



Research Article

Imagined Communities and Investment in Learning: Exploring their Interplay among TEFL Students

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ABSTRACT

The concepts of imagined communities and investment in learning reflect the social turn in applied linguistics, providing valuable insights into the complexities of learners' experiences. This research attempted to investigate the relationship between Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) students' imagined communities and investment in learning, and whether the former predicts the latter. To this end, 200 TEFL students completed the researcher-made questionnaires on imagined communities and investment in learning. Additionally, 27 TEFL students participated in the semi-structured interview to gain deeper insights into these variables. Linear regression analysis showed that imagined communities significantly predicted investment in learning. The interviews, conducted online via Google Meet and lasting 10–15 minutes each, were analyzed in NVivo 14 using reflexive thematic analysis. This analysis identified key themes and codes related to learners' investment and their imagined communities. This study suggests that imagined community is associated with higher investment in learning and may play a role in shaping TEFL students' engagement. This indicates the significant role of imagination in teacher education and provides practical implications for educators to enhance learners' engagement through future-oriented strategies.



Introduction

Contextual Background of the Study

Research has established that individuals' connections to imagined communities—those extending beyond their immediate realities—significantly shape their identity formation and influence their engagement and investment in learning (Kanno & Norton, 2003). In Iran, the quick expansion and diverse range of English language students necessitate a well-qualified group of English instructors to serve a varied body of learners with various linguistic, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds (Shakki, 2022). Educators indeed play a significant role in teaching learners who struggle to adjust to the language and culture within their communities and schools. Thus, they need to engage in educator training to enhance their academic knowledge and skills through experiences gained in teacher training programs and practical teaching during their primary training (Ahn, 2019; Wang & Derakhshan, 2024), as they progress through their learning journey and professional growth, they develop their educator identities, which form the basis for how they understand and implement the educational theories they have studied alongside their class experiences. Teacher training processes within teaching programs and beyond are inherently related to the formation of identities of teachers (Nguyen & Ngo, 2023). In her study, Norton (2000) refers to identity as the way people understand their connection to the universe, how that connection is formed over time and place, and how people perceive possibilities for the future. Two deeply related concepts that emerged as extensions of identity research are students' imagined communities and investment in learning of language (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Soltanian & Ghapanchi, 2021; Yuan, 2019).

Anderson (2016) first introduced "imagined communities," and Norton (2001) later modified it concerning language learning. It refers to any imagined communities in which language students desire attachment as they engage in language learning. Imagined communities refer to groups constructed socially, where members get a sense of attachment even without direct interactions with the members (Norton, 2016). This idea was expanded within language learning, indicating that students' imagined communities can greatly affect their motivation, agency, and investment in their educational process (Norton, 2001).

Learning investment signifies students' dedication to acquiring a second language, encompassing their imagined identities, aspirations for the future, interest in the activities within a language classroom or community, and following enhancements in learning a language (Darvin & Norton, 2021). As a construct mainly rooted in sociology, Norton and Gao (2008) introduced investment instead of the conventional psychological concept of motivation, enriching the understanding of motivation in language education. The investment allows for a more thorough examination of the language learning procedure, portraying the student as a social agency actively participating in the language learning process. This construct reflects the students' commitment to mastering a second language (L2), acknowledging their imagined identities and future aspirations (Norton, 2016).

The concepts of learning investment and imagined communities were studied solely through qualitative methods, focusing on the viewpoints of English language students (e.g., Goharimehr, 2018; Nghia, 2020; Xu, 2013). Nonetheless, there are insufficient studies aimed at understanding the imagined communities and investment of learner educators in their teacher training and instructional tasks, especially in the

context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) bachelor's and master's programs. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has not yet been an investigation of the interconnection between imagined communities and investment in learning in the context of TEFL bachelor's and master's programs. The present research seeks to investigate how Iranian TEFL learner educators develop their identities through imagined communities. The research purpose is to analyze the relationship between the imagined communities of Bachelor's (BA) and Master's (MA) TEFL learners and their commitment to learning, determining whether and to what degree these imagined communities can forecast their learning investment.

The present research seeks to fill a gap in the literature by employing a mixed-methods approach to examine the relationship between imagined communities and investment in learning among Iranian TEFL students at both the BA and MA levels. While much of the existing research has focused on English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts (Yuan, 2019), there is limited understanding of how these constructs operate within EFL settings, particularly in countries like Iran. Moreover, few studies have comparatively explored how BA and MA TEFL learners envision their professional communities and how these visions influence their investment in learning. By incorporating both quantitative data and qualitative insights obtained through semi-structured interviews, this study provides a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of the motivations and identity formations of TEFL students in Iran. By examining such distinctions, this research seeks to offer a deeper comprehension of how these concepts develop across various academic levels (Wang & Derakhshan, 2024). Accordingly, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. To what extent do postgraduate TEFL students' imagined communities predict their investment in learning?
2. To what extent do undergraduate TEFL students' imagined communities predict their investment in learning?
3. In what ways do TEFL students invest in their learning?
4. What communities do student teachers envision in their TEFL program?

In exploring these questions, the study seeks to offer insights *into the factors that enhance* or hinder the investment of Iranian TEFL students in their language learning journey. Indeed, the importance of this research lies in its ability to guide teacher training in policy-making in Iran. By exploring the interplay between imagined communities and learning investment, the research can offer meaningful knowledge into how teacher training programs may be structured to enhance student teachers' professional growth and involvement. For example, teacher trainers might facilitate opportunities for learner educators to engage with local and global English Language Teaching (ELT) communities, take part in professional development events, and be involved in reflective practices that foster identity formation and investment in learning. Furthermore, the research results can add valuable perspectives to the wider TEFL field by shedding light on the TEFL learner educators' experiences among non-English speakers. While a significant number of studies on imagined communities and learning investment have concentrated on environments where English is prominently used (Norton, 2001; Kanno & Norton, 2003), this research underscores the specific difficulties and prospects encountered by TEFL learner educators in Iran. Therefore, it broadens our comprehension of how sociocultural environments form language learning and teaching approaches. Finally, the research purpose is to

investigate the connection between imagined communities and learning investment within Iranian TEFL learner educators. By investigating how these learner educators shape their identities through imagined communities and how these identities affect their learning investment and English education, the research intends to offer insights into elements that either promote or obstruct their professional growth and motivation. The research findings could guide teacher training plans and policy development in Iran and aid the wider ELT field by illuminating the TEFL learner educators' experiences among non-English-speaking communities.

Literature Review

Imagined Communities

The concept of imagined communities describes how individuals seek a sense of affiliation with classes of people who are not directly accessible, relying on imaginative power (Winer, 2020). Anderson (2016) first introduced this term to illustrate the nation-state formation, denoting it as imagined because the smallest nation's members will hardly know most of their fellow citizens, visit them, or even hear about them; however, individuals form a mental representation of their community to which they belong. Imagination serves as a positive power that gives hope for a great future and can motivate action (Appadurai, 1996). Future selfhood is a significant element of imagined communities. The possibility of participating in an imagined community at a later stage motivates people to explore different areas, the learning of which takes a long time. Language students often visualize target language users' imagined communities, making it critical in language teaching. Imagination forces students to identify which practices are worth striving for and motivates them to invest effort in achieving their envisioned

futures within community life (Choi, 2018). The understanding of entry into these imagined communities through the target language can greatly inspire language students as an aspect of future selfhood (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019). Research indicated that entry into an imagined community of Mandarin natives was a key element that encouraged heritage language students to study that language (Leeman, 2015). Student teachers are a particular group of learners who might be involved in both classroom practice and pedagogical discourse in their universities. Their learning and involvement could be influenced significantly by their beliefs about their chosen career (Graves, 2000). Whitehead et al. (2006) argued that the imagined communities in which student teachers contemplate reaching their objectives, and the communities of practice that they take part in, might have a significant effect on student teachers' shifting identities throughout their teaching careers. As a result, this might influence the student teachers' degree of investment in their occupations.

Investment in Learning

The learning investment is not just confined to intrinsic motivation; it is closely linked to the identities of students and the social environments where they live (Norton & Toohey, 2011). The term 'investing', as defined by Barkhuizen (2017), means envisaging the future and our identities in connection with our future world. In their study, Darwin and Norton (2015) proposed a model that introduced investment as a dynamic interaction among ideology, capital, and identity. The model posited that students' language learning investment is affected by resource (capital) availability, the identities that individuals create (identity), and the ideological contexts shaping their experiences (ideology). This framework offers a detailed knowledge of how the imagined communities and

investments of Iranian TEFL learner educators are molded by their sociocultural surroundings. Darwin and Norton's (2021) recent findings further differentiated investment and motivation in language learning. They suggested that motivation means the students' readiness to study a language; whereas, investment pertains to their involvement with practicing language within the class or community.

Related Studies

Recent research emphasizes the role of imagined communities in language learning. Pavlenko and Norton (2007) explored how learners' actual and desired affiliations with these communities impact their motivation, autonomy, investment, and resilience. Ovalle Quiroz and Gonzalez (2023) analyzed the effect of visualization and attachment on the identities of future educators, highlighting the critical role of imagined communities in forming future identities.

Additionally, Luong and Tran (2021) performed a thorough literature review concerning imagined communities and identities within EFL teaching. They examined the roles, communities of practice, and conceptions of imagined communities, highlighting the influence of imagined identities on students' interaction with the language. The connection between investment in language learning and the imagined identities of three English language students in Turkey was investigated by Aslan (2020). Moreover, Aslan's (2020) study investigated the imagined communities associated with the subjects involved. Participants engaged in an intense language program, with data gathered through interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. The research found that the development of identity among language students is especially intricate, dynamic, and multifaceted. It also found that the envisioned instrumental community significantly affects

students' imagined identities and their investment in learning a second language.

Wu (2017) also investigated the imagined identities and investment in learning of a group of EFL learners and found that they are inclined to envision their possible selves in association with their English proficiency, along with images of their English language teachers or other professionals in the field of language education. Furthermore, Soltanian and Ghapanchi (2024) examined 945 Iranian EFL learners and reported a moderate degree of investment in their imagined communities. The study further identified significant variations in investment across gender, age groups, and proficiency levels. These findings enhance our understanding of how imagined communities shape language learners' identities and motivation. However, mixed-method studies offering statistical validation remain limited (Norton & Gao, 2008).

Method

Participants

A total of 200 Iranian students enrolled in either BA or MA programs in Teaching TEFL at various branches of Islamic Azad University and state universities participated in the study. All participants specialized in TEFL. From this group, 27 students volunteered and were purposefully selected to participate in a semi-structured interview, following a purposeful sampling strategy.

Table 1

Participants' demographic information

Feature	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	153	77
	Female	47	23
Education	Undergraduate	73	37
	Postgraduate	127	63
Age	18-22	32	17
	23-27	80	40
	28-32	36	18

Feature	Category	Frequency	%
	33-37	26	13
	38-42	19	9.5
	43-47	5	2.5
	48-52	2	1
Teaching Experience (Years)	6 months-1 year	70	35
	2-5	75	37.5
	6-10	32	16
	11-16	14	7
	17-21	7	3.5
	22-26	2	1
Total		200	100.0

Note. N = 200.

Instruments

The Researcher-made Imagined Community Questionnaire

The scale was developed by the researchers with 32 questions (see Appendix A), each based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The developed questionnaire consisted of five constructs: ideal self as a language teacher, ideal educational setting, teaching and learning conditions, job prestige and security, and course usefulness. In the first phase, 243 TEFL students completed the instrument, and an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to examine its underlying structure. In the second phase, the revised version was administered to 200 additional TEFL students, and a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to validate the factor structure. Before these analyses, face and content validity were established through expert review in the field of language education. The participants, aged 18 to 52, included both undergraduate and postgraduate students of both genders, with teaching experience ranging from six months to 26 years. The reliability of the final instrument was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .907, indicating high internal consistency.

The Researcher-made Investment Questionnaire

A 25-item questionnaire (see Appendix B) was developed using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), measuring four constructs: learners' identities and ideal selves, access to capital, commitment to learning, and professional dimensions of TEFL students. In Phase one, 243 TEFL students completed the scale, followed by EFA to explore its structure. In Phase two, the revised version was administered to 200 additional participants, and CFA was conducted for validation. Language education experts confirmed face and content validity. Participants (aged 18-52) represented both genders, undergraduate and postgraduate levels, with teaching experience ranging from 6 months to 26 years. The final scale showed strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .937$).

The semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview (see Appendix C) was conducted online via Google Meet with 27 TEFL students. Each 10-15-minute session was individually scheduled, ensuring participant confidentiality and anonymity.

Table 2

Participants' demographic information for the interview stage

Feature	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	7	26
	Female	20	74
Education	Undergraduate	3	11
	Postgraduate	24	89
Age	18-22	1	3
	23-27	10	38
	28-32	12	45
	33-37	2	7
	38-42	2	7
	43-47	0	0
	48-52	0	0
Teaching Experience (Years)	6 months-1 year	2	7
	2-5	10	38

Feature	Category	Frequency	%
	6-10	9	34
	11-16	5	18
	17-21	1	3
	22-26	0	0
Total		27	100.0

Note. N = 27.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection involved two stages: a questionnaire given to 200 participants, analyzed with SPSS (v27), and semi-structured interviews with 27 participants, transcribed and thematically analyzed using NVivo 14 and Braun and Clarke's (2022) method. This mixed-methods approach offered detailed insights, with interviews deepening the understanding of student teachers' views on imagined communities and learning investment.

Data Analysis

To address the first two research questions, linear regression was applied to test prediction. Assumption checks were carried out before analysis (see Results), confirming that regression was an appropriate method for the data. For the third and fourth questions, interview data were analyzed in NVivo 14 using reflexive thematic analysis (Elliott, 2018), following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase framework: data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, several strategies were applied in line with established guidance (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts in NVivo 14, compared results, and refined the coding framework through consensus discussions. An audit trail was maintained by saving project versions and recording analytic memos to document coding and theme development decisions, thereby enhancing dependability and confirmability. Reflexive notes were also kept to

acknowledge how researchers' perspectives could shape interpretation. Finally, member checking was conducted by sharing a summary of themes with a subset of participants to confirm that the findings resonated with their experiences, strengthening the credibility of the analysis.

Results

Results for Research Questions 1-2

Before addressing the first two research questions, preliminary analyses were conducted to verify key assumptions and determine the appropriate statistical methods (parametric or non-parametric). The assumptions of interval data and participant independence were already satisfied, as the data were measured on an interval scale and participants were independent (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Additional assumptions were assessed by examining the characteristics of the data. These assumptions, according to Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), are:

1. Normality of the distribution of the variables
2. Linear relation between each pair of variables.
3. Homoscedasticity

To assess the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity, descriptive statistics, skewness and kurtosis values, and Q-Q plots were examined. Initial analyses indicated non-normality in several distributions, with kurtosis values exceeding the acceptable range of ± 3 . Mahalanobis distance identified three multivariate outliers, which were removed. After exclusion, all skewness and kurtosis values fell within the acceptable range, and Q-Q plots confirmed approximate normality. Scatterplots revealed no evidence of curvilinear patterns or heteroscedasticity, confirming linear relationships and the assumption of homoscedasticity.

To answer the first two questions, two linear regression analyses were required. However,

before running the analyses, certain assumptions needed to be verified. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), these assumptions are: sample size, multicollinearity, regression normality, and lack of outliers.

Regarding sample size, the researcher followed Tabachnick and Fidell's (2013) criterion, which recommends a minimum of $50 + 8m$ participants (where m is the number of predictors). With one predictor variable, a minimum of 58 participants was required; this condition was met, with 67 undergraduate and 114 postgraduate participants.

Multicollinearity was not a concern, as each regression model included only one independent variable. To assess normality in regression, Normal Probability (P-P) Plots were examined. The points in both plots followed a reasonably straight diagonal line, indicating that the normality assumption was satisfied.

Having all the assumptions in place, two linear regression analyses were run to answer the first and second research questions. Table 3 presents the regression model summary, including the R and R^2 .

Table 3

Regression Summary for R and R²

Educational Level	Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	SE	DW
Undergraduate	1	.64	.41	.40	7.71	1.82
Postgraduate	2	.76	.58	.58	8.16	1.96

Note. Predictors: (Constant), Imagined Communities. Dependent Variable: Investment in Learning. SE = Standard Error of the Estimate; DW = Durbin-Watson.

As shown in Table 3, the correlation coefficient (R) between imagined communities and investment in learning was .64 for undergraduates and .76 for postgraduates, indicating strong positive associations between the two variables in each group. In addition, the regression model for undergraduates had $R = .64$ and $R^2 = .41$, indicating that imagined communities explained 40.9% of the

variance in learning investment (Cohen et al., 2003). The Durbin-Watson statistic ($DW = 1.82$) confirmed independence of errors. For postgraduates, $R = .76$ and $R^2 = .58$, meaning that imagined communities explained 58.4% of the variance, with the DW also within an acceptable range.

Table 4

ANOVA Results for Regression Analyses

Educational Level	Model	SS	df	MS	F	P
Undergraduate	1Regression	2675.19	1	2675.19	45.03	<.001
	Residual	3861.98	65	59.42		
	Total	6537.16	66			
Postgraduate	2Regression	10443.40	1	10443.40	157.03	<.001
	Residual	7448.46	112	66.50		
	Total	17891.86	113			

Note. Dependent Variable: Investment in Learning. Predictors: (Constant), Imagined Communities. SS = Sum of Squares; df = degrees of freedom; MS = Mean Square.

Table 4 shows significant ANOVA results for both groups—undergraduates: $F(1, 65) = 45.03, p < .001$; postgraduates: $F(1, 112) = 157.03, p < .001$ —indicating that the models significantly predicted learning investment.

Table 5
Regression Coefficients for Predicting Investment in Learning

Educational Level	Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	p
			B	SE	β			
Undergraduate	1	(Constant)	37.03	9.32			3.97	<.001
		Imagined Communities	.49	.07	.64		6.71	<.001
Postgraduate	2	(Constant)	5.87	7.65			.77	.445
		Imagined Communities	.73	.06	.76		12.53	<.001

Note. Dependent Variable: Investment in Learning. SE = Standard Error. β = standardized coefficient.

Table 5 presents the standardized beta coefficients, indicating the strength of each predictor's contribution to learning investment. The significance values confirmed that imagined communities were significant predictors in both models. For undergraduates, the model explained 40.9% of the variance ($R^2 = .41$), and the predictor was significant ($\beta = .64, t = 6.71, p < .001$). The positive value of β indicates that higher levels of imagined communities were associated with greater investment in learning. For postgraduate participants, the model explained 58.4% of the variance ($R^2 = .58$), and the predictor was significant ($\beta = .76, t = 12.53, p < .001$), again indicating a positive association between imagined communities and investment.

Results for Research Question 3

In what ways do TEFL students invest in their learning?

To explore how TEFL students invest in their learning, a thematic analysis of participant responses revealed seven distinct areas of investment. These themes—*money, energy, and time; participation in EFL communities; engagement with academic materials; collaboration; continuous learning; classroom*

observation; and keeping up with trends—collectively illustrate a multifaceted and meaningful commitment to professional growth.

Money, energy, and time

One of the most prominent themes that emerged was the substantial personal investment students make in terms of money, energy, and time. Many participants described themselves as highly devoted, with one noting, “I put 100% of myself, including energy and money.” This dedication was not limited to emotional investment but included tangible efforts such as paying for tutorial sessions and purchasing educational materials. Others emphasized a more balanced approach: “I always try to keep everything in moderation,” one student explained, acknowledging a conscientious but sustainable commitment.

Participation in EFL communities

Another theme was the active participation in various EFL communities. Student teachers reported attending Teacher Training Courses (T.T.C.), professional development workshops, webinars, and even international conferences. These experiences not only broadened their perspectives but also helped them stay connected with evolving teaching methodologies. One participant shared, “I joined T.T.C. courses and

online webinars,” while another noted, “I sometimes attend international conferences.” Furthermore, involvement in digital spaces such as online forums and social media channels (e.g., Instagram, Telegram) further showed their desire to remain embedded in professional networks, both formal and informal.

Engagement with academic materials

Several participants emphasized the importance of engaging with pedagogical content outside the classroom. Reading books and scholarly articles related to ELT methodology, as well as watching YouTube videos from experienced educators, were commonly reported practices. These activities illustrate a strong sense of initiative. One student teacher stated, “I try to read certain books in which the author writes about different techniques and methodologies,” while another reflected, “I spend too much time watching YouTube clips of various instructors and taking notes.”

Collaboration

Collaboration emerged as a vital force for learning, with many student teachers seeking out conversations with peers, coworkers, and faculty. These interactions were described as important to their understanding of complex concepts and day-to-day challenges. “Most of the time I ask my questions from my co-workers,” one participant shared. Others expressed interest in collaborating with professors or connecting with doctoral students in the field, expressing a desire to benefit from more experienced voices. Such collaboration fosters a supportive, dialogic approach to learning that aligns with social-constructivist views of teacher development (Johnson, 2009)

Continuous learning

Continuous learning also emerged as a theme from the data. This theme had one highlighted factor, which was continuous professional development that contributed to continuous learning. One respondent affirmed, “Continuous learning is

essential for any teacher,” expressing a broader viewpoint that growth in the TEFL profession is an ongoing, lifelong process (Vadivel et al., 2021)

Classroom observation

Observing other teachers’ classes was another theme that was revealed from the interview data. One participant described, “I also observe the different teaching methods of different teachers.” According to Farrell (2024), classrooms are dynamic, fast-moving environments, and it’s nearly impossible for teachers to be fully aware of everything happening at once. However, engaging in classroom observation allows language teachers to step back and gain deeper insight into the principles, choices, and instinctive decisions that shape their teaching practice (Farrell, 2024).

Keeping up with trends

Lastly, several student teachers articulated a conscious effort to stay current with developments in TEFL. “I try to be up-to-date, and I use tools that can facilitate my learning,” one participant reported. According to Gravani and John (2005), continuing professional development includes staying informed about the latest developments in TEFL, pursuing further qualifications, and developing expertise in specialized areas. This includes embracing evolving teaching methodologies, integrating new learning theories, and building skills in emerging areas such as educational technology.

Taken together, the findings indicated that TEFL students show a remarkable and multifaceted investment in learning. Their investment extends beyond their classroom setting, encompassing their personal and professional lives. Many expressed that they are willing to make financial sacrifices, participate in professional communities, learning materials independently, and engage in meaningful collaboration with their classmates and mentors. Ongoing, career-long professional development is essential for all teachers, enabling them to keep

pace with educational change while continually refining their knowledge, skills, and conceptions of effective teaching (Day, 1999).

Results for Research Question 4

What communities do student teachers envision in their TEFL program?

To investigate what imagined communities TEFL students envision in their learning, a thematic analysis of participant responses revealed seven distinct areas of imagined community. These themes include *financial stability, a respectful and supportive educational context, freedom in teaching, knowledgeable professors, a supportive and respectful teaching community, well-equipped universities and schools, and diversity in universities and schools.*

Financial stability

Student teachers frequently emphasized financial stability as an important aspect of their imagined teaching communities. Many underscored the importance of long-term economic security, stating that “financial security and long-term sustainability are important for teachers.” Others directly mentioned compensation, with one participant asserting that “they should offer fair payment,” and another expanding this by suggesting that schools should provide “fair and competitive salaries that reflect the value of teachers' skills and experience, along with comprehensive benefits packages to support their well-being.” Additionally, insurance services were brought up as a necessary form of institutional support: “I think teachers should be respected by students, and the institute should give teachers insurance services with enough salary.”

A respectful and supportive educational context

Another critical theme was the desire for a respectful and supportive educational context. Participants repeatedly stressed the importance of rapport between students and professors, as seen in the quote: “The way professors behave in front of students and form the rapport between professors

and students is very important.” Additionally, they envision institutions with a supportive environment, where cooperation is prioritized: “Prefer a supportive environment and collaboration with professors and the friendly atmosphere in the university is also very important.” Some also expressed a desire for differential treatment, showing a nuanced understanding of inclusive and respectful learning: “I wish to be respected in the learning community to which I want to belong.”

Freedom in teaching

Student teachers expressed a strong desire for freedom and autonomy in teaching, reflected in the unified coding of the flexible teaching community. One student plainly stated, “Having freedom for teachers is very important,” while another envisioned a classroom in which they could express their creativity: “I want to belong to a teaching community where I have the autonomy to use my supplementary materials.”

Knowledgeable professors

Participants consistently stressed their expectation for knowledgeable professors within their teacher education programs. Respondents noted that “Faculty should be experts in the field, with a deep understanding of both language teaching and intercultural dynamics.” Another echoed this sentiment, emphasizing quality: “I value faculties with a high level of expertise in English language pedagogy.”

Supportive and respectful teaching community

Student teachers also emphasized the significance of belonging to a supportive and respectful teaching community. Several participants stressed the importance of having “good rapport between colleagues and managers” as a key factor. This includes leadership styles that are friendly and approachable: “If I have some kind of supervisors who are friendly and they want to help me, I am eager to listen to them.” The theme also includes

the desire for growth opportunities, with one participant stating, “The school where I want to teach is where I have the possibilities for growth and improvement.” Furthermore, they valued non-competitive, team-oriented environments: “I like to work in a place that has knowledgeable people and colleagues shouldn’t compete in a bad way, and they have to support each other.”

Well-equipped universities and schools

Another significant theme was the need for well-equipped educational institutions. One expressed, “A good university should have good facilities in terms of laboratories, extra-curricular activities that the university provides.” Another remarked on the importance of having adequate teaching tools, stating, “I wish to belong to a teaching community which have good facilities for teaching.”

Diversity in universities and schools

Lastly, student teachers highlighted the importance of diversity and inclusivity within their imagined communities. As one participant put it, “I value a diverse, inclusive environment where different cultures and perspectives are celebrated.” Another expressed the importance of the professional and pedagogical value of such settings: “I believe that a community that supports various perspectives enriches the learning environment for both students and teachers.”

Collectively, these themes indicated that TEFL students envision professional communities that balance material, relational, and pedagogical dimensions. Material dimensions include financial stability, access to insurance, and well-equipped institutions. Financial stability is a key factor influencing the career decisions of preservice teachers in developing countries (Wang & Zhang, 2021).

Additionally, it is crucial to consider how the program can support preservice teachers in developing a strong professional identity and enhancing their motivation to remain in the

teaching profession or pursue a related career path (Wang & Zhang, 2021). The relational dimension underscores a supportive and respectful relationship among students, professors, and colleagues. To promote teachers’ development, the organizational culture must foster and support collegial relationships, as opportunities for learning through peer coaching and feedback depend on a school environment that promotes sustained collaboration and is guided by strong, supportive leadership (Day, 1999). Finally, the pedagogical dimension is reflected in student teachers’ desire for knowledgeable mentors, academic freedom, and inclusive, diverse teaching environments. This diversity will influence factors such as career advancement opportunities, school culture, and how teachers adapt to the now well-established, annually recurring cycle of student cohorts (Day, 1999).

Discussion

This study found a strong positive link between TEFL students’ imagined communities and their investment in learning. Imagined communities significantly predicted learning investment. Thematic analysis showed that students invested through time, effort, materials, collaboration, and continuous development. Their imagined communities emphasized financial stability, supportive environments, autonomy, expert mentors, adequate resources, and diversity.

Regression analyses indicated that imagined communities significantly predicted investment in learning for both undergraduate and postgraduate participants. The predictive strength was higher among postgraduates ($R^2 = .58$) than undergraduates ($R^2 = .41$), which may reflect postgraduate student teachers’ clearer or more developed imagined communities and their greater readiness to invest in learning. However, because

the design of this study is cross-sectional, these associations should not be interpreted as causal. These results point to the role of imagined communities as an important motivational factor across educational levels and are consistent with earlier claims that learners' imagined identities and future professional selves can influence their investment in language learning (Norton, 2013; Kanno & Norton, 2003).

When comparing these results with previous studies (e.g., Pavlenko & Norton, 2007), a consistent theme emerges that imagined communities are associated with students' investment in education. Students' identities, influenced by social factors and imagined communities, can shape their investment in meaningful learning endeavors (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). The present research agrees with their results, offering empirical evidence of the relationship between imagined communities and learning investment for both BA and MA students.

Additionally, these findings align with Ovalle Quiroz and Gonzalez (2023), indicating that imagined communities are related to students' investment in education. The findings of this study revealed that TEFL learners demonstrated a moderate level of investment in their imagined communities and identities, with these three constructs—investment, imagined communities, and identity—being closely interconnected. This aligns with the results reported by Soltanian and Ghapanchi (2024), who also found a significant relationship between these elements in the context of language learning. Because the EFL learners had a moderate level of language identity and investment in language learning, they invested moderately in their imagined communities and identities.

In response to the third research question—regarding TEFL students' investment in learning—participants expressed a strong willingness to invest,

motivated by anticipated personal and professional benefits. This supports Norton and Toohey's (2011) view that learners engage to access material and symbolic resources, and aligns with Kramsch's (2013) notion of investment as driven by expected returns, shaped by learners' agency, identity, and commitment to their goals. Blommaert (2013) notes that global transformations, especially in economic systems, have redefined power relations, influencing how language and communication function across different contexts.

With the rise of digital technologies, as Gee and Hayes (2011) point out, learners now operate across multiple, often overlapping, online and offline spaces, reshaping traditional concepts of identity and interaction. Blommaert (2013) adds that navigating these complex environments requires communicative adaptability, while Darvin and Norton (2015) emphasize that access to diverse virtual spaces allows learners to construct identities beyond the traditional native-speaker framework. Consistent with these insights, participants in this study reported actively engaging in digital platforms—such as online courses, webinars, and professional workshops—to expand their knowledge and build connections in the field of TEFL. These communities provide opportunities for collaboration and academic growth. Learners also expressed a strong desire to work with peers and faculty on research projects, read current literature in the field, and learn through observation and practice.

A strong theme across responses was the value placed on lifelong learning. Student teachers believed that ongoing professional development is essential for becoming successful educators. This view is supported by Doro (2020), whose participants also saw themselves as evolving professionals dedicated to improving their teaching practices. Similarly, Sanches-Silva (2013) found that student teachers remained committed to their

programs by engaging in collaborative academic activities, using English across various platforms, and actively participating in learning communities. These practices not only supported their language development but also contributed to shaping their professional identities.

Regarding the fourth research question (What communities do student teachers envision in their TEFL program?), TEFL students expressed a strong preference for becoming part of a teaching community that ensures financial stability and long-term security. Several participants emphasized the significance of fair and competitive salaries, seeing them as essential to pursuing a sustainable teaching career. These findings are consistent with Soltanian and Ghapanchi (2021), whose study revealed that financial incentives served as a motivating factor for learners to persist in their studies. Their participants imagined themselves as successful English instructors with high earnings, which, in turn, strengthened their motivation to improve their language proficiency. In addition to financial aspects, participants in the current study imagined themselves working and learning in environments characterized by mutual respect and strong support systems.

Furthermore, as both learners and future educators, they expressed a desire to be appreciated by their professors, colleagues, and supervisors. They envisioned ideal academic and professional contexts as collaborative spaces where students support one another, and where faculty and administrators actively promote growth and development. This mirrors Soltanian and Ghapanchi's (2021) findings, in which participants viewed the teaching profession as one that should bring social prestige and respect. Similarly, Kusumawardani et al. (2011) emphasized that learning English offers learners increased social capital and wider life opportunities. Doro (2020) also underscored the importance of reciprocal

respect between students and teachers as a foundation for effective learning communities.

Another critical aspect highlighted by participants was the need for autonomy and flexibility in their future teaching roles. They valued the freedom to tailor their teaching materials and methods according to their students' needs and learning objectives. Additionally, they expressed a desire to work in institutions equipped with the necessary resources to support effective teaching and learning. These insights align with Skilbeck and Connell's (2004) research, which found that educators sought more flexible teaching environments. Caprara et al. (2006) also affirmed that teacher autonomy is crucial, as it empowers educators to adapt curricula to suit learners' diverse needs, thereby enhancing both instructional effectiveness and student outcomes.

Moreover, participants emphasized the importance of being guided by knowledgeable and experienced faculty within their imagined academic communities. They valued professors who not only possessed strong content expertise in English language teaching but were also approachable and supportive. This echoes Doro's (2020) study, where student teachers identified the ideal educator as someone who demonstrates both subject mastery and strong interpersonal communication skills. Participants also envisioned studying and teaching in institutions with adequate facilities—such as well-resourced libraries and labs—that contribute to a conducive learning environment.

Diversity and inclusivity were also regarded as essential features of the ideal educational community. Participants hoped to belong to spaces where varied perspectives and identities are welcomed and respected. This aligns with Kharchenko's (2014) perspective that schools function as microcosms of the broader national identity. Kharchenko critiques the exclusionary practices in supposedly multicultural settings, like

British schools, where diversity is often undermined in practice. Furthermore, Zeichner (2011) emphasized the importance of incorporating social justice into language teacher education by recognizing and responding to the diverse backgrounds and needs of both teachers and students.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of the study enhance the theoretical comprehension of the interplay between learning investment and imagined communities. These concepts indicate a social shift within applied linguistics and may improve our understanding of students' experiences. The notion of imagined communities enables a genuine commitment to academic opportunities, as students imagine themselves as components of communities that are not easily accessible. This research strengthens the idea that imagined communities predict learning investment, establishing a positive association between the two constructs. This theoretical comprehension can aid teachers and scholars in making strategies to bolster learners' investment in learning by recognizing the effect of imagination and identity in the academic journey.

The learning investment-imagined communities link can have critical implications for education. Instructors and educators should acknowledge that learners' commitments to learning are deeply connected to their imagined communities and future goals. By grasping these relationships, educators can design learning environments that enhance and support learners' identities and aspirations. This includes creating opportunities for learners to visualize and work towards their future selves, which may help boost their motivation and dedication to learning. Additionally, teachers should highlight the significance of imagination within the process of

learning, motivating learners to envision their potential selves and the communities they wish to join. Similarly, Teacher training programs can integrate debates about imagined communities and identity development into their syllabus. This approach would equip future educators with a better comprehension of the role imagination plays in forming learners' learning journeys and investments. Such knowledge may assist them in creating more comprehensive and supportive educational settings that address the different requirements and aspirations of their learners.

By identifying and dealing with the themes that emerged from the interview transcripts, teachers and universities can foster a setting that facilitates, motivates, and develops learner educators, supporting their achievement and commitment to the education field. This encompasses discussions about wage levels, financial planning, and possible career development chances. Furthermore, educators and institutions should concentrate on building positive rapport, acknowledging success, and delivering both emotional and educational support. Establishing policies that encourage ethical evaluation practices and two-way respect can improve the general academic experience for learner educators. Educator training programs can highlight the importance of freedom in educational approaches, enabling learner educators to create and execute their educational techniques. This can develop a sense of autonomy and creativity, which could be associated with more effective and engaging learning experiences. Furthermore, institutions need to allocate resources for equipping laboratories, libraries, and other materials that facilitate efficient education and learning, thereby adequately preparing learner educators for their future profession.

Suggestions for Further Research (We removed the model's global application and added the limitation of regression.)

Broadening the research to encompass TEFL learners from countries beyond Iran would be beneficial. By including learners from diverse cultural contexts, scholars can examine how imagined communities and learning investments differ across settings. This international perspective could provide fresh insights into the cultural influences that shape language education. Furthermore, implementing longitudinal research in Iran could yield a deeper understanding of how imagined communities and learning investments evolve over time. By studying different cohorts of student teachers across extended periods, such as two or three years, researchers can trace variations and trends throughout their academic journeys, offering a more dynamic evaluation of the factors affecting language learning. Another important direction concerns methodology. While the present study used regression to show that imagined communities significantly predict investment in learning, regression cannot establish causality. Future studies could incorporate additional predictors, compare learners across contexts, or adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to explore causal mechanisms more fully. Finally, future studies are encouraged to investigate the influence of demographic variables such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and prior educational experiences on the development of imagined communities and investment in learning. Examining such variables may help identify the elements that facilitate or hinder language learning among diverse groups of ELT learners and support the design of educational programs better tailored to their needs.

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Appendix A

1. I envisage that my English teaching job helps me to be financially secure.
2. I like teaching since I envisage myself having a helpful job in the future.
3. I wish to be part of a teaching community that supports teachers with adequate insurance services.
4. I wish to work in a language institute or school that possesses good facilities for teaching.
5. I wish to be part of a teaching community that helps teachers to improve the quality of their teaching through teacher training programs.
6. I wish to study in a university that provides adequate educational facilities for their students.
7. I wish to study in a university that offers high quality TEFL courses.
8. The teaching methods and techniques used in my TEFL classes in university are those that I wish for.
9. I think that professors can inspire student teachers in order to improve in their TEFL courses.
10. I can imagine myself as an English language teacher who can use the technology in her/ his class in a skillful way.
11. I can imagine myself as an English language teacher who has a successful relationship with her/his learners.
12. In the future, I wish to be a teacher who sets up activities that match the learners' needs.
13. I wish to be among teachers who spend time to instill students with intrinsic motivation to learn.
14. I wish to be an English teacher who has a perfect command of English language
15. I wish to be an English teacher who has the academic knowledge of how to teach effectively.
16. I wish to be a charismatic English teacher whose learners attend her/his classes eagerly.
17. I wish to become a qualified English teacher who is admired by his/her students.
18. As a future EFL teacher I wish to be given the freedom in using my own supplementary materials to enhance my students' learning.
19. As a future EFL teacher I wish to be given the freedom to develop my own alternative ways of assessment.

20. As a future EFL teacher I wish to implement the teaching techniques and methods that I have learned in my TEFL classes.
21. My image of a successful teacher inspires me to improve my general English.
22. My image of a successful teacher inspires me to study more enthusiastically.
23. The current courses presented in my TEFL studies **don't help** me to reach my ideal person as a teacher.
24. When I think about the future, I desire to teach at a more prestigious school or institute.
25. I think by attending my TEFL courses, I might become a well-educated teacher
26. My professors are mostly supportive and I have a stress-free relationship with them.
27. My classmates are mostly eager and motivated as members of student teachers' community.
28. I wish to study in a university wherein students and professors have effective interactions.
29. The educational setting in which I am studying TEFL is the one I had wished for.
30. My ELT professors mostly represent perfect models of an English language teacher that I envisage.
31. I view myself among successful persons of my society while sitting in my TEFL classes.
32. I feel disappointed with my TEFL studies and I wish I would have chosen another field of study.

Appendix B

1. I invest in my TEFL studies since I have found studying ELT more interesting than any other study fields.
2. I invest in learning TEFL as it can enable me to create new thoughts.
3. The image of me as an ideal teacher in the future provokes me to do my best in learning TEFL courses.
4. I think getting involved in learning TEFL can help me achieve my ideal identity.
5. I guess if I am fully involved in learning tasks and activities assigned by my professors, I can improve as an English teacher.
6. I think I can gain more power through my TEFL studies.

7. I believe that by investing in my TEFL courses, I can earn more money as a professional teacher in future.
8. I believe that by investing in my TEFL courses, I will have greater professional opportunities in the future.
9. I invest in my TEFL program since it grants me a sense of security regarding teaching English.
10. I invest in my TEFL program since it develops my competence regarding teaching English.
11. If I invest in my education, I can build a good professional network (I might meet friends or professors who can help me to get a good/better job opportunity).
12. I think studying TEFL is worth spending time and energy
13. I think studying TEFL is worth spending money.
14. I study hard in order to achieve good results from my courses.
15. I budget my time for learning my TEFL courses.
16. I am fully involved in my education since TEFL is my favorite field of study.
17. I think my investment in the field of TEFL helps me to develop the skills required for a professional teacher.
18. I think in order to be a perfect language teacher, it's worth applying more effort than is normally required.
19. I wish to be among teachers who spend time in order to educate themselves in the art of teaching.
20. I think that it is worth spending time and energy for my education as it helps me become a professional teacher.
21. I think that becoming a perfect language teacher is worth spending money for education in TEFL.
22. I wish my investment in learning TEFL helps me to have a lifelong career as English teacher.
23. I think participating in extracurricular activities (e.g., workshops) can help me to improve in my TEFL studies.
24. I wish to be a student teacher who is invested in learning new teaching approaches and methods.
25. I believe that good teachers are those who are invested in learning (good teachers are lifelong learners).

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. Are you determined to invest in your learning as an EFL student teacher? If yes, provide some examples of the ways you have invested in your learning so far. (Investment in learning)
2. How much time, energy, money, and effort are you willing to spend in order to become a successful TEFL student? (Investment in learning)
3. What are the characteristics of a teaching community (language institute or school) to which you wish to belong? (For example, having financial security, ...) (Imagined community)
4. What are the characteristics of an ELT educational community (university) to which you wish to belong? (For example, the university should have adequate educational facilities, ...) (Imagined Community)