

Transnational Doctoral Students' Identity Negotiation and Translanguaging Practices: A Critical Review of Autoethnographic and Related Research (2020-2026)

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ABSTRACT

Transnational doctoral students increasingly use autoethnography and related first-person qualitative methods to examine how academic identities are negotiated across languages, institutions, and national borders. This critical review synthesises research published from 2020 to July 2026 on identity negotiation, translanguaging, academic writing, emotional labour, and methodological innovation among transnational and international doctoral students. A targeted search of Google Scholar, Web of Science, Scopus, and ERIC was combined with backward and forward citation tracing. The literature was analysed comparatively by research context, conceptual orientation, method, and contribution. Four findings are central. First, doctoral identity is constructed as temporal, relational, and institutionally regulated rather than as a stable status. Second, translanguaging functions not merely as linguistic support but as epistemic and identity work in writing, supervision, and AI-mediated composing. Third, collaborative, poetic, arts-based, and critical autoethnographies have broadened what counts as doctoral knowledge. Fourth, the field remains geographically concentrated on East Asian scholars in Anglophone destinations and gives limited attention to postcolonial multilingual settings, supervisors' perspectives, disciplines beyond language education, and intervention-oriented research. The review argues for a broader empirical geography and for doctoral pedagogies that recognise multilingual repertoires as intellectual resource.

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INTRODUCTION

International doctoral mobility involves more than the physical movement of students between countries. It also relocates scholars across linguistic regimes, disciplinary traditions, expectations of academic personhood, and unequal structures of knowledge production. Transnational doctoral students must learn how to participate in unfamiliar academic communities while maintaining, revising, or defending identities developed elsewhere. Their experiences therefore provide a productive site for examining how language, culture, race, gender, institutional power, and professional aspiration interact in doctoral education.

Earlier accounts of international doctoral education often interpreted difficulty through a

deficit lens, particularly by treating English proficiency, unfamiliarity with academic conventions, or limited confidence as individual shortcomings. Recent research has increasingly challenged this framing. Autoethnographic and narrative studies position transnational doctoral students as multilingual knowledge producers whose experiences can expose the hidden norms of universities. Studies of identity transition in Australia, the United States, Europe, and East Asia show that becoming a scholar is negotiated in everyday encounters, writing practices, supervisory relationships, career decisions, and imagined futures (Li et al., 2023; Lu, 2024; Ngo et al., 2025; Xu, 2023; Yu, 2025). This work shifts attention from what students allegedly lack to how institutions authorise some ways of speaking, writing, and knowing over others.

Translanguaging scholarship has contributed a complementary conceptual shift. Rather than conceptualising named languages as sealed systems, translanguaging foregrounds how multilingual writers mobilise their repertoires to think, interpret, draft, position claims, and develop knowledge. In doctoral education, translanguaging has been documented in dissertation writing, identity negotiation, supervision, and AI-mediated composing (Liu et al., 2026; Ou et al., 2026; Zhang & Hadjioannou, 2022; Zheng & Drybrough, 2023). These practices are not adequately explained as compensation for weak English. They can represent deliberate epistemic choices that enable writers to preserve conceptual distinctions, draw connections across intellectual traditions, and claim ownership of academic voice.

Although research on transnational doctoral identity and multilingual practice has expanded rapidly since 2020, the literature remains dispersed across applied linguistics, TESOL, international education, academic literacies, and higher education. Autoethnographic work has also developed diverse forms, including collaborative, critical, poetic, arts-based, and digital narratives. A critical synthesis is therefore needed not only to summarise recurring findings but also to examine what the field normalises, whose mobility it treats as representative, and which institutional actors remain outside the analytical frame. This review addresses four questions:

1. What features of transnational doctoral students' identity negotiation are revealed by autoethnographic and related qualitative research published from 2020 to 2026?
2. How does translanguaging function in academic writing, supervision, socialisation, and emerging AI-mediated practices?
3. What methodological innovations have developed within this body of research?
4. What conceptual, geographical, and pedagogical gaps remain?

METHOD

This article adopts a critical integrative review design. The purpose is interpretive rather than statistical: it compares how studies conceptualise identity, language, agency, emotion, and academic power, while also examining the geographical and methodological boundaries of the evidence base. The review is not presented as a PRISMA-style systematic review or meta-analysis because the relevant literature spans heterogeneous genres, including individual and collaborative autoethnography, duoethnography, narrative inquiry, interview-based studies, survey research, conceptual work, and chapters in edited collections.

The search was initially conducted in late 2025 and updated in July 2026 using Google Scholar, Web of Science, Scopus, and ERIC. Search strings combined terms such as transnational doctoral student, international PhD student, autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography, doctoral identity, identity negotiation, academic writing, translanguaging, multilingual doctoral student, doctoral supervision, and emotional wellbeing. Backward and forward citation tracing was used to identify related publications and final versions of papers first available online in an earlier year.

Sources were retained when they met at least one of two conditions. The primary group comprised peer-reviewed studies or scholarly chapters that focused directly on transnational or international doctoral students and examined identity, language practice, academic writing, emotion, mobility, or supervision. A smaller contextual group was retained when it offered a

methodological or conceptual contribution necessary for interpreting the primary studies, particularly work on autoethnography, critical translanguaging, raciolinguistic epistemologies, and doctoral writing support. Publications focused exclusively on undergraduate mobility or general internationalisation were excluded unless they directly illuminated a gap in the doctoral literature.

Each source was entered into an analytical matrix recording publication year, participant profile, mobility direction, destination context, discipline, method, theoretical orientation, and principal claims. The synthesis proceeded through iterative coding and comparison. Initial codes included identity positioning, temporal becoming, in-betweenness, translanguaging, academic writing, supervision, emotion, institutional power, career mobility, and methodological form. These codes were then consolidated into thematic clusters and examined for recurring absences. Because a critical review involves interpretive judgement, the analysis also attended to the reviewer's positionality and avoided treating the most frequently studied Asia-to-Anglophone route as synonymous with transnational doctoral experience in general.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Academic Identity as Temporal, Relational, and Institutionally Regulated

Across the reviewed literature, academic identity is consistently represented as an ongoing accomplishment rather than a status automatically conferred by enrolment. Xu (2023) shows how identity negotiation occurs not only in seminars and formal supervision but also in housing, religious settings, and informal interaction. Xu et al. (2022) similarly conceptualise the transition from experienced teacher to novice doctoral student as sustainable agentic construction across past, present, and anticipated futures. The apparent contradiction between being an expert in one context and a novice in another becomes a central condition of doctoral becoming rather than a temporary anomaly.

Collaborative autoethnographies reinforce this temporal and relational view. Li et al. (2023) demonstrate that international doctoral identities in Western academia are shaped through negotiation with linguistic hierarchies, institutional expectations, and racialised positioning. Ngo et al. (2025) describe Asian international TESOL doctoral students moving among identities as learners, researchers, teachers, and future scholars. Their imagined trajectories matter because participants interpret present difficulty in relation to who they hope to become. Lu (2024) and Yu (2025) add that disciplinary location is equally consequential: doctoral students must learn not only the language of academia but also the epistemic values and membership criteria of particular fields.

Institutional logics further structure what kinds of scholar are considered legitimate. Zheng et al. (2024) show that Chinese doctoral students' integration in Finnish universities depends on navigating competing institutional expectations rather than simply acquiring interpersonal confidence. Han et al. (2026) extend the analysis into digital spaces, illustrating how overseas Chinese PhD students perform an ideal scholar-self through academic vlogs under neoliberal pressures for visibility, productivity, and self-branding. Academic identity is therefore produced through a combination of interpersonal recognition, institutional metrics, disciplinary discourse, and mediated self-presentation.

Transnational Tensions, Mobility, and In-Betweenness

In-betweenness is one of the most persistent concepts in this literature. Yazan, Pentón Herrera, et al. (2023) show that identity tensions among transnational TESOL practitioners are not merely problems to be overcome; they can become resources for reflection and reconstruction. Dao et al. (2025) similarly trace the becoming of a Vietnamese doctoral student as a TESOL teacher educator through the intersection of identities, emotions, agency, and ideology. In these accounts, boundary crossing generates instability, but it also enables critical distance from categories that had previously appeared natural.

Mobility does not end when a doctorate is completed. Ai et al. (2024) document how EFL PhD returnees in Chinese universities negotiate international scholarly networks alongside domestic performance expectations. Liu et al. (2024) show related tensions in the career decisions of overseas-educated Chinese women PhDs, whose choices are shaped by gendered, familial, and institutional considerations. Return mobility thus produces a renewed form of in-betweenness: scholars are expected to embody internationalisation while also conforming to local systems of evaluation.

Research outside the dominant Anglophone destinations complicates a simple centre-periphery model. Dai et al. (2025) examine international students writing doctoral theses in China and show that in-betweenness can also emerge within a non-Western host system. Zhang and Lütge (2025) describe identity negotiation in a multilingual German university, while Miao and Yang (2024) analyse translingual identity across transnational education spaces. Shibata (2025) further demonstrates that multilingual identity in an English-taught programme in Japan is negotiated through both English-medium participation and broader language practices associated with belonging. These studies suggest that the construct remains useful, but its meanings depend on the linguistic ecology and power relations of each site.

Translanguaging as Epistemic and Identity Work

Academic writing is the most intensively studied site of translanguaging. Zheng and Drybrough (2023) identify multiple practices used by Chinese bilingual postgraduates during dissertation writing, including lexical annotation, movement between languages during planning, and cross-linguistic conceptual transfer. Zhang and Hadjioannou (2022) likewise show that Chinese graduate writers use translanguaging strategically within English academic writing. These practices support regulation and rhetorical precision, but they also allow writers to retain conceptual resources that may be weakened when ideas are forced prematurely into English.

Translanguaging also enables identity claims. Kim and Lee's (2024) duoethnography demonstrates how language practices intersect with gendered and racialised bodies in the experiences of transnational Asian women teacher-scholars. Smith (2024) argues more broadly for raciolinguistic epistemologies that recognise transnational languaging as knowledge-making rather than as deviation from an unmarked norm. Read together, these studies show that language choice is inseparable from questions of whose voice is recognised, which knowledge traditions are considered legitimate, and how scholars position themselves in relation to institutional categories.

The supervisory relationship is a particularly consequential site of linguistic regulation. Liu et al. (2026) propose a translanguaging approach to doctoral supervision in which students' multilingual resources are treated as intellectual resources. This framework moves beyond permitting occasional use of another language; it asks supervisors to recognise cross-linguistic reading, theorising, and concept development as legitimate parts of research. Such recognition can redistribute epistemic authority, although the literature contains relatively little evidence about how supervisors themselves negotiate this shift in practice.

Generative AI has introduced a new layer to translanguaging. Ou et al. (2026) show how multilingual doctoral students move between Chinese, English, and AI-generated text while negotiating authorship, disciplinary voice, and ownership. AI does not remove language politics; it can intensify them by embedding normative English in automated suggestions while simultaneously offering a space for comparison, revision, and metalinguistic reflection. The relevant question is therefore not whether AI eliminates linguistic difficulty, but how multilingual writers retain epistemic agency when interacting with systems trained on unevenly represented linguistic and scholarly traditions.

Academic Writing Socialisation and Epistemic Justice

Writing development is frequently described as a process of academic socialisation. Soltani

et al. (2022) argue that international students become legitimate language users through participation in academic communities rather than by mastering language before participation begins. Phyo et al. (2024), in a survey of international doctoral students in Hungary, found substantial demand for support in academic writing and showed that perceived needs vary with language background, proficiency, gender, and disciplinary field. These findings caution against uniform remedial provision.

A critical perspective asks who defines the standards into which students are socialised. Mendoza et al. (2024) call for contextualised critical approaches to translanguaging that attend to local histories and inequalities. Academic writing support that values multilingualism rhetorically but assesses only conformity to monolingual norms risks reproducing epistemic injustice. Support should therefore address genre knowledge, argumentation, disciplinary participation, and access to feedback while also making the ideological basis of academic conventions visible.

Emotional Labour, Wellbeing, and Academic Power

The emotional dimension of doctoral education is not peripheral to identity development. The collection edited by Yazan, Trinh, et al. (2023) brings together accounts of impostor feelings, bullying, racialisation, professional uncertainty, and emotional dissonance. Its collective contribution is to relocate distress from individual pathology to the institutional and relational conditions of doctoral work. Emotions become evidence of how academic power is experienced, negotiated, and sometimes resisted.

Ali (2023) uses the metaphor of walking on eggshells to describe faculty-on-student abuse and the vulnerability created by unequal authority. Cho (2023) examines emotional dissonance between institutional feeling rules and individual emotional experience, showing that dissonance can damage wellbeing but may also catalyse professional identity development. Jia and Yeung (2023) identify interrelated educational and life challenges among mainland Chinese PhD students in Hong Kong, including language barriers, political-environment differences, and discrimination. Uştuk's (2025) reflexive autoethnography in Hong Kong similarly demonstrates that emotion, identity, and professional reflexivity are inseparable in transnational teacher-educator development.

These studies challenge interventions that focus only on individual resilience. Counselling and peer support remain important, but they cannot substitute for accountable supervision, transparent grievance procedures, equitable workload expectations, and institutional recognition of racialised and linguistic power. Emotional wellbeing should be analysed as a pedagogical and organisational responsibility rather than solely as a student's capacity to cope.

Methodological Innovations in Autoethnographic Research

Collaborative autoethnography has become a prominent method because it places individual experience in dialogue with others. Kim and Cho (2022) used a two-year collaborative process to examine the identity negotiation of South Korean doctoral students in the United States. Selvi et al. (2022) likewise demonstrate how collaboration can expose tensions surrounding criticality and identity in English language teaching. Dialogue does more than validate parallel experiences: disagreement, comparison, and co-interpretation can reveal how apparently personal events are organised by wider cultural and institutional structures.

Arts-based and embodied approaches have also expanded the field. Kang et al. (2022) use arts-based collaborative autoethnography to examine Korean doctoral students' bodies and awakening in the United States. Keleş (2023) employs poetic autoethnography to represent in-betweenness, while Moroz (2023) uses the tumbleweed as a poetic figure for transnational identity. Trinh et al. (2023) argue that such formal experimentation can humanise applied linguistic inquiry and keep identity work open rather than forcing experience into a conventional expository closure.

Critical autoethnographic narrative has also moved from research method toward pedagogy. Yazan (2024) systematises the tensions, characteristics, and methodological possibilities of

autoethnography in language education. Kessler (2024) connects autoethnography with language teacher education curriculum design, while Dao et al. (2025) demonstrate how critical narrative can support the formation of a language teacher educator identity. Methodology here is not merely a means of collecting data; the act of narrating and analysing experience becomes part of doctoral learning.

The methodological diversification is significant, but limitations remain. Most supposedly multimodal studies are still disseminated primarily as alphabetic journal articles or book chapters. Digital vlogs, visual narratives, audio, and interactional records remain uncommon as integrated forms of evidence, despite Han et al.'s (2026) demonstration that digital self-presentation is now central to some doctoral identities. Future methodological innovation should therefore consider not only new forms of representation but also how those forms are evaluated, archived, cited, and ethically governed.

Comparative Orientation of the Literature

Table 1 summarises the principal orientations identified in the review. The categories overlap; they are used to clarify differences in analytical emphasis rather than to imply separate research traditions.

Table 1. Major Orientations in Research on Transnational Doctoral Experience			
Dimension	Identity Negotiation	Translanguaging and Writing	Emotion and Wellbeing
Representative works	Li et al. (2023); Ngo et al. (2025); Xu (2023)	Liu et al. (2026); Ou et al. (2026); Zheng and Drybrough (2023)	Ali (2023); Cho (2023); Yazan, Trinh, et al. (2023)
Core assumption	Identity is temporal, relational, and institutionally positioned.	Multilingual repertoires are epistemic resources, not remedial substitutes.	Emotion is shaped by academic power and institutional conditions.
Common methods	Individual/collaborative autoethnography; narrative inquiry; interviews	Text/process analysis; interviews; narrative inquiry; conceptual frameworks	Autoethnography; poetic narrative; qualitative and mixed-methods studies
Typical contexts	Australia, United States, Europe, Hong Kong, China	United Kingdom, Australia, China, Hong Kong, AI-mediated writing spaces	United States, Hong Kong, and other transnational sites
Principal contribution	Explains becoming, in-betweenness, and imagined trajectories.	Shows how language choice constructs knowledge, voice, and participation.	Connects wellbeing to supervision, discrimination, and institutional authority.
Persistent gap	Non-Anglophone and postcolonial multilingual destinations	Supervisor practice, STEM disciplines, and longitudinal process evidence	Intervention studies and institutional accountability mechanisms

Critical Gaps and Directions for Future Research

The first gap is geographical. The dominant narrative remains the movement of East Asian students to universities in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and other Anglophone destinations. This corridor has generated important knowledge, but it should not be treated as the universal form of transnational doctoral experience. Postcolonial multilingual systems in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America may produce different relationships among English, national languages, regional languages, and academic authority. Research in such settings can test whether established concepts such as in-betweenness retain the same explanatory force.

The second gap concerns the institutional actors represented in the evidence. Supervisors appear frequently as sources of recognition, guidance, silence, or harm, yet they rarely narrate their own linguistic and identity negotiations. Dialogic autoethnography co-produced by

supervisors and doctoral students could make visible how authority is enacted through feedback, meeting routines, assumptions about language, and decisions about publishability. Such designs would need careful ethical safeguards because collaboration cannot erase unequal power.

The third gap is disciplinary. Much of the literature is located in applied linguistics, TESOL, education, and closely related fields. The experience of multilingual doctoral writers in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, health, business, and the arts may differ because knowledge is represented through different combinations of prose, mathematics, visualisation, laboratory practice, and collaboration. Comparative and longitudinal studies could determine which findings travel across disciplines and which are specific to language-intensive fields.

The fourth gap is pedagogical. The literature is strong in critical description but comparatively weak in tested interventions. Future research should design and evaluate translanguaging-informed writing programmes, supervisor professional development, multilingual peer-writing groups, transparent feedback protocols, and institutional procedures for responding to supervisory harm. Intervention research should assess not only satisfaction or language accuracy but also ownership, participation, epistemic agency, wellbeing, and the durability of outcomes.

Finally, digital and AI-mediated doctoral work requires sustained attention. AI-assisted writing, academic social media, and video-based self-presentation create new opportunities for multilingual reflection while also introducing risks related to surveillance, homogenisation, authorship, data privacy, and unequal access. Research should avoid treating technology as a neutral tool and examine how platform design, training data, institutional policy, and disciplinary norms shape the identities that doctoral students can perform.

CONCLUSIONS

Research published from 2020 to 2026 has substantially changed how transnational doctoral students are represented. Rather than positioning them as deficient users of English who must adapt to a stable academic culture, the literature presents them as agentive multilingual scholars whose identities are continuously negotiated across language, discipline, mobility, emotion, and power. Autoethnography has been central to this shift because it makes lived experience an analytical resource and allows doctoral researchers to contest institutional narratives that have historically spoken for them.

The synthesis also shows that translanguaging is integral to knowledge production. It supports planning, conceptual transfer, rhetorical positioning, supervision, and the negotiation of voice in AI-mediated writing. At the same time, multilingual agency is constrained by monolingual standards, supervisory authority, racialisation, institutional metrics, and uneven access to recognition. The field's next phase should therefore extend beyond documenting tension. It should broaden the geography and disciplinary range of research, include supervisors and institutions as accountable participants, and evaluate concrete pedagogical practices that treat multilingual repertoires as intellectual resources.

DECLARATION OF AI ASSISTANCE

This manuscript was prepared with the assistance of an AI language model for translation support, language editing, and structural reorganisation. The literature search, source selection, critical analysis, interpretation, and final verification of the content and references remain the author's responsibility.

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