Language, Discourse & Society, vol. 5, no. 1(9), 2017

An investigation into the identity/imagined community relationship: A case study of two language learners in New Zealand

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Abstract

The relationship between imagined communities and identity construction has much potential to enrich our understandings of language learners' experiences. Both constructs sit at the forefront of the wider 'social turn' in Applied Linguistics which challenges notions of language learning as a predominantly psychological enterprise and views students instead as part of a wider social world. As identities are co-constructed in interactions, learners not only bring their histories and socialised ways of doing and being into the present, but their future desires are also harnessed and linguistically deployed in the 'now' (Block, 2015). The investigation of these emergent identities can then provide a linguistic springboard from which to access visions of desired futures. In times of enhanced mobility where English has accrued (for many) an unprecedented amount of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991), the concept of a future imagined self merits even deeper consideration.

This article investigates the relationship between identities and imagined communities for two key participants: Hue from Viet Nam and Jose from Timor Leste, both government officials in their respective countries and adult learners of English in a New Zealand university environment. Through a layered methodology which prioritises naturally-occurring conversational data and a discourse analytic approach, this article explores the emergence of salient identities and the significance of the imagination in identity construction. Findings show that similarly-labelled imagined communities may result in very different instantiations of identities and investments for language learners. By making connections between identity negotiations and the abstract realm of imagined communities, this paper highlights at once the importance of emic identity categories and the need for educators to remain open to the ways similar imagined communities may impact on their students' investments and classroom identity work.

Keywords

Imagined community, Identity, Interaction, Investment, Struggle

First submission: December 2016; Revised: May 2017, Accepted: June 2017

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Introduction

The relationship between imagined communities and identity[1] has reached centre stage in SLA research (Block, 2007; Dagenais, 2003; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Morgan & Clarke, 2011; Meadows, 2010; Norton, 2001, 2013). Both constructs sit at the forefront of the wider 'social turn' (Block, 2003) in applied linguistics, challenging beliefs of language learning as a predominantly psychological enterprise, one which accords importance to identity primarily in terms of the 'native speaker'/'non-native speaker' division. This conceptual shift has allowed for fascinating insights into language learner experiences as learners navigate new contexts and use language to negotiate both their sense of self and their various social identities. The role of imagination in the form of future and present social memberships is part of this wider encapsulation. As learners co-construct and negotiate identities in interactions (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), they not only bring their histories and their socialised ways of doing and being (e.g., Bourdieu's [1977, 1986] notion of 'habitus') into the present, but their future desires are also harnessed and linguistically deployed in the 'now' (Block, 2015). It follows that the relationship between identity, imagination, and language learning should remain at the forefront of second language acquisition research in the interests of deepening our understandings of language learners' experiences. The present article focuses on identity negotiations of two adult English language learners, and the influence of their imagined communities.

Identity is central in exploring imagined communities for language learners. No longer viewed as a static construct, identities are understood to be multiple, fluid and a "site of struggle" (Norton, 2000: 127), and as emerging through situated and negotiated encounters (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). An understanding central to the social constructionist framework is that negotiation forms a crucial part of this co-construction (see Holmes & Marra, 2017). This approach to identity encompasses not only how people imagine themselves, but also how they relate (through language) to their social worlds. It includes how they are positioned and repositioned by self and others, and their sense of legitimacy in the various social, cultural, and linguistic contexts in which they interact (Block, 2015; Duff, 2015). Given the dialectic relationship between language and identity (Bakhtin, 1981), it makes sense to investigate what language learners actually 'do' with their language by way of negotiating identities which are salient to them. The analysis of conversational interactions can be revelatory in this respect. The fact that the same linguistic features may well index multiple identities (Eckert, 2008) reinforces the centrality of context and reflexivity in attempts to reveal nuances of meaning. Further, the investigation of these identities which emerge as salient can provide a linguistic springboard from which to access visions of desired futures. In times of enhanced mobility where English has accrued (for many) an unprecedented amount of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991), the concept of a future imagined self merits even deeper consideration.

[1] The term identity is used to reference "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands the possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013: 4), thereby encouraging a shift in the conceptualisation of identity as static to one that is dynamic and influenced by the imagination. In line with this conceptualisation, identities are discursively co-constructed, continually re-created, and emergent in interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

This present article investigates the relationship between identities and imagined communities for two key participants: Hue from Viet Nam and Jose from Timor Leste, both government officials in their respective countries and adult learners of English in a New Zealand university environment. Through a layered methodology which prioritises naturally-occurring conversational data and a discourse analytic approach, this article explores the emergence of salient identities and the significance of the imagination in identity co-construction for the learners. This study shows that similarly-labelled imagined communities may result in very different instantiations of identities and investments, a finding which heightens in significance when viewed against a backdrop of globalisation and mobility. By making connections between real identity instantiations and the abstract realm of imagined communities, this paper highlights at once the importance of emic identity categories and the need for educators to remain open to the ways seemingly similar imagined communities may impact on their students' investments and classroom identity work.

1. Identity, investment, imagined communities and struggle – interconnected concepts

The relationship between identity and language learning is now taken as axiomatic by many. The poststructural framing of identity (within which social constructionism fits) has been instrumental in this regard, and the learner is now firmly situated in the language learning context with notions of *agency* and *empowerment* providing distance from previously anonymising SLA discourses.

The idea of imagined communities is valuable in its explanatory expedience. Much research has pointed to the powerful guiding force of the imagination in identity negotiations (e.g., Norton, 2001; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Originally coined by Anderson (1991), the term 'imagined community' refers to a conceptualisation of nationhood as being imagined, and necessarily different for each individual despite some commonalities of experience. In the education realm, the notion of the 'hopeful imagination' (Simon, 1992) encapsulates an emancipatory view of learning and teaching by bringing the role of imagination centre stage and calling on educators' sensitivity to both their own and their students' histories and desires. These ideas are further explored in discussions of *communities of practice* as a situated model of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). While the original conceptualisation of a community of practice stresses the powerful nature of the immediate in affecting an individual's learning, later revisitings see the role of imagination as crucial. Moving from peripherality to legitimacy in terms of community membership (and therefore learning) necessarily entails the construction of an image of our place in relation to particular communities and possibilities for the future (Wenger, 1998). Further, findings of the importance of imagined communities such as that of the 'global citizen' (Ryan, 2006) are of value, and invite an engagement with theory by way of 'articulating the imagined' (Ryan, 2006: 42) through real data provided by real learners.

The concept of investment (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2013) also merits attention in its important role in the conceptualising of the identity/imagined community relationship. Drawing on Bourdieu's economic metaphors, the notion of investment provides a social alternative to existing psychological constructs of motivation. It emphasises the socially and historically constructed relationship of the learner to the target language, acknowledging learners' complex

histories and multiple desires. Investment also presupposes a 'return' in the form of enhanced language skills, which can then function as a form of symbolic capital, leading to eventual economic capital. Many studies have shown how identity and investment are inextricably bound up in language learning. As an example, Norton's (1997) study of Mai (an immigrant learner in Canada), paints an absorbing picture of one woman's struggle and ultimate inability to invest in classroom practices, given the mismatch between teacher and learner investments and identities. McKay and Wong's (1996) study of Chinese-speaking immigrant teenagers in a Californian classroom context also points to the duality of investment in that learner investment in the target language presupposes an equal investment in social identities such as 'being American'. As Ryan (2006) shows, investing in learning English may be a way to appropriate an imagined 'global identity', thereby advancing the future plans and goals of many learners as they navigate fields impacted by globalisation.

As noted earlier, identity construction has been conceptualised as a "site of struggle" (Norton, 2000: 127), and as conflictive as opposed to harmonious, especially in situations involving border crossing (Block, 2007). In sociolinguistic workplace scholarship, interactional negotiations involved in boundary crossing are represented as "'sites of struggle' par excellence" (Holmes & Marra, 2017: 129). This has direct relevance for today's mobile adult language learners whose favoured identity practices may not be recognised or legitimised in their new setting. There may be a tension, then, between the learner's attempts to instantiate aspects of their preferred (or desired) identities and ways in which they are interactively positioned (see Davies & Harré, 1990; Menard-Warwick, 2009) by others.

The realm of the imagination too has been referred to as a "terrain of struggle" (Pavlenko, 2003: 252), capturing the sheer breadth of ideologies, societal discourses, and visions that can bring to bear on identity co-construction in a second language learning environment. While it is well recognized that the negotiation of identities does not imply a smooth journey toward shared understanding (e.g., Norton & McKinney, 2011; Pomerantz, 2008), the concept of struggle has been relatively underexplored in identity and imagined community research. This study posits then, that a better understanding of identity and investment practices for language learners, with attention to the level of struggle involved in negotiations, can throw light on the important connections between a language learner's identities and imagined communities.

2. Methodology

This article focuses on two case studies of government officials from South-East Asia who were in New Zealand for a five-month theme-based English proficiency course. While data was collected from six key participants for the wider study (see Dawson, 2014), two were selected as focus cases because of their interesting identity trajectories and the similarities in their desired imagined communities. The particular course the officials were participating in is commonly seen as the more academically challenging component of the overall programme and it was at this time that I came to assume a privileged 'insider position' with regard to this study. This occurred initially through my role as 'workplace liaison person', organising visits and accompanying the officials to New Zealand workplaces (an important component of the course), and later, as a co-teacher.

Data collection took place over a period of 9 weeks in a New Zealand university environment. In terms of data collection, I use a layered methodology in order to engage with complexity and multivocality. Naturally-occurring data (in the form of audio recorded interactions inside and outside of the classroom) was prioritised, aligning with Block's (2007) call for this type of data as a way to enrich understandings of the dialectic relationship between identity and second language acquisition. I was interested to see what identity co-construction looked like in practice, and how it played out in both a classroom context[2] and outside of the classroom with a conversation buddy[3]. By spreading the data collection across a period of 9 weeks and capturing identity negotiations in different contexts, I used an approach to identity examination established by scholars outside of the classroom domain (e.g., Dong & Blommaert, 2009).

Recordings alone, however, are not sufficient to provide strong warrants for interpretation (see Holmes & Hazen, 2014; Marra, 2012 for approaches to triangulation). To provide qualitative rigour, a supplementary ethnographic data collection was used. During nine weeks of a fourteen week course, participants recorded themselves four times in a classroom setting, twice with their conversation buddies[4], and participated in two semi-structured interviews with me. In line with the 'research with' principal (Roberts, 2003), the goal of empowerment was also taken into consideration, in that the participants not only had complete control over the recording process (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003), but also the opportunity to listen to the recordings afterwards, a tool many saw as valuable for their learning. In addition, I observed the class 4 times over this period and interviewed the main classroom teacher, the language tutors, and the conversation buddies. I also attended several informal gatherings and taught the class twice a week in the latter stages of the course (see Figure 1 below).

Analyses are presented in the form of participant case studies, so as to underscore the centrality of the participants' trajectories (De Costa, 2010), while simultaneously acknowledging the multiple perspectives in the data (Duff, 2008).

[2] The classroom context involves small group interactions around the course theme, as well as a one-off 'workplace visit' group task. Note that data for the latter is not included in the present paper.
[3] Each of the officials is paired up with a conversation buddy at the start of the course. Careful consideration is given to these pairings. The aims of the buddy programme are to provide regular opportunities for the officials to speak English outside of class, to learn more about the New Zealand lifestyle, and to develop friendships.
[4] Note that this only occurred where the conversation buddy consented to being recorded. Figure 1 represents this by including dotted lines around the conversation buddy circles.

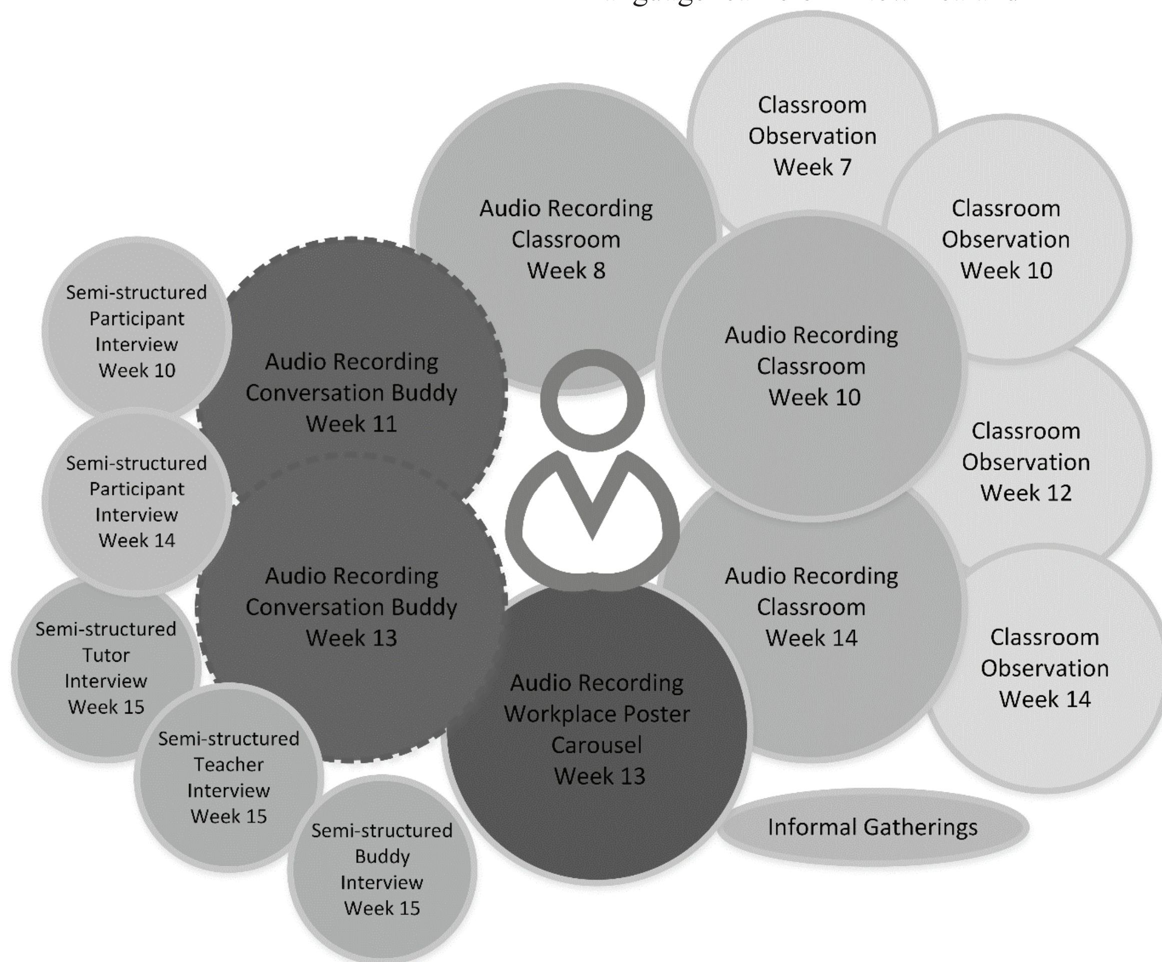

Figure 1: Multiple data sets

In terms of analysis, the application of a discursive linguistic approach to social constructionism afforded access to intricate detail within these different contexts. I was interested in capturing "rich points" (Blommaert & Dong, 2010: 41), or rather elements of surprise and promise to be used as portals to access the underlying workings of identity negotiations. By remaining aware of the dynamic interplay between macro and micro elements, identity co-construction was captured as it occurred without the encumbrance of preconceived notions of identity categories. A major focus of this article (and the social constructionist approach) is to show how identities emerge in negotiated interactions and are not given in any a priori fashion. I did not start out with the aim of investigating what a 'good student' identity looked like, for example. Rather, I was interested to see the shape of my key participants' identity trajectories and what particular identities became salient to them in their interactions with classmates and conversation buddies. This approach involved an openness to potential identity categories and an engagement with abstract concepts as well as the ground-level instantiations. I show how these identity categories emerged as salient (for my particular participants) through a focus on the linguistic micro features of the interactions (while acknowledging the intersectional properties of identity), and use existing scholarship and the ethnographic data collection to support the analysis.

The importance of imagined communities first arose in my interviews with key participants. These interviews provided evidence of the importance of a similarly-envisioned future imagined community for both Hue and Jose in the emphasis they placed on their aims of becoming part of a postgraduate community of learners in an English-speaking country. For example, in my first interview with Hue (in the context of discussing her aim of achieving highly in IELTS[5]), she directly indexed this aim: "I want to study and get masters". The brief interaction which followed lays claim to the English 'native-speaker' element of her future vision:

Shelley: oh that's exciting and where do you want to study do you know
Hue: native speaker like New Zealand or Australia

Teachers and tutors too were well-aware of these goals for both students, elaborating on them in our interviews. The naturally-occurring data also provided evidence of this desired future community both through direct indexicality where this community was directly referenced and through more indirect indexicality (see Silverstein, 2003 for a full discussion on indexicality) where linguistic forms and lexical choice can be seen as moves towards appropriating desired identities in light of these future aims. In sum, the multiple data sets allowed for strong support for interpretations of the naturally-occurring conversational data (see Holmes, Marra & Vine, 2011). The findings section makes use of a limited number of excerpts from the recorded conversational data that were selected as illustrative of wider patterns which show how identities emerged in interaction. I provide contextual cushioning from the ethnographic data at the outset to situate each participant, as well as interview data (presented in quotation marks).

3. Findings

3.1. Hue, The 'good student'

At the time of the study, Hue was a 28 year old government official in Viet Nam equipped with several degrees. In her own words, she is "forgetful", "lucky", and "self-confident". Throughout the course, she was very willing to communicate, despite being acutely aware of what she termed her "wrong pronunciation", a strong focus during her time in New Zealand. She was committed to her long-term goal of gaining a scholarship to study for her Master's degree in an English speaking country, and the English proficiency programme she was part of appeared to provide a pivotal stepping stone in this eventual attainment. Her drive impressed, concerned, and at times puzzled her teachers, tutors and conversation buddy, in equal measures.

Hue was invariably described as highly motivated and as displaying leadership qualities by her teachers. Her tutors, however, noticed a tendency to dominate small group discussions and to perhaps rely too heavily on model answers; in other words, there was a perceived lack of critical engagement. Hue's conversation buddy, Lucy, was initially struck by her clear desire to improve her spoken English. Hue made it very clear in our interviews that she was determined to make the most of every opportunity available to her both in and out of the classroom. She painted the

[5] IELTS is the acronym used for the International English Language Testing System.

English-speaking environment as a "precious opportunity", one which would allow her to "practise and enhance" her English.

The examples below highlight the situated and fluid nature of identities and imagined community membership, and the struggle these identity negotiations sometimes entail. For ease of presentation I have structured the analysis in such a way as to separate key identities whilst allowing for their interwoven and contradictory nature (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Norton, 2013). The focus on the selected excerpts does not preclude the negotiation of other identity positions in the data (see Dawson, 2014 for a fuller discussion).

The 'good student' identity emerged as salient from the outset for Hue, unsurprisingly perhaps given the academic context and her strong overall motivation and investment in classroom practices (as repeated in the interviews and supported during classroom observations).

The first recorded classroom interaction involves Hue working in a small group with her classmates – Dara from Cambodia and Jose from Timor-Leste (the second case study participant). Small group work was a regular way of exploring the course theme and this particular activity invited discussion on the costs and benefits of urbanisation by way of preparation for an essay task (see Appendix 1 for transcription conventions). The imagined community of 'postgraduate student in an English-speaking community' appears to be guiding Hue's (and Jose's) investment in different identities. For Hue, the most salient of these was that of the 'good student', as the following excerpts explore.

Excerpt 1 : 'Good student' in a classroom interaction

1.	Hue:	see record becau-
2.	Dara:	okay start
3.	Jose:	start from you
4.	Dara:	[laughing]: nooo not //me:\
5.	Jose:	/yeah\\ start from you ( )
6.	Hue:	in my opinion i think that the (potential) er
7.		[non-standard pronunciation]: urbanisation:
8.		far outweighs the disadvantages
9.		[speech-like]: firstly I feel that the benefits of:
10.		[non-standard pronunciation]: urbanisation: is means that
11.		er we can create more ++ er we can
12.		create er + [with conviction]: more: optun- opportunity
13.		for the poor people and
14.		er when they move from rural to the urban
15.		at that time they can easy
16.		to get a job to earn more money
17.		and to have a better life and another way of u- er
18.		[pronounced 'youburnisation'; struggles with this word]:
19.		urbanisation: is the economic grow
20.	Jose:	pronunciation?
21.	Hue:	[focuses on the word; pronounces correctly]: urbanisation:
22.	Jose:	okay urban//isation\
23.	Hue:	/urbanisation\\ when it's mean I mean that the grow of
24.		economic when economic grow it's mean that we will
25.		reduce poverty in our country
26.		in most of country in over the world +

27. in developing country we see that
28. many people move from the rural to the urban to get job
29. because that here they can get more opportunity
30. however the policy making er
31. the policy making of the government
32. can help them or not it depend on each government
33. if the government can have er
34. economic policy for the growing of the country
35. they can create more opportunity for the poor people
36. um and when the economic grow //(   )\
37. Jose: /what\\ is your point

This extract, as in the majority of others, shows Hue as initiating (line 1: see record becau-) the interaction. This suggests that Hue's idea of being a good student involves not only investing fully in the prescribed activity, but in maintaining a level of control, which emerges as a common feature in the data. This is similarly reflected in the relative length of her turns (e.g., lines 6-19, and 24-36), and in her use of questioning later in the dialogue as a topic control mechanism (Holmes, Stubbe, & Vine, 1999). These strategies act as helpful contextualisation cues (Gumperz, 1982) in accessing the emergent 'good student' identity. However, these strategies do not directly lay claim to this identity irrespective of context, nor are they devoid of negotiation and struggle.

The 'speech-like' delivery and length of the turn suggests that Hue sees these group discussions as a valuable opportunity to practise the academic vocabulary in her course materials. Although beneficial (in terms of opportunities for repetition), phrases such as "far outweighs the disadvantages" (line 8), sequencing words (line 9: firstly), and formal adverbs (line 30: however) may indicate a lack of discourse competence (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1997) in that they stand out as being somewhat inappropriate for this particular spoken genre. This focus on producing academic vocabulary correctly is also evident in Hue's use of collocations (line 25: reduce poverty; line 31: policy making; line 34: economic policy).

This combination of academic vocabulary and length of turns does not appear to ensure clarity, inviting some explicit negotiation from one classmate in particular. Jose's use of the interjection "pronunciation" (line 20), is framed as a question and seems intended to check his hearing of the word "urbanisation", which may be seen as reasonable given the difficulties Hue is exhibiting with the articulation of this noun. While Jose's repetition (and accompanying tone) of the correct word (line 22: okay urbanisation) supports this view, the ambiguity in his move may also provide insights into the negotiation at hand. His choice of word ("pronunciation"), viewed from this angle, may equally be conceived of as a power move, invoking a teacher identity, with the potential to destabilise Hue's confidence given her previously-mentioned focus on pronunciation. Her subsequent overlap implies that she does not read it as such, however, as she swiftly regains the floor (line 23) and attempts to elaborate on her ideas through an enactment of what seems to be inspired by a teacher-type discourse of her own.

The lack of minimal feedback is also evident and is made all the more salient by Hue's relatively slow speech and careful attention to words which provide ample opportunities for linguistic ratification of her turn. This lack of support is in direct contrast to other points that occurred later in this same interaction where Dara and Jose furnish each other's turns with a growing level of lexical and quasi-lexical backchannel cues. Despite the different cultural norms at play in terms

of provision of such feedback (see Stubbe, 1998), and the varying appreciation of what is acceptable in a New Zealand context, the complete lack of minimal feedback is striking and appears to emphasise Hue's interlocutors' discomfort rather than enacting support. This interpretation is supported through the ultimate result of what may be termed a "deep interruption" (West, 1979: 82), rather than any form of orientation to a transition-relevance place (Pomerantz & Fehr, 2011), i.e., a signal to continue talking. Indeed, Jose's direct question (line 37: What is your point?) can be viewed as a significant intrusion into the internal structure of Hue's preceding utterance, and thus calls forth West & Zimmerman's (1977) findings on the predominance and non-facilitative nature of interruptions as a way to achieve dominance.

A more situated interpretation would see Jose as concerned with Hue's lack of authenticity in this interaction and his direct question may therefore be viewed as an attempt to denaturalise (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) her claims to the 'good student' identity by questioning what he sees as problematic. Struggle, then, appears to manifest itself quite explicitly here in the form of 'discursive tussles'.

The salience of this 'good student' identity for Hue can be seen as it traverses contexts and manifests itself in similar yet novel ways with her conversation buddy, Lucy. Hue makes full use of these buddy meetings for what I will term 'identity rehearsals'. In other words, this context seems to function as a valuable practice space for appropriating her desired identities in light of her future aim of being part of an English-speaking postgraduate community. While there is evidence of a level of struggle, the interactions are for the most part harmonious and 'discursive faultlines' (Menard-Warwick, 2009, 2014) remain inactivated. Several learning strategies feed into this enactment, including the checking of vocabulary, use of academic vocabulary, direct questions, and requesting spontaneous model responses, a particularly ingenious learning aid (yet one which also potentially supports ethnographic interview data indicating Hue's overreliance on native-speaker models). Most relevant in this context, however, is the way in which this identity is often co-constructed in a supportive manner. The following extract from week 11 follows a discussion on Hue's childhood ambition to be a chef because of the poverty in Viet Nam at that time.

Excerpt 2 : 'Identity rehearsals': Valuable practice space in appropriating the 'good student' identity

1.	Hue:	but now er when our country er [guesses]:
2.		economic: er improve
3.	Lucy:	yep //( )\
4.	Hue:	/we have\\ many country in over the world and many
5.		I mean that many aids from foreign country and
6.		they help our country to reduce poverty
7.	Lucy:	right re//ducing poverty\
8.	Hue:	/yes and\\ er improve er economy
9.	Lucy:	yeah
10.	Hue:	and so er now I think that our living standard im//prove\
11.	Lucy:	/yeah\\

Much of this data set provides evidence of Hue's willingness to attempt complex vocabulary items, in the manner of line 2 ("economic improve"). Lucy's regular contribution of minimal feedback provides a level of scaffolding not apparent in the small group classroom discussions. While Hue's determination to string her sentence together with chunks of academic vocabulary is

resonant of her classroom identity work (as in Excerpt 1), in this case her claims to the 'good student' identity are actively supported and encouraged through Lucy's minimal feedback and sympathetic echo responses (see Marsden & Holmes, 2014) (e.g., line 7: right reducing poverty). Although the 'good student' identity position is instantiated in both contexts, the value placed by Lucy on Hue's linguistic and cultural resources seems to contribute to a more controlled and confident 'doing' of this particular identity, all of which brings to bear on future classroom episodes where Hue's sense of her own 'right to speak' (Bourdieu, 1991) is noticeably stronger and less susceptible to derailment. In moving towards her desired community of postgraduate students, the opportunities to trial this identity in the conversation buddy context were extremely valuable.

Hue's 'good student' instantiations were also actively supported by her main classroom teacher Julia in the classroom sessions, where she gained significant individual attention (as evidenced in the ethnographic observations). In this sense, we could argue that Hue's evolving identity work and strong levels of classroom investment aligned with Julia's sense of imagined community for her students (see Kanno & Norton, 2003), a vision which seemed to gel with that of Hue in the acknowledged importance of English to be used as 'capital' in (often transnational) career advancement (Dagenais, 2003). This idea is likely to have developed from socially constructed staff and stakeholder discourse around the course. Moving further towards the ideological core, this may also reveal the ability of larger institutional Discourses (Gee, 1996) to 'coerce' identity work to an extent (see Ehrlich, 2008) in the implicit and explicit value placed on behaviour which appeals to historically constructed notions of what is appropriate.

Interview data show that elements of Hue's 'good student' identity are called to task, however, by different interlocutors in other contexts. Her language learning tutor, Felipe, felt Hue had "put blinders on", a reference to her unwavering determination to improve her English, which seemed to involve a reliance on transmission (see Nelson & Kim, 2001) and little critical engagement. This idea of criticality seemed to form a central aspect of Felipe's optimal imagined community for this particular group of students, encouraging them towards a more autonomous approach to learning. Similarly, Lisa, another of the language learning tutors, seems to be calling on sociohistorically constructed visions of what it means to be part of this particular course, when she commented on Hue's tendency to "take over" discussions. As suggested earlier, part of Hue's 'good student' toolkit involved taking all opportunities to convey the knowledge she had worked hard to acquire, an occasioning which did not fit into Lisa's particular vision of an equal and harmonious sharing of ideas. These examples show that imagined communities can intertwine and collide in various ways.

3.2. Jose, The 'supportive classmate'

At the time of this study, Hue's classmate Jose was a 28 year old government official from Timor Leste who had a leadership role for his Timorese colleagues during his time in New Zealand. Fluent in both Indonesian and Tetun, he completed his Bachelor of Arts in Indonesia, and, like Hue, harboured a strong desire to pursue postgraduate level study in an English-speaking country ("it's like a passion"). Jose took time out from his job in the area of human rights to take part in this course, the opportunity for which he was extremely grateful. Highly communicative, he thrived in this New Zealand context, despite bouts of homesickness.

Jose actively sought opportunities to communicate with native speakers of English, and the enjoyment he gained from discussions with his conversation buddy Robert was a regular topic of our conversations and interviews, where he spoke of feeling motivated by the "authentic" nature of these discussions. Meeting regularly in a pub, and being treated as a "real person" (with no language concessions made) was a highlight according to Jose, and it is likely that this would have played a key role in his developing English language confidence and competence. During interviews, he often spoke of his emotional struggle during the course. He mentioned feeling "overwhelmed" in the beginning stages, and his difficulty with time management was a recurring theme, echoed by his teacher and more strongly by his tutors who found his lack of preparedness frustrating and confusing in light of their fondness for him. During the workplace visit I accompanied him on, Jose was the embodiment of professionalism, creating a strong impression and engaging with sincerity.

Salient in much of the data were two identity positions, the 'leader' and the 'supportive classmate' which appeared interrelated and connected to his future imagined community of postgraduate students in an English native speaker context. The excerpts which follow zoom in on aspects of this 'supportive classmate' identity.

Despite the identity tussles in Excerpt 1 where Jose may well be viewed as instantiating a distinctly non-supportive classmate identity with Hue, it is of note that this is a rare occurrence in all data channels. In interviews, teachers and tutors all spoke highly of the support he offered to his peers in his leadership role and in general as a classmate. Classroom observations added further support to this viewpoint. It became clear very early on in the data collection that Jose prioritised relational aspects in his interactions, seeking to make meaningful, "authentic" connections with his interlocutors and effectively holding his interlocutors to the same standards he placed on himself in this respect. The locus of struggle between Jose and Hue's early interactions, therefore, appears to exist (at this point in time) in this mismatch in identity investments, in their differing visions of what type of identities require nurturing to facilitate the transition to their desired community of postgraduate students.

The importance placed on the relational is highlighted in excerpt three, an interaction which occurs in classroom recording 1, involving Jose, Dara, and Hue discussing the costs and benefits of urbanisation by way of preparation for an essay task (see Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 3 : The importance of the relational

1.	Dara:	too many people
2.	Jose:	[drawls; in agreement]: y//es\:
3.	Dara:	/too many\\ people in the the government just
4.		the government how to say + i need to think
5.	Jose:	well er you know it you know the point but you just hard //to\
6.	Dara:	/stuck\\ with the wo//rd\
7.	Jose:	/yeah\\

A close-up analysis suggests the need for a nuanced interpretation, one that sees Jose as instantiating his 'supportive classmate' identity. This, as mentioned above, seems to have connections with his future imagined community in the focus on relational aspects of communication. Immediately of note is Jose's stretching of the vowel sound 'e' in his drawled response in line 2, which is not a common feature in the recordings. That there is meaning

attached to this prosodic choice is instantly clear. Dara's short utterance in line 1 ("too many people") is in response to Jose's question about the 'costs' of urbanisation, and comes after a linguistically dense turn from Hue, which had resulted in Jose's frustration (see Excerpt 1). Jose's response then, must be viewed in light of what had come prior, and can therefore be understood as a token of his appreciation and acceptance of what he sees as the authenticity of Dara's turn. 'Too many people' is a concrete answer that may be seen as indexing a shared 'concerned global citizen' identity (a reflexive positioning used more frequently by Dara in subsequent data), thereby invoking a sense of empathy and concern. This supportive identity is further reinforced in line 5, where the repetition of "you know" acts as a significant contextualisation cue (Gumperz, 1982) to interpret meaning. By reinforcing this shared perspective through repetition and insisting on Dara's cognitive depth (despite her own self-positioning as linguistically deficient), Jose can be seen as encouraging and authenticating Dara's line of discourse. With Dara, then, in this particular context, Jose's contributions are primarily facilitative and supportive (e.g., line 5), and the regular co-operative overlaps (Stubbe, 1998) between these two participants serve to reinforce the co-construction of the 'supportive classmate' position.

Another example of the 'supportive classmate' identity (which feeds into Jose's conceptualisation of his future imagined community of postgraduate students) occurs in the final classroom recording. This particular interaction involves Jose, Dara, and Vithu (another participant from Cambodia) and was characterised by a great deal of joviality at the beginning, as shown in the following segment. It involved shared laughter, funny voices, good-natured teasing and, later in the recording, some heartfelt supportive comments on what they felt they had all achieved.

Excerpt 4 : Idioms as indexing relationality

1. Jose: [exaggerated intonation; joking]: good morning Vithu how are you:
2. Vithu: [same intonation as Jose]: I'm fine and you: //[laughs]\
3. Dara: /[voc; laughs]\\
4. Jose: a bunch of fluffy d//ucks\
5. Dara: /laughs\\

Jose's exaggerated intonation and 'funny' voice immediately engages the support and 'buy in' from his classmates. Vithu's copying of Jose's intonation pattern seems to validate this as a supportive and relational resource and the subsequent shared laughter indicates the strong rapport these officials have developed. Of note is Jose's use of the idiom 'a bunch of fluffy ducks' (replacing the traditional 'box' with 'bunch[6]'), articulated carefully and with a similarly upbeat tone. Both Dara and Vithu reinforce the currency of this language, and thereby his 'supportive and friendly' classmate position, through accompanying laughter. While there was evidence of the teaching of idioms during the early stages of the course, it is unclear whether this one was part of the set. It seems likely that it was appropriated by Jose outside of the classroom environment (given that he is the only participant to use it in the data). Interview material also provides evidence of the satisfaction gained from what Jose understands as "natural language", which points to his desire to be part of a 'native speaker-like' community, and also perhaps has implications for the importance he places on 'authenticity' (see Excerpts 1 and 3) and corresponding concern with 'appropriate and judicious' language use (Bourdieu, 1977).

[6] 'A box of fluffy ducks' is an idiom that has derived from 'a box of birds', both of which are used in New Zealand English. The intended meaning is to express happiness or more generally, that everything is going well.

Jose's investments in these aspects of his identity work are connected to his visions of what his desired imagined community of postgraduate students will entail. Jose regularly spoke of the motivation and pleasure his conversation buddy sessions with Robert provided. Being treated as a "real person" and not being subject to 'deficient communicator' discourses was a highlight and it seems reasonable to assume that his enjoyment of idiomatic language may have either derived from, or have been intensified by these experiences. Jose also foregrounded his own associated embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991) by mentioning his "Irish friend" at his workplace in Timor Leste during our interviews and the final classroom recording, stressing how much help he had been in preparing for the English speaking component of the course. Jose saw this friendship as crucial in continuing to strengthen his speaking skills upon his return home (which he deemed a high priority). These men appear to embody the type of community that Jose sees as a necessary prerequisite in accessing his overarching community of postgraduate students in an English-speaking context. As such, their strength in shaping his identity work, and effect on his overall trajectory cannot be underestimated.

4. Discussion

This section builds on the case studies described above by examining the relationship and connections between future imagined communities and language learner identities. As already discussed, the notion of the imagined community was one that arose early in the data as a strong guiding force, and as such, offers a rich and intriguing lens on the identities that emerged as salient for Hue and Jose. Both Hue's and Jose's co-constructed identity work seemed to be guided by their powerful visions of becoming part of a postgraduate community of learners studying in an English-speaking environment. Despite this similarity, their identity instantiations and investments (Norton, 1997; 2013) were very different. Hue focused on demonstrating her knowledge, investing strongly in the perceived academic side of this community while Jose's investment lay primarily in the relational, in the authentic interactions he saw as characterising this group. This adds weight to Kanno & Norton's (2003) observation that imagined communities do indeed have the potential to impact more strongly on learners' actions (and identity co-construction) than the ones with which they have daily engagement.

Envisaging themselves as postgraduate students in an English-speaking environment had a strong bearing on their investment in different identity practices (classroom or otherwise), and the means of appropriation used to construct and negotiate these identities in English. Hue, in particular, appeared to have a strong sense of the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991) afforded by a command of academic English, conceptualising further study (which requires English language skills) as a way to advance her career. Her strong levels of investment were obvious from the outset as she took every opportunity to work hard and project herself as 'a good student'. Both the classroom and conversation buddy contexts provided discursive evidence of her commitment to constructing this identity position and interview data with tutors and her teacher provided further support for this interpretation. For Hue, developing this particular identity may be seen as the first rung in climbing towards her future imagined community. In other words, a legitimate claiming of this identity would help to validate her goals of future study, as surely (as Hue seems to be saying) only 'good students' populate this desired realm.

Jose, on the other hand, wanted to commit to further study because it was his “passion”, yet he also acknowledged the positive repercussions there would be career-wise. Based on my extensive ethnographic observations (which showed Hue’s complete commitment to each classroom task and Jose’s sometimes ambivalent responses) a traditional SLA perspective would deem Hue a ‘highly motivated’ learner, and perhaps label Jose as unmotivated (Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997). This essentialising only serves to sweep rich social constructs under the carpet, undermining the agency of the person in question, their particular visions for the future, and the importance of context. The perspective of an imagined community, however, allows these investments to be understood in the light of Hue’s and Jose’s desires to “expand [their] range of possible selves” (Kanno & Norton, 2003: 246).

Identity construction, however, does not happen in a vacuum. Through interactions, identity enactments may intersect with the imagined communities of others, leading to a level of struggle and opposing sets of negotiations. Given the fact that the ‘identity collisions’ in my data (see Excerpt 1 in this article) were seemingly activated by (and sometimes mitigated by) the pull of imagined communities, I would thus conceptualise struggle as an integral part of co-construction, involving sometimes challenging negotiations enacted through discursive positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990). As the case studies demonstrate, the power of these visions and potential lack of alignment between interlocutors’ imagined communities can be the ideological root of disharmony. When imagined communities aligned, however, struggle did not manifest itself explicitly in interactions, existing rather beneath the surface as participants struggled on other levels to appropriate their desired identities despite the supportive context (see Dawson, 2014).

The embeddedness and overlap of these imagined communities also surfaced as salient. Jose’s investment appeared to involve a breaking down of the abstraction of the imagined community into specific chunks of attainability. Interestingly, he appeared to invest particularly strongly in what seemed to be another level of imagined community – that of a ‘native speaker-like’ group, sitting under the wider umbrella of his postgraduate scholarship visions. In other words, these imagined communities may be embedded (Hall, 2004), and access to one may open the portal to another. Jose’s investment in this second-tiered ‘native speaker-like’ imagined community entailed an equal commitment to imagined identities (Norton, 2001) which he practised, struggled with, and seemingly revelled in during his time in New Zealand. In the ‘doing’ of his identities, there was an alignment with what he saw as authentic (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), where the concrete and ‘real’ were privileged. By discursively enacting these notions in his identity work and demanding them from others, Jose may be viewed as slowly appropriating the voice (Toohey, 2000) of a supportive individual with leadership qualities, somebody who can relate easily and confidently to proficient English speakers. In other words, this focus on gaining communicative competence and perhaps ‘proving himself’ in this New Zealand setting may well pave the way for a seamless segue into a higher tier of a postgraduate, English-speaking imagined community.

A key finding of this study pertains to the different investments that can arise from a seemingly ‘similar’ imagined community. The fact that Jose’s and Hue’s trajectories were so very different, yet guided by their shared desire to be part of an English-speaking postgraduate community is a useful reminder to educators to avoid assumptions of what such a goal would or should entail and to remain open to the range of identities and investments that these visions may result in for each learner. One way for teachers to at least access the abstraction of imagined communities is to

acknowledge the various identities that emerge as important to the learners (Menard-Warwick, 2009; Morita, 2004) and to speculate on this relationship. Even a minimum of speculation as to the links will be more helpful than employing essentialising terms such as 'motivated' or 'unmotivated', which do not do justice to social histories and future visions.

One way of maximising classroom potential is to provide opportunities to access multiple identity positions (Norton, 2000), encouraging students to draw on valuable intellectual and social resources and transcend the less powerful position of 'second language learner' (Miller, 2004; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). It may also be of value to set up activities at the beginning of a course which involve an equal sharing of 'future visions' so that a climate of respect and awareness is fostered from the outset, mitigating the potential amount of struggle in identity negotiations. Nurturing collaborative power relations under the umbrella of an inclusive pedagogy (Nelson, 1999) will likely lead to increased levels of tolerance and understanding in identity negotiations stemming from diverse sets of ideologies.

The clear 'meshing' of identities, investments, and imagined communities paints a complex picture, highlighting the sheer magnetism of these future visions for language learners as they guide on-the-ground identity co-construction. The embeddedness and intersubjective complexities of these imagined communities as they are brought into the social realm, however, is something which bears further investigation.

Conclusion

The goal of investigating identity co-construction and imagined communities has revealed layers of complexity which bring to bear on our understanding of English language learner experiences and investments. The fine-grained linguistic analysis of interactions has shed light on what identity construction looks like in practice, allowing for discursive intricacies to be captured as they emerged at ground level, feeding into a richer understanding of their connections to the more abstract realm of desired future communities. On a theoretical level, I would posit that this identity/imagined community relationship is itself dialectic and fluid. A deeper investigation of the linguistic instantiations of identities can enrich our understanding of the relevance of imagined communities for language learners, just as an enhanced appreciation of the importance of these future communities can add value to current understandings of identity. The empirical potential of capturing identity in this way is something to be embraced by researchers.

The findings also highlight the need for educators and students alike to acknowledge learners' imagined communities and the connections to investment and identity construction, given that the lack of such recognition has the potential to exacerbate non-participation (Norton, 2001). I argue, in line with Simon (1992), that there is a need for educators to reflect on their own socially and historically-constructed imagined communities (for themselves and the learners they teach). This would usefully be accompanied by a consideration of the implications of a less than harmonious co-existence.

The relationship between identities and imagined communities is therefore both complex and salient in the ESL classroom, given the links with investment and overall trajectories. The more educators appreciate the complexities around the nature of identity co-construction, and

understand the power of imagined communities, the stronger the chances will be for an essentially transformative and engaged learner experience (Cummins, 1996; King, 2000). In Jose's and Hue's cases the supportive parameters of the programme resulted in both learners flourishing in distinct ways. Identity co-construction involved struggle and challenges; it involved commitment to a desired future, and it manifested itself differently. Crucially, however, it allowed the learners to finish the programme not only with an enhanced ownership of a linguistic resource, but a stronger sense of how they might build on this new capital to access the communities they so aspire to be a part of. In this regard, the future seems bright.

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