with using English academic language, idioms, and slang, but also feels motivated and empowered when he sees English letters and writes in English. This is the moment of unlocking his personal strength through the English language. The activity and consciousness exist in a dialectical relationship; the changed consciousness in turn shapes new activity, which shapes reality, which again, in turn, shapes consciousness (Vygotsky, 1943/1986 cited in Moje & Luke, 2009).

He also shows his eagerness in the ability to write and transfer his thoughts into English.

> *Question: Have you ever felt like English might not express what you wanna say in your diary? Like some people choose to write diaries in their first language rather than in English.*
>
> Answer: I like this challenge. Very exciting. I like that the exciting parts of this writing is how to exactly transfer your thoughts without any differences from your mother tongue into target language. So this challenge is one of the most exciting parts of writing for me. (P05-INT5-p8)

Bakhshi sees the difficulty of writing in English not as a problem, but as a fun and exciting challenge**.** He feels energised, motivated, and adventurous about it. He enjoys the challenge of translating ideas from his native language into English and finds it rewarding to express his exact thoughts in English. He seems to be intrigued by how accurately he can express deep or complex ideas in a second language.

Vygotsky (1978) argues that writing profoundly changes the structure of thought itself**.** In this case, literacy is a tool for reshaping his consciousness about the two languages. Through writing, he gains control over his thought processes **and** shape his identities and understandings**.** He understands the requirements of the academic norms and strives to conform to them.

Bakhshi explains the reason behind his positive experience with English:

> *Question: So you also say you feel more powerful when you write in English?*
> Answer: Yes, because as I told you, it might help me develop my skills in writing, especially for academic writing, and because I'm living in an English speaking country, for sure. You'll see when you can speak with a high quality to your audience, even in daily conversations, you might be easily impressed. We can do your job better here (P05-INT5-p8)

He believes that being good at English writing, especially academic writing and speaking, gives him a real advantage in everyday life and his career, particularly because he lives in an English-speaking country. Writing and speaking in English make him feel stronger and more capable, and he feels proud when he can impress others with 'high-quality' English, even in casual conversations. He is determined to continue developing these skills to perform his job more effectively and integrate into the environment.

Bakhsi expresses his close distance towards English:

Question: I feel like you have closer distance to English than your first language.

Answer: Yeah. And it was kind of intentional. Because in that way I could develop my academic career, I can develop, stand out among the other people.I accepted the English language as my field of study at the university and I accepted English language as my main career. Naturally, it has become… vital parts of my life, and I kind of like that to somehow learning in English, thinking English or speaking English language (P06-INT5-p9)

Question: Hmm, So you think of English as a source of strength for you?

Answer: As source of income, source of strength, source of power. (P05-INT5-p9)

Bakhshi feels empowered, proud, and deeply connected to English as he views English with economic advantages. It is not only a communication tool but also an essential part of his identity, career, and personal strength**.** He makes this linguistic choice to achieve success and to satisfy his identity achievement.

Bakhshi's identity and mind are shaped, developed, and transformed through interaction with society, culture, and symbolic systems like language, writing, and education. This idea, rooted in thinkers like Vygotsky (1986) and expanded by others like Anzaldúa (1999)**.** Although he did not face significant struggles with linguistic differences, he appears to reject a hybrid identity, choosing to align closely with English. Despite not fully mastering the language, as evidenced by his ongoing

efforts to improve, he affirms English as a central part of his identity and expresses a positive sense of belonging through this association.

3.1.2 Bakshi ‘s writing dis-comfort zone:

Bakhshi expresses a sense of frustration and anger when he feels the challenges that native English speakers do not face:

> English language is not our first language. Because English is not our first language, sometimes it might be hard, specifically to take the first step. You have some ideas in your mother tongue, but you cannot channel it into the target language. You see that, for example, there are some Scottish people here who are taking a PhD. They are just passing that effortlessly, and even though they don't have any problem with the accent of some of the university professors who are native here. So, I feel jealous of them, and I kind of feel at a disadvantage. And you know the most of them, they do not even bother to learn second language. That is something that I'm sometimes angry with. They just know English. How about the other languages? They are rolling. They are born with silver spoon in their mouth. They have advantage even though they don't speak a second language. (P05-INT6-p2)

Through this sharing, he feels a strong sense of injustice**,** noting that native speakers benefit from privileges without making comparable efforts to learn other languages. This suggests a conflict with the emotion he expresses above, in which he shows his excitement about transferring his thoughts into English. Observing native English

speakers' ease in academic success generates feelings of jealousy and more frustration for himself. This sense of being 'behind' others fuels a perception of unfairness and inequality in academic and social contexts. Using the term 'born with a silver spoon in their mouth' shows his discontent with the societal structure that seems to privilege native speakers. Bakhshi shows a strong critical awareness of the structural linguistic inequalities that seem to favour native English speakers. He holds a belief that success and ease in academia are not only based on talent but are partly products of systemic privilege.

Bakhshi's engagement with the world around him has shaped his consciousness in writing experience. His thoughts, reasoning abilities, self-awareness, and identity are formed through his interactions with 'native speakers'. Language, as a tool, becomes a bridge between the external social world and internal consciousness. He shows his engagement and observation with the world when he sees people "passing effortlessly and they don't have any problem with the accent of some of the university professors that are native here' Or some people 'do not even bother to learn second language." This process is not merely the absorption of information but the reshaping of how he thinks and feels about other people and himself. Consciousness is, therefore, a socially constructed and constantly evolving phenomenon. This consciousness seems to bring about his negative feelings towards other 'native speakers' who he sees as oppressors having advantages.

Furthermore, Bakhshi shares his experiences with his academic research writing:

> In your research writing, it is partly creative, but not much, because you have to follow some rules; you have to be careful about what you quote and what you write, and you have to include the reference. You need to write critically while you write. If I had the chance, I wouldn't follow any of these rules. As I told you, I love just freestyle writing. But as you're writing for, for the reader, the reader is academic there. You are restricted to what you're writing about. I have to just follow some rules. No question about that. We are following some rules for which we cannot find any specific reasons. Even the external supervisors might pay attention to, you know, some of the mechanics of writing, so much so that they do not pay that much attention to your findings. But they do care about the spelling mistakes, punctuation marks and stuff. I dislike it, definitely dislike it. But this is a part of academic writing and all almost all the journals to pay attention to that. (P05-INT5-p20)

There is a sense of frustration, a sense of being restricted, and dissatisfaction with the rigid rules of academic writing. He feels creatively restricted because according to him, academic writing demands rules, quoting, referencing, and formal mechanics, which he openly expresses that he dislikes. Although Bakhshi dislikes the rules, he recognizes that he has to adhere to them, as they align with the expectations of academic readers and journals. He also makes a complaint showing his critical awareness that his readers and academic journals frequently prioritise mechanical correctness over intellectual contributions. He expresses a desire for greater freedom and creativity, preferring a ‘freestyle’ approach to writing that allows for more personal and expressive communication. In a critical literacy study about text-

redesigning process among postgraduate students in South Africa by Mendelowitz and Govender (2024), one participant also shared similar frustration on the standard of Western academic practices and highlighted the rigid academic rules that dominate the ‘game’.

There is a sense of identity negotiation here when he expresses his frustration over the rigid rules of academic writing. According to Anzaldúa (1999), writing enables individuals to navigate and process the tensions and conflicts within a divided or dual consciousness. Writing should become a powerful tool for working through these tensions because it provides a structured space to articulate, explore, and reflect on conflicting parts of the self. However, Bakhshi seems to choose not to confront the contradictions and accept “I have to just follow some rules. No question about that.” By saying “If I had the chance, I wouldn't follow any of these rules”, he suggests he has no other options but has to conform to strict academic rules. Anzaldúa’s (1999) idea emphasises that writing allows individuals to actively engage with their fractured consciousness. However, Bakhshi seems to passively suffer the strict conventions of writing. This practice risks failing to survive and make sense of his bifurcated consciousness.

From a critical literacy perspective, the goal is not merely to bridge the two sides of his bifurcated consciousness (creative versus academic), but to make that tension visible, name it, and work within it (Vasquez et al., 2019)**.** Critical literacy does not aim to reconcile or smooth over contradictions; rather, it encourages individuals to read and write against dominant norms and question whose knowledge and voice are

privileged in academic discourse (Janks, 2010). A critical literacy approach would transform that passive awareness into critical consciousness**.**

When discussing how he feels towards the languages, he expresses a certain distance to writing in his first language, and is more connected to English due to work demands:

> *Question: So how do you feel the same powerfulness when you write in your own language?*
>
> Answer: It's hard to say really. It's really hard to say because I hardly wrote in Farsi. But I wrote a lot in English because it was a part of my job. I can say from since the age 18, I just wrote English, I wrote Farsi only when in some specific situation that I was asked to, for example, write a report. But as my job entails, they were mainly English (P06-INT6-p8,9)

He acknowledges that English is his primary language for professional writing. Since his job constantly requires using English, he has become more comfortable with it and consistently practices English writing. He has accepted English as his primary language for writing, even though this may imply a slight, unspoken regret about his relationship with his native language. There may be a subtle feeling of regret or loss for not having developed his Farsi writing skills more deeply. But writing in English seems to have become tied to his professional identity, not just a skill but a part of his daily working life. Bakhshi seems to refuse to engage with the tensions by staying distance to Farsi and close to English. He chooses stability over discomfort for academic acceptance and possibly a clearer sense of self.

3.1.3 Bakhshi's written diary

> I'm doing a Ph.D. on how to use funny and creative ways to teach English to people who come from different countries, especially those who have been through hard times and have bad memories. What makes my research special is that I act like a joker in the classroom, making everyone laugh and have fun. I think this helps people learn English better and feel happier. I want to show how humor and acting can make learning English easier and more enjoyable for everyone.
>
> You go to an English class where you can laugh and act with other people who came from different countries.
>
> That's what I'm studying for my Ph.D. I want to see how being funny and creative can help people learn English. I'm not just a student; I'm also the joker who makes everyone smile. We're changing the way we learn English, especially for those who have had bad experiences in their lives. Come with me on this amazing journey as we find out how jokes and plays can make learning English fun and easy.
>
> Social Media/News Teaser:
>
> Don't miss this chance to laugh and learn English language!

Bakhshi's choice to write in English aligns with his interview remarks, where he expresses a deliberate distancing from Farsi and a stronger sense of comfort and connection with English. His use of English as a medium for self-expression

indicates a shift in his linguistic identity, reflecting either a sense of belonging to, or aspiration toward Western norms. Even when given the freedom to write in his preferred style, his inner voice naturally gravitates toward English. This tendency suggests a conscious or subconscious distancing from his native culture. On the one hand, this may be attributed to his dominant exposure to English throughout the research process; on the other, it reflects his belief in the superiority of English and his tendency to regard Farsi as less appropriate for expressing his research. English is, therefore, to Bakhshi, a legitimate way of expressing academic voice. Bakhshi adopts a first-person personal stance ("I'm not just a student; I'm also the joker") that emphasises his dual role as both researcher and practitioner. The language is simple and accessible, showing that he enjoys self-narration. He naturally tells stories about his own experiences as a way to process and explain his research. Through storytelling, he is actively constructing his own identity as a researcher. He uses a personal narrative to ground his argument and make it authentic. His frequent employment of the first person 'I' shows that he wants to speak from his own experience rather than from an academic stance. This is a process of conscious self-instruction through external activity, according to Vygotsky (1986).

As expressed in the interview, Bakhshi prefers to use English as his primary language for academic writing, which is why he writes his diary in English. He explains that free writing enables him to operate at a higher cognitive level, facilitating deeper reflection and meaning-making. Dali et al. (2018) emphasise the role of creative writing in validating students' personal experiences and prior educational backgrounds and fostering the skill of meaningful, engaging storytelling.

This sense of comfort and fluency in writing allows him to actively construct and assert his academic identity. Consequently, in his diary, he adopts a personal narrative tone, not merely to present arguments but to articulate his lived experiences. This stylistic choice aligns with his preferred mode of expression and underscores his desire to engage with his research through a personal voice. Notably, this self-representation emerges not in his native language but deliberately in English, highlighting the linguistic dimension of his identity formation.

3.2 Lee's writing zone

3.2.1 Lee's discomfort zone of writing

Lee does not view writing as part of her comfort zone. Therefore, I will now turn to exploring why she experiences writing as an uncomfortable or even identity threatening space.

To Lee, writing takes a lot of effort and is time-consuming because of the mechanics of writing:

> Writing is boring sometimes. Because you try to write something free and then you find that the logic is not the best. The words are not the best choice, the sentence pattern is wrong, and the grammar is wrong, so you need to edit it. It's very time-consuming; if you write a very short paragraph, you need to spend maybe one or two hours adding to it or making it perfect. I don't like

> this feeling, like you need to edit it over and over again, and read one paragraph over and over again. (P01-INT5-p6)

Lee expresses frustration and exhaustion with the difficult, repetitive nature of editing and improving her writing. She is frustrated when her initial writing does not meet her own expectations for logic, word choice, sentence patterns, and grammar. Overall, Lee struggles to fully and accurately express her thoughts and feels that the language barrier or writing mechanics prevent her from communicating clearly. The writing process appears mentally frustrating to her.

Next, she discusses in detail the mechanical aspects of writing that she finds uncomfortable, including hedging, signposting, and maintaining reasonable sentence length:

> I don't like hedging. You know, sometimes you need to be ‘not that sure’ to say something in your academic writing. For example, you can't say that ‘it must be’ ,you need to say ‘it is more likely to’. You cannot make sure what you write is true. But, sometimes I just want to say that's what I think is right. But I cannot, And I cannot say ‘this is totally true’. (P01-INT5-p2)

Lee feels uncomfortable and conflicted about the academic requirement to hedge her claims and struggles with the pressure to sound uncertain even when she feels confident in her ideas. She experiences an inner conflict: on one hand, she wants to be honest and firm about what she thinks is right; on the other hand, she feels forced by academic norms to sound less certain.

The second aspect of writing that Lee is unfamiliar with is the use of signposting in academic writing:

> Signposting is also hard for me to get used to because in Chinese writing, I don't think we use lots of signposting. We don't use much signposting to let people know what I am going to talk about. We don't say, we just write. So in English writing, I think my supervisors always told me that you need to write some signposting. Uh, like in next section, I will talk about blah, blah blah. We don't need to point out which section I want to write next, but you can just read with my flow in Chinese writing. (P01-INT6-p2)

Signposting in academic writing refers to the use of phrases that guide the reader through the structure and direction of the argument, helping them understand what to expect next. Lee finds it hard to adjust to the English writing convention of using explicit signposting because it is not a common practice in Chinese writing. She is aware of the major differences between Chinese and English academic writing styles; especially how Chinese writing allows ideas to flow naturally without telling the reader what will come next. Therefore, using signposting feels unnatural to her. Liu and Huang (2021) also point out that rhetorical conventions valued in English expository writing are not inherently required in Chinese exposition, where ideas may be developed and organized through its own way.

Finally, Lee also struggles with maintaining suitable length of sentences in writing:

> I liked writing long sentences, where the very complex grammar, tried to show my writing ability. But my supervisors just commented that 'No. It's a very long sentence. Don't write like that.' And then I tried to change it. I tried to divide one long sentence to some sentences, to some short sentences to show clarity. Also, the I'm focused more on coherence of my writing. Now, I will try to use some words to link different sentences, different paragraphs, different sections. Yeah, I will do that consciously. (P01-INT5-p6)

She used to feel proud of her ability to write long, complex sentences as a way to showcase her writing skills and mastery of grammar. But then she felt disappointed and possibly frustrated when her supervisors criticised her long sentences, as it challenged her perception of good writing. This experience shows how linguistic error categorisation not only enforces normative standards but also shapes writers' emotional engagement and identity in academic contexts and potentially suppresses hybrid or creative literacies. However, she showed a positive willingness to change her writing style by dividing long sentences into shorter ones. Gradually, she shifted her attention toward improving coherence in her writing by 'consciously' linking sentences, paragraphs, and sections. She expresses a determined attitude to consciously apply these new techniques in her writing, suggesting a strong motivation to develop 'better' academic writing skills.

Lee's struggles in academic writing are in line with Anzaldúa' concept (1999). She sees consciousness as formed in and through tensions, contradictions, and marginal spaces, not by smoothing them out, but by living in them, struggling with them, and

giving them voice through practices like writing. Rather than resolving these tensions into a single, unified identity, Lee's consciousness comes from dwelling within these contradictions**,** navigating them, struggling through them, and finding ways to express them. Lee feels pressured at an English-speaking university to abandon the practices of her home language because they are seen as 'less academic'. At the same time, her cultural background, logical thinking and expressive writing are deeply tied to Chinese. Instead of simply choosing one identity between English and Chinese, she struggles to live between these languages' practice and develop richer and more complex awareness of her identity. However, Lee seems to choose to resolve the situation by forcing herself into a single and easy identity. She chooses to conform to strict English academic rules by saying, "Yeah, I will do that consciously." This statement shows that she has to think about it overtly, not naturally. Although this practice may enable her to navigate dominant academic English norms, it simultaneously risks erasing culturally grounded forms of logic and expression.

Lee shares her way of improving her academic writing by asking for proofreading:

> When I was doing my master's degree. I sent it to a native speaker to help me proofread my writing and correct some mistakes. Some feedback, but not very detailed… they are more like the whole logic, whole organization of your paper, or about your idea, but not about the sentence like grammar in sentences, not about vocabulary and sentences. But if they can add more feedback, I will be happier. I will be happier if they can do because my second supervisor is native speaker. So I want her to give me more detailed

> comments about my writing actually, so that I can write more. I can write better. (P01-INT5-p19)

Lee took initiative to improve her writing by having it proofread with the expectation of sentence-level feedback, especially in grammar and vocabulary. However, the feedback did not fully meet her needs. She believes that detailed corrections would help her to become a better writer. By saying “because my supervisor is a native speaker,” she made an implication that the standard of writing needs to be higher, and her reader(supervisor) would expect more of the mechanics of writing. Lee is not fully enacting critical literacy, though she’s demonstrating awareness of academic power relations. She accepts the hierarchy of linguistic legitimacy instead of challenging or negotiating it.

When talking about her experiences of Chinese writing, Lee describes an uncertain feeling:

> I'm not very confident with that. I'm not very good at that. Actually, because I don't write every day. So I don't write Chinese. For most of my time, I think so. I don't practice that. So if you want to me to write a Chinese poet or Chinese diary or Chinese article, I think it's hard. Actually, it's really hard for me to do that now. But I think if I returned back to China to live in China, I will be more familiar with that. But now, I write everything in English. (P01-INT5-p8)

Her sharing reflects self-doubt and disconnection with her Chinese language in writing. She openly admits “I’m not very confident” and “I’m not very good at that,” implying a clear uncertainty about her current ability to write in Chinese. She recognises that the lack of regular use of Chinese is a key reason for her difficulty. She feels distanced from her cultural and linguistic roots**.** She accepts her current situation by saying ‘now... I write everything in English,” suggesting adaptability to the English research practice and the dominance of it in this space and place.

The fact that Lee stays distant from Chinese and closer to English suggests a forced unity of identity. This could result in internalised oppression (Freire, 1987), as she may start to believe that her roots, languages, or traditions are unimportant or inferior to the dominant culture. The connection to her cultural and language identity is now suppressed. According to Anzaldúa (1999), achieving a whole ‘self’ requires embracing different parts despite conflict, longing, loss, and alienation. It can be argued that Lee is struggling to achieve her full identity, as shown in her writing.

When asked how her confidence could be strengthened, Lee attributes it to achieving publication:

> I think publications can help you to be famous in that area, and can help you to be more confident about your writings because you know, that you can publish so you're okay with academic writing. You're just like a get approved.(P01-INT5-p45)

Lee views publications as a means of gaining recognition, suggesting she wants to be known and respected within her academic field. She expresses a need for validation and implies that she needs external approval with self-assurance. Too Lee, getting published serves as confirmation that her writing meets academic standards. This implies a desire for reassurance to foster self-esteem and belonging that is validated by the academic community. Lee's perception of the importance of publication achievements suggests a fragile self in writing. She uses writing as a medium to make an attempt to engage with the academic community. Literacy is used here to foster a sense of acceptance and belonging.

Throughout our conversation, Lee repeatedly expressed how difficult and stressful writing is for her. As a result, I asked her at the end how she prefers to express herself when writing is not enjoyable for her. She responded:

> I, like, try to speak out my ideas with different people. And I also record a podcast with my friend. So sometimes I just try to speak it out. (P01-INT5-p39)

Lee values self-expression and finds spoken communication more natural and effective. Phrases like "I just try to speak it out" suggest a sense of relief and freedom when communicating verbally. She feels more empowered and authentic when speaking and prefers the methods that align with her strengths to share her ideas effectively. Lee's sharing has shown that writing is intertwined with other communicating activities. Treating writing as a standalone, technical skill risks overlooking the social processes through which academic knowledge is produced.

Lee does not see writing as a tool for more advanced cognitive activity (according to Vygotsky, 1978) or as a medium for survival and expression in a complex world *(*according to Anzaldúa, 1999). Therefore, writing is likely to lose its transformative power in Lee's process of constructing identity through writing. She might feel stuck without a way to narrate her traits of thinking and experience in her writing. Thus, Lee's identity can become rigid and silently conflicted in writing experiences rather than dynamic, evolving, and empowered.

3.2.2 Lee's written diary

科技改变生活，科技改变爱情。随着近十年约会软件的出现和流行，人们的恋 爱方式有了大幅转变。越来越多的年轻人开始使用约会软件交友、恋爱或找到 性伴侣。然而在过往文献中，很少有学者关注短暂性移民，尤其是留学生对于 约会软件的使用。作为接受中国传统文化教育以及在中国社会规范中长大的年 轻人，当他们来到异乡，约会软件对他们意味着什么？他们的使用体验是否会 被不同文化环境影响？中西方的约会以及性文化的碰撞是否创造出冲突？这些

问题都值得探索但还没有解决。我的博士论文将会探讨在英中国留学生的约会 软件使用体验，以更好地了解移民群体的亲密关系、科技、种族、性别之间的 相互关系和作用。

Translated version: (By Chat GPT – validated by participant)

Technology changes life; technology changes love.

With the emergence and popularity of dating apps over the past decade, the way people form romantic relationships has undergone a significant transformation. Increasingly, young people are using dating apps to make friends, find romantic partners, or connect with sexual partners. However, in existing literature, there has been little scholarly attention given to short-term migrants—particularly international students—and their use of dating apps. As young people who have grown up under the influence of traditional Chinese cultural education and social norms, what do dating apps mean to them when they move abroad? Are their experiences shaped by the different cultural environments they encounter? Do clashes between Chinese and Western dating and sexual cultures create conflicts? These are important questions that remain underexplored.

My PhD research will examine the experiences of Chinese international students in the UK using dating apps, aiming to better understand how intimacy, technology, race, and gender intersect and interact within migrant communities.

Lee's choice to write this diary in Chinese further highlights her distance from English writing and her preference for expressing herself in her mother tongue. This choice seems to be contradictory to the point she mentions earlier about her self-doubt in the ability to use Chinese. This letter might be the motivation for her to improve her skills in expressing in her mother tongue and wrote about her research in Chinese language. The diary activity offers an alternative space for expression through which participants can reflect on and reconfigure their understandings of academic language and practice.

As a researcher with limited proficiency in Chinese, I am unable to analyse the original text directly. Therefore, the following interpretation is based on the translated version, which may introduce some limitations in accuracy or nuance. Nonetheless, the participant has approved this version, and I can provide a thoughtful, informed analysis of Lee's voice and stance as reflected in this diary. Lee's voice is academic and analytical, showing that her writing style in general has been deeply affected by academic writing in her daily basis. Her writing style cannot be separated from the academic identity that she holds during this research process. Despite sounding academic, the text is still accessible and clear. It balances descriptive and analytical elements with the desire to attract readers. The use of rhetorical questions, "Are their experiences shaped by the different cultural environments they encounter?", "Do clashes between Chinese and Western dating and sexual cultures create conflicts?", suggests a reflective tone, drawing the reader into the complexity of the issue.

3.3 Discussion

3.3.1 Writing-Language: position of the oppressed and the oppressor

Both participants express a strong desire to raise their voices and share their concerns, fully aware of the significance of their research. They choose to do so through different media and modes of expression. These choices reflect how they position themselves and are positioned by others as either empowered or marginalised, depending on the language they adopt. In the following sections, I explore how they are differently positioned, highlighting the subtle nuances that emerge through their use of language.

As a zone of expressing voices, the act of writing is a tool for Bakhshi to express his identity with a humorous and comedic voice. Through two different languages, he is positioned differently in terms of power. Writing in English excites him. He embraces its conventions, grammar, and vocabulary as a stimulating challenge, describing English as both a ‘source of strength’ and a ‘source of power.’ This engagement fosters a sense of belonging, as he finds motivation and joy in striving to meet the expectations of English academic writing. However, this sense of empowerment is accompanied by conflicting emotions. Bakhshi expresses frustration and resentment when comparing his efforts to those of native speakers. He feels ‘angry,’ ‘jealous,’ and ‘at a disadvantage,’ perceiving native speakers as having a ‘silver spoon’. The contradiction reveals a deep tension. Although English writing

initially provides a liberating space for self-development and identity performance, it simultaneously becomes a site of marginalisation when he observes others 'pass effortlessly' without the same struggle.

On the other hand, Bakhshi expresses uncertainty about whether Farsi holds the same symbolic power as English. He does not feel empowered when writing in Farsi and feels a growing distance from the language. Although he identifies as a Farsi 'native speaker,' he does not associate this identity with the same 'prestigious' status afforded to native English speakers. Bakhshi seems to reject the identity of 'Farsi native speaker' in the hybrid identity to get out of the oppressed position.

For Lee, writing does not feel like a liberating act due to the constraints imposed by the mechanics and conventions of academic discourse in English. She prefers speaking as a form of self-expression because it offers fewer restrictions and greater immediacy. The rigidity of academic writing positions her as the oppressed within this system. This may risk becoming a form of internalised suppression, where her 'authentic self' remains hidden or diluted in written texts. Lee also experiences difficulty writing in Chinese, her mother tongue, which further disempowers her and distances her from a linguistic identity that might otherwise offer comfort and authority. In both cases, she is positioned as lacking power—both within the dominant academic discourse in English and in her heritage language. Moments of empowerment only arise when her work is supported by English 'native speakers' through proofreading, and when she expresses a strong desire to publish her work. These instances represent a form of imagined power, as her ideas are validated only when filtered through a voice that conforms to the academy, more often underpinned

by Western and monolingual academic norms. Her reliance on native-speaker proofreading can also be interpreted as a strategic adaptation within an unequal linguistic hierarchy requiring her to 'translate' her voice into the dominant discourse in order to gain recognition.

These accounts can be understood through several key dimensions of critical literacy, particularly in relation to power, identity, language, and agency. Writing, in this context, functions as a site where participants negotiate and perform their identities, reflecting critical literacy's emphasis on literacy as a socially situated practice. For Bakhshi, his engagement with English illustrates how literacy is deeply embedded within power structures. For Lee, her experiences foreground the constraints of academic writing as a regulated discourse that can suppress voice and agency, Together, these narratives demonstrate that critical literacy is not only about questioning texts, but also about navigating, negotiating, and at times reproducing the power relations embedded within language, identity, and knowledge production.

3.3.2 Tension for hybrid identities

The two participants' stories powerfully illustrate the tensions of identity hybridity among multilingual scholars navigating dominant academic spaces. Anzaldúa's (1999) notion of the 'borderlands' helps us see that identity hybridity is not neat or painless**.** It is a constant negotiation, translation, and blending of positions without fully belonging to either. To Bakhshi and Lee, the identity struggle is deeply shaped by linguistic hierarchies, emotional complexity, and structural power**.**

In this study, the participants' identity hybridity is not a straightforward split between two visible identity laminations, but rather a tension between an academically recognised one and an invisible suppressed one. Both participants appear to distance themselves from one aspect of their identity in an effort to gain acceptance within a more dominant group. However, Bakhshi expresses resentment and frustration, while Lee experiences suppression and a lack of confidence. Therefore, the pressure of conforming to dominant English academic discourse runs the danger of self-destruction as opposed to self-construction.

True hybridity should offer a space for negotiating and making sense of the self across multiple linguistic and cultural affiliations (Anzaldúa's, 1999). Even in its pain and discomfort, identity hybridity can remain a source of and even fuel creative expression. Hybridity, in this sense, must allow for contradiction, discomfort, and growth, acknowledging the emotional and political complexities of living between languages and identities. However, the two participants seem to fail to do so. Critical literacy in these two cases emerges as a potential or aspirational practice, visible in reflection, negotiation, and subtle interventions, but it is constrained by academic, cultural, and emotional factors**.** By writing their research in their own way in the diary entry, the participants had space to express their more authentic voice and emotion about their research. This finding suggests activities underpinned by critical literacy can help the international multilingual doctoral students to navigate a true hybrid identity. Participants still seem to be navigating a borderland where hybridity, identity, and emerging agency intersect. The tension usually favours the academy,

with students adapting strategically to safeguard their academic progress. These structural power dynamics shape my participants' experiences in UK higher education. It shows that international doctoral students often have to prioritise compliance with institutional norms over personal or cultural expression. In my research context, this explains why participants may not be able to fully enact critical literacy. This understanding also situates my study in a broader postcolonial and decolonial framework. This insight supports my analysis of identity hybridity, linguistic negotiation, and the emotional labour of academic writing.

Lee abandons her authentic voice to write what is approved. Her academic journey becomes not only a striving symbol of success but also a space of loss of authentic self. Bakhshi has a conflict between his aspiration for English and an inadequate awareness of what he is not and what he believes he lacks. While this may bring surface-level inclusion, it breaks the self, deepens insecurity, and maintains marginalisation. Inside, they experience shame, loss, or disconnection from parts of themselves.

These findings point to the politics of translation as a significant issue in UK higher education, particularly for academic literacy development and the formation of researchers among international multilingual students. While institutions often expect students' ideas, voices, and experiences to be translated into dominant academic English norms, such translation practices are not neutral; they can obscure emotional labor, suppress linguistic and epistemic diversity, and constrain the development of hybrid researcher identities. Creating spaces where multilingual students can

experiment with multiple voices, genres, and languages has the potential to reframe translation as something other than assimilation into a single academic voice. In this way, translation can work to nurture more sustainable and equitable researcher identities by valuing hybrid voices rather than requiring them to be reshaped to fit pre-existing norms.

4 'Small narratives' in writing practices

In this chapter, I present and analyse stories from interview weeks 6 and 7 from 2 case analyses: Chan (P02) and Lim (P04). The interview data focus on their perspectives of academic writing and writing practices. I conduct critical narrative analysis to draw out the main narratives showcasing their different stories that hold together multiple experiences. My analysis is further informed by the theory of identity as narrative and identity as position (Moje & Luke, 2009). Specifically, in this chapter, I focus on 'small narratives' that help my participants shape meaning, establish continuity, and articulate values, struggles, and aspirations. Adapting and extending this concept further, I explain the discomfort and conflicts that the minoritised academics feel and the shift in their mindset in an attempt to create their own space for their unique voice in their small narratives.

Identity as narrative refers to the way individuals construct meaning about who they are by telling stories that connect their past, present, and imagined future (Moje & Luke, 2009). These narratives can be 'big stories' with a clear structure or 'small stories' that emerge in everyday conversation, both shaping and reflecting the self

over time (Moje & Luke, 2009, p.427). Identity as position focuses on how individuals locate themselves in relation to power, discourse, and social roles in interaction, how they are positioned by others and how they position themselves within institutional and societal contexts (Moje & Luke, 2009). Identity as position complements identity as narrative by grounding stories in social interaction, offering insight into how people's self-narratives are shaped by the roles, expectations, and constraints they navigate.

When combined, these frameworks enable a richer analysis that captures both how individuals make meaning of their experiences (narrative) and how they manage their social and discursive positioning (position). This dual lens is especially valuable in academic contexts, where participants often grapple with tensions between personal expression and institutional norms. It helps researchers uncover not just what people say about themselves, but how their identities are shaped and constrained by the broader structures they move within.

Both Chan and Lim, nearing the final stages of their PhD journeys, have accumulated extensive and diverse writing experiences. They are both from different Asian countries and are writing their research in the UK. Therefore, there are many clashes and conflicts in their ongoing formation of research identity. In addition, this chapter focuses specifically on 'small stories', which Chan and Lim have an abundance of due to their rich experience of engaging in writing for different audiences and different platforms. These stories illuminate their specific struggles and the identity-protective strategies they have developed over four to five years of doctoral study.

By centring on Chan and Lim, this chapter offers nuanced insights into the lived realities of international PhD students that are often overlooked or undervalued within institutional discourses.

In this analysis, I focus on 3 main topics: 1. How do you interpret the view that 'Academic prose is dry and personal'? 2. How 'personal' are you in your academic writing? 3. Writing for a social media audience.

4.1 Lim

Firstly, Lim gives her observation about academic texts that she has read and her opinion about "Academic prose is dry and impersonal":

> I don't know why that's the trend('Academic is dry and impersonal'). You know, when people publish, it's not just a matter of showing what you find in your studies, not just a matter of sharing the knowledge. It's also about adding up to your CV and boosting about the number of publications, so you do it in a manner that you tend to use big words to make yourself sound more important. Researchers sometimes talk about abstract things. They talk about theory. Those things don't make sense to us teachers. (P04-INT6-p3)

Lim expresses frustration and a disconnect with academic writing style and culture**.** She seems to be critiquing how academic work, particularly research publications, often becomes dry, impersonal, and overly complex. According to her, academic writing in general focuses more on impressing others or building a professional

profile than on clear and meaningful communication, which is on performative level**.** By using the word 'trend', she describes this as widespread and growing pattern to write and publish in a dry, impersonal, and overly formal way. She feels that using the abstract language and big theoretical terms makes she feels distanced from this kind of discourse.

Lim desires for more authentic, accessible, and relevant academic communication**:**

> I feel like if you want your work to be more accessible, you write it in a practitioner-friendly term. I think it takes guts to go against uh the current. Not all academicians have the talent to capture the audience. Not everyone has talent to present it in a in an attractive way. We look for tangibility, things that we can apply right away. (P04-INT6-p3)

Lim believes academic work should be written in a way that is more understandable and applicable to practitioners. By saying "it takes guts to go against the current," she acknowledges that writing accessibly in academia can be risky or frowned upon. She appears critical of the traditional, often inaccessible, academic writing style. Her critique, therefore, reflects a tension between knowledge for practice and knowledge for prestige in academia. Lim's critique also reflects resistance to the assumption that complexity and obscurity are markers of intellectual value. This stance aligns with critical literacy perspectives that question whose interests are served by opaque academic language and who is excluded by it. Writing accessibly allows her to remain accountable to practitioner communities and to herself.

Lim defines her identity in opposition to the academic norm through her narrative. By contrasting ‘us teachers’ with ‘researchers’, she draws a clear line between two different groups. In her narrative, she positions herself as a practitioner doing research rather than a ‘practitioner-researcher’. She acknowledges the power of the complexity of academic discourse, which she distances herself from it. She sees it as being fixed and made solid, which she believes results from the divide between researchers and practitioners. She also expresses a collective positioning by using ‘we teachers’ to build solidarity among people whom she believes can communicate more simply and effectively. Interestingly, despite seeing herself as a part of the teacher-reader community, she sets herself apart from researchers/academicians. She has also established her agency as a non-academic practice that values clear and authentic communication.

This is a narrative created by her, offering a space for self-expression and reflection. Through it, she represents both herself and others in her own terms, shaping her sense of agency. I then invite her to discuss how she incorporates personal experience into her academic writing, thereby revealing an alternative narrative of reality.

Lim shares her practice of academic writing:

> I use personal reflection. Even though my supervisor said personal anecdotes should not be included in academic writings, but I feel like personal anecdotes will strengthen the evidence of my rationale doing the study. I want my fellow teachers to read my thesis. Before I tried to sound as academic as

> possible. You know, I would change the simplest of sentence and then I will use Quill bot and to make it sound really important and serious. To paraphrase, I found that when I use chat GPT to phrase my sentences into a more academic tone, they don't sound like me, it sounds so fake. It sounds so serious. It sounds like it's written by a professor. it's not me. So I use my own words now. (P04-INT7-p5)

Lim's account offers a narrative of how she mobilises a personal writing approach within academic contexts. In describing her writing practices, Lim emphasises the value of personal anecdotes and reflective commentary. Her comments suggest a strong commitment to relational, accessible, and experience-based forms of knowledge, which she consistently aligns with a clearly identified readership, 'teacher-practitioners,' a group to which she belongs. This positioning becomes particularly salient in her reflections on supervisory advice. Lim describes consciously resisting recommendations to remove personal elements from her writing. Her attempt to imitate conventional academic styles using online tools further highlights this tension; however, she characterises the resulting text as inauthentic and unrepresentative of her own voice. The concluding part of her narrative marks a turning point, as she articulates a decision to reclaim her own voice in her academic writing "I use my own word now." This moment can be read as an act of empowerment and identity assertion, in which she chooses to write more closely aligned with her lived experience and professional values.

Viewed through a critical literacy lens, Lim's narrative illustrates a process of being re-positioned and re-positioning. While supervisory feedback and institutional norms attempt to re-position her as a compliant academic writer, Lim actively evaluates, negotiates, and ultimately resists these pressures. Her account thus becomes a story of voice reclamation, in which she creates space for an academic voice grounded in practice, reflection, and authenticity. This matters because it challenges deficit-oriented assumptions that personal or practitioner-oriented writing is incompatible with academic legitimacy, and instead highlights how doctoral writers can exercise agency to shape knowledge meaningful to their communities.

Lim's attentiveness to the audience further reinforces this agentive positioning. Seeking a deeper understanding, I request Lim to elaborate on her methods of engaging with online platforms. This shift opens new narrative spaces and allows more of her stories to emerge through this expanded mode of expression.

She seems to be more reserved in terms of this practice of writing:

> I have impostor syndrome. I feel like I'm not good enough to post anything… I feel like what if I say something and that's grammatical mistake? Oh, what if I say something dumb? What if I share something about my research and it's wrong? It's factually wrong. Let me just do it quietly in my thesis. This is just the examiner read it. (P04-INT7-p13)

These statements suggest that she views her thesis as a private space, where she can be less exposed, with an eventual but very limited audience: "let the examiner read

it.” This moment reveals the emotional weight that accompanies academic knowledge production, particularly the fear of being publicly exposed as inadequate or incorrect. Language plays a significant role here. Her concern about making ‘a grammatical mistake’ highlights how linguistic insecurity, as a multilingual researcher, intersects with academic expectations of clarity, correctness, and credibility. In this way, impostor syndrome is not merely a personal deficit, but a socially produced condition shaped by institutional norms, linguistic hierarchies, and the rigid boundaries of what is considered legitimate academic expression (Kubota, 2020). This story portrays fear of judgment and social exposure, particularly within academic norms and expectations. The self-narrative is in conflict, revealing identity as dynamic and shaped by internal negotiations.

Lim then mentioned her past story:

> I shared a lot of my stuff on Facebook. I have a large followers on Facebook. When I was teaching, I was sharing all the daily activities. They are teachers and parents. I have 40,000 followers. I created the page in 2015. Mostly Malaysians. Strictly Malaysian. That's when I feel confident to say anything. They will listen to me. I don't expect the whole country to be moved by my project or the whole country to be impressed. (P04-INT7-p5)

She reveals a strong sense of confidence, connection, and purpose rooted in her online identity and audience on Facebook platform in the past**.** With 40,000 followers (primarily Malaysian teachers and parents), she held influence and credibility within an online community. Therefore, her confidence stemmed not from

academia, but from being heard and valued by her own audience as a practitioner. Lim used it as a space to document and share her educational practice. Her practice was shaped by a community that validates her experiences, voice, and knowledge. In addition, by emphasising *'*strictly Malaysian*',* she asserts a geographically and culturally grounded identity**.** These experiences can be understood as a significant resource for Lim's research development, rather than as something external or in tension with academic work. Lim's established practice of writing for a clearly defined, responsive audience demonstrates rhetorical awareness, authorial confidence, and a strong sense of purpose, capacities that could meaningfully inform her academic writing. Rather than requiring Lim to suppress or translate these literacies into detached academic norms, institutional practice has the potential to recognise and build on them. In this way, her prior online writing practices highlight how researcher development can draw on existing literacies and identities and challenge deficit assumptions about what counts as legitimate academic voice.

Identity-as-narrative views identity as something people construct through the stories they tell about themselves, shaped over time (Wortham, 2001, as cited in Moje & Luke, 2009). Lim recounts her past as a time of confidence and strong public presence**.** In present, she grounds herself in humble expectations, distancing herself from grand outcomes: "*I don't expect the whole country to be impressed."*

I explore the reason behind her humble statement:

> Malaysian government… do you know the society today… in general seem to have this singular thinking mind, binary thinking, right and wrong, black and

> white. There's ‘no’ in between. It appears to be divided. There is no room for discussion or there's no room for acceptance. Like if you're different, then you're wrong. (P04-INT6-p15)

As a multilingual and multicultural researcher, Lim demonstrates a sharp awareness of how her voice is shaped and constrained by the sociocultural context in which she lives and writes. With a large Malaysian following on Facebook, she has cultivated a strong practitioner-based presence, where her experiences as a teacher and researcher are received with interest and trust. Yet, despite this digital confidence, she voices a deeper concern about the broader societal climate in Malaysian society. Her critique reveals a layered tension between her desire to engage in reflective discourse and the cultural pressure to conform to rigid binaries. Interestingly, despite her awareness and attention to binaries as problematic, she has stated and re-asserted the researcher-practitioner binary in her own context.

The lack of ‘room for discussion or acceptance’ signals the emotional and intellectual costs of being perceived as ‘different’, especially when academic expression intersects with public engagement. Her experience highlights the position of multilingual researchers who seek to assert their voices beyond academic conventions yet must navigate sociopolitical landscapes in which diversity in thought and language is not always welcomed. In this way, her narrative illustrates the complex interplay between digital agency, cultural constraint, and the pursuit of intellectual authenticity through academic literacy practices. This analysis, based on the theory of identity as narrative and identity as position, shows how identity

evolves across time and in relation to audiences, platforms, and cultural norms**.** Lim's stories show different transitions in identity perception shaped within social contexts.

4.2 Chan

First, Chan is asked whether he considers academic prose dry and impersonal. He shares different opinions from Lim's:

> I don't really think so (academic is dry and impersonal) because I think we have our own way of showing our emotion, but it's just a more covert way of showing our emotion, right. So, more implicit right? I don't really think it's dry because it's a very difficult thing to write a PhD thesis. We need to think a lot. It's a very interesting mental game, right? Uh, dry emotion but not dry in the intelligence. (P02-INT6-p2)

By saying *"*it's just a more covert way," he suggests that academic writing does not lack emotion. It simply communicates emotion implicitly, through intellectual effort rather than through overt personal expression. By describing it as a *'*very interesting mental game'*,* he sees the process of crafting a thesis as cognitively stimulating and emotionally engaging**,** even if not outwardly expressive. He distinguishes between emotional dryness**,** which he seems to partly agree with, and intellectual depth. He argues that PhD writing may appear emotionally restrained but is rich in thought and meaning**.** Chan's sharing is reflective, which indicates a mature narrative identity. It has been formed through experience, now offering counterclaims based on personal

insight. He positions academic writers as emotionally aware and intellectually thinkers**.**

This narrative, created by Chan, offers a space for self-expression and reflection. I then invite him to share how he brings personal experience into his academic writing, which reveals a seemingly opposite narrative of reality.

> You know, I want to be sarcastic in my own writing, but my supervisor, they forbidden me. (Because) It's not that academic. So I would avoid writing that way. I sound like I'm a machine, right? I'm like a writing machine and I need to follow a series of orders. (P02-INT3-p3)

By using sarcasm as a rhetorical strategy, he aims to add humor or personality into his academic work. However, in this story, a new figure emerges to 'forbid' him to use his own expressions. His supervisor acts as a gatekeeper of academic norms in his narrative. His acknowledgement of sounding like a 'machine' and 'need to follow a series of orders' implies mechanical and rigid aspects of academic writing. The metaphor of being a 'writing machine' illustrates how power structures in academia influence who has the right to speak, in what manner, and on whose behalf.

However, he confirms his personal characteristics in writing still shine through:

> 'I think it (my writing) is quite personal because I'm describing and analysing some unique phenomenon in China and new form of masculinity in China that not so many scholars has been discussed before. I think it's quite personal

> and I can show my opinions, understanding and critics in my thesis. It's our own thesis, right, we have the right to be personal. (P02-INT6-p4)

Highlighting his topic, which is under-researched, suggests a sense of pride in breaking new ground and contributing something unique to academic discourse. Chan demonstrates a strong intellectual investment in his research topic. By saying "It's our own thesis. We have the right to be personal," he is claiming his authorial agency**.** He believes that being personal is valid when writing about culturally specific phenomena. His stance challenges the notion that academic writing is distanced or impersonal. He embraces a situated and reflexive scholarly position, grounded in cultural insight and informed critique. His confidence here in this story reflects a reclaiming of academic space.

However, he appears to hold conflicting views when asked about the importance of personal elements in academic publishing.

> *Question: How important do you feel about the roles of being personal, the roles of narrative and in academic publishing?*
>
> Answer: I think it's not important at this stage because my supervisor and I have a paper in the review stage of a journal. So for me, as long as this paper can be published, I can do anything. You can ask me to be personal, emotional or nonpersonal, non-emotional. I can do anything. My supervisor or your supervisor, I think maybe after they published so many things they can have the power to decide. The way I want to express myself, right?

> Whether I want to be emotional or personal. By this stage, I'm just a rookie in academia. (P02-INT6-p11)

Chan appears to emphasise that publication is his primary goal at present. Whether the writing is personal or impersonal, emotional or detached, is secondary to meeting the expectations of reviewers and journals**.** The phrase "I can do anything" indicates a readiness to adapt and write in any style necessary to gain academic credibility. Expression is treated as something negotiable. By saying *"*after they published so many things they can have the power to decide," he implies that academic freedom and voice are earned over time**,** through experience, recognition, and publication history.

Chan's identity is formed through the evolving stories across past, present, and future. He begins with a belief in academic writing as implicitly emotional and intellectually engaging. He navigates his current position with a pragmatic mindset**,** willing to suppress personal voice in co-authored journal articles for publication. However, in his thesis, he retains ownership and claims the right to be personal**,** especially when working on original content. He imagines a future where, after publishing extensively, he will gain the power to express himself more freely. He expresses a desire to eventually reposition himself like an experienced academic who can choose when and how to be emotional or personal**.**

Chan appears to hold mixed views on including a personal voice in his thesis. Building on this, I encourage him to talk about his practice of engaging with online

platforms. This change creates fresh narrative opportunities and enables more of his stories to surface through this broader form of expression.

Firstly, he does not seem to be positive and confident about this medium to talk about his research:

> I don't think I'm the kind of people who like to, you know, post things online, especially regarding my topic, which is about gender. It's very sensitive and you are already seeing how people criticise feminism and how people say you are supported by Western countries. It's very difficult question for me. And maybe if one day, you know, uh, I am, uh, a very famous and very important professor in this area. I definitely will post things online and get involved in the heated discussion of this topic because I have more power and I can at least avoid being hurt by other people. And people will agree with me. Now I'm just research student. Maybe they were saying, you are just research student. Especially since you studied in the UK, you are definitely manipulated by the British Government. But if I can become famous and successful in a Chinese university, people will show some respect and they will at least, even though they still hate you. (P02-INT7-p9)

Chan implies a protective strategy in response to the highly politicised and hostile environment around gender discourse, especially in his cultural context. The phrase ‘manipulated by the British government’ reveals deep anxiety about political misinterpretation and social rejection**.** This narrative captures the complex interplay between voice, vulnerability, and power for multilingual doctoral researchers

engaging with politically sensitive topics. He seems to face a dilemma: his research is important and personal, yet public expression is caught within political risk. In this view, academic voice is a deeply political and cultural negotiation**.** Being 'just a student' makes him feel the lack of credibility and authority, which affects his ability to raise his voice on online platforms. Recognising his vulnerability as a student and emerging researcher helps him identify and play the long 'academic game'. Rather than treating academic writing as a neutral or purely technical skill, he understands it as part of a broader 'academic game' governed by implicit norms, expectations, and power relations. In this sense, his literacy practice is not simply about following rules but about navigating power with intention.

Chan expresses a preference in writing for academic:

> I aim to contribute to this area by publishing in academic journals. People who read my paper are normally also well-educated and at least they know something about the masculinity. So, it's the relatively, let's say, comfort zone for me. (P02-INT7-p10)

He demonstrates a preference for formal, peer-reviewed academic spaces over public platforms. He targets an informed audience likely to understand the theoretical nuances and not to react emotionally or ideologically**.**

In the end, he still reveals his desire to publish on an online platform:

> Although I said I don't like to comment or post anything, I had thought so many times about my first post online, an academic video to introduce this in

> my research in England. First thing is definitely the concept of hegemonic masculinity but still it's too sensitive, hegemonic masculinity, somebody might already be angry. So that's I'm very hesitate, but if I can, firstly I want to introduce what is hegemonic masculinity and why is important to the current social inequality, especially gender inequality. I think I aim to any young people who want to click this video and who want to watch this video, and maybe some other scholars' (P02-INT7-p17,18)

Although he previously states that he does not like posting online, he admits that he has considered making a video about his research. This desire suggests an underlying motivation to make his work more accessible and impactful. He wants to introduce hegemonic masculinity but recognises that even naming it might provoke negative reactions**,** particularly in certain sociocultural or political contexts. He understands that social justice work is risky work which requires considering our own vulnerabilities (Zembylas, 2022). He aims to engage young people and scholars, possibly to educate them and raise awareness about how hegemonic masculinity connects to broader issues like gender inequality.

Chan's narratives about online space have been a mixture of present and future. He narrates his current self as vulnerable and unestablished, and therefore strategically silent in a complex, sometimes hostile social and institutional environment. He positions himself as someone without current social or institutional power*: "*just a research student studied in the UK, definitely manipulated by the British Government." He projects a future version of himself as a 'very famous and

important professor' with enough power and legitimacy to enter controversial public discussions.

4.3 Discussion

In this discussion, I want to focus on the idea of 'big stories' and 'small stories' and how 'small stories' can help us to unpack the complex navigation of these multilingual researchers. Moje and Luke (2009) mention the concept of 'big stories' and 'small stories' by Georgakopoulou (2007). Big stories are extended, structured, and reflective narratives (like life stories or autobiographies) that present a coherent view of the self, often told in formal or retrospective settings. Small stories, in contrast, are brief, fragmented, and interactional narratives told in everyday conversations that reveal how people actively position and construct their identities in the moment. The concepts of 'big stories and small stories' resonate with the concepts of 'little-p and big-P politics'. Foundational critical literacy scholarship, particularly the work of Paulo Freire (1970), Allan Luke (2012), and Hilary Janks (2010), provides a coherent framework for understanding literacy within 'Big-P' and 'little-p' politics. Freire (1970) establishes the foundational premise that literacy is inherently political, foregrounding 'Big-P' Politics through his critique of structural oppression, institutional power, and colonial domination, while also emphasising that political struggle is enacted through everyday acts of reading and writing. Building on this foundation, Luke (2012) makes the relationship between macro and micro power explicit by showing how institutional policies and curricular regimes shape literacy practices, even as these structures are enacted, negotiated, and sometimes

resisted through routine literacy activities. Janks (2010) further synthesises these perspectives through her framework of power, access, diversity, and design, demonstrating how 'Big-P' structures both enable and constrain 'small-p' acts of meaning-making, and how individuals enact agency through textual design choices that may reproduce or challenge dominant discourses.

In this chapter, 'Big-P' and 'little-p' concepts help to present and analyse different 'small stories' in different moments of writing. Therefore, instead of calling the theory as 'identity as narrative', I would call it 'identify as small narratives' in this chapter. Lim's 'small stories' show different transitions in identity perception shaped within social contexts. Chan's 'small stories' is reflective, which indicates a mature narrative identity**.**

'Big stories' are the widely accepted. They are coherent narratives often gathered in formal modes of expression. They tend to follow a traditional plot structure (beginning-middle-end) and are seen as major reflections of a person's identity. In the context of this research, 'big stories' are embodied in PhD theses, which follow a structured format that includes problem identification, data analysis, and proposed solutions. Lim's 'big stories' focus on identifying English learning and teaching issues, investigating the use of wordless picture books to teach English, and suggesting a more critical and creative approach toward language teaching in Malaysia. Chan's 'big stories' focus on masculinity problems among Chinese men and try to introduce the concept of hegemonic masculinity to address gender equality. These 'big stories' are legible and recognisable within the academic

community and visible to supervisors and aligned with disciplinary expectations. This counts as ‘Big-P’ Politics because it describes how institutionally narratives of knowledge and identity are produced, recognised, and legitimised within academia**.** While such narratives are readily accepted in academic circles, they often obscure the nuanced and complex processes through which beliefs are formed. It sets up a contrast with **‘**small-p’ politics, where alternative, fragmented, affective, or multilingual stories may emerge in interviews, diaries, or informal writing spaces but remain less visible or valued in formal academic texts.

‘Small stories’ are short, fragmented everyday narratives that typically appear in casual conversations, similar to anecdotes. They may not follow a neat structure but still reveal important aspects of how people construct their identities.

Georgakopoulou (2006, cited in Moje & Luke, 2009) also refers to ‘small stories’ as ‘narratives-in-interaction’ to emphasize that they are situated within social activity and dialogue**.** The ‘small stories’ occur while people are engaged in activities, not necessarily in reflective or formal storytelling contexts. In this study, ‘small stories’ are the narratives that the participants talked about themselves and others. Their identity is formed through the evolving ‘small stories’ across past, present, and future. In Lim’s small narratives, she acknowledges the power of the complexity of academic discourse, which she distances herself from. Through small narratives, she represents both herself and others on her own terms, thereby shaping her sense of agency. The small self-narratives are in conflict and reveals the process of being re-positioned and re-positioning of Lim. Chan’s small narratives have been a mixture of

present and future. He narrates his current self as vulnerable and unestablished, and projects a future version of himself as a 'very famous and important professor' with enough power and legitimacy. Instead of focusing on big and structured stories, these 'small stories' are constructed through moments of writing on different platforms and for different audiences, in different cultural and linguistic contexts. These stories are performative as they are positioning themselves in real-time, in relation to others, norms, and social contexts. These observations count as 'small-p' politics because they focus on everyday, situated acts of meaning-making through which identity, agency, and power are negotiated in real time, rather than on institutionally authorised narratives. These small stories are a performative process of being re-positioned and re-positioning is a hallmark of small-p politics. Power, thus, is not only something imposed from institutional rules and regulations, but something negotiated through everyday communicative acts.

Multilingual researcher's identity is not only made through long and reflective piece of thesis but also shaped through **'**small stories' people tell as they engage in different research activities. These small stories, despite seeming to be often overlooked, are full of meaning. They happen in real-time engagement reflecting past, present and future identity and help the researchers position themselves in social contexts.

The analysis through the lens of identity as small narratives and position helps us see how the participants' personal insecurities are situated within external expectations, norms, and power relations in academia. Understanding this is key to creating more

inclusive academic cultures that validate diverse voices and experiences. They both assert that doctoral research is not just about conforming to conventions, but about authentically contributing to knowledge from within their cultural, linguistic, and intellectual standpoint. Their statement invites critical reflection on whose voices are valid I research and whose voices are understood to produce 'valid research' and how institutional expectations may overlook or flatten the complex identities of doctoral writers**.**

5. Unpacking writers' positions through writing

The preceding chapters have examined the complex, layered journeys of participants' research experiences through interviews and diary entries, providing spaces for reflection, meaning-making, and the articulation of nuanced, often ambivalent thoughts about academic literacy and identity. Building on these insights, this chapter shifts attention to how participants' identities are enacted through formal English academic writing. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the diverse rhetorical choices adopted by multilingual writers for voice in relation to their identities. My interest lies in identifying linguistic choices emerging from academic essays of novice and established multilingual writers and exploring the thoughts behind every act of linguistic repertoire.

Before I began data collection, all participants were asked to submit their favourite academic writing from their PhD research. Table 4.2 presents a summary of the writings that were submitted to me.

Table 4.2: *Summary of participants' written texts*

Participant	Topic	Type of text	Word count
Lim	The use of picture book in English	Literature review	5469
Bakhshi	Trauma-informed approach in English teaching for refugees	Literature review	16267
Pham	A comparative analysis of US and EU approaches to Efficiency Considerations in Merger Control	Research proposal	9698
Chan	Chinese hegemonic masculinities	Research proposal	5231
Kumar	Exploring migrant learner identity in the Scotting ESOL context	Research proposal	14342
Lee	The use of dating apps among international students in the UK	Literature review	1654

Huang	Investigating Global Citizenship Education in Taiwanese context	Research proposal	2902

In this subchapter, I employ a critical discourse analysis approach using corpus analysis to inform identity construction. I examine high-frequency content and non-content words to identify key themes and features to reflect the participants' 'rhetorical identity' (Hyland, 2010, p.167). Since I already know about my participants' research topic and area, I decide to focus more on non-content words to explore their writing identity.

To identify the most frequent use of non-content words in my participants' academic writing, I used LancsBox software. I first imported all their writing samples into the software to create a corpus. Then, I used the frequency tool to generate a frequency list for the entire corpus for each participant. Finally, I sorted the list by frequency to identify which non-content words appeared most often and to explore patterns in their academic writing style.

Because I cannot discuss every writing sample from all six participants within the limited space, I present the findings organised around three criteria: the most common linguistic devices across all samples; the devices participants commented on most; and the linguistic features not used for their intended purposes.

The applied linguistic field is highly interpretive with many case studies describing individuals' strategies in writing (Canagarajah, 2022; Hyland, 2010; Wu & Buripakdi, 2021). In this research, I conduct a discourse analysis of the written text and also position these writers at the centre to 'talk around the text' during the subsequent interview, enabling a more in-depth analysis. Therefore, the interview data from week 8, in which participants were asked to discuss and comment on their writing choices, are also used in this subchapter. I marshal Ivanič's (1998) method of talk around text to complement my data collection and analysis. Talk around texts involves discussion between the researcher and the writer-participant about a text that the writer is writing or has written. This talk focuses on specific language use, such as vocabulary, grammar, or particular pronouns, that relate to their life and language histories. In Ivanič's (1998) focus on writing, this encourages exploring the writer's perspectives, including the 'taken for granted' conventions.

The theoretical framework guiding my analysis is Moje and Luke's (2009) examination of the metaphor of identity and literacy: viewing identity as a position that underpins each act within the linguistic repertoire.

This section examines four rhetorical devices: hedges and boosters, attitude markers, first-person pronouns, and the use of non-English language. These features appeared most prominently in participants' writing and were most often mentioned in their reflections. For each device, selected cases illustrate how participants employed these strategies in their texts, followed by insights from interview data that reveal their underlying intentions and reflections.

5.1 Hedges and Boosters

Hedges

Hedges and boosters are two devices with opposite functions in academic writing. While hedges help writers to express caution and reduce their certainty towards their claims, boosters imply writers' confidence in their arguments. Across the participants' written texts, hedges and boosters are frequently employed. In this strategy, I present examples from the writings of Lim, Pham, and Chan.

The participants demonstrate awareness of the use of hedges in their academic writing, particularly in Lim's writing. She often uses hedges in her writing to avoid making direct claims. Modal verb 'can' is used 20 times and in the her 35 keywords. Similarly, Pham uses the word 'can' 70 times, which was in his 20 keywords. Both Lim and Pham demonstrate a strong awareness of academic conventions through their strategic use of hedging. Their frequent use of modal verbs such as '*can'* suggests a deliberate attempt to present claims cautiously, aligning with expectations of tentativeness in academic discourse. For Lim, this reflects an effort to position herself as a careful and credible scholar within the norms of English academic writing. Pham's even higher frequency of hedging indicates a similar orientation toward conformity with dominant academic standards, possibly as a means of negotiating linguistic and epistemic authority as a non-native English writer.

This pattern of hedging through modal verbs can be understood as a manifestation of critical literacy in relation to power, discourse, and identity positioning. The participants' strategic use of hedges and boosters illustrates how power and identity are enacted discursively through academic writing practices. By employing modal verbs such as "can" to construct cautious and tentative claims, Lim and Pham align themselves with dominant norms of English academic discourse, positioning themselves as credible and legitimate scholars. This repeated linguistic positioning reflects how authority is not inherent but produced through conformity to institutional expectations, particularly for non-native English writers negotiating epistemic power within unequal linguistic hierarchies. From a critical literacy perspective, academic writing is not a neutral form of communication but a socially regulated practice shaped by dominant epistemological norms (Janks, 2000). The participants' use of tentativeness reflects their awareness of these norms and their attempt to align with expectations of credibility and authority within English academic discourse. It also reveals the operation of power, as these linguistic choices are not entirely free but shaped by implicit expectations that privilege certain ways of knowing and expressing knowledge

Below are typical examples:

Example: From Lim's research proposal:

> Picturebooks used in language learning classrooms, along with follow-up activities that emphasise the contextual aspect of language learning, *can* be considered stimulus material.

Example : From Pham's research proposal:

> Sound competition law and policy acknowledge that merger efficiencies *can* enhance the merged entity's ability and incentive to compete and ultimately benefit consumers through lower prices, improved quality, enhanced service, or new products.

Furthermore, modal verbs 'may' and 'might' are used 17 times in Lim's cautious statements and are found 34 times in Pham's arguments:

Example: From Lim's literature and methodology chapter writing:

> In the context of my research, I like to think that the same holds true for wordless picture book reading; while the explicit intention may be to get the kids to talk and peel away the layers of the illustration, the implicit intention is to allow them to learn through the language they are supposed to be learning.

Example: From Pham's research proposal:

> …whether merger efficiencies may be relied on as a ground for blocking a merger because they enhance the merged entity's ability…

In these examples, the modal verbs function as a hedging device that softens the writer's claim and introduces an element of caution. They acknowledge possible variation in interpretation rather than asserting a fixed truth.

In the interview, Pham explained his awareness of using hedges in presenting his arguments:

> ‘It is very dangerous to enhance the certainty of my statements.’ (P06-INT8-p3)

Pham’s statement reflects a deep academic caution and the norms that privilege tentativeness in scholarly discourse. His awareness of the ‘danger’ of being too certain reveals how academic writing is experienced as a space governed by surveillance**.** In this sense, Pham demonstrates a strong disciplinary literacy within English academic culture.

His use of the word *‘*dangerous’ also exposes the emotional and ideological weight of these norms. It signals not only intellectual caution but also a sense of risk and vulnerability**.** Indeed, across the interviews and diaries, vulnerability emerges in various ways for all participants. This reveals how power operates through discourse: academic conventions shape what can be said, how it can be said, and whose voice is legitimised. Pham’s frequent use of hedges and his explicit commentary on ‘danger’ illustrate a form of strategic compliance within dominant academic norms. His cautious stance and frequent use of hedging can be interpreted through the lens of identity as position (Moje & Luke, 2009). He accepts the position offered to him by dominant academic culture: a cautious, non-confrontational writer who speaks within the boundaries of accepted discourse.

In contrast, Lim expresses a different perspective on using hedges: “I didn’t sound confident.” She explains that, at the time of writing her research proposal, she lacked her own data to support her arguments, which led to frequent use of hedging devices. Now, having completed the data collection process, Lim recognises the need to project greater confidence and adjust her writing style accordingly:

> I analysed the data. I'm almost done with my findings now, so … might change in discussion. I'm going to need to sound more convincing than just saying ‘this can be’. I will probably use less ‘can’. (P04-INT8-p58)

Lim demonstrates a reflective and evolving approach to academic writing, and awareness of how linguistic choices signal confidence and authority. Also, her critically literate practice is also temporal/ contingent on time. Initially, her frequent use of hedges reflects both the lack of empirical data and a cautious positioning within academic norms, indicating a careful negotiation of her identity as a novice researcher. However, her recognition of the need to write more confidently after completing data collection shows growing authorial agency and a more assertive positioning of herself as a knowledgeable scholar. Unlike Pham, whose hedging practices reflect a protective compliance with dominant norms, Lim’s evolving use of hedges illustrates strategic self-positioning: she adapts her linguistic choices to align with the requirements of academic credibility while simultaneously asserting her intellectual presence. This suggests a dynamic process in which identity, voice, and critical engagement with scholarly conventions develop alongside the progression of her research.

Lim's positioning can be interpreted through the lens of identity laminations (Moje & Luke, 2009) as a dynamic layering of experiences, roles, and self-perceptions over time. As she progresses through data collection and gains empirical authority, a new layer of confidence, agency, and authorial presence emerges**.** This does not erase the previous layer of caution but coexists with it, producing a laminated identity that encompasses multiple positions, including novice researcher, careful writer, and emerging confident scholar.

Boosters

Chan employs frequent boosters in his literature review writing to show his certainty towards research gap:

Example 5: From Chan's literature review

> Despite the large population of students studying abroad, research about this group's gender identity or masculinity/femininity is ***significantly*** lacking. My findings indicated that these Chinese young men's struggles about gender identity were ***clearly*** impacted by their one-year experience studying overseas.

In the first sentence, 'significantly lacking' amplifies the extent of the research gap to signal to the reader that this absence is important and warrants attention. In the second sentence, 'clearly impacted' emphasises the observable effect of Chan's

study. He demonstrates confidence and authority over the topic and make his contribution as credible and meaningful.

While Pham frequently employs hedges, he also uses boosting devices multiple times in his writing, demonstrating his confidence in emphasizing the importance of his research topic:

Example 6: From Pham's research proposal:

> merger control is of *great significance* research.
>
> *It is important* for competition authorities and courts to conduct a comprehensive and independent evaluation of the merger's anticompetitive and procompetitive effects.

By using these devices, Pham signals confidence and authority, asserting that the topic of merger control is not only relevant but also warrants careful attention from competition authorities and courts. The boosters strengthen the claim, positioning him as knowledgeable and credible, and framing the research as meaningful and impactful within its field.

Both these participants use booster devices in their writing to make firm statements of the value of their research. In the interview of talking around the text, Chan and Pham share similar reflections on their use of boosting devices in writing. Rather than simply expressing confidence, they appear to use these devices strategically to

mask underlying insecurities, amplify their claims, and emphasise the significance of their research in order to impress the review panel and secure approval for their first-year assessment:

> In my first year, I have strong feelings that I have to say something, have to boost it, criticise them and make some, uh, subjective comment. I think they show my subjective feelings. (P02-INT8-p58))

> I used boosters when I need to talk about my research motivation … it's more like pretending. I need to pass first- year review. I actually don't think this is an interesting topic in Law. I don't have much interest in it. But I have no choice. I just have to write in that way. (P06-INT8-p8)

Surprisingly, their use of boosters is not purely a reflection of genuine confidence but a strategic linguistic maneuver. In academic writing, boosters are used when writers want to show their confidence. In their cases, Chan and Pham adopt an opposite attitude when using boosting devices at a pretentious level, to demonstrate confidence and passion for their studies. This awareness highlights how academia and academic growth can sometimes be performative in fulfilling the expectations of the neoliberal university (Giroux, 2014). From the perspective of identity as position (Moje & Luke, 2009)**,** Chan and Pham are positioning themselves as competent and credible researchers in the eyes of the review panel. However, this positioning is influenced by external pressures rather than arising from a sense of scholarly confidence.

This example illustrates how early-stage PhD students may rely on linguistic strategies not only to navigate evaluation and power dynamics but also to 'play the game' according to academic rules**.** It is shown that authority and confidence in academic writing can be constructed performatively rather than fully internalised at this stage of their scholarly identity formation. This aligns with critical literacy's focus on how individuals negotiate their positioning within dominant discourses, especially in contexts shaped by unequal power relations. For early-stage doctoral students, such performative strategies may function as a means of gaining legitimacy while their scholarly identities are still developing. This illustrates how critical literacy involves not only critique but also the navigation and, at times, reinforcement of existing power structures within academic practice.

5.2 Attitude markers

In this section, I present and analyse how participant use attitude markers with strong adjectives, adverbs and modal verbs to express their stance in argument. Findings from Huang, Lim, and Lee are discussed below.

Huang uses strong statements showing his attitude towards the neglect of Taiwanese education in global citizenship education his research proposal.

Example: From Huang's research proposal

> The dominant postcolonial discourse in Taiwan was *disappointed* to notice and further admit the colonisation of Indigenous people…

The word ‘disappointed’ functions as an attitude marker to show his stance toward the dominant postcolonial discourse in Taiwan. By using this term, Huang expresses a negative judgment about the discourse’s failure to adequately recognise and admit the colonisation of Indigenous people.

Reflecting his tendency to write emotionally in his academic writing, Huang is aware of it and is trying to change his tone:

> I know my words in the paragraph I sent you are really subjective, and I have to say that when I write the article, I'm quite angry and have fears in my mind. I still believe that I'm talking the truth, but it's more like a critique article instead of a research article. (P03-INT8-p19)

This reflection exemplifies how stance-taking, through attitude markers, serves as a means of identity positioning that balances personal conviction, emotional engagement, and disciplinary expectations. Huang recognises that emotional engagement may conflict with the traditional conventions of academic discourse. This tension illustrates an identity negotiation process that positions them between the roles of critical advocate and academic researcher.

He believes this is not a good practice in academic writing:

> You make your audience feel negative. You cannot make any people feel uncomfortable. I'm trying to polish my words to make them milder. If I'm an academic writer, I should also adopt this kind of attitude. (P03-INT8-p20)

By saying “I’m trying to polish my words to make it milder,” Huang demonstrates a strategic performance of academic identity to consciously moderate emotion and critique to align with the affective conventions of academia. This also reveals a tension between authenticity and conformity. He shows the desire to express genuine emotion and a critical stance, and the perceived necessity to conform to the affective and linguistic aspects of academic discourse.

At the same time, he shows his doubt and concern when expressing a critical attitude towards Taiwanese education system in his writing:

> I'm trying to criticise the educational system in Taiwan, but I want to become a lecturer or professor in a National University in Taiwan. You know the National University, they are funded by the Ministry of Education. I want to criticise, make some critical criticisms. However, I'm also afraid it will be like evidence that the Ministry of Education refuse me to join the National University. So that means I do have the doubt that I should not write in this kind of harsh way. (P03-INT8-p24)

This statement reveals tension between critical agency and institutional constraint, and a concern about the risk of adopting a more activist stance. It reflects how academic writing operates within power structures, where critique is encouraged

rhetorically as a marker of critical thinking but can be risky in practice. This demonstrates how colonial control, even within Taiwanese higher education**,** continues to operate within academia, disciplining scholars, especially those from peripheral contexts, to write in ways that are 'safe', moderate, and institutionally acceptable. Huang's fear and doubt highlight that engaging in critique is not merely intellectual but deeply emotional and political. For emerging scholars, particularly those navigating unequal global knowledge hierarchies, the act of critique can threaten their sense of safety and professional trajectory. Both Taiwanese and UK higher education systems reproduce a shared academic logic in threatening authentic identity enactment.

Similarl to Huang, Lim tends to show her emotion directly in her writing:

Example: From Lim's literature review

> With wordless picturebooks, *I prefer to think* of the visuals as tangram puzzles.
>
> In the context of my research, *I like to think* that the same holds true for wordless picturebook reading…

Also, the word 'must' is used frequently in her writing to show her strong attitude about how picture books must be designed:

Example: From Lim's literature review

> It (page turns) ***must*** have features that compel readers to want to know what happens next.

> This implies that, *now more than ever*, page breaks *must* be properly designed.
>
> The platform used *must* allow the book to be presented in a way that is as similar to, if not better than, the real-life reading experience of reading a physical book.

Lim's use of attitude markers constructs a persona that is both reflective and assertive**.** Phrases like *'*I prefer to think' and 'I like to think' reveal a thoughtful and interpretive stance. Terms like 'must have' and 'now more than ever' convey growing confidence and evaluative strength. Together, these markers trace a subtle identity shift from tentative thinker to assertive scholar. This practice reflects how academic voice and stance evolve as part of the researcher's identity positioning.

Commenting about this, Lim showed confidence in writing emotionally:

> I write how I feel. I wouldn't write anything that I didn't feel strongly about, yeah. Yeah, because this research is personal to me. It's like a personal hobby that is being upgraded to PhD level. (P04-INT8-p22)

By stating "I write how I feel," *Lim* positions herself as an emotionally engaged scholar**,** aligning with the idea of critical affective literacy (Zembylas, 2022), where emotions are not distractions from rational inquiry but integral to understanding and meaning-making. This approach resists the Western academic norm of emotional detachment**.** Describing her research as *'a personal hobby upgraded to PhD level'* further highlights how personal identity and academic identity are intertwined. It

suggests a form of authentic engagement in which research emerges from lived experience and intrinsic curiosity rather than from external pressures, such as publication or institutional validation.

5.3 First person pronoun

For this rhetorical feature, the participants appear to fall into two distinct groups: those who frequently use first-person pronouns and those who avoid them. To illustrate this contrast, I focus on two case analyses. Chan explicitly asserts his authorial presence through the frequent use of the pronoun 'I', while Lee deliberately omits first-person references and prefers impersonal expressions such as 'this research'. Both participants chose their literature reviews as their preferred pieces of academic writing, providing a useful basis for comparison.

Below is Chan's paragraph as an example of using first person pronouns:

> *My* findings indicated that these Chinese young men's struggles about gender identity were clearly impacted by their one-year experience studying overseas. Due to the above reasons, *I* decided to continue to investigate how Chinese masculinities are reflected by Chinese international students in the UK and how their notions of masculinities might change due to their experiences abroad.

In this paragraph, the use of the first-person pronoun 'I' functions as a marker of authorial stance and agency. The shift from 'My findings indicated' to 'I decided'

demonstrates a movement from reporting results to asserting personal scholarly decision-making. This use of self-mention foregrounds the researcher's ownership of the study, situating the research as a reflective and interpretive process. This rhetorical choice aligns with the broader trend in qualitative and reflexive writing, where the researcher's identity and motivations are integral to the research narrative. In the interview, Chan reflects on his practices of using first pronouns:

> Using the first person is a requirement from my department and my supervisors. I was criticised for using 'the research' but not 'I' by my supervisor. You can use 'first person nowadays in academia'. (P02-INT8-p82)

This comment reveals how Chan's use of first-person pronouns is shaped by institutional norms**.** His statement highlights the institutional regulation of academic voice, where supervisors and departmental expectations dictate what is considered an appropriate authorial stance. Chan's confidence in using first-person pronouns stems from what is allowed in the institution. This moment underscores how academic writing is the space where identity, legitimacy, and authority are continuously constructed through linguistic choices. By aligning his writing practice with departmental and supervisory expectations, Chan positions himself as a legitimate member of his academic community and demonstrates adaptability to institutional discourse norms. This aligns with critical literacy's emphasis on how individuals negotiate their identities within power-laden discourses, where authority is not inherent but achieved through socially recognised forms of expression (Janks, 2010a, 2010b, 2013).

In contrast, the presence of the writer is not explicit in Lee's writing. Pronoun 'I' have not been used at all, instead 'this research' is used often:

> *This research* will fill this gap by focusing on migrants' racial preferences on MDAs.
>
> There is a need for relying on 'qualitative and ethnographic data to better understand the racial dynamics between couples in these relationships', which *this research* aims to achieve.

The avoidance of first-person pronouns in this paragraph reflects a positioning of the writer as objective and impersonal**.** By referring to 'this research' instead of 'I', Lee constructs an authorial stance that distances the self from the research process, thereby emphasising the work rather than the researcher. This linguistic choice can be interpreted as a strategic positioning within the academic community, where authority is often associated with impersonality and formality. This avoidance indicates that she is navigating institutional expectations and disciplinary norms to position herself as a novice researcher seeking legitimacy by conforming to perceived standards of 'proper' academic voice. The absence of 'I' thus reflects both a submission to academic power structures and a careful negotiation of identity**.**

In the interview of talking around the text, Lee shares her reflection on her practices of avoiding using first-person pronouns:

> It's not academic behaviour to use a lot of 'I''.I want to publish this paper so it's safe not to use a lot of 'I''. I didn't think about identity; I just think about academic's rules. (P01-INT8-p5)

These reflections reveal how Lee's sense of academic identity is shaped by institutional norms and power relations within academia. Her comments illustrate a strategic self-positioning that prioritises conformity and legitimacy over self-expression. Lee aligns with a traditional view of academic writing as impersonal and objective. Lee is actively negotiating her identity in relation to disciplinary expectations and gatekeeping practices**.** Her desire to 'be safe' and 'publish' implies awareness of the risks of nonconformity in academic discourse.

The statement "I didn't think about identity; I just think about academic rules" further reflects institutional discourses that separate identity from academic practice. It indicates internal contradictions and academic institutional inconsistencies. The statement captures the tension between personal agency and institutional regulation in academic writing. On the surface, it seems that she sees writing primarily as a technical act, governed by external standards rather than personal expression or identity work. However, this statement can be understood as a form of positioning, where Lee subordinates her own identity to the authority of 'academic rules.'

5.4 Non-English language

Four of the six participants conducted research with non-English-speaking participants, using their mother tongue during interviews. However, only two of

them (Lee and Huang) incorporated elements of their own language into their academic writing. In this section, I analyse how Lee and Huang integrate their first language into their texts.

Below is Huang's writing with Paiwan and English combination:

> The Paiwan people, known for their hierarchical system, follow a tradition where the chief, 'mamazangilan,' receives offerings of prey from all citizens after a successful hunt. The 'mamazangilan' then redistributes the harvested meat based on individual contributions and needs, ensuring that even those facing misfortune receive sustenance. Sharing and giving hold paramount significance within Paiwan culture, denoted by the Paiwan term 'pa' stands for 'to make it happen,' 'pu' means 'to possess,' and 'papu' means 'to let you possess.' When combined with 'lima' (hand), 'nasi' (breath or life), or 'varung' (heart or wisdom), 'papu' conveys 'giving a hand,' 'supporting or uplifting,' and 'deeply remembering.' Notably, 'papuvarung' signifies the desire for someone to retain words or reminders in their innermost self, fostering empathy actively.

The use of the Paiwan language in this paragraph serves several functions in terms of academic writing and identity. Firstly, it asserts cultural and epistemic authority by directly referencing concepts that cannot be fully translated into English. Terms like *'*pa', 'pu', and *'*papuvarung*'* act as cultural-linguistic markers showing the Huang's attention to local meanings and emphasising the specificity of the Paiwan worldview. Secondly, incorporating non-English terms positions the writer as a mediator

between linguistic and cultural systems**.** The careful explanation of each term functions as an explanation to allow readers unfamiliar with Paiwan culture to engage with the concepts, while still maintaining the authenticity of the source language. From a broader identity perspective, the integration of Paiwan language reflects a hybrid authorial stance, where the Huang navigates between English academic conventions and the preservation of cultural-linguistic knowledge. Linguistic choices in writing enact both agency and resistance within a predominantly English-language academic context.

On reflecting his Paiwan addition to the writing, Huang shares:

> It's Paiwan language, the third biggest Indigenous language in Taiwan. Each Indigenous language generally represents one unique cosmology. As we want to learn indigenous epistemology, starting to understand or even to learn their language will be the very first step. The paragraph I wrote, it shows the complicated description on sharing and giving in their language, which tells what they treasure and it can show us a piece of their culture and perspective' (P03-INT8-p20)

This reflection reveals a deeply decolonial awareness in the participant's linguistic and academic positioning. By emphasising that each indigenous language embodies a 'unique cosmology', he frames language not merely as a communicative tool, but as a critically literate understanding of language. His recognition that learning and using the Paiwan language is 'the very first step' toward understanding Indigenous epistemology reflects an effort to decenter Western norms and to engage with

knowledge from within the Indigenous worldview itself. The act of integrating Paiwan linguistic and cultural concepts into academic writing represents a performative act of identity positioning: by embedding Paiwan language and meaning in his text, Huang positions himself as an ally who engages in a relational process of knowing that values Indigenous voices and cosmologies.

Similarly, Lee uses Chinese language to explain terms and concepts in her writing:

> Chinese individuals, instead, commonly use *yuehui*约会 (joint activity) and *lian'ai*恋爱 (romantic relationships) to refer to romantic love (Wang, 2017).
>
> Chinese international students have their own social circle (*quanzi*圈子)
>
> The intimate lives of most Chinese international students are 'extremely promiscuous (*luan*乱)'

The use of Chinese terms functions as a strategic linguistic choice to convey culturally specific meanings that do not have exact equivalents in English. By including the original Chinese alongside translations, Lee preserves the nuance and richness of the source language to ensure that the concepts of romantic love are framed within their cultural context rather than flattened into generic English terms. Although, this flattening still happens to an extent, given the need to translate the expressions into English for an English audience. This choice also signals authorial identity and cultural competence and demonstrates a hybrid scholarly voice, where English academic conventions are maintained while non-English knowledge is validated and made legible.

> I chose to use Chinese…because I think it's really hard to explain some Chinese words in English, it's hard to translate. And I'm not sure if my translation is good or accurate, so I just show my audience that there are the words that my participants used in our conversation. (P01-INT8-p21)

This reflection highlights Lee's awareness of the limits of English in conveying culturally specific meanings and the ethical responsibility to represent her participants' voices accurately. By choosing to retain Chinese terms, Lee prioritises the original expressions over English translation, thereby expressing respect for her participants' linguistic and cultural identities. It is shown that Lee recognises that language is not a neutral medium and translation can sometimes distort meaning. She positions herself as an insider to the Chinese language and cultural context and to English academic norms, thereby demonstrating the hybrid and layered nature of doctoral student identity in multilingual and cross-cultural research contexts.

These practices reflects key aspects of critical literacy, particularly in relation to language, power, and identity. Participants demonstrate how meaning-making extends beyond dominant English academic discourse, aligning with critical literacy's emphasis on valuing diverse linguistic resources.

6. The exception that speaks

This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of one particular participant in my study who stands out as an outlier. While most participants navigate emotional tensions, cultural hybridity, and personal struggles that shape their academic identities and research motivations, this participant offers a markedly different narrative. By focusing on this case, I aim to explore how critical literacy can manifest in alternative forms that do not rely on personal narratives or visible identity negotiations. This analysis challenges dominant assumptions in the field and invites a broader, more nuanced understanding of what it means to engage critical literacy. The chapter begins by explaining why this participant is considered an outlier in the study. I then outline the structure of the analysis and the approach taken to interpret the data. The core findings are presented through four main themes. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion that reflects on the significance of these findings in relation to the broader research context.

Pham, a Vietnamese second-year PhD student studying Law at a UK university, is researching 'Approaches to Efficiency Considerations in Merger Control in the US and EU'. His aim is twofold: first, to present a comprehensive analysis of merger control practices across five countries; and second, to ensure that his findings remain practically relevant to law firms.

A further layer of my reflexivity emerged in relation to this participant whose responses diverged from the overall pattern of the study. During the diary activities and subsequent interviews, his accounts were notably structured around cognitive skills, measurable achievement, and technical understandings of research, leaving limited space for engagement with cultural, linguistic, or epistemological dimensions. His tendency to downplay or reject the influence of his linguistic and

cultural background made it challenging to explore critical literacy as conceptualised in this study. This difficulty initially led me to question whether his data aligned sufficiently with the research focus, and I considered excluding it from the analysis. However, engaging reflexively with this tension prompted a reconsideration of my own assumptions about what constitutes critical literacy. Rather than viewing his responses as a limitation, I came to understand them as offering an alternative orientation to academic literacy—one in which criticality may be expressed through cognitive or technical engagement without necessarily leading to reflexive or transformative positioning. This outlier case therefore contributed to a more nuanced interpretation of critical literacy, suggesting that it may manifest in multiple forms, with varying degrees of engagement with issues of identity, power, and transformation. Had the activities been framed more explicitly in terms of analytical reasoning, problem-solving, or technical critique, this participant may have engaged differently. This suggests that critical literacy itself may need to be understood as adaptable across disciplinary and epistemological contexts.

The outlier participant's orientation towards academic literacy as primarily technical and rational highlights an alternative, but partial, engagement with critical literacy. While this reflects a legitimate cognitive and analytical approach, it also aligns with critiques that dominant interpretations of critical literacy can become overly rationalised, privileging cognitive skills while marginalising affective, embodied, and sociocultural dimensions (Janks, 2002; Mendelowitz and Govender, 2024). In this case, the participant's focus on technical precision limited engagement with issues of identity, language, and power that are central to a more holistic understanding of critical literacy. A broader framing, positioning critical literacy not only as textual analysis but as an integrated practice involving identity, power, and knowledge across contexts may have enabled deeper engagement with these dimensions.

I consider this participant an outlier in my research because his experiences, beliefs, and academic choices stand in clear contrast to the broader patterns I observed among others in the study. While most participants navigate their academic journeys through emotional engagement, cultural negotiation, and identity tensions, he presents a different trajectory. He prioritises objectivity, rational thinking, and emotional detachment in both reading and writing practices. The lack of tension sets

him apart from the rest of the group, who often reflect on the complexities of working across languages, values, and epistemologies. What makes his position particularly significant is that he still demonstrates a high level of critical awareness. He engages carefully with texts, remains alert to ideological bias, and shows a thoughtful understanding of how knowledge and authority function in academic spaces. His case complicates my assumptions about the nature of critical literacy. By including his voice, the study gains a richer, more complex view of how multilingual scholars position themselves within academic research and how critical literacy may take different forms based on personal disposition and intellectual orientation.

The analysis is organised around four central themes, each examined through Pham's accounts that diverge from dominant narratives. For each theme, I begin by outlining the prevailing perspectives, then present Pham's contrasting experiences that challenge these patterns. These exceptions are then explored in depth using critical discourse narrative analysis to uncover the underlying complexities. I then demonstrate how these outlier perspectives invite a critical rethinking of the assumptions shaping each theme. Rather than dismissing these deviations as irrelevant, the analysis shows how Pham's insights contribute meaningfully to enrich theoretical understandings of critical literacy enactment.

The following four themes are drawn from the previous four chapters: the practices of critically reading 'the world' and examining 'the word', requiring an authentic emotional connection to real-life problems; conflicting emotions in reading practices, suggesting decolonising moves; the comfort and non-comfort zones of writing:

tension for hybrid identities; and ‘small narratives’ about being personal and emotional in writing, exposing real-time identity negotiation and struggles.

6.1 The practices of critically reading ‘the world’ and examining ‘the word’, requiring authentic emotion connection to real-life problem

The first central theme in the data is to unpack my participants’ authentic critical literacy enactment through emotional involvement. This topic examines not only how they engage in reading and writing but also how they remain aware of how their environment influences their literacy practices and vice versa. The five participants exhibit strong emotions toward their marginalised group’s suffering and an emotional attempt to dismantle society's complex structures. First, they view their world evolving around family, friends, school and politics. There is pain and struggle and the realisation of inequality. They then read, examine and interpret the texts and show a desire to ‘recreate the world’. By analysing the range of emotion, I can analyse power relations and how societal norms shape their world.

However, Pham tends to keep his personal world private and rarely shares much about himself. He identifies no challenges in his surroundings related to his research, which makes it difficult to access the emotional layers beneath his narrative. As a result, his complex emotions remain largely undetectable. He offers no stories that connect to his background or cultural roots, and the only moment of critical reflection appears when he discusses his study experience in Vietnam:

> The law I learned in Vietnam is just imitated to English one, but it is not imitated correctly. What the law understands is completely wrong. In general, it's a lot of crap. It's meaningless, it doesn't make any sense at all. And when I come here to study, I have to start over from the beginning. When I studied in Vietnam, I saw too little English and too little criticality. When I come here, I find it suitable because the law here follows the so-called positivism, which means there must be evidence for what is stated. I am very suitable here. (P06-INT1-p3)

He expresses a sharp critique and contrasts the education in Vietnam with the clarity, rigor, and evidentiary focus of the English-based system he now studies in. This reflects the challenges of cross-cultural academic mobility. Mobility in this case requires epistemic unlearning as much as learning. To succeed, the participant must distance himself from prior educational formations and re-author his academic self in line with dominant Western norms. In this way, his personal transformation is inseparable from the structural power relations that shape whose knowledge is powerful.

By saying “I am very suitable here,” Pham affirms his sense of belonging within Western academic norms, while distancing himself from his educational background in his home country. This stance contrasts sharply with other participants, who express a strong connection to their cultural roots and draw deeply on personal stories to shape their research. Pham, instead, constructs his narrative through a critical lens on his own academic heritage.

The lack of personal involvement is possibly due to the nature of his research. His research is not empirical and does not involve participants. Pham is the only person whose research motivation is not influenced by personal stories. His research topic was accidentally chosen during his Master and now he is expanding it in PhD:

> When I do research, I don't think about anyone's benefits. Because when you do it, I'm just curious. When it comes to its benefits, I'm a bit forced. I have to force its benefits to write down its benefits. From the beginning I don't feel like I want to benefit anything, I'm just curious so I'll do it. (P06-INT2-p5)

His main motivation for doing research stems from personal curiosity, rather than a desire to create social impact or benefit others – research for the sake of research. This internal and self-driven interest sets him apart from other participants, whose research is often rooted in personal struggles or emotional experiences. He feels pressured when asked to articulate the broader impact of his work, viewing it primarily as a pursuit of personal intellectual growth.

This raises the question: Does critical literacy require personal emotional involvement to be effectively enacted? If personal stories and emotions are absent, can one still engage critically, especially if the core of critical literacy lies in 'reading the world through reading the word?' Pham appears to demonstrate that it is possible, as he continues to 'read the world' in relation to his research, though in a way that is more detached and analytical:

> I want to portray a comprehensive picture of the five countries and what's happening. It brings law values. Because the law must also serve economic purposes, and freedom itself. (P06-INT3-p9)

However, without connecting deeply to his own pains and struggles, he seems not to connect deeply with his research purpose:

> That (the above statement) is just what is stated in my thesis. My aim is not that high. My aim is to finish the thesis and get recognised by top professors and be able to hold conversations with them. I don't aim to change the world. (P06-INT3-p9)

He views the stated research objectives in his thesis as a requirement, something expected in academic writing, not necessarily a reflection of his deeper and personal goals. He recognises the limits of his thesis project and is focused on attainable and personal milestones**.** He intentionally distances himself from idealistic narratives about changing the world, choosing instead to prioritise realistic achievements and intellectual belonging**.**

Again, this raises an important question: Are the narratives presented in academia realistic portrayals, or do they lean toward idealism? While idealistic narratives may sometimes seem disconnected from the practical realities of research, they play a vital role, particularly in shaping imagined identities and future aspirations. For many, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, these ideals are not merely abstract concepts but serve as necessary visions of possibility. They offer a sense of

direction, a way to claim space, and a source of empowerment within systems where their voices have often been overlooked or undervalued.

6.2 Conflicting emotions in reading practices, suggesting decolonising moves

The second central theme in the data explores discomfort and conflicts that the five participants feel and the shift in their mindset in an attempt to dismantle the complex structure in their White-dominant research reading practices. In this topic, identities appear stable yet also multiple, at times, conflicted. Cross-language and cross-cultural reading processes expose internal conflicts between the appreciation of non-Western perspectives and the unconscious prioritisation of Western literature. They recognise that their reliance on Western resources strengthens their research but also realise the importance of maintaining their cultural and intellectual heritage. They reveal a mixture of self-reflection, regret, frustration with their internal biases, and attempt to seek out more diverse voices in their academic work. Their research journey involves complex and conflicting beliefs and choices of action. It is not a straightforward adventure but full of tensions and confusion. These complexities often reflect the nuanced layers of identity that researchers must navigate in their intellectual and emotional experiences. Their journey is not merely an identity conflict but also an active engagement with the larger issues of oppression and injustice.

However, Pham's reading choices and practices appear relatively straightforward, lacking the layers of struggle or deep self-reflection seen in the other participants. He

exclusively engages with Western materials and consciously avoids emotional responses, approaching texts with a detached and analytical stance:

> If I don't pay attention, I might get carried away in that direction. The most important thing is to stay doubtful, even what 99% of what is said is true, we still have to stay doubtful. For example, if I know that he is left-wing or right-wing, if he like freedom, you will always be alert that he will demand freedom. (P06-INT5-p8)

Pham's approach to critical reading involves a rational and deliberate effort to stay aware of the writer's intentions and avoid being 'carried away.' His academic thinking is highly pragmatic and seemingly already aligned with academic conventions. It reflects a conscious self-protective strategy that helps him remain critically attuned to an author's potential biases or ideological positions. This indicates a strong commitment to maintaining critical engagement throughout the reading process. In this sense, he is actively enacting critical literacy, as evidenced by his recognition that texts are never neutral, as authors embed their values, worldviews, and intentions in their writing. By acknowledging this, he engages with arguments on his own terms. His approach reflects an active engagement towards cognitively critical thinking.

Furthermore, Pham describes one of criteria to choose his reading involving taking notice of references:

> I also have to look at the citations, read by many people and are also famous in the industry then those points of view are reasonable. Any research article

> that you consider good, it must at least mention the leaders in the field. They should be mentioned 1 or 2 times. (P06-INT5-p9)

He articulates a clear understanding of how academic credibility and authority are constructed, particularly through citation practices. In his view, a 'good' research article must reference well-known and widely-read scholars, as this indicates intellectual legitimacy and rationale within the field. For him, engaging with leading voices or foundational thinkers is essential to validate one's arguments. This reflects his respect for academic hierarchy, in which senior or 'famous' scholars are regarded as gatekeepers to credible knowledge. He demonstrates an awareness of existing power structures, but tends to align with and reproduce them rather than challenge them.

This stance contrasts sharply with the perspectives of the other participants, who draw largely on heritage knowledge and value research grounded in local or national contexts. Their academic work is often interwoven with the works of authors and thinkers from their home countries. Pham's research, by contrast, appears more detached from a specific cultural or national context. Yet, I would argue that this should not limit engagement with non-mainstream or less-recognised voices. Valuing diverse perspectives beyond major academic figures could enrich Pham's critical practice and broaden the foundation of his scholarly work.

Pham demonstrates a consistent alignment with Western academic norms, showing little internal conflict or competing beliefs about how research should be conducted.

His firm adherence to established academic conventions appears to simplify his research journey, seemingly sparing him from some of the emotional and intellectual tensions experienced by the other participants. Pham appears to approach research primarily as a rational, cognitive exercise, thinking rather than feeling his way through the process.

6.3 The comfort and non-comfort zone of writing: tension for hybrid identities

The third central theme explores my participants' general writing practices, including their preferences, challenges, and experiences with bilingual academic writing. These insights reveal the ongoing tensions that arise from negotiating hybrid identities in bilingual and bicultural academic contexts. Rather than resolving these tensions into a single, cohesive identity, the five participants demonstrate a consciousness formed by dwelling within contradictions from navigating them, struggling with them, and seeking meaningful ways to express them through writing. Many express a desire to write more freely, outside the constraints of rigid academic conventions, suggesting that standard academic norms often feel limiting or misaligned with their personal and cultural voices. Their experiences show that identity hybridity is neither tidy nor painless; it involves continual negotiation, translation, and the blending of multiple positionalities. In this process, writing becomes not just a tool for communication, but a site of identity work and resistance.

In this area, there is relatively little to explore in Pham’s case, as he has explicitly distanced himself from Vietnamese writing practices and fully embraced English

academic conventions. As a result, the kind of identity hybridity seen in other participants, marked by negotiation, conflict, and blending between linguistic and cultural norms, is not strongly evident in his narratives. There appears to be minimal space for negotiation between languages or cultural perspectives. His academic identity seems firmly rooted in a Western tradition without any tension.

This lack of perceived struggle does not necessarily mean hybridity is absent, but rather that it is not consciously experienced as conflict. Without encountering strong cultural dissonance or ideological resistance, Pham's shift in academic identity may feel smooth and natural, but it is not necessarily empowering or transformative. In such cases, hybridity can manifest in more subtle, unspoken ways, in which adaptation occurs without friction.

Additionally, to even sound more ‘rigid’, Pham uses AI tool to help with his writing style in communicating with his supervisors for adaptation:

> I use ChatGPT to correct my grammar and write emails to my supervisor. I want the email to sound better. I need to show I’m serious and professional even in writing emails. … I feel serious but cannot express that seriousness via English. My Vietnamese knowledge is not culturally suitable; I need to modify my writing. (P06-INT7-p4)

By using ChatGPT, he is actively negotiating language and culture to present himself in a way that feels ‘authentic’ and professionally appropriate to him. Therefore, it can

be seen that not all experiences of cultural transition involve conflict and fragmentation**.** For some, hybridity may feel smooth, strategic, and unremarkable.

6.4 'Small narratives' about being personal and emotional in writing, exposing real-time identity negotiation and struggles

The final central theme explores 'small narratives' showing different transitions in identity perception shaped within social contexts. A multilingual researcher's identity is not only made through a long and reflective thesis but also shaped through **'**small stories' people tell as they engage in different research activities. These 'small stories', despite seeming to be often overlooked, are full of meaning. The story follows as they navigate challenges and ultimately decide how to respond. Their narratives become stories of voice reclamation. People build through the stories they tell about themselves, shaped across time. The five participants' experiences highlight the position of multilingual researchers who seek to assert their voice beyond academic conventions yet must navigate socio-political landscapes where diversity in thought and language is not always welcomed. In this way, their narratives illustrate the complex interplay between digital agency, cultural constraint, and the pursuit of intellectual authenticity. The five participants embrace a situated and reflexive scholarly position, grounded in cultural insight and informed critique. They assert that doctoral research is not just about conforming to conventions, but about authentically contributing to knowledge from within one's cultural, linguistic, and intellectual standpoint.

However, firstly, for Pham, writing is primarily a space for constructing arguments, where diverse viewpoints should be presented and emotions intentionally set aside:

> I never ask who am I and what I want. If I can do something without emotion, I can do anything. If I only choose the opinion that I follow and like, that is too easy to do. The topic needs to be the mixture of like and dislike. I as a researcher need to put emotion aside, because emotion will make me have bias. I either like or hate my topic and I don't try to see whether I like it or hate it or not. (P06-INT6-p8)

He expresses a detached, rationalist view of doing research**,** where emotions are seen as obstacles rather than assets. He believes that to be a good researcher, one must suppress personal emotions, preferences, and biases. This implies a belief in a separation between self and research, where academic work is a task to be done, not a reflection of inner life. Pham's case shows that critical literacy does not require emotion to be activated when Pham has performed analytical thinking, scepticism, and awareness of language, power, and ideology.

Furthermore, he expresses his different perspective on being personal in academic writing:

> I don't like it (personal writing) very much because it often tends to defend a point of view, a point that is too strong. It gets biased. In general, I feel more comfortable hiding my ego. Basically, what I want to express is scientific knowledge rather than scientific knowledge with a personal effect. Scientific findings need to be acknowledged by the majority. You can't keep using your

> higher ego too much, like when you write with the mindset of writing to represent many scientists. I prefer writing to speaking because I can adjust my tone in writing, I can be mindful. In speaking, my ego also comes out with me and I have to be really good and write a lot and talk a lot to be able to make my speaking objective. I don't wanna show my ego too much. (P06-INT5-p8)

Pham shows a clear preference for maintaining objectivity and emotional distance in academic work. This perspective might be deeply rooted in his discipline in Law. He comes from an academic background that places a high value on humility, deference to authority, and emotional restraint, especially in professional or scholarly contexts. While Pham may not see himself as engaging in critical literacy in the emotional or personal sense, he is still practising a form of critical engagement that privileges rationality, consensus, and intellectual humility over personal voice or critique from the margins. However, his stance may limit deeper engagement with power, identity, or emotion in texts, which are also essential elements of critical literacy. His practices may not align with critical literacy in its most activist sense, as they do not explicitly pursue social justice goals. He nonetheless demonstrates a heightened awareness of power inequalities through his literacy practices, which can be understood as a form of critical literacy enactment.

Finally, Pham shows his views of audience who reads his PhD thesis:

> Audience only has 2 people. The first one is my supervisor, and the second one is the examiner. Nobody will read my work, unless I'm a famous person.

> Of course I want people to read my work but I'm realistic, I know no one is gonna read my work but I still need to write the best I can because I'm writing for myself. When I write, I don't think about audience. If I think about readers, it will affect my output. (P06-INT7-p8)

The statement reflects a strong internal motivation and a personal commitment to intellectual integrity and self-respect in writing. Pham chooses not to focus on potential readers, directing his attention inward to prioritise his own thinking and reasoning. This inward focus acts as a form of self-protection, helping him maintain clarity and confidence in his ideas without the pressure of external judgment. Writing in this way allows him to express his thoughts freely and honestly, without feeling compelled to adjust his voice or arguments to meet others' expectations. However, this approach stands in contrast to the practices of most other participants, who view their imagined audience as a key influence in their writing. For example, Lim considers that the reader helps clarify purpose, enhance communication, and generate motivation throughout the writing process.

This difference raises a question about the role of audience awareness in critical literacy. For many, writing with an audience in mind encourages engagement with larger conversations and strengthens the social relevance of their work. It also helps them write with greater intention, knowing that their words may reach and influence others. At the same time, writing without an audience can also be a meaningful way to develop voice and identity. It may offer a space for personal reflection and intellectual freedom that is not shaped by external expectations. However, this

inward approach can also result in limited confidence when sharing work publicly. Since the writing is not directed toward others, the motivation to contribute to broader academic or societal discussions may be reduced. In this way, writing for oneself, as Pham does, while authentic, might limit the research's broader impact, especially when academic work is often expected to serve a larger social or scholarly purpose.

Pham appears to rely primarily on ‘big stories’, which are broad, structured narratives focused on academic goals. He offers few, if any, ‘small stories’ that reveal personal reflections or emotional tensions. Throughout his account, he consistently describes how he conducts his thesis work with discipline and staying ‘on the lane’ to follow formal rules and procedures. His narrative is framed around strict academic rationale and critical literacy, leaving little room for ambiguity or internal conflict. As a result, it becomes difficult to identify nuanced moments of self-questioning or shifts in perspective, which are often key features of small stories.

While ‘big stories’ tend to engage with external or institutional challenges, ‘small stories’ expose the more subtle and internal struggles of navigating those challenges. These include moments of hesitation, doubt, and identity negotiation. In Pham’s case, these internal dynamics are seemingly absent. There is no evidence of repositioning referring to the reflective process through which individuals revise their understanding of themselves over time. Unlike most other participants, Pham does not appear to be working through a visible process of intellectual or emotional growth.

6.5 Discussion

Pham is the only participant who shares little about his emotional responses or personal engagement with the texts he reads, instead emphasising an objective and analytical stance which he consciously maintains. While this approach does not necessarily hinder his ability to read critically, it may limit his engagement with deeper critical literacy practices, which often require a more reflective and emotionally involved reading of the world. For example, Pham is the only participant who is not concerned about the power imbalance in society, as he views power as highly dynamic and does not wish to address any direct benefits to any group of individuals (P06-INT2-p8)

Despite thinking rather than feeling his way through the process, Pham still engages in critical literacy practices to some degree. He actively interrogates texts and examines how different authors construct arguments shaped by varying ideologies and political contexts. This analytical orientation shows his ability to read texts with scepticism and intellectual independence. However, what distinguishes his approach is its lack of a decolonial dimension. Unlike the other participants who attempt to challenge dominant knowledge systems and reclaim space for alternative or marginalised voices, Pham does not appear to question the power structures underpinning academic knowledge production. Instead, he accepts and operates comfortably within the mainstream, choosing to conform rather than disrupt. This raises important questions about the nature of critical literacy: Can one be critically

literate without engaging in acts of resistance or decolonial thinking? Pham's example suggests a version of critical literacy that values analytical rigor but stops short of transformative critique.

The fact that his 'small stories' are not evident in the highly pragmatic, technical actions he takes suggests an absence of ongoing self-reflection that connects past experiences, present actions, and future aspirations. It may indicate that his identity as a researcher is emotionally guarded. His emotion-safeguarding strategy appears to reflect a self-protective strategy that avoids exposing vulnerability. While this approach helps him maintain a sense of stability and purpose within the demands of academic life, it also limits the depth and complexity of his narrative voice.

Chapter 5

Bringing the threads together

As detailed in the previous chapter, this research project has brought to light several significant insights. This chapter focuses on unpacking the meaning of those key findings and their roles in addressing the research questions. The following section revisits the research questions that shaped the study.

1. **What are the experiences of PhD international students in navigating their individual voices in doing research in an English-speaking host country such as the UK?**

   1.a What are the students' experiences in becoming academic authors?

   1.b How do their prior knowledge and cultural background affect their level of engagement in research activities?

   1.c How is the students' confidence in claiming their (emerging) academic voice?

2. **How are the academic identities of international multilingual PhD students performed and constructed through their English second language research practices?**

   2.a How do the students establish their hybrid identity in relation to their established defined identities and ideological subjectivity?

   2.b What strategies do the students adopt in order to negotiate and create their emerging identity?

2.c How have the student's perceptions of their academic identities changed since the beginning of the data collection process, if at all?

3. **How is the international multilingual PhD students' awareness of critical literacy manifested in higher education research practice?**

3.a How can critical literacy be beneficial to multilingual PhD students?

3.a What are the possible issues of the enactment of critical literacy practices among the students?

3.b What are the students' perception of power in academia in the UK?

This discussion is organised around three central statements: (1) Voice and Identity establishment involves conflicting layers of post-colonial hybridity; (2) Space for Critical Affective Literacy is essential; (3) Space for Critical Affective Literacy is limited. Each statement addresses specific aspects of the research questions. The first statement focuses on issues of voice and identity formation, corresponding to research questions 1 and 2. The third statement engages with the theme of critical literacy, aligning with the final research question.

1. Voice and identity establishment involves conflicting layers of post-colonial hybridity

In this study, voice and identity are understood as dynamic and relational constructs: voice refers to the ways participants express and position themselves within

discourse, while identity refers to the evolving sense of self that is negotiated through their experiences, interactions, and contexts. The findings on voice and identity establishment closely align with, and are illuminated by, Moje and Luke's (2009) metaphors of identity and literacy.

1.1 Voice:

In relation to the first research question, I discuss voice in two interrelated dimensions: (1) participants' experiences of claiming voice as academic authors, and (2) their voice in research engagement. Across both, I also reflect on how participants negotiate confidence in expressing themselves as emerging scholars.

1.1.1 Claiming Voice as Academic Authors

The notion of an 'academic author' is multidimensional. In this study, it is tied to rhetorical choice in writing, knowledge contribution, audience awareness, and the negotiation of multilingual and cultural voice in academic research.

Rhetorical Choices

Whereas Hyland (2002) focused on textual analysis and Canagarajah (2004) drew on interviews to explore how second-language English writers employ rhetorical devices, my study integrates both methods. This combination not only allows me to trace participants' linguistic strategies in their written texts but also uncovers the intentions, emotions, and negotiations that shape those choices. In doing so, my

research extends beyond surface features of writing to illuminate the lived struggles and critical awareness that inform participants' authorial voices. Participants discuss how they structure arguments and references to pave the way for their own ideas. Yet, most report limited confidence in making direct claims, often relying on linguistic strategies to 'mask' uncertainty. For example, some consider not using hedging as a sign of confidence, while others believe the use of hedging marks them as more mature scholars. Thus, rhetorical choice is about projecting an academic persona. Interestingly, while emotional investment in research came through strongly in interviews, it was harder to identify in the written texts participants shared with me.

Authorial self-mention further reflects differences in positioning. Those with professional experience prior to the PhD tend to write with more direct presence, adopting what they see as a 'practitioner voice'. For example, Lim grounds her academic voice in practice and authentic reflection. By contrast, participants who more strongly identify with 'academic voice' are more cautious with explicit self-reference, seeing restraint as aligning with scholarly conventions. These practices resonate with Moje and Luke's (2009, p.422) metaphor of 'identity as sense of self'. Literacy practices shape participants' self-perceptions as (not) capable, confident, or legitimate writers. Writing subjectivity is developed through interaction, recognition, misrecognition, and engagement with texts and institutions (Moje & Luke, 2009).

Knowledge Contribution

Participants are confident in the originality of their knowledge contributions. This confidence often stems from their unique positionalities: their backgrounds, languages, and shared identities with their research participants. In particular, they feel self-assured when presenting cultural knowledge that they believe is underrepresented in academic discourse. A prior study by Goodman and Cocca (2014) note the importance of original identity. When students critically examine the historical, cultural, and institutional forces that shape their experiences, they often begin to reconstruct their identities in more empowering ways. These practices reflect in the metaphor of 'identity as difference' (Moje & Luke, 2009, p.419). This metaphor conceptualises identity in relation to group membership, such as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, or culture. Identity is understood through social difference, where literacy practices are shaped by, and interpreted through, affiliation with particular groups. For international multilingual doctoral students, identity as difference is often enacted through their positioning as 'international' within UK higher education.

Despite my participants' eagerness to contribute originality and make an impact, Singh and Meng (2013) argue that knowledge produced by international postgraduate students, especially those from non-Western or Asian contexts, is frequently overlooked and not recognised as meaningful within Western academic traditions. Tran and Hoang (2024) explain that their non-citizen status and the dominant discourse often diminish their academic contributions and lived experiences. These findings suggest that students may feel disheartened or invalidated when their authentic voices or cultural knowledge are not recognised.

This can lead to self-censorship, where they abandon original insights in favour of reproducing what they think will be accepted, deepening feelings of shame or disconnection from the self.

Audience Awareness

Only one participant, Lim, demonstrates strong awareness of her readership. She writes for practitioners in education, aiming to make her research meaningful for professional practice. The rest write primarily for examiners, with Pham even stating he writes only for himself. This highlights the tension between writing for assessment (the PhD as gatekeeping) and writing for knowledge circulation (the PhD as contribution to communities). Lim's stance suggests an orientation towards being a knowledge broker or public intellectual, whereas others' narrower audience focus reflects the institutional pressures of doctoral assessment. This raises questions about whether doctoral training should do more to encourage students to imagine multiple audiences, including academic, professional, and personal, to support both identity formation and knowledge mobilisation. This finding reflects 'identity as position' (Moje & Luke, 2009, p.430) by showing how participants locate themselves in relation to power, audience, and institutional expectations. Lim actively positions herself as a practitioner-researcher by writing for educators beyond the academy, while others accept or negotiate a more constrained position by writing primarily for examiners. These writing practices illustrate how doctoral identity is shaped through both self-positioning and being positioned within hierarchical academic structures.

Multilingual and Cultural Voice

Participants' narratives also reveal the layered struggles of navigating cultural, intellectual, and emotional experiences shaped by colonial legacies. These struggles are not one-dimensional but intersect across personal, social, and academic dimensions. Importantly, participants are not passive in these negotiations; they seek ways to position themselves, resist, or reconcile contradictions. Embedding non-English languages in their writing is one such act of resistance, subtly challenging the monolingual norm of academia and the privileging of English as the only legitimate medium of knowledge. These practices resonate that doctoral students are not merely learners of academic conventions but active contributors to redefine legitimate scholarly practice. As Cook (2012, p.1) affirms, these students possess 'knowledge of more than one language in the same mind or the same community', which enables them to draw from a wider range of cognitive, cultural, and linguistic resources. These practices resonate with 'identity as mind (consciousness)' by Moje and Luke (2009, p.425)**.** The participants' ways of thinking and knowing are formed, challenged, and reshaped through engagement with complex cultural and academic conditions. Navigating colonial legacies requires participants to develop heightened critical awareness of epistemic hierarchies, disciplinary norms, and the ideological assumptions embedded in academic knowledge.

However, dominant academic norms remain pervasive and difficult to escape. Participants express reservations about challenging these general rules. They feel that the conventions constrain their authentic voice or limit the expression of cultural and

linguistic perspectives. Resisting established norms could risk negative assessment, reduced publication opportunities, or a perception of being 'less academic'. In other words, the pressure to conform is not just procedural but deeply tied to academic survival and legitimacy**.** This finding is also reported by Wu and Buripakdi's (2021) from a mixed-method study, revealing that many EFL doctoral writers lack exposure to the concept of authorial identity, resulting in passive adherence to disciplinary norms rather than confident knowledge-making. Additionally, Lavelle and Bushrow (2007) argue that flexible and intuitive approaches to research writing are often more effective than rigid, formulaic methods. For multilingual doctoral writers, however, engaging in disciplinary writing presents challenges related to authorship, voice, and institutional expectations.

1.1.2 Voice in Research Engagement

Participants' research engagement reflect the influence of their cultural, historical, and linguistic backgrounds, and their responses to dominant academic traditions.

Engagement with Western Resources.

Participants describe an 'unwilling acceptance' of Western academic traditions. While they draw on Western sources as required, they express unease with the marginalisation of Asian scholarship and ideas. This tension is not only an identity conflict but also an ethical stance: a recognition of how colonial practices shape knowledge hierarchies and a desire to release these tensions by seeking alternative

pathways, even within contradictory systems. As Montgomery (2019) suggests, the doctoral journey can become a space for postcolonial reflection. The struggles of navigating power, language, and legitimacy often force students into deep reflection, sometimes painful, sometimes empowering. These moments of tension become opportunities for postcolonial reflection, in which students become acutely aware of the colonial structures embedded in academia and of their own positions within them. These practices are associated with **'**identity as position' (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 430) as they highlight how participants are positioned by dominant academic structures and how they respond to those positions. Their 'unwilling acceptance' of Western academic traditions reflects an awareness of occupying a subordinate position within global knowledge hierarchies. At the same time, their unease with the marginalisation of Asian scholarship suggests attempts to reposition themselves discursively. Similarly, the notion of 'identity as position' is further illustrated through participants' practices of *'*reframing power relations' and *'*criticality in action'*,* discussed in the sections that follow.

Reframing Power Relations

The personal letters participants wrote in Diary entry 3 (Write a personal letter to your participants or to the marginalised group(s) in your research) reveal a sense of empowerment to question and delegitimise existing social structures. They position society as the enforcer of inequality and frame marginalised groups not as passive recipients of norms but as active agents of change. This reflects a subtle decolonial stance, in which resistance emerges in everyday practices rather than through explicit

declarations. This finding aligns with Giampapa (2011), who also finds that researcher identities can be influenced and even redefined by their participants during the research process, highlighting the complexity and fluidity of identity formation.

Criticality in Action

Criticality emerges as participants recognised how dominant discourses position certain cultural or linguistic practices as peripheral or illegitimate. By reflecting on their own positions, they demonstrate that they are not uncritically absorbing norms but interrogating their effects on voice, identity, and legitimacy. Some directly challenge and seek to reshape academic conventions by embedding non-English terms, citing non-Western scholars, or foregrounding 'local' knowledge as valuable. These acts reveal not only their agency but also their intellectual independence, signalling their capacity to expand the boundaries of academic discourse. However, these actions are less visible in their formal academic work and emerge more openly through the diary activities and interviews in this research process. Their actions during the data collection reveal that criticality is not entirely absent but negotiated. They hold critical perspectives internally and articulate them in reflective spaces, but often strategically mute or adapt them in academic work. This suggests that colonial criticality is lived as a process of tension and compromise rather than as consistent action. It is therefore assumed that these students, to a certain extent, can act on critical literacy as they have the ability to uncover hidden

messages and power dynamics by drawing on their cultural and linguistic knowledge (Vasquez et al., 2019).

The research data collection activities, therefore, provide a safer and less formal space in which participants feel freer to articulate discomfort, critique, or resistance. Academic writing, by contrast, is a high-stakes space where they must conform to dominant expectations. This highlights how research methods can reveal layers of thought and voice that remain hidden in polished scholarly texts.

1.2 Identity

In relation the research question two, I discuss the main ideas around hybrid identity negotiation and formation.

1.2.1 Hybrid identity and strategies of identity negotiation and creation in research engagement.

Most participants (5 out of 6) demonstrated the ability to 'read the world into and onto texts' to connect their lived experiences with academic research. This connection enables them to critically assess Western scholarship in relation to their own cultural contexts and reveal both their critical literacies and their desire to reimagine society through research.

Language plays a central role in shaping their hybrid identities. All participants preferred writing in English, embracing its conventions, grammar, and vocabulary as the more convenient medium for academic expression. This engagement fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment, as striving to meet expectations for English academic writing became a motivating factor. Their use of English is expected, as their studies take place in an English-speaking academic environment where English functions as the medium of instruction. Yet, this engagement is accompanied by frustration, particularly over the difficulty of achieving a 'native-like' written voice. What initially feels liberating as a space for self-development simultaneously becomes a site of marginalisation.

Conversely, participants expresses a growing sense of distance from their mother tongues in academic contexts. Some reject their heritage languages as part of their scholarly identities, and consciously 'think in English' or attempt to 'act as a native' when conducting research. Others report difficulty writing in their mother tongue, which leaves them feeling disempowered and disconnected from a linguistic identity that might otherwise confer authority or provide comfort. Thus, they find themselves caught between two linguistic worlds: marginalised within dominant English discourse yet distanced from their heritage languages. The finding confirms that individuals carry a variety of identities that are fragmented, inconsistent, and sometimes conflicting (Luk & Lin, 2007).

These tensions illustrate the lived reality of hybrid identity. As Anzaldúa's (1999) notion of the borderlands suggests, hybridity is not neat or painless but marked by

constant negotiation, translation, and blending without fully belonging to either side. Participants' identity struggles are deeply shaped by linguistic hierarchies, emotional complexities, and structural power. 'Identity as position' (Moje & Luke, 2009, p.430) explains hybridity by emphasising how these individuals are continually positioned by others and institutions while also actively positioning themselves in response. Hybridity emerges as people move between, negotiate, and sometimes resist multiple, often contradictory positions shaped by language, culture, and power. Participants also employ diverse strategies to navigate these tensions. For example, Lee seeks support from English 'native speakers' for proofreading as a pragmatic adaptation that requires her to 'translate' her voice into the dominant discourse for recognition. Lim fully embraces Western resources while remaining aware of her cultural positioning. Bakhshi and Pham immerse themselves in Western norms and reject their own cultural knowledge. Chan attempts to balance Eastern and Western perspectives but acknowledges the dominance of Eurocentric academic traditions. Huang values his cultural knowledge but struggles to foreground it in practice. These strategies, while varied, often reflect an imagined sense of power through conforming to Western and monolingual academic norms. These findings further support the idea of Henkel (2005): academic identity is often formed either by internalising certain values, goals, meanings, language, theories, and knowledge, or through a process of interaction between how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others, balancing personal identity with external influences.

1.2.2 How have the students' perceptions of their academic identities changed since the beginning of the data collection, if at all?

With the exception of Pham, all participants reflect on changes in their perceptions of identity and practice since the beginning of the study. A recurring theme is their reliance on Western resources. Several note that they have become more conscious of incorporating sources from their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds, rather than depending almost exclusively on Western scholarship. Although decolonisation is not an explicit focus of my questions, participants' reflections highlight how decolonial processes emerge implicitly through lived experience. Their discomfort with the marginalisation of Asian or local scholarship reveals a growing critical awareness of epistemic hierarchies.

Participants also discuss learning to build arguments more effectively to project their presence and the value of their ideas. Some express a desire to write with greater emotional engagement, while others report a stronger awareness of the audience. These reflections suggest a shift from cautious conformity to a more intentional, authorial stance in which writing is seen not only as meeting structural conventions but also as a vehicle for projecting voice and presence. They also raise 'citation politics' as a critical literacy concern by disrupting taken-for-granted assumptions about who produces scholarship and where valuable research comes from. 'Identity as consciousness' (Moje & Luke, 2009, p.425) helps explain participants' changed perceptions by foregrounding how their ways of thinking and knowing evolve through engagement with literacy practices during the data-collection activities in

this study**.** As participants encounter critical discussion and reflective tasks, their understanding of literacy shifts from a technical skill to a socially and politically situated practice. This transformation reflects an emerging critical consciousness, in which participants become more aware of power, ideology, and their own positioning within knowledge production, thereby reshaping how they interpret and enact critical literacy in their academic work.

Identity negotiation, however, remains a constant and intricate process. The moves participants have made between emotion, perception, language, and power are complex, layered, and often ambivalent. This research reveals how such negotiations are entangled with both colonial realities and de/colonial acts. At times, participants engage in what might be understood as colonial acts, such as privileging English-only sources, orienting their writing exclusively towards English examiners, or reproducing dominant academic conventions to secure legitimacy. In other small moments, however, they engage in decolonial acts, for example by drawing on non-English knowledge traditions, valuing practitioner-oriented indigenous audiences, or resisting monolingual and deficit framings of academic writing. These practices often coexist, which reflects the complex and uneven nature of navigating English-dominant academia. Even if they cannot fully disrupt the system, their recognition of the imbalance signals a step toward epistemic resistance and potential future rebalancing in their scholarly work.

2. Space for critical affective literacy is essential

Table 5.1 summarises the key literacy practices identified across participants and maps them onto relevant dimensions of critical literacy, illustrating how these practices are enacted within doctoral research contexts. By linking specific examples from the data to aspects such as power, identity, discourse, and agency, the table demonstrates how critical literacy operates not as an abstract concept but as a set of situated practices embedded in participants' everyday academic work.

Table 5.1: Summary of Practices and Critical Literacy Dimensions

Participant Practice	Critical Literacy Aspect	Evidence from Data
Use of hedging (e.g., modal verb "can") in academic writing (Lim, Pham)	Power, discourse, identity positioning	Frequent use of "can" (Lim: 20 times; Pham: 70 times) to construct cautious claims and align with academic norms
"Playing the game" through linguistic strategies	Power, access, performativity of academic voice	Early-stage students use conventions strategically to gain legitimacy rather than fully internalised authority
Adapting writing to meet institutional/supervisory expectations (Chan)	Identity negotiation, discourse conformity, legitimacy	Alignment with departmental norms to position self as credible academic member
Writing in multiple languages / conducting research in mother tongue	Language, identity, diversity, agency	Use of L1 in interviews; Lee and Huang incorporating their own language into academic writing
Emotional and identity tensions in writing (Bakhshi, Lee)	Power, identity, affect, ideology	English as "power" but also source of frustration; distancing from L1; reliance on native-speaker norms
Literature review as "dinner party" (Huang, Lim)	Power, representation, voice, epistemic positioning	Selective inclusion/exclusion of scholars; awareness of Western dominance and knowledge hierarchies
Resistance or limited engagement with sociocultural aspects (outlier participant)	Alternative forms of criticality,	Focus on cognitive/technical skills; rejection of

Participant Practice	Critical Literacy Aspect	Evidence from Data
	disciplinary difference	linguistic/cultural influence on research

Developing critical affective literacy has several key benefits. First, it validates emotional experience as a legitimate part of scholarly identity rather than a weakness to be suppressed. Second, it equips students to read emotions as socially and historically situated. Third, it opens possibilities for transformation, as students learn to channel emotions into agency, resistance, and new forms of academic voice. Previous research shown that critical literacy has been beneficial for teaching and learning (Goodman & Cocca, 2014; Janks, 2000; O'Brien, 2001). While critical literacy enables doctoral students to interrogate power, discourse, and knowledge hierarchies, my research shows that this alone is not sufficient. Participants' narratives repeatedly highlight how academic research engagement is not only an intellectual endeavour but also an emotional journey marked by tension, vulnerability, and resilience. For this reason, I argue that critical affective literacy is equally important for understanding and supporting multilingual doctoral scholars. Critical affective literacy adds to the ability to recognise, reflect on, and strategically respond to the emotional dimensions of learning, writing, and knowledge production. Specifically, in this study, participants' emotional struggles can be understood as two-fold, including both cultural and linguistic dimensions. Culturally, participants navigate expectations about what it means to be a 'legitimate' researcher within Western academia, including norms about criticality, objectivity, originality, and appropriateness. Linguistically, participants navigate English alongside their heritage

languages, drawing on multiple linguistic resources in their meaning-making. In both dimensions, English serves as the language of power, having an impact on the emotional labour of multilingual doctoral students.

Critical affective literacy validates emotional experience as a legitimate part of academic identity. Emotions are not peripheral to academic life (Stanley, 2015); they are deeply entangled with issues of identity, belonging, and power. Participants in this study express frustration, pride, and unease. Importantly, critical affective literacy allows students to move beyond simply feeling these emotions to analyse them. This finding broadly supports the work of Ahmed (2015): it is essential for critical literacy to engage with the affective turn to more fully address the emotional dimensions of learning and social justice.

The process of becoming an academic requires emotional understanding. Developing a scholarly identity involves not only mastering research methods and disciplinary conventions but also negotiating self-doubt, marginalisation, and the pressures of conformity (Lehman, 2022). Emotional awareness enables students to capture the full breadth of their doctoral journey, including moments of empowerment and hesitation (Stanley, 2015). By reflecting on their affective experiences, participants reveal the strategies they employ to assert their presence in research practices and the reasons behind their cautious or delayed engagement with decolonial actions. In this way, emotions are not just obstacles but essential tools for understanding how students navigate and contest dominant academic structures.

Critical affective literacy equips students to read emotions as socially and historically situated. Their affective responses reveal how emotions function as indicators of power relations, suggesting that when students feel empowered, excluded, or in tension with academic norms. Critical affective literacy enables them to recognise how emotions intersect with colonial histories, linguistic hierarchies, and identity negotiations, and to position themselves more confidently within academic discourse. In this way, emotions become not only sites of struggle but also resources for critical reflection and decolonial possibility. As Ahmed (2015) stresses the importance of recognising how emotions are not simply private or psychological states but are shaped by language, power, and social relations.

Critical affective literacy opens possibilities for transformation. The participants' desire to write with more emotional engagement shows their attempt to resist a purely 'objective' academic voice and to assert authenticity and presence. Critical emotional literacy is important to multiple stakeholders. For students, it fosters self-reflection, resilience, and agency, helping them navigate the emotional complexities of academic work while maintaining authenticity and cultural integrity. For supervisors, developing an awareness of students' critical affective literacy practices is equally crucial. Supervisors who recognise the emotional colonial dimensions of doctoral research can provide more empathetic guidance, support the cultivation of agency, and facilitate students' ability to engage critically with epistemic hierarchies and colonial legacies. Theories of affect, particularly those of Ahmed (2015) and Zembylas (2022), help illuminate how emotions such as discomfort, shame, pride, or belonging are not merely personal feelings but are socially and institutionally

produced. This research extends the insights of Ahmed (2015) and Zembylas (2022) by showing that critical affective literacy creates a new pathway for understanding what transformation in academia can look like.

3. Space for Affective CL is limited

The space for critical affective literacy where multilingual doctoral students can engage authentically with texts, ideas, and themselves is often constrained in this study. The participants face multiple pressures that limit their ability to fully enact critical literacy.

External factors, including supervisor expectations, publication requirements, and broader institutional standards, shape their approach to research and writing. Participants describe being critical not as an organically developed skill, but as a necessity imposed by academic rules: their motivation to critique is largely practical, aimed at satisfying supervisors, publishing work, or securing future employment. In this context, rigid academic structures can redirect attention away from genuine reflection, decreasing confidence and limiting the enactment of critical literacy to a surface-level, performative practice. This explanation may lead to the observations by Dovchin (2020) that transnational students often face systemic inequalities, with their language practices either validated or marginalised depending on their backgrounds.

The process of research for multilingual students involves significant emotional labour**,** which is often unacknowledged. True hybridity of negotiating multiple languages, cultures, and identities requires a space where contradiction, discomfort, and growth are permitted (Anzaldúa, 1999). Within the bounds of this study, hybridity emerges as both a potential resource and a source of tension. In order to meet academic expectations, Lee and Bakshi abandon their authentic voices and write what they believe will be approved rather than what reflects their perspectives, experiences, or cultural knowledge. While this strategy may achieve superficial inclusion, it comes at a cost: participants report feelings of shame, disconnection, and loss of self. The academic journey becomes a site of compromised identity, in which authenticity is exchanged for conformity. This practice may contribute to the experiences highlighted by Udah and Francis (2022), who report that international doctoral students often experience exclusion, limited support, and a sense of disempowerment within higher education institutions. These experiences point to the need for UK higher education to create supportive environments where international multilingual students can explore multiple voices and non-traditional repertoires, and where the emotional dimensions of research are acknowledged as integral to scholarly work. Only by acknowledging the interplay of emotion, identity, and power can critical literacy be fully, authentically, and ethically enacted, enabling students to move beyond compliance toward genuine intellectual and creative agency.

One interesting variable is also found to be significantly associated with the ideas of critical affective literacy. Pham stands out among the participants as the only one who shares little about his emotional responses or personal engagement with the

texts he reads. Instead, he emphasises a consciously maintained stance of objectivity and analysis. This approach does not prevent him from reading critically, as he interrogates texts carefully, examines how authors construct arguments, and attends to the ideological and political contexts that shape his positions. Yet, Pham's practice differs from others in important ways. By focusing primarily on analytical detachment, he sidelines the reflective and emotional dimensions of critical literacy, thereby preventing him from engaging with broader structures of inequality and from connecting analysis to lived experience. For instance, Pham does not express concern about societal imbalances of power. He views power as dynamic and diffuse, and thus resists framing his work as benefiting any particular groups. While this perspective allows him to operate comfortably within dominant discourses, it also reveals a reluctance to acknowledge or address the asymmetries of knowledge and privilege embedded in academic traditions.

Unlike other participants who strive to reclaim space for marginalised voices or to contest dominant epistemologies, Pham remains within mainstream conventions, choosing conformity over disruption. His case raises an important question: Can one be considered critically literate without engaging in emotions, resistance or decolonial thinking? Freire and Macedo (1987) famously articulated the idea that reading the word is inseparable from reading the world, suggesting that our interpretations of texts are always influenced by our lived experiences, the sociocultural spaces we inhabit, and the languages we speak. Also, García & Kleifgen (2020) state that 'words and texts do not simply represent one worldview, it is incumbent upon literacy researchers to investigate how the acts of literacy and

different worlds interact.' This perspective emphasises that literacy practices do not merely reflect worldviews but actively interact with and shape social worlds. What distinguishes Pham, then, is not the absence of critical literacy but a narrower version of it. Pham appears to derive a sense of power from conforming to dominant practices rather than seeking to change them. Thus, while he might experience a certain empowerment, he inadvertently reproduces wider social relations of power: English as the language of power.

Ahmed (2015) critiques the rationalistic orientation of traditional critical literacy. He argues that such approaches often obscure our ability to comprehend the suffering of others. He suggests that critical literacy, when overly focused on logical reasoning and cognitive critique, may fall short in responding to the ethical complexities embedded in human experiences of pain, oppression, and marginalisation. In Pham's case, it is shown that critical literacy without emotional engagement leads to identity enactment without transformation**.**

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how multilingual international doctoral students make sense of, navigate, and respond to the conditions of internationalisation in UK higher education, with particular attention to identity, academic voice, and critical literacy. The research aims and objectives have been addressed through a qualitative narrative-based design and critical discourse analysis, underpinned by critical literacy theory. The research is underpinned by 3 main research questions: 1. What are the experiences of international PhD students in navigating their individual voices in research conducted in an English-speaking host country such as the UK?; 2. How are the academic identities of international multilingual PhD students performed and constructed through their English second-language research practices? 3. How is international multilingual PhD students' awareness of critical literacy manifested in higher education research practice?

Working with 6 participants from across the UK HE landscape, the research objectives were achieved through in-depth narrative interviews, reflective conversations, writing artifacts, and solicited dairies that invited participants to articulate their educational trajectories, linguistic histories, and evolving sense of themselves as emerging researchers. Also, the objectives were addressed by integrating critical literacy-informed prompts into the narrative inquiry and examining how participants responded to questions about power, knowledge, and inequality in academia. Rather than assuming that critical literacy was a preexisting competence, the study traced how participants' reflections evolved over time. An additional objective of the study was to explore whether participants' perceptions

shifted over the course of the research process, particularly in response to explicit engagement with critical literacy concepts. This objective was addressed through a temporal analysis of narratives collected at different stages of the data collection. By comparing earlier and later reflections, the study identified moments of re-interpretation, heightened awareness, and emerging reflexivity. Finally, the study aimed to contribute methodological insight into the use of narrative inquiry for researching identity and literacy in doctoral education. The narrative approach enabled attention to complexity, contradiction, and change over time and aligned with the study's poststructuralist orientation and supporting an ethical engagement with participants' voices.

Taken together, the research design, data collection, and analytical approach coherently addressed the study's aims and objectives. By centring multilingual doctoral students' narratives and critically examining their identity work and literacy practices, the study fulfilled its aim of offering a nuanced, participant-informed account of doctoral experience. In doing so, it provides a foundation for rethinking how critical literacy, identity, and multilingualism are understood within doctoral education. This is particularly important for revaluing multilingual doctoral students' marginalised voices and unpacking the layers of their identities in literacy practices. One of my participants, Huang, in the final interview, said: 'This is like a reminder for me in how I should read and write for myself and for my participants'. The findings motivate us to rethink how we do and teach reading and writing that draw on the logics and conventions of different languages.

Summary of findings

The following section presents a summary of the findings structured around the research questions.

Research Question 1

What are the experiences of international PhD students in navigating their individual voices in doing research in an English-speaking host country such as the UK?

This question examines how international doctoral students experience the process of developing and asserting an academic voice within an English-dominant research environment. Academic voice in this study is treated as a socially situated process shaped by institutional norms, disciplinary expectations, and students' positionality Lim is the only participant to demonstrate strong audience awareness, writing for educational practitioners, whereas the others focus on examiners, with Pham stating that he writes only for himself. The contrast highlights the uneven development of the authorial voice among the participants. Lim's strong awareness of readership suggests a more secure and open academic identity. By writing with practitioners in mind, she positions herself as a knowledge contributor whose work has relevance beyond thesis assessment. Lim's experience reflects an ability to align personal values, professional identity, and research purpose, which supports a more confident and socially situated academic voice. In contrast, the fact that most participants (5 out of 6) write primarily for examiners suggests that their research writing is experienced largely as a performative and evaluative exercise. While examiner-

oriented writing can support doctoral students in navigating assessment and gaining academic legitimacy, it may also constrain voice, audience awareness, and critical engagement.

Also, in their writing practices, most of them report limited confidence in making direct claims and often relying on linguistic strategies to 'mask' their uncertainty and doubt about their research. In contrast, those with professional experience prior to the PhD, like Lim, tend to write with more direct presence and perceive what they write with a 'practitioner voice'. This orientation constrains individual voice, as students prioritise compliance with perceived expectations over expressing original perspectives and critical stances. In this sense, the dominance of examiner-oriented writing reflects how doctoral research environments can narrow students' sense of what is permissible to say and how to say it. As Dixon et al. (2011) state when doctoral education lacks sustained communities of critical researchers, scholarly work becomes individualised, cautious, and oriented towards institutional approval. In such contexts, doctoral students are implicitly or explicitly encouraged to manage risk by aligning closely with examiners' expectations, which can limit experimentation, voice, and critical engagement.

Apparently, dominant academic norms remain pervasive and difficult to escape. All the participants express reservations about challenging these general rules, even when they feel that the conventions constrain their authentic voice or limit the expression of cultural and linguistic perspectives. The pressure to conform extends beyond procedural requirements and is closely tied to how these doctoral researchers

construct, constrain, or withhold their authorial voice to secure academic legitimacy and survival. Therefore, for multilingual doctoral writers, academic writing often presents challenges related to authorship, voice, and institutional expectations. Rather than treating students' multicultural backgrounds as deficits, this study recognises prior knowledge as a resource that may both enable and complicate participation. It allows analysis of how students draw on, adapt, or suppress prior ways of knowing when engaging in research activities such as reading and writing.

The participants are confident in the originality of their knowledge contributions. This confidence often stems from their unique positionalities: their backgrounds, languages, and shared identities with their research participants. In particular, they feel assured when presenting cultural knowledge that they believe is underrepresented in academic discourse. Most participants (5 out of 6) demonstrate the ability to 'read the world into and onto texts' to connect their lived experiences with academic research. This connection enables them to critically assess Western scholarship in relation to their own cultural contexts and reveal both their critical literacies and their desire to reimagine society through research. At the same time, they describe an 'unwilling acceptance' of Western academic traditions. While they draw on Western sources as required, they express unease with the marginalisation of Asian scholarship and ideas.

The struggles of navigating power, language, and legitimacy often compel students to reflect deeply, sometimes painfully, sometimes empowering. These moments of tension also became opportunities for postcolonial reflection, where students become

acutely aware of the colonial structures embedded in academia and their own positions within them. For example, the participants' academic voice emerges as a negotiated construct which is shaped by ongoing movement between Western academic norms and their own cultural resources. The findings are important for understanding voice not only as performance, but as something deeply connected to identity, belonging, and perceived entitlement within academic spaces. This shifts attention from surface-level competence to deeper questions of recognition, power, and inclusion (Kim, 2017; Mendelowitz & Govender, 2024; Zembylas, 2022), which highlights that the development of academic voice is inseparable from researchers' experiences of marginalisation, legitimacy, and agency within global higher education. These findings help to answer the second research question in the next section, turning explicitly to identity, examining how multilingual international doctoral students construct, contest, and rework who they are as scholars within English-dominant academic spaces.

Research Question 2

How are the academic identities of international multilingual PhD students performed and constructed through their English second language research practices?

This question shifts the analytical focus from experience to identity construction. It examines how academic identity is enacted and re/de-construted through everyday research practices conducted in a second language, including writing, presenting, and participating in academic discourse. This question allows exploration of how

language is entangled in identity formation in internationalised research environments.

This study explores how students negotiate hybrid identities that emerge from the intersection of past identities and new, sometimes imagined, academic positions. It attends to how students reconcile or hold in tension their established sense of self with the ideological expectations of English-dominant academia. The analysis foregrounds moments when participants negotiate competing demands: between personal histories, linguistic repertoires, and values, on the one hand, and institutional norms of legitimacy, neutrality, and accepted academic voice, on the other. The participants express a growing sense of distance from their mother tongues in academic contexts. Some reject their heritage languages as part of their scholarly identities, and consciously 'thought in English' (P01-INT3-p12) or attempted to 'act as native' (P01-INT3-p12) when conducting research. These are not only linguistic moves but also values that they hold to meet academic status. Others report difficulty writing in their mother tongue, which leaves them feeling disempowered and disconnected from a linguistic identity. Thus, they find themselves caught between two linguistic worlds and between two cultural and ideological worlds: marginalised within dominant English discourse yet distanced from their heritage languages.

However, they actively navigate identity formation within constrained institutional contexts. Language played a central role in shaping their hybrid identities. All participants prefer writing in English and embrace its conventions, grammar, and

vocabulary as the more convenient medium for academic expression. Their use of English is expected, as their studies take place in an English-speaking academic environment in which English serves as the medium of instruction. Yet, this practice is accompanied by frustration, particularly over the difficulty of achieving a 'native-like' written voice. What initially feels liberating as a space for self-development simultaneously becomes a site of marginalisation. Thus, they employ diverse strategies to navigate these tensions: seeking support from English 'native speakers' for proofreading, embracing Western resources with awareness of their cultural positioning, immersing themselves in Western norms and rejecting their own cultural knowledge, trying to balance Eastern and Western perspectives. These strategies, while varied, often reflect an imagined sense of power through conforming to Western and monolingual academic norms.

During data collection, I was also interested in examining whether engagement with questions informed by critical literacy prompted shifts in how they understood their academic identity. It seeks to determine whether making critical literacy concepts explicit contributed to heightened awareness, reinterpretation, or new perspectives on the identity construction process among the students.

With the exception of one participant (Pham), the rest reflect on changes in their perceptions of identity and practice since the beginning of the study. A recurring theme is their reliance on Western resources. Several note that they have become more conscious of incorporating sources from their own geographical, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, rather than depending almost exclusively on Western

scholarship. In particular, participants' reflections highlight how decolonial processes emerge implicitly and subtly through their lived experiences. Their discomfort with the marginalisation of Asian or local scholarship reveals a growing critical awareness of epistemic hierarchies. They also discuss learning to build arguments more effectively to project their presence in their work. Some express a desire to write with greater emotional engagement, while others report a stronger awareness of the audience. These reflections indicate a move from cautious conformity toward a more deliberate, authorial approach to projecting voice and presence. They also highlight 'citation politics' as an important aspect of critical literacy by challenging assumptions about who creates scholarship and the origins of valuable research.

Identity negotiation, however, remains a constant and intricate process. The moves participants make between emotion, perception, language, and power are complex, layered, and often ambivalent. This research reveals how such negotiations are entangled with both colonial realities and de/colonial acts. At times, participants enact what might be understood as colonial acts, such as privileging English-only sources, orienting their writing exclusively toward English-language examiners, or reproducing dominant academic conventions to secure legitimacy. In other small moments, however, they engage in decolonial acts, for example by drawing on non-English knowledge traditions, valuing practitioner-oriented indigenous audiences, or resisting monolingual and deficit framings of academic writing. These practices often coexist, which reflects the complex and uneven nature of navigating English-dominant academia. The project's underpinning of critical literacy theory

inadvertently creates conditions for participants to reflect on and recognise how power operates in their own contexts of researcher development. Even if they cannot fully disrupt the system, their recognition of the imbalance signals a step toward epistemic resistance and potential future rebalancing in their scholarly work. As such, the findings to this question are relatively coherent with those for research question 3 in the next section.

Research Question 3

How is international multilingual PhD students' awareness of critical literacy manifested in higher education research practice?

This question explicitly foregrounds critical literacy as a central theoretical lens. It examines how international doctoral students understand, enact, or implicitly demonstrate critical literacy in their research practices. Critical literacy is conceptualised not merely as a learned academic skill, but as an awareness of how knowledge production is shaped by power, ideology, and social positioning. The question allows exploration of whether and how students read the research world critically, even when such practices are not explicitly named or institutionally recognised.

Overall, 5 out of 6 participants demonstrate their capacity to expand the boundaries of academic discourse. They recognise that they are not uncritically absorbing norms but interrogating their effects on voice, identity, and legitimacy. Some directly challenge these discourses by embedding non-English terms, citing non-Western

scholars, or foregrounding ‘local’ knowledge as valuable. However, these actions are less visible in their formal academic work and emerge more openly through diary entries and interviews in this research process. Their actions during the data collection reveal that criticality is not entirely absent but negotiated. They hold critical perspectives internally and articulate them in reflective spaces, but often strategically mute or adapt them in academic work. It is therefore assumed that, to a certain extent, these students can engage in critical literacy, as they can uncover hidden messages and power dynamics by drawing on their cultural and linguistic knowledge.

Ahmed (2015) critiques the rationalistic orientation of traditional critical literacy. He argues that such approaches often obscure our ability to comprehend others' suffering. He suggests that critical literacy, when overly focused on logical reasoning and cognitive critique, may fall short in responding to the ethical complexities embedded in human experiences of pain, oppression, and marginalisation. The process of research for these multilingual students involves significant emotional labor**.** The participants’ narratives repeatedly highlight how academic research engagement is not only an intellectual endeavour but also an emotional journey marked by tension, vulnerability, and resilience. For this reason, I argue that critical affective literacy is equally important for understanding and supporting multilingual doctoral scholars. Specifically, in this study, participants’ emotional struggles can be understood as two-fold, including both cultural and linguistic dimensions. Culturally, participants navigate expectations about what it means to be a ‘legitimate’ researcher within Western academia, including norms about criticality, objectivity, originality,

and appropriateness. Linguistically, participants navigate English alongside their heritage languages, drawing on multiple linguistic resources in their meaning-making. In both dimensions, English serves as the language of power having an impact on the emotional labour of multilingual doctoral students.

Participants in this study expressed frustration, pride, and unease. Critical affective literacy adds to the ability to recognise, reflect on, and strategically respond to the emotional dimensions of learning, writing, and knowledge production. Critical affective literacy validates emotional experience as a legitimate part of academic identity. By reflecting on their affective experiences, participants reveal the strategies they employ to assert their presence in research practices and the reasons behind their cautious or delayed engagement with decolonial actions. Emotional awareness enables students to capture the full breadth of their doctoral journey, including moments of empowerment and hesitation. Their affective responses reveal how emotions act as indicators of power relations, which suggests when students feel empowered, excluded, or in tension with academic norms. The participants' desire to write with more emotional engagement shows their attempt to resist a purely 'objective' academic voice and to assert authenticity and presence. Critical affective literacy opens possibilities for transformation.

Next, I explore the challenges that international doctoral students face in enacting critical literacy.

The space for critical affective literacy where multilingual doctoral students can engage authentically with texts, ideas, and themselves is often constrained. International students face multiple pressures that limit their ability to fully enact critical literacy.

External factors, including supervisor expectations, publication requirements, and broader institutional standards, shape their approach to research and writing. Participants describe being critical not as an organically developed skill, but as a necessity imposed by academic rules: their motivation to critique is largely practical, aimed at satisfying supervisors, publishing work, or securing future employment. In this context, rigid academic structures can redirect attention away from genuine reflection, decreasing confidence and limiting the enactment of critical literacy to a surface-level, performative practice.

The emotional process of research for multilingual students is often unacknowledged. True hybridity of negotiating multiple languages, cultures, and identities requires a space where contradiction, discomfort, and growth are permitted (Anzaldúa, 1999). Within the bounds of this study, hybridity emerges as both a potential resource and a source of tension. For Lim and Huang, working across languages, identities, and knowledge traditions creates opportunities for more creative and meaningful scholarly expression. For others like Bakhshi and Pham, however, inhabiting this hybrid space proves difficult. In several interviews and diary entries, they describe making deliberate choices to suppress personal perspectives, cultural references, or alternative ways of meaning-making in order to align with

what they perceive as academically acceptable. While this strategy may achieve superficial inclusion, it comes at a cost: Bakhshi and Pham report feelings of shame, disconnection, and loss of self. The academic journey becomes the site of compromised identity, where authenticity is exchanged for conformity.

One interesting variable is also found to be significantly associated with the ideas of critical affective literacy. Pham stands out among the participants as the only one who shares little about his emotional responses or personal engagement with the texts he reads. Instead, he emphasises a consciously maintained stance of objectivity and analysis. Unlike other participants who strive to reclaim space for marginalised voices or to contest dominant epistemologies, Pham remains within mainstream conventions, choosing conformity over disruption. It is important to note that critical literacy is not defined only as resistance. It is a way of reading, writing, and meaning-making that attends to power, rather than as a fixed stance of opposition (Luke, 2013). Pham demonstrates his understanding of power imbalances. However, his case raises an important question that contests this study: Can one be considered critically literate without engaging in emotion, resistance, or decolonial thinking?

Freire and Macedo (1987) claim that our interpretations of texts are always influenced by our lived experiences, the sociocultural spaces we inhabit, and the languages we speak. What distinguishes Pham, then, is not the absence of critical literacy but a narrower version of it. Pham's example suggests that critical literacy may exist in multiple forms:vIn Pham's case, it is shown that critical literacy without emotional engagement leads to identity enactment without transformation**.** Pham

appears to derive a sense of power from conforming to dominant practices rather than seeking to change them. Thus, while he might experience a certain empowerment, he inadvertently reproduces wider social relations of power: English as the language of power. Empowerment thus happens at an individual (micro) level but not in meso/macro-levels that push back at uneven power relations within the institution or academia at large.

Significance and implications of the findings

This subsection outlines the key contributions and implications of the study in response to the empirical, theoretical, and methodological gaps identified in the literature. Situated at the intersection of doctoral education, literacy, and multilingual doctoral students' identity within global higher education, the thesis advances a critically grounded understanding of how international doctoral students experience, negotiate, and enact academic literacy practices.

First of all, this study addresses the relative paucity of research on doctoral students' lived experiences. This research foregrounds the everyday literacy practices, identity negotiations, and emotional labour of international doctoral students throughout their studies. While existing research has tended to focus on undergraduate populations, this thesis demonstrates that doctoral-level academic literacy development is ongoing and deeply shaped by institutional, disciplinary, linguistic, and transnational power relations. The findings of this study are significant in that they reframe doctoral research not merely as a process of skills acquisition or knowledge production, but as

a deeply ideological, affective, and cultural process with consequences for identity and power. The study highlights that academic voice, critical engagement, and legitimacy are neither evenly distributed nor transparently acquired, but are negotiated within already unequal academic structures (Noxolo, 2009). The study also contributes to identity theory by showing how dynamic multilingual doctoral identity is. Participants' narratives reveal identity not as a stable attribute but as something continuously negotiated through reading, writing, audience awareness, and encounters with academic authority. This contributes to the existing literature by illustrating how institutional power structures mediate identity formation and constrain opportunities for voice, particularly for multilingual and international researchers (Lillis & Scott, 2007). The findings suggest that doctoral training and supervision need to move beyond a narrow focus on linguistic competence and instead attend to how academic voice, identity, and legitimacy are shaped within English-dominant and unequal academic structures. Supervisors play a key role in mediating these dynamics and should be supported in recognising the emotional, linguistic, and cultural labour involved in doctoral research.

This study has contributed to an in-depth and more nuanced understanding of how international doctoral students in the social sciences experience and negotiate academic literacy practices within multilingual and culturally diverse contexts. The significance of this lies in reframing multilingualism not as a deficit or barrier, but as a form of epistemic and semiotic resource that can enrich knowledge production and researcher development. By focusing on a small group of participants from disciplines such as Education, Law, and Gender Studies, the research has highlighted

the complex interplay between language, identity, and knowledge production, moving beyond deficit-oriented perspectives commonly found in the literature. The findings demonstrate that research practice is not a neutral or purely technical skill, but a socially and politically situated practice shaped by affective experiences, disciplinary expectations, and broader power relations. These findings suggest that multilingual doctoral students possess access to rich linguistic, cultural, and experiential repertoires that can support them to interpret, negotiate, and potentially reshape academic conventions. However, it is demonstrated that such resources do not automatically translate into critical literacy practices. Instead, it highlights that critical literacy often requires what might be understood as 'conditions of possibility' such as structured opportunities, dialogic spaces, and supportive environments in which students can reflect on, mobilise, and legitimise their resources. This points to an important implication for doctoral education: that supervisors and institutions play a key role in co-creating these conditions, making explicit the otherwise implicit norms of academic discourse, and enabling more inclusive and reflexive forms of engagement with knowledge (Kamler & Thomson, 2006). Through a critical literacy lens, this study foregrounds the agency of multilingual doctoral students as active meaning-makers who draw on diverse linguistic and cultural resources to engage with and, at times, challenge dominant academic discourses in the UK. While the study is limited in scale, its in-depth, qualitative insights offer valuable implications for rethinking doctoral education as a more inclusive and reflexive space, and point to the need for further research that centres diverse student voices in higher education.

Conceptually, the study makes a significant theoretical contribution by extending critical literacy scholarship beyond its traditional focus on classroom-based pedagogical interventions and younger learners. By applying a critical literacy lens to doctoral academic reading and writing practices, the thesis demonstrates how literacy functions as a site of power, identity formation, and institutional regulation at the highest level of academic study. This research also extends the insights of Ahmed (2015) and Zembylas (2022) by showing that critical affective literacy creates a new pathway for transforming literacy. Only by acknowledging the interplay of emotion, identity, and power can critical literacy be fully, authentically, and ethically enacted, enabling students to move beyond compliance toward genuine intellectual and creative agency. The findings indicate that critical affective literacy practices are often present but unnamed in doctoral students' work. Making critical affective literacy explicit through discussion, reflection, or curriculum design may support students in recognising and articulating their critical capacities. For example, supervisors can explicitly discuss with students how examiner expectations shape writing, while also inviting conversation about alternative audiences, languages, or forms of expression that matter to the student's identity and research values.

This study contributes to knowledge by offering a critical and nuanced understanding of how multilingual doctoral researchers engage with academic literacy as a socially situated, affective, and power-laden practice. In particular, it highlights how dominant English-centric and Western academic norms continue to shape doctoral experiences, often in subtle and unexamined ways, pointing to the need for more explicit engagement with critical and decolonial perspectives in doctoral education.

The findings suggest that multilingual researchers are not simply navigating linguistic challenges, but sometimes also using their linguistic resources in complex ways to (re)position themselves as emerging researchers and 'academically literate. Importantly, this study demonstrates that the intervention programme, grounded in critical literacy and critical narrative inquiry, can function as a pedagogical model for doctoral support. By creating structured spaces for reflection, dialogue, and experimentation with language and voice, the programme enables doctoral students to critically engage with academic conventions, draw on their multilingual resources, and develop greater agency in knowledge production. Critical literacy may also need to be rearticulated across disciplines, particularly in fields that prioritise rationality and technical aspects, where criticality is expressed through analytical rather than explicitly sociocultural approaches. Even in these contexts, literacy practices are not neutral but remain positioned and positioning, requiring approaches that uncover how power, identity, and ideology operate in less visible ways. As such, the research offers practical implications for designing more inclusive and reflexive doctoral support practices that move beyond deficit approaches, instead recognising multilingualism as a resource and supporting more diverse and decolonial ways of thinking, reading, and writing in academia.

Doctoral programmes can incorporate structured activities such as reflective writing tasks, multilingual drafting, or supervision conversations focused on why particular academic conventions are used and when they might be strategically adapted or resisted. Supervisors who recognise the emotional colonial dimensions of doctoral research are likely to provide more empathetic guidance, support the cultivation of

agency, and facilitate students' ability to engage critically with epistemic hierarchies and colonial legacies. Future research could make a valuable contribution to higher education by examining supervisors' critically literate practices and their role in shaping doctoral researchers' academic development.

At a policy level, while international doctoral students are frequently positioned as contributors to research output and global competitiveness (HESA, 2021; UK Parliament, 2025), their intellectual contributions are not always equally valued (Mittelmeier, et al., 2025). Instead, their contributions may still be marginalised within dominant discourses (Mittelmeier et al., 2025; Kubota, 2020; Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2017). The findings suggest a need to move beyond instrumental views of international doctoral students and to recognise them as knowledge producers whose perspectives can challenge dominant assumptions and enrich academic cultures.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates and emphasises the value of critical narrative inquiry for researching doctoral education and identity. This offers a nuanced, qualitative account of how multilingual international doctoral students are positioned by their institutions (often through language or other meaning-making practices) and how they use language (and other meaning-making practices) to (re)position themselves. The integration of a poststructuralist orientation further enables the analysis to move beyond questions of accuracy or truthfulness, focusing instead on how meanings, identities, and positions are discursively produced. The critical literacy orientation of the data collection process creates structured

opportunities for participants to reflect, articulate, and make visible the institutional and sociopolitical power relations shaping their research practices and researcher development. Through interviews and creative writing diaries, participants can identify constraints, question taken-for-granted academic norms, and consider alternative ways of positioning themselves as scholars. This study, therefore, demonstrates how these activities can function as a site of critically literate practice and offer foundations for more reflective and critically informed approaches to researcher development. Table 6.1 describes four main writing tasks and explicitly shows how each task supported critical literacy enactment and researcher development**.**

Table 6.1: *Critical-literacy-informed diary writing tasks*

Writing task	**Purpose of the task**	**How critical literacy is enacted**	**Contribution to researcher development**
Biographical writing and bio-poems	To invite participants to represent themselves beyond conventional academic genres	To enable participants to reflect on identity, positioning, affect, and voice and foreground how selves are discursively constructed and shaped by power	To support identity exploration and recognition of personal, cultural, and ethical investments in research

Writing task	Purpose of the task	How critical literacy is enacted	Contribution to researcher development
Dinner table designing (literature review metaphor)	To reimagine the literature review as a relational and empowering space	To make visible how knowledge, authority, and inclusion/exclusion operate within academic fields; to encourage reflection on whose voices are centred or marginalised	To encourage critical awareness of academic hierarchies and students' positioning within disciplinary knowledge
Letter-writing to research participants	To shift audience away from examiners and formal academic readers	To think beyond examiner-oriented writing by foregrounding relationality, responsibility, and ethical communication	To encourage students' sense of audience and purpose,
Writing for different audiences and/or languages	To explore the experience of writing beyond academic genres/	To expose how language choice, genre, and audience shape voice, authority, and legitimacy	To enable participants to experiment with multilingual and hybrid voices, and broaden

Writing task	Purpose of the task	How critical literacy is enacted	Contribution to researcher development
	dominant language use		possibilities for scholarly expression

Each writing task is accompanied by a follow-up reflection interview, in which participants are invited to discuss their choices, feelings, and thinking processes during the task. These interviews provide opportunities for international multilingual students to articulate how they navigate audience, language, identity, and power in their reading and writing.

The findings of this study show both points of convergence and divergence when considered alongside existing research on doctoral students across universities in England and Scotland. While universities in England and Scotland differ in terms of doctoral structure, funding models, and levels of formal training, both contexts share similar expectations around independent research and English-dominant academic practices. As such, the experiences of participants in this study reflect broader UK doctoral conditions, particularly in relation to navigating implicit academic expectations, linguistic demands, and identity negotiations. While research across both contexts has increasingly acknowledged internationalisation and student diversity, this sample adds further depth by illustrating how multilingual resources, identity positioning, and disciplinary contexts intersect in complex and uneven ways. In doing so, the study extends the diversity of the literature by moving beyond generalised accounts of international doctoral students to provide a situated, process-oriented understanding of how critical literacy is enacted, negotiated, and, at times, resisted within UK doctoral education.

Limitations of the Study

As qualitative research, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting its findings. These limitations do not diminish the value of the study; rather, they clarify the scope, context, and boundaries within which the findings should be understood.

First, the study involved a relatively small number of participants. While this is appropriate for an in-depth narrative inquiry, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable to all multilingual international doctoral students in the UK or elsewhere. Instead, the study offers analytic and conceptual insights into how identity, voice, and critical literacy are negotiated in specific contexts.

Secondly, the study is situated within a specific national and institutional context, namely UK higher education. Doctoral structures, assessment practices, and expectations around academic practices and criticality vary across countries and institutions. As such, the findings reflect the particular conditions of UK doctoral education and may not fully capture the experiences of multilingual doctoral students in other higher education systems. Readers should therefore consider the transferability of the findings in relation to their own institutional and cultural contexts. However, given the global dominance of western academic traditions (UK traditions in particular), the questions raised by this study may still have relevance for higher education institutions globally (particularly in the postcolonial countries which may have inherited UK-styled academic traditions for researcher development).

Thirdly, the study focuses on participants who are willing to engage in reflective narrative inquiry and ongoing dialogue over the data collection period. This may have shaped the nature of the data, as participants who are more comfortable with reflection or discussion may be overrepresented. Additionally, participants' accounts are influenced by their relationship with the researcher and the research setting, and some experiences or perspectives may remain unarticulated or underexplored. Furthermore, while the study traces changes in participants' perceptions over time, the duration of the data collection was relatively limited. Although the temporal design allows for examination of shifts in awareness and interpretation, longer-term longitudinal research would be needed to explore how identity, authorial voice, and critical literacy continue to evolve across different stages of the doctoral journey and beyond thesis submission.

Fifth, the study foregrounds participants' self-reported narratives rather than observational data or textual analysis of thesis writing itself. While narratives provide rich insight into how participants make sense of their experiences, they do not capture all aspects of practice. Future research could complement narrative accounts with analyses of supervision interactions, supervisors, or institutional documents to offer a more comprehensive picture of how identity and critical literacy are enacted.

Finally, the study is informed by the researcher's positionality as a multilingual international doctoral student. While reflexivity was actively maintained throughout the research process, this positionality may have shaped the questions asked, the

interactions with participants, and the interpretations of data. At the same time, this insider perspective enabled trust, shared understanding, and depth of engagement that might not otherwise have been possible. This dual position is therefore recognised as both a limitation and a strength of the study.

In acknowledging these limitations, the study aims to provide a transparent account of its scope and boundaries. These limitations also point to productive directions for future research, including studies involving larger and more diverse participant groups, longer timeframes, and comparative or mixed-methods approaches.

Directions for future research

The findings of this study point to several productive directions for future research that can further deepen and extend critical understandings of doctoral education, academic literacy, and identity in global higher education.

Firstly, there is a clear need for further research into critical affective literacy at doctoral level. While this thesis has highlighted the emotional dimensions of academic reading, writing, and identity negotiation, future studies could more explicitly theorise affect as a site of power, regulation, and resistance. Longitudinal and ethnographic designs would be particularly valuable in examining how emotions are shaped by institutional norms, linguistic hierarchies, and doctoral timelines, and how doctoral students mobilise affective resources to sustain academic agency over time.

Next, future research would benefit from more sustained engagement with decolonial perspectives in doctoral academic literacy studies. Critical literacy frameworks offer important tools for interrogating power; decolonial approaches can further illuminate how colonial legacies continue to shape what counts as legitimate knowledge. Research that foregrounds epistemic justice, pluriversality, and Southern versus non-Western knowledge traditions could challenge Eurocentric assumptions in doctoral literacy norms and internationalisation discourses. Studies that complicate these binaries (north-south and east-west) are also needed (i.e., south perspectives in the north).

Furthermore, the findings suggest the importance of further investigation into the supervisory relationship, particularly supervisors' literacy-related practices and expectations. Future studies could explore how supervisors interpret, reinforce, or contest dominant academic norms, and how their feedback practices, discursive positioning, and relational styles shape doctoral students' literacy development. Including supervisors as participants would enable a more relational and systemic understanding of doctoral academic socialisation.

Also, there is a need for more research focusing on doctoral students in non-social science disciplines, where academic literacy practices, genres, and epistemological assumptions may differ substantially. Much of the existing critical literacy and identity research, including the present study, is situated within social science or education contexts. Expanding this work into STEM, health sciences, or professional

fields would help to examine how discipline-specific norms interact with language, power, and identity in doctoral education.

Moreover, future research could adopt larger-scale qualitative designs, such as incorporating focus group interviews alongside individual interviews, to capture collective meaning-making and shared struggles among doctoral students. Focus groups may be particularly useful for exploring peer dynamics, informal literacy learning, and collective forms of agency. In addition, interviewing supervisors alongside doctoral students would allow for triangulation of perspectives and provide a more comprehensive account of how critical literacy is negotiated across hierarchical and institutional relationships.

Finally, future research would benefit from adopting a longer, more sustained data-collection period to capture the temporal and developmental nature of doctoral academic identity and critical literacy practices. Extending data collection across multiple stages of the doctorate would enable researchers to examine how students' literacy practices. Such an approach would move beyond snapshot accounts of doctoral experience and provide a more nuanced understanding of how identity and critical literacy are gradually negotiated, contested, and reconfigured over time. A longer data collection period would also allow for closer attention to affective trajectories, revealing how emotions fluctuate rather than follow linear patterns throughout the doctoral journey. By tracing these shifts longitudinally, future studies could offer richer, more context-sensitive insights into the dynamic interplay between literacy, identity, affect, and power within doctoral education.

Taken together, these directions underscore the need for future research on doctoral education that is methodologically diverse, critically informed, and attentive to affect, power, discipline, and relationality. Such work has the potential to further disrupt deficit narratives and contribute to more equitable and inclusive understandings of doctoral academic life. It opens up the field for further investigation, placing multilingual international doctoral students and their complex identities at the centre of the shifting sociopolitical conditions of higher education. This is particularly important because their experiences are often marginalised or treated as peripheral within dominant research on doctoral education, despite being deeply shaped by global power relations, linguistic hierarchies, and institutional norms. Critical literacy research further extends this field of inquiry by prompting questions about new and often taken-for-granted sites of education where power, identity, and knowledge are continuously negotiated rather than simply transmitted.

This thesis began with my experiences navigating academic life as a multilingual student of colour and concludes with a renewed sense of possibility. While the accounts presented here expose the inequities, silences, and constraints that continue to shape internationalised higher education, they also reveal moments of courage, care, and quiet resistance. Listening closely to participants' stories has reminded me that academic spaces are not fixed, but continually made and remade through everyday practices of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and relating to others. I hope this work, in a small way, contributes to the creation of more humane and inclusive academic environments where multilingual scholars can speak in their own

voices, draw on the fullness of their identities, and be recognised not only for their labour but also for the knowledge they bring.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Diary interview questions (7 weeks)

Interview week 1: Getting to know you

1. Can you talk briefly about where you are from, your cultural and language background? And how do they affect you in choosing your research topic?
2. If you had to make a short diversity statement about yourself, what would you say?

This is what I would say: I am a young, Asian female with a significant amount of education about English language education. However, English is not my first language. Vietnamese is my mother tongue. I am also an international student in the UK, I am culturally different from the majority of people around me. And I have experienced racism in the UK. This has given me a particular passion for inclusion and diversity in higher education in Western society. Being in the UK for more than 3 years, I think I also have been affected by 'British identity' that makes me sometimes feel I am different from Vietnamese community back in my home country.

3. Can you tell me briefly, research purpose and your main findings/observations so far?
4. What has made and motivated you to choose the topic of your research? What does the topic say about you as a researcher?

(i.e. I am doing research in critical literacy practices among EAL multilingual PhD students. I consider myself as an educator passionate in language education and pay attention to multilingual students' voices)

5. How do you describe the research field that you feel you belong to?
6. Do you think your cultural, historical, language, geographical background affects the way you do research in English? If so, in what way?
7. Can you describe 1 to 2 critical events that has urged you or changed you/your study in the process of your study?
8. Tell me some narratives of marginalized groups of people that have touched your heart and urged you to act as a researcher? what's the role of social justice in your research? What communities do you want to make social impacts via your research?
7. Name/ Describe the field that you feel you belong to? Do you feel you belong to more than one field?

Interview week 2: Reading activities and communicating about research

1. What kind of genres do you normally read? (academic journal articles, novels, blogposts) Why are you choosing those genres?
2. What are your favorite authors in the field? How diverse is your group of authors? Why did you choose their works to read?
3. What aspects of a journal article do you pay attention to when you read? In what order? (Meaning? Vocabulary?)
4. What were your expectations in terms of your reading and writing development during your PhD when you first started your PhD?
5. What were your experiences with reading and writing in English before you started your PhD?
6. What do you enjoy most when you read? How involved do you feel being a part of a research community when you do your extensive reading?
7. In what way is it beneficial for the development of your sense of belonging to the field? What do you enjoy most about it? What has been the least enjoyable?
8. Try to reflect on when you just started your PhD, what had been your concerns to 'fit into' your research communities via reading? (Concept comprehension difficulties? Unfamiliar names of authors? Too broad area?
9. How does your reading affect how you communicate about your research? How are your communicating experiences with supervisors and with other people within and outside your work area?

Interview week 3: Discussion of critical literacy in reading practices

1. How to be a text critic? Who should be a text critic?
2. Assess your ability to be a text critic in English and your own language?
3. How have you been encouraged to be a text critic as a PhD researcher?
4. Do you think a PhD researcher needs to have a much higher level of being a text critic? (Obviously, you got taught about critical reading in a previous degree?) How different should PhD reading be?
5. How is your marginalised group presented/depicted in the research you read? How do you feel about the depicted image?
6. Who has the most power in your literatures that you have read? How do you know? How do you feel about it?
7. How do you feel about the inequalities of power? How has this been reflected in the text?
8. Are there any 'new' perspectives that you want to bring to your research? What are they, and why? How have your supervisors (or others in your research community) responded to this?
9. If most of your reading are Western scholars, how different are your perspectives? Give examples
10. Do you think text has the power to shape our identity?
11. How does your reading affect your research paradigm? Talk about your research paradigm

Interview week 4: Dinner table metaphor

1. Do you enjoy writing a literature review? Why or why not?
2. There must be more authors/scholars you have read or learned about through their works. Why are you inviting these people? Did you have a hard time choosing who to invite?
3. Imagine these guests bring their own speciality dish to the party. Can you tell me what they are bringing?
4. What do you tend to do during the meal to make sure the atmosphere does not have any awkwardness, and has the flow? (Criticise? Raise a debate among them, allow each guest a time slot to take a turn to talk?)
5. Do you think you will be 'swallowed' by the discussion? Who will enjoy your food?
6. How do you criticise? What is important? What is not?
7. Is there anything has not been done? Is there anything that could have been done but was not?
8. Do you enjoy this party? In what aspects? How does it help you?
9. What might your supervisors think of your party? Have your supervisors been a co-host? Would you like so? Why?
10. Think about the party table again from the previous week. Among those guests, who would you like to talk to again and which piece of their writing is your favourite that you would like to talk about? What do you like about

it and what have you learnt from it? Describe your feelings after you read it?

Interview week 5

Think again about the party dinner in previous weeks. Imagine you are the host who cooks the meal. Cooking and writing have much in common. Good ingredients, such as fresh thoughts and powerful language tools, impact good writing. Both writing and cooking can have varying degrees of preparation. Some people like to use recipes, some don't.

1. Do you have any 'recipes' of 'formulas', general rules that you follow in writing?
2. Do you think that 'recipes/ formula' and sticking to the strict rules help you create a good piece of writing?
3. What are the things (ingredients) you need in order to get into your writing?
4. Do you always follow the 'recipes' strictly?
5. Do you consciously think about your style of writing when you write?
6. What do you enjoy most when you write?
7. What do you hope to bring to your guests when you create the meal?
8. What are the steps you follow?
9. Are they your own or are you following someone else's (or both)?
10. Do you ever use language(s) that are not in the expected list of ingredients?
11. What non-English language ingredients could you substitute or would add more flavour to your dish?
12. What do you like best in your piece of writing?
13. In what way do you think your discussion with the scholars at the dinner party helps you create your own piece of work?
14. Are you confident in bringing your writing to the 'table'?

Interview week 6: Writing experiences

1. Describe a time when you felt you resisted English writing conventions in your academic writing?
2. What do you think about the opinion: 'Academic prose is dry and impersonal?'
3. How 'personal' are you when you write academic texts?
4. Who is your main audience reading your piece of writing? How do you establish a connection with your readers (supervisors, examiners)?

5. Have you ever thought of/font of the idea of writing non-academic texts? Would you ever consider incorporating your other pieces of non-academic writing into your academic writing? Why or why not?
6. Share your favourite piece of writing which is not a part of your PhD writing (If there are any). How different is it compared to your PhD pieces of writing? If you have not got one, why?
7. How important do you feel the role of the personal, narrative, and affective in academic publishing?
8. Do you notice when the experts use the first person in their writing? Why do you think they use the first person? Do you have the confidence to use the first person in your research?
9. Do you have your preferred writing convention in your first language? Do you bring your personal characteristics into communication when delivering presentations to your supervisors or at conferences, and when you debate?
10. What are the styles of writing that you enjoy the most?

Interview week 7: Critical digital literacy

1. Which digital platforms/ social media/ digital newspapers relevant to your research have you been engaged with?
2. Have you had separate digital platforms for academic and personal/ social identity? Where is the best place for identity performance?
3. What can be the best platform for academics? What multimedia-format stories can you create out of your research?
4. Have you found any fake news/ miscommunications / false myths about your research topic and your community on the digital platforms? What are the intentions of that fake news? What actions have you taken accordingly? How do you want to contribute to the discussion out there?
5. Are you reserved to do something publicly (composing your own stories, on digital platforms?
6. How do you think academic digital practices/ media production can be embedded in PhD training? (What educators should do? How do you expect to be trained?)
7. Imagine if you were to publish a piece of writing to an online platform? What would you publish? Why? What message and to whom do you want to bring it to?
8. Have you ever thought of the impact you can bring through media?
9. What AI- powered platforms/apps for research and academic writing have you used? What is your attitude/belief/trust towards this? (credibility?)
10. Will AI (like Chat GPT) predict the future of academic research?
11. Can AI answer political questions? Is AI neutral or biased?