

Imagined Identity and Investment in English Pronunciation Learning Among English Learners

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Abstract—This qualitative case study examined the impacts of learners' imagined identity on investment by analyzing English pronunciation learning journey among three English major students in China. The results indicated that the participants' investment choices at different learning stages were influenced by their diverse imagined identities, which were shaped by specific social and personal factors. However, the limitation in imagined identities as test-machine led to the neglect of English pronunciation learning, while the extension of imagined identities like a good English pronunciation learner and teacher encouraged further investment to be made in senior high school and university. Additionally, participants' imagined identities may function as a potent motivator for action, allowing them to execute investments accordingly across diverse learning contexts. Nonetheless, various personal and contextual factors hindered English pronunciation learning investment. Drawing from the findings, several practical pedagogical implications and recommendations for future studies are proposed to advance the domain of foreign language learning and teaching.

Index Terms—English pronunciation learning, English major students, imagined identity, investment

I. INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a significant national policy proposed during the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee in 2013, aims to strengthen the global economic governance system and foster global common development. English, being the international language in countries along the BRI route, offers job opportunities and poses challenges for Chinese English major students (Xiao, 2021; Wang, 2020; Liang, 2015). One of these challenges is their insufficient English pronunciation skills, which impede smooth communication (Xuan, 2019).

Considering the poor pronunciation learning among Chinese English major students, a few studies (Wu & Zhu, 2020; Niu, 2022; Lu, 2016) have analyzed this matter based on motivation. As a result, the psychological construct perceives English learners as having a single, fixed, and non-historical personality and classifies them as good/bad, motivated/unmotivated, or introverted/extroverted. Norton (2015) contended that motivation alone cannot elucidate why a highly motivated learner might decline the chance to speak in a situation where they perceive themselves as disadvantaged. She argued that language learners possess intricate, multifaceted identities that evolve over time and in different environments, and are perpetuated through social interactions.

In Norton's (2000) perspective, identity includes "how an individual perceives their connection to the world, how this connection evolves over time and space, and how they envision future possibilities" (p. 5). Additionally, Norton (2000) stressed the intrinsic link between investment and identity, suggesting that investing in a target language is also an investment in one's identity. Consequently, not only do past and present constructed identities influence decision-making, but imagined identities also significantly impact learners' agency in making various learning choices, thereby shaping their learning paths (Norton & Kamal, 2003; Wu, 2017). Several researchers (Wu, 2017; Xu & Kim, 2022; Chik, 2007) have explored the connection between English learners' imagined identity and investment. Nevertheless, the aforementioned studies solely illustrated the relationships between the two constructs regarding general English learning in both the ESL and EFL contexts. The relevant studies on English sub-skills, such as English pronunciation learning in EFL are relatively rare.

Pronunciation stands out among the linguistic factors acquired by foreign or second language learners due to its profound link with identity, serving as a crucial aspect of self-representation (Tamimi Sa'd, 2018; Huang, 2022). Moreover, Foote and Trofimovich (2017) mentioned that learners' desired membership in professional, cultural, social, or linguistic communities influences their pronunciation. It indicates the necessity of understanding English learners'

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imagined identity and investment in English pronunciation learning from a sociocultural perspective. This current study could help teachers and learners understand the personal and contextual factors impacting learners' English pronunciation learning.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: IMAGINED IDENTITY AND INVESTMENT IN ENGLISH LEARNING

With the waning of cognitivism in the mid-1990s, the sociocultural dimensions of second language acquisition have garnered increased attention. Amid this paradigm shift, the notion of investment (Norton, 2000) has emerged as a focal point. It challenges the idea of motivation as a binary, fixed, and singular construct, positing instead a more fluid, dynamic, and contextualized perspective that views language learners as individuals with diverse desires and identities shaped by historical and societal factors. According to Norton (2013), identity includes a learner's comprehension of their connection to the world, as well as the ongoing construction and reconstruction of that relationship in the future. This concept interconnects the past, present, and future, including various social connections. The formation of a learner's identity occurs within communities of practice, both past and present (Wenger, 1999), including learning groups and social activities within institutions. Regarding the future, it can be envisioned through imagination based on past experiences and personal interpretations of all other relationships.

Wenger (1999) pioneered the connection between imagination and identity, conceptualizing imagination as an extension of the individual that surpasses temporal and spatial boundaries. In this context, language learners can craft a fresh portrayal of themselves and their aspirations in professional and academic realms. This notion lays the groundwork for the concept of "imagined identity." Norton (2014) defined imagined identity as a virtual identity in the mind, wherein the perceived connection between events, even in the absence of direct interaction, influences their investments in second language (L2) learning. Some empirical studies (Pavlenko, 2003; Chik, 2007; Wu, 2017; Xu & Kim, 2022) in the EFL and ESL contexts have associated learners' imagined identity with investment in general English learning, revealing that if learners' imagined identity provides one's academic and professional objectives, they will take agency to achieve those goals.

Trofimovich and Turuševa (2015) proposed that learners' dedication to improving English pronunciation may strongly hinge on their beliefs regarding how their pronunciation will impact their future membership in an imagined community. Within the framework of ELF, numerous inquiries (Sung, 2014; McCrocklin & Link, 2016; Huang & Hashim, 2021; Kong & Kang, 2022) have examined the link between learners' perceptions of their desired identity and the learning of English pronunciation, particularly in relation to English accents. However, relevant empirical studies in this area of EFL are relatively scarce. In China, the general American (GA) and received pronunciation (RP) remain dominant in the learning process. To grasp the influence of learners' imagined identity on their English pronunciation learning, it is crucial to analyze the phenomenon of English pronunciation learning experiences qualitatively, for instance, through a case study approach.

To tackle the aforementioned concerns, this study utilized a multiple-case study approach to examine the English pronunciation learning experiences of three English major students in China. The primary focus was on their imagined identity shaped by English pronunciation learning and its influence on their investment in English pronunciation learning. The following research questions guided this investigation:

1. What imagined identities do the students develop throughout their English pronunciation learning?
2. How do their imagined identities impact their investment in English pronunciation learning?

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is part of the documentation from a qualitative PhD project. As per Yin (2009), a case study aims to investigate a contemporary condition within its real-life context, particularly when the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is blurred. Following this definition, Heigham and Croker (2009) suggested that a case study serves three objectives. Firstly, it seeks to enhance conditions or practices based on observations within specific cases. Secondly, the findings are extended to other cases with similar backgrounds. Thirdly, the study aims to attain a comprehensive understanding of the matter under investigation. Consequently, this current qualitative case study was developed to offer valuable insights into the role of imagined identities in English pronunciation learning investment in China.

A. Participants

In qualitative research, purposeful sampling is commonly employed, typically with small sample sizes (Palinkas et al., 2015). In addition, the researcher gains significant insights from participant selection (Merriam, 2019). Since imagination is a personal matter, imagined identity is influenced by specific social and personal factors (Wu, 2017; Kharchenko, 2014), such as learning and professional experiences, as well as language proficiency. To comprehensively understand English major students' investment in English pronunciation learning, three participants were chosen based on diverse English learning backgrounds and proficiency levels at a typical university. Invitations were presented to the students, while an introduction was made to the requisites and advantages of participation in this study. Subsequently,

three students consented to participate and signed consent forms. Additionally, pseudonyms were assigned to maintain participant confidentiality.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS

Name	Age	Major	Pronunciation level	Grade	Family	Nationality
Chen	19	English Education	High level	freshman	Diver and saleswomen	Han
Xi	21	English Business	Middle level	Sophomore	Businessmen	Han
Ma	21	English Education	Low level	Sophomore	Peasants	Hui

B. Data Collection

Following the tradition of qualitative research, various data collection methods were employed in this study, such as interviews, participants' oral narratives, and written narratives. This approach facilitated a comprehensive comparison and triangulation of three distinct sources, thereby enhancing the credibility of the research findings and interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Data collection took place over a period of four months, from March to June 2022.

(a) *Written narrative* The three participants in this study were directed to document their English pronunciation learning journeys from primary school through junior and senior high school to university. They received a structured framework, based on Barkhuizen and Wett's (2008) guidelines, to capture essential data about their experiences, emotions, perspectives, and reflections on English pronunciation learning. Specifically, they were asked to detail their personal imagined identities related to English pronunciation learning, the development and evolution of these imagined identities, their impact on English pronunciation learning, and the challenges encountered across different stages of English pronunciation learning. All participants recorded their narratives in Chinese. Chen's narrative consisted of 3500 words, Xi's 2235 words, and Ma's 2100 words.

(b) *Oral narrative* All participants recounted their stories in Chinese, each lasting approximately 30-40 minutes. Their oral narratives were recorded, but only the extra comments not included in the written narrative were noted and then transcribed verbatim because the content of the oral narrative coincided with the written narrative.

(c) *Interview* The semi-structured interview format enables interviewers to investigate the opinions and ideas of the interviewees, as well as to probe deeper into their responses for further information and clarification, particularly when addressing complex or sensitive topics (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). An interview protocol, containing the questions for Chen, Xi, and Ma, was prepared in advance. Several questions required participants to provide clarification regarding the issues identified by the researchers upon observing their written narratives. These questions aimed to elicit additional insights and deepen the understanding of the participants' experiences. Overall, two semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 40 minutes each for factors shaping their imagined identity and investment in terms of English pronunciation were performed and audio-recorded during different English pronunciation learning phrases.

C. Data Analysis

Data analysis is a dynamic and evolving process that involves multiple readings of data collected from diverse sources (Patton, 2023). The written narrative transcripts, serving as the primary data source, underwent coding using Nvivo12 software. Subsequently, paradigmatic analytic procedures were employed to derive taxonomies and categories from common elements across the dataset (Polkinghorne, 1995). Key themes in both oral and written narratives were identified, and these findings were cross-referenced with interview data to confirm or refine emergent themes. Recurring themes and patterns observed during analysis were interpreted within the framework of two theoretical concepts: imagined identity and investment. Subsequently, the preliminary results were then summarized and presented to participants for feedback through a member-checking process (Thomas, 2017).

IV. THE RESULTS

A. Primary School

(a) *Chen* Chen, a native of Guiyang in southwestern China, had a substantial phonetic learning background compared to her peers. Despite English not being a primary subject in primary school, like Chinese and mathematics, she displayed strong enthusiasm for English learning. In her written narrative, Chen recounted how her mother regularly enrolled her in an English training institution called "*CC English*" every weekend. Inspired by the instructional philosophy of these English training institutions, which aimed to enhance learners' English communication skills, Chen aspired to excel as an English pronunciation learner.

Despite the positive aspects mentioned earlier, Chen encountered several challenges. For instance, she struggled with learning English pronunciation at "*CC English*" because she could not keep up with the teacher's pace of instruction. However, unlike her peers who gave up, Chen, a competitive individual, sought to earn her teacher's recognition and praise. With the help of her mother, she enrolled in another English institution called "*Susan English*." Here, Chen was able to acquire a solid foundation of basic phonetic knowledge, enabling her to develop her spoken English with the guidance of her dedicated teacher and her own diligence. During the interview, Chen elaborated on the investment behaviors she exhibited to achieve her goals.

Interviewer: How did you learn English pronunciation in *Susan English*?

Chen: During that period, I aimed to earn praise from my English teacher at the training center. Therefore, I made every effort to memorize the English IPA, spelling rules, and to mimic the teacher's pronunciation both inside and outside the classroom. Eventually, I became a model student in my formal school, and my classmates looked up to me as someone to emulate. You know, I was so delighted.

(Interview-Chen)

(b) *Xi* Initially, Xi's English pronunciation learning was confined to using Chinese pinyin to help her spell English words. Since English was not a major subject in the curriculum of her primary school, neither the school nor the teacher prioritized English learning. Based on Xi's written narrative, the English subject was taught by a math teacher whose English pronunciation was inadequate, causing her to lose interest in English. Consequently, she neglected English pronunciation learning and did not develop any imagined identity related to English pronunciation.

I began learning English in the third grade of primary school. However, phonetic symbols were not part of our curriculum. English was not a priority subject, so we did not pay much attention to it, including pronunciation. What's worse, the English was taught by a math teacher with poor English pronunciation. We had to resort to writing in Chinese to aid our memory of English pronunciation. Personally, I was playful and never considered improving my English pronunciation.

(Written narrative-Xi)

(b) *Ma* Ma, hailing from the Hui ethnicity, was born into a farming family. She attended primary school in Miyi, a mountainous county home to 26 ethnic groups. Due to the secluded location and limited educational resources, she had no contact with English during her elementary school years. According to Ma's narrative, she was completely unaware of English and had never heard of the concept, let alone formed any imaginary identities related to English pronunciation.

During my time in primary school, unlike my classmates who had experiences learning English in training schools or formal schools, I did not have the opportunity to learn English. To be honest, prior to junior school, I had never even heard of English, let alone English pronunciation. It simply was not something that crossed my mind.

(Written narrative-Ma)

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF IMAGINED IDENTITY AND INVESTMENT IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Participants	Imagined identity	Investment
Chen	A good pronunciation learner	"CC English" training institution; "Susan English" training institution
Xi	No	No
Ma	No	No

B. Junior and Senior High Schools

(a) *Chen* Throughout junior and senior school, Chen engaged in watching multiple English movies and TikTok short videos, as well as developed an interest in short dubbed videos. These experiences not only fueled her aspirations to become an English singer, blogger, and dubbing actress but also enlightened her to the pivotal role of pronunciation in shaping diverse characters. In the internet age, she believed that ordinary people are able to rely on their talents and efforts to join careers that were previously out of reach in the past and become members of glamorous communities. In her written narrative, Chen aspired to become a singer like *Taylor Swift*, who inspired her fans with an authentic American accent and hoped to be a lively and entertaining English blogger like *Ma Siri* and *Cardib*, who shared insights into the differences between Chinese and Western cultures in English. Overall, the appealing visions motivated Chen to consistently invest in English pronunciation through various means, including English fun dubbing, singing English songs, shadow reading outside of class, and practicing with classmates to overcome suprasegmental features and correct her Chinese accent. Despite facing challenges in reaching English pronunciation standards, Chen encouraged herself with the motto "Persistence is victory." She expressed the following sentiments during the interview.

In today's Internet age, achieving overnight popularity is no longer impossible if one has talent. Believing that with sufficiently standard English pronunciation, becoming an English-related internet celebrity was entirely feasible, I persevered in diligently working towards my dream through daily English dubbing and shadow reading exercises.

(Interview-Chen)

(b) *Xi* In junior high schools, English is no longer considered a minor subject; it holds an equally significant role alongside Chinese and mathematics in the curriculum syllabus. However, English pronunciation remains neglected, similar to Cinderella, as English teaching and learning primarily focus on written-examination knowledge, comprising vocabulary and grammar. However, her negative belief in English pronunciation turned to positive in senior high school. As the English representative, Xi was tasked with leading her classmates in morning read-aloud sessions. To fulfill the role of a model student capable of reading English texts accurately and fluently, she dedicated her spare time in the first and second years of senior high school to shadow reading after listening to audio to practice her English

pronunciation. While, in the third year, Xi shifted her focus entirely to preparing for the college entrance examination (*Gaokao*), which impacts the future of millions of students in China. Consequently, English pronunciation ceased to be her priority, given its exclusion from high-stakes examinations.

During senior high school, I was selected as the representative of the English course. Our English teacher preferred interactive activities to enhance our communicative skills. I always actively participated in these interactive activities. It was essential for me to serve as a role model. Hence, when speaking English, I felt compelled to ensure accurate pronunciation and enhance fluency. After class, I regularly practiced English reading in the mornings. But, in my final year of senior high school, I discontinued regular pronunciation practice and focused solely on preparing for the college entrance examination.

(Written narrative-Xi)

(c) *Ma* Although Ma began learning English in junior high school, she found that English pronunciation remained neglected throughout both her junior and senior high school years. From Ma's written narrative, as part of a minority group of students with weak English foundations, their English teachers expected them to achieve high English scores in both the senior high school entrance examination and the college entrance examination (*Gaokao*). These exams primarily focused on exam-oriented knowledge, including vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. Since English pronunciation was not assessed in these high-stakes exams, it was never a focal point of the teachers' instruction. Consequently, activities related to English pronunciation learning, such as listening and speaking in the classroom, were rare. Ma described her experience as being similar to a "test machine" throughout junior and senior high school, with no emphasis on English pronunciation.

Interviewer: How did you evaluate your role in English pronunciation learning in junior high school and senior high school?

Ma: During these two periods, I saw myself merely as a test-taking machine devoid of emotions, never considering English pronunciation.

(Interview-Ma)

TABLE 3
SUMMARY OF IMAGINED IDENTITIES AND INVESTMENT IN JUNIOR AND SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

Participants	Imagined identity	Investment	Events resulting in less investment	
Chen	A good English pronunciation learner; An English singer; An English actress; An English blogger	English funny dubbing; Singing English songs; Doing shadow reading; Practicing with classmates		
Xi	A model English learner	Doing shadow reading	College entrance examination	
Ma	A test-machine		High entrance examination; College entrance examination	

C. At the University

(a) *Chen* As a versatile girl skilled in singing and dancing, she joined the school's literature and art club and actively participated in cross-cultural exchange activities to connect with like-minded friends. However, when she shared her aspirations with classmates and friends, they did not take them seriously, believing that teaching was the ideal career for girls. This reality made her aware of the obstacles in achieving her imagined identity as a multi-talented celebrity. In Chen's oral narrative, she acknowledged that if her dreams of becoming an English singer and blogger did not materialize, becoming an ordinary English teacher would be a respectable alternative, given its high public regard. With both her old and new aspirations in mind, she actively engaged in phonetic learning activities, sought assistance from teachers in class, sang English songs, practiced English dubbing exercises, and studied phonetics online outside of school. Here are Chen's statements from the interview:

Interviewer: Have you ever thought about giving up on ideas that classmates find impractical, such as becoming an English blogger?

Chen: No. Now everyone is living on the Internet. These ideas, as English singers, bloggers, or actresses, were easy to implement. Classmates may be more traditional. However, if these imagined identities cannot be realized, I can also become an ordinary university teacher who is widely recognized by the public. After all, becoming a well-known celebrity was not an easy task. Anyway, I would do my best not to let them burst.

(Interview-Chen)

(b) *Xi* At the university, Xi listened to the opinions of her parents, who perceived teaching as a more stable and suitable career for women. This profession also provided summer and winter holidays for women to care for their families. Therefore, Xi applied to a normal college to pursue an English major. In her freshman year, she encountered Ms. Dong who was responsible for teaching the English phonetic course and comprehensive English. Known for her strict teaching style, Ms. Dong prioritized articulation and pronunciation, which helped Xi aware the incorrect pronunciation habits formed from previous learning experiences. Concerned about potentially misleading future

students as an English teacher due to her own poor pronunciation, Xi actively engaged in phonetic instruction activities during her freshman year. This included participating in shadow reading, mimicking news broadcasts, and conducting morning reading sessions outside of class.

In the first semester of my freshman year, I aspired to be an English teacher. I was very motivated to learn. Ms. Dong, who was in charge of learning pronunciation at the time, made me realize that I had many incorrect pronunciation habits. Thinking about becoming a teacher in the future, I was afraid of misleading my students, so I was very serious about correcting pronunciation and practicing by imitation.

(Written narrative-Xi)

However, she has stopped learning English pronunciation since her sophomore year. According to the foreign language school policy, if students fail to pass the TEM-4, they will not be able to obtain a bachelor's degree or graduation certificate, which is essential for their job-seeking process in the future. Thus, to enhance the passing rate of the TEM-4 exam, teachers intentionally intensified exam-oriented practice in class, overlooking pronunciation issues. Concurrently, surrounding students were also intensively preparing for the exam, shifting their focus away from pronunciation learning. In this environment devoid of pronunciation learning, Xi's enthusiasm for improving pronunciation gradually waned.

In the sophomore year, everybody was busy with TEM-4, which was very significant for us in obtaining a bachelor's degree. The overall learning atmosphere was completely different from that in the freshman year, when both teachers and classmates paid great attention to pronunciation. I was not a maverick person. Hence, I did not keep learning pronunciation anymore.

(Written narrative-Xi)

Additionally, Xi lacks a comprehensive understanding of English phonetics. She expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that the English phonetic course was only offered for one semester during her freshman year. In particular, the focus of the course was on segmental features of phonetic knowledge, with little attention given to supra-segmental features. Consequently, Xi felt ill-prepared in this area. Even if she desired to self-study, she felt powerless due to the lack of resources and guidance.

Interviewer: How do you feel learning English pronunciation?

Xi: It is quite challenging. We only covered basic segmental features in the first semester, which was limited. Sometimes, I feel motivated to learn in my free time, but I struggle to figure out where to begin.

(Interview-Xi)

(c) *Ma* Following parental advice, she pursued an English major, aspiring to become an English teacher. Influenced by her English pronunciation instructor, she began to understand the importance of pronunciation. In her written narrative, Ma recounted attending an English phonetics class during her freshman year, where the instructor stressed the significance of pronunciation. Inspired by this guidance, Ma aimed to cultivate strong pronunciation skills and achieve her goal of becoming a qualified English teacher. Thus, during the phonetics course, Ma actively followed the instructor's guidance, practicing imitation of the 48 IPA symbols, focusing on articulation techniques in class, engaging in morning readings with English audio, and watching phonetic instructional videos on the *Bilibili* platform after class, all in pursuit of obtaining a high score in the pronunciation test.

During that period, I sensed a significant gap between myself and my classmates, motivating me to study diligently. Our English phonetics teacher was also very conscientious. Through her, I realized that poor pronunciation could adversely affect students if I were to become an English teacher in the future. Therefore, I dedicated myself to learning during that time, engaging in numerous imitation exercises such as morning readings and watching Bilibili, hoping to attain excellent results.

(Written narrative-Ma)

Despite Ma's diligent endeavors, she fared poorly in the English pronunciation exam, which left her disheartened since her efforts did not culminate in the outcomes she had hoped for. Subsequently, Ma stopped learning pronunciation and deliberately neglected it, as she perceived herself as a poor English learner, unlike her Han classmates who were apt and able to pursue advanced English pronunciation.

Interviewer: How do you feel about your poor phonetic score?

Ma: Disappointed. I am a minority student from remote areas. I did not aspire to be like my classmates who excelled in English. My only goal was to pass the TEM-4 exam the following year. Although achieving excellent pronunciation was satisfactory, I felt it was not the right fit for me. Consequently, I lost interest in furthering my English pronunciation skills.

(Interview-Ma)

Additionally, as the pronunciation-related courses wrapped up and Ma's sophomore year progressed toward the TEM-4 exam, her enthusiasm for learning pronunciation waned. She shifted her focus to redefining herself as a test-taker, directing her efforts towards acquiring knowledge that could improve her English literacy and skills essential for passing the TEM-4 exam. Acknowledging that mastering English pronunciation required significant effort but offered limited benefits for the TEM-4 exam, she opted to deprioritize it in her future learning endeavors.

Interviewer: How did you stop English pronunciation learning in the sophomore?

Ma: No learning atmosphere. The teacher and classmates no longer cared about English pronunciation. Even if

I wanted to learn, I may not feel as motivated by my own self as before. It was a little strange. On the other hand, English pronunciation did not have much effect on the written examination. Hence, I did not have any desire to learn it anymore.

(Interview-Ma)

TABLE 4
SUMMARY OF IMAGINED IDENTITIES AND INVESTMENT IN THE UNIVERSITY

Participants	Imagined identity	Investment	Events resulting in less investment
Chen	An English singer; An English actress; An English blogger; An English teacher	Participating in pronunciation learning activities; Asking for help from the teacher; Singing English songs; Doing English dubbing; Learning phonetic knowledge on the Internet	
Xi	A good pronunciation learner; An English teacher	Participating in phonetic instruction activities; Doing shadow reading; Doing news broadcasts; Doing morning reading	No phonetic course; TEM-4;
Ma	A good pronunciation learner; An English teacher	Participating in phonetic activities; Reading along with English audio; Watching phonetic knowledge videos	Poor result in English pronunciation test; No phonetic course; TEM-4

V. DISCUSSION

This multi-case study investigated the life experiences of three Chinese English major students to explore their imagined identities and investments in English pronunciation learning. The following sections will discuss in depth the themes pertaining to the results of the current study.

A. What Are the Students' Imagined Identities Throughout Their English Pronunciation Learning?

(a) *Imagined identity is socially constructed and reconstructed over time and place.* It was observed that Chen, an advanced English learner, cultivated positive imagined identities, envisioning the benefits of mastering English pronunciation and setting ambitious goals to fulfill throughout her learning journey. Her positive imagined identities, including 'a good English pronunciation learner', 'an English singer', 'an English actress', 'English blogger', and 'an English teacher', were integral to her English pronunciation learning process. In contrast, Xi developed two positive imagined identities, 'a model English learner' and 'an English teacher', during her senior high school and university years, respectively. Similarly, Ma's imagined identity pertaining to English pronunciation learning only emerged during her college years. However, Ma's imagined identities, such as that of an English learner with proficient pronunciation and a qualified teacher, deteriorated as she struggled to adapt to new learning contexts and relied heavily on her phonetics teacher's guidance. Throughout the process of learning English pronunciation, Ma experienced an identity conflict, viewing herself as a subpar English pronunciation learner and merely a test-taker, leading her to abandon her aspirations of becoming "a proficient English pronunciation learner" and "an English teacher". Overall, the three participants demonstrated varying levels of agency in constructing imagined identities. These findings align with the post-structuralist perspective that identity is socially constructed and continuously reconstructed over time and in different contexts (Block, 2007; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007).

(b) *Imagined identities were constructed and influenced by individual factors.* Chen's personal learning experiences were influenced by individual factors (Wu, 2017). Living in an urban environment, Chen benefited from ample informal English pronunciation learning opportunities through English training institutions and exposure to English media. This unique circumstance shielded her from the constraints of conventional formal schooling practices faced by her peers, enabling her to cultivate imagined identities as a proficient English user and a versatile celebrity with the assistance of the internet.

(c) *Imagined identities were constructed and influenced by the social institutional factor.* The social institutional factors (Wu, 2017) manifest through social, institutional practices and arrangements. Ma and Xi, influenced by the prevailing culture of English education focused on written examinations in their formal schools, viewed themselves as mere test-takers during their junior and senior high school years. Moreover, they did not develop any imagined identities related to English pronunciation. This finding corroborates earlier research indicating that social institutional practices and arrangements, such as educational systems, communities, organizations, and legal frameworks, play a crucial role in shaping the identity scope for language learners (Kharchenko, 2014; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the two participants initially perceived themselves as passive test-takers, given the limited or nonexistent opportunities for English oral communication practice in their school environments.

(d) *Imagined identities are constructed and influenced by social cultural value.* The social cultural value, represented by the social professional gender stereotype, significantly shaped the imagined identities of participants as English teachers, as evidenced in the experiences of Xi and Chen during their university years. For example, Xi's parents' view

that “girls are more secure as teachers with enough time to take care of family” and Chen's recognition that “being a teacher is a widely recognized job” highlight the prevailing gender stereotypes associated with teaching professions. These stereotypes suggest that teaching roles offer stable schedules, ample vacation time, and guaranteed income, characteristics often deemed more suitable for women (Ao & Lin, 2020).

B. How do Their Imagined Identities Influence Their English Pronunciation Learning Investment?

(a) *Imagined identities promote English pronunciation learning investment.* The results of this study were consistent with Norton's (2015) statement that imagined identity refers to a virtual identity in the mind regarding the relationship between oneself and other people or events in which one has virtually no direct interaction and could influence one's investments in L2 learning. In the case of Chen, she had been aspiring to be a good English pronunciation learner since primary school. In addition, her imagined identities, which included an English singer, actress, blogger and teacher, became more diverse throughout her junior high school and university years. This situation prompted her to continuously invest in English pronunciation in various ways. Unlike Chen, Xi, from primary school to junior high school, and Ma, from primary school to senior high school, regarded themselves as test machines who ignored English pronunciation and invested specific effort in vocabulary and grammar. This trend stemmed from their perception that excelling in written exams would bring them advantages. However, as their imagined identities regarding pronunciation expanded, they started investing in English pronunciation learning. For instance, Xi's aspiration to become proficient in English pronunciation during high school and later to become an English teacher in university prompted her to enhance her pronunciation abilities. Similarly, Ma's desire to excel in English pronunciation and become an English teacher at university motivated her to make pertinent investments during her freshman year. However, in addition to the imagined identity, there is the impact of some contextual factors.

(b) *Learner identity inhibits learners' English pronunciation learning.* As a minority student from a remote area with limited English resources compared to her peers, Ma experienced feelings of inferiority and marginalization during the English pronunciation learning process (Cervatiuc, 2009). Despite her aspirations to excel in English pronunciation and become a qualified English teacher, her dissatisfaction with her pronunciation score led to a loss of motivation to continue investing in improvement and return to be an English test-machine. This finding is concurred with Teng's (2019) statement that in contrast to advanced learners, poor learners were unprepared to implement agentic behaviors to promote changes in their EFL learning.

(c) *The mismatch between practical and imagined communities inhibits English pronunciation learning.* Encouraged by the English phonetic course, Xi and Ma invested considerable time and effort into improving their English pronunciation during their first year at university. Their goal was to enhance their English communication skills and fulfill their envisioned identities. However, as the second year approached and with the completion of pronunciation-related courses, coupled with the upcoming TEM-4 exam that did not assess pronunciation, their focus on pronunciation learning decreased. Current and previous studies (Norton, 2010; Teng & Bui, 2020) have indicated that a match between practiced and imagined communities could generate coercive or cooperative forces and promote language learning investment, while misalignment was not conducive to investment in EFL learning.

(d) *A lack of systematic phonetic knowledge hinders learners from learning English pronunciation.* In the current study, Xi lacked suprasegmental knowledge, which made her feel lost and led to lower confidence. Hence, in practice, she avoided investing in her English pronunciation. This finding is consistent with Sung's (2019) finding that learners' limited cultural capital inhibits their participation in EFL learning activities. In summary, the analysis suggests that the development and investment in English pronunciation among EFL learners are influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including their imagined identity. The imagined identity is not solely responsible for shaping their investment in English pronunciation but interacts with various personal and contextual elements.

VI. CONCLUSION

This multiple case study of three Chinese EFL university students' English pronunciation learning experiences sheds light on their imagined identity and investment. It highlights the importance of contextual factors such as social institutional practices, social professional gender stereotypes, and individual factors in shaping participants' imagined identities. The intricate relationship between their imagined identity and English pronunciation learning is also examined. Drawing from these findings, the study carries several implications.

From a theoretical viewpoint, this research has broadened the scope of studies on imagined identity and investment relationships. Whereas previous research focused primarily on general English learning, this investigation delved into the intricate relationship between these constructs in the realm of English pronunciation learning, thereby advancing the “social turn” in the research of English pronunciation. Besides, this study has identified various personal and contextual factors that influence learners' imagined identities and their investments regarding English pronunciation learning.

Simultaneously, this study presents several points of empirical significance. It was discovered that participants' imagined identities motivated them to make contextual investments and reshape their trajectories in learning English pronunciation. Consequently, it is recommended that language teachers not only impart essential language knowledge but also recognize the influence of learners' imagined identities on pronunciation learning and organize activities that connect students' personal and professional aspirations with their learning of English pronunciation. Such interventions

enable students to see themselves as part of multiple communities, including the classroom, the target language community, and imagined communities; thus, facilitating their journey in learning English pronunciation with guidance (Norton & Toohey, 2011).

Furthermore, the findings suggest that institutional practices and arrangements have influenced the limited imagined identities of Xi and Ma as test-takers prior to their education in junior high and college, respectively. Language teachers are therefore advised to carefully evaluate their teaching methods to ensure they do not limit students' imaginative capacities regarding the language being learned and to pay particular attention to learners who struggle to engage in proactive behaviors and developments in EFL learning (Teng, 2019).

Last but not least, policymakers and curriculum developers are encouraged to concentrate on the needs, goals, and expectations of learners to provide adequate external support. In China, English pronunciation has been neglected in major examinations, leading to a lack of systematic phonetic knowledge in courses for English majors. Policymakers and curriculum developers are urged to reconsider the current examination and evaluation systems, the necessity of testing learners' oral expression skills, and the potential increase in instructional hours for English phonetics, particularly for supra-segmental features.

In conclusion, while the study of the three participants has linked imagined identities with investment, it is crucial to acknowledge the uniqueness of their experiences and their understanding of these experiences within specific contexts. Therefore, this research does not aim to generalize across all EFL learners. Future research should investigate additional learning contexts using diverse methodologies.

APPENDIX INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CHEN, XI AND MA

Examples of interview questions for Chen:

1. How did you feel about learning English in the training school during your primary school days?
2. Could you explain how the significant persons influence your English pronunciation learning during different learning phases?
3. What do you think was the reason that made you persist on English learning (even after having encountered so many negative experiences)?
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?
6. You mentioned in the written narrative that you want to be an online English blogger, how such idea comes from?
7. How do you think of your English pronunciation?

II. Examples of interview questions for Xi:

1. What did English mean to you when you were in the primary school?
2. What did English mean to you when you were in the junior and senior high school?
3. Why do you think you wanted to be an English teacher rather than a teacher of other subjects?
4. Did you invest in any additional effort in learning English pronunciation in the after-school program, i.e. cram school or tutoring, during your different learning phases?
5. Currently, what do you do to improve your English pronunciation ability in a daily life?
6. You said you want to pursue a graduate degree, how?

III. Examples of interview questions for Ma:

1. What did English pronunciation mean to you when you were in primary, junior and senior high school?
2. You said English pronunciation was like a big monster when you enter university. What was English to you when you were in the university?
3. Why do you want to go back to your hometown and be an English teacher?
4. How do you think of your English pronunciation that compared with your classmates?
5. Could you explain how the significant persons influence your English pronunciation learning during different learning phases?

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