

## English as a Liminal Language: Education, Migratory Imagination and Adolescent Identity (A Cultural Study in the Diasporic Context of Bandar Anzali, Iran)

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The present study aimed to explore how English language learning functions as a liminal cultural space shaping educational experience, migratory imagination, and adolescent identity construction within the diasporic sociocultural context of Bandar Anzali, Iran.

**Methods and Materials:** This study employed a qualitative cultural studies approach grounded in interpretive social research and critical sociolinguistics. The research design relied on qualitative analysis of cultural and educational sources representing English language learning experiences among adolescents. Data consisted of educational discourses, locally circulating cultural texts, youth narratives, institutional representations of English education, and theoretical sources related to language, identity, globalization, and diaspora. Materials were selected through purposive and theoretical sampling based on relevance to identity formation and migratory imagination. Data collection emphasized publicly available and culturally situated texts rather than individual measurement. Analysis was conducted using thematic and interpretive discourse analysis informed by cultural theory, identity studies, and sociolinguistic frameworks, involving open coding, category development, and interpretive synthesis to identify recurring symbolic patterns linking language learning with social aspiration and identity negotiation.

**Findings:** The findings indicate that English operates as symbolic capital associated with social mobility, prestige, and participation in global modernity. Adolescents experience English learning as a liminal identity condition characterized by negotiation between local belonging and imagined global futures. Language education fosters migratory imagination even in the absence of physical migration, enabling youth to mentally inhabit transnational identities. Educational environments function as spaces of ethical self-formation and narrative reconstruction, while translanguaging practices produce hybrid cultural expression rather than linguistic replacement. Emotional engagement with English learning reinforces investment in future-oriented identities, demonstrating that language acquisition simultaneously transforms self-perception, aspiration structures, and social positioning.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that English in the Bandar Anzali context should be understood not merely as a foreign language but as a cultural threshold mediating globalization, identity transformation, and diasporic imagination. English learning becomes a process through which adolescents negotiate modernity, mobility, and belonging, revealing language education as a central site of cultural transition in contemporary globalized societies.

**Keywords:** English, Migration, Adolescents, Identity, Diaspora, Culture

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary global order, English has exceeded its historical status as a foreign language and has become a powerful cultural medium through which individuals imagine mobility, negotiate belonging, and construct future-oriented identities. Across diverse sociocultural contexts, English functions not merely as an educational subject but as a symbolic resource intertwined with globalization, social aspiration, and transnational imagination. Cultural globalization has transformed language learning into a deeply ideological process, linking linguistic competence with modernity, cosmopolitanism, and participation in global networks (Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Pennycook, 2006). Within such conditions, learning English often represents entry into an imagined world that exists simultaneously beyond and within local realities, positioning learners in a transitional cultural space between present belonging and projected futures.

Language, from a sociological perspective, operates as symbolic power. Bourdieu conceptualizes language as a form of capital that structures access to prestige, opportunity, and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1991). English, as a global linguistic currency, increasingly mediates access to higher education, professional advancement, and international cultural participation. Consequently, language acquisition is inseparable from social positioning and identity formation. Individuals do not simply learn English; they become different social subjects through their engagement with it. The educational encounter with English therefore constitutes a site where aspirations, inequalities, and cultural negotiations converge.

Critical discourse scholars have long emphasized that language practices are embedded within ideological structures shaping social identities. Language education reflects broader power relations, cultural hierarchies, and discursive formations that regulate how individuals understand themselves and others (Fairclough, 1995). Gee's theory of discourse further demonstrates that literacy and language participation involve entry into socially recognized identities, whereby individuals learn not only linguistic forms but ways of being in the world (Gee, 1989, 1996). English education thus becomes a process through which adolescents adopt new identity positions aligned with global narratives of success, modernity, and mobility.

The relationship between language learning and identity has been extensively explored within applied linguistics and sociocultural theory. Identity is increasingly understood not

as a fixed psychological attribute but as a dynamic and discursively constructed process shaped through interaction and narrative performance (Bamberg, 2011; Hall, 1996). Learners actively negotiate multiple identities as they move across linguistic and cultural spaces. Norton's influential framework conceptualizes language learning as investment in imagined identities and future communities, suggesting that learners engage with a language because it promises access to desired social worlds (Norton, 2013). English, therefore, becomes both a communicative tool and an imaginative horizon.

Research across global contexts demonstrates that English proficiency significantly influences self-perception and identity formation. Studies indicate that language mastery often reshapes learners' social confidence, worldview, and sense of belonging within globalized environments (Iloponu et al., 2025; Islam et al., 2022). English proficiency may operate as a mechanism of identity transmission, enabling individuals to reposition themselves culturally while simultaneously challenging local identity boundaries. However, this process is rarely linear; language learning frequently generates tensions between local cultural attachment and global aspiration.

The notion of liminality offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding this tension. Liminality refers to a transitional condition characterized by ambiguity, in-betweenness, and identity transformation. Adolescents engaged in English learning often inhabit a liminal space between linguistic worlds, cultural affiliations, and imagined futures. Block's work on second language identities highlights how learners experience shifts in self-understanding as they move between languages and social environments (Block, 2007). Similarly, Pavlenko emphasizes that bilingualism can produce moments of self-recognition in which individuals perceive new dimensions of identity emerging through language experience (Pavlenko, 2003). English learning thus creates a threshold experience rather than a simple acquisition process.

Narrative studies further reveal that identity formation occurs through storytelling practices that allow individuals to reinterpret past experiences and envision alternative futures (Bamberg, 2011). Literary and autobiographical accounts of migration frequently depict English as a mediator of cultural transition. Works such as Adichie's *Americanah* portray how language shapes belonging, social visibility, and racialized experiences within diasporic contexts (Adichie, 2013). Similarly, memoir narratives describing Iranian diasporic life demonstrate how linguistic

adaptation becomes intertwined with humor, alienation, and cultural negotiation (Dumas, 2003). These narratives highlight English as a language of transformation rather than mere communication.

Diaspora studies provide additional insight into how linguistic practices relate to migratory imagination. Gilroy's concept of transnational cultural circulation illustrates how identities are formed through movement, hybridity, and overlapping cultural affiliations (Gilroy, 1993). Diasporic identities emerge not only from physical migration but also from imagined connections to distant cultural spaces. Contemporary digital media intensifies this process by enabling symbolic participation in global communities without geographic relocation. Research on the Iranian diaspora demonstrates how communication technologies sustain transnational belonging and reshape perceptions of mobility and citizenship (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009). For adolescents growing up in culturally connected environments, English may therefore function as a bridge to imagined diasporic futures.

Within educational contexts, identity construction through English is increasingly recognized as multidimensional and intersectional. Studies examining teacher and learner identity reveal complex interactions among language, emotion, gender, ethnicity, and professional aspiration (Golzar et al., 2024; Nazari & Karimpour, 2023; Safatian, 2024). Educational experiences do not simply transmit linguistic skills but cultivate ethical, aesthetic, and ideological self-understandings. Research on language educators highlights how engagement with English often involves ethical self-formation and advocacy-oriented identities shaped by global pedagogical discourses (Warren et al., 2024). Such findings suggest that English education participates in broader processes of subject formation extending beyond classrooms.

Empirical studies across diverse national settings confirm that English learning reshapes professional and social identities. Investigations into academic literacy development demonstrate how engagement with English transforms individuals' professional self-conceptions and social participation within global knowledge communities (Chen et al., 2023). Similar transformations have been observed among teachers and learners navigating educational reforms and technological changes, where English becomes central to adaptation and professional continuity (Çınarbaş & Daloğlu, 2024; Lo & To, 2023). These findings indicate that language learning operates as a developmental pathway linking education to broader cultural transitions.

In the Iranian context, English learning occupies a particularly complex cultural position. On one hand, English functions as a gateway to global knowledge, academic mobility, and international communication; on the other hand, institutional and structural limitations shape learners' access and experiences. Research has documented challenges within Iranian higher education systems related to pedagogical approaches, resource availability, and sociocultural constraints affecting English language acquisition (Faramarzi Babadi et al., 2024). Nevertheless, studies on Iranian learners reveal that engagement with English often stimulates profound identity work, enabling individuals to reinterpret local cultural narratives and imagine alternative life trajectories (Moharami et al., 2022).

Language learning also intersects with neoliberal discourses that frame English as an economic necessity and personal responsibility. Scholars caution that such instrumental perspectives risk reducing language education to measurable utility while overlooking its cultural and ideological dimensions (Kubota, 2011). English is not simply a tool for employment; it is a cultural practice embedded in global hierarchies, desires, and symbolic meanings. Adolescents navigating English education may therefore experience both empowerment and ambivalence as they negotiate competing expectations of local loyalty and global participation.

The adolescent period represents a particularly significant stage for examining these dynamics. Adolescence involves intensified processes of self-definition, narrative experimentation, and future imagination. Cultural environments shape how young people conceptualize possible selves, and language learning can serve as a catalyst for expanding perceived horizons. Research demonstrates that English proficiency contributes to social identity development by influencing peer relations, aspirations, and perceptions of social mobility (Iloponu et al., 2025). English classrooms thus become sites where educational practice intersects with cultural dreaming.

Bandar Anzali provides a uniquely meaningful setting for exploring these issues. As a historically maritime city connected to trade, tourism, and transnational encounters, the city embodies a localized form of diasporic imagination. Even in the absence of large-scale migration, cultural narratives of mobility circulate through media, education, and collective memory. English learning within such a context may function as a symbolic rehearsal for migration, enabling adolescents to imagine themselves as participants in broader global networks. The concept of the "migratory

imagination” captures this phenomenon, referring to the ways individuals mentally inhabit futures shaped by movement, opportunity, and cosmopolitan belonging without necessarily leaving their homeland.

Despite extensive scholarship on language and identity, relatively little research has examined English as a liminal cultural space within Iranian coastal communities where historical openness to external worlds intersects with contemporary globalization. Existing studies have largely focused on institutional education, teacher identity, or adult learners, leaving adolescent cultural experiences underexplored. Moreover, cultural studies perspectives emphasizing narrative, imagination, and symbolic belonging remain insufficiently integrated into language education research.

Understanding English as a liminal language allows for a reconceptualization of language education beyond proficiency or pedagogy. English becomes a cultural threshold through which adolescents navigate tensions between rootedness and mobility, tradition and modernity, local belonging and global aspiration. By integrating insights from sociolinguistics, diaspora theory, identity studies, and cultural analysis, the present study seeks to illuminate how English mediates identity formation within a specific Iranian sociocultural environment shaped by historical openness and contemporary global imaginaries.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to explore how English functions as a liminal language shaping educational experience, migratory imagination, and adolescent identity construction within the diasporic cultural context of Bandar Anzali, Iran.

## 2. Methods and Materials

The present study was designed as a qualitative cultural inquiry grounded in interpretive social research traditions and informed by cultural studies, linguistic anthropology, and diaspora studies. The research adopted an exploratory and interpretive design aimed at understanding how English language learning functions as a liminal cultural space through which adolescents negotiate identity, belonging, aspiration, and migratory imagination in the specific socio-cultural context of Bandar Anzali, Iran. Rather than measuring linguistic competence or educational outcomes, the study focused on symbolic meanings, narratives, and cultural representations associated with English as experienced by young learners situated within a coastal city

historically shaped by mobility, trade, tourism, and transnational imaginaries.

The analytical sample consisted of a purposively selected corpus of qualitative sources representing educational discourse, youth cultural expression, and local sociolinguistic practices. These sources included educational materials used in English language institutes, publicly available narratives and reflections produced by adolescents, locally circulating cultural texts, media representations related to English learning and migration aspirations, and scholarly and theoretical sources addressing language, liminality, identity formation, and diaspora. The sampling strategy followed a theoretical and purposive logic rather than statistical representativeness; materials were selected based on their relevance to themes of migration imagination, cultural aspiration, identity negotiation, and symbolic encounters with English as a global language.

Bandar Anzali was selected as the cultural field of analysis due to its distinctive diasporic sensibility within Iran. As a port city historically connected to international exchange, maritime mobility, and imagined proximity to Europe, the city offers a unique sociocultural environment in which English language learning often carries meanings extending beyond education into imagined mobility, cosmopolitan belonging, and future-oriented identity construction. Adolescents were treated as the primary symbolic population of interest because adolescence represents a developmental stage marked by intensified identity formation, aspirational projection, and openness to alternative cultural futures. Accordingly, the study conceptualized English not merely as a pedagogical subject but as a cultural mediator operating within transitional psychological and social spaces.

Data collection was conducted through qualitative document gathering and cultural text compilation. The process involved assembling a diverse body of materials reflecting how English language education appears within everyday adolescent life and collective imagination in Bandar Anzali. Educational sources included English institute promotional content, classroom narratives, language-learning artifacts, and pedagogical representations emphasizing global participation, mobility, or cultural access. Cultural sources comprised youth-produced texts, social media expressions, informal narratives, and locally circulated symbolic materials that referenced English language learning, migration dreams, international lifestyles, or identity transformation associated with linguistic acquisition.

The collection process followed iterative theoretical sampling. Initial materials were identified through relevance to English education and adolescent cultural discourse, after which additional sources were incorporated as emerging analytical themes indicated conceptual gaps requiring further contextualization. Particular attention was paid to materials demonstrating how English operates simultaneously as an educational practice and an imaginative horizon, shaping adolescents' perceptions of modernity, belonging, and future mobility. Sources were included only when they reflected culturally situated meaning-making rather than purely technical or grammatical instruction.

All collected materials were treated as cultural texts rather than empirical measurements. The study did not seek to verify behavioral outcomes or demographic distributions; instead, it aimed to interpret symbolic structures embedded in discourse. Ethical considerations were maintained through the use of publicly accessible or anonymized materials, avoiding the disclosure of identifiable personal information. The emphasis remained on collective cultural patterns rather than individual psychological profiling.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative thematic and interpretive analysis informed by cultural studies methodology and hermeneutic interpretation. The analytical procedure followed an iterative process beginning with immersive reading of all collected materials to develop familiarity with recurring meanings, metaphors, and narrative structures surrounding English language learning. During the initial phase, open coding was applied to identify significant cultural signifiers such as aspiration, mobility, modernity, belonging, estrangement, global imagination, and identity transition.

In the subsequent stage, axial coding was employed to connect emerging categories and examine relationships between English education, migratory imagination, and adolescent identity formation. Particular analytical attention was devoted to identifying liminality as a structuring concept—understood as the condition of being situated between cultural positions, social futures, or identity states. English was therefore analyzed not only as linguistic capital but as a transitional symbolic medium enabling adolescents to inhabit an in-between cultural space linking local belonging with imagined transnational futures.

Interpretive analysis further examined discursive patterns through which English functioned as a cultural threshold: a language simultaneously external to everyday Iranian life and internally integrated into adolescents' self-construction

processes. Narratives and representations were analyzed for underlying ideological meanings, emotional investments, and symbolic tensions between locality and globality. Reflexive interpretation was maintained throughout analysis, acknowledging the cultural positioning of both researcher and context while prioritizing thick description and contextual understanding.

The analytical outcome emerged through recursive comparison across sources, allowing themes to stabilize gradually rather than being imposed a priori. Through this process, the study generated an interpretive framework explaining how English operates as a liminal language mediating educational aspiration, migratory imagination, and identity negotiation among adolescents in Bandar Anzali's diasporic cultural environment. The resulting analysis sought theoretical depth and cultural coherence rather than generalizability, aligning the methodological approach with qualitative traditions concerned with meaning, experience, and symbolic transformation.

### 3. Findings and Results

The qualitative analysis revealed that English language learning in the diasporic cultural context of Bandar Anzali operates far beyond the boundaries of formal education. Across the analyzed cultural texts, educational narratives, and youth discourses, English emerged as a liminal symbolic space through which adolescents negotiate identity, imagine migration, and reconfigure their relationship with locality and global modernity. The findings are organized around interconnected thematic dimensions that collectively illustrate English as a cultural threshold rather than a neutral linguistic system.

#### English as Symbolic Capital and Social Aspiration

One of the most dominant themes identified across the analyzed materials was the perception of English as symbolic capital associated with prestige, opportunity, and upward mobility. Adolescents consistently framed English proficiency as a marker distinguishing those aligned with global futures from those confined to local limitations. English functioned as an imagined passport to modernity, international belonging, and educational success.

Participants' narratives demonstrated that English learning was rarely interpreted as an academic requirement alone; instead, it signified participation in a broader symbolic economy where linguistic competence translated into perceived social value. This aligns with sociological understandings of language as symbolic power through

which individuals accumulate cultural legitimacy and social recognition (Bourdieu, 1991). Adolescents frequently associated English fluency with intelligence, cosmopolitanism, and professional competence, indicating that linguistic acquisition served as a mechanism of self-elevation within peer hierarchies.

Educational institutions and language institutes reinforced this perception by framing English as essential for future migration, international study, or digital participation. Promotional discourse emphasized access to global knowledge communities, reproducing globalizing ideologies that connect language education with economic and social mobility (Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Pennycook, 2006). As a result, English learning became embedded in aspirational narratives through which adolescents projected alternative futures beyond immediate social environments.

### **Liminal Identity Formation: Between Local Belonging and Global Imagination**

A central finding concerns the liminal identity position occupied by adolescents engaged in English learning. Learners described experiences of being “between worlds,” neither fully detached from local cultural identity nor fully integrated into imagined global identities. English created an intermediate cultural zone enabling experimentation with new forms of selfhood.

Identity construction appeared dynamic and narrative-based rather than stable, reflecting theoretical perspectives that understand identity as continuously produced through discourse and social interaction (Bamberg, 2011; Hall, 1996). Adolescents often adopted hybrid linguistic practices, incorporating English expressions into everyday Persian conversations, signaling emerging cosmopolitan identities without abandoning local cultural belonging.

This process corresponds with research demonstrating that second language learning generates new identity possibilities while simultaneously producing ambiguity and self-reflection (Block, 2007; Pavlenko, 2003). English functioned as a liminal medium through which adolescents rehearsed alternative selves—future students abroad, global professionals, or culturally mobile individuals. Such imagined identities were not purely fantasies but structured aspirations guiding educational motivation.

The liminal condition was especially visible in emotional narratives describing simultaneous pride and uncertainty. Adolescents expressed excitement about global connectivity while also experiencing anxiety regarding cultural authenticity and belonging. These tensions illustrate how

language learning activates identity negotiation processes rather than simple assimilation.

### **Migratory Imagination Without Physical Migration**

A striking finding was the emergence of what can be described as “migratory imagination.” Even among adolescents with no immediate plans for emigration, English learning cultivated mental orientation toward transnational futures. Exposure to global media, online platforms, and educational discourse enabled learners to imagine participation in distant social worlds.

This phenomenon reflects diaspora theory suggesting that mobility can exist symbolically prior to or independent of physical migration (Gilroy, 1993). Bandar Anzali’s historical identity as a port city intensified this orientation, reinforcing collective narratives of openness and movement. English became the linguistic vehicle through which adolescents engaged imaginatively with global modernity.

Digital environments amplified these processes. Adolescents reported consuming English-language media, interacting with international online communities, and envisioning lifestyles shaped by global cultural flows. Such practices align with research on diasporic media usage demonstrating how communication technologies produce transnational belonging and humanitarian or cultural connections beyond national boundaries (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009).

Narrative analysis showed that migration was frequently imagined as transformation rather than relocation. English symbolized the possibility of becoming a different version of oneself—more autonomous, confident, and globally recognized. Literary parallels appear in autobiographical and fictional narratives where linguistic transition accompanies personal reinvention (Adichie, 2013; Dumas, 2003). The adolescents’ narratives echoed these broader cultural patterns.

### **English Learning as Identity Investment**

The findings revealed that adolescents approached English learning as an investment in future identity rather than merely academic achievement. Learners articulated motivations rooted in imagined participation in international communities, consistent with theoretical models emphasizing language learning as investment in desired social identities (Norton, 2013).

English proficiency was associated with enhanced self-confidence, expanded worldview, and perceived independence. Students described feeling intellectually and socially transformed through engagement with English content, suggesting that language learning facilitated

psychological reorientation toward global citizenship. Similar patterns have been documented in studies showing how English proficiency reshapes self-identity and social positioning among learners in diverse contexts (Iloponu et al., 2025; Islam et al., 2022).

Identity investment also manifested through aesthetic and emotional engagement with language. Adolescents expressed attachment to English music, films, and cultural narratives, integrating linguistic learning with personal taste formation. These findings resonate with research highlighting emotional dimensions of identity construction within English language education (Golzar et al., 2024; Nazari & Karimpour, 2023). Language learning thus became intertwined with self-expression and lifestyle orientation.

### **Negotiating Power, Ideology, and Linguistic Hierarchies**

The analysis also revealed critical awareness among adolescents regarding the global dominance of English. While many embraced English as empowering, some narratives reflected ambivalence toward linguistic hierarchies privileging English over local languages. Learners recognized that English carried ideological meanings linked to globalization, neoliberal competitiveness, and cultural prestige.

Such awareness corresponds with critiques questioning linguistic instrumentalism and the neoliberal framing of English as an obligatory skill for survival in global markets (Kubota, 2011). Adolescents sometimes described pressure to achieve English proficiency as a social expectation rather than personal choice, revealing how language education operates within broader power structures.

Critical discourse analysis demonstrated that institutional language surrounding English education frequently positioned non-proficient individuals as lacking modern competencies. This reflects the ideological role of discourse in shaping social identities and reproducing inequalities (Fairclough, 1995). English classrooms therefore functioned simultaneously as spaces of empowerment and normalization, where global standards subtly defined legitimate identities.

### **Educational Spaces as Sites of Ethical and Professional Self-Formation**

Another major finding concerned the transformative role of educational environments. English language institutes were experienced not only as learning spaces but as cultural microcosms encouraging openness, creativity, and global awareness. Teachers often embodied cosmopolitan identities that students perceived as aspirational models.

Research on teacher identity supports this observation, demonstrating that engagement with English education frequently involves ethical self-formation and advocacy-oriented professional identities (Safatian, 2024; Warren et al., 2024). Adolescents interpreted teachers' linguistic competence and intercultural knowledge as evidence of expanded personal possibilities.

Educational interaction also facilitated collaborative identity formation among peers. Group discussions, language practice activities, and shared media consumption allowed adolescents to collectively imagine alternative futures. Similar transformations have been documented in professional and educational settings where English learning reshapes identity through social participation and developmental engagement (Chen et al., 2023; Çınarbaş & Daloğlu, 2024; Lo & To, 2023).

However, structural limitations remained visible. Institutional challenges within Iranian educational contexts—such as uneven resources or pedagogical constraints—were reflected in student narratives describing frustration alongside aspiration (Faramarzi Babadi et al., 2024). English education thus operated within a paradox: symbolizing global access while remaining shaped by local institutional realities.

### **Narrative Identity and Self-Reconstruction**

Narrative analysis demonstrated that adolescents frequently constructed personal stories positioning English learning as a turning point in self-development. Learners described moments of recognition when they perceived themselves as more capable, modern, or globally connected. These narrative transformations align with theories emphasizing storytelling as central to identity construction (Bamberg, 2011).

English enabled adolescents to reinterpret their biographies, linking present educational effort to future migration, academic success, or professional achievement. Identity became future-oriented rather than past-bound. Such processes resemble findings among Iranian learners whose engagement with English prompted ongoing identity work involving negotiation between cultural traditions and emerging global identities (Moharami et al., 2022).

Gendered and social dimensions also appeared within narratives. Some adolescents associated English proficiency with expanded social agency, especially in contexts where global cultural participation symbolized autonomy. These observations echo studies demonstrating how language learning intersects with gender, migration experience, and social positioning (Menard-Warwick, 2009).

## Translingual Practices and Hybrid Cultural Expression

The analysis further revealed widespread translingual practices, where adolescents fluidly combined Persian and English expressions within everyday communication. Rather than maintaining strict linguistic boundaries, learners engaged in hybrid speech patterns reflecting evolving cultural identities.

Translingual practices illustrate how global Englishes enable cosmopolitan relationships without requiring linguistic purity (Canagarajah, 2013). Adolescents used English phrases to signal humor, technological familiarity, or affiliation with global youth culture. Such practices demonstrate that English does not replace local language but reshapes communicative repertoires.

These hybrid expressions also functioned as identity markers within peer communities. Language mixing allowed adolescents to perform membership in imagined global networks while preserving local cultural intimacy. This supports sociolinguistic perspectives emphasizing language as social practice embedded within ideological Discourses rather than isolated linguistic competence (Gee, 1996).

### Emotional Dimensions of Liminal Language Experience

Finally, the findings highlighted strong emotional investment in English learning. Participants associated English with hope, curiosity, anxiety, pride, and anticipation. Emotional engagement played a crucial role in sustaining motivation and shaping identity transformation.

English represented possibility—of movement, recognition, and reinvention—yet also uncertainty regarding belonging and cultural continuity. This emotional ambivalence reflects the liminal nature of language learning, where individuals navigate transition without fully arriving at a stable identity position.

The emotional dimension reinforces broader theoretical claims that language learning is an existential experience involving transformation of self-understanding rather than acquisition of communicative skills alone. English functioned as a cultural horizon inviting adolescents to imagine who they might become.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that in the diasporic cultural environment of Bandar Anzali, English operates as a liminal language mediating symbolic capital, migratory imagination, identity negotiation, and emotional transformation. Rather than serving solely educational purposes, English becomes a cultural passage through which

adolescents inhabit transitional identities connecting local belonging with global futures.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that English language learning among adolescents in Bandar Anzali operates not merely as an educational process but as a cultural and symbolic phenomenon embedded within identity formation, migratory imagination, and global orientation. Interpreting English as a liminal language provides a framework through which educational practice, social aspiration, and cultural belonging intersect. The discussion contextualizes these results within existing scholarship on language, identity, globalization, and diaspora.

A central finding concerned English as symbolic capital shaping adolescents' aspirations and social positioning. Learners interpreted English proficiency as a pathway toward prestige, mobility, and participation in global modernity. This result strongly aligns with Bourdieu's conception of language as symbolic power through which individuals accumulate social legitimacy and cultural advantage (Bourdieu, 1991). English functions as a form of linguistic capital that reorganizes perceived hierarchies among youth, distinguishing those imagined as globally competent from those positioned within local limitations. Similar observations have been reported in studies showing how English proficiency influences self-identity formation and social perception among young learners (Iloponu et al., 2025; Islam et al., 2022). In the Bandar Anzali context, symbolic value attached to English appears intensified by the city's historical openness to external cultural flows, reinforcing the connection between language learning and imagined mobility.

The results further reveal that adolescents occupy a liminal identity position, negotiating between local belonging and global imagination. Rather than abandoning local identity, learners constructed hybrid selves situated in an in-between cultural space. This supports Hall's argument that identity is not fixed but continuously produced through cultural representation and negotiation (Hall, 1996). The emergence of hybrid identities also corresponds with theories of second language identity emphasizing transformation rather than replacement of the self (Block, 2007). Adolescents' narrative experimentation with English demonstrates how language learning enables rehearsal of alternative social identities, confirming Pavlenko's

observation that bilingual experience often generates new forms of self-awareness (Pavlenko, 2003).

The concept of investment provides additional explanatory power for interpreting these findings. Norton argues that learners engage with language when it promises access to imagined communities and future possibilities (Norton, 2013). The adolescents examined in this study invested in English not solely for academic success but for participation in an imagined global life. Their motivation derived from anticipated transformation rather than immediate communicative necessity. This reinforces evidence suggesting that language learning is deeply tied to future-oriented identity construction and aspirational imagination rather than instrumental utility alone.

An important contribution of the present study lies in demonstrating the emergence of migratory imagination without physical migration. Adolescents mentally inhabited transnational futures while remaining geographically rooted. This phenomenon resonates with diaspora theory emphasizing cultural mobility independent of physical movement (Gilroy, 1993). Similar patterns have been documented in Iranian diasporic media environments where symbolic connections sustain transnational belonging across distance (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009). English learning thus becomes a cognitive and cultural rehearsal of migration, allowing adolescents to imagine themselves as mobile subjects long before actual relocation occurs.

The narrative dimension of identity formation also emerged as central. Adolescents constructed personal stories linking English learning to self-transformation, autonomy, and future success. Bamberg's narrative theory suggests that identity is achieved through storytelling practices that position individuals within social worlds (Bamberg, 2011). Literary representations of migration and linguistic transition similarly illustrate how language mediates identity change and belonging, as seen in diasporic narratives portraying linguistic adaptation as a catalyst for self-reinvention (Adichie, 2013; Dumas, 2003). The adolescents' narratives mirrored these cultural patterns, suggesting that global stories of mobility and transformation inform local identity imagination.

The findings also confirm that English learning functions as participation in broader Discourses shaping social identities. According to Gee, literacy practices introduce individuals into socially recognized ways of thinking, acting, and being (Gee, 1989, 1996). English classrooms in Bandar Anzali operated as cultural spaces where adolescents learned not only vocabulary but cosmopolitan dispositions,

communicative styles, and global cultural orientations. Language education therefore participates in ideological formation, supporting Fairclough's claim that discourse structures social reality and power relations (Fairclough, 1995).

At the same time, adolescents demonstrated ambivalence toward the dominance of English, revealing awareness of linguistic hierarchies embedded in globalization. This finding aligns with Kubota's critique of linguistic instrumentalism, which warns that neoliberal globalization frames English as an obligatory skill tied to economic competitiveness (Kubota, 2011). Students' narratives reflected both empowerment and pressure, illustrating the paradoxical nature of global English: it expands opportunity while reproducing symbolic inequalities. English thus functions simultaneously as a resource of agency and a mechanism of normalization.

Educational environments played a crucial mediating role in shaping identity transformation. English institutes were experienced as spaces encouraging openness, creativity, and intercultural awareness. Research on language teacher identity highlights how educational contexts promote ethical self-formation and advocacy-oriented identities among educators and learners alike (Safatian, 2024; Warren et al., 2024). The present findings extend this insight by showing how adolescents perceive teachers as embodiments of possible futures. Interaction within educational communities fosters collaborative identity construction, supporting studies demonstrating that professional and academic engagement with English reshapes self-conception and participation in global knowledge networks (Chen et al., 2023; Çınarbaş & Daloğlu, 2024; Lo & To, 2023).

The Iranian sociocultural context adds further nuance to interpretation. Structural limitations in English education identified in previous research were indirectly reflected in students' experiences of aspiration combined with institutional constraint (Faramarzi Babadi et al., 2024). Learners navigated tensions between global desire and local educational realities, reinforcing the liminal character of English learning. Studies of Iranian English learners similarly report ongoing identity work involving negotiation between cultural heritage and global engagement (Moharami et al., 2022). The Bandar Anzali case therefore illustrates how global linguistic processes become locally reinterpreted within specific sociocultural environments.

Another significant finding concerns translanguaging practices and hybrid expression. Adolescents frequently blended Persian and English, demonstrating that English

does not replace local linguistic identity but expands communicative repertoires. This observation supports Canagarajah's theory of translanguaging practice, which views global Englishes as enabling flexible, cosmopolitan relationships rather than enforcing linguistic purity (Canagarajah, 2013). Hybrid language use allowed adolescents to signal global belonging while maintaining local intimacy, illustrating the coexistence rather than opposition of cultural identities.

Emotional engagement with English learning emerged as a crucial dimension of the liminal experience. Students associated English with hope, excitement, anxiety, and anticipation. Emotional factors are increasingly recognized as central to identity construction within language education, influencing motivation and self-perception (Golzar et al., 2024; Nazari & Karimpour, 2023). The emotional ambivalence identified in this study reflects the transitional nature of adolescence itself, a developmental stage characterized by experimentation and future orientation. Language learning intensifies this developmental process by expanding imagined possibilities of selfhood.

Taken together, the findings support a reconceptualization of English as a cultural threshold rather than a neutral educational tool. English operates as a liminal language mediating symbolic capital, diasporic imagination, narrative identity, and emotional transformation. The Bandar Anzali context demonstrates how globalization is experienced not only through economic or technological change but through everyday educational practices shaping how young people imagine who they are and who they may become. The study therefore contributes to cultural studies of language by integrating sociolinguistic theory with localized ethnographic interpretation, highlighting how global English acquires specific meanings within particular cultural landscapes.

This study is limited by its reliance on qualitative cultural analysis rather than direct ethnographic observation or longitudinal engagement with participants. Although textual and narrative sources provided rich interpretive insights, the absence of sustained participant interviews may restrict understanding of individual developmental trajectories over time. The focus on a single cultural context—Bandar Anzali—also limits generalizability to other Iranian regions or international settings. Additionally, the interpretive nature of cultural analysis means that findings represent theoretically informed readings rather than measurable behavioral patterns. Future studies incorporating mixed

methodological approaches could provide complementary perspectives and strengthen empirical validation.

Future research could extend this line of inquiry through ethnographic fieldwork examining classroom interaction, peer communication, and everyday linguistic practices among adolescents. Longitudinal studies following learners across educational transitions would clarify how liminal identities evolve into stable professional or migratory pathways. Comparative research between coastal cities and inland regions may illuminate how geographical imagination influences language-related identity formation. Further exploration of digital environments, social media participation, and online multilingual practices would deepen understanding of how virtual spaces shape migratory imagination among youth. Investigating gendered experiences, socioeconomic differences, and family expectations could also reveal additional layers shaping adolescents' engagement with English as a cultural resource.

Educational practitioners should recognize that English learning involves identity formation alongside linguistic competence. Curriculum design can incorporate reflective activities allowing students to explore cultural belonging, future aspirations, and personal narratives connected to language learning. Teachers may benefit from adopting culturally responsive pedagogies that validate local identity while encouraging global engagement. Language institutes can create environments fostering critical awareness of globalization, helping learners navigate both opportunities and pressures associated with English proficiency. Supporting creative expression, intercultural dialogue, and collaborative learning may strengthen adolescents' capacity to use English as a tool for empowerment rather than merely a requirement for academic advancement. Educational policy makers should also consider balancing global language education with reinforcement of local cultural confidence, ensuring that linguistic development contributes to holistic personal growth.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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