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EXPLORING THE IMAGINED COMMUNITIES, IDENTITIES, AND INVESTMENT AMONG MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

CHAN SIANG JACK



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UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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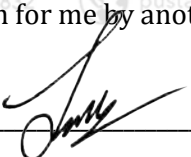
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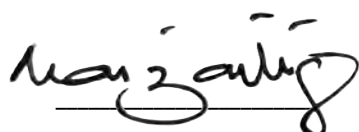

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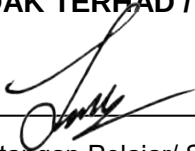
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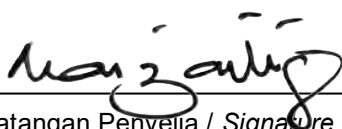
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the characteristics of imagined communities, identities, and investment, as well as the linguistic behaviours among high and low proficiency ESL learners. The data of this qualitative study were collected through in-depth interviews and written narratives from 12 high-proficiency undergraduate ESL learners and 10 low-proficiency undergraduate ESL learners, who were selected based on the learners' Malaysian University English Test (MUET) result. The data were analysed through thematic analysis, to generate themes and patterns related to the participants' imagined communities, identities, investment, and linguistic behaviours. The findings revealed that high-proficiency learners' imagined communities, identities and investment are reflective of their professional aspirations and career success, global communication, travel, and cultural adaptation, educational influence and inspiration, as well as their social and peer influence. In contrast, low-proficiency learners' imagined communities, identities, and investment mirrored their perceived relevance of English language, social and peer-influenced, as well as limited practice and exposure. The data on the linguistic behaviours of high and low proficiency learners indicated differences in terms of their language and length of responses, clarification requests, and sentimental indicators. The results of this study imply that the learners' imagined communities, identities, and investment could influence their proficiency and linguistic behaviours. The study brings about theoretical contributions on the understanding of three important constructs in Second Language Acquisition (SLA); imagined communities, identities, and investment in the context of Malaysian setting.

MENEROKA ‘IMAGINED COMMUNITIES’, ‘IDENTITIES’, DAN ‘INVESTMENT’ DI KALANGAN PELAJAR PRASISWAZAH MALAYSIA

ABSTRAK

Penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji ciri-ciri ‘imagined communities’, ‘identity’, ‘investment’ serta tingkah laku linguistik di kalangan pelajar English as Second Language (ESL) yang berkemahiran tinggi dan rendah. Kajian kualitatif ini mengumpul data melalui wawancara mendalam dan naratif bertulis daripada 12 pelajar prasiswazah ESL berkemahiran tinggi dan 10 pelajar prasiswazah ESL berkemahiran rendah, di mana pelajar dipilih menggunakan keputusan Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik untuk menghasilkan tema berkaitan ‘imagined communities’, ‘identity’, ‘investment’ dan tingkah laku linguistik para peserta. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa ‘imagined communities’, ‘identity’, dan ‘investment’ pelajar berkemahiran tinggi mencerminkan aspirasi profesional dan kejayaan kerjaya, komunikasi global, perjalanan dan penyesuaian budaya, pengaruh dan inspirasi pendidikan, serta pengaruh sosial dan rakan sebaya. Sebaliknya, ‘imagined communities’, ‘identity’, dan ‘investment’ pelajar berkemahiran rendah menggambarkan ketidakpentingan Bahasa Inggeris, pengaruh sosial dan rakan sebaya, serta amalan dan pendedahan yang terhad. Data mengenai tingkah laku linguistik pelajar berkemahiran tinggi dan rendah menunjukkan perbezaan dari segi bahasa dan panjang respons, permintaan penjelasan, dan petunjuk sentimen. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa ‘imagined communities’, ‘identity’ dan ‘investment’ pelajar boleh mempengaruhi kemahiran dan tingkah laku linguistik mereka. Kajian ini memberikan sumbangan teori terhadap pemahaman tiga konstruk penting dalam Second Language Acquisition (SLA); ‘imagined communities’, ‘identity’, ‘investment’ dalam konteks Malaysia.



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference
CTS	Critical Thinking Skills
EF EPI	Education First English Proficiency Index
EFG	English as a Foreign Language
EL	English Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
KBSM	Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah
KBSR	Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah
KSSM	Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah
KSSR	Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah
MEA	Malaysia English Assessment
MEB	Malaysia Education Blueprint
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
MUET	Malaysian University English Test
OIT	Organismic Integration Theory
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
STPM	Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia
TESL	Teaching of English as a Second Language

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The first chapter introduces and discusses details of the research, including the research background beginning in section 1.2. Next, the problem statement is dealt with in section 1.3. The chapter also dwells on the research aims and objectives and the research questions in sections 1.4 and 1.5, respectively. The significance of the research is discussed in section 1.6, and section 1.7 deals with the operational definition in this study. Finally, the summary for this chapter is dealt with in section 1.8.

1.2 Background of the Study

According to the 21st edition of *Ethnologue* (Simons, Gary, & Charles, 2018), the English language has become the world's third most spoken second language (L2) and is an international lingua franca. For many, proficiency in English can open doors to better job prospects, further education opportunities, cultural expansion, and the ability to express personal, political, and religious viewpoints. English is regarded as a second language (L2) in several South-East Asian countries, including Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Hong Kong (Hickey & Elaine, 2017).

In Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia is the primary language used in the education system, but English (EL) is positioned as a second language (L2) and is a compulsory subject at all levels of education—primary, secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary (Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013). An ordinary Malaysian student who completes formal education from pre-school to tertiary level would have at least 11 to 16 years of English language education. Despite this, students are not required to pass English at primary or secondary levels, though it has been established as an essential second language in Malaysia's Education Ordinance since 1957 and reaffirmed in the Education Act and National Policy Education issued in 1970 (Ministry of Education, 2012).

The Roadmap for English Language Education in Malaysia 2015–2025 was launched to align the standard of English in schools and higher education institutions with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages, aiming to produce learners capable of effective communication in English (Rozana, 2018).

This led to the proposal of the Malaysia English Assessment (MEA) to be CEFR-aligned and integrated into the communication component of public universities (Rozana, 2018).

Despite these efforts, many Malaysian students continue to struggle with English language proficiency. Research indicates that the quality of English language education and the proficiency levels of students have not met national expectations (Zeehan et al., 2013; David et al., 2015; Rusreena et al., 2018; Phan & Ganapathy, 2020). Various reforms, including the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025 and the English Language Education Reform Roadmap 2015–2025, aim to address these challenges by improving the quality of English language instruction and aligning it with international standards (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Recent research has emphasized the importance of sociocultural factors in language learning. Norton's (2013) sociocultural theory posits that language learning is not just a cognitive process but also a social one, deeply embedded in the learners' identities and social interactions. According to Norton, imagined communities, identity, and investment are key constructs that influence how learners engage with language learning.

Imagined communities, a concept adapted by Norton from Anderson (1983), refer to the groups of people with whom learners feel a sense of connection, whether real or imagined. These communities can significantly influence learners' motivations and aspirations. For instance, a learner who envisions themselves as part of a global English-speaking community may be more motivated to invest in learning English.

Identity, another key concept in Norton's theory, involves how learners perceive themselves and their relationship with the target language. This perception can greatly influence their motivation and engagement in language learning. Learners who see themselves as competent and confident English speakers are likely to be more engaged and persistent in their efforts to learn the language.

Investment, the third major concept, refers to the commitment and resources that learners allocate towards learning a language. This investment is driven by the desire to integrate into the imagined communities and to form desired identities. A learner's investment in language learning is not just a matter of time and effort but is also influenced by their social and cultural contexts, including their access to resources and support systems.

In Malaysia's multiracial and multilingual context, these sociocultural factors present unique challenges and opportunities for English language learning. The country's diverse environment means that learners are often navigating multiple identities and community memberships simultaneously. This complexity can both facilitate and hinder their English language learning, depending on how they perceive and negotiate these identities and communities.

By exploring the influence of sociocultural factors such as imagined communities, identity, and investment, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of English language learning among Malaysian undergraduate students. This perspective aligns with the global shift towards more holistic and inclusive approaches to language education, recognizing that proficiency is not solely a matter

of classroom instruction but is also deeply intertwined with learners' social worlds and personal identities.

1.3 Problem Statement

The English language has been a part of a compulsory subject in the Malaysian national education curriculum. The subject of the English language is not foreign to the children in Malaysia, as they are exposed to the language as early as pre-school, and it is also a common language in the country. The English language continues to be taught as a compulsory subject in the national primary school for six (6) years, secondary school for another five (5) years, up until the post-secondary (diploma, matriculation, A-levels, or Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia [STPM]) and tertiary levels of education. Overall, an average Malaysian student who completes his or her formal education would have approximately 11 – 16 years of English language education.

Ideally, Malaysian students should be proficient in their English language, given the number of years of formal English language education and the initiatives implemented by various parties and governments to ensure the optimisation of the teaching and learning of the English language in the country. However, the ideal situation is quite far off from becoming a reality. The fact that a Malaysian child typically would have at least 11 – 16 years of English education and that they start their EL education as early as primary one (age 7) does not guarantee the competent acquisition of the language (Hazita, 2016). This notion is supported by the statistic

presented in JobStreet.com, citing that 52% of the undergraduates who failed to secure a job is due to their low command of English language proficiency (www.jobstreet.com.my). Even though Malaysia is ranked as having high proficiency on the Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), the proficiency trend of Malaysia has dropped from being number 13 in 2017 to 26 in 2019 (www.ef.com).

The persistent decline in English language proficiency remains a critical issue, potentially undermining Malaysia's ongoing efforts towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its commitment to becoming a regionally and globally competitive knowledge-based economy. Despite significant efforts by the government and various stakeholders to enhance students' English language proficiency, mastery of the language continues to be a challenge, and the problem of low proficiency levels still affects a substantial number of Malaysian students (Zeehan, Mohamed, Fahad, Noman, Tahir, & Hisham, 2013; David, Thang, & Hazita, 2015; Rusreena, Melor, & Harwati, 2018; Liskinasih, A., Weganofa, R., & Renyaan, T. P., 2020; Phan, J., & Ganapathy, M., 2020; Ganapathy, M., Che Lah, S., & Phan, J., 2022; Ahmad, I., & Yusof Khan, Z. J., 2023).

The traditional focus of research in English language teaching has predominantly centred on pedagogical methods and classroom instruction, with studies extensively exploring aspects ranging from curriculum design to teaching methodologies and teacher training programs (Chiew et al., 2016; Siti & Azalina, 2019; Manesha, Manjet, & Eng, 2015; Noorizah, Idris, & Rosniah, 2011). Significant research has also been dedicated to enhancing students' English language (EL) proficiency within the classroom context, including investigations into teaching

pedagogy improvement (Kepol, 2017; Mynbayeva, Sadvakassova, & Akshalova, 2018; Panev & Barakoska, 2015; Richards, 2017; Téllez & Mosqueda, 2015; Shotte, 2013; Zein, 2017), effective teaching and learning methods for EL (Arora, Joshi, Koshy, & Tewari, 2017; Belyaeva, Samorodova, Voron, & Zakirova, 2019; Intarapanish, 2013; Sajjad, 2010; Shaikh, 2015), and strategies to boost students' motivation (Alizadeh, 2016; Hamidah, Azizah, Shah, Faizah, Wan, & Mohd Asyraf, 2017; Ismail, Hazlina, & Faizal, 2014; Long, Ming, & Chen, 2013; Purnama, Rahayu, & Yugafiati, 2019; William & William, 2011).

However, these approaches have not fully addressed the underlying issues affecting language proficiency, particularly in terms of overall fluency and accuracy (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Nalini & Subadrah, 2019; Saeed, Ismail, & Eng, 2019).

There is a growing recognition that language knowledge is deeply influenced by socio-cultural factors, such as learners' engagement with imagined communities, identity formation, and their investment in the learning process (Norton, 2013; Kanno & Norton, 2003). Imagined communities are groups of people with whom learners feel a sense of connection, shaping their aspirations and motivations for language learning (Anderson, 1983; Norton, 2001). Identity, as related to language learning, involves how learners perceive themselves and their relationship with the target language, influencing their motivation and engagement (Norton, 2013). Investment refers to the commitment and resources that learners allocate towards learning a language, driven by their desire to integrate into these imagined communities and form desired identities (Norton, 1997).

In Malaysia's multiracial and multilingual context, these sociocultural factors present unique challenges and opportunities for English language learning. The interaction of imagined communities, identities, and investment significantly impacts learners' language proficiency levels, yet the application of these theoretical frameworks within the Malaysian ESL context, particularly at the university level, remains underexplored. Studies have primarily focused on contexts where English is a first language, leaving a gap in understanding how these concepts influence English language learners in Malaysia (Lee, 2003; Lee et al., 2010; Norton Pierce, 1995; Norton, 1997, 2000, 2001; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Kharchenko, 2014; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Ridwan & Zahariah, 2017; Song, 2010; Teng, 2019; Wu, 2017).

Recent studies continue to explore these dynamics, such as Ovalle Quiroz and González's (2023) examination of imagined identities and communities in professional development for English teachers, and Alghamdi's (2023) investigation of identity negotiation in a virtual Saudi EFL context (Ovalle Quiroz & González, 2023; Alghamdi, 2023). However, there remains a significant gap in research specifically addressing how imagined communities, identities, and investment affect English language learning among Malaysian undergraduate students.

This study aims to fill this gap by critically analysing how imagined communities, identity, and investment influence English language learning among Malaysian undergraduate students. It seeks to understand whether and how these socio-cultural factors contribute to or hinder language proficiency, moving beyond the traditional focus on classroom instruction and pedagogical methods. In doing so, this study responds to the call for more comprehensive research in second language

acquisition that extends beyond grammatical competence and pedagogical effectiveness, aiming to provide new insights into the mechanisms of language learning outside traditional classroom settings and contributing to a more nuanced understanding of second language learning in Malaysia.

1.4 Objectives

The study aims to understand the relationship between imagined communities and identity and comprehend their language learning role (investment). The objectives of the study are to:

1. explore the characteristics of imagined communities among high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners ESL learners
2. identify the characteristics of identities among high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners ESL learners
3. examine the characteristics of investment among high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners ESL learners
4. investigate the patterns of linguistic behaviours exhibited by high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners ESL learners

1.5 Research Questions

The study endeavours to answer the following research questions:

- 1 What are the characteristics of imagined communities among high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners?
- 2 What are the characteristics of identities among high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners?
- 3 What are the characteristics of investment among high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners?
- 4 What are the patterns of linguistic behaviours between high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners ESL learners?

1.6 Significance of the Study

As aforementioned, limited research was conducted on imagined communities and identity towards EL learning, especially in multiracial and multicultural settings such as in Malaysia. This study could provide insights into the existence and the role of imagined communities and identity in EL learning. It also helps shed light on how learners invest in language learning outside of the classroom setting and learn how high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners language learners learn the target language.

Norton (1995) and McKay and Wong (1996) noted that teaching and learning of EL are not limited only to the use of effective teaching and learning methods, teaching materials, and processes. Instead, it also depends on the learners themselves, as they are complex social beings who continuously struggle to navigate and search for their ideal L2 identity, which could affect their level of motivation in learning. This study will also provide insights into how learners learn EL through a non-formal setting.

This study also hopes to extend the scope of SLA theories of the notion of imagined communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and tries to conceptualise the notion of imagined communities, identity, and investment introduced by Bonny Norton. This study is significant as it seeks to develop an identity profile that could help ESL learners understand how they can improve their EL through investment in developing their desired identity. The findings from this study could add to the existing literature and encourage further inquiry into identity-based motivation, which could also improve the teaching and learning practice in EL.

1.7 Limitation of the study

The primary limitation of this study stems from its research design. As a case study, the data collected were inherently specific to the selected individuals, events, or groups, and therefore, cannot be presumed to represent a broader population. This characteristic is typical of qualitative research, where the emphasis is on depth and richness of data rather than generalizability. Consequently, the findings of this study



are intended to provide detailed insights into the specific context examined, rather than to be extrapolated to a wider population.

Additionally, due to the qualitative nature of data collection, there is a potential for participant bias in their responses. To mitigate this, measures such as ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality will be implemented, and where possible, data triangulation will be used to cross-verify information.

Furthermore, while variables such as gender, socioeconomic background, and sociocultural differences are acknowledged as influential in second language acquisition (SLA) studies, they fall outside the specific focus of this research. The decision to not include these variables is aligned with the study's concentrated examination of imagined communities, identities, and investment in language learning among Malaysian university students. This delimitation allows for a more focused exploration of these specific aspects, while acknowledging that other factors also play a significant role in SLA.

1.8 Operational Definition

This section deals with the terms that are used in this study.



1.8.1 Imagined community/communities

In the context of this study, imagined communities refer to groups of people that learners aspire to be part of through the power of imagination, even if these groups are not immediately tangible or accessible. This concept, derived from Kanno and Norton (2003), encompasses both physically existent groups and purely aspirational ones. Imagined communities play a crucial role in language learning by providing learners with a sense of belonging and purpose, which in turn motivates them to invest in learning the target language.

For this study, an imagined community is operationally defined as a social group or network that learners envision themselves belonging to in the future, which influences their motivation and investment in learning English. These communities could be professional, educational, social, or cultural groups that learners hope to join. Additionally, imagined communities can also include immediate communities that learners are currently part of but perceive through their aspirations and motivations. The terms 'community' and 'communities' are used interchangeably, with the singular form referring to an individual learner's specific aspirational group, and the plural form referring to multiple such groups across different learners.

1.8.2 Identity/Identities

Identity, as defined by Norton (2013), is 'the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space,

and how the person understands possibilities for the future' (p. 4). In this study, identity/identities refer to the individual's self-conception or alter-ego, influenced by their imagined communities. In the realm of language learning, identity shapes and is shaped by the language acquisition process, reflecting the learner's aspirations and engagement with the target language. These identities are not fixed but are dynamic and evolving, influenced by both immediate and imagined social interactions. The terms 'identity' and 'identities' are used interchangeably, depending on whether they are referenced in singular or plural form.

1.8.3 Imagined Identity/identities

Imagined identity, as defined by Norton and Toohey (2011), refers to the ideal L2 self that learners aspire to become in the future. In this study, imagined identity/identities encompass the envisioned selves of learners that are shaped by their engagement with their imagined communities. These identities represent the learners' goals, aspirations, and motivations in language learning, influencing their approach to acquiring the target language. The concept of imagined identities is crucial as it links learners' current efforts with their future goals and aspirations, providing a motivational framework for language learning. The terms 'imagined identity' and 'imagined identities' are used interchangeably, based on the context.

1.8.4 Investments

Investment, as defined by Norton (1997), signifies ‘the social and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes-ambivalent desire to learn and practice it’ (p. 411). In this study, investment encompasses the actions and efforts learners undertake, such as study, practice, and active engagement, to achieve proficiency in the target language (English). It reflects the dynamic relationship between learners’ identity, their goals, and the social context of language learning. Investment is influenced by learners' aspirations to integrate into their imagined communities and form desired identities, thereby driving their commitment to learning the language. This concept will be explored in greater depth in the literature review.

1.8.5 High-proficiency English Language Learners

In this study, ‘high-proficiency’ English language learners are defined as learners who scored Band 4 or above in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). In addition, high-proficiency learners are not solely determined by academic achievements, but also by their ability to effectively use the language in diverse contexts. Success encompasses both linguistic proficiency and the ability to engage in meaningful communication, adapt language use to different situations, and demonstrate continuous growth and adaptability in language skills. This broader perspective acknowledges that success in language learning extends beyond test scores to include practical language use and personal development.

1.8.6 Low-proficiency English Language Learners

‘Low proficiency’ English language learners in this study are learners who scored Band 2 or below in the MUET. In addition, they are characterised not just by lower academic performance, but also by challenges in effectively using the language in practical contexts. This includes difficulties in communication, limited vocabulary, and a lack of confidence or opportunities to practice the language. It is important to note that this label of ‘low-proficiency’ is context-specific and does not necessarily reflect the learners’ overall language proficiency or potential for improvement.

1.8.7 Linguistic Behaviours

In this thesis, ‘linguistic behaviour’ is defined as the range of observable and measurable aspects of language use by learners within the context of the study. This encompasses the language of response, which refers to the choice of language or dialect employed by learners in their communication; the length of responses, indicating the extent or verbosity of learners’ verbal replies; clarification requests, which are instances where learners actively seek additional information or understanding to enhance their comprehension or communication; and sentimental indicators, which involve the expression of emotions, attitudes, and dispositions through language use.

These elements collectively provide a framework for assessing and understanding the nuances of how learners interact with the language and the learning

environment. The operational definition of linguistic behaviour in this study is crucial for the systematic observation and analysis of language use patterns among learners, particularly in distinguishing between high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners.

Observational data derived from this definition is integrated with other qualitative findings to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the language learning process as experienced by the learners. Such a multifaceted approach aligns with established research in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, which emphasises the importance of examining both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of language use to gain a holistic view of learners' linguistic behaviours (Ellis, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 2008).

It is important to note that while this definition guides the observation of linguistic behaviour, it represents a specific aspect of language use and may not capture the entirety of learners' linguistic capabilities or experiences. Therefore, integrating observational data with qualitative findings ensures a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the language learning process.

1.9 Summary

Chapter 1 introduces the study, highlighting the importance of examining imagined communities, identities, and investment in English language learning among Malaysian university students. It outlines the problem statement, emphasizing the gap

in research regarding the socio-cultural factors influencing English proficiency in Malaysia's multiracial and multilingual context.

The chapter sets forth the research objectives and questions, aimed at exploring the differences and similarities in language learning conceptions and practices among high-proficiency and low-proficiency learners. Key operational definitions are provided to ensure clarity and precision in the study.

This chapter lays the foundation for understanding the socio-cultural dimensions of English language learning in Malaysia, setting the stage for the detailed literature review in Chapter 2.