

Imagined Communities and Identities in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learning: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Imagined community and identity have been recognized as critical aspects in English language learning. Imagined community refers to the ideal community that learners wish to get engaged in, while imagined identity refers to the ideal self that language learners wish to become in the future. However, there is a scant research on these two notions in relation to English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. To that end, this paper aims to present the literature review of the contemporary theories on imagined communities and identities in EFL learning. It first discusses the imagined communities regarding the functions, community of practice, notions of imagined communities and concepts of imagined EFL classroom communities. It then scrutinizes imagined identities in terms of poststructuralists' theory, English language learners' identities, notion of imagined identity and EFL learners' imagined identity. This paper is hoped to provide a timely and needed conceptual framework for other relevant constructs (e.g., English language learning investment) in English language learning.

Keywords: *Education, English as foreign language (EFL), literature review, imagined community, imagined identity*

INTRODUCTION

English in today's world has become a major means of communication, and its benefits extent even further than just merely being a communication tool. Bordieu (1986) has coined the term 'capital' to highlight the value that learners earn after mastering a particular language. He has stated that 'capital' covers a wide range of aspects including material (income, wealth), symbolic (education, friendship), cultural (appreciation toward cultural values and norms), and social (connections to power). Irrespective of the 'capital' a learner yearns to get, English would offer them opportunities to fulfill their wish, which makes it an instrumental part to their professional or academic paths.

In order to view 'capital' as a built-in factor within the language acquisition process, one needs to consider the situation from the viewpoint of a post-structuralist (Norton, 2013). Norton argues that language learning is not the process of an individual but the one interacted by multiple aspects, namely the language, the linguistic community, the position he or she possessed or be placed by others. In the post-structuralist's point of view, the linguistic community is seen as "heterogeneous arenas characterized by conflicting claims to truth and power" (Norton, 2013, p. 54). This can be simply explained that language learners are constrained in a linguistic community and influenced by factors such as ethnicity, genders or races, which in turn will construct an identity for the learners. For Norton (2013), identity refers to "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the

person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 4). In other words, the identity of language learners is fluid, changes temporarily and spatially and can be negotiated as well as renegotiated.

In identity theories, the notions of imagined communities and imagined identities are seen as inseparable variables from language learning. Imagined community, coined by Anderson (1983), is the desired community that learners wish to get access to, and it leads to the construction of imagined identity, a sense of possible self that learners anticipate to become in the future (Norton, 2001). Even though these notions are abstract, and arbitrary, they are “no less real than ones in which learners have daily engagement and might even have a stronger impact on their current actions and investment” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 242).

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

In this section, the notion of imagined communities in English language learning is discussed. The essence of imagined community lies within the power of imagination. Thus, the functions of imagination are revealed before other aspects of imagined community is visited.

The Functions of Imagination

According to theories of poststructuralists, one of the most important aspects in critical pedagogy is the engagement with imagination (Pennycook, 2001). With the power of imagination, people will be able to adjust their environments, expand and negotiate their identities, and, ultimately, alter their own reality. In other words, imagination can be simply identified as “a way to appropriate meanings and create new identities” (Pavlenko & Norton, 2005, p. 590). In the case of imagined communities, imagination is assumed as its core phenomenon, and the notion of imagined communities can be further studied when the notion of imagination is fully comprehended.

Imagination as a Social Practice

Considering the modern and globalized world, Appadurai (1996) argues that “the two interconnected diacritics generate their joint effect on the work of imagination as a productive feature of modern subjectivity” (p. 3). He believes that the role of imagination in social practice somewhat characterizes the modern world. Hence, “the image, the imagined, the imagery - these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31).

Likewise, a number of language learners and immigrants all over the world position their imagination, adjusting their expectations and identities to the future communities where they yearn to become a member of. For example, according to several studies in the field of EFL and SLA, students in Pakistan imagine a peaceful future community where their English and their variants coexist with each other (Norton & Kamal, 2003). In another study, Asian immigrant parents who have their children enroll in French-English immersion schools imagine that those institutions will aid their children to get access to a legitimate bilingual Canadian community (Dagenais, 2003). Some Japanese students imagine their future in which the boundaries of their geographical territories are transcended (Kanno, 2003).

As Simon (1992) claims, the kind of future that is worth one's devotion is shaped through imagination. Each individuals' imagination creates a variety of visions and expectations which connects to their imagined communities. That is, imagination has its projective function, as, through imagination, people connect their self-images to a future society. In other words, it is by the power of imagination that one's imagined communities are constructed. Further than that, imagination is believed to urge people to practically reach the future society through active involvement and investment in learning (Wenger, 1998; Norton, 2000, 2001).

The Educational Function of Imagination

The role of imagination in education has been emphasized by some scholars. Vygotsky (1978), who has focused on the social construction of learning, has explored the educational function of imagination in children's play. Vygotsky (1978) claims that, through children's play activities, creative imagination can develop into a higher psychological function that is regulated through inner speech. Vygotsky (1978) makes another point considering that imagination triangulates with thinking and language, helping children to better understand the surrounding world.

Meanwhile, Greene's (1995) version of imagination suggests social as well as educational functions. She argues that it is due to our imagination that it leads to the existence of the constructs and conditions that we live under. In her opinions, imagining might be the first step toward proving that they can be changed; "when a person chooses to view herself and himself ...as beginner, learner..., and has the imagination to envisage new things emerging, more and more begins to seem possible" (p. 22), and without it our lives would be "our pathways become cul-de-sacs" (p. 17). Her premises extend the power of imagination to the domain of schools, places where students are in search of new meanings and their own identity.

Wenger (1998) sees a possibility to combine imagination with identity construction and learning, believing that there is a close connection between imagination and identity as well as the community of practice. His imagination is "a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space, and creating new images of the world and ourselves. Imagination in this sense is looking at an apple seed and seeing a tree" (p. 176). In this sense, it is due to the power of imagination that people can realize their position to the world and history and view their identities with new possibilities and futures. Thus, imagination begets practices and motivation which heavily anchors in social interactions and communal experiences.

Appadurai (1996) makes clear distinction between imagination and fantasies. He argues that "the idea of fantasy carries with it the inescapable connotation of thought divorces from projects and actions, and it has a private, even individualistic sound about it. On the other hand, the imagination has a projective sense about it, the sense of being a prelude to some sort of expression" (p. 27). Likewise, Simon (1992) also distinguishes between wishes and hope. According to him, wishes suggest no possible actions, while hopes promise active and practical engagement in order to fulfill one's desire. Norton (2001) concludes in one of her studies on immigrant ESL learners that even though imagined communities are a product of

learner's imagination, their imagined communities should be viewed in terms of "possibility."

Community of practice

Norton (2000, 2001) is the pioneering scholar who integrates the concept of imagined communities to ESL classrooms by examining English language learners' identity construction. Her dedicating work on this premise is rather influential as she believes imagination is "another important source of community" (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241). Since her first introduction of imagined communities to the field of English language education, Norton (2000) has turned the work of imagination from a virtual perspective to an actual one.

The application of her studies on imagined communities have largely drawn on the notion of the "community of practice (CoP)" framework created by Lave and Wenger (1991). Besides imagination as the core of the idea, CoP provides imagined communities with an effective and meaningful framework. For that reason, it is imperative to take into consideration the COP framework because, through it, imagined communities can be strongly supported and tangibly revealed.

Essentially, Lave and Wenger's CoP exist with everyday life practices, and the involvement of learners are direct and practical, which is similar to Anderson's (1983) notion of participation in imagined communities, basing on social relationships. Meanwhile, Kanno and Norton's (2003) imagined communities are regarded as "not immediately tangible and accessible" (p. 241). Nevertheless, as Greene (1995) suggests that imagining is the first step towards changes, Kanno and Norton note that the power of our imagination lies under the tendency to help us power ourselves to get access to possible future world formed through our feeling of attachment to it. They suggest that "imagined communities are no less real than the ones in which learners have daily engagement and might even have a stronger impact on their current actions and investment" (p. 242). Thus, it is necessary to interpret the notion of imagined communities as a way of living with prospects by progressively employing the histories and the future. This comprehension marks a turning point, changing the perspective on imagined communities from virtual to actual and linking it to the language learning process of language learners.

The notion of imagined communities

Recent trends in English language education have led to a proliferation of studies that explore the impact of imagined communities and imagined identities. According to a definition provided by Anderson (1983, p. 49), imagined community is where "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p. 49). This powerful notion later inspired Wenger (1998) to conclude the significance of engagement. He states that to get access to a community, besides socially joining a set of communities of practice, individuals were bound to harness their power of imagination to "include in our identities other meanings, other possibilities, other perspectives" to create a "mode of belonging" (Wenger, 1998, p. 187). Once people are attached to an imagined community, they tend to "engage in active attempts to reshape the surrounding contexts" (Pavlenko, 2003, p. 266), so as to reach their imagined community. These are interdependent sociological constructs that are shaped by learners' "power of imagination"

(Norton, 2013) .

On the grounds of identity and educational functions of imagination, some scholars have stated that the notion of imagined communities provides actual engagement representing educational opportunities (Dagenais, 2003; Kanno, 2003; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko, 2003; Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2001). In the field of EFL, Norton Pierce (1995) tempted on this notion and developed a theoretical foundation that has been applied in language teaching and learning. She asserts that language learners are not simply restrained to a community that their temporary learning progress exists within such as schools, classes, or language clubs, but an imagined community that are “not immediately tangible and accessible”. By “not immediately”, she states the same environment that learners will participate in in the near future. The contribution of the community produced through the imagination of learners toward language learning should not be overlooked as it might pose an effect on the learning trajectories through negotiation and renegotiation and give learners picture of their possible selves. Concerning this, Norton (2001) claims that the imagined identities of learners would be shaped through the demonstration of imagined communities, which later leads to a set of learning investments. Therefore, the notion of imagined communities includes one’s future images, and these images cause one to particularly commit or invest in real life by learning a language or participating in a tangible community. Through the projection of different visions of the future and the production of everyday practices as repercussions, imagined communities lead people to the notions of identity and belonging, whether their imagined community is a school, a workplace, a nation, or any social forms. Thus, imagined communities are no less than real (Kanno & Norton, 2003).

Furthermore, in order to avoid any confusion, Kanno and Norton (2003) have attempted to draw fine distinctions between imagination and fantasy. Imagination, in this context, is “hopeful imagination” in which there are the existence of possible rules and regulations that encourage learners to form a mode of behavior beneficial for their learning rather than mere wishful thinking that is unrealistic. The imagination then embarks the planning and participation of the students in order to fulfill the vision they set out. This in turn will make a contribution to a change of identities in response to the community they create imaginatively and result in an investment.

Definition of imagined EFL classroom communities

The term “imagined EFL classroom communities” which refers to the specific target EFL classroom communities that EFL learners desire to get access to is adopted. In this desired communities, three main components are closely examined. Firstly, it is the teacher who is in charge of the imagined communities. Drawing upon the findings of Kanno and Norton’s work (2003), it is noteworthy that teachers’ educational vision has a profound impact on the language learning trajectories of students. For example, in Kanno and Norton’s study (2003), Katarina, one of the main participants, never returned to her English class as there was a conflict between her and the teacher. Thus, language teacher should be one of the main factors that forms a favorable imagined community. Secondly, the classmates in the imagined EFL classes are also taken into consideration. In Wu’s study (2017), it is evident that all three participants are partially, if not completely,

influenced by their EFL counterparts. For instance, Brie felt a sense of achievement and success as she was frequently asked for help in teaching English and highly praised by her fellows. Meanwhile, Leo underperformed with his English as he realized that all of his classmates in his new class had an outstanding English performance, leaving him with the thought that there would always be people who are better than you. In other words, the peers are also an important part in one's imagined classroom communities. Finally, it is the classroom practices EFL learners hope to experience. Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) claim that "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). In another work carried out by Attamimi, Al-Tamimi, and Chittick (2019), some of the participants show their lost in enthusiasm when the classroom practices do not match their interest and expectation. Fatima, one of the participants, felt the language used in her collese was mostly academic and limited, leaving her no chance to fully use her linguistic capacity. Another participant, whose name was Faris, also said that the classroom activities in his elemenrary and secondary schools greatly focused on grammar and vocabulary, giving him no chances to practice speaking English. For that reason, along with teachers and peers in EFL classroom, an ideal imagined EFL classroom coommunities will also comprise of desirable classroom practices.

In conclusion, the notion of imagined community views imagination as its core phenomenon. It is the educational functions of imagination that give individuals a number of visions and projection which are possible alternative realities, and eventually urge people to actually engage in the real world and take any learning opportunities to reach that future world. More than that, the educational function of imagination also clearly distinguishes between imagination, which are characterized with actions, and fantasy, which are nothing but wishes without any practices. Through imagination, the construct of imagined communities is formed and negotiated. Basing on the notion of imagined communities originating from Norton's work (2001), the research then adopts a new term which is the imagined EFL classroom communities so that the favorable and desired communities of practice of EFL learners are further explored.

IMAGINED IDENTITIES

Poststructuralists' theory of identity

Like other poststructuralist theorists who have informed their work in the field of identity, Weedon (1997) has argued that the role of language does not lie merely in the institutional practices but also in the construction of one's sense, or subjectivity, highlighting the instrumental part of language in her study of the connection between individuals and society. She states that "language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested, yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed" (p. 21). Norton (2013) agrees with the use of the term subjectivity as it is compelling and it reminds us that the identity of one person must always be understood in relational terms; for example, one could be the subject of a set of relationships (i.e., in a position of power) or the subject to a set of relationships (i.e. in a position of reduced power).

Furthermore, Weedon (1997) notes that identity is formed in and through language. Whenever language learners use the target language, whether in reading, writing or speaking, they are exchanging information with speakers in the target language community while negotiating and renegotiating a sense of themselves and how they position their identities relating to the social world. In other words, when using a language, they are also engaged in identity construction and negotiation. Norton (2013) shares the same viewpoint with other poststructuralists since she defines identity as “the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 45). She stresses that an understanding of both identity and investment is central to the lives and careers of many language learners.

According to poststructuralists’ approach which contradicts the perspectives of the essentialists, identity is conceptualized as “multiple, fluid, situated, dynamic and context-dependent” (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Identities are not fixed attributes, but are constructed and reconstructed in accordance with specific contexts (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2000; Sung, 2014). Moreover, Norton (2000) sees identity construction as a site of struggle where individuals form their sense of self by following favorable identity and resisting unfavorable ones as a result of unequal power relations. However, as the social systems and structures that each individual lives in such as governments, peer groups, and educational systems could limit the amount of available selections, some may face difficulties resisting identity options imposed on them (Block, 2007; Sung, 2016). Despite these obstacles, individuals could exercise their agency to “resist, negotiate, change, and transform themselves and others” (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 20). By doing this, individuals could put their available resources in use and deploy suitable strategies to get access to social networks and communities, leading to the increase in their language learning opportunities (Norton, 2000; Norton and Toohey, 2001).

English language learners’ identities

Recently, researchers have focused prolifically on how language learners construct their identities and how learners themselves are positioned by societal and classroom discourses within socially determined identity roles. Norton Peirce (1995) has made a groundbreaking research in the field of SLA as well as EFL with poststructuralists’ theories of identity. By collecting data from questionnaires, interviews, diaries with immigrant women in Canada outside the classroom context, Norton Peirce (1995) concludes that “comprehensive theory of social identity” (p. 12) is necessary. Such an idea would make a connection between social theory conceptions viewing identity as “multiple, changing, and contradictory” (p. 26), and social discourses occurring around language learners as well as with learners’ access to communities that are required to develop linguistic competence, so as to understand the students’ investment in learning English.

Drawing upon Norton Peirce’s work (1995), many other scholars and researchers have conducted their studies on the link between students’ identities and language learning. A number of studies have explored identity within teaching Foreign Languages other than English (Haneda, 2005; Kinginger, 2004; Lyons, 2009), EFL (Atay & Ece, 2009; Murphey, Jin, and Li-Chi, 2005; King, 2008; Rajadurai, 2010a; Rajadurai, 2010b) and ELFL contexts (Baker, 2009; House,

2003). There are other studies which have looked into academic ESL contexts with children (Rymes & Pash, 2001; Willett, 1995), adolescents (Ibrahim, 1999; McKay & Wong, 1996) and adult learners (Lee, 2008; Marshall, 2010). However, fewer studies have looked at adult language learners as well as adolescents in academic EFL contexts.

The notion of imagined identity

An essential variable in this research is “imagined identities,” which was first introduced by Norton (2001) as an extensive work derived from Anderson’s (1983) “imagined communities”. In order to fully comprehend a student’s investment in English, it is vital to understand who a learner perceives himself at the moment and who he views himself as becoming. Investing in possible selves as a competent speaker of English language clearly results in an investment in learning English (Norton, 2000).

Basing on poststructuralist’s theory, identity is not seen as a fixed attribute, but constructed in regards to an individual’s experiences within a social, cultural, economic, and political world (Early & Norton, 2012). Norton (1997) defines identity as the way that “people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (p. 410). Later, Norton (2013) suggests that identity is a site of struggle, changes spatially and temporarily, negotiates throughout different contexts, and reproduces through specific practices or social interactions. From these premises, imagined identity can be indicated as an identity that is formed within oneself during the process of imagining the relationship between oneself and other individuals in the imagined communities, and about things in the same temporal and spatial context with which the individual has no immediate interactions (Norton, 2001).

Drawing upon the notion that language learning is an inseparable part of teacher and student identity negotiation in the context of language learning classrooms (Cummins, 2001), Norton (2000, 2001) integrates the concept of imagination into the field of EFL. Norton (2001) notes that a language learner makes his investment in learning a target language largely due to the provision of access to one’s imagined communities. Building upon this, Pavlenko and Norton (2007) realizes that language learning necessitates not only skills acquisition but also a temptation to achieve a certain kind of identity. There is partially a desire to construct and obtain an imagined or “wished-for” self in accordance with the imagined target language communities.

More than that, studies on learners’ feelings and attitudes toward imagined communities can underline the influence of identity in language learning. For example, an imagined identity can put learners on the pursuit of educational opportunities that in other cases they might not probe; on the other hand, it may also curb learners’ enthusiasm toward other language learning experiences (Kanno & Norton, 2003). In addition to this, a disconnection between language teachers’ and language learners’ imagination could even interfere with the learners’ process of language acquisition (Norton, 2001).

Operational EFL learners’ imagined identity

In order to narrow down the scope of this study into only the EFL classroom

context instead of the whole social world, (Anderson, 1983) the researcher intentionally explores the participants' imagined identity only in terms of their English language proficiency. Basing on Wu's (2017) research on the imagined identities and investment, it can be inferred that EFL learners tend to imagine their possible selves in relation to their language proficiency with images of English teacher, English professionals and superior English speaker.

Another study in the field of identity conducted by Pavlenko (2003) has also shown the same trend with non-native speakers having a tendency to imagine themselves in accordance with their language proficiency. As in the study, the participants usually hypothetically position their future selves with distinguished linguistic ability of native speakers, non-native speakers or multilingual individuals. In other words, language learners, in most cases, are concerned with their competence in using their target language and usually expect their language repertoire to be enhanced. As a result, this study yearns to investigate the imagined identities of the participants in terms of their desired English language proficiency.

In conclusion, similar to the idea of imagined communities (Norton, 2001), imagined identities are also powered by imagination. Identity of language learners are no longer seen as fixed attribute but a construct that are affected and shaped by different experiences. In the context of the language classroom, identity is seen as an instrumental factor for researchers to base on and produce implications relating to the results.

CONCLUSION

The field of identity has been attracting much attention from researchers. Many topics related to it, especially on the relationships between imagined communities identities and imagined identities, have been studied, and they have underlined and stressed the importance of improving the awareness of the significant role of language learners' identity in language teaching in English language teaching and learning in particular. Therefore, it is imperative that studies should be conducted to provide a more profound understanding of language learners' selection of identity in their learning. Furthermore, from the discussed theoretical framework could be expanded by examining the imagined identity that language learners negotiate and construct during their language learning process that their selection of language learning investment.

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