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*Iranian Journal
of
Language Teaching Research*



Urmia University

Learner Identity and Learners' Investment in EFL Learning: A Multiple Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Existing research on learner identity stresses a need to explore how the way one perceives oneself as an EFL learner has impacts on his or her investment in the endeavor to learn English. Likewise, examining the factors that influence identity and investment in EFL learning is also essential. In the present study, data were triangulated to explore the way three Chinese college English major students negotiated and navigated identity in the process of English learning. The findings indicated that the learners displayed identity flux within and across various communities. Learner identity shaped their investment in English learning, and vice versa. Learner identity, which can be negotiated and constructed over time, is complex and dynamic, involving at least four factors, which include learners' cognitive awareness/ideology; perceptions of affordances in English learning community; learners' sense of agency; and mismatches between the practiced community and the imagined community. Pedagogical implications and areas for ongoing research are discussed.

Keywords: agency; communities of practice; English language learning; investment; learner identity

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 22 Jan. 2018

Revised version received: 29 Sept. 2018

Accepted: 11 Nov. 2018

Available online: 1 Jan. 2019

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Introduction

Identity, which was originally proposed as a dimension of human learning, has emerged as a popular line of research in the field of teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Identity is formed in the participation in communities of practice, which denotes a set of relationships established over time between persons, activities, and the world (Wenger, 1998). Identity and community are interconnected, and the fluid nature of community makes identity become a dynamic, hybrid, multi-framed, fragmented, and contradictory notion (Teng, 2018). Owing to the diverse positions from which EFL learners participate in different social interactions, identity and investment in EFL learning has received significant attention over the past decade.

In EFL teaching and learning, classrooms are regarded as sites of struggles, wherein the constructions of learners' identities are affected by the pressures of language learning (see Kim, 2003; Lee, 2014; Teng & Bui, 2018). Researchers also argued that individual and social identities are often dynamic, interactive, discursive, contradictory, and contextually situated as a result of the mismatch between imagined and practiced communities (e.g., Block, 2007; Gu, 2010; Teng & Bui, 2018). Therefore, identity should not over-simply be defined as "the self" (Taylor, 1989, p.5) or "who one is" (Gao, Li, & Li, 2002, p. 95). As argued by Norton (2013), identity is a person's understanding of his or her relationship to the world, the way that relationship is structured across time and space, and possibilities for the future. A common theme from the aforementioned studies is that identity is how one individual perceives himself or herself, and identity negotiation and reproduction take place while learners interact with others in the target language.

Identity is related to the notion of investment (Norton, 2010). According to Norton (2013), investment is influenced by the unequal relations of power experienced by language learners, as well as the contextual, social, and historical nature related to language use. As such, the main reasons for learners to invest in a target language include a goal of acquiring symbolic resources (e.g., language, education, friendship) and material resources (e.g., capital goods, real estate, money). The understanding of investment in language learning illuminates the conditions of how relations of power limit the opportunities for language learners to speak and use the target language (Teng & Bui, 2018). The notion of investment sheds light on the socially and historically constructed relationship between learners and the target language. Researchers can examine the relations of power in different learning conditions and the extent to which these conditions shape students' commitment to their EFL learning. Issues worth investigating are also the extent to which EFL learners are willing to invest in a target language, claim legitimacy as the target language speakers, and negotiate power in constrained contexts. Thus, similar to the notion of identity, investment in EFL learning is also fluid, multi-folded, and often in a state of contradiction and flux.

However, learners' capacity to identify and navigate systemic patterns of controls influences their investment in particular pragmatic norms and literacy practices (Kim, 2014). In Norton's (1995) view, the multiplicity, discontinuity, and social nature of identity led to learners' struggle over time. This makes EFL learners' investment in language learning changeable due to learners' perceptions of capital resources of learning that target language. This may explain why Benson (2011) claimed that identity can be constructed, fashioned, developed or modified based on an individual's knowledge. Identities become unbounded but related to learners' ideology and are no longer tied to fixed localities, patterns, or cultural traditions. As delineated in Darwin and Norton's (2015) model, investment is located at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Model of Investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015)

Enlightened from this model, when learners move across communities, the value of their economic, cultural or social capital also shifts across time and space. It is also normal for their ideologies to collude and compete. Their identities and self-positioning are hence shaped in different ways. Learners' symbolic capital (i.e., linguistic or cultural capital)—including their prior knowledge, home literacies, and mother tongues—influence their investment in the language learning practices. The investment is dependent on learners' perception of affordances or benefits for the self, or the action possibilities perceived by the learners.

In EFL education, the EFL learning community may affect the formation of learner identity. Learners who construct a positive identity are more willing to exert more effort into EFL learning, whereas those who construct a negative identity may exert less effort in their EFL learning. Given the reciprocal relationship between identity and investment, Murray and Kojima (2007) explored how a Japanese female adult student learned a foreign language in an out-of-class setting and how the language learning experiences affected her identity development. Their study suggests that the learner's positive experience and personal fulfillment strengthen identity development. Similarly, Man, Bui, and Teng (2018) explored the relationship between social learning environments, investment, and the identity development of learners based on their Japanese and English learning experiences. The findings revealed that the investment on language learning was unfixed, dynamic and subject to the changing context. The overall self was not single, fixed or permanent but like a collection of several different shifts, and sometimes even contradictory selves.

Identity is, thus not conceived as having a single identity but contains different roles that an individual may take on in one context (Teng, 2018). Learner identity is closely related to language learning. Language is a prime source of linguistic identity, which refers to a sense of belonging to a community mediated by symbolic resources of language, or the discrepant ways that learners perceive in the understanding of the relationship between language and selves (Souto-Manning, 2013). Social context influences the development of learners' linguistic identity. According to Robinson and Clardy (2012), when learners experience feelings of anxiety in a language learning environment, they may not be able to achieve outstanding academic performance. In addition, learners may have an identity loss. Hence, identity and language learning go hand-in-hand.

The aforementioned studies suggest that learners' struggles in learning EFL should be understood from the perspective of identity and investment. It is crucial to understand how EFL learners overcome barriers to engage within and across various communities and how they enhance their linguistic competence in the communities. In addition, the interrelationship between learner

identity and investment in EFL learning needs to be further explored, as well as the factors influential to this interrelationship. To address these issues, the present study examines how three EFL learners developed and practiced their English after entering university, and how their identity construction impacts their investment in EFL learning. Two research questions that guided this study are:

1. How do the EFL learners construct their identities in relation to their English learning experiences?
2. What factors influence the EFL learners' identity and their investment in EFL learning?

The study: A multiple case study

Narrative inquiry

The investigation of the three EFL students' identity formation was conducted through narrative inquiry, an approach that help researchers elicit data on how individuals view themselves and how they initiate actions aligned to their perceptions (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004). Connelly and Clandinin (1999) suggest identities are developed through "stories to live by" (p.4), emphasizing the value of collecting learners' stories to make sense of their experiences and themselves. A collection of narratives can also help researchers discern various identities emerging from an individual's social practice (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014). The present study is a qualitative study focusing on the university students' identity and their EFL learning experiences. Reasons of using narrative inquiry included: first, the purpose of making contribution to the increasingly popular tradition of using narrative inquiry for researching identity and language learning (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2013); and second, the advantages of personal narrative in revealing identities and lives of story tellers (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). For example, narrative inquiry could be useful for individuals to tell others who they are or what they try to act. This may help interpret EFL students' identities.

The present study followed Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) proposed dimensions of narrative inquiry to explore EFL learners' identity development and their investment in EFL learning. First, I incorporated the dimension of 'time' to explore their past experiences, present engagement and future plans as an EFL learner in order to maintain the consistency with the temporal and fluid nature of identity (Gee, 2001). Second, I emphasized the 'personal and social' dimension by tapping into how the subjects' identities emerged and shifted in relation to their 'inward' (i.e. emotions, perceptions, and values) and 'outward' (i.e., social interactions). Finally, I considered the socio-cultural environment that may influence their EFL learning. This can provide insights into the dimension of 'context' in forming identity as an EFL learner in higher education.

Participants

The research participants included three EFL students: June, Rick and Mary (pseudonyms). The author sent invitations to the students in his class, introducing them the requirements and benefits of attending this study. Five students volunteered in this study. Through purposive sampling, the present study presented findings of three students, who exhibited different development trajectories during their EFL learning. They were enrolled in a three-year diploma program at a university in China. This university is a non-prestigious university and it is located in the under-developed southwestern region of China. The participants were given guidelines about the need to conduct in-depth interviews and communicate with the researcher on a regular basis. They signed consent forms. The present study used pseudonyms for participants' confidentiality.

Data collection

As proposed by Pavlenko (2007), materials that can be analyzed for narrative research include oral, written and visual data. With an aim to have a thorough understanding of learner identity, the present study triangulated multiple sources of data. Drawing upon learners' autobiographical accounts and narrative interviews, the present study explores learner identity and investment on EFL learning experiences in an institutional context in China. Data triangulation helped to investigate EFL identities from multiple perspectives. Benson and Nunan (2005) suggested the efficacy of learners' autobiographical accounts in understanding their learning experiences. The participants were guided to reflect on their subject positions as EFL learners, their emotions or attitudes toward English, and their relations to various EFL-related groups and communities. They were allowed to write in Chinese, their native language. They produced the data over a period of four months, which allowed them to deepen their reflective gaze. They wrote most of their texts at home. This reduced the teacher's influence on the texts and increased the participants' willingness to reveal their authentic selves. The author occasionally gained clarification for their written entries during regular courses. Twenty computer-written A4 pages were collected from each participant and each piece was 400–800 words in length. Interviews were a vital part of primary data collection in examining the rich, intricate dynamics of each issue in narrative inquiry studies (Barkhuizen, 2013). Two semi-structured interviews were conducted and audio-recorded, ranging from 100 to 120 minutes each. One technique in narrative interview was to elicit learners' stories and life histories. Interviews were in Chinese to enhance ease in expression of opinions and comprehension. The first and second interviews were conducted before and after the four-month research period respectively. The first interview focused on participants' personal history, stories, feelings, and attitudes about EFL learning. In the second interview, the participants were invited to reflect on their overall learning experiences, their emotions, and their perceived benefits as EFL learners. During the process of data collection, the author also kept regular communication with the participants via emails, phone calls, and informal meetings (e.g., canteens). Although these types of data were not collected for analysis, it increased the trustworthiness of stories shared by the participants.

Data analysis

Data collection and analysis were conducted in an ongoing, iterative, cyclical process. Data processing consisted of three main stages. First, the author carefully coded the interview transcripts and autobiographical accounts, focusing on learners' identity and investment in EFL learning. For example, June' identity as an "excited but anxious attendee for remedial class" was described after understanding that June had attended extra-curricular English training courses every week and she had still been scared of her poor English. Three themes based on learners' different learning stages were identified: EFL learning in primary and secondary school, EFL learning in college, and action possibilities for future EFL learning. Second, following the identification of the themes, the author conducted an in-depth re-examination of each theme. This was accomplished by rereading the original data in relation to time, space, and characters involved (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). This process of deconstructing, constructing, and reconstructing the social meanings with reference to the identified themes sheds light on the identity development of EFL learners (Liu & Xu, 2011). Finally, although narrators may distort their life stories to respond to interviewer's questions, this pitfall can be avoided by building a good rapport between the investigator and the participants. This is a voluntary study, and the learners commented that their attendance in this study would help them reflect on their EFL learning experiences and build awareness of their EFL learning process and outcome. The author also motivated the participants to share real experiences. In addition, the constructed narratives were also shared with the participants, who clarified interpretations and sometimes added additional comments. Overall, building reciprocity between researcher and participants and having

participants' checking effectively ensured trustworthiness of data collection and analysis in doing qualitative studies (Creswell, 2007).

Findings

June's story

EFL learning in primary and secondary school

June described her purpose for learning English in primary and secondary school, which was mainly examination-oriented. Her aim was to get into a university. She described herself as an "excited but anxious attender of remedial classes", reporting that she was forced to attend many extra-curricular English classes, where she learnt English by rote, during the learning process. Although June was quite excited at the beginning, she later felt anxious and restless at mechanically memorizing numerous grammatical structures and vocabulary. Though she did attempt to improve her English skills in middle school, a variety of tests dispelled her interest. She felt annoyed with the approach of "spoon-feeding" and the remedial class, according to June, was useless. June reported,

"From the first beginning I was exposed to English learning, I was forced to attend many extra-curricular English training courses. I was an excited but anxious attender of remedial class. I memorized many grammar structures to secure a good score in the English tests. When it came to my middle school, I practiced English tests to get admitted into a university. I was so scared. I attended remedial class every week, but my English was still very poor. I was very worried, and I hated this way of spoon-feeding me a lot of grammar rules and requiring me to memorize without telling me how to use." (Autobiography)

June's social interactions with her main advisors (parents and teachers) also influenced her ability to tailor her strategies to the specific problems in learning English. She became a "driller" for grammar learning. For example,

"My parents and my teachers repeated the importance of learning grammar structures to me. I needed to drill again and again on the grammar structures to perform well in various kinds of English tests." (Autobiography)

June was increasingly depressed and distressed with practicing the test skills, struggling with whether she should give up learning English. She did not want to select English as her major because being a "test machine" rather than an "English user" made her feel unconfident in performing well in this subject. June explained,

"I knew how to take tests, but I didn't know how to speak English. Could I learn English well after entering university? I doubted. I didn't want to be an English major student who could not speak and use English. Anyway, I was just a test machine." (Autobiography)

The social and economic situation attracts her to choose English as her major. In addition, her parents' perceived benefits in learning English became one source of encouragement for June to be an English major student. She wrote,

"The social and economic development calls for a need of more English users. Learning English could help me find a good job. My parents also told me the benefits of studying for an English program. So, I chose it." (Autobiography)

EFL learning in college

June regarded herself as an English learner in an exam-oriented context. She was reluctant to change due to her lack of direction. She found it challenging to cope with the mismatch between the desired and actual learning community. The exam-oriented learning and the internal resistance to foster changes in her learning patterns strengthened her identity as a peripheral member of EFL learning community. June described the situation,

“I did not have courage to speak English. I did not understand the lectures. I had become used to this exam-oriented learning. When people spoke English to me, I would become very scared. The only words that emerged in my mind is ‘Sorry, I don’t know’.” (Interview 1)

June exerted efforts to become a successful English major, trying to attend more English-speaking activities. However, she failed. Without recognition, she could not acquire the desired identity as a successful English major student and finally, she lacked agency and motivation to be an active learner. June stated,

“I tried to attend many English-speaking activities, including English corner. But it was useless because I dared not speak English. Even when I tried to speak some, nobody would understand me. I told myself to practice English. I wanted to be an autonomous learner. But I was always a passive learner.” (Interview 2)

June felt a pressure to meet her familial expectations and a sin in being a passive learner, particularly when she needed to seek for financial assistance from her parents. She understood the necessity of being a good English learner in order to repay her parents. June recounted,

“I felt guilty when I needed to ask money from my parents. I knew the only way for me to do was to improve my learning. I wanted to do it well, but I was always passive, for which I often blamed myself.” (Autobiography)

June also had a low motivation to engage in English communication with her classmates. The reasons for June’s reluctance to speak English was related to her belief that she was a Chinese speaker. She continued,

“The classroom context does not afford me any chances to practice English speaking. We are all Chinese speakers. It is weird for us to talk in a foreign language.” (Autobiography)

Action possibilities for future EFL learning

June’s parents insisted that she should embark her career as an English teacher after graduation. However, June was puzzled on this option due to a lack of social connections and abilities to teach. June expressed,

“My parents kept telling me that teaching job is good for a girl. But finding a job as an English teacher is impossible for me. I do not have any social connection or ability to handle this job.” (Interview 1)

Confidence also influenced June’s decisions about her future identity. June was not aware of any action possibilities for being an English teacher. About these influences, she stated,

“I have learned English for many years. I am never a competent English user. How can I be an English teacher?” (Interview 2)

June's statements revealed that she had lacked confidence in constructing the identity of an English learner and a future English teacher. She experienced anxiety and uncertainties about her future. The lack of confidence made her feel incompetent in her English learning. She did not perceive the benefits in learning English in the future. Her lack of optimism and willingness to tackle difficulties in English learning shaped her practiced identity as a peripheral member of the English learning community. She reflected,

"I was scared of learning English before. And I am scared of learning English in the future. I don't see any benefits for me to continue my English learning. I will never be in the central position for my English learning." (Interview 2)

Rick's story

EFL learning in primary and secondary school

Rick identified himself as an English learner who lacked confidence when he was in the primary and secondary school. Rick was born in a countryside. Inadequate educational resources in his school caused challenges to his English learning. Rick used Chinese Pinyin to pronounce English. He explained that he started losing confidence when his classmates were laughing at his pronunciation,

"I was born in a countryside. I did not know how to pronounce the English words. I used the Chinese Pinyin to pronounce English. I felt confused at my English learning when many classmates laughed at my odd accent. I began to lose confidence." (Autobiography)

Rick identified himself as a lover of martial arts fictions, having a goal to become a novel writer. His imagined identity contradicted with the forced identity proposed by his parents, which was to be an advanced English user. Although he felt confused, he still followed his parents' requirements to select English as his major. About his experience, Rick wrote,

"I wanted to become a writer in martial arts fiction novel. It was my dream. But my parents said those jobs were for stupid people. They said I could not make any money and lead a life through writing stupid novels. I had no choice but to follow them. I finally chose English as my major." (Autobiography)

EFL learning in college

Rick wanted to enhance his English proficiency after entering university, setting a target for his English learning. However, he lost his interest owing to his insufficient English capability to cope with university English learning. He failed to catch up with the English course requirement and then resorted to the use of Chinese Pinyin again. The lack of improvement in English learning led to a struggle with his identity construction. He became unwilling to exert efforts in his English learning. Rick clarified his experience,

"I thought university was my new journey. I paid a lot of efforts in improving my English. But it did not work. I could not memorize the words. I didn't know how to use English. I was confused because I do not have a gift in learning English. I used the Chinese Pinyin to memorize English words again. But it did not work. So, I just stopped my English learning." (Interview 2)

Rick's identity as a poor English learner grew stronger. He reflected and attributed his poor performance to various factors including lack of institutional support in learning, pressures from parents, and teacher-dominated teaching method. Rick's words described this situation:

"I gradually lost interest in English. All the English courses were teacher-dominated. We did not have any chances to speak English. The school did not support us too. My parents expected me a lot, but they didn't understand me. English learning to me now is a struggling process. I don't even want to attend classes." (Autobiography)

Rick's identity was influenced by his perceptions of opportunities afforded by the learning environment. He succumbed to the unsatisfying environment. His lack of individual agency influenced his identity formation. Rick stated:

"I have tried different methods to improve my English. The result was that I was neither good at learning English nor gifted to learn the language. The environment is not good for learning English, too. I am a Chinese speaker, what is the need to ask Chinese speakers to speak and use English. I think if I were in an English-speaking environment, I would greatly improve my English. But for now, in this school, I have to say it is impossible." (Interview 2)

Action possibilities for future EFL learning

Rather than finding a job, Rick decided to start a small business after graduation. His plan was also enlightened by the national policy. In addition, his lack of proficiency in English put him in an embarrassing situation of finding a job in English language domain. Rick spoke about his plan.

"Everyone now around me is talking the national policy for encouraging university graduates to start a small business rather than hunting a job. I agree with this proposal, too. I cannot find a job considering my poor English proficiency. In addition, even if you can find a job, the salary would be very low. So, I think it realistic for me to open a small restaurant or a shop." (Interview 2)

Rick made preparations while establishing a business. His engagement in his imagined identity made him invest more in preparing for his desired career. For example, he took various part-time jobs. However, Rick's final stance was incongruent with his parents' expectation, which placed him in a struggling state. Rick elaborated,

"I spent a lot of time in doing part-time jobs to prepare for my business-starting plan. It deprived me of the time for learning English. Sometimes I was confused at why I chose this major. I chose it because of my parents, but I finally chose not to follow their expectations." (Interview 2)

Mary's story

EFL learning in primary and secondary school

Mary was born in a city and the resources afforded in her learning environment motivated her to practice a lot for her spoken English. She attempted to be an innovative learner for her English. She perceived herself as a pragmatic English learner. Her main purpose of learning English was to use the language to communicate. Related to this, Mary expressed she was an "innovator" in English learning. Mary stated,

"I was born in a city. I went to a bilingual primary and secondary school. My parents encouraged me a lot to learn English. The resources in my school provided me a good environment for me to practice my spoken English. I was always thinking of various innovative ways to improve my English. For example, I would go to a park and talk to foreigners." (Autobiography)

Mary realized the contextual constraints in her English learning environment. She became aware that, to be a good communicator in English, she needed to be an agent in taking full responsibility for her learning. Mary explained,

“I think English teaching in China focuses too much on test skills. The most important thing for a Chinese student was to pass the exams. I realized that I should take responsibility for my English learning to speak it well.” (Autobiography)

Mary's imagined identity as an “active learner” motivated her to invest in her English learning. Along with her improved proficiency in English, she also did a good job in the English exams. The success in her English learning encouraged her to choose English as her major. Mary delineated her progress,

“I did not spend too much time in preparing English exams, but I always got satisfactory results. I was an active learner in learning English. I learned well, so I could also do well in exams. Without hesitation, I chose English as a major.” (Autobiography)

EFL learning in college

Mary expressed her anxiety and frustration after taking some courses at the university because she thought that many courses were useless. She expressed her anxiety as follows,

“I am an English major student. But why do I need to take so many courses like politics, moral education, and history? What is the meaning of learning those courses? Those courses are useless, but they account for almost 60% of the total courses.” (Interview 1)

Mary revealed that she was dissatisfied with the learning environment, which was different from her imagination. Her imagined community was one in which learners would gather together and talk and communicate in English. However, the practiced community was that all students were pushed to get high marks in exams for the sake of teaching evaluation. She did not want to be an “obedient follower” in the university learning environment. Mary reported,

“The university English learning was totally different from what I imagined. I was annoyed at the various exams. The teacher would also give some answers to us before taking the exams. I didn't understand the meaning of taking courses, memorizing some answers, and passing the examinations. University English learning should be different. I imagined that many learners would gather and speak English together. I was wrong.” (Interview 1)

Despite the challenges, Mary tailored her learning strategies to cope with the English learning problems. For instance, she actively sought opportunities to communicate with international students. These chances of practicing in English enhanced her English-speaking skills and cultural knowledge. Related to this, Mary's identity as an English speaker encouraged her investment in gaining full participation in English speaking practice. She reported,

“Sensing the improvement of English, I seize opportunities to communicate with those international students. The practices in communicating with international exchange students enhance my speaking skills and cultural awareness. I want to be a full member of the English learning community.” (Interview 2)

Action possibilities for future EFL learning

Mary was determined to become an English language user after graduation. Her new identity as an English user was shaped by her own internal interest or motivation. Her expectations to find a job related to English were from her prior successful learning experiences. Mary described,

“I want to work as a translator, tourist guide, or English instructor after graduation. I like speaking English, and I hope I can practice my English in my future career.” (Interview 2)

Mary’s positive learning experiences led her to assume more active roles in her EFL learning. She worked very hard to get admission to a bachelor or postgraduate program, attending many training centers and reading a lot of books. Her decision to take control of her learning strengthened her identity as a “hard-working English learner”, despite the challenging scenarios. Mary declared,

“I am studying in a non-prestigious university. I think I should go to a more famous university. So, I need to work harder. I read a lot of books. I want to join a bachelor or postgraduate program in a good university. I want to be different from now.” (Interview 2)

Discussion

This study—drawing upon three Chinese EFL students’ lived experiences—served as a multiple case study through which their identities and investment in English learning were explored. The learners experienced identity flux during their learning experiences. Having constructed a positive identity, as in Mary’s case, she perceived the affordances in the English learning community, set ambitious goals, and strived towards achieving those goals. Her positive identities, including “innovator”, “agent”, “legitimate English user”, “active learner”, “hard-working learner”, and “imagined postgraduate degree holder”, emerged in her English learning process. However, in June’s case, her identity as an EFL learner was deteriorated. She was reluctant to adapt to a new community and relied heavily on rote memorization strategies. She encountered identity conflicts, being determined to give up her goal of becoming an English teacher. June’s identity options included “excited but anxious attender of remedial class”, “driller” for grammar learning, “test-machine”, and “incompetent English speaker and user”. Similarly, Rick formed his identity as a poor English learner due to the lack of resources in his learning environment. He dropped the plan of establishing a career related to English and explored a totally new imagined identity as a businessman. Rick’s negative identities included “a learner who lacked confidence”, “a lover of martial arts fictions”, “an imagined identity as a fiction writer”, “a practiced poor English learner”, and “a passive English learner”. Overall, these three learners varied in the extent to which they exercised their agencies in constructing their identities. Echoing previous studies (e.g., Gao et al., 2002; Teng, 2017a/b, 2018), identity is multi-framed, dynamic, fluid, and competitive in nature.

Identity affects learners’ investment in English learning. In June’s case, she gradually understood that her identity as a poor English learner had made it difficult for her to realize her imagined identity as an English teacher. This awareness caused a loss of perseverance in improving her English proficiency. Rick’s identity as a poor English learner made him feel marginalized. This resulted in his absence in his classes. This circumstance ultimately forced him to reshape his imagined identity as a businessman, which deprived his time for English learning. In contrast, Mary’s identity as an advanced English speaker drove her to invest more effort, time and energy in her acquisition of English-speaking skills. She chose to take control of her learning and

participated in the EFL learning community, where was replete with constraints in speaking and practicing English.

According to Norton and Toohey (2001), good learners were more willing to “exercise human agency to negotiate their entry into the social networks, so they can practice and improve their competence in the target language” (p. 256). However, poor learners were subject to the contextual constraints and were unwilling to adopt agentive behaviors to foster changes in their EFL learning. In addition, those EFL students who lack confidence and direction to adopt agentive behaviors in English learning are “marginalized, introverted, and sensitive to rejection” in the English learning community (Cervatiuc, 2009, p. 255). This suggests that learners’ lack of language proficiency led them to legitimate peripheral participation when moving to a new learning community. Nevertheless, learners who have a strong motive and desire, become competent language learners and occupy a centripetal position in their communities (Teng & Bui, 2018). Investment constitutes “a meaningful connection between a learner’s desire and commitment to learn a language, and his/her changing identity” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 420). Investment, as noted by Norton and Gao (2008), signifies the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners with the target language and their occasionally ambivalent desire to learn and practice the language. Hence, investment is complex, necessitating a greater connection with identity.

Overall, EFL learners’ identity development and investment in language learning is a complex and interactive process, which is constructed and reconstructed over time involving at least four contributing factors: learners’ cognitive awareness/ideology; learners’ perceptions of affordances in English learning community; learners’ sense of agency; and mismatches between the practiced community and the imagined community (Figure 2). The interrelations among the four factors based on the findings in the Chinese EFL context also complement to Darwin and Norton’s (2015) model on investment.

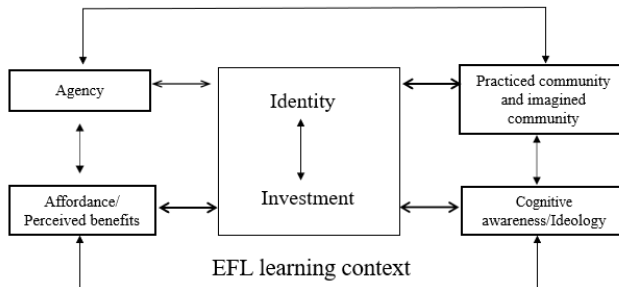


Figure 2. Identity and Investment in EFL Learning Context

First, EFL learners’ cognitive awareness or ideology influences their identity formation. A belief system imposed upon reality (ideology) influences learners’ identity options. June was a self-protective person, and hence, she externalized blame while protecting herself. For instance, she felt that the absence of support from the school demoralized her investment in English learning. On the other hand, Rick was a conformist learner, who responded negatively to the contextual constraints and believed that he could not transform his identity of being a poor English learner. June and Ricky’s linguistic identity, i.e., the consideration of belonging to a certain group of people that speak Chinese language, inhibits their willingness to speak English with other learners. Among the three cases, Mary displayed conscientious behavior, persevering her increased self-

reflection, goals, beliefs, and independence. These three examples imply that ideology navigates the construction and development of EFL learners' identity.

Second, EFL learners may not perceive the affordances for language learning in the communities. The tightly organized, hierarchical, and collectivistic structure of the Chinese society inhibits learners' perceived benefits in language learning. Teacher-centered, textbook-centered, grammar-translation method, and exam-oriented instructions could have contributed to EFL learners' negative emotions (Teng, 2018). For example, Rick and June were quite stressed and passive in class. They reported that they displayed non-participative traits, as they preferred listening to the teacher silently. Mary preferred to spend her time reading books and attending English-speaking activities. The three learners, despite their desire to fit into the classroom environment, experienced emotional struggles in classroom EFL learning. The classroom failed to provide a pleasant, effective and motivating EFL learning environment for them. In addition, learners had to cope with the external threats arising from school policies, organizational climate, and so on. Pressures to obtain good examination grades can also detach learners from a new learning community and lead to a concomitant loss of power and satisfaction. For instance, Mary felt a psychological self-exclusion from the institution, which affects the realization of the ideal self (Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015). Rick was confined to his deep-rooted habit of using Chinese Pinyin for learning English pronunciation. To a certain extent, the failure to possess hopes, aspirations, or expectations in future learning were attributed to learner's perceptions of benefits and opportunities related to language learning.

Third, learners' agency also mediates identity development and investment in language learning. Although Mary experienced doubts after entering the university, her determined actions related to 'emotional intelligence' (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189) helped her monitor her own feelings and emotions. It also steered her thinking and actions toward an appropriate career selection, which was to become a qualified English user. Through 'tactical compliance' (Roberts & Graham, 2008, p. 1401) and 'agentive work' (Miller, 2010, p.286), Mary managed to inject positivity into her English learning process and regained her motivation and confidence. Rick formed negative emotions and perfunctory attitudes, and faced difficulties in exhibiting agency. His unwillingness to become a member of the community isolated him from the learning environment. This detachment from the learning community finally repressed his agency and obstructed the development of his identity as a legitimate EFL learner. Similarly, June was also confused with how she could conduct agentic behaviors in her EFL learning. She was perplexed and stagnant after years of learning in an exam-oriented context.

Finally, Norton (2013) argued that, "English language learners had complex investments in their respective literacy practices, each of these investments associated with a range of identities, including those of the imagination" (p. 91). Learners may not make investments to become a member of the target language community when a practiced community did not match with the imagined community of EFL learning. Alignment between imagined and practiced community may positively enhance language learning investment (Teng & Bui, 2018). For instance, Mary invested in the target language by reading many English books with the understanding that she would gradually acquire a wide range of linguistic knowledge and symbolic resources. She was able to navigate systematic patterns of control and develop her identity. The perseverance in English reading helped her extend beyond improving English reading skills. She developed a sense of ownership of English, which enabled her to negotiate her current learning communities or circumstances well and articulated a vision for her future. However, Rick, a poor English learner, was not active in English learning, which in turn had a detrimental impact on his engagement with the community. These observations, combined with previous research (e.g., Cummins, 2001; Norton, 2010; Teng & Bui, 2018), suggest that a match between the practiced community and imagined community yields coercive or collaborative power and facilitates the

development of learner identity while a misalignment is detrimental to the investment in EFL learning.

Concluding remarks

The present study—drawing upon narrative inquiry of three Chinese EFL university students' English learning experiences—delineates the complex relationship between EFL learning, identity, and investment. Enlightened from his study, issues of identity and investment in EFL learning will continue to be at the forefront of research on language education.

Implications based on the findings can be concluded as follows: First, learner identity is historically and socially formed, and learner identity influences EFL learning. Related to this, an understanding of students' needs, particularly the misalignment between their imagined and practiced communities, is essential to the development of appropriate curriculum or English pedagogy. It can also tailor for students with diverse backgrounds, different English proficiency levels, goals, and expectations.

Second, the process of EFL learning is a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities are negotiated during interactions. There is an intricately intertwined connection between investment, language learning, and identity development. To better understand this, research on EFL learning is not simply an evaluation of learners' internal characteristics, linguistic input, or linguistic output, but an exploration of learner actions in socio-cultural communities. In this regard, a focus on EFL learners' social practices and interactions in communities is a prerequisite to understanding effective EFL learning.

Third, the present study traced three EFL learners' participation from their old communities (primary school, secondary school) to new communities (university). It seems that participating in their practiced communities and imagined communities led to identity shifts or even collapse. This supports the argument that “an imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner's investment in the target language must be understood within this context” (Norton, 2010, p. 356). An implication is that interpersonal interactions enable learners to get close to the target culture (Kramsch, 2013), for which they may invest more in the EFL learning and support a shift to a positive identity. However, EFL learners who lack interpersonal interactions in practiced communities failed to advance their English learning strategies and become legitimate members of their EFL learning community. This, in turn, affects their investment in EFL learning.

Finally, teachers might need to provide help for students to adapt to a new learning community, e.g., from secondary school to university. Teachers need to equip students to reflect on their emotional flux. Students need to be guided toward developing the emotional intelligence to manage, mediate, and control their emotions in learning. To that end, teachers should consider the mechanisms of which and the extent to which EFL learners' investment might be productive for their language development. For example, teachers can model means in which they cope with their emotions and become legitimate peripheral members of the community. In addition, strategies, including ‘emotional diaries’ (Zembylas, 2003) and ‘emotional support’ (Protheroe, 2007), can be applied to help students manage their own emotions.

Limitations in this study included: First, although the purpose of this study was not to generalize to all EFL learners, there is still a need for future studies to gather data from more EFL university students. Second, the short time span of the study made it difficult to collect richer data and revisit the informants in a regular basis. Thus, longitudinal studies in observing students' EFL learning experiences should be conducted. Third, more data sources should be collected. For

example, inviting learners to write diaries, observing students' classroom learning behaviors and engagement in out-of-class learning activities, can enrich the findings. Nevertheless, this study provides insights into teaching and learning English for EFL students. The way one perceives oneself as an EFL learner may have an impact on one's investment in his or her endeavor to learn English. Likewise, an investment in EFL learning equals an investment in the learner's own identity. Hence, this study highlights a need to examine the individual, institutional, and contextual factors that influence identity and investment in EFL learning.

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest involved in this article.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to the participants who shared their personal life stories to me. Special thanks go to Jessie Yip (Hong Kong Baptist University), who provided help on editing the paper.

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