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English Learning Investment and Imagined Communities: Three University Students in Jeju

Mi-Sun Kim

Department of Tourism English, Cheju Halla University, Jeju, Republic of Korea

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ABSTRACT: English learning is closely connected to learners' identities, future aspirations, and perceived access to social and professional opportunities. This qualitative case study examined how imagined communities and imagined identities shaped the investment of three university students in English learning in Jeju, South Korea. Drawing on Anderson's concept of imagined communities and Norton's theory of investment, it analyzed the participants' journal entries and interviews collected over one academic semester. The findings indicated that their investment in English was shaped by the future communities and identities they imagined. Hyun-Joo associated English with becoming a responsible tourism professional who could contribute to the development of Jeju. Yoo-Na viewed English as a means of overcoming a marginalized learner identity and gaining access to her imagined communities. In-Jung's overseas language-training experience expanded her aspirations from local hotel employment to participation in international hospitality communities. For them, English functioned as both a communicative skill and a symbolic and practical resource for accessing their imagined communities. This study suggests that English education in tourism-oriented regions should connect classroom learning with learners' local experiences, professional aspirations, and imagined participation in broader communities.

KEYWORDS: English learning investment; imagined communities; imagined identities; learner identity; English proficiency; Jeju

1. INTRODUCTION

Earlier approaches to second-language learning frequently explained learners' engagement primarily through motivation. Although motivation remains important, it does not fully account for the relationship between language learning, identity, power, and access to social resources. Norton (1995) introduced the concept of investment to explain why a learner may be motivated to learn a language but participate differently across particular social contexts. Investment draws attention to what learners expect to gain through language learning, including access to symbolic and material resources and opportunities to construct desired identities.

The concept of imagined communities provides a useful framework for understanding how learners' future aspirations and imagined identities shape their investment in language learning. Originally introduced by Anderson (1983), the concept refers to communities whose members share a sense of belonging despite having little or no direct personal interaction. In language education, imagined communities refer to groups with which learners hope to affiliate through language learning, even when they do not yet have direct access to them (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Such communities may be professional, educational, cultural, or transnational and are closely connected to imagined identities. These concepts are particularly relevant in Jeju, the largest island of South Korea, where tourism and hospitality play a central role in the local economy and society. University students preparing for careers in tourism-related industries may view English not simply as an academic subject but as a resource that provides access to future professional communities.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of imagined communities in investment in language learning. However, more context-specific research is needed to understand how this concept shapes university students' investment in English learning within the context of the tourism-driven economy in Jeju. This study investigates how three university students in Jeju connected English learning with their imagined identities and communities. Through an analysis of their interviews and journal entries, this study addresses the following research question: How do imagined communities influence the English-learning investment of three university students in Jeju?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Imagined Communities and Imagined Identities

Anderson (1991) introduced the concept of *imagined communities*, defining them as communities whose members share a sense of belonging through common identities, values, languages, or cultures despite having little or no direct personal interaction. These communities exist in individuals' imaginations because they are shaped by aspirations and visions of future selves, often reflecting the communities to which individuals aspire to belong.

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Norton (2000) extended this concept to language education. English learners may imagine becoming members of international professional communities, English-speaking academic communities, or workplaces in which English is used. Such imagined communities can influence their investment in English learning. Imagined communities are also closely related to imagined identities. Learners do not simply envision belonging to imagined communities; they also envision how they will be recognized within those communities. These imagined identities can influence the value learners assign to English and their investment in language learning.

2.2 Investment in Language Learning

Norton (1995) developed investment as a sociological complement to motivation. The concept emphasizes that learners invest in a language because they expect language learning to increase the value of their symbolic and material resources. Through acquiring a language, learners may seek access to education, employment, or desired identities.

Investment is closely connected to identity and power. Learners may be highly motivated yet choose not to participate in contexts where they feel marginalized or excluded. Conversely, they may continue investing in language learning despite low confidence when they believe English proficiency can provide access to more desirable future identities and communities. Investment may also change as learners' imagined identities develop (Norton, 2000, 2010, 2013).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case-study design to investigate how imagined communities shaped the English-learning investment of three university students in Jeju. The analysis was informed by Anderson's (1991) concept of imagined communities and Norton's (1995, 2000, 2013) theory of investment.

3.2 Participants

The participants were Hyun-Joo, Yoo-Na, and In-Jung, all identified by pseudonyms. They attended a university in Jeju and were enrolled in an English writing course offered by the Department of Tourism English. Their diverse educational backgrounds, English proficiency levels, and career aspirations provided a valuable basis for examining their investment in English learning.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Participant	Age	Major / Year	Educational background	Future orientation
Hyun-Joo	23	Tourism English / 2nd year	Girls' commercial high school	Tourism career and contribution to Jeju
Yoo-Na	21	Tourism English / 2nd year	Vocational high school	Flight attendant or overseas employment
In-Jung	21	Hotel Management / 3rd year	Jeju Foreign Language High School	International hospitality and overseas work

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected during one academic semester through journal entries and individual interviews. Students wrote reflections on their experiences, emotions, perceptions as English learners in the context of Jeju.

Ten journal entries were included in the analysis: two written by Hyun-Joo, one by Yoo-Na, and seven by In-Jung. Fourteen interviews were also conducted: four with Hyun-Joo, nine with Yoo-Na, and one with In-Jung. Because Hyun-Joo and Yoo-Na found it difficult to express their thoughts and feelings in English, the interviews were conducted primarily in Korean to complement the data collected through their journal entries.

3.4 Data Analysis

Analysis of the interview and journal data revealed that the participants' English learning was closely connected to their imagined communities. They viewed English not only as a means of communication but also as a symbolic and material resource that could provide access to the communities they aspired to join. The participants' imagined communities shaped how they perceived the value of English and influenced their investment in English learning within the sociocultural context of Jeju.

3.5 Research Ethics

The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and provided informed consent before participating in the study. They were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the research and were advised that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Hyun-Joo: Becoming a Responsible Contributor to Jeju

"Some of my classmates in college don't try to study English hard. They are always late and don't do their homework. I think they are too lazy. I think they entered this college to get a diploma and get a job. But they should know that they must be more responsible for their behavior and they must do their duty as students. I want to improve my English skills to contribute to the development of Jeju." (Hyun-Joo, Interview 1)

This narrative suggests that Hyun-Joo's English learning was shaped not only by motivation but also by her imagined identity. By contrasting herself with classmates whom she described as lacking responsibility and clear goals, she positioned herself as a responsible,

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Corresponding Author: Mi-Sun Kim

hardworking, and goal-oriented learner. This positioning reflects the poststructuralist view that identities are constructed through processes of differentiation and positioning in relation to others.

For Hyun-Joo, learning English meant more than developing linguistic competence. Her desire to improve her English "to contribute to the development of Jeju" indicates that she imagined herself not only as a competent English user but also as a future tourism professional who could contribute to her local community. Rather than viewing English solely as a means of personal achievement, she associated English proficiency with participating in the future development of Jeju and serving international visitors. Her imagined identity therefore extended beyond individual career success to include a sense of social responsibility toward her community.

This imagined identity was closely connected to her imagined community. She envisioned herself as a member of an internationally connected tourism community in which English functions as an essential means of communication. Within this imagined community, English represented both a symbolic resource for constructing a socially valued identity and a material resource for gaining access to future occupational opportunities. Her imagined identity and imagined community therefore gave meaning to her English learning and encouraged her continued investment in English learning necessary to achieve her future aspirations (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2013).

4.2 Yoo-Na: Overcoming Marginalization Through an Imagined International Future

"I graduated from a vocational high school and my English ability was lower than that of my classmates who graduated from academic high schools. I only got 300 in my first TOEIC test, but many classmates received 600. I felt unimportant compared to them. However, whenever I think of becoming a flight attendant or getting well-paid overseas jobs, I decide to keep studying English hard." (Yoo-Na, Interview 4)

Yoo-Na, a graduate of a vocational high school, had fewer opportunities to study English than her peers from academic high schools, resulting in lower English proficiency. She interpreted these educational differences and her low TOEIC scores as evidence that she was less capable and less important within the Department of Tourism English. By comparing herself with classmates whom she perceived as more successful English learners, she constructed a marginalized English learner identity.

Despite these feelings of inferiority, Yoo-Na did not abandon her efforts to learn English. Instead, she regarded English proficiency as essential for changing her future. She imagined herself becoming a flight attendant or obtaining well-paid employment abroad, aspirations that reflected her desire to participate in internationally connected professional communities. These imagined communities provided an alternative basis for constructing her identity beyond her current educational circumstances and offered a meaningful vision of her future.

From the perspective of imagined communities and investment, Yoo-Na's narrative demonstrates that English functioned as more than a means of communication. It represented a symbolic resource for constructing a more valued identity and a material resource for gaining access to employment, international mobility, and socioeconomic opportunities. Her continued investment in English learning was therefore sustained by the belief that English could enable her to move beyond her present social and educational position.

As Greene (1995) argues, learners are capable of imagining worlds beyond their present realities. Likewise, Yoo-Na envisioned an alternative future despite her marginalized position as an English learner. Her continued investment in English learning can therefore be understood as an effort to gain access to the imagined communities made possible through English proficiency (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2013).

4.3 In-Jung: Expanding from Local Hospitality to Transnational Participation

"Ever since I went abroad through an overseas language-training program, I definitely want to have an English-speaking job. I also have a desire to work abroad. So I will study English conversation really hard to become a person who can talk to foreigners without any trouble." (In-Jung, Journal Entry 7; original in English, lightly edited for readability)

In-Jung, a hotel management student, initially envisioned herself working as a hotelier in Jeju without a clearly defined professional plan. Although advice from a professor introduced the possibility of pursuing a concierge position serving international guests, it was her participation in an overseas language-training program that reshaped her future aspirations. Following this experience, she began to associate English with professional roles involving communication with international clients and potential employment beyond Korea.

This shift reflects a transition from a locally oriented career trajectory to an imagined transnational hospitality community. Rather than viewing English simply as a foreign language, In-Jung came to perceive it as an essential resource for professional participation, international mobility, and legitimacy within the global hospitality industry. Her determination to "study English conversation really hard to become a person who can communicate with foreigners without any problems" illustrates her investment in English learning. Consistent with Norton's (1995, 2013) concept of investment, she invested in English not merely to improve her linguistic competence but to gain access to the professional identity and future opportunities she envisioned.

In-Jung's narrative also demonstrates how imagined communities are continuously reconstructed through new social experiences. Her overseas language-training experience expanded the range of communities she imagined herself joining and redirected her future aspirations beyond the local context of Jeju. English therefore functioned as both a symbolic resource for constructing an internationally oriented professional identity and a material resource for accessing employment opportunities in the global hospitality industry. As Pavlenko and Norton (2007) argue, learners' imagined communities play a central role in shaping their language-learning trajectories. Similarly, In-Jung's continued investment in English learning was sustained by the belief that English would enable her to become a legitimate participant in the international hospitality communities she envisioned.

5. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrated that investment in English was closely connected to the professional identities and communities the participants imagined. Hyun-Joo imagined English as a resource for contributing to Jeju. Her future orientation challenges the assumption that imagined English-speaking communities must be geographically distant. Yoo-Na's imagined community served a different function: it allowed her to construct a future identity beyond her present marginalization. For In-Jung, overseas experience made a transnational hospitality community more tangible and redirected her language-learning priorities.

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Corresponding Author: Mi-Sun Kim

Across the cases, English functioned as a communicative, symbolic, and material resource. It was communicative because the participants associated it with interaction with international visitors, customers, and colleagues. It was symbolic because proficiency represented professional legitimacy. It was material because participants expected English to increase access to occupations and economic opportunities. The findings support Kanno and Norton's (2003) argument that imagined communities can influence present educational engagement. The participants' desired communities were not yet fully available to them, but they shaped the value assigned to English.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This qualitative case study examined how imagined communities influenced the English-learning investment of three university students in Jeju. Although the participants differed in their educational backgrounds, English proficiency, and career aspirations, they all viewed English as a resource for achieving their desired futures. Hyun-Joo imagined herself as a responsible tourism professional contributing to the development of Jeju. Yoo-Na continued investing in English despite her marginalized English learner identity because she envisioned becoming a flight attendant or obtaining employment abroad. In-Jung reoriented her career aspirations toward the global hospitality industry following an overseas language-training experience.

The findings indicate that learners' investment in English was closely connected to the imagined communities and imagined identities they constructed in relation to their future aspirations. English functioned not only as a means of communication but also as a symbolic resource for constructing socially valued identities and a material resource for gaining access to employment and professional opportunities. Consistent with Norton's (2013) theory of investment, the participants continued their investment in English learning because they perceived English as essential for realizing the identities and futures they imagined. These findings highlight that English-learning investment is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by imagined identities, imagined communities, and the sociocultural contexts in which they are constructed. The findings have important pedagogical implications for tourism and hospitality English education. Rather than focusing exclusively on linguistic competence, English education should help learners connect language learning with their professional aspirations and imagined identities.

7. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The insights from this study provide a foundation for future research on how imagined communities shape English learning experiences, but there are some limitations of this study. One limitation is the small number of participants. To improve the generalizability of the findings, future studies should include data from a larger and more diverse group of students. Additionally, further research on English learning and imagined communities should incorporate carefully contextualized, triangulated, and longitudinal research designs to provide more comprehensive insights.

8. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The qualitative data are not publicly available because they contain personal narratives that could compromise participant confidentiality. De-identified data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to applicable ethical and institutional restrictions.

9. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this manuscript.

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11. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

[Author name] contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and drafting and revision of the manuscript.

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13. AI ASSISTANCE STATEMENT

During the preparation of this manuscript, a generative artificial intelligence tool was used to support English-language editing, improve clarity, and assist with manuscript organization. The author critically reviewed and revised all AI-assisted content, verified the accuracy of the arguments and references, and takes full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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Corresponding Author: Mi-Sun Kim