English Language Learning and Imagined Communities in the Iranian EFL Context

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Abstract

The present paper reports a study conducted among Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, addressing the critical issue of imagined identity/community within a globalized world. The concepts of "imagined identities" and "imagined communities" (ICs) refer to the internalized self-conceptions learners develop regarding who they aspire to be and the broader social groups they envision themselves as part of in the context of language learning, respectively. Drawing on Norton's (2000, 2001) framework of ICs, this study focused on the diverse imaginations that Iranian EFL learners possess while learning English. The study involved five participants, aged between 13 and 36, and employed a qualitative approach utilizing semi-structured interviews for data collection. Through these interviews, rich narratives illustrating the learners' unique perspectives emerged. The findings revealed that while the imagined identities/communities differed among participants, a common thread was their significant influence on guiding learners through the language learning process. Moreover, the research indicated that a lack of awareness regarding learners' desired membership in their ICs could detrimentally impact their engagement and commitment to language learning, often resulting in various forms of non-participation in the classroom. Pedagogical implications of the study for EFL teaching practices, emphasizing the importance of creating classroom environments that validate and support learners' ICs and foster their imagined identities/communities as essential components of effective language instruction, are discussed. The study also offers recommendations for future research endeavors to further explore the dynamic interplay between imagined identities/communities and language learning outcomes.

Keywords: EFL Learners, English Language Teaching/Learning, Imagination, Imagined Identities/Communities

The social turn in second language acquisition (SLA) represents a transformative shift in the field, drawing attention to the ways in which L2 learners are influenced by their specific social, cultural, and historical contexts (Norton & Toohey, 2001). This shift reflects a departure from viewing language learning purely as an individual cognitive process and has encouraged researchers to investigate the interplay between social dynamics and language learning experiences, particularly through the lens of Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment. Their model underscores the significant role of social dynamics in shaping learners' identities

Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ)
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44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80

56

Nahid Soltanian

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

and engagement with language learning, illustrating how these factors deeply influence motivation and participation in the learning process.

Understanding the role of identity in L2 learning, specifically how learners develop their L2 identities and navigate associated self-representations, remains a significant area of inquiry (Sung, 2019). Norton's extensive research on this topic (e.g., Norton, 1997; 2000; 2001; Norton Peirce, 1995) has been pivotal in elucidating the concept of language learner identity, which subsequently led to the introduction of new ideas, including ICs and investment in language learning.

According to Norton (2001), ICs are defined as the groups that language learners envision themselves associating with, influenced by their aspirations and desires related to language use, impacting their motivations and engagement in learning a language. This conceptualization highlights how learners' perceptions of these communities can motivate their engagement in language learning. In this context, ICs provide a framework for understanding how learners imagine their future selves and their potential membership in these communities, which significantly shapes their learning experience. This concept aligns with the emphasis placed on social dynamics in Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, which asserts that learners' identities and their investment in language learning are deeply intertwined with their perceptions of these ICs.

Kramsch (2013) highlights that the interrelated concepts of identity, investment, and ICs have greatly enriched applied linguistics. They have offered valuable theoretical tools for exploring various aspects of language learners' experiences (Norton, 2019) and informed the creation of more inclusive learning environments that enhance connections between learners and their language practices.

ICs are communities where individuals' imaginations cultivate a sense of belonging to groups that may not be readily accessible (Wenger, 2010). Wenger (1998) emphasizes that belonging to a community and identity formation is not solely dependent on active participation in community practices or relationships; rather, individuals may connect with communities beyond their immediate surroundings. This understanding resonates with the broader "social turn" in SLA, which frames L2 learning as more than a psychological process and acknowledges learners as active agents engaged within their social contexts (Tajeddin et al., 2021). While Wenger (2010) offers valuable insights into communities of practice, Norton's conceptualization of ICs remains central to understanding the impact of social dynamics on language learning.

Learners' imagined identities and communities significantly influence their agency, motivation, resistance, and engagement in classroom literacy and language practices, ultimately shaping their overall language learning progress (Norton, 2013; 2016; 2019; Norton & Pavlenko, 2019; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Students are more likely inclined to invest in activities that foster connections with these ICs and allow for the expression of their diverse identities (Tajeddin et al., 2021). When a learning environment fails to support these connections, learners' investment typically declines, leading to practices that hinder their language development or

prompt them to seek new learning contexts (Trentman, 2013). Conversely, a supportive learning environment that enhances belonging to ICs can increase learners' investment in language learning (Norton, 2001; Norton & McKinney, 2011).

In Iran, English is increasingly recognized as a vital skill for personal and professional advancement (Iranmeher & Davari, 2018). The landscape of language learning in this context is deeply intertwined with a multifaceted socio-political framework that is rich in cultural heritage encompassing a long history of literature, art, and national traditions, yet significantly influenced by the pressures of globalization, which often favor Western norms and practices (Chamani, 2023; Morady Moghaddam & Murray, 2019; Tajeddin & Chamani, 2020). As Iranians engage with the English language, they encounter a pivotal crossroads, where the desire to participate in global discourse must be balanced with a commitment to their cultural identity and values. This unique intersection profoundly shapes learners' perceptions of their identities and community affiliations as they strive to balance these impacts and negotiate their roles within a rapidly evolving global landscape.

While access to English-speaking communities may be limited in real life, many Iranian learners navigate a landscape of ICs through virtual platforms, online forums, and social media. These digital spaces empower Iranian learners to forge meaningful connections with global communities, facilitating English conversations and cultural exchanges that transcend geographical boundaries. By leveraging technology, they cultivate their language skills and broaden their understanding of diverse perspectives, ultimately enhancing their ability to navigate the complexities of a globalized world. Through this engagement, Iranian learners not only develop their linguistic abilities but also contribute to the dynamic interplay between local cultural identity and global citizenship.

Given the importance of L2 learners' ICs in language learning, especially in an era of heightened global mobility where English language connects learners to broader networks, affecting their future (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019), and that proficiency in English confers significant symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) and opens doors to a plethora of opportunities that shape their personal and professional trajectories, it is essential for researchers to delve deeper into the notion of present or future imagined self (Dawson, 2017). Additionally, advancements in digital technologies, mobility, and super-diversity have reshaped socialization and learning, altering our views on place, time, and individual roles in a global context (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Social media also enables the exploration of transnational identities, broadening possibilities for language learners to express themselves within multicultural settings and expanding the range of imaginable communities (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton & DeCosta, 2017).

In light of these developments, it is vital for SLA researchers to investigate the complex relationships among language learning, imagination, and identity more comprehensively, particularly within localized contexts such as Iran. Understanding how learners' ICs affect their identity construction, investment in specific ICs while learning another language, and

Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ)
(Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills)
44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80

58

Nahid Soltanian

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

participation in language classrooms is crucial for designing effective pedagogical strategies (Dawson, 2017). Accordingly, this study seeks to illuminate how Iranian EFL learners can actively shape their language learning experiences through their imagined identities and communities, thereby enhancing their connection to their educational journeys.

To fully comprehend how Iranian learners engage with English, it is imperative to investigate their sociocultural positioning and aspirations within their specific environment. The ambition to participate in global discourses often intertwines with deeply held notions of national identity, influencing how these learners envision their imagined connections to the English-speaking world (Shahidzade & Mazdayasna, 2022). This localized perspective corresponds to the social turn framework, which emphasizes the importance of situating learners within their specific social, cultural, and historical realities (Block, 2003; Norton, 2013). By foregrounding these localized experiences and the communities that learners engage with, it is possible to elucidate the complex dynamics of imagined identities and communities, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of English language learning in the Iranian context and its relevance to the Social Turn in language education.

Literature Review

The Power of Imagination and ICs in L2 Learning

Imagination serves as a crucial catalyst for action, instilling hope for a positive future (Appadurai, 1996) and motivating individuals to transcend their current situations, facilitating personal and educational development. This forward-looking perspective highlights the significant impact of imagination in learning and teaching, demonstrating how the capacity to envision potential outcomes can enhance engagement and motivation in ongoing efforts (Norton & Kamal, 2003).

It is essential to distinguish between imagination and fantasy. According to Simon (1992), the fundamental difference lies in the concepts of "wishes" versus "hopeful imagination." Wishes tend to be temporary and lack actionable potential, while hopeful imagination drives individuals to take intentional steps toward achieving their aspirations. This proactive aspect of hopeful imagination acts as a strong motivator, inspiring individuals to turn their visions into reality.

Imagination plays a crucial yet often elusive role in L2 education, as it empowers language learners to explore new possibilities (Liu et al., 2023). It serves as a significant tool for empowerment, necessitating alignment with the histories, experiences, social statuses, inequalities, and aspirations of both learners and instructors (Liu et al., 2023). By fostering imagination, language learners can transcend their immediate contexts, as the pursuit of a new language often represents a desire to expand their identities and connect with broader communities (Barkhuizen, 2016; Darvin & Norton, 2015). This exploration of imagined identities is not merely theoretical; it can significantly impact learners' primary identities and their engagement in language learning activities (Gao, 2012).

Imagination is a vital tool for navigating meanings and power dynamics, enabling L2 learners to shape their identities and engage with broader realities beyond their immediate contexts (Darvin & Norton, 2021). This concept expands dimensions of language learning by introducing "imagined communities," defined as groups connected through imagination (Kanno & Norton, 2003). By investing in these communities, learners can connect with English speakers worldwide, access symbolic and material resources, and assert their rights to self-expression within a power-structured world (Darvin & Norton, 2021; Norton, 2013). Ultimately, this investment cultivates a socially expansive future, allowing learners to develop diverse identities and pathways beyond the classroom (Liu et al., 2023).

The concept of ICs was initially introduced by Anderson (1991) to clarify the formation of nation-states. Anderson characterized nations as ICs, emphasizing that individuals, regardless of the size of their nation, are unlikely to know, meet, or hear of most of their fellow members, yet they maintain a shared image of their communion. This perspective highlights how imagination extends beyond individual experiences, encompassing broader societal ideologies related to nationhood (Pavlenko, 2003).

Wenger (1998) conceptualizes imagination as a mechanism for engaging with communities of practice within the framework of situated learning theory, extending Anderson's concept of ICs to encompass any community an individual wishes to join. He argues that imagination facilitates a sense of belonging, enabling individuals to position themselves and others while integrating diverse meanings and perspectives into their identities. By further elaborating on situated learning, Wenger asserts that imagination is a crucial link between individual participation and broader goals. Norton's (2001) work builds on this idea by exploring how imagination relates to investment in these communities.

Anderson's (1991) concept of ICs was adapted to SLA by Norton (2000, 2001). Norton expanded on Wenger's notion of imagination by emphasizing the interrelationship between imagination, identity, and investment in communities associated with the target language (Liu et al., 2023). In her research, Norton (2001) examined the resistance and disengagement of two immigrant language learners in their English as a second language (ESL) classrooms. She found that these learners aspired to join communities that were beyond the classroom, both temporally and spatially, and were largely inaccessible to their teachers. The disparity between the learners' ICs and classroom realities, shaped by teachers' goals, negatively impacted their motivation and engagement, ultimately leading to their withdrawal from classroom activities.

Norton (2016) argues that learners within a class can imagine a world separate from their current realities, suggesting that their identities are shaped by both personal experiences and aspirations for potential futures. Similarly, Muir et al. (2021) assert that even without travel, educational materials and resources can facilitate the formation of imagined transnational connections and identities, enabling learners to perceive themselves as members of global communities.

| TESL Quarterly | Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ) (Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills) 44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80 | **60** Nahid Soltanian |

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Learners' engagement in their ICs demonstrates their sense of agency (Dawson, 2017; Sung, 2019). Within these communities, learners gain control that empowers them to reshape their identities and take on more significant roles (Norton, 2020). Being part of ICs facilitates the pursuit of current and future aspirations, allowing for informed decision-making and reflection on their choices, expectations, and outcomes, including identity transformation (Tajeddin et al., 2021). As learners explore their needs, desires, and imagined identities within ICs, they can cultivate new investments and identities (Norton, 2020; Przymus, 2016; Sung, 2019; Tajeddin et al., 2021).

A key feature of ICs is that their influence on learners' identities, behaviors, identity co-construction, and investment can be as significant as that of the communities in which they actively participate, potentially even exerting a greater impact on their investment (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Furthermore, these ICs provide learners with a range of imagined identity possibilities (Norton & McKinney, 2011) and broaden their prospective selves (Wenger, 1998).

Learners' engagement in ICs can help them reshape their current communities or envision new ones (Kharchenko, 2014). While a newly envisioned community may not always offer the most beneficial options, learners' disengagement from certain language practices is notably influenced by their investment in specific ICs (Norton, 2000, 2001). Although these new communities may not always be ideal, learners' commitment to particular ICs significantly influences their trajectories and life choices (Dagenais, 2003). Non-participation among language learners often signifies resistance to marginalization in learning environments that do not align with their ICs (Song, 2018). Conflicts between the identities learners express in their ICs and the identity expectations set by others can lead to withdrawal from classroom activities (Norton, 2000). This withdrawal restricts access to meaningful participation, linguistic resources, opportunities for L2 practice, and overall academic success (Song, 2018).

Numerous studies (e.g., Dawson, 2017; Norton, 2019; 2020; Przymus, 2016; Sung, 2019) underscore the necessity for teachers and teacher trainers to recognize learners' ICs to prevent increased non-participation in language classrooms. While Norton (2001) asserts that teachers could exacerbate learners' disengagement by failing to recognize their ICs, she also acknowledges the challenges teachers face in unconditionally validating these communities. She advocates for a transformative approach that values learners' aspirations, images, and memories, encouraging them to express their aspirations and evaluate how these align with their future prospects. Additionally, learners should consider how such personal investments can enhance their participation in the broader L2 community.

Przymus et al. (2020) outline several effective strategies for teachers to enhance student engagement with ICs. Firstly, educators should invest time in understanding their students' interests and backgrounds, enabling them to foster meaningful connections among learners with shared interests, thus promoting a sense of belonging and community. Secondly, it is essential to create blended affinity spaces—both physical and ideological—where students can collaborate and interact, in-person or online. These spaces facilitate dialogue and idea exchange.

Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ)
(Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills)
44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80

61

Nahid Soltanian

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Educators should also engage actively with these groups to identify necessary resources and support systems for improving learning environments. Moreover, educators are encouraged to actively engage with these groups to discuss the necessary resources and support systems that can enhance their learning environments. Conducting action research to explore learners' perspectives on the effectiveness of these spaces is crucial, as it offers feedback for refining teaching approaches, ensuring that the spaces created truly meet the learners' needs and foster deeper engagement with their ICs. By adopting these strategies, educators can cultivate a more dynamic learning atmosphere that empowers students to connect with one another and their broader communities and identities.

Previous Research

ICs were the central theme of a special issue in the *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* in 2003 and in the *Journal of Language, Discourse, and Society* in 2017. These issues featured a range of researchers analyzing the significance of ICs within the realm of language learning. For example, Kanno (2003) analyzed four Japanese schools to investigate the relationship between the schools' aspirations for students, their current practices, and student identities. Findings revealed that bilingual policies of these schools were largely influenced by teachers' perceptions of the communities where students would engage in the future. Furthermore, these aspirations significantly shaped existing policies and practices, ultimately affecting student identities. This point underscores the active role both individuals and educational institutions play in embodying ICs.

Dawson (2017) examined the interplay between ICs and identities among two adult learners of the English language at a university in New Zealand. Utilizing naturally occurring conversational data and a discourse analytic framework, the study aimed to discern how each learner constructed valued identities within their ICs. Findings revealed that, despite having similarly defined ICs, the learners expressed their identities distinctly and demonstrated varying levels of investment. Dawson found that their differing perceptions of identities essential for community membership significantly influenced their levels of engagement.

Sung (2019) investigated a Hong Kong undergraduate's experiences with L2 learning investments and identity formation across various contexts, including university classroom, workplace, and study abroad. Findings showed a strong link between the student's different L2 investments in these settings and the unique identities he formed in each context. A key factor influencing his strategic investments in L2 was his aspiration to belong to an imagined global community and cultivate a cosmopolitan identity.

Tajeddin et al. (2021) investigated communities of practice (CoPs) within the framework of English as an International Language (EIL) using a mixed-methods approach. They aimed to understand English language learners' perceptions of their imagined CoPs across various EIL settings. A questionnaire was administered to 592 participants, followed by interviews with 64 individuals. Data analysis revealed that participants saw imagined CoPs as beneficial for: (a)

Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ)
(Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills)
44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80

62

Nahid Soltanian

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

constructing language learning identities, (b) engaging in global communication, (c) reinforcing shared values, (d) enhancing learner agency, and (e) fostering collaboration within their communities.

Cui and De Costa (2022) conducted a two-year case study in China to explore how ethnic minority learners construct their identities and engage in multilingual practices amid internal migration. The study centered on a Uyghur college student who faced limited access to educational resources. Findings indicated that the participant successfully developed a strong and educated identity as a minority student by utilizing her multilingual abilities to enhance her future opportunities.

Liu et al. (2023) explored the relationship between imagination and informal digital learning of English (IDLE) through a mixed-methods research involving 401 participants from a Chinese university. Quantitative findings indicated that students' international posture influenced their IDLE practices positively, with the Ideal L2 Self partially mediating this relationship. Qualitative analysis identified three themes—imagining possible selves, navigating access, and investing in IDLE—showing how EFL learners use imagination to shape their learning journeys and pursue membership in international communities.

Meihami (2023) explored the influence of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) on the imagined identities of 12 Iranian EFL student-teachers using a descriptive narrative approach. Through interviews, field notes, and autobiographical narratives, the thematic analysis revealed that PLCs significantly shape their identities as collaborative educators, reflective practitioners, continuous learners, and syllabus designers in their future roles. The findings emphasize that PLCs foster knowledge sharing, encourage a bottom-up collaborative culture, and create a supportive environment that helps develop student-teachers' imagined identities.

In a recent quantitative study, Soltanian and Ghapanchi (2024) investigated Iranian language learners' perceptions of their ICs. Their research surveyed 945 EFL learners of varying ages and proficiency levels across multiple cities in Iran using a validated 57-item questionnaire. Findings indicated that participants exhibited a moderate level of investment in their ICs. Additionally, t-test analyses revealed significant differences in the extent of investment in ICs based on gender, age groups (teenagers vs. adults), and proficiency levels (low vs. high).

Despite existing research on the importance and educational potential of imagination, it remains a relatively under-explored concept that requires further investigation to achieve a clearer and more consistent understanding, particularly within the context of an increasingly globalized and digitalized world (Liu et al., 2023). As noted by Pennycook (2006), globalization has facilitated transcultural exchanges and cross-border communication, with English emerging as a global medium for various language groups in both online and offline environments. Therefore, imagination should not be seen as a simple future projection tool but rather as essential for language learners' self-perception and their vision of contexts and communities where they might use English in the globalized future (Murray, 2013).

Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ)
(Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills)
44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80

63

Nahid Soltanian

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Language learning and teaching are often framed within face-to-face communities of practice; however, this perspective frequently neglects the intricate relationship between learning and a learner's engagement with a broader imagined community. Block (2007) highlights that this critical aspect has remained underexplored. Although existing literature extensively examines the role of ICs in both EFL and ESL contexts, there is a notable lack of published studies focusing on this construct within the Iranian EFL context. Studies such as the one conducted by Soltanian and Ghapanchi (2024) have offered valuable insights into ICs among Iranian EFL learners by investigating their perceptions of these communities. However, there remains a limited empirical understanding of how Iranian EFL learners perceive their potential membership in their ICs, envision their future possibilities, and how these perceptions impact their commitment to language learning practices. Addressing this gap is essential as it offers promising insights into language learning dynamics and a deeper understanding of learners' perceptions, which can lead to more effective, aspiration-aligned teaching strategies. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring how five Iranian EFL learners conceptualize their imagined identities and communities in a globalized world. Utilizing in-depth interviews, this research will gather detailed perceptions and experiences, shedding light on their ICs.

In this research, ICs are primarily defined as learners' imaginations and reflections that emerge in the language learning process, both in and out of the classroom. The following research question leads this study:

How do Iranian EFL learners conceive of their ICs with respect to the use of English?

Method

Participants

This study investigates L2 learning and imagined identities among five Iranian EFL learners enrolled in private language institutes and universities in Mashhad, Iran. Snowball sampling was employed for participant selection, initially contacting 15 identified learners via email to invite them to participate. These individuals, unfamiliar with the interviewer, received detailed information about the research. Ultimately, five learners consented to participate, and subsequent communication was conducted through phone, email, and Telegram.

Interviews were conducted with participants— two male and three female learners— between January and April 2022. Participants were categorized by age into teenagers (13–19) and adults (over 19), resulting in a sample of two teenagers and three adults, with an average age of 22.8. Their English learning experience varied from 5 to 14 years. The teenagers were enrolled in a private language institute, while the adults included a medical university graduate and two university students—one studying English language and literature and the other engineering, both attending language institutes for skill enhancement. Demographic information is summarized confidentially in Table 1 using symbols L1 to L5.

TESL Quarterly	Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ) (Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills) 44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80	**64** Nahid Soltanian

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Years learning English	Education
L1	male	25	14	university student majoring in English language and literature
L2	female	36	13	university graduate in medicine
L3	male	17	6	high school student
L4	female	13	5	high school student
L5	female	23	11	university student majoring in engineering

The researcher secured ethical approval following standard informed consent protocols, ensuring that all participants were fully informed about their voluntary participation in the study. Each participant was made aware of their right to withdraw at any time, underscoring the importance of autonomy and ethical integrity. Furthermore, participants were guaranteed that recorded information would be treated with the highest confidentiality, protecting their identities and personal data. This dedication to ethical standards not only builds trust between researchers and participants but also enhances the overall credibility of findings. By prioritizing ethical considerations, the study aimed to establish a respectful and supportive environment for all involved.

Data Collection and Analysis

Given the intricate nature of the construct under investigation and the specific research question posed, a qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate for this study. Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview, lasting between 70 and 90 minutes, which was conducted face-to-face to facilitate a deeper dialogue (see the Appendix for general interview protocol). These interviews delved into internal conflicts and challenges faced by language learners, exploring their feelings, hopes, aspirations, identities, and ICs related to learning English in various contexts, both within the classroom and beyond.

To ensure the clarity and effectiveness of interview questions, a pilot test was conducted with two representative language learners from the target population. This preliminary testing allowed for crucial modifications in phrasing to eliminate ambiguities and enhance the overall quality of the data collection process.

Participants chose to be interviewed in English, and each session was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to facilitate thematic analysis. Conducted in individual sessions within a quiet setting at the university or a private language institute, the interviews featured a blend of predetermined questions and the flexibility to explore topics that emerged organically from the conversation. Participants were encouraged to share additional thoughts and to diverge from the primary questions as they felt comfortable, fostering an open dialogue. To enhance the accuracy and credibility of findings, transcripts were shared with interviewees for feedback and additional comments.

TESL Quarterly	Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ) (Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills) 44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80	65 Nahid Soltanian

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Data analysis started concurrently with the interviews, wherein the researcher made reflective notes on participants' responses. The researcher adopted thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2006), systematically coding the transcripts to identify and extract meaningful unit segments of text from the interview transcripts that are particularly rich in information and encapsulate significant insights directly relevant to the research question. For instance, a meaningful unit might include a participant's description of their fear of speaking English in public due to past experiences of ridicule, or it may include a participant's expression of internal conflict regarding their English proficiency, reflecting both emotional and educational dimensions. Another significant, meaningful unit might be a participant's personal narrative about overcoming language-related challenges in their academic pursuits. These units served as the foundation for identifying subsequent codes and themes. Upon identifying these units, the researcher categorized them into distinct codes that encapsulate their essence. For instance, codes such as "motivation," "identity struggles," "fear of miscommunication," and "external pressures" emerged from the data. Each code contributed to the development of broader themes, facilitating a conceptual framework through which the data could be interpreted.

The initial recognition of recurring themes was conducted across individual interviews, with relevant themes emerging organically from the data through careful reflection on the interviewees' narratives and experiences. Throughout the interviews, themes were identified through careful reflection on the interviewees' repeated narratives and experiences. These themes were then refined through iterative readings of the transcripts and coding during the data analysis phase, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the data.

The major themes identified through this systematic analysis were "English proficiency and a promising future" and "The desired English language education system." To provide transparency and clarity to the readers, Table 2 below presents examples of meaningful units, their corresponding codes, and the resulting themes.

Table 2

Examples of Meaningful Units and Codes

Theme	Example of Meaningful Unit	Code
English proficiency and a promising future	"Learning English opens doors for my future career."	Aspirations
	"I believe mastering English will open many opportunities for me."	Motivation, aspirations
	"I envision a future where Iranians can communicate easily with others in the world."	Aspirational Identity
	"For many women, English offers a chance for more freedom and opportunities."	Gender Empowerment
	"I see myself at MIT, engaging in discussions with peers from around the world."	Prestigious Aspirations
		Access to Knowledge

	Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ) (Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills) 44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80	**66** Nahid Soltanian

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Theme	Example of Meaningful Unit	Code
Desired English language education system	"I see Iranians using scientific English websites to improve knowledge." "More speaking practice should be included in our lessons." "Our classes should focus more on speaking skills rather than grammar."	Educational needs and expectations
	"My ideal class has interactive technology."	Technology Integration
	"I prefer classes that utilize digital tools and native speakers for enhanced learning."	Engagement and Interaction
	"What is the value of language classes that focus solely on providing scores and certificates?"	Ineffective Teaching Methods

The recognition of recurring themes was grounded in an examination of the interviewees' narratives and experiences. The validity of the themes was further established through member checking, whereby identified themes were shared with the participants for their feedback and validation. This collaborative approach not only enhanced the credibility of findings but also enriched the interpretation of the data with insights from the participants themselves.

The participants perceived the interviewer as an outsider, a dynamic that fostered open communication, especially among the predominantly teenage respondents. Throughout the interview, each interviewee was seen as an active contributor (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), with their contributions deemed crucial for enhancing the language education system. The participants expressed enthusiasm for the interviewer's genuine interest in their experiences and narratives, which created a trusting atmosphere. For female participants, the interview process became an empowering opportunity to discuss their gender identity, reinforcing their sense of self-empowerment and agency. This openness revealed individual stories and broader social dynamics within their educational setting. Ultimately, the interviews served as a platform for participants to voice their concerns and aspirations, enriching the overall understanding of their experiences in language education.

The interviewer conducted the semi-structured interviews with minimal intervention, creating a comfortable environment that encouraged interviewees to share their perspectives openly and honestly. This careful approach allowed participants to feel at ease, leading to richer and more authentic narratives. Throughout the interview process, new insights naturally emerged from participants' stories, facilitated by collaborative interaction between the interviewer and interviewees (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). To effectively identify key themes, the interviewer adhered to the principle of "an extended series of question/answer sequences comprising the interview" (Talmy, 2011, p. 38), which structured the conversation while allowing organic flow. As a result, the interviewer did not simply act as a passive recorder of responses; rather, she played an active role in shaping the dialogue. By attentively listening and skillfully responding,

she directed and redirected discussions, fostering deeper reflections and a more dynamic exchange. This interactive process enriched the data collected and empowered the participants, allowing their voices to resonate throughout the research.

Results and Discussion

The interview data offered important insights into the IC of Iranian EFL learners and their future aspirations. The findings related to the research question are presented in the following subsections based on the two main themes identified in the analysis.

Learners' Aspirations for a Promising Future Achieved through English Proficiency

When prompted to reflect on their future aspirations and perceptions of English language learning, the interviewees articulated a vision of an imagined community characterized by affluence and interconnectedness, all rooted in English proficiency, technological advancement, and harmonious global relations. Mastery of English was regarded not only as a skill but as a valuable asset that should be universally accessible. The participants highlighted the reciprocal relationship between English proficiency and technological progress, emphasizing their joint significance in the global landscape. Several interviewees identified themselves as part of a broader English-speaking community within Iran, a nation that values literacy and knowledge of English. They expressed a desire for Iran to gain greater international respect, aspiring to enhance its status among global peers. The following excerpt encapsulates the rich perspectives of the interviewees, reflecting their hopes for a future where English fosters broader opportunities and understanding.

Excerpt 1: A society proficient in English

> Iran has a top position in the world, advanced in all areas. I see Iran as a country that is full of individuals being fluent in English, at least the young. Although it is not possible for all to go abroad, they have gained this knowledge. I see Iranians using scientific English websites to improve their knowledge, engaging with global resources and communities. They don't have any problems with English terms used there, often seamlessly integrating these terms into their academic discussions and professional environments. Moreover, the rise of online courses and international collaborations further underscores their commitment to mastering English.

(L3)

L3's remarks in Excerpt 1 suggest that many Iranians encounter difficulties with English proficiency, leading them to avoid situations requiring strong English skills due to fears of miscommunication or embarrassment. L3 envisions an imagined community in which Iran has numerous proficient English speakers who effectively leverage their language abilities across diverse domains. This proficiency facilitates navigation of both local and international contexts, helping to break down barriers and enhance educational and professional pursuits.

The participants emphasized that developed countries exhibit a strong command of the English language, which they consider essential for facilitating global communication and collaboration. They envisioned a nation where individuals could use English effortlessly without encountering barriers. For example, L1 imagines a scenario in which numerous influential figures in Iran communicate fluently during international meetings, effectively representing the nation and engaging in meaningful dialogue with global partners. This vision highlights a collective aspiration for improved English proficiency, viewed as vital for strengthening diplomatic relations and enhancing Iran's presence on the world stage.

Excerpt 2: A developed country

> I look forward to a time when Iranians can communicate easily with others in the world…
> I envision a future when many authorities are able to communicate in English, not bringing disgrace on our nation due to low competence in this language. This country is seen as developed as Japan or even the USA not developing or underdeveloped. Why should Iranians depend on the skills of a translator? I also see many Iranians with enough self-confidence to thrive in foreign countries, navigating challenges without any problems with communication, whether for travel or studying abroad. This fluency would open doors to international opportunities, allowing Iranians to contribute to global discussions and collaborations.

(L1)

L1 contends that English proficiency is a vital criterion for classifying a country as developed. His vision underscores the belief that English proficiency is not just a skill but a pathway to greater opportunities and national development. He asserts that English language skills could facilitate the adoption of cutting-edge technologies, thereby contributing to the nation's development. In this envisioned community, many Iranians would possess sufficient English proficiency, including at least survival English, enabling them to interact confidently in diverse environments. L1's optimistic outlook reflects a broader aspiration for national pride and self-sufficiency, indicating that effective communication can enhance Iran's respect and recognition globally.

The data revealed two prominent identity positions: 'prestigious' and 'respectable' identities, which were found to be interconnected and related to the interviewees' imagined future community as university students in an English-speaking environment. For several participants, the imagined community of being a 'university student in an English-speaking community' was especially vivid and served as a significant source of inspiration. This imagined community greatly impacted their investment in various identities, particularly that of the effective language learner. This is illustrated in Excerpt 3:

Excerpt 3: At a famous university

> I see myself in MIT, a prestigious university, without any language problem. I often envision walking through the campus, engaging in discussions with peers from around the

Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ)
(Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills)
44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80

69

Nahid Soltanian

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

world, and contributing to innovative projects. With this imagination I do my best in language class. Surely, this is necessary for me to achieve my goal of being at MIT.

(L5)

L5 views language proficiency as a critical stepping stone toward achieving his prestigious dream. The reference to the absence of language problems underscores his determination to eliminate barriers that could hinder his academic journey. Furthermore, L5's vivid imagination of his future experiences at MIT highlights how such aspirations can foster a strong motivation to excel in language learning. The pursuit of a prestigious identity not only shapes this learner's language learning approaches but also reflects broader societal values associated with successful educational outcomes.

Some of the interviewees, especially the female ones, expressed a strong commitment to their long-term goal of securing a scholarship for further studies in English-speaking countries. The English proficiency programs in which they had enrolled appeared to serve as a pathway toward achieving this aspiration. This drive impressed them to excel in their English language learning efforts, as they understood that proficiency might significantly enhance their chances of acceptance into prestigious institutions. They were eager to maximize every available opportunity, both within and outside the classroom, and regarded the English-speaking classroom context as a valuable setting for improvement. As stated by L2, the opportunity to be perceived as "near-native speakers" fuels a sense of urgency and determination to refine their language skills. L2 also emphasizes the dual necessity of English proficiency and academic skills, indicating a holistic approach to future preparation. This sentiment is captured in Excerpt 4 by L2.

Excerpt 4: Being considered as versatile

I will gain a scholarship for Canada or a similar country. They will accept me because of my abilities in numerous fields [Laughs]…one of them is my English proficiency. I am not ignored for communication there. They see me like native speakers…no….near-native speakers. Anyway, I should improve myself in my language class to enjoy being at a top university whose minimum entrance requirement is English proficiency. I will fulfill other prerequisites via my academic skills and am not worried about them.

(L2)

L4, a female interviewee, expressed the view that proficiency in English would enhance her power within society. She equated English proficiency with future empowerment. As illustrated in Excerpt 5, L4 expresses that learning English is not merely an academic pursuit but a transformative journey that opens doors for self-expression and empowerment.

Excerpt 5: English and gaining power

I feel learning a foreign language, especially an international language, e.g. English, gives us some power. With this additional language, I can prove myself, show my talents,

| TESL Quarterly | Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ) (Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills) 44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80 | **70** Nahid Soltanian |

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

present my abilities, I don't know how, but I know some way is provided. I continue learning English to find a way to power.

(L4)

L4's comments suggest that being bilingual, particularly in English, enhances women's perceived influence. Her notions of "proving herself" and "showing her talents" reflect an awareness of the societal barriers women may face, particularly in contexts where their contributions may be overlooked. L4's statement underscores a deep-seated aspiration, linking the pursuit of English with her desire for agency and influence within her community. Research by Mohammadian Haghighi and Norton (2017) indicates that for many young women in Iran, English classes offer a sought-after form of outdoor recreation, offering a space for more freedom. This context enriches L4's viewpoint, as these classes serve not only as language-learning opportunities but also as avenues for exploring new identities and possibilities beyond their everyday lives.

Compared to other subjects, English classes provide Iranian EFL learners, particularly females, with a wider array of imagined identities and communities. Mohammadian Haghighi and Norton (2017) emphasize that learning English empowers these women to advance gender equity. Through English proficiency, they gain not only a valuable skill but also a tool capable of dismantling barriers, challenging stereotypes, and promoting social change. L4's insights align with this broader discourse, highlighting how language learning can act as a catalyst for both personal and societal empowerment.

Given the opportunity to discuss their visions for English language learning, the interviewees articulated a strong desire for systemic changes at the national level to enhance English proficiency. They believed that these transformations could be actualized through extensive communication and collaboration with foreign countries. For them, English represented not merely a language but also a symbol of power and influence on the global stage. They envisioned a future when their country would experience significant improvements, emphasizing that while proficiency in English would be essential, broader expertise in this global language would be necessary to truly drive advancements.

The insights provided by the interviewees, particularly in Excerpts 3, 4, and 5, suggest that the learners' imaginations play a significant role in their investment in language learning. The hopes and aspirations of these EFL learners motivate them to drive their deep engagement in language studies, as they view English proficiency as essential for achieving their future goals. Moreover, their aspirations for membership in various ICs notably influence their investments and participation in classroom activities. This desire for connection not only enhances their motivation but also fosters a more dynamic learning environment where learners actively seek opportunities to apply their language skills in meaningful ways.

Learners' imaginations of the desired English language education system

None of the interviewees deemed the existing language education system in Iran, particularly in universities and schools, to be satisfactory. They mentioned several reasons for their reluctance to participate actively in language classrooms. Key factors contributing to their disengagement included teachers' perceptions of their abilities as language learners, ineffective teaching methods, unengaging textbooks, and uninspiring classroom environment. Furthermore, the impacts of family, peers, culture, and society added complexity to their learning experiences. They exhibited their non-participation in various ways, e.g., irregular attendance, lack of engagement in classroom activities, and diminished motivation to complete assignments.

The interviewees identified a notable disconnect between their expectations for foreign language learning and the realities of current classes. They envisioned an ideal English classroom characterized by advanced technology, a student-centered approach, and alignment with their individual learning needs and styles. Additionally, they aspired for teachers to take on supportive and facilitative roles, guiding students rather than merely imparting knowledge. This reflects their desire for a collaborative classroom community where learning occurs through innovative teaching methods and cutting-edge technology, fostering a more communicative atmosphere. One learner expressed this perspective, stating, "My ideal English class focuses on equipping me with communication skills rather than simply teaching vocabulary and grammar. This approach would enhance my foreign language learning." Further insights from L5 in Excerpt 6 offer additional details about the learners' imagined English classroom, illustrating their aspirations for a dynamic learning environment conducive to effective learning.

Excerpt 6: Learning English with state-of-the-art-technologies

> I like an English class equipped with the latest technologies….not just an LCD on the wall or a CD player. Wi-Fi is available in this class and we can be on the net. We can download English songs within the class and listen to them during break. Watching clips without any subtitles is my favorite. The teacher accompanies us in these activities. The most interesting one is chatting with native speakers from the classroom. This is invaluable.

(L5)

The interviewees conveyed considerable frustration with textbooks used in their school and university courses. Most indicated that their primary motivation for enrollment was to pass exams rather than to enhance their English communication skills. One participant noted, "What is the value of language classes that focus solely on providing scores and certificates? The textbooks are uninspiring and filled with irrelevant grammatical content and do not meet my expectations for a meaningful language learning experience."

The interviewees envisioned future English textbooks as predominantly digital, shifting away from traditional paper formats. They imagined a dynamic classroom environment where students utilized tablets and engaged interactively with advanced educational software, thereby

enhancing their learning experience. This preferred setting starkly contrasts with typical classrooms; they pictured immersive learning taking place in a language lab equipped with headsets, promoting a more engaging and focused atmosphere. Comments from L4 in Excerpt 7 further illustrate this ideal English learning environment, highlighting the role of technology in facilitating effective language learning and fostering cultural connections. This perspective is echoed by other interviewees, suggesting that learners' conceptualizations of English language education within the EFL classroom significantly affect their investment in learning English. Overall, this vision reflects a modern educational approach that prioritizes interactivity and adaptability.

Excerpt 7: Being with native speakers

> I am almost good in English. When I attend the class, I see myself among native speakers [Laughs loudly]…especially when I watch English movies in the class… What should I do without these imaginations? Do you agree that imagination is free? My most favorite activity in the class is chatting and online talking with the native speakers. They can help us with the points we learn in each session. I can say,… learning English with native speakers inside the class. That's fantastic and enjoyable to have native speakers in the class… at least online.

(L4)

The learners' imagined identities and communities showcased considerable diversity, reflecting their varied backgrounds and aspirations. Nonetheless, a common theme emerged: these imagined constructs significantly shape and motivate their language learning experiences. Such identities foster a sense of belonging and inspire learners to pursue their goals with increased determination. This aligns with Pavlenko and Norton's (2007) assertion that "language learners' actual and desired memberships in ICs affect their learning trajectories, influencing their agency, motivation, investment, and resistance in learning English" (p. 589). Additionally, it resonates with Kanno and Norton's (2003) insights, highlighting that the ICs learners envision and the identities they adopt profoundly affect their L2 identity and investment.

The interview excerpts revealed that, alongside individual factors, various social influences significantly shape language learners' imagined identities and communities, as well as their motivation and commitment to foreign language learning. The findings indicate that Iranian EFL learners could demonstrate a higher level of investment in language learning if the discouraging issues within the educational process—e.g., factors related to teachers, classroom dynamics, instructional materials, family support, peer influence, cultural context, and societal context—were addressed or improved. In this light, introducing specific positive social and educational elements desired by learners could create a more supportive environment for balanced investment in English language learning, ultimately enabling learners to thrive and fulfill their potential as effective communicators in an increasingly globalized society.

Interviewees expressed a strong belief that their investment in learning English would yield substantial benefits, particularly by facilitating access to preferred language classrooms in the future.. This view reflects the assertion by Norton and Toohey (2011), who noted that learners "invest in the target language at particular times and in particular settings because they believe they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will, in turn, increase the value of their cultural capital" (p. 420).

The findings of this study are in line with those of Chang (2011), who investigated the learning investments of two Taiwanese doctoral students in the United States. Chang's analysis indicated that the students' professional backgrounds and envisioned identities significantly influenced their learning investments. Rather than striving to enhance all language skills uniformly, they exhibited agency by focusing their efforts on specific skills, particularly in academic writing genres, which they perceived would offer the greatest benefits within their ICs. For instance, one student, Hou, who aspired to secure an academic teaching position in Taiwan after completing his doctoral studies in the U.S., invested heavily in developing his academic English writing skills and showed little interest in improving other communicative competencies, such as speaking, which he deemed less critical for his future goals. In contrast, the other student, Burnerman, motivated by the desire to enter the U.S. industry, prioritized enhancing his overall English communicative competence.

The findings are also partly consistent with those found by Norton (2001), as both studies highlight the importance of the learners' ICs, which extend beyond the physical classroom and encompass broader temporal and spatial dimensions. Additionally, both studies indicate that a disparity between learners' imagined identities and their actual experiences can lead to diminished efforts in mastering the English language. In light of this, Norton (2000, 2013) emphasized the need to be attuned to the challenges faced by L2 learners that are influenced by their social contexts.

The points mentioned by the interviewees, as well as their imaginations, can also be partly compared to the findings of Hu and McKay's (2012) research. Even though their research did not specifically focus on ICs, the themes highlighted by the participants in this study parallel those identified in Hu and McKay's work. In their study, participants articulated various reasons for the proliferation of English in Japan, China, and South Korea. They noted that China requires English for global integration, modernization, talent recruitment, cultural enrichment, and intellectual advancement, all of which contribute to its enhanced status and power. Similarly, Park (2009, as cited in Hu & McKay, 2012) points out that English has gained significant prominence in South Korea, a phenomenon attributed to social and economic exchanges, government policies, and the increasing impact of communicative teaching methodologies. Participants noted additional motivations for English proficiency in South Korea, including improved job prospects, success in university entrance examinations, and elevated social status. Regarding Japan, Kubota (1998, as cited in Hu & McKay, 2012) asserts that the dual forces of

	Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ) (Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills) 44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80	**74**
		Nahid Soltanian

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

internationalization and economic growth geared toward international communication have propelled the enhancement of English language education.

Conclusions

This study explored how Iranian EFL learners visualize the English language. The findings indicated that the participants desired transformative changes within the language education system in Iran, aspiring to a format that aligns with their preferences. They tapped into their desires and imaginations to enhance their investment in learning English. In essence, their visions served as powerful motivators propelling them along their language learning journey. For these interviewees, aspirations for literacy, access to English, technological advancements, and the attainment of substantial resources were closely interconnected. They envisioned a future in which Iran emerges as a fully developed nation, proficient in English and equipped with state-of-the-art technological capabilities. This imagined community was characterized by amicable global relationships, viewing English not just as a skill but as a vital privilege that should be accessible to all, essential for progress in scientific, political, and various other domains.

The study provides EFL teachers with valuable insights into the subtleties of language learners, emphasizing the need to view foreign language learners as individuals experiencing complex social networks (Riley, 2006; Ushioda, 2009). It offers a holistic picture of Iranian EFL learners' investment in their imagined identities/ICs. The findings underscore the necessity of enhancing teaching practices by shifting fixed attitudes toward language learners, as these learners possess their own perceptions of themselves as well as the activities they participate in. Such fixed attitudes can hinder teachers from providing crucial pedagogical support for learners' struggles. In the Iranian context, for example, individuals have various motivations for enrolling in English classes and engaging in language practices with different conceptions in mind. While some learners focus narrowly on classroom tasks, others envision broader contexts in which they may apply their skills. This ability to think beyond the immediate learning environment is crucial, as it fosters adaptability and a deeper connection to real-world applications of language. The forward-thinking perspectives of this latter group empower them to transcend the classroom confines, enabling them to envision practical future uses of their language skills.

Recognizing that students invest effort in practices that align with their imagined identities and communities (Darvin & Norton, 2019), it is essential for teachers to understand their students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, social status, commitment to foreign language learning, imaginations they engage with during language learning, as well as their needs, aspirations, and desires related to the use of a foreign language. Failing to consider language learners' imagined identities/ICs comes with a price. If teachers do not validate these identities, it may exacerbate learners' non-participation in language activities, adversely affecting the learners' educational trajectories (Kharchenko, 2014). This lack of recognition can create a disconnect between learners and their educational experiences, resulting in feelings of alienation, resistance, and disengagement, ultimately diminishing their investment in the learning process.

| | Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ) (Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills) 44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80 | **75** Nahid Soltanian |

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Consequently, teachers should design activities that acknowledge and celebrate learner diversity, validating the histories, identities, and aspirations students bring to the classroom (Darvin & Norton, 2018). By utilizing approaches like surveys, interviews, class observations, and journal reflections, teachers can ascertain the ICs with which their learners aspire to connect, as well as the identities they seek to reconstruct (Tajeddin et al., 2021).

As one of the few qualitative studies on language learners' ICs in Iran, this research has several limitations. While qualitative approaches are favored in sociolinguistics for their ability to provide deep insights into individual experiences (Gao et al., 2015), they are frequently criticized for being time-consuming, costly to administer and analyze (Khatib & Rezaei, 2013), and for lacking generalizability due to typically involving fewer than ten participants (Rezaei, 2017). These potential problems justify the incorporation of quantitative approaches, which, when combined with qualitative research, can address the inherent challenges of the latter case, thus enabling more comprehensive research and enhancing generalizability (Khatib & Rezaei, 2013). A mixed-methods approach not only broadens data collection techniques but also facilitates triangulation, consequently increasing the credibility of the results. Furthermore, studies employing mixed methods can offer a more nuanced understanding of the complex nature of identity (Rezaei, 2017).

Future research into imagined identities/ICs can investigate how focusing on language learners' imagined identities/ICs in the classroom affects their investment in learning and opens up future possibilities for them, ideally through longitudinal research. Additionally, examining the impacts of variables such as language proficiency, economic status, ethnicity, and geographic location on ICs warrants further investigation, as these factors may significantly shape learners' aspirations. Another important direction for future research is to consider the contextual nature of ICs. Researchers should exercise caution regarding the generalizability of the findings of this study, which is based on a limited sample size and is confined to the Iranian context. Investigating this construct in diverse EFL contexts with more participants could yield valuable comparisons that enhance our understanding of language learners' imagined identities and communities.

In closing, it is restated that EFL teachers should prioritize fostering respect for diversity among language learners by acknowledging their imagined identities and ICs and leveraging these imaginations in the pursuit of greater investment in language learning. They should be cognizant of learners' imagined identities and ICs and engage in discussions about them (Tajeddin et al., 2021), as neglecting these communities may hinder the establishment of continuity necessary for learners' language development and their sense of belonging to specific communities (Przymus et al., 2020). Such awareness contributes to an inclusive learning environment where each learner feels valued and understood. If teachers wish to appreciate the true nature of language learners' ICs, they cannot disregard the imperatives of the real world. Therefore, teachers must strive to recognize learners' investments in a given class and their imagined identities, providing the necessary support to help them navigate their experiences in

Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ)
(Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills)
44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80

76

Nahid Soltanian

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

the most fulfilling and enriching manner possible (Soltanian & Ghapanchi, 2021). It is hoped that EFL teachers will reflect on how their classrooms can serve as contexts of possibility for learners with a wide scope of backgrounds, aspirations for the future, and investments, ultimately transforming the learning experience into one that empowers students to view language as a tool for achieving their dreams and engaging with the world.

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| TESL Quarterly | Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ) (Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills) 44(2) 2025, pp. 55-80 | **80** Nahid Soltanian |

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Appendix

Sample Interview Questions

1. First, tell me about yourself and your background in general.

2. How do you imagine the English language? What are your imaginations of English language speakers? How do your imaginations of the English language and English-speaking countries influence your learning English?

3. Do you consider yourself as the owner of English? Why yes, why no? Do you feel like you belong to an English-speaking group or country?

4. Has learning English changed your way of looking at the world? If so, how it happened?

5. Most of us have plans or dreams about what we'd like to get out of life and hope for the future. These plans or dreams provide lives with goals, interests, hopes, aspirations, and wishes. What are your dreams and plans for the future? Has English language learning promoted your thinking about the future? If yes, how? Also, tell me if your dreams or plans affect your learning English.

6. Can you think of times when you have felt a lot of tension, struggles, and challenges while learning English? How did those challenges affect you previously, or are they affecting you now?

7. Do you think the attitude of Iranians toward the English language differs in any way from that of other countries? If so, how? How do you see Iran and Iranians in the future?

8. What do you think about the educational climate of the English language in Iran today? Talk about your participation in English language classroom activities. What factors enable or hinder your actual engagement with your learning?

9. What would your ideal classroom look like? Which opportunities in the language classroom and outside it are the most/least useful in your learning?

10. Can you think of times when your behavior in English language class may be different? (maybe due to gender, age, or cultural differences)?

11. Do you have any heroes or heroines in your life? Who? What do you admire about that person? Can learning the English language help you to be like your dream person?

12. Drawing to a conclusion, is your knowledge of English an advantage or disadvantage?

13. Is there anything you would like to add?

Probes:

Could you help me understand what you meant when you said _____?

If I understood you correctly, you said _____?

Will you expand on your discussion of _____ a little bit more?)