



# Motivation, investment, and identity in English language development: A longitudinal case study<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 7 November 2012

Received in revised form 17 January 2014

Accepted 22 January 2014

### Keywords:

Investment

Identity construction

Learning strategies

English language development

Legitimate peripheral participation

Imagined communities

## ABSTRACT

Drawing on Norton's (2010) conceptualization of motivation as investment, this longitudinal case study investigates how a Korean international graduate student's motivation affected her English language improvement and learning strategies. In the study, the researcher not only analyzed a series of regular face-to-face interviews with the participant conducted over 12 months, but also considered how the participant, her teachers, and her friends evaluated her oral English. Specifically, the study explored how the participant's investment helped her gain legitimate peripheral participation in academic and non-academic settings. This study interpreted these processes to present the participant's experiences, and to show how her identity was socially constructed across time and place.

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## 1. Introduction

Many second language acquisition (SLA) scholars regard L2 classrooms as sites of struggle, where the social, cultural, and political pressures of learning a second language influence L2 learners' identities (Gee, 2000; Hirst, 2007; Kim, 2003; Luke, 2003; Norton, 2006; Weedon, 1987). These socially constructed identities, they argue, are often multiple, varied, and contradictory (e.g. Gu, 2010; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Norton Peirce, 1995). As pointed out by Ricento (2005), these sociocultural approaches to identity do not treat identity as a fixed and invariant attribute in the mind of each individual learner. Instead, they emphasize how learners relate dialectically to the "various worlds and experiences they inhabit and which act on them within sociocultural approaches" (p. 895). Norton's research underscores that these relationships are constructed "across time and space" (2000, p. 5), and she traces "similarities among conceptions of identity and the collapsing of boundaries between the 'social' and 'cultural'" (2006, p. 24). Rather than simply trying to define appropriate and meaningful cultural and linguistic interaction (Kim, 2003), Norton (2006) reminds us that identity is complex, contradictory, and multifaceted; it is constructed by language; and it has to be understood through both larger social processes and relations of power. Within the classroom, Barnawi (2009) argues, "language and identity should be seen as a single entity, which suffices to identify student membership in a given group" (p. 66), since language is the most important tool for both communication and identity (de)construction. In other words, as a linguistically mediating tool, language enables L2 learners to gain participation, legitimacy, and membership in L2-mediated academic and non-academic discourse communities (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Kim, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Morita, 2004; Norton, 2001).

<sup>☆</sup> This paper was presented at the 2012 AAAL Conference in Boston, Massachusetts.

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Unfortunately, many L2 learners have experienced difficulties with constructing their learner identities among different and diverse people and surroundings. Keeping up with American practical speaking speeds and understanding native speakers' expressions without any misconceptions are the most difficult tasks, especially when combined with social, cultural, racial, and national differences from the students' respective home countries. As a result, L2 learners who are new to the US, such as international students and immigrant students of all ages, have a hard time communicating with native speakers of English, as well as participating in their academic discourse communities.

L2 learners' struggles to learn English should also be understood in terms of the complex interactions between socio-cultural meanings and identities (Kim, 2003). Consequently, it is critical to understand how L2 adult learners engage with these new imagined communities (Anderson, 1991): how they overcome linguistic barriers to participation (Morita, 2004), how they develop their engagement strategies, and what strategies they use to enhance their communicative competence in the target language community. To address these important issues, this longitudinal case study examines how a highly motivated L2 learner developed and practiced her English in imagined academic and non-academic discourse communities, and how her investment impacted her identity construction.

In this study, I draw on Norton's (2006) definition of identity and emphasize how the participant's learning strategies and L2 interactions changed her identity in significant and interesting ways. I also apply Norton's theorization of investment to enrich the role of motivation in language development and identity construction. Unlike previous studies of motivation which focused on psychological constructs (Dörnyei, 2001), this holistic approach pays more attention to the close association between the participant's motivation (theorized as investment), learning strategies, and identity construction. To better understand language learners' investment, Pavlenko and Norton (2007) contend that "we need to examine their multiple communities and understand who can and who cannot be imagined as a legitimate speaker of a particular language variety in a specific context" (p. 595). For this reason, the present study focuses on how the participant's investment and English learning strategies change as she engages in academic and non-academic communities. This is especially relevant to SLA contexts, since most international students and immigrant students undergo significant changes in their lives while adjusting to new countries and new academic environments. In the following sections, I will discuss motivation in terms of investment and identity construction, as language learners have complex identities and multiple desires. Next, I will contextualize this study's findings with reference to three earlier studies on motivation, language learning, and adult L2 learners' identity construction. Finally, I will argue for the necessity of utilizing a holistic methodology in researching motivation and L2 learning and recommend possible directions for future research on adult L2 learners' motivation, language learning strategies, and identity change.

## 2. Motivation, investment, and language learning

### 2.1. Motivation vs. investment

Norton theorizes motivation as *investment* "to make a meaningful connection between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language and [his or her] changing identity" (Norton, 2010, p. 354; see also Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 420). Investment goes beyond mere instrumental motivation. According to Norton Peirce (1995), the notion of instrumental motivation "generally presupposes a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner who desires access to material resources that are the privilege of target language speakers," such that "motivation is a property of the language learners—a fixed personality trait" (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 17; see also Norton & McKinney, 2011, p. 75). Conversely, the notion of investment "attempts to capture the relationship of the language learner to the changing social world," and likewise "conceives of the language learner as having a complex identity and multiple desires" (Norton Peirce, 1995, pp. 17–18; see also Norton & McKinney, 2011, p. 75). Even though both concepts can operate simultaneously in terms of acquiring new skills or knowledge, only investment allows for specific identity negotiation and development. This is because investment targets a more complex and specific learning context than motivation does, especially in terms of the often-vague concepts of 'class participation' or 'community involvement.' As a result, a learner is not simply *invested* or *not invested*, but rather specifically invests "in the target language practices of [a given] classroom or community" (Norton & McKinney, 2011, pp. 75–76).

As this difference suggests, a given number of students "may be highly motivated language learners, but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom" (Norton & McKinney, 2011, p. 76). In other words, even though a learner is highly motivated, she "could be excluded from the language practices of a classroom, and in time positioned as a poor or unmotivated language learner" (Norton & McKinney, 2011, p. 76). In this regard, the present study follows Norton and Toohey's (2001) advice that studies on L2 learners' investment should be conducted in terms of "learning context, human agency, and identity in SLA research" (Norton & Toohey, 2001, as cited in Cervatiuc, 2009, p. 256).

### 2.2. Review of recent empirical studies: motivation, L2 learning strategies, and identity construction

This section draws attention to the potential of motivation to facilitate language learning and identity changes, by assessing three studies of adult L2 learners' identity construction. Specifically, I show how the various learners in the revised studies employ their own strategies to engage their respective academic discourse communities. These strategies help them

to construct their identities as legitimate members of the academic community, both during classroom discussions and other participation activities (Morita, 2004) and outside of their classrooms (Cervatiuc, 2009; Norton Peirce, 1995).

Lisa in Morita's (2004) study possessed strong motivation and desire to participate in classroom discussions. Even though she struggled with linguistic and academic competencies, her personal investment and efforts enabled her to construct her identity as a legitimate and valued member of her classroom community, and to develop her own strategies to engage in academic classroom discourses. For instance, Lisa prepared her remarks in advance, tried to speak in less face-threatening situations such as individual or small group discussions, and overall sought to "maximiz[e] her opportunities to speak academic English outside the classroom" (Morita, 2004, p. 585). In brief, developing and practicing her own strategies to engage her academic classroom discourses helped Lisa to construct her identity as a legitimate peripheral member in classroom discussions and participation, even though her improvement progressed slowly (Morita, 2004).

Along similar lines, Norton Peirce's (1995) study demonstrates how adult L2 learners' investment affects their language learning and identity construction outside of class. Eva, an adult immigrant, robustly longed to learn English and to become a legitimate speaker of English. Such positive motivation allowed her to generate opportunities to practice her English in the workplace and to change her social identity, boosting her right to speak and her self-confidence. Notably, though, "it was only over time that Eva's conception of herself as an immigrant—an 'illegitimate' speaker of English—changed to a conception of herself as a multicultural citizen with the power to impose reception" (pp. 23–24).

Eva was a 22-year old refugee from Poland, and she immigrated to Canada in order to get economic advantages. She wanted to learn English, and when she looked for a job she found a place where she could become a more proficient speaker of English. Being an "illegitimate" speaker of English, though, challenged Eva's subject position in the workplace. However, Eva "responded to and created opportunities to practice English in her workplace," which also caused her "social identity as subject to change" (p.23). Over time, despite her deficient communicative competence, she managed to increase "an awareness of her right to speak" (p.25) with more confidence to give herself a voice. Norton Peirce triangulated her data for this study, employing diaries, questionnaires, individual and group interviews, and home visits.

Finally, staying with the theme of identity negotiation, Cervatiuc's (2009) study primarily focuses on discovering strategies and approaches that 20 adult immigrants used to become good language learners (GLLs), especially in terms of "the role of human agency." By doing so, the participants "negotiated their marginal standing in Canadian society and became successful professionals, proficient in English" (p. 255). Cervatiuc's (2009) study ascertains three major strategies and approaches common among 20 highly proficient adult non-native speakers (NNS) of English: as adult immigrants, all the participants spawned a self-motivating inner dialogue as a counter-discourse, gained access to native speakers' social networks, and adhered to an imagined community of multicultural and bilingual individuals. Similarly, all the participants continued to speak and practice their English and to enhance their confidence and self-esteem even under conditions of marginalization. To be sure, their powerful and dynamic motivation influenced their English language development and identity construction as confident multilingual immigrants. As a result, the participants "constantly resisted marginalization by negotiating a powerful identity for themselves and generating an inner counter-discourse" (McKay & Wong, 1996, as cited in Cervatiuc, 2009, p. 259).

The participants in these reviewed studies were from diverse countries, though thus far few scholars have specifically studied Korean students' motivation and L2 learning, despite the growing number of Korean students in American L2 classrooms. Therefore, there is a need to conduct more studies on motivation and these students' L2 learning. It is likewise necessary to conduct longitudinal research on the close connection between adult L2 learners' investment and their learning strategies, taking both near ethnicities and their different proficiency levels into account, in various target language discourse communities. English language proficiency is a common challenge for new international students and immigrants, particularly in terms of successful workplace participation (Cervatiuc, 2009). Similarly, since people representing diverse nations and cultures immigrate to the US and other English speaking countries, including race and ethnicity may help identify useful techniques for developing L2 communicative competence targeted to adult L2 learners of a certain race.

As a first step toward these goals, the present study presents a longitudinal case study on learner motivation as investment (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995), identity construction, and English learning strategies. Specifically, it investigates how a Korean student in an MA Engineering program engaged in her new academic school contexts and acquired English proficiency. To do so, this study considers the participant's previous English education and proficiency, effects of her investment on her English language development, her investment in L2 social interactions, and her investment and academic setbacks. More importantly, it examines these elements using a holistic and integrated approach. Using a year's worth of ethnographic emic interviews, this study focuses on the participant's inner voices and her "introspective account of her experiences" (Ricento, 2005, p. 904), how her investment affects her English language development and learning strategies, and how her investment plays a role in constructing her social interactions within and outside of her classrooms.

### 3. The study

#### 3.1. Research questions

The study investigates how an Engineering MA student's ("Mina") motivation theorized as investment affected her English language development and second language (L2) communication. It addresses the following research questions:

1. How does Mina's investment affect her English language development and learning strategies?
2. What role does Mina's investment play in constructing her social interactions and actual L2 communication skills within and outside of her classrooms?

### 3.2. Participant recruitment

I first met Mina at a social gathering, and introduced her to several of my friends. As we often attended subsequent gatherings together, I was able to observe Mina's social and linguistic development relatively closely. The main reason that I asked Mina to participate in my study was that her English was different from other engineering students I met, and from other Korean students who had recently come to the United States for the first time. Several scholars have observed that international engineering students often struggle with oral English, perhaps since they spend most of their time in solitary laboratory research or in cyberspace, rather than discussing their studies and interests in the classroom (Pierson, 1997; Rogers & Goktas, 2010; Watkins & Green, 2003). Indeed, during my own dissertation research (2011–2012) I interviewed more than 20 international students in graduate engineering programs, and all of them reported this same set of challenges. Mina, however, seemed to be an exception to this rule. These differences piqued my curiosity, so with Mina's consent and that of three other members of her church, I started this case study on her language or identity development.

### 3.3. Research context

This longitudinal case study was conducted in a large Midwestern public university in the US, from January through December 2011; under the university's quarter system, this span included the Winter, Spring, and Fall quarters. All international graduate students who enroll in this university have to take an ESL Composition placement test. According to the results of this test, each student is enrolled in Composition I, II, or III. Mina was assigned to Composition II for her first quarter in Winter 2011, and she completed Composition III in her second quarter (Spring 2011) as well. In order to investigate Mina's social interactions and actual L2 communication skills in non-academic contexts, three members of Mina's American church congregation were also interviewed for this study.

### 3.4. Data collection

Even though this study's design emphasized regular face-to-face interviews with Mina, overall the data were collected through multiple and triangulated methods: five planned interviews (in English) and two additional impromptu interviews (in Korean); an autobiography of Mina's EFL learning experiences; Mina's journal entries on her English learning strategies; the researcher's brief notes on Mina's English learning, progress, and strategies for the whole year; and written evaluations of her oral English and participation in classroom discussion in the Composition II course. Additionally, the researcher gathered assessments of Mina's oral English development from three congregation members in Mina's American church. Even though these members were not experts in SLA, having ordinary Americans' natural and candid responses to and opinions of how Mina communicated and interacted with them in real social community contexts helped to evaluate how she established social interactions with Americans, and also how her English developed and progressed through outside socialization.

Most importantly, collecting information from all these sources enabled the researcher to use triangulated data resources to investigate Mina's motivation to learn English and her strategies to master English, as well as how her first-year experiences developed her English speaking and perspectives on participating in academic and non-academic communities. In particular, the purpose of the individual face-to-face interviews (1.5–2 h each), which were conducted each academic quarter, was to draw out more detailed data on how Mina's motivation influenced her English language improvement, L2 communicative behaviors and skills, and learning strategies. Table 1 shows the data collection methods used in each part of the year.

**Table 1**  
Data collection and methods.

Winter quarter (Jan to mid-March)	Spring quarter (end of March to mid-June)	Fall quarter (end of Sep. to mid-December)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Autobiography of English learning (Jan 31)</li> <li>2. Face-to-face interview (2 h, Feb 17)</li> <li>3. Teacher's written evaluation from the Composition II course (March 18)</li> <li>4. Interview with three American congregation members (10 min each)</li> <li>5. Brief notes on English learning, progress, and strategies</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Face-to-face interview (1.5 h, April 14)</li> <li>2. Impromptu interview (2 h, April 18, in Korean)</li> <li>3. Impromptu interview (30 min, May 2, in Korean)</li> <li>4. Journal writing (on English learning strategies)</li> <li>5. Face-to-face interview (1 h, June 16)</li> <li>6. Brief notes on English learning, progress, and strategies</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Face-to-face interview in August (1.5 h, Sep 15)</li> <li>2. Interview with three American congregation members (20 min each)</li> <li>3. Face-to-face interview at the end of November (1 h, Nov 18)</li> <li>4. Brief notes on English learning, progress, and strategies</li> </ol>

### 3.5. Data analysis

The data of this study were analyzed in accordance with each research question. Based on a year's worth of ethnographic interviews, this study focused on Mina's inner voices and her "introspective account of her experiences" (Ricento, 2005, p. 904). Her interview responses were coded and categorized, and four common themes emerged: Mina's previous English education and proficiency, effects of her investment on her English language development, her investment in L2 social interactions, and her investment and academic setbacks. These four codes were re-examined and revised three times to ensure more accurate and fine-tuned qualitative data analysis. Member checks, also known as informant feedback or respondent validation, were used in order to corroborate the accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability of the study. The recurring themes and topics were coded and classified by research questions: how her investment affected her English language development, L2 communication, and learning strategies; and how her investment played a role in constructing her social interactions and actual communicative skills within and outside of her classrooms. In addition, ongoing observation notes and interview data analysis were helpful to evaluate Mina's English language development, as well as to analyze her investment, English learning and strategies, and identity changes over time and place, as she sought to become a legitimate and valued member of her different communities.

## 4. Findings

This section focuses on the findings of the two research questions: how Mina's investment influenced her English studying and learning strategies each quarter, and how her investment played a role in establishing her social interactions and practical L2 communication skills within and outside of her classrooms. However, before moving on to the findings of these two research questions, this section explains how Mina had studied English from elementary school to college in her home country, and how her previous English learning and approaches affected her English proficiency in language skills. Establishing these descriptive and detailed explanations of Mina's previous background in learning English and her previous English proficiency will be helpful to understand how her investment (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995) has an impact on her English learning development, her learning strategies to improve both her communicative competence and her engagement skills in academic and non-academic contexts, and her identity construction over time.

### 4.1. Mina's previous English education and proficiency

Mina was born in Korea and was educated in Korean until college. When she was in elementary school, her mom let her learn English via a private visiting English language institution company, called 'Teacher Yoon.' Mina's English teacher visited her once a week to give her thirty minutes of one-on-one instruction. Her tutor, a non-native speaker of English, played recordings of native English speakers, and recorded Mina's attempts to repeat the same phrases and sentences. Then, she listened to both recordings again, so she could hear the differences between her English and native speakers' English. However, Mina really did not like that her pronunciation was so different from the native speaker, so she practiced hundreds of times until she achieved near-native pronunciation. She continued with this study method for many months.

When she reached middle school, Mina stopped recording her English sentences. However, whenever she felt her pronunciations or accents were not correct, she checked them against an electronic English dictionary, and repeated the dictionary's pronunciation and vocabulary. Likewise, Mina regularly participated in an English Speaking Contest every year, which the US Army held in Seoul, Korea. At this time her father was a soldier in the Korean Army, and was serving a three-year assignment with the US Army. Even after he finished this assignment, though, Mina continued to compete and to attend English-language worship services on the American base. In doing so, Mina had lots of opportunities to learn English from the American soldiers and to communicate with them. To supplement these opportunities, once she started college, Mina tried to take at least one English course every semester until she graduated.

Mina's autobiography of her English learning experiences in Korea, along with interviews conducted during the Winter 2011 quarter, demonstrated not only that she was a highly motivated language learner, but also that she continuously invested effort and time to maintain and improve her English. These continued endeavors earned her praise for her English improvement. In her own words, when she came to the United States, her neighbor said, "Your English is good, you did not have any Korean accents" even though she (Mina) did not even talk much (Mina's interview, Feb 17, 2011). Along similar lines, both Mina's fellow church members praised Mina's communicative skills as above average, and her Composition II teacher remarked that "Mina's pronunciation was accurate and very close to standard U.S. pronunciation" (written evaluation, March 18, 2011).

### 4.2. Effects of Mina's investment on her English language development

As Mina noted in her February 17 interview, when she came to the United States in the middle of December 2010 she did not understand what Americans said to her, and she failed to keep up with all their words, even though she had many opportunities to talk with American soldiers in English in Korea and had spent lots of time learning English there. Thus, to keep up with Americans' natural English speeds and expressions, in January 2011 she created her own self-directed curriculum to learn and practice English.

Every the morning for thirty minutes, Mina started by reading an American English version of the Bible (the NIV, first published in 1973) aloud, using a three-step process. First, she read silently through her daily four or five chapters, and then she read them aloud while listening to a recording of a native speaker of English reading the same material. In the last step, she again read the chapters aloud without listening to the recording, so she could hear her own pronunciations, accents, and intonations. When she came across words whose exact meaning she didn't know, she looked them up and copied what she learned onto post-it notes, which she stuck to the front of her desk. This method helped her remember the words whenever she saw them. At the end of each week, she reviewed her new vocabulary and transferred them into a wordlist.

Although reading the Bible aloud in English partly entailed imitation and repetition, it not only helped Mina notice the differences between her English and the native speaker's recording, but also gave her a feel for some rhythms that occur frequently in American speech. Mina explained these advantages this way:

Reading the Bible aloud helps me to select the word. If I did not use this strategy, I could still communicate, but not using many words. While practicing this kind of method, I could use the words, which I did not know. Another advantage for reading aloud is that my English speaking is getting close to native English speaker's accents and intonations. When I did not practice reading the Bible with a loud voice, I could just read it and think it. But when reading it with a loud voice, I could find out myself who was speaking out with real accents that native speakers of English do (Mina's interview, Feb 17, 2011).

In addition to developing her own learning strategies for English improvement, Mina's demonstrated her investment in her ESL Composition II course. In his written evaluation (collected on March 18), Mina's composition teacher noted that Mina was an exceptionally motivated ESL learner. Unlike many of his East Asian students, Mina was always ready to answer questions he asked to the class in general, and she frequently raised her own interesting questions during classes. He did not know whether she acted that way in Korea or not, but he thought this behavior was very much in line with desired classroom behavior in U.S. higher learning. Even though Mina's answers were mistaken perhaps 15–20% of the time, he emphasized that she did not allow that to inhibit her efforts, and she continued with active participation regardless of whether her answers were correct.

Mina continued her Bible-reading plan in the Spring 2011 quarter. As she mentioned in her April 14 interview, when she first came to the university, she could carry on a conversation in English. However, whenever she talked with someone, she had to think in Korean first, and then she had to translate what she wanted to say into English. Only then could she talk. For this reason, it took a long time for her to talk freely in English during the Winter quarter. However, reading the Bible aloud had helped her to switch from Korean to English more easily. Sometimes, Mina reported, she did not even think about translating into Korean—she just told her professors what she wanted to say, without any hesitation. By the same token, reading aloud gave her model sentence structures and examples of how to talk fluently. Therefore, when she said something, she did not have to pay much attention to English grammar, since it came more naturally.

Despite constant practice, though, Mina still had difficulty enhancing her English speaking speed in real English conversation situations. Since Americans' regular speaking speed is not slow, she thought she had to get used to speaking quickly: whenever she spoke slowly, she could not get involved in the conversations and discussions, and she often missed the right exact time to share her voice and opinions. Thus, she tried to speak English faster than her normal English speaking speed. However, whenever she attempted to speak faster, she dropped syllables and consonants, and her grammar was not correct. To meet this challenge, Mina set a goal of adjusting her English speaking speed to match Americans' actual speaking speed.

To meet this goal, Mina increased the amount of scholarly material she read aloud, and she also used new academic situation to improve her English output. In May, she started to work with a new lab and advisor. The new lab environment provided her with more opportunities to speak than before, because she had to present updates on her research, and her lab team members had to cooperate with each other to create successful research projects. For this reason, she had more chances for speech output, which ultimately reduced the incorrect grammatical structures and mistakes in her speaking patterns.

On September 15, the week before Fall quarter started, the researcher again interviewed Mina for one and a half hours, to discuss her English learning, improvement, and strategy changes during summer vacation. Mina had kept reading her articles aloud, and she pointed out that "after reading some articles, I reminded of some idioms and words and expressions in the article, to use them in my real speaking. It is good to follow the structures and patterns in published articles" (Mina's interview, Sep 15, 2011). On the other hand, while Mina maintained that reading scholarship aloud was a basic fundamental step to learn formal English, she recognized that keeping it up might limit her opportunities to learn American colloquial English, slang, and practical English. Accordingly, Mina claimed that she needed to balance learning formal and informal English by being involved in American communities, such as church and small group Bible studies, in order to talk and converse with her American friends. So, over summer 2011 she made a point of increasing these opportunities, more so than she had done in previous quarters.

To improve her English further, Mina also added another strategy, on the advice of one of her professors: every morning she tried to watch and listen to CNN News before going to school. Even though she could not catch all of the words, she reported, the practice helped her learn about Americans' standard speech rhythms, accents, intonations, and pitch. This practice also made Mina more aware of global issues, and encouraged her to think of her studies as one step toward taking future leadership on these issues. That vision kept encouraging her to study English very hard, above and beyond her engineering coursework.

Mina's last interview, conducted on November 18, demonstrated that her strong desires and investment to master English had a significant impact not only on her learning strategies but also on her identity construction as a legitimate member of

American society and community. There, she distinguished between learning about a culture and getting involved in communities within that culture, and she strongly supported the latter. Her words are worth quoting at length here, because they demonstrate well the close relationship between how she understood her investment in learning English and her similar investment in American society:

When I think I am just a Korean, I cannot understand all of the culture of this country [US]. If a person thinks that he or she is an alien, their English improvement could be limited. However, I just try to be one of the members of America when I speak in English. It is really important to understand what an American thinks when I speak in English. When I take classes or practice as a choir member, I have never thought about races, my focus is to communicate with them freely. My willingness to improve my English and to communicate with Americans makes my life energetic and passionate me every day, even if sometimes it gives me challenges (Mina's interview, November 18, 2011).

In particular, in regard to why it is important to be a member of the American society and community, Mina maintained that:

If you want to know about American football, you have to read tutorials of some football games, which could be really hard to understand. But if you attend a game, you can easily get it. You can get knowledge from the article, but it is just an article, it is not reality. If you go to the community, you are really getting involved in their culture and experiencing it first hand. That is why I am involved in their culture and community (Mina's interview, November 18, 2011).

#### 4.3. *Mina's investment in L2 social interactions*

During her first quarter at the university, Mina had to get used both to her professors' individual speech patterns and to differences between American and Korean classroom cultures. Adjusting to these new school cultures and environments in America was especially difficult for her. Specifically, even though she was a highly motivated L2 learner, Mina hesitated to start conversations with her first-quarter classmates, even though she wanted to talk with them. Right after her first class, though she took some comfort in telling herself that "this was the first class and it was normal not to talk each other" (Mina's interview, Feb 17, 2011), she realized that she had to be friendlier and get used to different classroom cultures. She also realized that she would have a much tougher time in class if she did not get closer to her classmates. So, for the rest of that quarter, as well as during later quarters, Mina made a point of greeting and making friends with her classmates, an approach that she said freed her to speak up in classroom discussions. As she put it, "surprisingly, it was really comfortable to say again next classes. I got friends through this approach and I really proud of myself to do it. I think it is one of the American cultures. These days, I do not hesitate to talk with people first, even if I do not meet them before" (Mina's interview, September 15, 2011). This pattern was also evident outside the classroom: Mina's fellow church members specifically praised her increasing fluency and confidence in speaking English, and her high comfort level in interacting with others in the church.

#### 4.4. *Investment and academic setbacks*

Mina's social interactions with her two advisors (here, I call them Dr. X and Dr. Y) also influenced her L2 communication skills and attitudes, as she encountered negative stereotypes about non-native speakers of English and their professional skills. In this case, funding was an issue: though most international MA and Ph.D. engineering students get departmental funding before starting their programs, Mina did not. Accordingly, in February 2011 she started looking for funding from faculty in her program, and for an advisor. By the end of March she had contacted Dr. X and started working in his lab and participating in lab meetings.

Over the next couple weeks, Mina seemed increasingly depressed and distressed, and on April 18, 2011, she came to see me with tears in her eyes. We talked for two hours in Korean (I translated the excerpts quoted here into English), and right afterwards I transcribed our conversation. Mina felt isolation from Dr. X and her lab-mates. In the lab, she reported, she felt like an alien: her advisor treated her like "a kind of participant in [his] research" but made it clear that "you are not my advisee" and that she "could not get involved in research with him" (Mina's interview, April 18, 2011). Likewise, whenever she communicated with Dr. X, she found that her English was not effective since her feelings were already hurt from his condescension. Along similar lines, his advisees in his lab made her feel lonely and separated from them: "while I sit in the lab, they do not talk with me, and they do not even make any conversation with me, except for greetings. They behave like I am not even there, and I do not feel any connection with them" (Mina's interview, April 18, 2011). Mina summarized the situation this way:

I had adversity because of [Dr. X]. It was my first time to meet such a person who broke his promise so easily and had such contempt for me when I talked. Usually, I am a very courageous person to speak in English despite the fact that English is not my mother tongue. However, whenever I speak to him, he sees me without any words and makes me feel that I am not a native. This influenced me to speak with hesitation in front of him, and I tended not to ask any simple questions I have in the class. I expected every American man to be a nice gentleman who talks with a smile. Yet, this was my misunderstanding of Americans (Mina's interview, April 18, 2011).

After three or four weeks of this treatment, Mina noted, Dr. X “rejected me by simply sending an email, saying that he was not going to be my advisor” (Mina’s interview, April 18, 2011). At this point Mina wanted to quit her MA and transfer to another school. However, I encouraged her to keep studying, look at the bright side of her experience, and look for another advisor in her department. Finally, she got in touch with Dr. Y at the very end of April, and he made a much more positive impression on her:

He seems like nice person and very energetic advisor. What he said at first when we talk was compliment on my English skills. After getting his compliment on my English speaking, I am getting stronger and to know how to confront the matters what we talk about the research. And I can speak English more, and I could try to explain about what I know about my research in English. I felt like more comfortable (Mina’s interview, May 2, 2011).

While Dr. X evidently had little sympathy for Mina’s difficulties with English, Dr. Y—a non-native speaker himself—better understood Mina’s situation and difficulties because he had to go through similar hardships to integrate into an English environment. In fact, Mina reported, Dr. Y regularly reminded his advisees that “you have to speak English well, if you do not speak English well, you cannot survive in this competitive world” (Mina’s interview, May 2, 2011).

By the same token, while Dr. X’s lab offered Mina few chances to speak with Americans, Dr. Y’s gave her lots more opportunities. She had to talk in English all day with a diverse group of people, sharing her opinions and advancing her research. She stated that she was very glad to be exposed to lots of opportunities to talk with students who were from different countries, and to feel comfortable enough to speak out in English without hesitation. Mina’s story, then, has a happy ending: she received full funding from her new advisor starting in the Fall 2011 quarter, and once again became a highly confident and professional student in Mechanical Engineering.

## 5. Discussion and implications

Norton and Toohey (2001) argue that the key difference between good learners and poor learners is that good learners “exercise human agency to negotiate their entry into the social networks so they can practice and improve their competence in the target language” (p. 256). However, Norton (1997, 2000) points out, “native speakers (NS) are more likely to avoid interactions with non-native speakers (NNS), rather than provide them with input and help them negotiate meaning in the target language” (as cited in Cervatiuc, 2009, p. 255). Under these circumstances, many international students and immigrants, who are exposed to few opportunities to interact with the target language and culture, are “marginalized, introverted, and sensitive to rejection” in the target language discourse communities (Cervatiuc, 2009, p. 255). Likewise, their lack of communicative competence in the target language prevents L2 learners from gaining legitimate peripheral participation and membership in the target discourse communities, academic or otherwise.

Nevertheless, some L2 learners who have a strong motive and desire to learn the target language become competent language learners and successful participants in their respective target language communities. Taking the position that investment constitutes “a meaningful connection between a learner’s desire and commitment to learn a language, and their changing identity” in a sociological framework (Norton, 2010, p. 354; see also Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 420), this longitudinal case study has shown how Mina’s motivation as investment influences her English learning, learning strategies, and identity—which is dynamic and constantly changing across time and space (Norton, 2000, 2006)—and what roles her investment plays in constructing her social interactions and L2 communication skills to gain legitimate peripheral participation in academic and non-academic discourse communities (see Lave & Wenger, 1991).

More specifically, this study traced Mina’s participation in neighborhood, workplace, educational, and religious communities. Participating in these communities “through the power of the imagination” led to several of Mina’s identity changes, strongly supporting the idea that “an imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and a learner’s investment in the target language must be understood within this context” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241; Norton, 2010, p. 356; see also Norton, 2001, p. 166 and Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 422). Similarly, interpersonal interactions in various imagined communities made it possible for Mina to differentiate between learning about others’ cultures and getting involved in communities within those cultures, so that she could enhance her English learning and identity changes. Indeed, Mina’s own English learning strategies advanced and developed each quarter of the academic year, and helped her to construct her social interactions and identity changes, as she became a legitimate member of her academic and non-academic circles.

These approaches mesh well with Cervatiuc’s (2009) study, where 20 highly proficient and academically professionally successful adult non-native speakers (NNS), all of whom had arrived in Canada as adults, employed three major common strategies or approaches: generating a self-motivating inner dialogue as a counter-discourse, gaining access to native speakers’ social networks, and adhering to an imagined community of multicultural and bilingual individuals. All three strategies empowered the participants to maintain their investment, improving both their English and their job prospects. In the same way Eva in Norton Peirce’s (1995) study who learned to “reduce the power imbalance between herself and her interlocutors, and speak with greater confidence” (as cited in Cervatiuc, 2009, p. 266), all the participants in Cervatiuc’s study “relied on their own cultural capital of multilingual and multicultural individuals and symbolic resources acquired prior to immigration to boost their confidence and speak the target language, even under conditions of marginalization” (p. 266).

In the same way, Mina tailored her strategies to the specific problems she encountered while learning English, as detailed above. Reading aloud improved Mina’s English vocabulary and her knowledge of common English speech rhythms, which allowed her to interact more capably and confidently with her friends, colleagues, and professors. Likewise, she actively



sought out opportunities to talk and communicate with her American friends, and she got involved in American communities such as a church and small group Bible studies. These new communities, along with her new lab environment, gave her more chances for speech output, which ultimately decreased the incorrect grammatical structures and mistakes in her speaking patterns. Indeed, Mina's strong desires and investment to acquire English had a crucial impact not only on her learning strategies but also on her identity construction as a legitimate member of American society and of various communities within it. In that process, Mina distinguished between learning about culture and getting involved in communities within that culture. Throughout the study, consequently, Mina strongly preferred active community participation to simply learning about American culture.

Even though Mina's social interactions with Dr. X damaged her L2 communication skills and attitudes, as her first advisor exhibited negative stereotypes about non-native speakers of English and their professional skills, her interactions with Dr. Y motivated her to restore her investment to improve her English. Similarly, his lab environment provided her with more opportunities to talk with her lab-mates in English, and to feel comfortable enough to speak out in English without any hesitation. This transition highlights the importance of Mina's investment for dealing with those stakeholders (e.g., Dr. X) who served as what Norton (2001) calls the gatekeepers to an imagined community. According to Norton, "the very people to whom the learners were most uncomfortable speaking English were the very people who were members of – or gatekeepers to—the learners imagined communities" (p. 166), whereas "the people in whom learners have the greatest investment may be the very people who represent or provide access to the imagined community of a given learner" (Norton & Gao, 2008, p. 114). Therefore, English language educators or teachers should think about the ways of which and the extent to which L2 learners' investment might be productive for their engagement and language development, both within academic and non-academic target language communities.

As an example, Helena in Norton and Gao's (2008) study stated that speaking English with her Christian friends made her feel comfortable and supported at a challenging time, even though Helena herself is not a Christian. Consequently, it should be noted that L2 learners are more willing to invest to speak when the target language communities are safe, non-threatening, and supportive. Many international students come to the U.S. in order to complete their education without having had many meaningful interactions with Americans. For this reason, having more interactions with native speakers of English in a comfortable way provides them more enriching experiences of learning English and of increasing communicative competence. It can also help them gain self-confidence in using their learned English to strike up conversations with Americans in a relaxed atmosphere and a friendly relationship.

This longitudinal case study has allowed me to consider more profoundly the meanings and standards of becoming good language learners. According to Rubin (1975), good language learning hinges on three variables: aptitude, which is "assumed to be the least subject to manipulation" (p. 42); motivation to communicate; and opportunity, including all activities within and outside of the classrooms to practice the target language. Similarly, Rubin (1975) indicates that a good language learner 1) has a strong drive to communicate, 2) is uninhibited, i.e. willing to appear foolish and to make mistakes, 3) is prepared to attend to form, 4) practices, 5) monitors his or her own speech and the speech of others, and 6) attends to meaning.

However, as Rubin (1975) discussed, these general strategies present only "some good insights into the cognitive processes that seem to be going on in good language learners" (p. 48). This limitation supports Norton and Toohey's (2001) argument that "previous research viewed good language learners as gradually developing appropriate strategies for interaction in their respective linguistic communities by monitoring their performance more diligently and exploiting the target language more systematically" (p. 312). In fact, the process of being good language learners might be much more complex, as revealed in many studies on identities and language learning (McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 1997, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995, as cited in Norton & Toohey, 2001).

In addition, language is formulated "not only as a linguistic system, but as a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated" (Norton, 2010, p. 351). For this reason, more research on good language learning is necessary to evaluate not only "learners' internal characteristics, learning strategies, or linguistic outputs," but also "the reception of their actions in particular sociocultural communities" (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 308). To meet these goals, this longitudinal case study investigated the intricately intertwined connections among Mina's investment, her various English learning strategies, her social interactions, and her identity changes for one year in a set of target language discourse communities. Analysis of these connections supports viewing identity as a dynamic and constantly changing social construct across time and place (Norton, 2000, 2006). In this regard, a focus on L2 learners' social practices in L2 learning contexts is a prerequisite to understanding good language learning.

As an in-depth and descriptive longitudinal case study, the present study has some limitations. First of all, due to the university's strict policies and rules about classroom observations, the researcher could not observe Mina's ESL composition classes or other academic classes. Moreover, Mina's two advisors (Dr. X and Dr. Y) were unavailable for interviews because of their busy schedules. Such interview data might have shown more specific affective relationships between gatekeepers and L2 learners in the target language communities, and how those relationships might influence L2 learners' affiliation with such imagined communities, identity changes, and L2 learning trajectories.

For future research, there is a need to conduct more longitudinal investigations of the close connection between adult L2 learners' investment, their learning strategies, and their ethnicities in the target language discourse communities. Since people representing diverse nations and cultures immigrate to the US and other English speaking countries, including race and ethnicity in this future research may help identify useful techniques for developing L2 communicative competence targeted to adult L2 learners of a certain race, as well as a significant psychological and emotional effect on adult L2 learners.

Additionally, future work might consider how personality traits, especially introversion vs. extroversion, interact with investment for L2 learners.

Given that identity is a dynamic and constantly changing social construct across time and place (Norton, 2000, 2006), I also believe that future research needs to include more detailed and long-term analyses of the relationships among adult L2 learners' varying investment, changed learning strategies, and participation in the target language communities to become legitimate peripheral participants. Specifically, drawing on Cervatiuc's (2009) study of three major strategies common among 20 highly proficient adult non-native speakers (NNS) of English, it would be worthwhile to compare and contrast similar groups of beginner or intermediate-level non-native speakers, as well as to show more precisely different levels or types of investment, different learning strategies, and how different participants creatively engage their target language discourse communities.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Bonny Norton for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also grateful to my audience at the 2012 AAAL Conference (Boston, MA) for their feedback.

## Appendix A

### Data collection materials

#### 1) Interview questions

##### A. Participant's educational background:

1. How long did you study English as a foreign language (EFL) in Korea?
2. What kinds of language skills (for example, speaking, listening, reading, and writing) did your EFL class focus on?
3. When did you start learning how to write in English?
4. When did you start learning how to speak in English?
5. Did you write any academic English papers in college? If so, what kinds of papers (e.g., essay, critical review, literature review, or research paper) did you write?
6. When you were in college, did you have opportunities to speak in English? If so, what kinds of learning strategies did you use to develop your oral English?

##### B. Participant's oral English proficiency:

1. Do you like speaking English? Why or why not?
2. How long have you spent practicing your oral English?
3. What opportunities have you created to communicate with Americans in English?
4. How frequently have you tried to speak in English?
5. What makes you develop your oral English?
6. How do you feel about communicating with people in English here in America?
7. What are the differences between learning spoken English in Korea and in America?
8. Why do you want to learn English as a second language? What is your motivation to master it?
9. What are your goals for improving your oral English?
10. What are your attitudes toward learning English?
11. Could you tell me about your classroom experiences of speaking in English?
12. What obstacles have you encountered to improving your English? How have you tried to overcome them?
13. Do you have any strategies to improve your oral English? What effects have those strategies had?

#### 2) Journal entry prompts

These journal entries help track how the participant's motivation, attitudes, and English learning strategies have progressed over time.

- a) How has your motivation to learn English changed?
- b) How have your attitudes toward learning English shifted?
- c) What kinds of learning strategies have you developed to improve your oral English proficiency?

#### 3) ESL learning autobiography

The autobiography paper mainly focuses on how and why the participant studied English, and what motivates her to continue to improve her English. Specifically, it consists of four sections. The first part is about the participant's educational background in EFL classrooms in Korea, including both secondary school and college. The second part identifies the linguistic difficulties that she has gone through in order to improve her oral English proficiency. The third part is about how the

participant has overcome these linguistic hardships, and how her motivation makes her keep learning English and affects her English language acquisition. The last part analyzes how the participant develops her learning strategies and adopts new ones, and how she chooses to interact with native speakers of English to develop her own speech.

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