Exploring the Influence of Imagined Communities on English Language Learning: A Comparative Study of Successful and Unsuccessful Malaysian University Students

Chan Siang Jack[1], Maizatulliza Binti Muhamad @ Mohd Saufi[2]
[1]Centre for Language Competencies, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPS), [2]Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)

Abstract
This study delves into the concept of "imagined communities" within the realm of English language learning among Malaysian university students, distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful learners. Through a qualitative case study approach, employing in-depth interviews and written narratives, this research explores how learners' perceptions of imagined communities influence their engagement with and acquisition of the English language. The analysis reveals that successful learners tend to have a broader and more global perspective of imagined communities, which motivates their language learning process and fosters a sense of belonging to a global English-speaking world. Conversely, unsuccessful learners often exhibit a more localized view of imagined communities, which may limit their engagement with the language and its perceived utility. These findings underscore the pivotal role of imagined communities in shaping learners' language learning experiences and highlight the need for educational strategies that broaden learners' perceptions of and engagement with these communities. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the sociocultural factors that underpin language learning and offers insights for educators to enhance language learning curricula by integrating the concept of imagined communities.
Keywords: Imagined Communities, English Language, Language Acquisition, Comparative Study, Education

Introduction
The status of the English language as a global lingua franca is undisputed, with its pervasive influence evident in education, business, and international relations (Simons et al., 2018). In Malaysia, English is not only a compulsory subject across all levels of education but also a crucial medium for upward mobility and global connectivity (Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013). Despite the Malaysian education system's rigorous emphasis on English language education, spanning over a decade of formal schooling, challenges in achieving uniform proficiency among students persist (Hazita, 2016).

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of "imagined communities" and their impact on English language learning among Malaysian university students. Imagined communities, a concept introduced by Anderson (1983) and adapted by Norton (2001) in the context of language learning, refer to the social groups that learners envision themselves being a part of, which profoundly influences their motivation and engagement with the language. Understanding these imagined communities is crucial because they shape learners' identities, aspirations, and investment in language acquisition, which are key determinants of language learning success.

This research is important because it addresses a gap in the understanding of socio-cultural factors influencing language learning, particularly in a multilingual society like Malaysia. By distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful learners, this study provides insights into how broader and more global perspectives of imagined communities can enhance language learning, while more localized views may limit engagement with the language and its perceived utility.

The utility and effectiveness of this study are manifold. For educators, understanding the role of imagined communities can inform the development of more effective teaching strategies that foster broader, more inclusive perceptions of language use. For policymakers, the findings can guide the creation of educational policies that support diverse language learning environments and enhance overall language proficiency. For learners, recognizing the importance of imagined communities can motivate and guide their language learning journey, leading to better academic and professional outcomes.

Moreover, this study contributes to the broader discourse on second language acquisition (SLA) by integrating socio-cultural theories that emphasize the importance of identity and community in language learning. Recent studies have highlighted the critical role of socio-cultural contexts in shaping language learning experiences and outcomes (Duff, 2019; Ushioda, 2020). These perspectives align with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which posits that social interaction and cultural context are fundamental to cognitive development and learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

By examining the interplay between imagined communities, identity formation, and investment in learning English, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on second language acquisition. It offers valuable perspectives for future educational strategies and policies in Malaysia and similar multilingual contexts, ultimately fostering more effective and inclusive language education practices. The findings from this research could also provide a basis for further studies exploring the role of imagined communities in different linguistic and cultural settings, thereby enriching the field of SLA with diverse and context-specific insights.

Research Objectives
The objective of this study is to explore the influence of imagined communities on English language learning among Malaysian university students. It aims to examine how learners' perceptions of these communities shape their identities and investment in acquiring the English language.

Literature Review

The concept of imagined communities, originally introduced by Benedict Anderson (1983) to analyze nationalism, has been significantly adapted in the field of language learning. Anderson (1991) describes nations as imagined communities where members, despite never meeting, share a collective identity, primarily facilitated by language and print media. This idea underscores the role of language in forging connections and fostering a sense of belonging among individuals who share common linguistic practices.

In the realm of language learning, Norton Pierce (1995) and later Kanno and Norton (2003) expanded on Anderson's concept, illustrating how language learners envision themselves as part of broader, often intangible, communities. These imagined communities are not just aspirational; they influence learners' motivation and investment in language learning. For instance, learners might envision themselves in professional or academic communities, driving their engagement and commitment to acquiring the language (Song, 2010).

The relationship between imagined communities and language learning is further nuanced when considering the concept of communities of practice as defined by (Wenger, 2007). While communities of practice are tangible and involve direct engagement, imagined communities are formed through the power of imagination, influencing learners' actions and investments in language learning (Kanno & Norton, 2003).

Research has shown that learners' engagement with imagined communities can significantly impact their language learning process. For example, Norton and Gao (2008) found that learners' investment in English learning was closely tied to their aspirations to join certain elite communities, demonstrating how imagined communities can serve as a powerful motivator for language acquisition.

The function of imagination is central to the concept of imagined communities. Appadurai (1997); Wenger (1998) both emphasize the transformative power of imagination in shaping individuals' perceptions of themselves and their worlds. Imagination allows individuals to transcend their immediate realities, envisioning themselves in different roles and communities, which in turn, can motivate and guide their learning processes.

In conclusion, the interplay between imagined communities, identity, and investment offers a rich framework for understanding language learning beyond the confines of traditional classroom settings. By exploring how learners imagine and align themselves with various communities, educators and researchers can gain deeper insights into the motivational dynamics that underpin language acquisition.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative multiple case study approach to explore the concept of imagined communities among successful and unsuccessful English language learners in Malaysia. The research aimed to uncover how learners' perceptions of belonging to imagined communities influence their language learning experiences and outcomes.

Participant Selection
Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of successful and unsuccessful English language learners. Successful learners were defined as those who achieved a Band 4 or higher on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), while unsuccessful learners were identified as those with a Band 2 or lower. The study included 12 successful learners and 10 unsuccessful learners, all enrolled at Malaysian universities.

Data Collection
Data were collected through in-depth interviews and written narratives. Interviews were conducted in English or Bahasa Malaysia, based on the participants' preferences, and were designed to elicit detailed insights into the learners' experiences with imagined communities in their language learning journey. Written narratives provided an additional layer of data, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences in a more contemplative and personal manner.

Data Analysis
Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, following the guidelines set by (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved a meticulous process of coding and theme development to identify patterns related to imagined communities within the learners' narratives. This process was iterative, involving constant comparison between data segments and emerging themes to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the learners' experiences and perceptions.

The analysis specifically focused on how imagined communities were conceptualised by the learners, their impact on learners' identity and investment in language learning, and the distinctions between successful and unsuccessful learners in this context.

Findings
Imagined Communities in Language Learning
In the exploration of language acquisition, particularly within the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, the concept of 'imagined communities' emerges as a pivotal element. This concept, which finds its roots in Norton's seminal work, extends beyond the physical confines of existing communities, delving into the realms of learners' aspirations, dreams, and objectives. Imagined communities are not tangible in the traditional sense; instead, they are mental constructs representing the social worlds that learners aspire to join and engage with through their language learning journey.

For ESL learners, both successful and unsuccessful, these imagined communities act as a significant motivational force. They encapsulate the learners' future aspirations, their desired identities, and the social networks they aim to access. Whether it involves envisioning participation in global academic circles, professional domains, or cultural groups, imagined communities imbue the language learning process with purpose and direction. They represent the unseen yet profoundly influential goals that learners strive towards as they master the English language.

The concept of imagined communities is deeply intertwined with Norton's theory, which suggests that learners' investment in language learning is intricately linked to their desire to become members of these imagined communities. This intersects with Vygotsky's

Sociocultural Theory, emphasising the role of social context and interaction in cognitive development. In today's digital era, the theory of Connectivism further expands our understanding of imagined communities, underscoring the impact of digital networks and technology in modern learning environments and broadening the scope of these communities.

This section aims to delve into the imagined communities as conceptualised by our participants, encompassing both successful and unsuccessful ESL learners. Through an examination of their narratives, we seek to explore the diverse and complex ways in which these imagined communities influence their language learning experiences, motivations, and identities. Our objective is to uncover how these learners envisage their place in the English-speaking world and the extent to which this vision shapes their approach to language learning. The structure of this section is designed to first present the data from successful learners, followed by the narratives of unsuccessful learners. This arrangement is intended to facilitate a comparative understanding of how different learners perceive and engage with imagined communities. Each subsection will not only present the data but also provide a comprehensive analysis, linking back to our theoretical frameworks and elucidating the themes that emerge from these narratives.

Imagined Communities Among Successful Learners
In exploring the theme of imagined communities within the context of English language learning, the narrative of Respondent 2 (SR2), a successful ESL learner, offers a compelling insight. SR2's reflections resonate with a profound appreciation of the English language, not merely as a tool for communication but as a means to broaden her understanding of the world. Her perspective exemplifies the concept of imagined communities, where language learning extends beyond the acquisition of linguistic skills to encompass a deeper, more holistic engagement with the global community. SR2 articulately expresses this viewpoint, stating:

> *"English language helps me to learn more about the world, understand things from different perspectives, and encourages me to explore further."*

SR2's perspective transcends a conventional understanding of English as merely a linguistic tool; it is envisioned as a bridge to a vast reservoir of global knowledge. This perception is emblematic of a profound investment in language learning, not solely for linguistic acquisition but as a conduit to broader intellectual and cultural horizons. SR2's articulation of English as a medium that "helps me to learn more about the world, understand things from different perspectives, and encourages me to explore further" is indicative of a learner who perceives language not just as a skill but as an integral component of their intellectual identity.

This stance aligns seamlessly with Norton's theory, particularly the concept of 'investment', where language learning is intertwined with the learner's aspirations and envisioned future selves. For SR2, mastering English is not an end in itself but a means to an end – the end being an active participant in a global community of knowledge seekers and contributors. This vision of English as a gateway to global understanding and participation is a clear manifestation of Norton's 'imagined communities'. SR2 does not view English learning as a mere academic requirement; it is a strategic investment in an imagined future where they are an integral part of an interconnected world, engaging in cross-cultural dialogues and exchanges.

Moreover, SR2's emphasis on "exploring further" underscores a proactive, rather than passive, approach to language learning. This proactive stance, deeply ingrained in personal beliefs about the value of English, shapes their imagined identity – an identity that transcends the confines of a traditional language learner and aligns with the notion of a global citizen. This imagined identity, as conceptualized by Norton, is a powerful motivator, driving learners to invest in language learning not just for immediate linguistic gains but for long-term personal and intellectual development.

Incorporating Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, SR2's engagement with English can also be viewed through the lens of social interaction and cultural context. The desire to understand and interact with diverse perspectives suggests an intrinsic recognition of the social nature of language and learning. SR2's language learning journey is not isolated but is influenced and enriched by their interactions with a broader global community, reflecting Vygotsky's emphasis on the role of social environments in cognitive development.

In examining the narratives of Respondent 5 (SR5) and Respondent 6 (SR6), we uncover a unique facet of language learning that vividly illustrates the concept of imagined communities within the context of English language acquisition. Both SR5 and SR6, successful ESL learners, embark on their language learning journeys driven not by conventional academic pursuits but by a genuine passion for specific cultural products – anime, novels, and translated literature. Their experiences offer a compelling insight into how personal interests can profoundly shape one's engagement with a language. SR5's journey into the world of English began with his interest in anime and novels, as he states:

> "During my Form 3, I started watching anime with English subtitles and reading novels. Since I want to read more novels and watch more anime, I need to acquire a higher level of English comprehension, so it drives my motivation to study English better."

This narrative highlights a significant departure from traditional language learning motivations. For SR5, English is not just a subject to be mastered in a classroom; it is a key to unlocking the rich and intricate worlds of anime and novels. His investment in English is deeply intertwined with his identity as an anime enthusiast and an avid reader. The language transcends its role as a mere medium of communication, becoming a crucial tool that enables him to fully immerse himself in his interests. This immersion bridges the gap between his current linguistic capabilities and his aspirational identity as a proficient English speaker, reflecting Norton's concept of 'investment' in language learning.

Echoing SR5's sentiments, SR6's narrative also underscores the impact of personal interests on language learning. Growing up surrounded by books, SR6 developed a keen interest in English-translated Japanese novels. She reflects:

> "…grew up reading lots of books and now I'm currently into English-translated Japanese novel. With my current English level, I can understand and enjoy reading the novels, as I can understand the content better and use my imagination to create the scenario as depicted."

SR6's engagement with the English language is deeply personal and rooted in her love for literature. Her proficiency in English is not merely about linguistic competence; it represents

the joy of reading, the thrill of exploring new worlds, and the ability to let her imagination soar. Her dedication to learning English is a reflection of her imagined identity as a well-read individual, capable of navigating the nuances of translated literature with ease and confidence. This dedication aligns with Norton's concept of 'investment', where the learner's commitment to language learning is a reflection of their broader personal and intellectual aspirations.

Both SR5 and SR6's narratives illustrate how language learning, driven by personal interests and passions, can lead to the formation of imagined communities. These communities are not bound by physical or geographical constraints but are instead defined by shared interests and cultural engagements. The learners' investment in English is not solely for the purpose of linguistic acquisition but is deeply connected to their desire to be part of these imagined communities – communities of anime enthusiasts, novel readers, and literary explorers.

Both SR5 and SR6's narratives illustrate how language learning, driven by personal interests and passions, can lead to the formation of imagined communities. These communities are not bound by physical or geographical constraints but are instead defined by shared interests and cultural engagements. The learners' investment in English is not solely for the purpose of linguistic acquisition but is deeply connected to their desire to be part of these imagined communities – communities of anime enthusiasts, novel readers, and literary explorers.

In the context of Connectivism, a theory that emphasizes the role of digital networks and technology in learning, the experiences of SR5 and SR6 gain additional significance. Connectivism posits that learning occurs through the connections formed across a network of people and technology. SR5's engagement with anime and SR6's interest in English-translated novels are facilitated and enhanced by digital platforms and online resources. The internet, as a vast repository of information and a medium for cultural exchange, has likely played a crucial role in shaping their language learning experiences. It provides access to a wealth of English-language content, from subtitled anime to digital novels, enabling SR5 and SR6 to immerse themselves in their interests and, concurrently, in the English language.

This digital landscape creates a networked environment where learning is not confined to traditional methods but is expanded through engagement with global communities and resources. SR5 and SR6's journeys reflect the principles of Connectivism, where their language learning is augmented by the connections they make with online communities, digital media, and cultural content. This aspect of their learning journey underscores the relevance of Connectivism in modern language acquisition, particularly for learners whose motivations are intertwined with digital media and global cultural narratives.

Exploring the narrative of Respondent 7 (SR7), we delve further into the theme of imagined communities and their profound impact on language learning, particularly in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL). SR7's experience, much like that of SR5 and SR6, illustrates how personal interests, specifically in the realm of movies and Korean dramas, serve as a catalyst for engaging with the English language in a manner that transcends traditional academic settings. SR7 shares a unique aspect of his language learning journey:

> *"I spend most of my time watching movie or drama, mostly Korean drama. Even though I don't understand Korean language, they have English subtitles and with that, I can enjoy watching all the Korean dramas."*

This statement reveals a fascinating intersection between language learning and cultural immersion. SR7's engagement with English, facilitated through subtitles in Korean dramas, is

not merely a tool for comprehension but a bridge to a broader cultural experience. The English subtitles provide him with access to the emotional depth, intricate plots, and cultural nuances of Korean dramas, despite his lack of proficiency in the Korean language.

Drawing upon Norton's framework, SR7's narrative underscores the significance of 'imagined communities' in shaping one's investment in a language. The world of Korean dramas, rich with characters, stories, and emotions, becomes an 'imagined community' for SR7. This community is a space of emotional resonance, where he can vicariously experience life through diverse narratives. His investment in English transcends mere linguistic understanding; it encompasses a deeper engagement with the stories, forming emotional connections with characters and, in essence, becoming part of this imagined community.

Moreover, SR7's interaction with English through subtitles is an active process. Each act of reading, deciphering, and connecting subtitles with the on-screen action enhances his English comprehension. This active engagement also reflects one of Norton's concepts – 'investment' in language learning. SR7 is not just passively absorbing information; he is actively participating in a cultural exchange, using English as a medium to explore and experience a different world.

In the broader context of ESL learning, SR7, along with SR5 and SR6, exemplifies how personal interests can significantly influence language acquisition. Their shared belief in the power of English to enhance their enjoyment of hobbies and cultural content is a testament to the intrinsic motivation that fuels successful language learners. They view English proficiency not merely as a linguistic skill but as a tool that enriches their lives and broadens their cultural horizons. This belief drives them to invest considerable time and effort into learning English, highlighting the crucial role of personal beliefs and interests in shaping one's language learning journey.

In conclusion, the successful learners' narratives collectively illustrate diverse motivations and experiences shaping their conceptions of language learning. From personal interests and social interactions to early familial influences and a sense of global citizenship, these factors contribute to forming their imagined communities. English is viewed not just as a linguistic tool but as a gateway to broader cultural, social, and personal realms. Their stories highlight the intricate interplay between language learning, identity formation, and imagined communities, offering rich insights into the factors driving successful language acquisition.

Imagined Communities Among Unsuccessful Learners
As we shift our focus to the experiences of unsuccessful ESL learners, the narrative of Respondent 2 (R2) offers a stark contrast to those previously discussed. R2's account provides insight into the challenges faced in a linguistic environment where English is scarcely used, highlighting the impact of one's immediate linguistic surroundings on language acquisition and usage. R2 describes his language use

Researcher: What language that you usually use with your friends or family?
> *R2: We use Malay all the time.*
> *Researcher: Do you use English, even just a bit, with your friends?*
> *R2: No. We don't use English to speak with each other and we don't use it at all.*

R2's narrative reveals a linguistic environment heavily dominated by Bahasa Malaysia, offering limited opportunities for natural engagement with English. This pervasive use of

Bahasa Malaysia, while fostering a deep connection with cultural roots and the local community, inadvertently creates barriers to assimilating and applying English. The lack of regular exposure to English in R2's daily life could hinder his ability to internalize the language's nuances and colloquialisms, potentially leading to challenges in understanding and producing fluent English in diverse settings.

Furthermore, the dominance of Bahasa Malaysia in R2's environment may shape his perceptions of the utility and relevance of English. If English is rarely encountered as a necessary or beneficial tool, R2 might question the value of investing time and effort into mastering it. This situation could result in diminished motivation to pursue English learning opportunities, exacerbating the proficiency gap.

In the context of Norton's theory, R2's linguistic environment likely influences his imagined identities and communities. The absence of English as a valuable asset in his current context may prevent him from envisioning a future where English plays a significant role in his personal or professional life. This lack of a clear 'imagined community' where English is essential can impact his investment in the language, potentially limiting his aspirations and opportunities in English-centric spheres.

R2's experience underscores the intricate interplay between one's immediate linguistic environment, the perceived relevance of a language, and broader socio-cultural dynamics. It highlights the challenges faced by individuals in predominantly monolingual settings and the potential repercussions on their linguistic aspirations and identities. This narrative illustrates how the lack of a supportive environment for English usage can significantly influence a learner's proficiency, motivation, and perception of the language's importance in their life.

Respondent 3 (R3) provides insights that sheds light on the linguistic environment of their upbringing, emphasizing the dominance of Bahasa Malaysia in both familial and community interactions. This account offers a perspective on the challenges faced by unsuccessful ESL learners in a monolingual context. R3 describes their linguistic background:

> *"Since young, me and my family don't speak any other language other than Bahasa Malaysia. There is no need to speak English because our area all use Bahasa Malaysia."*

R3's recollection paints a picture of a linguistic environment where daily life is predominantly conducted in Bahasa Malaysia. This setting, where English is an outlier, seldom heard or spoken, creates a linguistic bubble that limits R3's exposure to and engagement with English. While the extensive use of Bahasa Malaysia nurtures a strong sense of cultural and communal belonging, it also inadvertently restricts R3's linguistic experiences, particularly with English.

The implications of growing up in such a linguistically homogenous environment are twofold. On one hand, R3's deep connection with Bahasa Malaysia provides comfort, identity, and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, the limited exposure to English could present challenges in contexts where English is a valuable asset, such as in higher education or global professional settings.

R3's perception of English as non-essential in their immediate environment is significant. This viewpoint suggests that English is viewed as unnecessary or even superfluous, which can profoundly impact their motivation to learn the language. Without seeing tangible benefits or practical applications for English, R3's drive to master it may diminish.

From the perspective of Norton's theory, R3's linguistic environment and perceptions likely influence their imagined communities and identities. If English is not seen as necessary in

their immediate world, R3 might not envision a future where English is pivotal. This lack of envisioned necessity for English could lead to reduced investment in learning the language, both in terms of time and effort.

In a broader context, R3's experience highlights the significant impact of one's immediate environment on language acquisition, imagined identities, and future aspirations. It serves as a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by individuals in predominantly monolingual communities. The narrative illustrates how such environments can shape linguistic journeys, potentially limiting exposure to and proficiency in languages like English, which are essential in many global contexts.

Respondent 7 (R7) offers an experience that underscores a common challenge in language learning: the gap between passive consumption and active usage of a language. Her engagement with English through movies and books, while beneficial, is contrasted by limited opportunities for active conversation. R7 explains her experience:

> *"I read and watch a lot of English movies and books, but I don't use it when talking because I don't have many friends that speak to me in English."*

R7's situation illustrates a scenario prevalent among many language learners, where passive intake of a language, such as through media consumption, does not fully translate into active linguistic proficiency. While engaging with English media enhances comprehension skills and enriches vocabulary, the lack of real-life conversational practice can leave essential communicative skills underdeveloped.

Incorporating Connectivism theory, which emphasizes the importance of digital networks and technology in learning, R7's narrative can be viewed through a different lens. The digital age offers unprecedented access to English language resources, such as online forums, social media, and virtual language exchange platforms. These digital networks could provide alternative avenues for R7 to engage in active English communication, compensating for the lack of English-speaking peers in her immediate physical environment. Connectivism suggests that learning occurs through connections within a network, and for R7, digital platforms could serve as a bridge to connect with English speakers globally, offering opportunities for active language practice.

The act of speaking involves more than the reproduction of words; it encompasses tone, intonation, and context, crucial for effective communication. R7's limited chances to converse in English may impede her ability to master these subtleties, potentially leading to challenges in fluid conversations, especially in unfamiliar contexts. The absence of a supportive environment to practice spoken English could lead to reduced confidence in her speaking abilities, even if her comprehension skills are well-developed.

From a socio-cultural perspective, R7's experience also touches upon the broader dynamics of language communities. While R7 is interested in English content, the lack of an English-speaking community around her might affect her 'imagined identity' as an English speaker. The integration of Connectivism into this analysis highlights the potential of digital networks to provide alternative communities for language practice and development, thereby supporting the formation of a more confident linguistic identity.

Respondent 10 (R10) provides an insightful account of her linguistic evolution, illustrating the significant impact of changing environments on language acquisition and usage. R10 shares her experience:

"I use more English when I talk to my friends in university. Before this I use mostly Bahasa because nobody use English with me."

R10's narrative highlights the transformative effect of her surroundings on her language choices. Initially immersed in a predominantly Bahasa Malaysia-speaking environment, R10's linguistic preferences were naturally inclined towards Bahasa Malaysia. This preference was reinforced by the lack of English-speaking peers and prevailing cultural norms, which made Bahasa Malaysia the default mode of communication. This environment limited R10's opportunities to engage with English, restricting her exposure and practice in the language.

The transition to a university setting marked a significant shift in R10's linguistic environment. Universities, known for their diverse student populations and focus on global competencies, often create an atmosphere where English serves as a lingua franca, connecting individuals across cultural and linguistic boundaries. For R10, this new setting provided not only exposure to English but also a compelling reason to actively use the language. This change facilitated an enhancement in her English proficiency and confidence, demonstrating the influence of social and educational environments on language development.

R10's experience also underscores the critical role of social interactions in language learning. Beyond formal education, the informal aspects of language acquisition, such as nuances, colloquialisms, and real-time feedback obtained through casual conversations, are essential for comprehensive language development. R10's adaptation to her new university environment exemplifies the adaptability of individuals to new linguistic contexts. It also highlights the influential role of educational institutions in shaping linguistic landscapes and, consequently, affecting individual language choices and proficiencies.

In essence, R10's journey from a Bahasa Malaysia-dominated environment to a more English-centric university setting illustrates the dynamic nature of language learning. It showcases how changes in one's immediate environment can significantly influence linguistic preferences and abilities, emphasizing the importance of exposure and active engagement in language acquisition.

The exploration of unsuccessful ESL learners within the context of Norton's Imagined Communities unveils a nuanced landscape of linguistic challenges and societal influences. These learners often grapple with their peripheral status in English-speaking communities, a consequence of limited exposure and engagement with the English language in their everyday lives. Narratives like that of R10 exemplify this sense of isolation, where learners feel sidelined due to their sporadic interactions in English, leading to feelings of exclusion and a questioning of their place within the linguistic landscape. This experience is further compounded by the dominant role of Bahasa Malaysia in both personal and digital realms, which, as seen in the accounts of learners like R8, limits their exposure to English and confines their language identity within Malay-centric circles.

The societal norms and the linguistic capital of Bahasa Malaysia emerge as significant factors in these narratives. In environments where Bahasa Malaysia prevails, English often holds a lower linguistic capital, influencing learners' motivation and perception of its utility. This dynamic is evident in learners' sparing use of English, reflecting its perceived lower value in their immediate contexts. Additionally, the digital interactions of these learners, predominantly occurring in Bahasa Malaysia, restrict their access to diverse linguistic inputs, thereby impacting their proficiency and confidence in English. The digital realm, while a potential space for linguistic expansion, often heightens learners' vulnerability due to their uncertainties about English proficiency.

These narratives collectively underscore the challenges faced by unsuccessful learners in bridging their primary linguistic world with the English-speaking world. Despite the global connectivity offered by digital platforms, these learners struggle to expand their linguistic networks to include more English-centric interactions. This struggle highlights the need for supportive environments that encourage active participation in English-speaking communities, both offline and online. Such environments would facilitate learners' transition from peripheral to more central roles in their imagined linguistic landscapes, fostering a sense of belonging, linguistic confidence, and ultimately, a more integrated language identity within the realm of English.

Discussions
Imagined Communities and Their Influence on Successful ESL Learners
The journey of language learning depends on a myriad of factors and not just from personal factors like motivations and ideology. As the narratives suggest, successful learners' heavily emphasise on how their immediate communities like family and friends influence their EL learning journey, which directly reinforce their investment in learning the language. The successful learners in this study exhibit a distinctive aspiration to be part of global English-speaking communities. This global envisioning signifies a desire to transcend local and national boundaries, aiming to participate in international discourses and networks where English is the lingua franca. However, it is essential to consider the interplay between these global aspirations and the local contexts in which learners are situated. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital offers a lens through which to examine how learners navigate between their immediate environments and their envisioned communities. The acquisition of cultural capital, in the form of linguistic proficiency, enables learners to access and participate in their imagined communities, thereby influencing their social mobility and identity formation.

The act of envisioning and identifying with imagined communities is not a passive process; it involves active negotiation of meanings and a sense of belonging. Learners engage with their imagined communities through various forms of social interaction, media consumption, and cultural engagement. This active participation allows them to construct knowledge, develop linguistic competencies, and negotiate their positions within these communities. The sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) provides insights into how social interactions within communities contribute to cognitive development and the construction of meaning. Learners' engagement with their imagined communities facilitates the internalisation of cultural norms, values, and linguistic practices, shaping their perceptions of belonging and influencing their identity development.

For successful learners, their community plays a pivotal role when navigating through the nuances of language learning. As seen in the data, the immediate communities surrounding them provide positive encouragement that nurture the learners' desired identities, which in turn, propel them to invest in the learning process in order to achieve their ideal self. For example, some of the learners' familial background supported them in the journey of learning EL and reinforcing the importance of having good EL proficiency. This nurturing environment is crucial, as Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory posits that learning is fundamentally a social process, and the communities surrounding the learner significantly influence their cognitive development.

One aspect that merits deeper exploration is the role of family and peer influence in shaping learners' engagement with imagined communities. Norton (2000) emphasizes the

significance of social interactions in language learning, suggesting that learners' investment in a language is often motivated by their desire to communicate with specific people or groups. For instance, Kinginger (2004) found that family encouragement and support play a crucial role in learners' language development. This is echoed in the data, where learners reported familial support as a key factor in their English language journey.

Moreover, the influence of peers, especially those from English-educated backgrounds, provides learners with authentic contexts for language use, as noted by (Peirce, 1995). This aligns with the findings where learners highlighted the importance of practicing English with friends. Such interactions not only improve linguistic proficiency but also help learners internalize the cultural and pragmatic aspects of the language, as discussed by (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006).

The integration of digital media in language learning also presents a significant avenue for engaging with imagined communities. As Warschauer (2000) points out, the internet offers learners access to global English-speaking communities, expanding their opportunities for authentic language use and cultural exchange. This is particularly relevant, where learners' use of digital platforms for English engagement was evident.

This positive reinforcement from immediate communities aligns with the learners' aspirations, propelling them to invest more in the learning process to achieve their ideal self. For instance, some learners reported that their familial background played a supportive role in their journey of learning English, reinforcing the importance of proficiency in the English language. This finding resonates with the work of Norton (1995), who highlighted the importance of investment in language learning, where learners are driven to learn when they envision future selves being part of their imagined communities. Moreover, the role of the community in fostering language acquisition can be related to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasizes learning through observation, imitation, and modelling. In this context, the learners observe and imitate the linguistic behaviours of their community members, which serves to reinforce their language learning.

Imagined Communities Within Unsuccessful ESL Learners
The concept of imagined communities, as introduced by Anderson (1983) and later adapted by Norton (1995) in the context of language learning, revolves around the notion of individuals envisioning themselves as part of a broader community, even if they have not physically interacted with every member of that community. This sense of belonging and aspiration can significantly influence one's motivation and investment in language learning.

From the responses of the unsuccessful learners, it becomes evident that their imagined communities are not as strongly tied to English-speaking communities as one might expect. R3's statement, "Since young, me and my family don't speak any other language other than Bahasa Malaysia. There is no need to speak English because our area all use Bahasa Malaysia," underscores the dominance of the immediate physical community over any potential imagined English-speaking community. Similarly, R4's mention of the exclusive use of the "dialek Kelantan" in their area further highlights the limited exposure and integration of English in their daily lives.

The lack of a conducive English learning environment, as highlighted by R5's recounting of their English class experience, where even the English teacher predominantly used Malay, further diminishes the formation of a strong imagined community tied to English. This is not just a reflection of the educational system but also indicates a broader societal perspective where English is not seen as an integral part of the community. R1's comment about learning

grammar during English classes in secondary school, without any emphasis on communicative competence, further reinforces this observation.

Moreover, the perceived relevance of English in their daily lives seems minimal. As R1 and R3 mentioned, English is primarily used during English classes or when necessary. The lack of integration of English into their daily lives, as indicated by R2's and R9's responses, suggests that these learners do not see themselves as part of a global English-speaking community. Instead, their imagined community remains firmly rooted in their immediate surroundings, where Bahasa Malaysia dominates.

The barriers to investment in language learning, particularly the lack of self-belief, further exacerbate this disconnect from English-speaking imagined communities. R2's hesitance to use English due to fear of making mistakes and R8's reluctance to speak English for fear of being laughed at highlight the deep-seated insecurities and lack of confidence in their English proficiency.

In the realm of sociolinguistics, Bourdieu (1991) posited that language is not just a tool for communication but also a form of cultural capital. In the Malaysian context, where Bahasa Malaysia is the dominant language, English becomes a form of symbolic capital, which, when acquired, can provide social mobility and access to global communities. However, for these unsuccessful learners, the lack of opportunities, coupled with societal perceptions and personal insecurities, limits their acquisition of this symbolic capital, thereby restricting their access to global English-speaking imagined communities.

The concept of imagined communities, while primarily associated with the broader socio-political realm, has profound implications in the domain of language learning. For learners, the imagined community represents not just a linguistic group but also a socio-cultural space where they aspire to belong and be recognised. However, the unsuccessful learners' narratives reveal a disconnect between their aspirations and the realities of their immediate environment.

Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice can offer further insights into this disconnect. According to Wenger, learning is a social process that involves participation in communal activities. In the context of English language learning, this would mean active engagement in English-speaking communities, both real and imagined. However, the responses from the unsuccessful learners indicate a lack of such active participation. R2's statement, "No. We don't use English to speak with each other and we don't use it at all," and R3's emphasis on the dominance of Bahasa Malaysia in their immediate environment highlight this absence of an English-speaking community of practice.

Furthermore, the stigma associated with using English, as expressed by R1 and R7, further alienates these learners from potential English-speaking communities. Such negative perceptions can be traced back to historical and socio-political factors. Malaysia's colonial past, where English was the language of the colonisers, might still influence contemporary perceptions of the language. R2's reference to English as "bahasa penjajah" (colonial language) underscores this historical baggage.

Historically, Malaysia's colonial past plays a pivotal role in shaping contemporary perceptions of the English language. English, being the language of the colonisers, carries with it the weight of historical subjugation and dominance. For many, especially in post-colonial societies, languages of the colonisers often become emblematic of oppression, cultural erosion, and loss of indigenous identity. R2's characterisation of English as "bahasa penjajah" (colonial language) is an upsetting reminder of this historical context. Such perceptions can inadvertently create a dichotomy where English is viewed as an 'outsider' language, in

contrast to Bahasa Malaysia, which is seen as the authentic representation of Malaysian identity. This sentiment resonates with the findings of a study by Ullah (2017), which highlighted the socio-cultural constraints in learning English in certain regions, where the language is perceived as foreign or even as a remnant of colonialism.

This historical baggage, combined with the stigma of using English, can significantly influence learners' imagined communities. Instead of envisioning themselves as part of a global, cosmopolitan English-speaking community, they might perceive these communities as exclusive, distant, and perhaps even antagonistic. The imagined communities, in this context, become spaces of exclusion rather than inclusion, further diminishing their motivation to invest in English language learning.

Moreover, the socio-political narrative that champions national languages over colonial languages can further exacerbate this stigma. While promoting national languages is crucial for preserving cultural heritage and identity, it should not come at the cost of alienating learners from global linguistic communities. For these unsuccessful learners, the imagined community becomes a space of conflict, where their aspirations to be part of the global English-speaking world clash with the socio-cultural pressures and stigmas of their immediate environment.

Self-efficacy, as conceptualised by Bandura (1977), refers to an individual's belief in their capabilities to execute tasks and achieve specific outcomes. In the realm of language learning, self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in shaping learners' engagement with the language and their aspirations towards becoming a part of specific linguistic communities. Learners like R8 and R7, who express a lack of self-efficacy, often grapple with doubts about their linguistic capabilities, which can manifest as hesitancy to use the language, avoidance of challenging linguistic tasks, or even withdrawal from language-learning opportunities altogether.

This diminished self-efficacy has direct implications for the nature of their imagined communities. When learners doubt their abilities, they are less likely to envision themselves as active participants in English-speaking communities. Instead, they might perceive these communities as elite, exclusive, and beyond their reach. Such perceptions can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where learners, believing they cannot be part of these communities, do not invest the necessary effort to improve their language skills, further distancing themselves from these imagined communities.

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) highlight the intricate relationship between motivation, identity, and the broader socio-cultural context in language learning. They argue that learners' imagined selves, which represent their future aspirations and identities, can be powerful motivators. However, a lack of self-efficacy can distort these imagined selves, making them seem unattainable. For learners like R8 and R7, their low self-efficacy might lead them to envision a future where they remain on the peripheries of English-speaking communities, rather than as integrated, confident members.

Furthermore, the socio-cultural environment can either bolster or undermine learners' self-efficacy. Positive feedback, supportive learning environments, and successful language use experiences can enhance self-efficacy. In contrast, negative feedback, unsupportive learning contexts, or experiences of failure can erode it. For the unsuccessful learners in this study, their lack of self-efficacy might be a culmination of various negative experiences, further distancing them from their imagined communities.

Moreover, the lack of identification with English-speaking communities, as indicated by R1, R2, and R9, suggests a deeper socio-cultural divide. This divide is not just linguistic but also cultural, where English is seen as an 'other', an external entity not fully integrated into the

learners' socio-cultural fabric. The research by Ovalle Quiroz & González (2023) on Colombian English teachers' investment in their professional development sheds light on the concept of 'imagined communities'. The study emphasises the role of imagined identities and communities in shaping teachers' professional trajectories. Drawing parallels, unsuccessful learners' lack of identification with English-speaking communities can be seen as a result of their inability to envision a future where they are proficient English speakers, further hindering their investment in the language.

Conclusion
This research has provided a comprehensive exploration into the complex nature of imagined communities among ESL learners. The primary objective was to discern the differences and similarities between successful and unsuccessful learners, offering a detailed understanding of their linguistic behaviours and the factors influencing them.

The data revealed the significant impact of imagined communities on learners' motivations. These socially constructed communities serve as influential determinants in learners' engagement with the English language. Observational insights further enriched the study's findings, presenting tangible evidence of the linguistic behaviours that set apart successful learners from their unsuccessful peers. These behaviours, from the language of response to sentimental indicators, offer valuable insights into the learners' confidence and commitment to English.

Comparing the findings with existing literature has been instrumental in situating this study within the broader academic discourse. This comparison has highlighted areas of alignment and divergence, underscoring the study's contribution to the field. The implications derived from the research findings are multifaceted, spanning educational practices, policy considerations, and teacher training. These implications emphasise the potential of this study to inform future practices and policies in the Malaysian ESL context.

In conclusion, while this research provides a detailed snapshot of the ESL learning landscape in Malaysia, it is essential to recognise the dynamic nature of language learning. The findings and implications presented here are hoped to serve as a foundation for future research and discussions in English language education in Malaysia and beyond.

References

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Appadurai, A. (1997). *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). The economics of linguistic exchanges. *Social Sciences Information, 16*(6), 645– 668.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Dörnyei, Z. (2009). Individual differences: Interplay of learner characteristics and learning environment. *Language Learning*, 59(1), 230-248. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2008.00473.x

Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2011). Teaching and Researching: Motivation (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315833750

Downes, S. (2019). Recent work in connectivism. European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning, 22(2), 113–132. https://doi.org/10.2478/eurodl-2019-0014

Downes, S. (2012). Connectivism and Connective Knowledge: Essays on Meaning and Learning Networks. National Research Council Canada. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22082

Duff, P. A. (2019). Social dimensions and processes in second language acquisition: Multilingual socialization in transnational contexts. The Modern Language Journal, 103(S1), 6-22. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12534

EF English Proficiency Index. (2019). Retrieved February 7th, 2020, from https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/regions/asia/malaysia/

Gill, S. K., & Kirkpatrick, A. (2013). English in Asian and European higher education. In C. Chapelle (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of applied linguistics*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Azman, H. (2016). Implementation and challenges of English language education reform in Malaysian primary schools. *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies,* 22(3), 65-78. http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2016-2203-05

JobStreet.com Fresh Graduate Report 2018. (2018). Retrieved February 5th, 2020, from https://www.jobstreet.com.my/announcement/FTP/FACT-SHEET_Fresh-Graduate-Survey-2018.pdf

Kanno, Y., & Norton, B. (Eds.). (2003). Imagined communities and educational possibilities [Special issue]. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 2(4), 241-249.

Kinginger, C. (2004). Alice doesn't live here anymore: Foreign language learning and identity reconstruction. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts (pp. 219-242). Multilingual Matters. DOI: 10.21832/9781853596483-010

Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development. Oxford University Press.

Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE) (2001). Primary School Integrated English Language Syllabus. Kuala Lumpur: Curriculum Development Centre.

Norton Pierce, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, *29*(1), 9-31. DOI: 10.2307/3587803

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity, and educational change*. Harlow, England: Longman/Pearson.

Norton, B. (2001). Non-participation, imagined communities, and the language classroom. In M. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research*. London: Pearson Education Limited.

Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation (2nd ed.)*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Norton, B. (2013). Identity and second language acquisition. In C. Chapelle (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. Wiley-Blackwell.
https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal0521

Norton, B. (1997). Language, identity and the ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, *31*(3), 409-429.

Norton, B., & Gao, Y. (2008). Identity, investment, and Chinese learners of English. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 18(1), 109-120.

Quiroz, M., & González, A. (2023). Imagined identities and imagined communities: Colombian English teachers' investment in their professional development. Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development, 25(1), 213-228.
https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v25n1.99248

Sani, R. (2018). Building capacity to increase English proficiency. New Straits Times. https://www.nst.com.my/education/2018/02/332968/building-capacity-increase-english-proficiency

Simons, G. F., & Charles D. F. (2018). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world, 21st edition*. Dallas: SIL International.

Song, H. (2010). *Imagined communities, language learning and identity in highly skilled transnational migrants: A case study of Korean migrants in Canada* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Manitoba, Canada.

Ullah, F. (2017). Socio-Cultural Constraints in Learning English Language at Jazan University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. International Journal of Language and Linguistics, 5(2), 29–33. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijll.20170502.11

Ushioda, E. (2008). *Motivation and good language learners*. In: Griffiths, C. (Ed.), Lessons from Good Language Learners. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Ushioda, E. (2020). Language learning motivation: An ethical agenda for research. Language Teaching, 53(1), 66-79. https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144481900038X.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4

Warschauer, M. (2000). Online learning in sociocultural context. Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 31(1), 10-37. DOI: 10.1525/aeq.2000.31.1.10

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E., & Wegner-Trayner, B. (2007). *Introduction to communities of practice.* Retrieved May 10th, 2020, from https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/