



Imagined Identities and Investment in English-As-A- Foreign-Language Learning by Saudi Students in Technical Training Contexts

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Abstract

Language learners have multiple and changing identities associated with unequal power relations; their direct identity and language learning involves imagination-created identities in communities not immediately accessible or tangible. Imagined identities drive learners' investment in meaningful learning practices. This quantitative study addresses a research gap by examining Saudi students' imagined identities and investment in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learning during technical training. Data from an imagined-identity questionnaire completed by 98 participants were analyzed using arithmetic averages and standard deviations to determine how learners' imagined identities serve their language-learning investment. Results show that learners' imagined identities throughout EFL learning during technical training were positive and served their language-learning investment. Learners wanted to extend their identities, assert their right to speak, and practice learner agency, which is significant to their commitment to learning EFL. Further qualitative investigation is required to understand the interrelated nature of EFL learners' imagined identities and language-learning investment.

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Keywords: TVTC, Identity, Agency, Cultural and Social Capital, Female EFL Learners.

Introduction

With increasing recognition of the economic and social benefits of investing in human resources, women's empowerment and inclusion in development have gained momentum worldwide (Weedon, 1997). Saudi Vision 2030, launched in 2016, emphasizes empowering women and integrating them into the labor market (Alharbi, 2022). Supporting their education and empowerment is understood to be crucial for the Saudi economy, and fostering exemplars and pioneers in various fields is one form of support (Women Empowerment, 2023). The Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) plays a pivotal role in implementing these goals by offering technical and vocational diploma programs for women in various fields (TVTC, 2021). Despite their significance, TVTC programs have historically been stigmatized in favor of university education, but recent socioeconomic changes are altering perceptions of them (Aldossari, 2020). English proficiency is now crucial for employment, and is a key skill taught by TVTC (Almoaibed, 2020). It provides Saudi women with a competitive edge in the economy, serving as a tool to empower them and as a critical lens through which to view their lives and society (Almegren, 2022; Alshahrani et al., 2023)

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In the context of Saudi Vision 2030, research concerning TVTC tends to focus on female learners' changing attitudes toward it and their potential for future employment (Aldossari, 2020). A deeper understanding of language learning is vital, however, in light of the socioeconomic transformations now taking place in Saudi Arabia. Education changes what it is to be a Saudi woman and what Saudi women envisage as a better and desirable future; it opens up many possibilities for negotiating how they connect to the outside world, especially in terms of identity (Mustafa & Hamdan Alghamdi, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to investigate female students' imagined identities and to assess how the materials and resources provided by TVTC programs facilitate their investment in language learning. The concept of investment can be used to elucidate the connection between socioeconomic transformations and language learners' identities: it denotes learners' sociological effort to gain proficiency in a language (Darvin & Norton, 2023). This enables them to develop and realize their potential identities and to achieve inclusion in diverse communities, actual or imagined, through adopting various imagined identities (Lan, 2020).

There is a dearth of studies with qualitative approaches in investigating investment and imagined identities; however, quantitative studies have only examined the concept of language-learning investment and its underlying aspects (Dauzon-Ledesma & Izquierdo, 2023; Soltanian, Ghapanchi, & Pishghadam, 2020; Soltanian et al., 2018), but have not investigated the connection between imagined identities and investment in the context of Saudi female EFL learners in TVTC Saudi Arabia, particularly through a quantitative lens. To bridge this gap in the existing literature, the current study aimed to explore the formation of imagined identities among female students in Saudi technical colleges and their investment in language learning during technical training. To achieve this objective, the study framed the following research question:

1. What are Saudi female students' imagined identities throughout their English-language-learning experiences at a technical college?

This research question is also based on the premise of the current study that there exists connection between female students' imagined identities and investment in terms of linguistic, personal, and cultural experiences, in their journey to achieve English proficiency.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Recent EFL learning studies showed that identity is a sociocultural construct that is negotiated over time (Norton & Gao, 2008; Xu, 2013). Learners' identity formation is shaped by their participation in their actual and imagined communities of practice, such as institutions and classrooms (Teng, 2019). Within their actual and imagined communities of practice, learners gradually build their imagined identities; particularly, EFL learners strive to embody the English proficiency they need to achieve (Nguyen, 2020).

Role of Imagination in Education

The imagined community and imagined identity concepts center imagination as it allows people to change their surroundings, negotiate and broaden their identities, and eventually change their realities. Researchers have debated imagination's importance, especially in FL learning. They have, however, agreed that imagination is a social practice that characterizes the modern world in certain ways (Appadurai, 1996). Scholars have emphasized imagination's importance in education. For instance, Greene (2000) argued that imagination serves both social and pedagogical purposes and that having the imagination to envision new possibilities may be the first step toward demonstrating that society is malleable. Imagination inspires people to actively participate and engage in education to advance society (Norton, 2000, 2001; Wenger, 1998, 1999). Imagination thus encourages people to engage with the real world and seize learning opportunities. For example, Pakistani students imagined a peaceful future where they could use their English skills and faith to navigate environments where different languages coexist (Norton & Kamal, 2003). According to Nguyen's (2020) autobiographical study, social factors play a major role in the formation of imagined identities, and imagined identities regulate language learning investment. Due to imagination's educational role, people are given various visions and projections that represent conceivable alternate realities. Furthermore, people create and negotiate imagined communities through imagination.

Imagined EFL Classroom Communities and Imagined Identities

Imagined communities shape students' interactions in educational settings (Darvin & Norton, 2023; Norton, 2013; Pavlenko, 2003; Xu, 2013). Norton (2001) suggested that teachers might struggle if unaware of students' imagined communities. Challenges arise when classroom activities do not align with students' expectations (Attamimi, Al-Tamimi, & Chittick, 2019). Researchers use the concept of imagined EFL classroom communities to explore learners' preferred communities of practice, consisting of teachers, peers, and desirable activities (Luong & Tran, 2021). To support students' integration into the global English-speaking community, teachers should acknowledge students' unique linguistic skills and imagined communities (Przymus et al., 2021). Emesha (2022) investigated how the imagined identities of ten first-year

undergraduates at the University of Kelaniya affected their investment in language learning and found that teachers were crucial in stimulating learners' imagined identities and understanding the conditions under which they invested in language activities. Creating activities that highlight imagined identities can transform learners' interactions and provide opportunities for social engagement where they can display a "strong sense of ought self, as they believe that they ought to possess the attributes of an English learner" (Teng, 2019).

Learners' paths are shaped by their conceptualized community, and aspirations to be part of it through envisioned identities drive learners. Imagined identities are important because they guide individuals to focus, engage, and avoid aspects within a specific context (Norton, 2020; Sung, 2019). Investing themselves in an imagined international community enables language learners to imagine themselves as English speakers and negotiate access to practical and symbolic resources with which to assert their right to speak in a society where power is concentrated among native English speakers (Darvin & Norton, 2023; Norton, 2013).

Investment and Agency

Researchers working on learner identity have utilized two closely intertwined concepts: learner's agency and investment. Agency is the ability and act of exercising authority (Kanno & Norton, 2012). Researchers have employed the concept of investment to investigate motivation and the relationship between learner-teacher interactions and student commitment to learning. They have highlighted tensions between agency and socially defined power structures (Darvin & Norton, 2023). Wu (2017) stated that learners' imagined identities can motivate them to act and encourage comparable investments in their learning contexts but can also inhibit learners' engagement and investment in their learning. Imagined identities' influence on EFL learners' investment and language-learning experiences requires further investigation.

Learners exert their agency to invest in activities from which they anticipate obtaining something beneficial in exchange for the time and effort they invest. Achieving one's goals and benefitting from learning a language requires considerable investments in the form of initiative, determination, and endurance (Dauzon-Ledesma & Izquierdo, 2023). Learners commit of their own volition to practices that empower them to develop imagined identities. Consequently, imagined communities and identities are crucial influences on learners' educational decisions and trajectories. For instance, Chang (2011) investigated two Taiwanese doctoral students in the United States and found that their professional backgrounds and imagined identities significantly affect their learning choices. One of the students, who hoped to obtain an academic teaching position, exerted significant effort to master his academic English writing but had little or no desire to improve his other communication skills. Silence can be interpreted as a kind of resistance, but learners exercise their agency in deciding when to communicate and when to stay silent (Al-Ahmadi & King, 2023).

Cultural and Social Capital

Cultural capital is important within Peirce's (1995) theory of learning investment and its associated advantages. Peirce accepted Bourdieu's (1977) conceptualization of cultural capital as effectively capturing the intricate dynamics between identity, power, and language acquisition. According to Bourdieu, a language's value is determined by its speakers' power and authority, which depend on the economic and cultural power dynamics in their environment. The value of an individual's language changes along with their power and position in different contexts.

Students choose to acquire a new language with the understanding that doing so will expand the array of symbolic and material resources they have access to and augment their cultural capital (Peirce, 1995). Material resources include monetary assets, capital goods, and property, whereas symbolic resources are such intangibles as interpersonal relationships, education, and linguistic abilities (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Individuals learning a language augment their cultural capital by acquiring tangible and symbolic resources and expanding their ability to interact with various individuals within a community.

Alfred's (2010) conception of social capital encompasses collaboration, networking, and resource sharing, all of which are underpinned by trust. Social capital is crucial for fostering the growth and welfare of individuals and collectives. Balatti & Falk (2002) asserted that collaborative classroom learning increases social capital. Classroom exercises can strengthen and extend students' social networks and help them become "global citizens" (Lan, 2020).

Theoretical Framework for Investment, Imagined Identity/Community, and Language Learning

To integrate theoretical research from the past two decades, Darvin & Norton (2015) introduced an investment model that positions investment at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology (Figure 1). This framework provides insights into language learners' agency dynamics, offering a nuanced understanding of the evolving nature of identities, the intricate composition of linguistic repertoires, and the negotiation of power (Darvin & Norton, 2015).



Figure 1: Model of Investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

Researchers have employed this model in their explanatory studies on EFL learners' investment and identity (Mavaddat & Razmjoo, 2020). It appears primarily alongside qualitative approaches, mainly interviews and case studies, with a limitation on participant numbers that allows only small sample sizes (Al-Rubai'ey, 2023; Scott, 2023; Yoo, 2023; Zhang, 2024). For instance, Scott (2023) conducted semi-structured conversational interviews with three case studies of Saudi female students who studied English to increase their chances of acceptance into a medical college. Attempting to "extend Darvin & Norton (2015) investment theory to the context of Saudi Arabia," (p. 153), the author wanted to understand how each learner renegotiated her identity to enable entering her imagined community of medical practitioners. The researcher explored the connection between investment, agency, and identity in three cases. The study revealed previously unknown challenges, including linguistic, personal, and cultural issues that the researcher encountered while studying efforts to achieve a required level of English proficiency. However, the findings were not generalizable, due to the study's sample size.

The prevalence of qualitative approaches in investigating investment and imagined identities implies that few recent studies have attempted to employ quantitative measures to systematically examine the concept of language-learning investment and its underlying aspects (Dauzon-Ledesma & Izquierdo, 2023; Soltanian et al., 2020; Soltanian et al., 2018). For example, Soltanian et al. (2018) reviewed the relevant theoretical literature about investment and identity—particularly theories on the role of imagination in learning—to develop a hypothesized investment model in the context of EFL. The model's primary basis was Norton's (2000; 1995) work and Darvin and Norton's (2015) conceptualization of investment. It comprised six components: commitment to learning, identity, legitimacy, capital, agency, and emerging selves. A "commitment to learning" demonstrates the learner's seriousness about learning English. "Identity" is a key component that contributes to the development of the investment construct, showing how learners' changing identities may impact their language learning. The concept of "legitimacy" emphasizes the notion of recognizing language learners as valid members with the ability to speak. "Capital" refers to the gains the learner acquires. "Agency" denotes the language learner's initiative and accountability in the language classroom; "emerging selves" highlight the various identities that language learners might form.

The expanded version model encompassed eight elements consistent with the imagined communities of language learners in Iran (Figure 2). Learners' "commitment to learning" in Soltanian et al. (2018) model was developed to "imagination and learners' desires for belonging and recognition" Soltanian et al.'s (2020). Further, two new components were added: experiences of "marginalization, non-participation, and resistance within or outside the language classroom" and considerations of "gender, power, and material inequalities" (p.168).

Main questionnaire Component	What it reflects
1. Imagination and the learners' desires for belonging and recognition	Reflecting Iranian EFL learners' imaginations (and desires) while learning English and how this strong power stimulates them to explore new identity formations and possible
2. Expanding one's range of possible selves by imagined communities	Referring to the individuals' imaginations of what they might become (possible self), what they would like to become (ideal self), what they are afraid of becoming (feared self), and what they think others expect them to be (ought self)
3. Marginalisation, non-participation and resistance in language classroom or outside	Reflecting the reasons why language learners do not engage in the language practices of the classroom
4. Trying to attain a legitimate membership (moving from peripherality to legitimacy)	Discovering the extent learners know themselves responsible for learning the language
5. Gender, power, and material inequalities	Reflecting how relations of power, gender, and material conditions in the social world and in the language class might affect learners' access to the target language community, the conditions under which learners speak, read or write the target language, and hence opportunities for language learning
6. Access to different capitals (economic, cultural, social and symbolic)	Referring to the numerous advantages gained by language learners in the process of language learning. Economic capital refers to wealth and income; Cultural capital refers to knowledge, educational credentials, and appreciation of specific cultural forms; Social capital refers to connections to networks of power, and symbolic capital refers to language, education, and friendship
7. Identity construction and promotion	Reflecting how language learners' identities shift in response to the changing relations within the EFL classroom and how a shift in the participants' identity impacts their interest in learning English and the direction their future English learning will take.
8. Language learner's agency	Discovering the extent to which learners know themselves are responsible for learning the language.

Figure 2: Components of Language Learners' Imagined Communities in Iran and their Definitions.

Translating the definitions for these eight components into quantifiable measures resulted in a set of 57 questionnaire items that the researcher attempted to employ as an "efficient scale for understanding the status of language learners' imagined communities in the Iranian context" (p.176).

Despite the acknowledged relevance and influence of imagined identities, little research examines the connection between imagined identities and investment in EFL learning in any educational context in Saudi Arabia, particularly examining these matters through a quantitative lens.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative research design for examining the imagined identities of Saudi female learners during their EFL learning experiences at a technical college and to bolster the credibility of the results. The research tools, including questionnaires, were employed to elucidate the significance and effectiveness of quantitative activities. By tapping into learner opinions, values, and preferences, these tools aimed to precisely understand the elements constituting the problem (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). Therefore, the model developed by Soltanian et al. (2020) to understand the imagined communities of language learners in Iran was initially adopted.

Research Instrument

Sixty-one questionnaire items were generated in an online questionnaire using Google Forms. The validity and reliability of the items were reviewed by asking experts and non-experts to remark on their intelligibility. Based on informative feedback on the items and questionnaire content, minor modifications were made to the language of the items to ensure that they used simple and natural language, avoiding loaded and ambiguous words. After numerous reviews, some items were changed or deleted because they were irrelevant, long, ambiguous, or lacked suitable diction. The English version of the questionnaire was translated into Arabic to enable participants with varying levels of language competency to complete it easily and avoid misunderstanding. Another expert double-checked the translation's appropriateness and administered the Arabic version.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part dealt with participants' demographic data, which included six items including age, language proficiency, current work status, highest education level, current major, and major academic level. The second part included 58 items to collect data on the imagined identities of participants, which affected their EFL learning investment. The items were grouped into eight components:

1. Imagination and learners' desire to explore new identity formation (nine items)
2. Broadening of learners' repertoire of potential identities (selves) through exploration of imagined communities (five items)
3. Lack of participation inside and outside the language classroom (seven items)
4. Speaking opportunities (moving from peripherality to legitimacy) (six items)
5. The interplay among gender, power dynamics, and material inequalities (six items)
6. Access to various resources (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital; (nine items)
7. Identity construction and promotion (seven items)
8. Language learners' agency (nine items)

Data Collection and Procedures

To improve the instrument's reliability, the questionnaire was first administered in a pilot study with four students who were comparable to the target participants for whom the questionnaire was developed. The pilot study was conducted separately with individual participants—rather than in a group context—to avoid any influence and ensure functional equivalence between the English and Arabic versions. Feedback from participants helped change and remove certain elements.

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement, responding "strongly agree," "agree," "slightly agree," "slightly disagree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree" (scored 6–1, respectively), a scale that helped overcome the problem of participants hedging on sensitive topics and ensured the data were distributed normally.

Sampling

All participants were female students from various technical college departments for girls in Saudi Arabia, studying third semester of the academic year 2022–2023. A total 102 students were sampled for this study, out of 4 students who had participated in the pilot study, were excluded. A total of 98 students

participated in the actual study. A link to an online Google Forms questionnaire was posted to the college students on the college student portal website. All 98 participants completed the online questionnaire within two weeks, so it was a 100% response rate. The Jouf University's ethics committee granted ethical approval (No. 2/44/2030 in June 2023). Before conducting the data collection procedure, signed informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring the confidentiality and rigorous safeguarding of personal information, which would be used for research purposes only.

Data Analysis

SPSS was used to analyze the descriptive and inferential statistics. Some of the items that were negatively keyed, were reverse-coded before examination. When examining the items pertaining to each of the eight components, frequency analysis was performed to determine the percentages from the responses of participants to each item in the questionnaire. To address the research question, the researcher calculated arithmetic averages and standard deviations to determine whether participants' average degree of approval on the questionnaire items exceeded neutrality.

Results

This study's results were presented in eight areas (Tables 1–8) that cross-bounded to the questionnaire's eight components.

Imagination and Learner Desire to Explore the Formation of New Identities

The statistical results in Table 1 show that the average of all items pertaining to the first category was 4.65, with the relative weight equaling 77.57%. This indicates that participants wanted to build a new identity or future imagined identity when learning EFL. Notably, 88.61% of participants agreed about needing to invest energy and time in learning English to attain more opportunities in the future, and 85.03% agreed that learning EFL would make people perceive them differently.

Table 1: Arithmetic Averages, Standard Deviations, and Relative Weight of Participants' Responses to Items Related to Their Desire for New Identity Formation.

No.	Item	Mean	Percentage	Std. Deviation	Agreement Level	Rank
1.	As a trainee at the technical college, I could see myself communicating clearly in English in the future.	4.69	78.22%	1.125	Agree	5
2.	Curriculums at technical colleges help improve English skills.	4.81	80.10%	1.012	Agree	4
3.	When I'm at technical college taking English classes, I imagine myself with people who speak English well.	4.72	78.74%	1.233	Agree	7
4.	If I have perfect English, people will see me differently.	5.10	85.03%	0.979	Agree	3
5.	If I want to have other opportunities in the future, I'm willing to put in the effort and time to study English.	5.32	88.61%	0.754	Strongly agree	1
6.	Academically, I am extremely motivated to study English in college.	5.19	86.57%	0.927	Strongly agree	2
7.	Since it's required, I study English at technical college.	3.59	59.86%	1.552	Slightly agree	9
8.	I think it will be enough to just do the tasks in the textbook.	3.77	62.76%	1.525	Slightly agree	8
9.	Even with my inadequate language skills, I feel it will give me access to my targeted group of English speakers.	4.69	78.22%	1.019	Agree	5
All questionnaire items		4.65	77.57%	0.658	Agree	

Broadening of Learners' Repertoire of Potential Identities (Selves) Through the Exploration of Imagined Communities

Table 2 shows a slightly high scope of learners' desire to expand their range of identities; the average of all items pertaining to the second category was 4.27, and the relative weight equaled 71.09%. Meanwhile, 80.78% of the participants' imagined identities encouraged them to learn EFL for the sake of future benefits, and 81.29% imagined that they would have new friends in the future by using EFL.

Table 2: Arithmetic Averages, Standard Deviations, and Relative Weight of Participant Responses to Items Related to the Second Category.

No.	Item	Mean	Percentage	Std. Deviation	Agreement Level	Rank
1.	I am terrified about failing my English class.	3.65	60.89%	1.700	Slightly agree	4
2.	I believe that by attending English classes at technical college, I will change as a person (e.g., in personality).	4.39	73.13%	1.289	Agree	3
3.	I consider myself a professional English speaker.	3.56	59.35%	1.422	Slightly agree	5
4.	I'm motivated to go to English classes and give my all when learning English by imagining the person I want to be in the future.	4.85	80.78%	1.143	Agree	2
5.	By acquiring proficiency in the English language, it is plausible that I can form friendships with fluent English speakers.	4.88	81.29%	1.204	Agree	1
All questionnaire items		4.27	71.09%	0.800	Slightly agree	

Lack of Participation Inside and Outside the Language Classroom

Table 3 illustrates the moderately elevated level of resistance and a tendency to avoid participation in the classroom. The item means ranged from 4.55 (75.85%) to 3.18 (53.06%). The overall average for all items was 3.78, with a corresponding relative weight of 62.95%.

Table 3: Arithmetic Averages, Standard Deviations, and Relative Weight of Participants' Responses to Items Related to the Third Category.

No.	Item	Mean	Percentage	Std. Deviation	Agreement Level	Rank
1.	When I have to speak English in a meeting or class, I experience anxiety.	4.11	68.54%	1.498	Slightly agree	3
2.	My errors in English classes make me feel insecure.	3.80	63.27%	1.680	Slightly agree	4
3.	Because of my teachers' constant corrections of my speaking, I prefer not to talk in English class.	3.18	53.06%	1.755	Slightly disagree	7
4.	When I talk to my friends, I feel most at ease using English.	4.14	69.05%	1.392	Slightly agree	2
5.	Using English in class is the best way for me to learn it.	4.55	75.85%	1.269	Agree	1
6.	It makes no difference to me whether a language class is supportive or not. I shall not take part in it.	3.45	57.48%	1.600	Slightly disagree	5
7.	I think learning the English language at technical college is difficult.	3.20	53.40%	1.533	Slightly disagree	6
All questionnaire items		3.78	62.95%	1.024	Slightly agree	

Speaking Opportunities (Moving from Peripherality to Legitimacy)

Table 4 shows that participants obtained the right to speak and legitimacy in the context of their language class, with the means of the items ranging between 4.97 (82.82%) to 3.03 (50.51%). The average of all items was 4.39, and the relative weight equaled 73.19%. Of the participants, 82.82% agreed that EFL learners should be permitted to speak in English.

Table 4: Arithmetic Averages, Standard Deviations, and Relative Weight of Participants' Responses to Items Related to the Fourth Category.

No.	Item	Mean	Percentage	Std. Deviation	Agreement Level	Rank
1.	I am motivated to take advantage of every chance to improve my English proficiency, both within and outside of the language classroom.	4.95	82.48%	1.059	Agree	2
2.	Learners of English should feel free to use the language.	4.97	82.82%	1.040	Agree	1
3.	Most of the time, I look at English websites so that I can talk about English topics in class.	4.52	75.34%	1.212	Agree	3
4.	When I talk English, whether in class or outside, people pay attention to me.	4.45	74.15%	1.202	Agree	4
5.	I find it absurd that people are learning and speaking English.	3.03	50.51%	1.847	Slightly disagree	6
6.	As someone who doesn't speak English as their first language, I use writing in English to show that I own the language.	4.43	73.81%	1.201	Agree	5
All questionnaire items		4.39	73.19%	0.854	Agree	

The Interplay Between Gender, Power Dynamics, and Material Inequalities

Table 5 demonstrates a slightly higher level of influence of power and material inequalities in EFL classes on participants' imagined identities, with the average of all items being 4.38 and the relative weight equal to 72.93%. Notably, 83.16% of participants thought that English would cause inequalities, and 81.29% considered English to be a language of empowerment.

Table 5: Arithmetic Averages, Standard Deviations, and Relative Weight of Participants' Responses to Items Related to the Fifth Category.

No.	Item	Mean	Percentage	Std. Deviation	Agreement Level	Rank
1.	If someone knows English well, they will be powerful, and if they don't, they will be less powerful.	4.99	83.16%	1.060	Agree	1
2.	If some of my friends speak English better than I do, that doesn't bother me.	4.11	68.54%	1.552	Slightly agree	5
3.	Engaging in English conversations with my teacher or someone more skilled is challenging for me. I often resort to simply smiling instead of actively generating opportunities to talk.	4.14	69.05%	1.436	Slightly agree	4
4.	I dislike English lessons where the teacher controls when, how much, and what students can speak about.	3.61	60.20%	1.616	Slightly agree	6
5.	I believe that if the teacher gives all students an equal opportunity to speak, I will learn more effectively.	4.52	75.34%	1.262	Agree	3
6.	I think that women want to learn English because it gives them power.	4.88	81.29%	1.229	Agree	2
All questionnaire items		4.38	72.93%	0.892	Slightly agree	

Access to Various Resources (Economic, Cultural, Social, and Symbolic Capital)

Table 6 shows that the average of all items related to the sixth category was 4.72, and the relative weight equaled 78.65%, indicating a high level of desire among learners to obtain the economic, social, and cultural resources associated with learning the language. Notably, 82.82% believed that EFL would help them seize additional employment opportunities, 82.31% believed that English opens doors to academic opportunities, and 78.06% believed that EFL could help them join the ranks of the globally connected professionals who are culturally literate and well-educated.

Table 6: Arithmetic Averages, Standard Deviations, and Relative Weight of Participants' Responses to Items Related to the Sixth Categories.

No.	Item	Mean	Percentage	Std. Deviation	Agreement Level	Rank
1.	I do not believe that English is the crucial factor in altering one's social standing and improving one's prospects.	3.53	58.84%	1.626	Slightly agree	9
2.	Learning English will afford me the possibility of seizing additional employment opportunities.	4.97	82.82%	1.069	Agree	1
3.	I hope that being able to speak and write English well will be necessary to get a job in the future.	4.63	77.21%	1.295	Agree	4
4.	Some of my thoughts come out better in English than in Arabic.	4.15	69.22%	1.431	Slightly agree	6
5.	I believe that as a trainee at the technical college, proficiency in the English language will enable me to join the ranks of professionals who are globally connected, culturally literate, and well-educated.	4.68	78.06%	1.145	Agree	3
6.	I believe that switching between English and Arabic in discussions confers social status.	4.08	68.03%	1.531	Slightly agree	7
7.	I would like to have a career in the future that requires me to travel internationally and speak English proficiently.	4.62	77.04%	1.320	Agree	5
8.	I can obtain respect by speaking English.	3.95	65.82%	1.627	Slightly agree	8
9.	English opens doors to academic chances.	4.94	82.31%	1.073	Agree	2
All questionnaire items		4.72	78.65%	0.866	Agree	

Identity Construction and Promotion

Table 7 shows that the average of all items related to the seventh category was 4.72, and the relative weight was equal to 78.65%. This indicates that identity construction substantially affected language learners' interest in learning English and the direction their future EFL learning would take, with 81.46% believing that they would acquire a global identity after learning EFL.

Table 7: Arithmetic Averages, Standard Deviations, and Relative Weight of Participants' Responses to Items Related to the Seventh Category.

No.	Item	Mean	Percentage	Std. Deviation	Agreement Level	Rank
1.	I will participate in English classes more actively in the future.	4.88	81.29%	1.018	Agree	2
2.	My long-term goal of becoming a professional English speaker motivates me to enhance my skills.	4.84	80.61%	1.199	Agree	4
3.	I enjoy English classes that involve me in a variety of ways.	4.77	79.42%	1.101	Agree	6
4.	I prefer that my English teacher plan activities that are in line with my preferences.	4.78	79.59%	1.180	Agree	5
5.	Upon completing my English studies, I will attain a global identity.	4.89	81.46%	1.054	Agree	1
6.	Studying English at the technical college would enhance my self-assurance in performing duties that need a high level of English proficiency.	4.88	81.29%	1.048	Agree	3
7.	My personality does not match the present activities employed in English classrooms.	4.01	66.84%	1.468	Slightly agree	7
All questionnaire items		4.72	78.65%	0.866	Agree	

Language Learners' Agency

Finally, Table 8 shows that the average of all items pertaining to the eighth category was 4.51, and the relative weight equaled 75.14%. This indicates a slightly high level of learner agency achieved through English-language learning, with 78.40% of them seeing English as a tool for gaining power and 77.21% believing that English would give them a voice to be heard in the future.

Table 8: Arithmetic Averages, Standard Deviation, and Relative Weight of Participants' Responses on Items Related to the Eighth Category.

No.	Item	Mean	Percentage	Std. Deviation	Agreement Level	Rank
1.	I do not believe that English is the crucial factor in altering one's social standing and improving one's prospects.	3.53	58.84%	1.626	Slightly agree	9
2.	Learning English will afford me the possibility of seizing additional employment opportunities.	4.97	82.82%	1.069	Agree	1
3.	I hope that being able to speak and write English well will be necessary to get a job in the future.	4.63	77.21%	1.295	Agree	4
4.	Some of my thoughts come out better in English than in Arabic.	4.15	69.22%	1.431	Slightly agree	6
5.	I believe that as a trainee at the technical college, proficiency in the English language will enable me to join the ranks of professionals who are globally connected, culturally literate, and well-educated.	4.68	78.06%	1.145	Agree	3
6.	I believe that switching between English and Arabic in discussions confers social status.	4.08	68.03%	1.531	Slightly agree	7
7.	In the future, I would like to have a career that requires me to travel internationally and speak English proficiently.	4.62	77.04%	1.320	Agree	5
8.	I can obtain respect by speaking English.	3.95	65.82%	1.627	Slightly agree	8
9.	English opens doors to academic chances.	4.94	82.31%	1.073	Agree	2
All questionnaire items		4.72	78.65%	0.866	Agree	

Overall, no statistically significant differences were observed when comparing the imagined identities of participants majoring in cosmetology, e-commerce, and multimedia and web technologies. Thus, in the context of technical training, students with positive imagined identities devote more time and effort to actively learning English. Furthermore, no statistically significant differences were observed between participants of different ages.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined the imagined identities of female Saudi students in the context of EFL learning during technical training. Positive imagined identities were evidenced by participants' aspirations for legitimacy, the right to speak, and a sense of learner agency, as well as their desire to reconstruct their identity through EFL and their participation in global communication. The learners demonstrated a relatively significant desire to construct new identities. They imagined themselves as professional EFL speakers and believed that the English curriculum in their technical college would help them achieve their goals if they invested time and energy in learning English. This may be because the English courses offered in technical colleges provide students with the opportunity to acquire a language that is pertinent to their future interests. This could be explained by the assumption that an individual who truly desires being a part of their imagined community would strive to strike a balance between their desires and requirements and the obligations and responsibilities expected of them as community members. To some degree, their imagined identities as proficient speakers may function as potent investment constructs in English learning. Learners can consequently negotiate new identities and investments.

Furthermore, they want to expand their identities and share their hopes and ambitions for language learning with students worldwide. According to data analysis, participants tended to gain symbolic resources, such as friendships, by learning EFL. They imagined connecting with other people in their imagined target language community in the future. However, in this study, although learners wanted to expand their identities, they reported reasonably moderate levels of resistance and avoided classroom

participation. These findings may be explained by the widespread belief that their wishes conflict with impediments including classroom procedures, instructor expectations, inequality, disrespect, thoughts, aspirations, or ambitions. If their language-learning circumstances change, the opportunities to practice English may shift. These findings resemble those of one participant in the research of Peirce (1995), who withdrew from class due to the teacher's critique of Peru, her home country, and its exclusion from the category of major global powers. Thus, teachers are essential social characters who influence learners' imagined identities (both positively and negatively). If teachers do not approve of language learners' imagined identities, their non-participation may worsen, negatively affecting their learning trajectories (Kharchenko, 2014). Notably, this study has also considered the powerful impacts of classroom procedures and practices and learners' colleagues on their imagined identities and EFL investments, resembling past results (Barkhuizen, 2016; Ovalle Quiroz & González, 2023).

The analysis has highlighted that participants used their imagined identities to gain legitimacy and the right to speak in language classes. They imagined themselves as confident English speakers capable of making others listen to them. They also envisioned themselves as active language learners who improved their language proficiency by investing in opportunities both inside and outside the classroom. Thus, imagination expands language learning and places of usage and allows language learners to benefit from a more imaginable future, expanded imagined identity repertoires, and learning trajectories outside the classroom if they invest in EFL learning. Although participants created opportunities to speak English to achieve their imagined identities as English-language speakers, the data revealed that some were likely to decide not to speak English or to remain silent. This finding resembles that of Leo in the work of Wu (2017): Leo did not want to appear less fluent or proficient in front of colleagues and avoided participation in English classes. Meanwhile, one participant in Lamb's (2009) study imagined herself as a global businessperson who could use English fluently, invest in learning English, and participate in each opportunity for interaction in English to achieve her desires. Thus, contextual influences and related EFL learning activities contribute to the construction of imagined future identities, as also witnessed in a few past studies (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007).

The findings also revealed the influence on participants' imagined identities of power and material inequalities in EFL classes. Participants supported the idea of maintaining learners' shared values by studying the language in EFL classes in a technical training context. This confirms the belief that EFL classes represent forums for interaction and communication and become places to raise awareness about topics related to basic human needs. Participants envisaged English as the language of empowerment, and there was a significant level of agreement with the statement "a person who knows it well is powerful, and vice-versa." This agreement indicates learner awareness of the importance of English in their future as powerful women in Saudi Arabia.

Most learners want to obtain the material and cultural resources acquired when learning a language, with participants claiming that they could obtain enhanced opportunities by learning English at a technical college. They also agreed that English language proficiency would land them more job opportunities. Because they would benefit from learning English, their imagined identities as competent employees encouraged them to invest in studying English. This argument aligns with the assertion of Norton & Toohey (2011) that learners invest in language learning in particular contexts and at particular times because they believe that doing so will provide them access to a greater diversity of material and symbolic resources that will increase their cultural capital.

Most learners reported pursuing global identities and communication with the whole world rather than simply integrating with native speakers. This aligns with the work of Norton (2013), who argued that EFL learners worldwide desire connecting with the global community. Similarly, Norton & Kamal (2003) asserted that English gives Pakistani participants the chance to preserve their social, economic, and political ties to the UK, the US, and the larger global community. This indicates that participants' imagined identities impact their level of engagement in the English learning process and the trajectory of their future pursuits in English-language learning.

The findings also show that learners have an increasing sense of agency as English learners and speakers and tend to change their surroundings and broaden their identities to change their reality. Participants claimed more powerful positions and reconstructed their identities to gain more social, economic, and academic opportunities. Moreover, they asserted their right to speak, negotiated their identity, and established themselves as legitimate English users. Their growing confidence, agency, and imagined identities as globally connected, culturally literate, and well-educated professionals stimulated them to invest in English learning. This resembled the observations of participants in King's (2000) study, who developed more empowerment and self-esteem as they realized how they might contend with learning a new language and culture, with increased self-confidence impacting their actions, relationships with others, and self-perceptions. As such, agency empowers learners to commit to learning, imagining, changing, and rejecting new identities through participation, non-participation, resistance, and the use of a specific language (Duff & Doherty, 2015).

Language use permeates all aspects of our lives. It is fundamental to how we think, act, and perceive ourselves and others. This study's findings indicate that the identities imagined throughout EFL learning in the technical training context are positive and serve student investment in EFL learning. Participants imagined themselves to be fluent and competent speakers, powerful women, well-educated people, professional employees, language agents, and global speakers. Thus, learners' imagined identities might enable them to practice agency in their EFL learning, communicate with others, be heard globally, negotiate their aspirations and identity positions, and reconstruct new identities in the future. Although enthusiasm for learning English is present, if learners do not acknowledge and invest in it, they will not obtain the necessary social and cultural capital, and becoming fluent will take longer. Thus, imagined identities may serve as a means of accessing materials and resources for English learning. Consequently, learners should be aware of their imagined identities, and teachers should be aware of them and discuss them in class because teachers can affect the imagined identities and language-learning trajectories of learners. The latent undervaluation of these imagined identities by some teachers may be an obstacle to the progress required for language learning (Przymus et al., 2021). For this reason, quantifiable data can help us understand how the various dimensions of EFL learner identities (present and future selves) interact and become operative during compulsory language learning.

The findings regarding female learners' imagined identities have practical implications for incorporating imagined identities into teaching methods and resources. First, the concepts of imagined identities and communities should be presented in EFL classes in the context of technical training. Second, students and teachers should be informed of the advantages and disadvantages of their use. Moreover, teachers should understand the types of imagined identities that their students want to construct and negotiate in EFL classes in technical training contexts. Achieving this requires various approaches, including interviews, surveys, and classroom observation. To facilitate student exploration of learning opportunities beyond the confines of English classrooms, instructors should motivate them to find friends with similar interests, requirements, and aspirations. Enhanced opportunities for extracurricular engagement can facilitate students' reorientation toward equitable social and academic contexts.

Notably, some limitations of this study could affect the generalizability of the findings. First, individuals may overstate their judgment of their imagined identities. Further research could address this by employing different research methods, such as classroom observations, interviews, ethnographic research, and case studies. Furthermore, participants in this study learned EFL in the context of technical training. Future research could be conducted at various schools or institutions to study learners' projected identities and investment in EFL learning in different contexts.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical approval was obtained from the Jouf University ethics committee (No. 2/44/2030 in June 2023).

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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