

## Imagined Communities and Teaching English as a Second Language

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### Abstract

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The article analyzes the research literature regarding the role of imagination and languages in creating real and imagined communities of practice for non-native speakers of English. Throughout our lifespan we inadvertently become members of numerous imagined and real communities; while some of them are crucial in our identity formation and life goals, others may be just fragmented and insignificant. On the other hand, some communities could be a matter of our choice or interest, whereas others are assigned to us irrespectively or even despite our free will. The dual nature of a human imagination may either empower or marginalize learners of English as a second language (ESL). The following paper addresses the role of English as a second language in terms of imagined and real learning communities of practice and presents some possible alternatives for both ESL teachers and learners in order to ensure the positive language learning experience.

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**Keywords:** imagined communities; communities of practice; ESL (English as a Second Language); EFL (English as a Foreign Language); L1 (first language); L2 (second language)

In our everyday life we may frequently use words like “imagination”, “fantasy” or “creativity” interchangeably as contextual synonyms without thinking too much about the different shades of meanings implied behind. While “fantasy” is obviously associated with a literature genre, “imagination” is generally defined as “the ability to form new images and sensations that are not perceived through senses such as sight, hearing, or other senses” (Wikipedia, n.d.).

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In the research literature there is a strict distinction between “imagination” as a productive force and “fantasy” as a fruitless unrealistic aspiration for unachievable goals. Appadurai (1997) defines imagination as “a collective social fact” (p.5) that, unlike fantasy, “can become the fuel for actions” (p.7), so imagination should not be perceived as escape from a harsh reality. Simon (1992) differentiates “wishes” (i.e. fantasy) versus “hopeful imagination” that projects a desirable future (as cited in Kanno & Norton, 2003, p.244). Moreover, Wenger (1998, p.176) believes imagination is “a process of expanding oneself by transcending out time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves” (as cited in Kanno & Norton, 2003, p.241). Despite negative connotation, fantasy may be considered as a product of our imagination; in other words, it is a human ability to create imagery. With the help of our powerful imagination we may feel connected with people we have never met, creating the so called “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1992) that shape our past, present and future as well as influence our perception of who we are or trying to become.

The notion of imagined communities is applicable in a myriad of possible senses from our personal individual aspirations to become members of some specific community of practice (Wenger, 2000) to a broad understanding of nations as imagined communities (Anderson, 1992). Throughout our lifespan we inadvertently become members of numerous imagined and real communities; while some of them are crucial in our identity formation and life goals, others may be just fragmented and insignificant. On the other hand, some communities could be a matter of our choice or interest, whereas others are assigned to us irrespectively or even despite our free will. Probably one of the most significant assigned imagined communities according to Anderson (1992) is the nation, which is “*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p.6). He also believes that nations are limited by their boundaries, and sovereign due to elimination of dynastic hierarchy. There is one arguable point in his interpretation of a nation as a community because he states that “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (p.7). If we take into account the ethnic conflicts at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or an ongoing present crisis in Ukraine, there seems to be no “horizontal comradeship”, at least not across the nation as a whole.

I think in their interpretation of imagination as a positive stimulus for actions, researchers overlooked the down side of this phenomenon. The desire to participate in some imagined communities could be a driving force to change the existing real communities of participation or even to alienate oneself from the real community in favour of a future imagined one. The problem is that a newly imagined community is not necessarily a better one. Appadurai (1997) addresses the crucial role of mass media in building those new imagined communities, especially for deterritorialized viewers, but he fails to acknowledge the dramatic influence of mass media in terms of destroying the existing real communities. For example, over the last couple of months, Russian media divided Ukrainians into two groups and now define them as either “fascists or benderovtsi” (i.e. those who support the membership in the EU) or “pro-Russian supporters” who fight for federalization and separatism. The word “Ukrainian” is never mentioned, so what happened to the whole nation of Ukrainians? In the mind of Russian onlookers Ukrainians as a nation ceased to exist; consequently, the best solution would be for Russia to patronize or control the Ukrainian territories. Appadurai (1997) warns that “there is always a fear of cultural absorption by polities of larger scale, especially those that are nearby. One man's imagined community is another man's political prison” (p.32). Consequently, there may be tensions between our participation in real and imagined communities, especially if those communities violate or overlap with the imagined communities of our fellow members.

While Anderson (1992) analyses nations as imagined communities from a historical perspective and claims that the new imagined communities appeared due to “interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communication (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity” (p. 43), Appadurai (1997) illustrates the emergence of modern imagined communities as a result of combination of globalized mass media and mass migration, which he calls “a theory of rupture”. Due to mass media, images transcend national borders and “meet deterritorialized viewers”, those people who chose to immigrate and participate in a different real community, but who still want to be in touch with their home countries. In many cases those imported images cause confusion between reality and fiction, so “the homeland is partly invented” by the imagination of deterritorialized immigrants.

Appadurai (1997) also claims that many ethnic conflicts in different parts of the world may be intentionally provoked by culturalism which “is the conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics. ” (p.15). The recent occupation of the Crimea by Russian military forces was a direct result of culturalism and dominating influence of Russian media advertising a better and more prosperous imagined community for ethnic Russians in Ukraine. While Appadurai (1997) states that imagination makes it possible for “more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before” (p.53), imagination can perform both destructive and consolidating roles.

Nation-states as imagined communities are naturally associated with some national or official languages, but the role of languages in formation of nations is not that simple and straightforward. Anderson (1992) points out that in the past religious communities were imagined through specific sacred languages, but as those languages became replaced with vernaculars, religious communities lost their integrity and power. Taking into account the popularity of English as a global language at the present, the question is whether English can assume the role of a “sacred language” in our present-day reality. Does English really help to unite and create extended imagined communities which are partially deterritorialized and expand beyond the geographical boundaries of nation- states? There is no definite answer yet, but Anderson (1992) asserts that all languages should be viewed as means of inclusion since “the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities*” (p.133). This claim seems to be contradictory because on the one hand, Anderson (1992) admits the existence of “languages- of-power” as a direct consequence of print capitalism; on the other hand, he assigns all languages in general this powerful feature of unification:

from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be ‘invited into’ the imagined community. Thus today, even the most insular nations accept the principle of *naturalization* (wonderful word!), no matter how difficult in practice they can make it (p.145).

Yet in order for new immigrants to be invited to join the Canadian family (an imagined community), one must be proficient in English or French, so a language could be a gate keeper or a pass to new imagined and real communities of practice.

All in all, the role of languages in creation of the imagined communities is far from being defined, but this paper addresses the role of English as a second language in terms of imagined and real learning communities of practice.

### **ESL Identities and Communities of Practice**

A positive constructive role of imagination is realized as one out of three modes of belonging to social learning systems according to Wenger's (2000) notion of "communities of practice". Through engagement, imagination and alignment people demonstrate their membership in various communities of practice, so the most important thing is not who they are or where they are from, but if they are in the process of doing some common mutual action or practice. According to Wenger (2000), knowing is "a matter of displaying competences defined in social communities" (p.226). He considers the process of learning as an exchange between our personal *experience* and the *competence* as it is defined and offered by the community we participate in. Wenger (2000) elaborates on the phenomenon of knowing and learning and claims that:

If competence and experience are too close, if they always match, not much learning is likely to take place. There are no challenges; the community is losing its dynamism and the practice is in danger of becoming stale. {...} Learning at boundaries is likely to be maximized for individuals and for communities when experience and competence are in close tension. {...} Boundaries are sources of new opportunities as well as potential difficulties (p.233).

Communities of practice are also applicable in learning English as a second or foreign language, when ESL/EFL learners seek membership in a new imagined (EFL) or real (ESL) community of English speakers. While most research literature focuses on potential difficulties and barriers preventing new language learners from full participation in a new community, there is one potential benefit that those newcomers can bring to an already established community of English language speakers with a well-defined social competence. Every new language learner brings his or her unique personal life experience thus enriching the ongoing process of learning and improving. According to Wenger (2000), in order to develop competence and be successful each community of practice should "maintain the spirit of inquiry", which usually happens at the boundaries of different learning opportunities.

Thus every new language learner should be viewed not as a potential invader threatening to undermine the standards of an established competence (i.e. language competence), but as a new source of opportunities, knowledge and experience.

Application of Wenger's notion of communities of practice in the area of teaching English as a second language symbolizes a shift from cognitive approaches, which viewed language learners through input-output lenses, to socially-oriented approaches, which consider learners as "part of a larger social matrix, affiliated with diverse communities and interacting in dynamic ways with members of these communities. Second language acquisition, and learning generally, is produced within communities of practice rather than reflecting an accomplishment of isolated individuals" (Cummins & Davison, 2007, p.615). In order to facilitate learners' development, there should be interaction between novice and expert community members with opportunities for new members to have "peripheral legitimate participation" in this new community (Lave & Wenger, 1991 as cited in Meadows, 2010).

In terms of ESL community of practice, the only idea of being accepted, not even granted a legitimate peripheral participation, may seem unattainable for many beginning language learners. Lee (2008) claims that "classroom discourses created and reproduced locally-and globally- subjugated (or Othered) student identities both within and outside the classroom" (p.92) thus denying novice members a legitimate status within new communities. Haneda (2006) reiterates that application of Wenger's theory regarding communities of practice in the area of second language acquisition has several limitations since "it does not (a) critically examine the concept of community or (b) distinguish among different types of learning" (p.811). Moreover, the issues of power and hierarchy in ESL communities is also overlooked "with respect to who can assign certain roles and identities and thus control trajectories that lead (or not) to full participation" (Haneda, 2006, p.812). While this criticism of Wenger's theory has ground, it is notable that he still offered some suggestions regarding developing a strong and healthy identity, which can definitely be applicable in ESL classrooms. Wenger (2000) maintains that "connectedness", "expansiveness" and "effectiveness" are crucial in building a strong identity. By "connectedness" he meant involvement with others within the community; by "expansiveness" he proclaimed multimembership in various communities of practice; finally, "effectiveness" implies liberating and empowering force of our identities.

Wenger (2000) suggests three trajectories for the possible future in order to develop identities; all of these suggested trajectories can be identified within ESL community of practice. Wenger (2000) believes that:

Inbound trajectories invite newcomers into full membership in a community. Peripheral trajectories allow a person to interact with the community without making the commitment to becoming a full member. Outbound trajectories, such as the ones offered by schools, point to forms of participation outside the current communities (p.241).

Unfortunately, some ESL educators may be rather narrow-minded, and they imagine only one possible trajectory for non-native speakers of English when “inbound” one is not their first choice.

Besides limited language competence and possible teachers’ assumptions, novice language learners face numerous other barriers that prevent them from being accepted into a new English-speaking community. First, imagined communities, as well as the real ones, have their own rules which influence learners’ goals (Kanno & Norton, 2003) and opportunities of legitimate peripheral participation. Some rules are well-pronounced and clearly defined, while others are implied, so for new language learners with different personal life experience it may be challenging to perceive those unstated invisible rules and regulations. Secondly, the unwillingness of native speakers (expert members) to accept new members into their linguistic communities of practice also restricts ESL learners from possibilities of even peripheral participation. Finally, the well-established hierarchy between native speakers and non-native speakers limits the chances of non-native English speakers to become fully legitimate members of an English-speaking community. Meadows (2010) concludes that “when seen through nationalist border practices, second language learners embody the national-Other for core members of the target national community and are thus by definition restricted from full membership in the national community of practice” (p.108).

According to Wenger’s (2000) definition of communities of practice, all members are supposed to have access to “shared repertoire of communal resources” (p.229). In order to ensure the successful progress of new language learners, ESL teachers and other members of the community should be willing to provide novice members with all necessary communal resources. One of them would be the extreme dependence of new learners on expert members.

Meadows (2010) notes that "language learning involves at its very core a process of appropriation of others' voices" (p.98). In the context of his study, by "others' voices" he referred to the participants who relied mostly on legitimate native speakers in Japan in order to construct the national image of the country. In general, novice language learners have to "borrow" native speakers' intonation, expressions, body language, pronunciation etc. in order to acquire more or less legitimate peripheral status in a new community. Some learners may be quite successful in this process of imitation, while others may be less fortunate, but the bottom line is that native speakers should be patient and ready to offer their help and provide patterns for non-native speakers of English. Wenger (2000) calls a community of practice "a joint enterprise", which in terms of language learning means a mutual process of language sharing and acquisition; in other words, if we consider ESL a community of practice, then expert members are equally responsible for the success and progress (or failure) of new language learners.

### **Alternative Communities for Non-Native Speakers of English**

New immigrants and novice language learners in general usually have an ideal image of a future imagined community of English speakers and believe that even limited language proficiency will guarantee them an access to a new community. In reality though, even native-like proficiency is not always a pass to a new membership. Pavlenko (2003) discusses the possible identities for non-native ESL teachers and concludes that her participants "drew on two alternative discourses of language and identity that offered them three imagined communities in which they sought and claimed membership: (a) native speaker community, (b) non-native speaker/L2 learner community, and (c) multilingual/L2 user community" (p.256). Due to the prevailing dominant discourse of native-speakers and natural hierarchy between native and non-native speakers, L 2 learners are restricted from being admitted to a native speaker community. Consequently, they have two other options for possible future imagined communities: either non-native speaker or multilingual community. Imagined community of L2 users is not the most appealing one since it carries some kind of labels and provokes negative self-image among language learners: "The students who position themselves as non-native speakers/L2 learners talk of embarrassment, frustration, desperation, and torment, and describe themselves as passive, incompetent, stupid, and childlike" (Pavlenko, 2003, p.260).

At the beginning of their language journey, L2 learners hope that the imagined community of non-native speakers would be a transitional one on their way to complete competency and legitimate participation. Unfortunately, in reality they find themselves stuck and assigned in this L2/ non-native speaker's community even years after they began their language learning and even if they are fully proficient in a second language.

Pavlenko (2003) offers a third type of imagined community, multilingual community, as a valid alternative to a non-native speaker community. She based her claim on Cook's (1992,1999) theory of "*multicompetence*, which suggests that people who know more than one language have a distinct compound state of mind, not equivalent to two monolingual states, and can be considered legitimate L2 users" (p.262). In addition, she employs a broad understanding of bilingualism as a general ability of using more than one language irrespective of the proficiency level. While this alternative multilingual imagined community could be comfortable for ESL learners, it is quite problematic to implement this theory in the community of monolingual English speakers who still believe in their language competence as established within an English-speaking community. Another possible alternative is to view every local ESL community of practice (which Wenger (2000) identified as a "subcommunity") as an integral part of a global English speaking community. Wenger (2000) claims that "if a community is large and does not have a fractal structure with local subcommunities in which people can engage actively, then it can easily happen that beyond a small core group various segments of the community feel disconnected" (p.243). All in all, English language learners can identify with a global community of ESL/EFL learners not native-speakers per se.

Difficulties in accepting the participation in a real community of non-native speakers versus the imagined one of native speakers is not the most dramatic outcome for L2 learners. In some extreme cases when non-native speakers are not acknowledged and refused peripheral legitimate participation in a language community of practice, they may eventually completely withdraw from the real community and no longer seek membership in a desirable imagined community of proficient speakers. Norton (2000) introduces the idea of language learners' investment into the target language:

when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Thus an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space (p. 11).

Norton's female participants constructed the idea of their future imagined identities and communities in a host country, yet not all of them managed to pursue their dreams and ambitions due to the hostility or misunderstanding from the expert members (native speakers). For instance, two of her participants withdrew from ESL classed because their teachers positioned them as new immigrants not as professionals (one was a teacher in her home country, and the other one was trying to become a computer specialist). The imagined communities of these two women clashed with the perception and attitudes towards them in a real community, thus depriving them of possibilities to further pursue their goals. Based on the interviews with those women only, it is hard to tell whether the ESL teachers are to be blamed. There is a chance that these females simply misunderstood their teachers' attitudes; on the other hand, those ESL educators may have been unaware of professional ambitions of their learners, so they assigned some different communities of practice for them.

Chang (2011) suggests that advisors and teachers should offer international student some new identities and communities; otherwise students may be absolutely unaware of their potential imagined and real communities of practice. For example, Chang (2011) explains how language learners' assumptions may be inaccurate or misleading in their language acquisition process. Two international students in her study had a very limited investment in learning English because they had already prepared possible future communities of practice for them without considering other opportunities available to them; one student invested into his communication competence because he believed it was valued in US society, while the other student focused only on writing competence since this was an asset in his home country. ESL learners and teachers should not focus on only one imagined community since life trajectories are unpredictable, so it is always wise to be prepared for more possible identities and communities of participation.

There is no doubt that limited English proficiency may definitely be one reason, perhaps even the defining reason, why ESL teachers may not be able to imagine some future professional roles for their students outside of the classroom.

On the other hand, Norton (2000) also points out a case when a participant intentionally refused to invest into L2 acquisition since she was still living in her imagined community back in her home country and imagined herself as a wealthy Peruvian woman without any attachments to her real Canadian context. Norton (2000) confirms the statement that both past and future imagined communities can be crucial in learners' language investment. Norton's research findings should be probably taken with a grain of salt because the researcher is a representative of a dominant target language group, so she presented her interpretation of her participants' personal life experience; she was still exploring the "otherness" in her participants since they really did not share the same experience, so there is this invisible binary of "I versus they".

Not only ESL learners can be denied access to some imagined or real communities; in fact, everyone is not immune to being an outsider at some point in his or her life, so lack of any particular competence can be a reason for rejection. Surprisingly, even teachers are vulnerable to the phenomenon of rejection, and the reason is not their lack of competence. Xu (2012) explores how some novice teachers in her study failed to achieve their ideal imagined identities and communities. Three participating teachers began their teaching careers with established pre-constructed imagined identities of "language expert, learning facilitator, and spiritual guide" but three years later these imagined identities translated respectively into practiced identities of "language attrition sufferer, routine performer, and problem analyzer" (p.572). The teachers in this report had to negotiate their imagined identities under the pressure of reality: "Specifically, the cue-based or exemplar-based imagined identities transformed into the more rule based or schema-based practiced identities. A strong driving force behind such transformation came from the institutional pressures of school rules and regulations, thus leading to rule-based identities" (p.576). Unfortunately, this example demonstrates that institutions may limit not only marginalized or minority students, but also those who are supposed to be expert community members, teachers in this particular case.

Imagined communities can also create some alternative imagined identities assigned by the possible membership in future communities of practice. Pavlenko and Norton (2007) specify five identity clusters that may be influenced by the multiple memberships in imagined communities.

Postcolonial aspect may be viewed differently in terms of English as a language of colonialism, neutral or appropriated by local population. In countries where English was not a postcolonial language, it is viewed as language of global economy and the language of "citizens of the world". Norton and Kamal (2003) explored imagined communities of Pakistani school children who were involved in a local literacy project helping refugee Afghan children. Being aware of instability and marginal status of Pakistan, those school children imagine a peaceful and developed country in the future. They also believe that technology, literacy and the English language will secure connections to global community, provide resources, and promote peace and communication between nations. At the same time they do not devalue the significance of their local language, culture and religion, so they imagine their local community in a more global international context. Ethnic identity cluster (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007) refers to those who may or may not be called legitimate language speakers and community members.

The authors claim that ESL and minority students are offered a very limited range of imagined identities and communities. As Kanno (2003) rejoins "it is on the whole the least privileged bilingual students who are socialized into the least privileged imagined communities" (p.298). Pavlenko and Norton (2007) also suggest a multilingual identify cluster instead of a well-established deficit framework for L2 learners. They believe that our world should not be dominated by English but be a linguistically diverse one. Finally, they claim that English may also influence gender identities offering some alternatives and different possibilities. The same point was mentioned by Norton (2000) with respect to some of her female participants who view their proficiency in English as a possibility to support their families financially, thus those women were breadwinners for their family members. Pavlenko and Norton (2007) state that "the process of imagining and reimagining one's multiple memberships may influence agency, motivation, investment, and resistance in the learning of English in terms of five identity clusters: postcolonial, global, ethnic, multilingual, and gendered identities" (p.669). For some learners a specific identity aspect may be more pronounced, but in general, all "five identity clusters" are found in complex while acquiring English as a second or foreign language. Every language learner is positioned with regard to gender roles, in a particular cultural context connected to either postcolonial legacy or modern global stage, and, obviously, all ESL/EFL learners are multilingual or at least bilingual. Consequently, all language learners create their future imagined communities experiencing changes in all five identity aspects.

## **Transnational Imagined Communities**

In the process of reimagining one's individual identity, a person would eventually consider alterations in broader imagined communities, such as institutions or even the whole nations since our imagined communities and possible identities are closely interwoven. Blackledge (2003) observes that "nations and nation-states are constantly developing, shifting, and changing and are constantly imagined and reimagined in diverse and complex ways by dominant and subordinate groups and individuals whose identities are in constant process of renegotiation" (p.332). With regard to more traditional and monoculture societies, which may hardly be found in our present world, those changes may be very slow and even not noticeable over time and may be regarded as a natural course of history. That is why Anderson (1992) in his analysis of the possible factors that provoked the phenomenon of imagined communities covered centuries going back to old hierarchical dynasties and tracing a slow and gradual development of society in general and people's individualities in particular; for Appadurai (1997) only the two past decades served as a time framework to analyse the appearance of modern imagined communities.

Since immigration is one of the most identifiable features of our modernity (Appadurai, 1997), it is possible to assume that human identities and nations as imagined communities are changing dramatically faster than it was the case centuries ago. Newcomers bring with them their personal and cultural life experience which may contribute either positively or negatively in their adaptation in a host country. In most cases their knowledge and experience are useless, if not harmful, in terms of established idea of a dominant nation as a community. Blackledge (2003) points out that "common-sense public discourse often identifies cultural practices different from those of the dominant group, and they become symbols of the 'Otherness' of the minority" (p.334). In particular, the author illustrates this claim by explaining how immigrants' visits to their home countries are considered a foreign practice not acceptable in the "imagined community of Britishness". Blackledge (2003) analyses school reports that allegedly claim correlation between frequency of visits to students' heritage countries and their academic achievements. British school officials in this study reported that absences related to long visits of minority students' home countries influenced negatively their grades and academic progress. The implied statement was "visits to heritage countries as negative, harmful to pupils, a burden to the system, and an abuse of rights" (p.339).

Blackledge (2003) notes that no factual information or specific data were presented to actually prove the claim of educational authorities, but the ideology behind “views learning as principally (if not entirely) school-based, and attainments are very largely measurable in terms of public examinations and tests” (p.340). Stables (2003) asserts that school’s success is not measurable by test scores or exam results because school in itself is imagined community: “A school only exists in relation to its being imagined: if it is the sum total of anything, it is the sum total of perceptions and experiences of it” (Stables, 2003, p.896). Schools as imagined subcommunities reflect ideology and practice of a bigger imagined community— the nation, so in case with immigrant children’s regular visits to their heritage countries this practice is not approved by school authorities because is it not acceptable at the level of a whole society; in other words, it reflects the perception of imagined British community as “culturally and linguistically homogeneous” despite the proclaimed ideology of diversity (Blackledge, 2003, p.342-343). Kanno (2003) claims that “schools are powerful social agents that can create images of communities for their children’s future and give these visions flesh and blood” (p.295). In other words, imagination at personal and individual level is still subject to hierarchy and rules of the dominant society (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Blackledge, 2003).

Imagined communities of immigrant population, the so called “transnational imagined communities” (Song, 2012), are quite different from possible imagined communities of native-speakers, local population and monolinguals. Bi-/multilingual people with cross-cultural competence have more potential to acquire multimembership in numerous imagined communities beyond their actual real communities of practice. Their trajectories could be directed into the future, past or a combination of both. For example, international students who study temporarily abroad possibly have imagined future communities back in their home countries; they plan to return and rejoin their past communities of practice and bring with them new knowledge, expertise and experience. Wenger (2000) cautions that this newly-acquired experience may not always be compatible with the “old” home communities of practice, but, on the other hand, it may be an eye-opening moment that helps realize one’s limitations. In the case of refugees, who were forcefully relocated, their imagined communities may be still in the past in their homeland; at the same time, their image of the home country may be chimerical, far from the real one, yet in some other cases, their country may not even exist on the geographical map anymore.

For instance, immigrants of older generations from post-soviet republics feel connected with one another even though the Soviet Union collapsed more than 23 years ago; for some inexplicable reason, common language (Russian) and common past life experience unite people of different cultural backgrounds into one imagined community that no longer exists and will never resume its existence. Somebody may just call it nostalgia, but in reality it is more than a simple desire to go back in time, it is a community of real people who may not know each other (Anderson, 1992) yet feel connected when they celebrate soviet holidays, design "old" soviet labels for modern goods, share their past memories and argue about the issues that are no longer relevant.

Imagined communities of immigrants who decided to stay in a new host country yet stay actively connected with the heritage country are unique with respect to temporal and spacial aspects. Dagenais (2003) reports on immigrant parents in Canada who send their children to French Immersion programs despite the unwritten "recommendation" for minority and immigrant children to avoid these programs in order to have enough exposure to the main dominant language (in this respect it may be viewed as another imagined community for immigrant children, the one when they have to master English only in order to be accepted as legitimate members; French is the privilege for native-speakers who are already legitimate members in an English-speaking community). Having their own transnational, cross-cultural and multilingual personal experience, those immigrant parents are willing to invest in their children's linguistic repertoire and in this way secure a better future with more possible imagined communities to enter. Their imagination is not a way to escape difficulties of their immigrant life in a new country, it is a constructive force that gives hope for a better future and provides "a fuel for action" (Appadurai, 1997). By investing time and money into additional languages, immigrant parents at the same time invest into their children's "transnational identity" (Dagenais, 2003) which resonates with a "global identity cluster" (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Moreover, immigrant parents are well aware of the different symbolic and economic value attached to different languages, so while in a host country their bilingualism may not be appreciated, they hope it will be a benefit in some other imagined or real communities: " these parents seek to counter exclusionary practices in the market by anticipating that, as multilinguals, their children's identity can be reframed from offspring of immigrants, whose linguistic resources may be unrecognized in the host country, to transnationals whose capital is marketable elsewhere" (Dagenais, 2003, p.281).

Unfortunately, in reality these expectations of potential benefits of multilingualism may not be justified, so imagined communities are not always transformed into real ones; similarly, symbolic values of languages are not always associated with significant economic capital.

Imagined identities and communities are even more complicated for those sojourners who not only stay in constant contact with their home land, but also hope to return one day. In this case parents invest not only in the languages of a dominant host society but also maintain and develop their heritage language. Song (2012) analyses linguistic choices and language learning practices of two Korean families living abroad but planning to return to their home country. These migrant families have “simultaneous and fluid membership in multiple communities” (Song, 2012) which confirms Wenger’s (2000) hypothesis of “expansiveness” i.e. multimembership as a necessary component of a strong identity. Song (2012) explains that “transnational” imagined communities are different from “wishful” imagined communities because the migrant families in her study already have close ties with the home community, so “future trajectories in their future communities are more concrete and tangible than other kinds of memberships in wishful ICs” (p.522); consequently, their aim is to regain a membership in a home community, not to gain access to a completely new imagined community of practice.

### **Reimagining Teaching ESL**

While applying the concepts of imagined communities and communities of practice in the area of ESL teaching, we should highlight “the importance of addressing both participants’ past life histories and their envisioned futures in developing an understanding of their current mode of engagement in a particular CoP” (Haneda, 2006, p.814). In other words, ESL teachers should not assume the authority to define and assign possible imagined identities for their language learners, nor should they treat them as *tabula rasa* with regard to students’ life experience. Teachers should remember the limits of their professional and personal influence on their learners, for educators enter the life of students only at some particular point, but the learning experience also happened before and will continue in the future; the most important thing for ESL teachers is not to discourage their learners’ desire to acquire some new identities. Kanno (2003) admits that imagining alternative future may not be sufficient, but “if we do not even begin to imagine alternatives, we will be paralysed by the status quo and fail to take action” (p.298).

Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) warn that “if the classroom practice fails to link the learner to the imagined community which each learner wishes to be part of, it can alienate him/her” (p.569).

Furthermore, Haneda (2006) advises to view a learning community not as an integral unit, but as a collection of individual personalities with their own past, present and future trajectories. Power relations and hierarchy within every learning community should also be considered as some members have more authority to assign identities and grant acceptance. In addition, research should consider some alternatives for new community members (language learners) to resist established rules of the community without being denied legitimate participation (Haneda, 2006). Silberstein (2003) admits that national identities are not stable, and cultural norms may be contradictory, so teachers should offer their learners a possibility to analyze critically the possible imagined communities they wish to join. Surprisingly, there is not enough research on imagined communities with regard to new immigrants and novice ESL learners. Even though these communities are called “imagined”, they are projected into people’s real life, so they may either be a motivating factor or a discouraging one. Newcomers who struggle in a host country and seek acknowledgement and acceptance into the new real and imagined communities could be devastated if ESL teachers, counsellors, and settlement programs offer them a totally different future perspective. Moreover, since imagination is a personal thing, imagined communities would be also shaped by one’s age, cultural background, learning and professional experience, language proficiency and other individual factors.

## **Epilogue**

While I am writing this paper, I regularly check the news from my home country, but I am still desperate to catch up with all recent events when every hour I find out that more and more people were killed or wounded. I think I have this multimembership in numerous real and imagined communities, yet the real communities from my past now seem absolutely incomprehensible; all I know for sure is that Ukrainians have been dramatically changed by all recent events in the country, and I also know they will never be the same.

Anderson (1992) claims that the death of a nation, if it ever happens, cannot be natural, but I believe in case with Ukraine it is more like the death of a nation as imagined community with "a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 1992). What used to be one united nation now looks more like a fragmented mosaic or a patchwork of mutually hostile individuals with vague or even twisted understanding of where their imagined communities will lead them. The collapse of a real community provoked numerous imagined communities in conflict to each other, but the most dangerous thing is that imagination is not always a constructive and beneficial driving force; if our imagination is blind, leads to destruction and causes harm to others who inhibit our real community, then it is not imagination anymore. To conclude, Anderson (1992) and Appadurai (1997) proposed a valid understanding of immense potential of human imagination, but we should keep in mind that it must be a consolidating factor, not a destructive one.

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