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EFL Learners from Hungary and EFL Pre-service Teachers from Colombia: A Narrative Research on Imagined Identities¹

Estudiantes de inglés en Hungría y licenciatura en inglés en Colombia: Una investigación narrativa sobre identidades imaginadas

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Abstract

This article reports on a qualitative study that aims to explore on how the notion of imagined communities elucidates issues concerning identity and foreign language learning and teaching. The research questions that frame this study are the following: (1) What are the imagined identities (English as a Foreign Language (EFL)) students have constructed to learn English when enrolling in an English bachelor programme?, (2) How are these imagined identities connected to the imagined community they feel affiliated with? and (3) How are these imagined identities linked to the language practices of the EFL classroom? Narrative inquiry was used as the research method to answer these questions. Autobiographies were also written by the 26 participants enrolled in an English teacher education programme at a university in Colombia. Furthermore, written narratives and interviews were conducted with 15 students from an English bachelor programme at a university in Hungary. The study was conducted during one academic semester. The L2 motivational self-system theory, the theory of possible selves and the concepts of imagined communities and identities framed this research. Three salient categories emerged from the analysis of the narratives, namely, (1) bicultural identity: belonging to a worldwide community, (2) possible selves: broadening the scope of possibilities and (3) becoming an English teacher: an ongoing process.

Keywords: imagined communities, imagined identities, possible selves, narrative research

Resumen

Este artículo informa sobre un estudio cualitativo cuyo propósito fue explorar cómo la noción de comunidades imaginadas aclara los problemas relacionados con la identidad y el aprendizaje y la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras. Las preguntas de investigación que enmarcan este estudio fueron (1) ¿Cuáles son las identidades imaginadas de

1 Research conducted at the university level with Hungarian and Colombian students enrolled in English programmes.

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los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera cuando cursan un pregrado de inglés? (2) ¿Cómo estas identidades están conectadas a la comunidad imaginada a la que quieren pertenecer? (3) ¿Cómo están vinculadas a las prácticas de lengua dentro de la clase? El método utilizado para dar respuesta a estos interrogantes fue la investigación narrativa. Los 26 participantes inscritos en un programa de formación de profesores de inglés en una universidad de Colombia escribieron autobiografías. Se realizaron narraciones escritas y entrevistas con 15 estudiantes de un programa de pregrado de inglés en una universidad de Hungría. El estudio se realizó durante un semestre académico. La teoría de auto-sistema de motivación en L2, la teoría de los posibles sí mismos y los conceptos de comunidades e identidades imaginadas enmarcan esta investigación. Del análisis de las narrativas surgieron tres categorías destacadas: (1) Identidad bicultural: pertenecer a una comunidad mundial, (2) Posibles sí mismos: ampliar el alcance de las posibilidades y (3) Convertirse en un profesor de inglés: un proceso continuo.

Palabras clave: comunidades imaginadas, identidades imaginadas, posibles sí mismos, investigación narrativa

Introduction

Nowadays, we are living in a multilingual world as a consequence of the global economic and political interests. Multilingualism is supported not only by linguistic features but also by cultural and social constructs that make the field of foreign language learning more complex to understand, but interesting to study. According to the theories of Halliday (1978) and Vygotsky (1978), teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) know, for example, that language learning takes place in a social context; therefore, language cannot be understood outside social relationships. Moreover, as recent identity research suggests, identity should be worked on the face of globalisation and the intersecting groups of people (e.g. Heller, 2011; Higgins, 2011; Shin, 2012). Hence, the case of identity in language learning is important to understand how the different dimensions of learners, as social human beings, are weaved and how these dimensions maintain the theories of language learning constantly in discussion.

According to Norton (2013a), the theoretical assumptions associated with research on identity, literacy and multilingualism suggest that language learners do not conduct individual processes of internalising a set of rules and structures of a standard language, but that they must negotiate meaning or language constantly, as the social practice it is. Thus, the understanding of imagined communities and identities are necessary to contribute to the great debates regarding foreign language learning. Identity has become an important construct to frame language learning. Hence, Norton (2013b) explained that identity entails “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 45). In addition, Bucholtz and Hall (2010) proposed another definition that assembles divergent theories and approaches and that makes the concept of identity wide and inconclusive: “identity is the social positioning of self and other” (p. 18). Consequently, identity is subject to change, and it is dynamic and multiple because of the diverse positions language learners take according to the social context in which they participate.

When studying identity, one must pause and reflect upon the notion of community and what it entails. Wenger (1998) affirmed that a person belongs to a community not only being directly engaged in it but also imagining being part of it. To put it differently, Wenger depicted how engagement and imagination are the two processes a person follows to belong to a community. He further stated that imagination is “a process of expanding one-self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves” (p. 176). Accordingly, when people think about communities they belong to, they do not have to evoke only the institutions they attend or their workplaces, or maybe their neighbourhood or places where they celebrate their religious practices, but also the communities they imagine being part of. This idea is easier to understand when reviewing the concept of nation in compliance with Anderson (1991). He argued that nations are imagined communities “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives

the image of their communion” (p. 6). To rephrase it, imagination succeeds in connecting people from a country to their fellow citizens or nationals throughout time and space. On this account, the notion of communities deals with groups of people, whilst the term ‘imagined’ refers to not attainable and palpable right now.

During the last decades, there have been interesting studies on the field of imagined communities and language classrooms, such as Norton (2001), Kanno and Norton (2003), Pavlenko and Norton (2007), Norton and Gao (2008), Norton and Toohey (2011), Kharchenko (2014), Wu (2017), Shirvan and Talebzadeh (2018) and Posada-Ortiz (2018). The common ground amongst these authors is the scenario they present of the target language classroom as a community. In this community, the expectations of the different learners for the future encounter, as well as their motivation to learn the target language, and their personal and professional goals meet. Hence, when thinking about an imagined community, the concept of imagined identity arises; therefore, language classrooms might have an effect on the identity construction of learners due to the practices conducted inside. On the basis of this discussion, the present study is led by the following research questions: (1) What are the imagined identities EFL students have constructed to learn English when enrolling in an English bachelor programme?, (2) How are these imagined identities connected to the imagined community they feel affiliated with? and (3) How are these imagined identities linked to the language practices of the EFL classroom?

Theoretical Framework

Learning has been socially situated in specific and concrete communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), where the diverse identities of the learners as individuals meet. This is also the case of the studies conducted in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), where learning a language as a social situated practice has been grounded on the success of learners in their learning process, based on their direct engagement in tangible groups of study. Here, highlighting that motivation has played

an important role in SLA research to understand this engagement of language learners in their learning process is crucial. Motivation has been progressively developed in harmony with new approaches and studies. Dörnyei (as cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) described three historical periods in the development of the construct of motivation in language learning, namely, the social psychological period (1959–1990), the cognitive-situated period (during the 1990s) and the period of new approaches (2000s).

The former period was characterised by the work performed by Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972), who presented the two types of motivation: integrative and instrumental. The fundamental point of Gardner’s work was based on goals to be achieved; thus, a motivated learner sets goals and works to achieve them. Moreover, Gardner (2001) complemented this understanding of motivation by explaining that it is the result of learners’ interaction with the target language and culture. Thus, the social context and the attitudes of learners toward learning the target language are the basis to unravel their motivation. Whilst the integrative motivation deals with the wishes or interests learners have to belong to the target language community, the instrumental motivation alludes to external goals or reasons for learning a target language.

The cognitive-situated period broadened the theories worked in the former one and considered other cognitive approaches to better understand the construct of motivation in language learning. For instance, Dörnyei (1994) proposed three levels of motivation, namely, language level, learner level and learning situation level. The language level considers the language, the community and the two types of motivation proposed by Gardner. The learner level involves the cognitive processes of the learners, and learning situation level focuses on teacher, course and group as learning levels in the classroom. Therefore, it is worth highlighting that this period was focused not only on social and psychological aspects that influence motivation in learners but also on pedagogical aspects.

Conversely, the new approaches have emphasised motivational change or the words of Dörnyei (2005) on the “ongoing changes of

motivation over time” (p. 83). The other major focus of the new approaches has been the study of the relationship between motivation and identity. Here, understanding that motivation is dynamic and encounters distinct moments during language learning and even in a single class is essential. Dörnyei and Otto (as cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) argued that motivation should be explored from other perspectives at the personal level of a learner, for example, from the executive aspects of goal achievement in ongoing social activities, such as classroom learning. The main concepts that have emerged from this period have been the process-oriented conceptualisation of motivation (Dörnyei, 2000, 2001), the conception of investment and language learning (Peirce, 1995) and the notions of the ideal and ought selves. Additionally, Dörnyei (2005) proposed the L2 motivational self-system theory, which is consistent with the work of Gardner and Lambert and others authors, such as Ushioda (2001) and Noels (2003). It combines theories of motivation in language learning and in psychology, especially those related to the concept of the self and possible selves. However, mentioning that the work on selves conducted by Higgins (1983); Higgins et al. (1985) and Markus and Nurius (1986) preceded that on the L2 motivational self-system is pivotal. This concept was unfolded as the ideas individuals have about what they would like to become and the fears and possibilities they have to reach that state. Consequently, the image of individuals in future scenarios or states goes beyond future plans because of the fact that these possible selves entail palpable feelings, senses and images.

Clarifying that the work of Norton on language learning since 1995 has included the construct of ‘investment’ to present a different perspective from the one embedded in the scope of motivation is crucial. She argued that most theories of motivation do not consider unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers, which are key elements in the understanding of language learning. Consequently, the conception of investment not only unveils a counter proposal to focus on motivation but also highlights the relationship of learners to the target language and their ambivalent desire to learn it.

Hitherto, the contextualisation of approaches to motivation and the construct of investment developed by Norton have displayed important concepts and theoretical components to understand the foundations of imagined communities and identities. Pavlenko and Norton (2007) claimed that learning connected to imagination as a means to construct identities and meanings has been barely studied. Here, it is important to rewind the notion of imagination stated by Anderson (1991), when explaining how a nation is conceived as an imagined community, and the link this notion has with the engagement of learners in communities of practice, as Wenger (1998) argued. All of this, along with the theory of selves (Higgins, 1983; Markus & Nurius, 1986), the L2 motivational self-system (Dörnyei, 2005) and the development of investment in language learning (Peirce, 1995) allow researchers to understand imagined communities from the bond between motivation, investment and behaviour.

Accordingly, the decisions of language learners are determined by their psychological possible selves and their fellowship with the imagined community, which encourage them to act or behave in specific manners during their learning process, as Peirce (1995) asserted in her work on investment. She claimed that learners invest in the target language being aware of gaining various symbolic and material resources, which in return will increase the value of their social power. Hence the hopes of learners for the future and multiple identities, as sites of struggle, are reassessed.

Furthermore, for the understanding of the concept of imagined communities and identities, explaining the five identity groups to English as an international language is significant, listed by Pavlenko and Norton (2007) to discuss affiliation in imagined communities. These clusters are (a) postcolonial, (b) global, (c) ethnic, (d) multilingual and (e) gendered identities. Currently, postcolonial contexts have an interesting focus when researching language learning. This has to do with the fact that new imagined communities and identities are linked to language. Most of the postcolonial countries use English as the language of instruction; therefore, it is the language of the imagined community learners from these countries have become part of.

The dominance of English as an international language is connected to postcolonial legacies and globalisation, which has led to the creation of language policies that position English as the mandatory language to learn in schools, even in countries where it is not a postcolonial language, such as Colombia and Hungary. Heller (2010) brought the term of commodification into the field of language to explain how the outstanding feature of English as an asset with trade value has grown in accordance with the globalised economy under the political conditions of late capitalism. She also depicted some tensions and conflicts between ideologies and language practices in some settings, such as language teaching and translation.

In Colombia, there are numerous studies referring to this situation of English, and the prestigious position government has conferred it within the framework of language policy creation. Furthermore, the discourses of resistance these policies have caused in language teachers and learners have been the focal points of research (Bonilla & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Gomez Lobaton, 2012; Guerrero, 2009; Méndez et al., 2019; Posada-Ortiz, 2019; Quintero & Guerrero, 2013).

Contrarily, in Hungary, the growing number of learners enrolled in EFL corroborates the intention of the country in its reorientation with the West of Europe (Medgyes & Miklósy, 2000). Moreover, these authors present in their research the posture of the governments since 1990 about the foreign language competence of Hungarians and the pressure of media displaying the low language competence of the average Hungarians. Similarly, Kontra (2016) mentioned the “catastrophic effects of the government-imposed structural changes to Hungarian teacher education since 1990” (p. 1). This situation in Hungary is similar to the one in Colombia since the National Plan of Bilingualism was created by the Ministry of Education in 2004. There have been tensions, criticism, discourses of resistance, media interference and discredit of English teachers.

Thus, it is worth mentioning that it is not surprising to find Hungarians interested in learning EFL because of the fact that they feel their future

as engaged members of the European Union. Notwithstanding, there are some studies that present results in which some Hungarians are afraid of their own language displacement (Biava, 2001; Medgyes & Miklósy, 2000). On this account, Colombia and Hungary can be taken as examples of the power of EFL not only to enter the global market but also to envision better professional goals abroad for their citizens.

On a slightly different note, there is another identity group presented by Pavlenko and Norton (2007): the ethnic. The English language, for example, with the prestige it has because of the global market, is seen by people as the language that supports powerful identities in society. It has gained a high status as a global language and has also granted its speakers a top-level position in society (Heller, 2007a). One of the different factors that have to do with this status is the influence of the media, which contributes to shaping the ethnic and racial identities through the display of the highest ranked countries and communities based on market results (Norton & McKinney, 2011). This means that language learners imagine themselves to be members of these types of communities, which present politically valued and publicly visible identity options.

This means that some identities have become less visible, devalued or delegitimised and, consequently, some ethnicities and races as well (Piller, 2014). Hence, ethnicity comes to be an important piece in the individual or institutional imagined communities of English speakers or learners. Norton and Toohey (2011) claimed that what also influence the imagined communities of English learners are the persistently changing world and the phenomena of linguistic ownership and language rights, which are deeply discussed and studied by Wee (2011).

The other two identity clusters to English presented by Pavlenko and Norton (2007) are multilingual and gendered identities. When talking about multilingual identities, it is important to mention the work by Nongogo (2007), who asserted that within this multilingual world, multilingual identities should find their way to become visible

into the public media, rather than presenting one single identity dominated by standard English. Therefore, younger generations can learn to imagine themselves as members of a multilingual and diverse world. From this linguistic diversity and the connections that can be created with the notions of selves, numerous studies have been exploring this field of discourses of hybridity and multiplicity (Early & Norton, 2012; Gao, 2012; Norton & Morgan, 2013).

According to Norton (2000), the most essential point is to understand how an imagined community implies an imagined identity that provides a wide scope of possibilities for the future. Consequently, the diversity of imagined identities relies on language as a site of identity and negotiation, as it is also explained by Cameron (1985) when displaying the relationship between language and gender as a feminist poststructuralist approach. Likewise, Piller and Pavlenko (2007) averred that this approach focused on diversity presents that not all forms of multilingualism are equally valued, in fact, certain languages become valued or devalued because of social, political, historical and gendered foundations, as it was previously mentioned.

In sum, on the basis of the proposal of Pavlenko and Norton (2007), the five groups of identities to English as an international language that learners can construct or negotiate in order to belong to imagined communities gather issues concerning postcolonialism, globalisation, ethnicity, multilingualism and gender. All of these are key pieces in the engagement, motivation and investment learners experience in their learning process to have access to certain communities they want to affiliate, even if those communities are not legitimated by participants so far. Consequently, the non-participation or lack of interest of learners in certain language practices can be explained through their investment in their imagined communities and through their access to these communities (Norton, 2000, 2001, 2010). Thus, recalling here the bond between the imagined communities of language learners and the language classroom is crucial, which is also a community and a discursive space, as it was previously explained. Heller (2007b) argued that language is progressively approached as “a set

of resources which circulate in unequal ways in social networks and discursive spaces, and whose meaning and value are socially constructed within the constraints of social organisational processes, under specific historical conditions” (p. 2). Hence, there are also least privileged bilingual students who are associated with the least privileged imagined communities, as Kanno and Norton (2003) found in her study, when exploring the relationship between the vision, curriculum, practices and policies of schools and student identities.

Methodology

This article presents the findings of a qualitative study that collected narratives from 26 sixth-semester students who were enrolled in a language teacher education programme at a university in Colombia and 15 fourth-semester students from an English bachelor programme at a university in Hungary. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 25 years. Both groups of participants were taking courses whose contents allowed the use of narratives as a way to reflect upon their experiences as English learners. The study was conducted during one academic semester. The participants from Colombia wrote their autobiography as language learners and the participants from Hungary five narratives from prompts related to their language learning process and the images they have about themselves in the future. The latter participants were also interviewed to better compare the sources of data. This interview required the participants to clarify the issues that were encountered when the researcher was reading through their written narratives. The participants volunteered to take part in the project.

This study aimed to examine the imagined identities of EFL learners from two different contexts and to explore how those imagined identities were connected to their imagined community. In addition, the study aimed at investigating the actions and practices of those learners in their language learning that might shape their imagined identities.

The research method employed to achieve these objectives was the narrative inquiry, which, according to Barkhuizen et al. (2014), is “an established

umbrella term for research involving stories” (p. 3). Pavlenko (2001) argued that “personal narratives provide a glimpse into areas so private, personal and intimate that they are rarely – if ever – breached in the study of SLA, and at the same time are at the heart and soul of the L2 socialization process” (p. 167). Thus, this narrative inquiry allowed us as researchers to explore the imagined identities and communities of the participants and to compare if there are common insights and reflections between the two groups of learners although they are from different countries.

Analysis and Discussion of Results

The data analysis procedure was based on the repeated reading and reflection of the narratives and interview transcripts. This narrative inquiry analysis allowed us to delve into participants’ experiences of language learning and the identities they have constructed and represented to themselves and to the others. Here, recalling the questions that frame this study is essential: (1) What are the imagined identities EFL students have constructed to learn English when enrolling in an English bachelor programme?, (2) How are these imagined identities connected to the imagined community they feel affiliated with? and (3) How are these imagined identities linked to the language practices of the EFL classroom?

The analysis of the narratives revealed that the imagined identities participants have constructed to learn English when enrolling in English programmes are similar without mattering the context they are immersed in. Three categories emerged from the analysis, namely, (1) bicultural identity: belonging to a worldwide community, (2) possible selves: broadening the scope of possibilities and (3) becoming an English teacher: an ongoing process. These categories are described in what comes next in this section.

Bicultural Identity: Belonging to a Worldwide Culture

Arnett (2002) suggested that learners of English can develop bicultural identities that entail

both a local and a global identity that “gives them a sense of belonging to a worldwide culture” (p. 777). There is another concept that can be brought here to explain the identity of the learners who study English in their countries of birth, and it is the concept of the global imagined identity of L2 learners (Ryan, 2006, p. 42). This concept is linked to the culture of the target language, in this case, English, and how the learners can decide if they are willing to learn the language of that culture. Therefore, if learners see themselves as part of the processes of globalisation, then they will be willing to learn English; thus, the element of menace is removed from their minds.

I can start my job here in Hungary and improve my skills and later when I am better I want to move abroad. (S02H.Int)
Living abroad in a Nordic country or at least, traveling a lot around the world meeting and learning lots of new countries, languages and cultures, also sharing my culture, my thoughts, teaching about my homeland and my language. (AR.C p2)

The category we are describing here gathers the elements that correspond to the identification of the learners as members of a worldwide community. This characteristic of living and working abroad can be interpreted as the search some of the English learners are continuously immersed in about knowing new cultures and finding new opportunities of personal and professional developments. They feel the need of using English as the means to explore and know different cultures to broaden their way of thinking and visualise the world from the difference and diversity. Further, they see themselves as members of a constant intercultural dialogue in which they can gain from the other cultures, but they can also give from their own.

I hope that in a future I could reach even the level C2, because I would like to travel to Canada and if it is possible, to settle there, without forgetting my beloved Colombia. (JA.C p3)
A few years ago, my plan was to go abroad after university. I wanted to live in London, because my favorite football team, Arsenal, is there. (S01H.n3)

I'd definitely choose England or maybe Spain. In England, I could practice the language every day, talk with native speakers and in this way, my language skills would improve. (S07H.n3)

Learners' sense of accepting English as the bridge of communication with people from divergent countries and cultures removes the feeling of seeing themselves as foreigners; instead, they identify themselves as members of a multilingual community that is formed by multilingual identities:

In my future, it [English] could be more important, especially if I move abroad because English is useful everywhere. It is the language most people are familiar with. Even if they are in a country where English is not the mother tongue [...] (S03H.Int)

English is a means that I can use to meet people and to be a more international person, not a local person. I can use English later in my life. (S01H.Int)

When I speak in English I feel like a powerful girl, I feel that I can talk to anyone in the world and I feel that I'm also learning about different cultures. (KR.C p7)

The analysis of the narratives indicated that English learners in both contexts, Hungary and Colombia, recognise English as the language utilised in the multilingual world. The group of participants imagine themselves belonging to a worldwide culture, where they can learn from the interactions with others.

Possible Selves: Broadening the Scope of Possibilities

In this category, we can appreciate how English learners perceive that learning this language allows them a wider range of possibilities when choosing who they want to be. Future teachers see themselves not only as such but also as members of diplomacy and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and also as translators and interpreters.

According to Carver et al. (1994), cited in Dörnyei (2009), possible selves represent "the individuals' ideas of what they *might* become,

what they would *like* to become and what they are *afraid* of becoming" (emphasis by the author), and these possible selves denote "a unique self-dimension in that they refer to future rather than current self-states" (p. 11). What an individual might or would like to become is connected to the power of imaginations that, in the case of the participants of this project, seems to be boosted by the fact of learning a new language that they consider the gate to access a broader scope of possibilities for their future working life.

Some of the English learners in both programmes see themselves as teachers in their home countries. This imagined identity brings particular features that make the learners work hard to achieve a good level of English to become a good teacher with the purpose of helping their future students to construct a better society. The connection these learners find between English and education is founded on the feelings of seeing a more suitable world. Learners see themselves playing the crucial role of teachers to engage new generations in positive changes for the country. This imagined identity extends the horizons of a country development through the teaching of a global language. A dialogue between the local and the global identity can be undeniable in this category.

My life goes around passion for what I want to do in the future in teaching and how do I got related with English as my focus not only to produce bilingual people, more for help in the construction of future persons that bring something special to society and at the time will help to develop a better country. (DB.C p6)

Despite how hard the academy can sometimes be, with its sleepless and hard works, it is the love of teaching that keeps me firm and happy every day studying to become what I so admire, and it is a great teacher, who always fight and put everything of her so that through teaching this country and its people who need us so much, never faint and become in that new Colombia with which I dream so much. Finally, that is my vision for the future and that is why every day I fall in love with being able to be a future teacher and to be able to continue to find myself every day. (IR.C p2)

As stated above, English learners also identify themselves in their future as members of diplomacy and NGOs.

I want to help with NGOs specially in countries like India or Thailand, because I found those countries amazing and with a rich culture and many different things if you compared with countries like USA or England, those countries have a respect for their beliefs and their costumes and that's so beautiful and shows a contrast of all the things we live and we experiment in the occidental side. (DR.C p5)
I would really enjoy working in the administrative area for example in an EU office as a translator or a diplomat. I would like to meet important people like politicians, and discussing serious topics. I hope that, by my job, I will be able to help disadvantaged people who are suffering due to war, famine or natural disasters. I also want to volunteer for charity organizations such as The International Red Cross, or UNICEF. (S01H.n2)

During the analysis of data, the imagined identity of the learners as translators and interpreters was also found. This finding shows how translation is perceived by the learners as a powerful tool that promotes intercultural dialogue between speakers from different backgrounds and languages. Learners see the world as a space of diversity where they help create an increasingly borderless community through translation and interpretation. Learners also imagine themselves as translators and interpreters to mediate between individuals. Therefore, they assure that they should be immersed in an ongoing process of training to acquire the high level of English needed to achieve this purpose.

I will learn how to use English properly in every situation, since I want to be an interpreter (but mostly, a translator). I imagine myself translating literary works and maybe occasionally interpreting. (S02H.Int)

I think my plans will work and I will be working as an interpreter or someone who helps people communicate with each other. (S05H.n2)

The excerpts above also show an investment in which the future language teachers “invest in the target language...understanding that they will

acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources (capital, goods, real state, money), which in turn increase the value of their capital and social power” (Norton, 2013b, p. 6), a capital and social power represented in better and wider job opportunities. The scope of possibilities for the future increases when learning a target language. The relationship between investment and identity is a key element to understand the changing and possible identities learners construct.

Becoming an English Teacher: An Ongoing Process

The possibility of becoming an English teacher motivates the learners to fulfil the requirements of the ELT community, especially achieving the language proficiency and “the specific forms of practice; in our case language teaching and learning” (Díaz-Maggioli, 2012, p. 12). For instance, one of the learners stated the following:

The reading skill class helps also to read and interpret sentences in a different way to understand them, and the writing skill class helps to write more articles and essays and we have the use of English, sentences, prepositions. Those are very important. (S03H.Int)

It could be said that the search for proficiency is marked by the internalisation of the dichotomy native vs. non-native speakers of English and the struggle that this implies, which leads students to look for distinct ways to improve their language level as it can be seen in these excerpts:

I like to watch movies in English with closed captions, just to see the way they pronounce the words and listening and reading books or articles. I do like comedy movies and action movies. (S08H.n4)

I like to read newspaper articles [...] There are also some places in Bogotá where you have the opportunity to speak with native speakers, depending on your level and that's a good tool because is the closest chance that you have to know about English people and their culture. (DN.C p2)

In terms of the professional knowledge related to theory and practice for language teaching and learning, the students acknowledge the opportunities the teacher education programmes provide for them to be engaged in activities that promote their teacher development and academic skills:

In university I have learned to talk in front of others, I learned to manage a classroom, I learn new English words every day and I learn about different cultures from all around the world. (KR.C p7)
The programme has good classes to improve my English, for example, communication skills class because I am a shy person, in this class I can speak in English with the other people without being shy. (S03H.Int)

Finally, as future English teachers in their early stages of language teacher education, students still face the ontological dilemma related to being a teacher. Given this situation, it is interesting to note that pleasant experiences help them in the decision to continue their process, as we can see in the excerpts below:

I think that the best experience I have ever had in the B.Ed. program, was in first semester, the English teacher I had at that stage was simply amazing, and I learnt a lot from him. He made me feel sure about this career, and about being an English teacher. Clearly, that experience, made me want to continue in the program. (SB.C p1)

This does not mean that unpleasant experiences make them give up their career; on the contrary, this drives their agency due to their great internal motivation, which leads them to invest in the language through autonomous work:

I had a terrible teacher, so I realized that it is too important the autonomous work. That's why I started to improve by myself, watching movies, reading books, looking for free English courses online, talking to native English speakers in chat rooms, and so on. (CS.C p2)

In sum, the participants of the study who belong to teacher education programmes seek to improve their English Language and Teaching skills

through their own investment and take advantage of the opportunities that programmes provide them to engage in practices related to their language teaching development. English learners know that the process of improving their language and teaching skills does not end in the classroom, and they look for opportunities to correct the deficiencies that the programme they study may have. Therefore, they know that being a language teacher is an ongoing process that depends not only on the programme but also on their own effort.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

This study sought to inquire the imagined identities of EFL learners enrolled in English programmes from two different contexts and to explore how those imagined identities were connected to their imagined community. Additionally, the study intended to investigate the actions and practices of those learners in their language learning that might shape their imagined identities. The analysis of data demonstrated that the imagined identities of the EFL learners are connected to their imagined community and that the practices in their language learning aim at developing the language proficiency and the language teaching and learning skills required for them to be able to belong to the target language and professional community.

Through the analysis of the narratives of the EFL learners in Colombia and Hungary, three main categories were identified and entitled as follows: (1) bicultural identity: belonging to a worldwide culture, (2) possible selves: broadening the scope of possibilities and (3) becoming an English teacher: an ongoing process. Initially, the EFL learners show their desire to belong to a world community in which they retain their local identity and subscribe to a global identity in which English is the main means of communication. In the second category, learning English offers the EFL learners a range of possibilities that goes beyond being an English teacher. For these learners, English allows them to become part of different communities of practice, which include imagined identities, such as diplomats and translators. Within these communities, their

imagined identity is linked to the desire to build a better world, one in which diversity is welcome and a borderless community in which they can interact and mediate between individuals. Finally, their imagined community is linked to an ongoing process of building their imagined professional identity that is connected to achieving English language proficiency and language teaching skills. To achieve this desired professional identity, the EFL learners enrolled in these English programmes invest in the target language trying to fulfil the gaps they find in the classes by exercising agency in their learning process.

The results of the studies display some differences and similarities between the Colombian and Hungarian contexts. The biggest and most important difference between the students of the two contexts in terms of their imagined identities has to do with the fact that the Colombian students show a greater internalisation of the true mission of a language teacher than the Hungarian students. For this reason, the imagined identity of the latter is related to other professions, such as translators, interpreters or diplomats. The ideal self of these Hungarian students might be derived from the fact that they feel their future as engaged members of the European Union.

In the case of the Colombian students, their internalisation of the role as English teachers can be due to the emphasis on education placed by the programme to which they are enrolled in. Nonetheless, it is also true that the students in both contexts seek to develop a bicultural identity and that they dream of a better world. The bicultural identity allows them to preserve elements of their own culture and at the same time take part in a global world through a cultural exchange mediated by English. Finally, the students in both contexts struggle to achieve not only proficiency but also the expected academic and pedagogical skills to be good English teachers in an ongoing process of professional identity construction.

This study has some implications in terms of English language teacher and English language teacher education. Firstly, it is important to recognise the struggles the future English language teachers

go through in their language learning process and identity construction as this information can be useful to design English language teacher education programmes more aligned with the expectations of the future English teachers, “thus enhancing and illuminating multiple ways of becoming a teacher” (Sarasa, 2016, p. 110).

Secondly, imagination is connected to our desires. In this study, we could see how imagination leads students to invest in their learning in various ways, such as integrating to communities to interact in the target language, using new technologies and even foreseeing their future identity. Imagination is a category that must be aligned to the design of EFL programmes as it is an important element for the investment and identity construction of students. Finally, knowing the stories that our students tell in their narratives is pivotal to recognise other possibilities in the design of EFL programmes.

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