

## IMAGINED IDENTITIES AND INVESTMENT IN L2 LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

Imagined identity, referring to the ideal self that L2 learners aspire to become in the future (Norton & Toohey, 2011), has been identified as a critical factor that could guide learners to make a learning investment that they believe would in turn reward them with the social capital for which they yearn (Kanno & Norton, 2003). This qualitative case study explores the relationship between imagined identity and investment through the analysis of English learning histories of three high achieving EFL learners in Taiwan. The findings reveal that the participants' different imagined identities constructed under the influence of particular social and personal factors influenced their choices of investment in different learning stages. Limited imagined identities as English learners confined their learning investment to the school context while more extended imagined identities such as an expert English user and English teacher guided them to make more varied investment in both formal and informal contexts. In addition, it was found that while the participants' imagined identities could act as a beneficial impetus for action, motivating them to make corresponding investments in their learning contexts, they also play a negative force, triggering the participants' resistant acts that led to reduced learning investment. In light of the results, some practical pedagogical implications and suggestions for future research are provided to add to the field of learning and teaching foreign languages.

**Key Words:** SLA, imagined identity, investment

## INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1990s, the field of SLA saw the decline of cognitivism and the rise of an emphasis on the socio-cultural aspects of second language learning. Ortega (2009) in her informative and comprehensive book *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* depicts how the “social turn in SLA” (Block, 2003) revealed the L2 researchers’ dissatisfaction of viewing L2 learning as a linear process and a universal pattern that can be generalized to second language learners. She pointed out that the central argument addressed by the critics is that the process of second language learning is similar to other human problems, complex, dynamic, and fundamentally unpredictable and is interrelated with other social elements embedded within the social context. In this sense, the pursuit of this particular and contextualized L2 phenomenon is valued and could better explain the different aspects of L2 learning (Ortega, 2009). Within this paradigm shift, several socially oriented theories such as Vygotskian socio-cultural theory, conversation analysis, language socialization theory, and identity theory have been proposed (e.g., Block, 2007; Duff, 2012; Lantolf & Apple, 1994; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Lin, 1999; McGroarty, 1998; Norton, 1995, 2013; Pennycook, 2001). Among them, identity theory has received a great deal of attention and has been extensively used to shed light on the intricate process of second language learning.

According to Block (2007), identity can be thought of as “socially constructed, self-conscious, ongoing narratives that individuals perform, interpret, and project . . . identities are about negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of the past, present and future” (p. 27). Viewed through the lens of poststructuralism, SLA researchers consider language learners’ identities multi-layered, fluid, dynamic, contradictory, and constantly changing across time and space (see Block, 2007; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Some theoretical concepts such as investment and imagined communities highlighted in identity theory have become influential concepts that have furthered our understanding of L2 learners’ identity. Investment is a notion that emphasizes the efforts learners put into learning with the anticipation of acquiring tangible or intangible returns that will “increase the value of their cultural capital” (Norton, 1995, p. 17). Norton & Toohey (2011) argued that different from motivation, which is generally considered a fixed psychological construct, investment should be regarded as a social

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construct that is subject to an embedded social environment. In other words, the concept of investment should be understood within a social context in which L2 learners who are social beings interacting with other social actors in social practices would make contextualized investments that in turn yield symbolic or material gain for the learners themselves. In addition, coined by Anderson (1983) and developed by Norton Pierce (1995, 2006), imagined communities refer to the communities that are constructed through learners' imaginations. They embody the communities that learners wish to join and become a member of in the future, and learners' imagined identities—a desired sense of self that learners project for themselves in the future (Norton, 2001)—would simultaneously be formed and developed along the construction of their imagined communities. Norton (2001) stated that although imagined communities and identities are neither tangible nor visible, they are, however, “no less real than ones in which learners have daily engagement and might even have a stronger impact on their current actions and investment [in language learning]” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 242). That is to say, imagined communities and identities can play a critical role, influencing the learners' agency to make different learning decisions that may contribute to the shaping of the learners' learning trajectories. Seen in this light, Kanno and Norton (2003) argued that since our actions will be driven by our aspirations, “our identities then must be understood not only in terms of our investment in the “real” world but also in terms of our investment in possible worlds” (p. 284).

While the relevance and influence of imagined identity has been recognized, it has been observed that to date much greater research attention has continued to be placed on the L2 learners' actual and real-life communities (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007); also, there remains a dearth of research that explores the relationship between the L2 learners' imagined communities and identities and investment. Therefore, to bridge the gap, a qualitative case study method was adopted to investigate three high-achieving English learners' learning histories to illustrate the interplay in language learning between learners' imagined identities and investment. In particular, the interaction among different factors contributing to the structuring of these learners' imagined identities and the investment they made across different learning stages during their L2 learning journeys were examined. To investigate the factors that influenced the learning trajectories and the respective outcomes of the research participants, individual efforts and motives behind their requests

toward making learning investments from their *sui generis* first-person account experiences were analyzed; this has been acknowledged as a legitimate qualitative research method that recognizes the learners' own voice and regards learners as diverse people (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001).

According to Pavlenko (2001b), these learners' first account stories "are unique and rich sources of information about the relationship between language and identity in L2 learning and socialization" (p.167) and the unique, private L2 learning experience can be better captured and illuminated through these personal narratives (Pavlenko, 2001b). Hence, by analyzing the participants' L2 learning narratives and data gathered through semi-structured interviews, findings of this study can likely expand our understanding of the role of imagined identities in L2 learning.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Imagined Communities and Imagined Identities

The theoretical constructs of imagined communities and imagined identities have gained considerable momentum in the field of second language teaching and learning. More than two decades ago, the term "imagined communities" was first coined by Anderson (1991) in an attempt to redefine the notion of nationalism. He believed that a nation should not be defined based on its concrete territorial boundaries but viewed as an imagined political community because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communication" (Anderson, 1983, p. 49). That being said, our sense of nationalism is mostly created through our imagination that enables us to connect to and to bond with other fellows we do not know and may not ever meet throughout our lifetimes. Two decades after, Anderson's concept of imagined community remains a powerful perspective for people to interpret their relationship with other communities, be it real or virtual, that they may not have immediate contact with. Inspired by this concept of imagined communities, Wenger (1998) included imagination as one of the core elements that enables people to learn and to engage in a community. He argued that to join a community, people not only socially participate in various tangible communities of practice, but also rely on their imagination to "include in

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our [their] identities other meanings, other possibilities, other perspectives” to create a “mode of belonging” (Wenger, 1998, p. 187). The notion of imagined communities and that said imagination later became the theoretical foundation upon which Norton (2001) developed her theory and applied it to the realm of SLA. In conjunction with second language learning, Norton (2001) suggested that learning is not simply confined to the actual communities that learners participate in, such as schools, church, and language clubs; instead, to a great extent, the involvement of distant communities constructed through learners’ imaginations also serves as a significant source that creates an impact on their learning. In this sense, these imagined communities give learners the space to picture themselves as being the members of a community to which they wish to become a part.

Elaborating on the concept of imagined community and imagined identity, Kanno and Norton (2003) pointed out the necessity to distinguish imagination from fantasies. Imagination that learners create, according to them, is not wishful thinking that separates one from reality and that can hardly be realized; rather, it is “hopeful imagination” in which rules and regulation exist and guide the learner’s behavior. Namely, it is the mental vision of a more desirable and possible future that facilitates the planning and regulation of the learners’ learning behavior and thus may lead to a change in their identities and learning trajectories (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2001).

### **Imagined Community and Investment**

Understanding the concept of imagined communities can have important implications for second language teaching and learning. Kanno and Norton (2003) suggested that the imagined communities learners envision and the imagined identities they assume may result in great influence on their L2 identity and investment. Seen from the perspective of poststructuralism, investment refers to “the degree to which people actively put symbolic, material and other resources into their language learning based on a kind of cost-benefit assessment, and in light of their desires and hopes” (Duff, 2012, p. 8). Investment is fundamentally similar to motivation constructed from the perspective of social psychological theory, for both of the terms were coined to explain what drives language learners to make monumental efforts and spend time in learning an additional language. Nevertheless, Norton and Toohey (2011) argued that unlike motivation, which is generally

considered a fixed psychological construct, investment is a social construct that “sees language learners as having complex identities, which change across time and space, and which are constructed on the basis of the socially given, and the individually struggled-for. . . and seeks to make meaningful connections between a learner’s desire and commitment to learn a language and their changing identities” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 420). As this definition suggests, what influences second language learners’ learning is not just confined to their individual characteristics, such as cognitive skills and personalities; rather, the social context that the learners engage in also plays a role in affecting their commitment and desire to learn the language. In fact, more and more attention has been paid to the investigation on the relationship between second language learners’ imagined communities and L2 investment (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Norton’s (1993) study of immigrant women in Canada is among one of the first research papers that demonstrated how L2 learners’ imagined communities along with actual communities influenced their degree of learning investment and therefore produced divergent learning outcomes. In addition, Chang (2011) investigated two Taiwanese doctoral students in the USA and found that these students’ professional backgrounds and their imagined identities had a profound influence on their selections in learning investment. For example, in terms of their investment in English learning, these students did not put effort into improving every language skill. Instead, they exerted their agency and made specific investments in improving those language skills, such as academic writing genres that could “generate the most profit valued in their imagined communities” (Chang, 2011, p. 225). For example, one of the participants Hou, who aspired to obtain an academic teaching position in Taiwan after completing his doctoral degree in the United States, invested tremendous effort in mastering academic English writing skills and found little or no desire to improve other communicative competencies such as speaking.

The aforementioned studies illuminate the relations between imagined communities and learning investment in ESL contexts. Nevertheless, relevant studies are comparatively scarce in the EFL context where English is learned as an additional language in a non-English country. Therefore, in response to this gap, the present study investigated three high achieving EFL learners’ language learning experience, with a particular focus on their imagined identity formed through the process of English learning and how their imagined identity along with other social

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factors influenced their investment in English learning. The research questions that guide the analysis of this study are as follows:

1. What are their imagined identities throughout their English learning?
2. How do their imagined identities influence their English learning investment?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The current study is a qualitative case study. According to Heigham and Croker (2009), a qualitative case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries and contexts are not clearly evident” (p. 13). By this definition, it is suggested that the objectives of a case study are (1) to improve conditions or practice based on what has been observed in a particular case, (2) to extend to other cases that may share a similar context, and finally (3) to obtain an in-depth understanding toward the particular case in question (Heigham & Croker, 2009). Accordingly, it is expected that this qualitative case study can provide useful insights into the role of imagined identities in learners’ learning and investment in the EFL context.

#### **Research Context**

The participants of the current study and I were classmates in a TESOL graduate course at Green University (pseudonym) in Taipei, Taiwan. The course introduced the issues related to second language learners’ agency and identity in a social context, and the instructor of the course required the students to write down and later orally share in class their own English learning stories throughout different phases in their life. It was through the story-telling section that I had the chance to listen to others’ English learning experiences and was intrigued by some of the stories they told. I approached some of my classmates and explained to them my research purpose. In the end, three classmates, Brie, Leo, and Alicia, agreed to participate in the study.

#### **Participants**

The three participants were high achieving English learners who

entered the TESOL master's (Brie and Leo) and doctoral (Alicia) programs with a strict screening process that examined the examinees' ability in English writing, knowledge of TESOL theories, and linguistics. Brie was a second-year graduate student. Before graduating from university, she had received an English teaching certificate and had started her teaching career in different high schools for a total of three years, which allowed her to obtain teaching experience immediately after graduation. Leo, on the other hand, was a third-year graduate student. Before participating in this study, he had already had two years of English teaching experience as a private English tutor. He hoped to become a high school English teacher in Taiwan after getting all the educational credits required for his credential and receiving his master's degree. Lastly, Alicia was a second-year doctoral student. Before participating in the study, Alicia had been teaching English and Spanish in a private university for five years, and now she was pursuing her doctoral degree while teaching in the university at the same time.

#### **Data Collection**

Following the tradition of qualitative research, the present study employs multiple data collection methods, including interviews, and participants' oral narratives and written narratives to better compare and triangulate different sources through which the findings and interpretation could be credible (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). All the data were collected in 2016.

**Written narrative.** As mentioned previously, the participants were required to write down their English learning stories that included different phases of their learning experiences from childhood to their current adulthood. They were also encouraged to reflect on their family's influence on their English learning. The design of this form of written narrative follows what Barkhuizen and Wett (2008) called a narrative frame which allows researchers to give participants guidance on what to include and reflect on in their narratives. According to Barkhuizen and Wett (2008), a narrative frame provides a scaffolded function that not only allows the participants to write down their reflections with a greater sense of direction, it also enables the researcher to use a more structured and thus effective way to collect relevant data and later to analyze them easily. What is more, Pavlenko (2001a) also contended that personal L2 learning narratives are valuable resources that can "provide glimpse into areas so private, personal and intimate that they are rarely – if ever –

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breached in the study of SLA, and at the same time are at the heart and soul of the L2 socialization process” (p. 167). However, a more organized structure is not without limitations. For example, Barkhuizen and Wett (2008) pointed out that the structured narrative frame may trade off the participants’ space to express themselves more freely and to reflect deeper on a given topic. Such being the case, the structured nature of the narrative frame may fall into the pitfall of “de-personalizing the teachers’ stories of experience” (Barkhuizen and Wett, 2008, p. 382). To lessen these problems, there were no other limitations placed on the writing format, language use, or word limit for the participants to compose their narratives. All the participants wrote down their stories in English. Brie’s written narrative comprises 3,277 words, Leo’s 2,356 words, and Alicia’s 3,014 words.

**Oral narrative.** All the participants shared their stories in Chinese, and each of them shared their stories for around 50 minutes in class. Their oral accounts were recorded, but since the contents of the spoken narrative overlapped with the written narrative, only the additional remarks that were not mentioned in the written narratives were noted and later transcribed verbatim.

**Interview.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted to not only gain the scope and depth of the analyzed data but also provide a more complete and solid-ground test for conclusions (Becker, 1970). The participants were interviewed individually, and each interview section ran between 50 to 70 minutes. The interview protocol was prepared in advance (see Appendix for the interview questions for Brie and Leo) and some questions required the participants to clarify the questions that were encountered when the researcher was reading through their written narratives. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese with occasional use of English and were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

To ensure a systematic and consistent data analysis process, the current study employed Murray’s (2009) data analysis procedures, which combined categorical content analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) and the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Categorical-content analysis, focusing on “the content of narratives as manifested in separate parts of the story, irrespective of the context of the complete story” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 16) is useful for

analyzing various written and oral narrative data, including personal diaries, autobiographies, or oral life stories (Lieblich et al., 1998). Constant comparative analysis, on the other hand, is a common analytical tool that has been used extensively in analyzing qualitative data to develop a grounded theory (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The following paragraph summarizes how Murray's (2009) analysis procedure was adopted and adapted in this study:

*Step 1: Coding the interview transcripts*

The researcher read through all data and engaged in the process of open coding while recording what was observed. The code words may have come from the literature or terms were coined when found that they "summarized or captured the essence of the segment" (Murray, 2009, p. 52). During this step, the researcher also read through the data repeatedly to seek patterns among the coded data. This procedure allowed constant reflection of the data and helped identify any emerging patterns in the data.

*Step 2: Looking for connections between codes and start to group codes into categories*

In this step, the researcher kept on applying new codes to the data and started to type up memos that included comments and ideas about the coded segments. To deepen the analysis, the analytical process of axial coding—the process of categorizing various codes in terms of the relationship and connection between them was included (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

*Step 3: Configuring the participant's story from the interview data*

Focus on the interview data in this step led to examining whether something said by the participants was not clear enough and needed further clarification. These segments were then marked and the participants contacted to get more information about his/her accounts.

*Step 4: Sending the story to the participants for additional comments*

After transcribing the interview data, the transcription was sent to the participants to ensure that their accounts, thoughts, and feelings were correctly recorded.

*Step 5: Carrying out a "cross-story" analysis*

After coding the data of one participant, the categories of coded words were used to code the other participant's data. The segments of data that shared similar meanings were integrated into the original categories, and those that did not match the original categories were

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given new codes. In addition, continual writing of memos and repeated axial coding were included to search for any possible relationship between the two participants' coded data.

### *Step 6: Noting themes as they emerge from the stories*

All the coded data in this step were rearranged to help better see the connections and find the emerging themes. This process is similar to selective coding—a procedure for building a theory, story, or idea that connects the categories (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007); it helps advance the data analysis process by deriving themes and narrative passages. Finally, when the coding analysis became “saturated” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in which no categories could be found after the preceding comparison procedures, interpretations were then made and findings were presented.

## RESULTS

The following section presents the participants' imagined identities constructed throughout their early (primary school years), middle (high school to college years) and present (graduate/doctoral program years) English learning stages and their corresponding investment in English.

### **Early Learning Stage**

**Brie and Alicia.** Alicia's and Brie's early stages of English learning experiences shared many commonalities. Both of them started to receive English instruction in private after-school programs during elementary school. Their parents sent them to learn English to make sure that they would not fall behind or “lose at the starting line” when they started their mandatory English lessons in junior high school. Nonetheless, an early exposure to English learning did not inspire them to learn the language; instead, both of them had a negative and discouraging early learning experience. For Brie, the after-school program she attended required students to do regular rote learning exercises and would even physically punish students who failed to memorize the assigned text. Her written narrative depicted vividly how the learning in the after-school program was stressful, frustrating, and even demeaning. For example, the after-school teachers had little or no tolerance for mistakes and used corporal punishment to punish students who failed to achieve the

required performance and would sometimes make humiliating comments to the students. The whole learning process, as Brie commented, “[it] was like I was fighting against a gigantic monster all the time” (extracted from the written narrative). Similarly, for Alicia, she did not think she learned much from the after-school program due to the monotonous and traditional way of the teaching methods. She described:

The program was famous for its rote learning and practicing. In my memories, the teachers spent little time teaching pronunciation or grammar. I just kept writing vocabulary and sentences. Frankly, I have no idea what I had learned from there. (written narrative)

Although neither of them liked English at this stage due to their negative learning environments, they did not give up English learning and still managed to get rather satisfactory scores on their English tests in school. Their accounts made in the narratives and the interviews revealed that what made them persist in English learning was their insistence on fulfilling the “good learner” identities they assumed for themselves.

They imagined that if their English performance was as good as their other subjects, they could better ensure that they could attend prestigious schools in the future. Following this idea, both Brie’s and Alicia’s investment toward English learning was therefore directed to and restricted to improving those skills that were emphasized and tested at school, such as grammatical knowledge and reading ability. They put little or no effort on working on other language skills such as speaking or listening and did not see much value in investing in English learning outside of the educational context.

**Leo.** Before starting to learn English, Leo had had the idea that English was useful. In his written narrative, Leo mentioned that both his grandfather and his father could speak English, and their English ability allowed them to respectively work as a bartender in an expat bar and a sailor whose career was dotted with wonderful encounters with people from diverse backgrounds. Raised in an environment where speaking English was regarded as a great asset, Leo had a positive impression of English before learning it. He commented, “I still have no idea why I am interested in learning English, but I think my family might have given me the idea that speaking good English makes you better than others” (extracted from the written narrative). Leo’s initially positive attitude toward English was reinforced when he started his English learning journey.

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Unlike his female counterparts whose early learning experience was discouraging, Leo started off his English journey with a positive experience. In his written narrative, he described in vivid detail how he stood out in English learning. He mentioned that in the after-school program, he was ranked as one of the top students in class and frequently impressed teachers and parents because of his performance. Owing to these outstanding performances, Leo started to develop the aspiration of being a “perfect English speaker” and even becoming an English teacher. His early-formed aspiration of being a perfect English speaker and an English teacher prompted him to make diverse investments in English learning that were not merely confined to the school context but were also extended to his everyday life. For instance, besides continuously getting high scores on his school English tests and participating in different speech competitions, Leo also made a habit of watching English learning TV programs at home on a daily basis during his primary school years. He wrote he would watch the show attentively, repeat after the host, and would even take notes from what he learned from the show. Table 1 summarizes the participants’ respective imagined identities and investment in their early stages.

Table 1

### *Summary of Early Stage Imagined Identities and Investment*

Participants	Imagined Identity	Investment
Brie Alicia	Good learner studying in good schools	Limited to investing language skills within the institutional requirement
Leo	English teacher and perfect English speaker	Diverse investment on four skills in both formal and informal learning contexts

### **Middle Learning Stage**

**Brie.** The previous section reveals Brie’s limited aspirations and investment toward English at the beginning learning stage. However, Brie’s attitude toward learning English underwent a positive change when her English proficiency improved in high school. She recalled, because of her excellent English performance, many of her classmates

would approach her and ask her to teach them English, and she enjoyed this newly gained recognition and task; a sense of achievement became highly apparent when she successfully helped them out. Besides undergoing an attitude change, Brie also became more active in investing in her English learning at this stage. For example, when Brie found her English teachers in high school were not effective, she took the initiative to attend an after-school program that offered better English instruction in order to maintain her level of English performance.

Moreover, it was also at this stage that Brie developed the idea about pursuing an English teaching career in the future. In fact, before attending university, Brie was interested in Chinese and intended to apply to the Chinese department and become a Chinese major. However, in the end she opted for majoring in English instead of Chinese in university because she was persuaded by her mother that mastering English would give her more job opportunities than majoring in Chinese and that a degree in Chinese would likely place her in a less advantageous position in a competitive job market and might even make her unemployable. Convinced by her mother's words, Brie was therefore determined to choose English as her major and later made up her mind to pursue an English teaching career. Once this objective was established, she then put effort into enhancing the skills that she thought would be important to get her near her goal of being an English teacher. For example, when she found out her listening skill was far worse than that of most of her peers' and this disadvantage might end up dashing her dream of becoming an English teacher, she was frightened and did her best to improve the situation. She started to try different strategies to improve her listening, such as listening to online English news reports and watching English videos. Gradually, her listening skill improved and her dream of becoming an English teacher was preserved.

**Alicia.** Similar to Brie's case, after a brief period in high school, Alicia found that she outperformed her peers in English, and it became the subject in which she excelled. The fact that she could always "reap what she sowed" on English tests, that is, getting good grades after studying hard for it, gained her interest and confidence in English. Consequently, Alicia's growing interest and confidence transformed her once aloof attitude toward English learning. As her motivation for English learning heightened, she no longer felt content with what she learned at school and began to look for opportunities to acquire more English knowledge. For example, when she found that a classmate

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whose English score ranked top in her class went to an after-school program that emphasized teaching methods usually neglected at school, she immediately went to ask her parents to sign her up for the program. After learning in this program, Alicia for the first time had the chance of communicating with native English speakers, and this new and exciting experience served as a trigger that broadened her purpose of English learning. She did not just learn English for a utilitarian reason of entering a good college; rather, she desired to use English to interact with other English speakers in real life contexts. She said:

Though I just said two or three sentences in the class, I felt so happy that I was able to talk to foreigners, so I would feel like, yeah if I could talk to the foreigners in the future that would be so great! (interview data)

It was through this positive learning experience that Alicia set the goal of becoming an English major in a prestigious public university and also an English teacher after college graduation.

Alicia's imagined identity as an English major drove her to strengthen her overall English proficiency through her high school years. Nevertheless, the pursuit of her imagined identity did not always lead her to make a greater investment in English learning. Rather, counterintuitively, it was found that when the possibility of fulfilling her imagined identity was threatened, the determination to defend the integrity of the imagined identity only made Alicia take actions that resulted in less investment. To illustrate, as mentioned earlier, as a student in a top ranked high school, Alicia had high expectations for herself and desired to be an English major in a national university. However, much to her surprise, she did not do well on the university entrance examination and was disqualified from applying to any public universities. Feeling devastated, Alicia made an unexpected decision—to choose Spanish instead of English as her major in a private university. The decision of abandoning the idea of majoring in English was not because she decided to give up learning English but because she simply could not bear the thought that her long-desired imagined identity—an English major in a national university— was compromised. She said in the interview, “I felt like, whatever, since I couldn't get into my most desired school, I might as well just give up, and went for the other option. . . yeah, like I was done, I would just give up on the whole thing.” As a result of this sense of defeatism, Alicia became an

unenthusiastic Spanish major in university yet a still passionate English learner who devoted energy and time to English learning. After making a long and struggling detour from the path she originally desired and planned for herself, Alicia finally achieved her dream and got into the master's linguistics program of the English Department in a public university. Another imagined identity of hers—an English teacher—was also realized afterwards. After she got a master's degree, she successfully obtained a teaching position as an English teacher in a college, and has been teaching English there ever since.

Leo. As mentioned previously, Leo formed early in life his imagined identity as an English teacher and someone who speaks perfect English, and accordingly, he made varied investments toward English learning to make his aspirations more tangible. Nevertheless, not long after Leo entered high school, he found that the talented English learner identity he enjoyed from elementary school through junior high school faced serious challenges, and it was at that stage that he began to show resistant behavior that hindered his English learning. Owing to his great academic performance, he was admitted to one of the best public high schools in Taipei and attended a special class designated for students with great English aptitude. In his class, almost every student, like Leo, had always had an outstanding English performance since childhood. As a result, Leo realized that “there were always people better than you” (extracted from his written narrative), and his imagined identity of becoming a perfect or superior English speaker suddenly became questionable and even unattainable. Therefore, like a proud monarch who was uncrowned, Leo began to lose a sense of confidence in his English ability and experienced frustration and stress. He wrote:

Some of my classmates could express their ideas fluently in English and they always got the praise from the teacher. However, I stuttered every time when I was called on and had to smile nervously to show that I really didn't know how to answer the questions. (written narrative)

Therefore, his sense of frustration aggravated Leo's resistance to English learning—he would feign sickness so that he could stay in the sick bay to skip some English classes. In the end, the loss of the confidence in achieving his imagined identity led to another resistant act that would have otherwise helped improve his English proficiency. He described in the very end of his written narrative with a trace of dejection, demonstrating his diffidence in his English ability:

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There are a lot of my friends who scored high on the TOEFL iBT test, and I still don't have the time and the courage to take the test.  
(written narrative)

Table 2 below outlines the participants' respective imagined identities and investment in their middle learning stage.

Table 2

*Summary of Middle Stage Imagined Identities and Investment*

Participants	Imagined identity	Investment	Events resulting in less investment
Brie	English teacher	Took initiative to study in the after-school program and worked on listening skill	
Alicia	English major, teacher, user	Joined various learning communities, including the after-school program and English club to enhance communicative competence	Chose to become Spanish not English major
Leo	English teacher and superior English speaker	Kept enrolling in the after-school program, reading English magazine	Passively participated in class, skipped classes, avoided taking TOEFL test

**Present Stage**

The previous sections reveal that as the participants moved forward on their educational paths, they gradually, yet not always smoothly, fulfilled or got near to becoming their imagined identities to which they had aspired. This final section would complete the description of their respective learning journeys by displaying their investment in English learning in their current stage—the stage when Brie and Alicia have

fulfilled their imagined identities of being English teachers and when Leo was just a step away from becoming an English teacher.

**Brie.** After graduating from the university, Brie successfully got a teaching certificate and started to work as a high school English teacher. The completeness of her imagined identity as an English teacher has further inspired her to have a new goal, that is, to make advancement in her knowledge in language teaching to the betterment of her students' learning outcomes. Accordingly, she attended an M.A. TESOL program to advance her knowledge.

**Alicia.** As for Alicia, like Brie, hoping to “update” herself in terms of her teaching knowledge and efficiency for the benefit of her students, Alicia applied for the doctoral program in Green University after teaching English in a university for about five years. When she was interviewed in the summer semester of 2016, she was in her second year of the doctoral program and also worked as an English teacher. When asked about what English meant to her as she had successfully reached her goal of being an English teacher, Alicia's answer indicated that English for her had had a different layer of meaning:

Alicia: um, it is still a necessary part of my life

Researcher: Like an indispensable tool?

Alicia: um. . . I wouldn't want to think of it as just a tool, but it's more like it gives me some spiritual comfort? Like when I can understand the songs, the punchline on the shows, this makes me really happy. (interview data)

In other words, English is not merely conceived as a necessary tool through which she could climb to the top of the educational ladder, but also as a source of recreation through which she could gain pleasure that enriches her private sphere. Seeing English as a lubricant in life, Alicia now informally invests in her English learning by watching a variety of TV shows, movies, and listening to English songs. In addition, her desire to improve her English proficiency and her love for Western entertainment productions inspired her to consider the idea of studying abroad to have a chance to interact with people in the local community. She said,

Alicia: I feel like I want to integrate with English speaking people more [ . . . ] umm, I think English is a medium, so if I understand this language, I can be friends with them, then I can know more. For example, I would better understand the punchlines on the TV shows that usually contain some additional cultural meanings. (interview data)

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Leo. Last but not least, when Leo was asked about his future aspirations for English learning, his response suggested that he planned to follow a career path similar to Brie’s—getting his master’s degree, applying for a teaching certificate, and working as an English teacher in a school. As an English learner, he said he was still not very confident in his speaking skills, and would want to improve to a more advanced level. Interestingly, when further asked about how he planned to strengthen his speaking ability, Leo answered that his job as an English tutor actually helped in that he could have more opportunities to speak English and feel less stressed:

Leo: well, now I have tutees that are two junior high school students. Their mother kind of hopes that I can only use English to teach them, so I think this makes a difference. . I feel I am getting a hang of it [in English speaking]

Researcher: You mean when you teach them, you feel you can speak English more fluently?

Leo: Yeah, I guess on one hand it’s because of the power relationship, after all, it’s very unlikely that a junior high school student’s English can be better than mine, so comparatively [when I speak to them in English], it’s less stressful. (interview data)

Table 3 below summarizes the participants’ present stage of fulfilled and pursuing imagined identities and investment.

Table 3

*Summary of Present Stage of Fulfilled/Pursuing Imagined Identities and Investment*

Participants	Imagined identity	Investment
Brie	English teacher (fulfilled)	Matriculated in an M.A. TESOL program to advance her knowledge in teaching.
Alicia	English teacher (fulfilled), English user (pursuing)	Matriculated in a Ph.D. TESOL program to advance her knowledge in teaching.
Leo	English teacher (pursuing), superior English speaker (pursuing)	Matriculated in an M. A. TESOL program and joined teacher education program

## **DISCUSSION**

Although all the participants attained high English proficiency, their imagined identities and investment throughout their learning trajectories were by no means identical and were influenced by and connected to different factors in their respective socio-cultural contexts. The following two sections continue to discuss in depth the significant themes and emerging issues pertaining to the results of the current study.

### **What are Their Imagined Identities Throughout Their English Learning?**

**Imagined identity as an English learner: The social institutional factor.** To begin with, the findings showed that in the early stage, both Brie and Alicia shared a similar imagined identity of becoming “a good learner studying in good schools.” They were interested only in investing in those skills which would enable them to score high on their exams. This utilitarian attitude toward academic performance thus limited their willingness to make investments in other language skills such as listening and speaking that are without doubt essential if having communicative competence is seen as the ultimate goal in language learning. This finding resonates with previous studies that pointed out social institutional practices and arrangement (e.g., educational organizations, communities, companies, and legal systems) may play a role in constraining or enabling the range of identity to language learners (e.g., Blackledge, 2003, as cited in Kharchenko, 2014; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton & Toohey, 2011). For example, Kanno (2003) claims that “schools are powerful social agents that can create images of communities for their children’s future and give these visions flesh and blood” (p. 295). In other words, as interpreted by Kharchenko (2014), “imagination at personal and individual level is still subject to hierarchy and rules of the dominant society” (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Blackledge, 2003, as cited in Kharchenko, 2014, p. 33). As a case in point, studying in an EFL learning context in which the real use of English is limited may act as a key factor that limited Brie’s and Alicia’s range of imagined identities. As shown in the result section, during their early stage of learning, both of them learned English in a test-oriented school and after-school program. In these learning contexts, both of the participants received little or no communicative language practice but rather decontextualized instructional practices such as grammar and translation. The participants’ English learning goal, therefore, was to pass the tests

with competitive scores. In this way, it is not surprising to see that both of them assumed the restricted and even passive imagined identity of being a good learner in a good school, or say, of being an English test-taker. Seen in this light, it is fair to argue that the institution and instructional practices they were exposed to restricted them from forming a more powerful imagined identity such as an English user that may lead them to make a more balanced investment in their English learning.

**Imagined identity as an English professional: The socio-cultural value factor.** On the other hand, in Leo's case, although he was also an EFL learner exposed to a rather non-communicative learning context like Brie and Alicia, he, however, was still able to form a wider imagined identity for himself and exerted his agency to make diverse investments contributing to his learning in the early stage. Aspiring to become a perfect English speaker and an English teacher in the future, he made comparatively more divergent investments toward English learning in both the formal school environment and the informal daily life context. In addition to Leo's inherent talent and aptitude in learning English, one critical factor embedded in his socio-cultural context—the socio-cultural value—could also be used to explain why he did not fall prey to the existing social institutional practices like his female counterparts had undergone and was able to form wider imagined identities and thus make diverse investments contributing to his learning. That is, another layer of social meaning bestowed on English proficiency was emphasized early in his life that influenced Leo's construction of his imagined identities and thereby gave him a stronger sense of purpose in devotion to his learning. As mentioned before, influenced by his family background in which the family breadwinners—his father and grandfather—were both capable of speaking English at work, Leo as a young child had had the belief that “speaking English makes you better than others”. This belief that English is privileged and associated with greater career prospects was implanted in Leo's mind as a young child; this helped him foster a positive attitude toward English and contributed to his learning and later, to certain degree, inspired him to pursue the goal of becoming a perfect English speaker and English teacher. In a similar vein, the socio-cultural value that English is perceived as a language with more prestige and possibilities became a source of influence that changed Brie's imagined identities during her middle learning stage. As mentioned previously, before entering the university, Brie decided to choose English rather than

Chinese as her major in college. This motivation of being an English major was triggered by her mother's inculcation of the utilitarian benefits of being an English teacher instead of a Chinese one in Taiwanese society.

The two families' shared belief that English is associated with status and possibilities, in fact, has reflected a wider socio-cultural value in Taiwanese society. A brief history of English education in Taiwan would help to understand how such an ideology has permeated mainstream thinking. According to Lu (2011), in Taiwan, the importance of English education was most emphasized around 1990, when the government reached a consensus on the need to promote internationalization in Taiwan to attract more international investment. To attain the goal, one of the most vital policies was to reform English education by introducing an English curriculum earlier in elementary schools. Throughout the years, the curriculum guidelines by the Ministry of Education (MOE) went through several changes, and now the legal age to receive English lessons was lowered to third grade in 2005. Lu (2011) further pointed out that the emphasis on English education has since become a top-down education reform movement in which private and out-of-school English programs for different ages of students have popped up like mushrooms after the rain. It is estimated that over 90 percent of high school students in major cities in Taiwan have attended after-school English programs (Lu, 2011). Undeniably, the popularity and the prevalence of English education, especially in countries in an expanding circle (see Kachru, 1985) results from the fact that English enjoys the status as a lingua franca, or world language, and fluency in English gives one instrumental benefits, such as matriculating into better schools and obtaining better job opportunities. What is more, it has been observed that possessing proficient English ability indeed not only gives one visible instrumental benefits but also helps one gain social capital. For instance, a number of studies have shown that English is deemed highly positive in Taiwan (e.g., Chen, 2010; Tsai, 2010), so much so that having English ability has become synonymous with one's competence, elevating the level of social meaning to a much higher category. In one study investigating language skills and social status attainment in Taiwan, Tsai (2010) found that despite the indirect need of using English for communicative functions, fluency in English matters more than fluency in Chinese for an individual in terms of getting a better chance to advance their socioeconomic status. In other words, English is seen as a

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symbol of one's competence, associated with socioeconomic progress and even with elitism and individual upward mobility (Chen, 2010).

Seen in this light, Leo's family ethos that "English makes you better than others" and Brie's mother's belief that majoring in English would guarantee a more promising future is an axiom highly persuasive not only because it is passed down from family members, but also because it reflects a broader social value that has deeply permeated social thinking. When these words coincide with family values and the external social milieu, it can be argued that they become a powerful and even a dogmatic source that molded Leo's and Brie's belief systems and inspired them in different stages of learning vis-à-vis their English learning.

**Imagined identity as an English professional and user: Individual factors.** As for Alicia, unlike Brie and Leo whose imagined identities as English professionals were shaped primarily by the socio-cultural value factor, Alicia's imagined identity as an English professional did not fall into the socio-cultural spectrum; Alicia's imagined identity as an English professional was shaped more by a personal factor: it was a direct result of her personal achievement and success in secondary education that became the impetus for launching her academic pursuit and future career around what she did the best, and that is English.

As Kharchenko (2014) indicated, "since imagination is a personal thing, imagined communities would be also shaped by one's age, cultural background, learning and professional experience, language proficiency and other individual factors" (p. 37). Besides the interaction with different social factors, it was found that some individual factors also play an influential role in the participants' construction of imagined identities along their English learning journeys. First, the results showed that one of the turning points that prompted Alicia to change her attitudes toward English learning was when she saw an improvement of her English proficiency after entering high school. English became her best subject and even a source of confidence, and the witness of this change enabled her to re-evaluate the role of English in her life. Additionally, another individual factor identified in Alicia's case is the inspiring learning experience she had in the after-school program she attended in high school. It was through this learning experience that she had the chance for the first time to use English in a more communicative environment than that provided in the school context. Accordingly, she started to imagine the possibility of using English outside the school context to communicate with other English speakers in the world, the

transformation of which expanded her imagined identity from an English learner to an English user. After Alicia realized her imagined identity of being an English teacher was cemented, her liking of the western entertainment productions that are replete with western cultural traditions, attitudes, and thinking inspired her to form the idea of studying abroad. By doing so, she would get the opportunity to interact with local English native speaking people and to learn more about the local culture from local people's perspective.

#### **How do Their Imagined Identities Influence English Learning Investment?**

The previous section unraveled whether the participants' imagined identities were restricted ones as mere English learners or extended ones like English teachers and users, they guided the participants to make relevant and contextualized investments that contributed to their English learning. That is to say, the investment they made reflected the imagined identities they aspired to become. This part of the findings, in fact, is consistent with Norton and Toohey's (2011) observation. They stated that learners "invest in the target language at particular times and in particular settings because they believe they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will, in turn, increase the value of their cultural capital" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 420). In the early learning stage, having limited "good language learners" imagined identities, Brie and Alicia invested specific energy in enhancing the language skills valued and emphasized at school. They did so because they believed they would give themselves an advantage in attending their ideal schools in the future. In their middle learning stage, their extended imagined identities motivated them to make more diversified investments in both formal and informal school contexts. Brie's imagined identity of being an English teacher impelled her to improve her listening skill while Alicia's imagined identity of being an English user motivated her to strengthen other language skills for communication. Likewise, Leo's imagined identity of being a perfect and superior English speaker, and later an English teacher, motivated him to make relevant and diverse investments in English learning.

Nevertheless, as Pavlenko and Norton (2007) stated, "language learners' actual and desired memberships in imagined communities affect their learning trajectories, influencing their agency, motivation, investment, and resistance in the learning of English," (p. 589) the imagined identities they had across different learning stages did not

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simply always play a beneficial driving force, positively influencing their English learning investment. Rather, there were untoward circumstances where their imagined identities became the source that resulted in their resistant mentality toward English learning that resulted in less language learning investment.

In Leo's case, for example, when he realized that most of his peers in high school had better English proficiency than he did, his imagined identity of becoming a superior English speaker suddenly was threatened and unattainable. The conflict between the imagination and the reality made Leo passively participate in his high school English class; at some critical points of his secondary education, he even skipped classes or feigned sickness to avoid participation in class. It is as if by avoiding speaking English in front of other students with better English proficiency, he would avoid the possibility of being regarded as a less able and less fluent speaker, and his idealized self-image as a superior English learner could still be maintained. In addition, a similar resistant act is observed when Leo said that he did not have the courage to take the TOEFL iBT test when many of his peers had taken it and had attained high scores. A possible interpretation of this resistant response to learning may be the fear of getting an unsatisfactory result that may challenge his already wavering confidence of being a superior English learner that had once been consolidated through past positive learning experiences during his primary school education. What is more, in the end of Leo's narrative, he mentioned that the way he practiced speaking at the current stage was mainly through speaking English to his tutees in class. In this way, he could represent a more powerful figure and felt less stressed. However, although practicing speaking in a low stake context could allow Leo to feel more at ease, the opportunity of enhancing his speaking skill more effectively (such as practicing English speaking with others with more equivalent English competence such as native speakers or peers) is traded off. Leo's strategic investment of practicing English speaking with less proficient students instead of practicing it with more fluent speakers revealed his discomfort in communicating with those people he desired to become, that is, the superior and perfect English speakers. A similar situation can also be seen in Alicia's case. As revealed in the results section, when her dream of becoming an English major in university was dashed because of her unexpected entrance exam result, she took an extreme action to abandon the whole idea of majoring in English and chose Spanish as her major in university. And the decision

of doing so was not because she lost interest in English—as evidenced by her continual efforts in English learning during university life—but because she could not tolerate the idea that her long-aspiring dream had been compromised.

In summary, both Alicia and Leo shared a common sense of ambivalence and, in fact, their situations find resonance in Norton's (2001) words, who observed that “the very people to whom the learners were most uncomfortable speaking English were the very people who were members of—or gatekeepers to—the learners' imagined communities” (Norton, 2001, p. 166). Seen in this regard, the imagined identities that Leo and Alicia wished for themselves, ironically and counterintuitively, became the source of their resistant acts, reducing the likelihood of gaining more effective investment in English learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the discussion, the influence of different factors in forming and shaping the learners' imagined identities was noted. Sociocultural factors, including institutional practices and sociocultural value along with individual factors, such as proficiency and learning experience, all interacted together and fashioned the participants' construction of imagined identities. This part of the findings supports the post-structuralist perspective which claimed that identity is socially constructed and is constantly changing across time and place (see Block, 2007; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). In addition, as Levis and Moyer (2014) commented “the concept of imagination is critical in understanding participation and lack of participation by learners” (p. 106), the positive and negative influence that the participants' imagined identities had on them were also discussed.

Based on the results, some pedagogical implications can be made. First, the results show the participants' imagined identities to a great extent drove them to make contextualized investments, reshaping their English learning trajectories. In this light, it is suggested that besides imparting learners with necessary linguistic knowledge, language teachers should also recognize the role of learners' imagined identities in language learning and design relevant learning activities that could guide students to connect their personal aspiration in terms of personal growth, professional development, and job opportunities with language learning *per se*. In so doing, language teachers may facilitate students to “think of

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themselves as living in multiple communities, including the classroom community, the target language community, and the imagined community” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 178)—the vivid imagination of which may help them to learn the language with a sense of direction along the long voyage of second language learning. Second, the finding also suggests that institutional practices and arrangement acted as a critical factor that constructed Brie’s and Alicia’s limited imagined identities as mere English learners in the early stage. Therefore, it is vital for language teachers to take a critical view to examine whether their teaching practices would limit or constrain students’ imagination of the language they are learning. Finally, in the situation when language teachers are informed of the students’ imagined identities through needs analysis or other means, language teachers then need to take students’ imagined identities into consideration when making pedagogical decisions such as designing lesson plans, learning activities, and learning materials so as to ensure that the learning is meaningful, context-specific, and can address the learners’ needs and aspirations. Otherwise, as cautiously put by Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008), “if the classroom practice fails to link the learner to the imagined community which each learner wishes to be part of, it can alienate him/her” (p. 569).

All in all, although the exploration of the three participants’ experiences has shed light on our understanding of the relationship between learners’ imagined identities and investment, it is worth noting that their experiences are idiosyncratic and should be understood in their respective contexts; therefore, it allows only limited generalizations to other learners or in other contexts. Future research is encouraged to explore learners’ imagined identities and their relation to learning investment by collecting more data sources or by involving more participants through a longer period of documentation. Additionally, researchers are also encouraged to explore and identify more factors that contribute to the shaping of learners’ limited as well as extended imagined identities in the EFL context to further enrich our understanding of the interrelated and complex working of EFL learners’ identities and investment.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview Questions for Brie and Leo**

#### **I. Examples of interview questions for Brie:**

1. Back when you were an elementary school student, did you have any ideas about what kind of English teacher you would like to be when you grew up?
2. What do you think was the reason that made you persist on English learning (even after having encountered so many negative experiences)?
3. You said English was like a big monster for you in the primary school. What was English to you when you were in high school?
4. What did English mean to you when you were in college?
5. As an English learner, what was your expectation of yourself in the future?

#### **II. Examples of interview questions for Leo:**

1. What did English mean to you when you were an elementary school student?
2. Why do you think you wanted to be an English teacher rather than a teacher of other subjects (when you were a child)?
3. Did you invest in any additional effort in learning English in the after-school program, i.e. cram school or tutoring, during your elementary school education?
4. In junior high school, did you think about what kind of people you could interact with or what kind of jobs you could do in the future because of your good English ability?
5. How did you feel about learning English in the cram school during your elementary school days?
6. Currently, what do you do to improve your English ability in a daily life context?

第二語學習者的想像身份與投資

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第二語學習者的想像身份，即對自我身份的想像或期望，被視為關鍵的因素，能驅使學習者在學習過程中做出有助學習的投資，以在未來獲得他們所渴求的社會資本。此質性個案以三位高學習成就者為研究對象，透過他們的書面敘述文分析其在不同英文學習階段的想像身分，並進一步探討這些想像身份如何影響他們的英文學習。研究結論可見，受試者在不同社會情境下所建構的想像身份影響他們在不同階段的學習過程中，做出不同的投資。例如，有限的想像身份如「英文學習者」使他們僅專注於加強制式學習環境所強調的英文能力；而擁有較多元的想像身份如「英文使用者」與「英文老師」則使他們能透過較多元學習方式，加強不同的英文能力。研究也發現，想像身份雖有助受試者學習，但當想像身分與現實有所落差時，卻也造成負面影響，降低他們的學習成效。文末將對外語老師可如何透過想像身分幫助學生學習提出建議。

**關鍵詞：**外語習得、想像身分、投資理論