Article

Building and Sustaining a Group of Chinese EFL Learners' Imagined Identities and Agency

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Abstract: This study explores the imagined identities of three EFL undergraduates at a local public university in China, and how these identities relate to their commitment to language learning. Data were gathered through classroom observations, interviews, course documents, and student artefacts for two academic semesters. The data showed that the students' imagined identities with regards to their professional development, academic pursuits, and corresponding social roles developed throughout their language learning trajectories. In turn, their imagined professional and social identities informed their current EFL learning agency in terms of their initiative to learn English at the university. The findings suggest that a focused imagined identity assists students in building self-discipline and choosing appropriate learning skills. As the current study presents a limited group of students that may not fully represent EFL students' imagined identities in China, a longitudinal study may further reveal other factors that could contribute to this topic in the future. Although the construction and development of one's imagined identity are complex and dynamic, the data show that the earlier one sets a clear professional or academic imagined identity, the more motivated a student is to learn the target language.

Keywords: English as a foreign language; EFL learner; imagined identity; agency

1. Introduction

A cognitive approach to language learning research based on theories of motivation (Dörnyei [1,2]) does not fully meet the demands of current English education practices. It seems important to perceive English learning as a more complex, dynamic sociocultural process (De Valenzuela [3]) that often occurs beyond the classroom. The transformation from cognitive to sociocultural exploration in language learning research is conceptualized by Block [4] as a social turn. One example of this social turn at the micro level is seen among English major undergraduates in China during their second and third academic year. For example, in the current study, students with clear career goals are well adapted to their current academic environment and appear to improve their language proficiency. Such students learn English with a clear purpose and make efforts early on in their academic career or studies. On the contrary, those without clear plans for future academic or professional goals feel unsure of the direction of their efforts. Thus, it is often difficult for the latter group to fully engage in language learning.

In order to better address the difference in learning between the two types of language learners, the researchers examined a group of EFL students in the English department who were learning English at the aforementioned university between September 2020 and June 2021. With the support of the Dean of the English department and two English teachers, the researchers introduced the research project to sophomore English majors in each class. After the students fully understood this research project, more than a dozen students showed interest and were willing to participate. The researchers were interested

in understanding the ways in which students learn English in relation to how they imagine their future professions and lives. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of this topic, this research attempted to focus on three focal students, who represented EFL learners with different ways of planning their career.

The researchers drew upon Early and Norton [5], Norton [6], and Luong and Tran's [7] concept of imagined identity to analyze students' academic pursuits and career planning. The researchers are also interested in how these imagined identities relate to the students' EFL studies at the university. As EFL (or other language) learning is perceived by van Lier [8] as an intentional act with initiative, the capability of this initiative action is conceptualized as agency (Aro [9]). Thus, as the researchers attempt to understand the students' imagined identities during their learning trajectories, the concept of agency seems to be interrelated to their identities. The study attempts to answer the following primary research questions:

1.　What are the focal students' imagined identities with regards to EFL learning?
2.　How do these imagined identities inform students' agency as language learners?

In an attempt to address these questions, the study offers implications for EFL learners who struggle with English learning and career planning, and provides pedagogic suggestions for language educators and researchers in China and beyond. This article presents the research procedure and results in six sections. In the introduction, we put forward research questions; in section two, we present the literature review; in section three, we explain the research methods; in section four, we report the main findings; in section five, we discuss the research results; and in the last section, we summarize the study, restate the research questions, clarify the significance and limitations of current study, and recommend future research directions.

2. Literature Review

During the past two decades, increasing numbers of researchers have begun to explore learner identity (Norton [10–12]) by examining learner-related social and cultural practices. Darvin and Norton [13] considered language learner identity as a set of relationships that comprise race, gender, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. It shapes interactions in communities of practice or learning contexts over time and space. Norton [14], and Norton and Toohey [15] draw upon a poststructuralist view to argue that "identity" is not a fixed concept but one that must be understood with respect to a language learner's relationship to a broader social world. Thus, the construct of identity is fluid, dynamic, and hybrid (Teng [16]), instead of static, concrete, and invariant. Recent studies on EFL or ESL (English as a second language) learning provide rich interpretations of identity as a sociocultural construct continuously negotiated over time (Toohey [17]; Norton and Gao [18]; Norton [19]; Xu [20]; De Costa and Norton [21]). As Norton [6] argues, identity implies a learner's understanding of their relationship towards the world, as well as the way in which that relationship has been constructed and will be reconstructed in the future. This concept bridges past, present, and future, and captures varied social relations. In both the past and present, learner identity was and is being constructed in communities of practice (Wenger [13]), such as learning groups and social practices in institutions. As for the future, it can be virtually constructed in the imagination based on previous experiences and one's personal understanding of all other relations. For example, one participant in this study experienced a successful professional and academic career as an English teacher at an English training school. This experience provided her self-confidence, and informed her future career plans and identity as a professional. In this regard, identity development bridges the past, present and future.

Wenger [13] predicted the possibility of relating imagination to identity. He regarded imagination as an extension of oneself and a transcendence of time and space. That is, language learners can create a new image of themselves and what they hope to achieve professionally as well as academically. This is where the term "imagined identity" was coined. More specifically, Luong and Tran [7] added that a language learner's imagined

identity is an ideal self as a language learner and professional. It allows them to project a new self-image in terms of professional development and social interactions in the future. In a broader sense, as Norton [22] argues, imagined identity refers to a virtual identity in the mind regarding the relationship between oneself and other people or events that one has virtually no direct interaction with. Imagination in this sense, according to Xu [20], allows individuals to create unlimited images of themselves on the foundation of limited personal lived experiences from their past and present. With regards to language learning, although imagined identity is virtual and intangible in its existential form, it guides one's navigation in the language learning process. As Chik [23] argues, if a learner is responsible for his or her language learning, his or her imagined identity provides the direction and motivation for learning. The responsibility for one's learning is conceptualized by Larsen–Freeman [24] and many others (Tae youn Ahn [25]; Ray [26]; Lipponen and Kumpulainen [27]) as agency. If one's imagined identity provides purpose for one's academic and professional goals, agency attempts to answer the question of how to take ownership of one's actions in order to achieve those goals.

The concept of "agency" is defined by Hunter and Cooke [28] and Ray [26] as the capacity to initiate an intentional act. Huang and Benson [29] relate the construct of agency to consciously purposeful action. Language learning agency, in particular, not only indicates that the learner (or agent) has the capacity to freely choose the best means to build their imagined identity but also implies that one may intentionally adapt to the learning environment or change the situation for the better (Ray [26]). In Chik's [23] case study of two EFL learners, one focal participant, Karen, hoped to construct an imagined identity as an English-speaking teacher; this career pursuit guided Karen to build responsibility (and thus, agency) for her English learning with the goal of becoming a qualified speaker. When confronted with institutional restrictions, she changed her situation for the better by creating "individual spaces". Through her created "spaces", Karen challenged institutional doctrines by successfully participating in spoken English practices outside the classroom to support her oral English skills. As Biesta and Tedder [30] state, the agent takes control and ownership of his or her learning, which in turn may influence her future career and academic goals.

In this current study, the undergraduate students' imagined identities are often defined by their future professional and academic goals, such as becoming an English teacher or entering postgraduate studies. The EFL students' agency in this study is seen in the ways in which they pro-actively utilize their English language learning to achieve their future professional and/or academic goals (fulfilling the imagined identity), particularly when facing constraints from their institution and family-related challenges. To date, the ways in which English majors' imagined identities inform their EFL learning agency in this local institutionalized context in China have rarely been explored. The current study aims to shed light on this topic in this local context in China.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

The research adopted a qualitative approach to address the aforementioned research questions. First and foremost, the researchers attempted to explore the possible relationship between the focal EFL learners' imagined identities and language learning agency based on various data sources. These sources include classroom observation field notes, interviews with the focal participants, informal interviews with related faculty and staff members, course documents, and focal students' diaries, notebooks, and class assignments. Interviews and field notes were the primary data for this research. The interviews included semi-structured (see Appendix A) and open interviews. Other data sources such as course syllabi and students' assignments were used to triangulate the interview and field note data.

With regard to the data analysis, the researchers adopted Miles et al.'s [31] qualitative analysis strategy to categorize the data and produce results through an inductive method. There was no explicit theoretical framework for guidance during the initial stage of the

data collection. With further data collection and analysis, the researchers gained clarity regarding the focal students' EFL learning trajectories, as well as their personal views of their present language learning and future career. Key words and phrases emerged from the data related to the aforementioned theme, which further guided the next step of data collection. Based on the overall analysis of the data, the researchers discovered the primary thematic issues: how the participants imagined their future professional and social identities in relation to the current language learning at university, and how such imagined identities informed their need to learn English.

3.2. Participants

The three focal participants were female sophomore English majors—Candice, Margaret, and Selena (pseudonyms)—with an average age of 20. Based on our initial background interview, they perceived themselves as studious English learners in class, but their responses showed that each student represented different types of learners with respect to their professional goals and academic pursuits. The participants were selected mainly based on their similar (a) English learning trajectories, (b) entrance exam scores, and (c) attentiveness in English classes, as observed by the researchers in the classroom (refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Focal participants' background.

Pseudonym	Age	Socio-Economic Status	Years of English Learning	Personality (as Perceived by the Participants)	Imagination for Future Profession
Candice	19	Low-income rural family	9	Active, open-minded, with strong willpower	Postgraduate education; a teacher of English at university
Margaret	20	Single-parent urban family	12	Positive, optimistic, kind-hearted, perseverant	An English teacher at a local junior high school
Selena	20	Middle-class urban family	10	Introverted and inarticulate	A bit confused by multiple options; possibly an English teacher

3.2.1. Candice's Story

Candice was a 19-year-old female from a low-income rural family. Her mother, an illiterate homemaker, had high hopes that Candice would be a school teacher near her home town. Considering their socioeconomic status, in her mother's opinion, it was expected that Candice would be a homemaker and live an average life in the future. According to Candice (interview, 8 November 2020), her family had struggled financially since her childhood, and Candice hoped to pursue a different life with personal effort. In order to do so, Candice felt that education could offer new opportunities. She made exceptional efforts to learn English as an English major, and thus earned excellent grades at the university. She maintained a strong desire to complete postgraduate education at a top university in China.

3.2.2. Margaret's Story

Margaret was from a single-parent family. Since losing her father, she lived with her mother, who was deaf and mute. Margaret learned to shoulder the burden of family responsibilities since childhood. She actively participated in classroom discussions and school projects. Margaret's professional and academic goal was to become a primary or

middle school English teacher. Almost equally important to her future career was her desire to find a stable job to support her family.

3.2.3. Selena's Story

Selena came from a middle-class urban family. She initially admitted that she had no clear idea about her future career (interview, 15 September 2020). She considered several possibilities for her professional identity, such as being a salesperson, a self-employed shopkeeper, or a teacher. She was also considering taking the postgraduate entrance exam but remained unsure. In the face of unemployment issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she began to seriously consider her plans to get a job. According to Selena (interview, 21 April 2021), she had the opportunity to work part-time as an English teacher, which she greatly enjoyed. This experience instigated her desire to learn and improve her English skills.

3.3. Data Collection

The data were collected throughout two semesters, from September 2020 to June 2021. The methods of data collection included (a) classroom observation and field notes, (b) semi-structured and open interviews, and (c) documents and artefacts, such as course syllabi and student assignments.

The researchers observed the focal students' classes four times per week. With the permission of the two teachers, the researchers observed the two classes: an intensive reading class, and an oral English class. The researchers took field notes, primarily about the class atmosphere, teacher–student interactions, and group discussions. Specifically, the notes were focused on the participants' responses during classroom learning, student presentations, and their stage acting performance, as well as teacher feedback. During breaks between the classes, the researchers communicated with the participants in order to clarify what they meant by certain statements from the observation notes, or to respond to questions that the participants may have had for the researchers.

The interviews with each focal participant were conducted separately, either in a public teashop or an empty classroom. Each interview ranged from 15 to 60 min. Moreover, informal interviews with each teacher and other faculty members were conducted based on the interview responses from the participants. The researchers used Chinese to conduct the interviews because the participants felt at ease in expressing their ideas in their native language. The interviews were then translated into English.

In addition to the classroom observations and interviews, the researchers also collected documents, such as course syllabi, the participants' homework, online discussion records, and final grades. Some of the focal students' notebooks and diaries were also collected, with their permission. The classroom field notes and interviews contributed mostly to the primary data, although official documents and students' artefacts also aided in the data analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were coded inductively with reference to Miles et al.'s [31] data analysis strategy. The data analyses were conducted through three rounds of coding: preliminary coding, tentative categorization, and final conceptualization. The preliminary coding helped initially group facts or concrete information about the participants. Wherever one data block (primarily the narratives of the participants) implied a unit of meaning which was directly or indirectly related to the participants' professional plans, desired lifestyles, or academic pursuits, a code was entered with descriptions. In this step, local terminology adopted by the participants' own words was noted. The second round of data analysis was based on the first round. By carefully examining the interrelations among these codes, the researchers formed tentative categories.

The third round of data analysis attempted to correlate these categories by closely examining the logic between the codes. A conceptual framework of identity–agency

relations was constructed based on this endeavor. On the basis of the coding, the researchers triangulated the three types of data in order to ensure their validity (see Figure 1). Member checking was used during the research, whenever necessary, to ensure credibility.
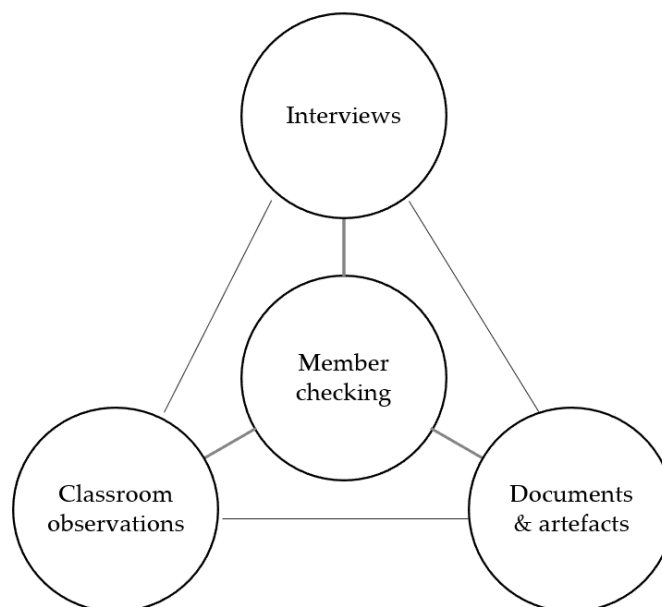
Figure 1. Data Triangulation.

3.5. Researchers' Role

The researchers were responsible for the whole process of the data collection, selection, and analysis, which allowed the theme to emerge gradually. As a faculty member of the university, one of the researchers was familiar with its training purpose and course arrangement. In this study, the researchers selected one class of English major undergraduates to observe. Simultaneously, we arranged a series of semi-structured and open interviews with the focal students separately. We also conducted several informal interviews with related faculty members whenever necessary. In order to ensure anonymity, we adopted pseudonyms to refer to all of the participants involved. All of the interview transcripts, classroom observation fieldnotes, and related documents quoted in this article were translated by the researchers.

4. Findings

This section outlines two major themes that emerged from the data analysis. First, the focal participants formed their unique imagined identities related to English learning throughout their EFL learning trajectories. Second, imagined identities informed learner agency in terms of personal goals and the ability to make choices about their language learning. Because imagined identity for these participants is a future identity as a result of their endeavors in EFL learning, it functions as an important mediator in their English learning. The earlier a student builds a clear and focused imagined identity, the more likely he or she is to take a proactive attitude towards EFL learning.

4.1. Candice: Ambitions to Be "An English Teacher at a University"

Candice dreamt of becoming an English teacher at a university since her first academic year. In an attempt to achieve this goal, she set a short-term goal: continuing postgraduate studies. In an interview at the beginning of her third semester, she described her imagination about her future professional identity:

> I'd like to be an English teacher at a university in China because it's my dream . . . teachers have more free time. I can do other things I like. I have to pass some exams . . . I should complete my postgraduate studies with a master's degree . . .

> I used to think that as a teacher, one must firstly have one's own thoughts, to be independent thinkers . . . in the process of my study, I found myself having a special feeling towards the profession of an English teacher . . . I found that, at the first hand, compared to my classmates, I prefer to express what I have learned. Moreover, I worked as a part-time English teacher in some training institution for a period of time. At that time, I liked the feeling of being a teacher. (Interview, 18 September 2020)

This narrative indicates that Candice yearned for her imagined identity as an English teacher at a university. In her imagination, more free time as a university teacher would allow more freedom with her time, which, according to her understanding, is difficult to gain in other occupations. Another attractive feature of this imagined teacher identity, as Candice imagined, was "hav[ing] one's own thoughts, to be an independent thinker" (interview, 18 September 2020). This impression, according to Candice (interview, 18 September 2020), stemmed from her long-term observation of her teachers. Therefore, she had a "special feeling towards the profession" (interview, 18 September 2020). Moreover, her social practice "as a part-time English teacher in some training institution" (interview, 18 September 2020) further motivated her desire to become an English teacher. This teaching experience apparently gave her self-confidence in pursuing her future career as an English teacher.

In order to fulfil her professional ambitions, Candice must "complete [her] postgraduate studies with a master's degree" (interview, 18 September 2020). An imagined academic identity in the near future for her was as a graduate student majoring in English language and literature at a top university in China, such as the Beijing Foreign Studies University (interview, 18 September 2020). Candice believed herself to be talented in language learning, and was not professionally satisfied with being an English teacher at a local middle or primary school (interview, 18 September 2020). Worse than being a primary school teacher was the idea of becoming a housewife "at home with her husband and children" and being "safe and stable" without "other extravagant hopes", as expected by her mother (interview, 18 September 2020). Candice had a more ambitious dream: studying abroad to acquire more knowledge about the world and broaden her horizons. She also admitted that she hoped to fulfill this ambition after finding "a stable financial foundation in the future" (interview, 18 September 2020). As she said, "The postgraduate entrance examination is only the first step for me. If it is possible, I would prefer to study abroad and then come back to China" (interview, 18 September 2020).

Candice's short-term imagined academic identity is to become a postgraduate student majoring in English language and literature at a top university in China; her medium-term imagined academic identity is as an overseas student or a visiting scholar abroad; her long-term imagined professional identity is as an English language teacher at a domestic university. With these multiple imagined identities as her motivation, Candice had the motivation to study English at her own will, rather than mechanically following pre-set language learning strategies, as is typically seen in many of her fellow Chinese classmates.

Candice also displayed a pro-active attitude towards her English learning. For example, in her intensive reading class, when most students gave a brief presentation on the topic of "environmental pollution", as required, Candice gave a very detailed presentation using multimodal sources. She illustrated her ideas with texts and several photos she had taken. Her explanation was clear and logical, with personal stories and opinions about the topic (field notes, 29 October 2020). When asked how she prepared her presentation, Candice responded:

> As to this kind of open topic . . . I think I should put my heart into it when preparing. It's okay to do as the teacher assigned, but, if you have an extra idea, it's better to extend as well. "Pollution" is a topic that I really want to talk about in detail . . . so I took photos and added textual descriptions. I do not simply complete the teacher's assignment. I have a strong desire to express my own idea instead. Generally, as for this kind of assignments which allow free expression, I

will do a comprehensive job . . . hoping to do better than required. (Interview, 30 October 2020)

As Candice noted, she took the initiative to express herself clearly and logically in English by using any opportunity available to her when she had insightful ideas to share with the class. She regarded the open-topic assignment not as a task but as an opportunity to practice her English presentation skills and to further develop her critical thinking skills. She did "not simply complete the teacher's assignment" as required; she thought she "should put [her] heart into it" (interview, 30 October 2020). Her interest in this topic and her desire to share her personal ideas shed light on her imagined identity. She perceived her imagined identity as a university English teacher, who she believed "must firstly have one's own thoughts, to be independent thinkers" (interview, 18 September 2020). Despite the restricted classroom setting and curriculum, Candice found some "space" to practice her English in a way in which she felt comfortable. In addition, as Candice further noted (interview, 26 May 2021), she sometimes gave impromptu speeches in front of her classmates, but she disdained preparing such speeches in the same manner as many of her peers.

> When I express myself in front of the classmates, I focus on my own logical thinking. I think the logic has to be clear. You have to make yourself understood. Although some students prepare in great details, if the content is messy, it will make people confused. I think logic and free expression is important. A lot of students can recite what they are going to say in advance, but I don't think I need to spend time reciting prepared sentences. (Interview, 26 May 2021)

Candice was unwilling to recite a prepared script when giving a speech, as other students did, although she knew a prepared list of oral expressions helped students obtain "usual [good] grades", according to the teacher (interview with the intensive reading teacher, 22 November 2020). Candice, instead, preferred to focus on "logical thinking" (interview, 26 May 2021), which she believed is more important than "prepared sentences". In her view, it is better to make ideas easier to understand than to present confusing contents based on a prepared list of English expressions. Thus, according to Candice, logical thinking takes precedence over good grades. Within the constraints of the classroom setting and curriculum, Candice still took ownership of her learning by approaching language as a medium to express her thoughts as an independent thinker. This type of autonomous learning strategy might help Candice pave the way to her postgraduate studies in the future.

This short anecdote reflects an important dimension of what Giddens [24] describes as learner agency. It is embodied in a language learner's free will to take actions for their own learning. As seen in the provided data, Candice's agency can be seen in her daily commitment to EFL learning. According to the intensive reading teacher (interview, 26 November 2020), Candice "devote[d] much enthusiasm and emotion" to class activities, proactively participated in class activities, and grasped nearly every opportunity to orally practice English expression and speech skills. Her unremitting efforts rewarded her with a national scholarship and praise from her instructor (interview with the instructor, 13 November 2020).

In summary, Candice, with a clear imagined identity of becoming a university teacher, was able to take pro-active measures to build and practice her English language skills. This was seen in her purposefully adopting the learning strategies that she enjoyed most, rather than to earn good grades. The manner in which Candice learned English shows that, if they are guided by clear academic ideals or professional goals, students may find effective ways to benefit from EFL learning in the classroom.

4.2. Margaret: 'A Fable for My Tomorrow'

At the beginning of her third semester, Margaret made it clear that she wanted to be an English teacher at a junior high school. She believed herself to be a patient teacher and good at communicating with students, which she believed was an important skill to be a

qualified teacher (interview, 18 September 2020). In her fall semester class, she wrote an essay entitled 'A Fable for My Tomorrow' (in an intensive reading class on 15 October 2020, one text was an excerpt from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. According to the teacher's introduction, the book started with a fable of a lovely rural town that suddenly suffered blight, sickness, and death (Fieldnotes, 15 October 2020). After class, the students were asked to write a short fable), in which she described her imagined identity as an English teacher who lives a simple yet meaningful life.

> I have imagined my future more than once. Tomorrow's picture is full of happiness. Every day I spend is meaningful. I associate with people of higher level [those more skilled in English], and I am able to learn advantages from them so that I improve [myself] to varying degrees all the time. Tomorrow, as an English teacher, I can skillfully express English with the world in my eyes to my students, make them understand and love English in this process. In this way it can provide more valuable tools for their future, which will also make me feel a sense of accomplishment. (Excerpt from Margaret's writing assignment: 'A Fable for My Tomorrow', October 2020)

Margaret imagined her future self to be a skilled English teacher, who is prepared to explain the world as she understands it to her students. Margaret's passion for teaching English is further reflected in her writing. She hopes to help her students to "understand and love English", and to "provide more valuable tools for their future" ('A Fable for My Tomorrow', October 2020). She believed her endeavors in English education might bring her a sense of accomplishment. She also dreamt of encountering "people of higher level" so that she would be "able to learn advantages from them" ('A Fable for My Tomorrow', October 2020). In short, Margaret's imagined identity is associated with her strong desire for self-improvement in the English language via learning from others.

Margaret's imagined identity, bestowed with the aforementioned characteristics, further guided her English learning in a number of ways. First, Margaret made the effort to improve her English skills by learning from those whose English proficiency was superior to hers. When listening to a dialogue in a sitcom, for example, she managed to "imitate the pronunciation and intonation of the characters" and thought about "how to cultivate the same pronunciation habits" (part of interview, 22 October 2020). When she found an opportunity in the school dormitory, she discussed how to express ideas in English as a native speaker would with her roommates (interview, 22 October 2020). In her own words, "Even if, sometimes, I just think it over without opening my mouth, I should at least conceive how to express it like a native speaker" (interview, 22 October 2020). Margaret also consciously learned from her classmates if she could learn something to improve her overall English language skills. As a case in point, when she noticed that Selena "often expounds her opinions in detail, and her language is polished", Margaret said, "I will consciously learn from her [Selena] as a valuable resource" (interview, 20 October 2020).

In the classroom, Margret was attentive and active in answering questions from the teacher (field notes, 29 October 2020). She also enjoyed observing the teacher's teaching style and reflecting on the teacher's pedagogic methods (informal interview during the break, 5 October 2020). Margaret believed that various teaching styles benefited students uniquely in different ways:

> The intensive reading teacher tends to explain everything thoroughly in detail, which allows me to more easily grasp related knowledge point. Her teaching style is different from that of Miss Zhang. Miss Zhang oftentimes raises questions and lets us think for ourselves first, and then she will explain them from the students' point of view. Beginner students can benefit more with teacher-led teaching, but for more advanced level students, open questions and thinking for themselves could be more beneficial. (Informal interview during the break, 5 October 2020)

Unlike most of her classmates, who only cared about the content of the class, Margaret was keenly aware of the teaching styles and methods of her teachers, from which she hoped to choose the best for use in her future English teaching. This kind of observation and reflection was particularly meaningful for Margaret, who imagined herself to be a teacher who wanted to provide students with the best English teaching skills by learning about various pedagogical methods (part of interview, 15 October 2020).

In addition to her interest in pedagogy, Margaret also paid special attention to the problem of young students' moral education. In her oral English class, the students were given the opportunity to share a social issue with the class using any multimodal source. Margaret presented a short video about violence among young students (field notes, 20 November 2020). The video depicted a scene in which four boys mercilessly beat a younger boy in the street outside campus after school (field notes, 20 November 2020). Many of her classmates voiced their anger at the four young perpetrators' violent act. Margaret, however, expressed sympathy with the young perpetrators. She expressed her thoughts to the class when she claimed that:

> When I firstly watched the video, I was scared, with tears in my eyes. I felt sympathy with the little child who was beaten, but the violence comes from the failure of family education ... we cannot simply blame the bullies. They are victims too. We need to set up a moral and legal guarantee to make them aware of their misbehaviors and lead them to a right direction. (Field notes, 20 November 2020)

Margaret was concerned with this social problem and the moral guidance of teenagers when she chose the topic for the presentation in oral English class. For Margaret, in order to be an English teacher for junior high school students, English speaking and writing skills are important to learn. However, she believed that English can be used as a means to voice the need for moral education in schools. Such societal issues in education were a topic Margaret felt passionate about, and were part and parcel with her wanting to learn and improve her English.

In sum, Margaret's vision of her future identity as an English teacher at a junior high school is clearly described in her 'A Fable for My Tomorrow' (October 2020) and interviews (24 June 2021). Her imagined identity as a future English educator guided her in a certain direction to improve her English proficiency, specifically by learning from others, reflecting on various teaching methods, and the desire to improve youths' moral education. This career goal encouraged Margaret to take a proactive attitude towards English learning.

4.3. Selena: A Focused Career Plan

A nearly year-long follow-up investigation allowed the researchers to outline the development of Selena's imagined professional identity. Selena did not have a clear career plan until her fourth semester, and her professional goals were unrelated to her English learning; she was more interested in completing the required assignments for the course. However, after experiencing successful teaching practice as a part-time English teacher during the winter vacation, her career goal grew clearer. She gradually grew interested in becoming a primary or secondary school English teacher. It was through this teaching experience that she showed more enthusiasm towards learning English. Her agency as an English learner also grew in accordance with the development of her imagined identity as a successful English learner (see the process in Figure 2).
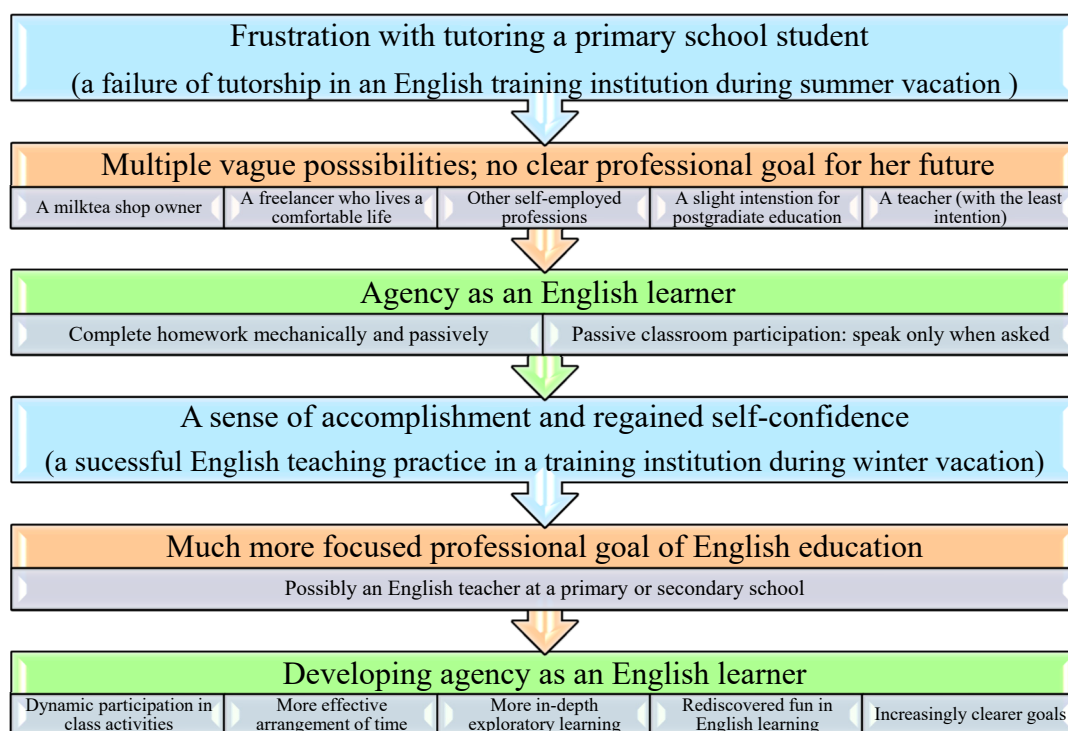
Figure 2. Selena's evolution of imagined identity and English learning agency.

As is reflected in Figure 2, Selena's first English tutoring experience during one of her summer vacations initially led to her reluctance to build a career related to teaching English. This frustration was further explained in one of our interviews:

> During the past summer vacation, I did one-on-one tutoring at the Cambridge English school. When I was there, I could only draw my patience to teach by using a variety of techniques, but the boy still followed his original habits to learn. I became less patient, and I was ready to give up . . . Such a kind of teaching might be very boring . . . No one helped me clarify what I should do . . . Language teaching, thus, is not a profession for me. (Interview, 15 September 2020)

Selena's sense of failure in her tutoring experience presented a frustrating professional scene. When she was asked to clarify her reasons for losing patience and for being "ready to give up", she noted that she felt hopeless when the student was unable to correct his learning habits the way she expected (interview, 15 September 2020). She also noted that, "No one helped [her] clarify what [she] should do" to cope with the problem (interview, 15 September 2020). Thus, Selena felt lost in this profession because she was unable to make meaning from her teaching process. She came to the conclusion that "language teaching . . . is not a profession [for her]" (interview, 15 September 2020).

If teaching English was initially not part of her career goal, Selena considered "open[ing] a small shop, like a milk tea shop, you know. I prefer a kind of freelance job . . . I can't say I don't love any profession at all, but it seems that I don't love it so much" (interview, 15 September 2020). However, during her last semester, she noted to the researchers that she had attended the Cambridge English School to teach children English during winter vacation, which gave her a different experience:

> At this Cambridge school, language teaching is mainly devoted to motivating the children. I must give full play to their enthusiasm . . . I have a sense of accomplishment this time . . . I found I was integrated into students . . . I used to believe that teaching children is annoying or tiresome . . . Now I think I can be a qualified teacher . . . I can apply to be an English teacher at a secondary or

primary school ... You know, I was not clear about this last semester ... Now I feel my goals are getting clearer. (Interview, 21 April 2021)

In contrast with the previous tutoring experience, this teaching experience brought Selena "a sense of accomplishment" and enabled her to regain self-confidence in English teaching (interview, 21 April 2021). By briefly examining the trajectory of Selena's career goal, Selena experienced a transformation from having "no specific idea" about her future profession (interview, 15 September 2020) to expecting to "apply to be an English teacher at a secondary or primary school" (interview, 21 April 2021). This reflects the constructive process of her imagined professional identity (see Figure 2). According to Selena, the primary reason for this transformation was the successful teaching experience at the Cambridge English school during winter vacation (see Figure 2: the fourth stage), which overturned her initial negative view of language teaching.

The evolution of Selena's imagined professional identity informed her agency as an English learner at the university (see Figure 2: the third and sixth stages). Before this successful teaching practice, Selena was hesitant to give public speeches and reluctant to practice oral English, as she said, "I used to be afraid to open my mouth. In fact, I wanted to express my own ideas at that time, but I didn't say" (interview, 21 April 2021). Selena noted that her negative experience with teaching English in the past further contributed to her lack of confidence in the use of English, and more or less to the use for career English purposes. In addition to her teaching experience, Selena's lack of interest in learning the language was also reflected in her coursework: "To be honest, I dislike these course assignments. I don't understand the purpose of doing them. Every time I do my homework, my mood is different" (interview, 29 October 2020). Selena felt burdened with the course assignments because she found no purpose in completing them.

However, after discovering projects in her courses that motivated her interest to further practice her oral English skills, Selena gradually grew more interested in the English language, and hoped to become an English conversation teacher for young children:

Nowadays, I feel that I have more opportunities to speak and express myself at the front of the class. Although I am still a little nervous, I think this kind of opportunity is good for me ... I can improve myself through it ... and it's no need feeling shy ... Recently, I have been keeping my study schedule extremely full ... now I love English more ... I feel that I am not as good as others in a certain aspect. I am aware of the gap, and therefore enhance my motivation because I found something I really like maybe a conversation teacher for kids. (Interview, 21 April 2021)

As Selena gradually constructed an imagined identity as an English-speaking teacher, and built a focused academic practice, her English learning became more focused. For example, she found more "opportunities to speak at the front of the class" (interview, 21 April 2021) and managed to overcome her "shyness" to speak in front of others (interview, 29 October 2020). Thus, according to Selena, she became aware of the transformation of her agency as an EFL learner from "casualness" (interview, 29 October 2020) to "attentiveness" (interview, 21 April 2021), and from a passive attitude to taking ownership of her learning.

In sum, as Csikszentmihalyi [32] argues, focus and goal shape identity, and are in turn reshaped by the latter. Selena's professional goal was not clear at the beginning of this research, such that it was challenging for her to find meaning in any of her English courses. An incidental event (successful teaching practice experience during winter vacation) enabled her to discover the value of language education, and helped her to identify a goal to work towards.

5. Discussion

The researchers followed three English major undergraduate students in order to explore how their imagined identities were formed, and in what way these identities informed learner agency in EFL learning. In order to discover the dynamic process of

imagined identity construction, the researchers traced the participants' English learning trajectories.

The findings revealed that the focal students' imagined identities as English teachers were associated with their professional development, their English learning, and their future academic pursuits. Whether the learners chose to continue their language studies depended, to a great extent, on their imagined future jobs. Each focal participants' imagined identity revealed unique features. For example, Candice's imagined identity was reflected on three distinct levels: as a postgraduate student majoring in English, as a student studying overseas, and ultimately, as an English teacher at a university in China. Margaret had a relatively distinct imagined professional identity: as an English teacher at a junior high school. Selena, on the other hand, experienced a transformed imagined identity, from a lack of clear career goals to a relatively focused plan to become a school English teacher.

Moreover, the participants' imagined identities were negotiated between their individual circumstances and their current social situation. The former includes the learners' family influences, as in the case of Candice. The latter is reflected in their opportunity to learn English, and academic pursuits, as seen in the case of Margaret. As seen in the findings, the development of the students' imagined identities is complex in terms of its multiple correlation with the factors mentioned above; it is dynamic in terms of its fluidity across time and space. The findings also showed that the students' imagined identities are negotiated self-images, rather than pre-conceived idealized images.

In addition, imagined self-images in terms of professional development and academic pursuits set the directions for the students' English learning. These directions guided them to take more ownership of their EFL studies at the university. In this sense, the participants' imagined identity enabled them take charge of their English learning, which is what Giddens [24] conceptualized as agency. Thus, one important dimension of agency lies in the agent's ability to initiate an intentional act with a certain purpose (Hunter and Cooke [28]; Ray [26]) in language learning.

Finally, the findings imply that a focused imagined identity may guide EFL learners to be more self-disciplined in setting their academic goals, and to become well-adjusted to their current institutional environment. As in Selena's case, during her first three semesters, indecisiveness regarding career development caused anxiety and thus negatively influenced her learning. After developing a focused imagined identity as an English teacher, she became more proactive towards English learning, and more self-disciplined regarding planning her career goals. Thus, the earlier the participants constructed a relatively clear imagined identity related to their English learning and career goas, the more likely they were to take pro-active measures to learn the language.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study attempted to address questions concerning the formation of three Chinese EFL learners' imagined identities and their impact on learner agency. As the findings show, the imagined identities in relation to personal career planning and academic pursuits did inform the learners' agency through the activation of the students' subjective initiative with focused language leaning goals. The ways in which the focal students imagined their professional development and future life to a great extent guided their enthusiasm and initiative in language learning though with different features. The exploration of imagined identity and EFL learner agency in current research is often seen within the theoretical framework of Norton's [6] construct of imagined identity and Giddens [24], Ray [26], and Huang and Benson's [29] concept of agency in language learning. This study further shed light on this topic and contributed to existing literature in a few ways. First, the qualitative nature of this study—situated in a local context at a public Chinese university—offered a unique perspective on EFL agency and imagined identity. Second, this study bridged studies on imagined identities and those on agency by examining the students' unique learning attitudes, and social and familial situations. Imagined identities, particularly professional identities, may set important directions for EFL learners, and may inform their

agency. In this way, it extended the previous research, which emphasized either identity construction or learner agency separately.

However, there are a few limitations to this current study. This study presented a limited group of students that may not fully represent EFL Chinese students' imagined identities in the current research setting. As the current study is a part of a larger project, perhaps, a longitudinal study on more participants across a longer research cycle may further reveal other factors that could contribute to this topic. Because qualitative research is not meant to be generalized, quantitative analysis based on wider statistical data might be applied to help draw more universal conclusions in the future. Finally, this research was conducted during nationwide pandemic control, which might influence students' professional and academic goals in unique ways compared to before the pandemic. Ascertaining how these adjusted goals are formed and in what way they may further affect learner agency may require additional exploration in future studies.

The study's findings hold important pedagogical implications for EFL researchers and educators globally. First, some problems that have long plagued EFL educators at universities, such as the gap between efficient EFL learners and the struggling learners, may be explained in light of the relationship between imagined identity and learner agency. Moreover, students' extracurricular experiences in relation to EFL learning may be crucial for the formation of imagined identity and learner agency, as in the case of Selena. Learners' self-confidence, gained either in class or from social practice, is crucial for the improvement of language learning. EFL teachers must teach in a way that facilitates students' self-confidence.

Second, it might be helpful for students if language educators assisted students in discussing professional goals early in their academic career. Setting such goals may improve students' motivation to learn the target language. The data in this study revealed that when students envisioned an identity in which English had a purpose (either professionally or academically), they were more cognizant of their learning.

Third, it is possible that students may feel constrained by institutional regulations, especially when facing contradictions between personal expectations and curriculum requirements (such as assignments, teaching inspections, and grading systems). If they construct imagined professional or academic identities, students (such as in the case of Candice) may find more freedom to negotiate their language learning. EFL educators may assist these students by, perhaps, encouraging this sort of "free display" to build their multi-faceted language skills by offering "assignments which allow free expression" (interview, 30 October 2020).

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Appendix A. Example of Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Have you any idea about future job? Is it related to your English learning?
2. Is your idea about future job influenced by others? If it is, who and how?

3. What English language proficiency do you think you should achieve when you graduate?
4. What do you learn from the oral class/intensive reading class you attend? What do you learn from the teacher's feedback?
5. What do you learn from your extracurricular reading, if any? What do you learn from your social practice, if any?
6. Looking back at this semester, what are your main achievements in English learning? Have you achieved your expected goals set at the beginning of the semester?
7. Have you strengthened your confidence in English learning? Has your attitude toward English learning changed?

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