Beliefs and identity formation: a case study of three English learners in China

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Abstract: This paper presents a case study of three Chinese English major students' experiences of English pronunciation learning from primary school to university, paying close attention to how their beliefs and identity changed throughout time and space. Drawing on the data from written narrative as well as interview, the study revealed that the participants' English pronunciation learning beliefs both static and dynamic influenced by specific contexts as well as imagined identities. It was also found that their English pronunciation learner identities and beliefs were intricately linked and changed across time in a complex manner as well as influence with each other in bi-directional way. Based on the results, a few recommendations and pedagogical implications for future studies are proposed to broaden the scope of English pronunciation learning and teaching.

Keywords: Identity, belief, English pronunciation learning, English major student

1.   Introduction

Some scholar, Jarosz, et al., (2019) claimed that English pronunciation plays a more critical role and is the basic step for the comprehensive training of English learners. According to Gimson (1989), a person who has mastered a language would have 100% phonetic knowledge, 50%–90% grammar knowledge, and 1% vocabulary knowledge. However, Gilakjani (2016) note that pronunciation is one of the challenging skills to learn in English learning and that it costs learners much time to improve. In fact, English learners in EFL contexts have always faced difficulties in English pronunciation(Plailek, 2021; Yusriati & Hasibuan, 2019; Nasar & Hamzah, 2018). Numerous studies (Farah&Choe, 2022; Phuong, 2019; Nguyen, et al., 2021; Bakokoet al., 2023) have analyzed the influencing factors of English pronunciation learning from the perspective of individual differences, one of which is learners' beliefs.

As far as Kalaja & Barcelos (2006, p. 1) are concerned, learners' beliefs are defined as "the opinions and ideas that learners have about the task of learning a second/foreign language." These beliefs can be used to frame tasks, filter and interpret information, and are a major factor in determining both learning outcomes and learning behavior (Ellis, 2008; Buehl & Beck, 2015; Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro, & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2015). They are social structures that are the result of individual learning and socialization processes; they are reproduced, modified, and creatively applied in response to situational demands (Kallenbach, 1996) and are frequently associated with the identity of the learner (Barcelos, 2000; Oxford, 2008; Sakui & Gaies, 2003; Singh & Richards, 2006; Woods, 2003).

In the applied linguistics, learners' beliefs have been explored in various areas in English learning acquisition, but learning of English pronunciation are obviously rare among the literature on language acquisition beliefs(Brown, 2009). While some researchers have attempted to investigate how EFL learners perceive themselves when pronouncing English and how this influence their oral performance (Huang & Hashim, 2021, Kong & Kang, 2022), they have primarily relied on questionnaires and laboratory settings to extract learner perspectives and experiences (Szyszka, 2011). More researches need to employ longitudinal, individual-based, and qualitative research designs to explore how learners' pronunciation learning beliefs interact with their identity constructions across different English pronunciation learning periods.

It can help further understand the nature of learners' English pronunciation beliefs, the source of learners' English pronunciation learning beliefs, and the reasons for changes in their beliefs, as well as give some insight into the relationships between learners' English pronunciation learning beliefs and their English pronunciation learning identities

construction across time. This will assist English teachers and policymakers to make better understand what Chinese learners bring into the English pronunciation learning contexts.

2.   Literature Review

2.1   Learners' belief in English learning

Learner beliefs are defined as "student opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning"(Horwitz, 1988, p. 284) or "opinions and ideas that learners have about the task of learning a second/foreign language" (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2003, p. 1). Learner beliefs have been conceptualized through a variety of theoretical frameworks in the discipline of SLA. The normative method explores how learners' misconceptions differ from those of SLA researchers (e.g., Horwitz, 1988). The meta-cognitive approach treats learner beliefs as solid, unchanging, and ingrained mental representations that direct the deployment of methods by L2 learners (e.g., Wennen, 1998; Zhang, 2010). Due to the "complex turn" that has appeared in the social sciences and in SLA (e.g., N. Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006), learner beliefs,along with other individual characteristics, are now conceptualized as having both a static, trait-like dimension as well as a situated, changing dimension（Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; Mercer, 2011). In keeping with the complex dynamic systems concept, the contextual approach regards learner beliefs as the individuals' own perspectives embedded in and dynamically mediated by the sociocultural, interactional, and experiential context (Barcelos, 2003; Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; Mercer, 2011). This approach maintains that: (a) beliefs can shift in tandem with changes in learners' motivation, attitudes, and emotions (e.g., Aragao, 2011); (b) beliefs can be influenced by learners' experiences of learning and utilizing L2 (e.g., Navarro & Thornton, 2011). In other words, some beliefs might develop or get strengthened while others might get changed or get weaker (Han, 2017). It should therefore be emphasized that while beliefs are context-dependent and can change in response to a larger sociocultural context, they can also hold steady throughout time and exhibit resistance to change on occasion (Barcelos, 2003).

There are tons of studies on learners' beliefs in English acquisition, one of which is the study of the evolution of learners' beliefs. However, compared with studies on learner belief evolution, which were frequently explored in studies on general English learning (Fujiwara, 2018;Vildana & Esma, 2019; Kang, 2024), it is still rare that in English pronunciation learning research(Brown, 2009). Considering the dearth of studies in this area, studies on the changes and the factors of English pronunciation learning belief during different learning periods are warranted. The current study adopts the view that learner beliefs are social, cognitive, individual, and contextual in character, and that their formation and evolution are influenced by specific sociocultural situations. Moreover, learner beliefs—that is, ideas, opinions, and assumptions regarding the status of English pronunciation during different English learning phases—were the focus of the current study.

2.2 Belief, identity and English learning

According to Barcelos (2015), there are close and complex connections between beliefs and identities. Our identities are shaped by our beliefs, which define who we are. In philosophy and psychology, there has been suggested a complex link between beliefs and identities(Dewey,1933; Rokeach,1968). Researchers have suggested this relationship in their work (Barcelos, 2000; Murphey, 1995; Oxford, 2008; Sakui & Gaies, 2013; Singh & Richards, 2006; Woods, 2003), despite the fact that there are few specific studies that have examined the relationship between beliefs and identities in applied linguistics (Barcelos, 2015). As early as 2003, Woods had already stated that beliefs "seem to be intrinsically related to people's selves and identity"(p. 225). Until now, the most direct and worthy study was made in attempts to explore the role of beliefs in shaping L2 learners' identities, carried out by Sung (2021). It was discovered by him that the L2 identities and beliefs of the participant not only changed in a complex and dynamic way over time, but also showed signs of intimate connectivity and interacted with each other in reciprocal and bi-directional way.

However, as for studies on English pronunciation, the focus are limited to few aspects including the importance learners place on English pronunciation and/or pronunciation learning (Pawlak, 2015; Phuong, 2019), their goals in learning pronunciation (Jindapitak, 2015; Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011), and English pronunciation strategies (Simon & Taverniers, 2011). Only a few researchers have implicitly attempted to investigate how EFL learners see themselves when pronouncing English and how their pronunciation self-perception influenced their oral performance (Huang & Hashim, 2021, Kong & Kang, 2022; Richter, 2022). Nonetheless, they mostly depended on the utilization of questionnaires and lab settings to extract student viewpoints and experiences. These snapshot-like and out-of-context methods can only offer very narrow insights into the experiences and viewpoints of the learners, which leads to a very simplistic comprehension of their complicated and multiple identities. To further understand how learners' pronunciation learning beliefs interact with their identity construction across several English pronunciation learning periods, more study needs to consider learners' perspectives and employ longitudinal, individual-based, qualitative research approaches.

The current work fills in these gaps by investigating the relationship between learner pronunciation learning beliefs and learner identity construction in the process of English pronunciation learning. Taking a normative, meta-cognitive and contextual approach to learner beliefs, this study operationalizes this construct as the opinions and ideas that students hold to be true within a specific temporal and situational context. This operationalization recognizes the stable and

dynamic nature of learner beliefs and allows for comprehensively understanding learner beliefs about English pronunciation learning among different schooling stages. Specifically, this study is guided by two research questions:

1. What are their English pronunciation learning beliefs throughout their different English learning periods?
2. How do their English pronunciation learning beliefs interact with their identity construction throughout their different English learning periods?

3. Methodology

This article is a part of the reports of this research on a qualitative PhD project. A case study, according to Yin (2009), tries to investigate a contemporary condition in its real-life setting, especially when it's difficult to draw a clear distinction between the phenomenon and the context. Based on this definition, Heigham and Croker (2009) believed that a case study comprises three objectives. The first objective is to improve conditions or practices based on observations in specific cases. Second, the findings are expanded to other cases with similar backgrounds. Third, this study aims to obtain a thorough comprehension of the matter under discussion. Hence, this current qualitative case study was projected to offer helpful insights into how learners' English pronunciation learning beliefs change and factors, as well as how beliefs interact with their identity construction at different stages of learning in China.

3.1 Participants

In this study, participants were selected via purposive sampling. Those chosen were the ones the researcher believed she could learn the most from (Merriam & Grenier,2019). The first criterion is the difference in their language proficiency levels, which is one of the key factors that shape their different language learning beliefs (Barcelos, 2003; Simon & Taverniers, 2011; Mercer, 2011). The second criterion is differences in academic background such as English education, English translation, and business English. As the learners' learning experiences also play an important role in shaping their unique learning beliefs (Barcelos, 2003; Horwitz, 1987). Hence, the participants selected for this study will be from different academic backgrounds and different English pronunciation proficiency. The study participants' demographic data is compiled in Table 4.1, where pseudonyms have been used in place of the students' true identities.

Table 3.1 Focal participants' demographic information

Name	Age	Major	Pronunciation proficiency	Grade	Family Background
Chen	19	English Education	High level	Freshman	Saleswomen
Ping	21	English Translation	Middle level	Sophomore	Migrant workers
Lan	21	English Business	Low level	Sophomore	Businessmen

3.2 Data collection

In line with the tradition of qualitative research, a variety of data collection techniques were employed in this study, including interviews and participants' written descriptions to gain a better comparison and triangulation of two different sources, contributing to credible research findings and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This was followed by data collection, which was conducted for three months from March to June 2022. In this process, regular communication with the participants was constantly carried out through wechat and phone calls. While this data collection was not conducted for analysis, it made the stories the participants told seem more credible.

3.2.1 Interview Written narrative

The three participants were selected to record their English pronunciation learning stories in varying phases including primary school, junior and senior high schools, and university. A written frame according to Barkhuzien and Wett (2008) was given to the three participants to record essential data regarding their academic backgrounds, previous experiences, and reflections on English pronunciation learning. The participants were required to present their beliefs related to English pronunciation learning, the formation and shift of their English pronunciation learning beliefs, the factors that make their beliefs change, and how these beliefs interacted with their identity construction in different English pronunciation learning phases. Chen's written narrative comprises 3500 words, Ping's 2800 words, and Lan's 2100 words.

3.2.2   Interview

Semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to explore the opinions and ideas of the interviewees, as well as probe deeper into their answers for additional information and clarification, especially when dealing with complex or sensitive subject matter(Merriam & Grenier,2019). The interview protocol was made available beforehand, while several questions needed the participants' clarification of the problems identified by the researchers upon the observation of their written narrative. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted in total, with each one being audio recorded for between thirty and fifty minutes. Specifically, the first interview highlighted the participants' experiences, sentiments, and viewpoints toward English pronunciation learning. The participants were then asked to reflect on their beliefs about learning English pronunciation, the factors that influence their beliefs, and the ways in which their beliefs interact with their identity construction during various English pronunciation learning periods during the second interview. Furthermore, the interview was conducted primarily in Mandarin Chinese, with sporadic English usage, and it was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

3.3   Data analysis

Data analysis is an iterative and developing procedure that incorporates several (re)readings of data gathered from various sources(Patton, 2023). The written narrative transcripts served as the main source of data, and as such, they were coded using Nvivo12. This was followed by an analysis using paradigmatic analytic processes, which created taxonomies and categories based on the common elements found across the database (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). Identification of the key themes in the written narrative was conducted, followed by triangulation with data in the interviews or confirmation and refinement of the emergent findings. Subsequently, a member-checking procedure was used to obtain feedback from the participants once the preliminary results had been summarized (Thomas,2017).

4. Finding

4.1 In the primary school

4.1.1 Chen

As she was born in the city, Chen had access to more English learning resources compared to her peers who come from rural areas of the country. Since her primary school days, Chen had began to learn English in extracurricular training institutions like *'CC English'* and *'Susan English'.* The English teachers in these informal schools paid much attention to English phonetic knowledge in order to improve students' English oral ability. In the written narrative, Chen described in vivid about her experience at *'CC English'* in primary school. There were three foreign English teachers who took turns giving students English oral lessons each week and carried out different kinds of interactive activities to practice their oral English. One of the most memorable activities for her was the topic discussion. When they engaged in topic discussions, her foreign teachers would observe and give comments based on their performance. She was always praised for her good pronunciation by the foreign teacher. However, the pronunciation of her partner student was questioned by the foreign teacher, saying that it was difficult to understand. Inspired by two entirely distinct comments from her foreign teacher, Chen was aware of the significance of English pronunciation for listening and speaking.

> *"Interviewer: Were there any activities that promote English pronunciation learning?*
> *Chen: The most commonly used activity was the topic discussion in the 'CC English" training institution.*
> *Interviewer: How?*
> *Chen: The foreign teacher listened to our discussion. Then she observed our opinions and pronunciation as well as gave comments. Once, she said, "your English pronunciation was relatively standard and I could understand but felt difficult to understand your partner's".*
> *Interviewer: How did you feel at that time?*
> *Chen: I wanted to learn English pronunciation well. I thought that good English pronunciation was useful listening and speaking."*

(CIT1-1266-1280)

Apart from the English pronunciation learning experiences in the extracurricular training institutions, Chen was fortunate to be given the opportunity to the places where English was commonly used in daily life. As a ballet dancer with level 8 of the amateur group, she went on a performing tour with dance companies in Hong Kong and Macao, China. These two cities are where Chinese and Western cultures blend closely. Hence, it was extremely common to meet foreigners who communicate in English in their daily life. Chen envied their standard American and British pronunciation and took advantage of the opportunity to chat with them to imitate their English accents. As a Child from inland of China,

this is a rare experience for her to have an authentic communication with foreigners. It not only further strengthened her belief that English pronunciation was important for listening and speaking but also motivated her to become a good English speaker with native-like accents.

"I went to Hong Kong and Macao to perform with the ballet company. There were many foreigners from English-speaking countries. It was quite common for the locals to communicate in English. However, It was a rare opportunity for me who was from inland China to talk with them in English. I thought their pronunciation was perfect and when i talk with them, I tried my best to remove my accent. I want to be like them with standard English pronunciation."
(CWN-11-13)

4.1.2 Ping

Ping was the second participant with an academic background in English translation willing to take part in my research. Born and raised in a rural area, she spent six years in primary school in a remote village, where each grade had one class with just 14 students. Recalling the learning experiences in the primary school, Ping couldn't help complaining that the teaching and learning facilities were quite outdated. For example, there was no multimedia for them expose to any English audios or videos. What's worse, since the school was too remote to recruit English teachers, the English courses were not offered for them. Thereby, Ping stated in the written narrative that she knew nothing about English before junior high school.

"There was no English course offered for us in the primary school because the school I attended was very remote. The teaching and learning equipment was backward. No English teacher was willing to work there. I hadn't heard of the notion of English."
(PWN-20-21)

4.1.3 Lan

Unlike Ping who didn't learn English learning, Lan started to be exposed to English when she was in the third grade of primary school. She recalled in the written narrative that as English was not like Chinese and mathematics which were critical subjects for junior high school entrance exams, the number of English courses was scarce and taken once every two weeks. Briefly speaking, English learning was interest-oriented in the primary school. For example, in the class, English teacher often held some simple games like *Rabbit Dance* to cultivate their English learning interest and increase their confidence in speaking English. In terms of English pronunciation learning, it had never been emphasized by her English teacher. Consequently, she didn't have much memory about it either. The same statement was confirmed in interview.

"Interviewer: When did you start to learn English?
Lan: Primary three.
Interviewer: How did you learn English in the class?
Lan: There were many games for us to participate. For example, our teacher gave us the small card to spell the new word. If our pronunciation were correct, we were given a sticker as a prize.
Interviewer: Did you teacher taught your English phonetic knowledge?
Lan: No, she didn't. I didn't have any memory of it. I only regarded learning English as a hobby and thought learning English was fun."
(LIT1-67-74)

Table 4.1: English pronunciation learning belief and identity construction in the primary school

Participants	English pronunciation learning belief	Identity construction
Chen	English Listening and Speaking	A good English speaker
Ping	No	Know-nothing
Lan	No	Know-nothing

4.2 In Junior and Senior high school

4.2.1 Chen

During junior and senior high school, Chen didn't give up English pronunciation learning but maintained a passion for it although under the pressure of written examinations. Being selected as an English monitor, she had high requirements for her overall English proficiency compared with her classmates. In order to be capable to guide her classmates to read aloud in English correctly, she proactively sought help from teachers in terms of English pronunciation after class. For instance, each week she went to her English teacher's office to recite English texts and received her English teacher's corrections such as intonation, stress, spelling rules, liaison, and individual phonemes. As far as Chen was concerned, even if the written exams did not test English pronunciation, as an English class representative, she must be a role model for her classmates in English pronunciation skill.

"I was chosen as an English representative in both junior and senior high school. Each morning, I guided my classmates to read English texts aloud. Even though English pronunciation was not tested in the high stake exams, my English pronunciation must be as standard as possible. If my pronunciation was poor, how would I be capable of being an English representative and a model for my classmates? Therefore, I asked help from teachers to correct English pronunciation mistakes."
(CWN-77-83)

4.2.2 Ping

Entering junior high school, Ping started to learn English. Having missed a critical period of language learning, she found it difficult to speak English. Aiming to overcome these problems, Ping took advantage of Chinese characters to help her spell due to the fact that her English teacher didn't teach their English phonetic knowledge. In the written narrative, she depicted vividly that during junior high school and senior high school, her English teacher's instruction pattern was monotonous. There were seldom any interactive activities to improve students' spoken English abilities. In addition, the two high stake written examination, senior high school entrance examination and college entrance examination, were like an invisible baton that influenced teachers and students' teaching and learning behaviors. All their energy and time were invested in written exam-related skills like vocabulary and grammar. Considering English pronunciation wasn't tested in these two examinations, English pronunciation never attracted their attention. In the interview, Ping said that she was used to being evaluated through English-written tests and regarded herself as a test machine.

"Interviewer: How did you improve your English pronunciation when you found it difficult to read correctly?
Ping: I tried to read with the help of Chinese characters.
Interviewer: Did you ask your teacher for help?
Ping: No. Our English teacher didn't emphasize it. In fact, English pronunciation was not crucial for us. We focused on senior high school entrance examination or college entrance examination. They didn't test English pronunciation.
Interviewer: Okay. What was your role in learning English in middle and high school?
Ping: I was a test- machine who was centered around written-examinations. Haha..."
(PIT1-135-142)

4.2.3 Lan

In the junior and senior high school, the status of English pronunciation didn't change much in Lan's mind. Even though her senior high school English teacher verbally emphasized the importance of pronunciation for listening and speaking, in practice both teacher and students' energy was still on the English sub-skills relevant to the written examinations such as senior high entrance examination and college entrance examination. These two high-stakes examinations didn't test oral English, let alone pronunciation. Consequently, English pronunciation was like *Cinderella* that was ignored. Lan can hardly recall what specific phonetic knowledge learned. She joked herself as a test machine during senior and junior high school.

"In both junior and senior high school, the English teachers didn't pay special attention to our pronunciation. In most cases, they would only ask us to memorize words, grammar structures, memorize texts to prepare for the written examinations. There were no compulsory English oral examinations. Not to mention the English pronunciation test. To achieve high scores in the college entrance examination, I was also a test machine like other classmates."
(LWN-642-645)

Table 4.2: English pronunciation learning belief and identity construction in junior and senior school

Participants	English pronunciation learning belief	Identity construction
Chen	English Listening and Speaking	A qualified English class representative
Ping	Cinderella	Test- machine
Lan	Cinderella	Test-machine

4.3 University

4.3.1 Chen

After entering college, as an English major, her emphasis on English pronunciation was related to future jobs. Since primary school, Chen has watched numbers of English movies, TikTok short videos and done many English dubbing exercises. These activities catalyzed her dreams of becoming an English singer, or a blogger, or a dubbing actress. Chen confessed in the written narrative that when she graduated from college, she would try to be a lively and interesting English online blogger like *Ma Siri* and *Cardi B* who were humorous and knowledgeable to share kinds of interesting ideas and opinions. Based on her observation, standard English pronunciation is a key factor for them becoming a popular English online blogger to attract netizen attention and support. .

"Now is the Internet age, and it is actually very good to be an English online blogger like Ma Sirui and Cardi B. They are very interesting and share different culture about English-speaking countries. After graduating from university, I also want to an English online blogger to share Chinese culture with people all over the world like them. Thus, if I want to attract the attention of netizens and become a popular English blogger, standard English pronunciation is basic."
(CWN-92-98)

In order to realize her own imagined identity, Chen took advantage of limited interactive activities like pair work, topic discussion in English listening and speaking class to practice English fluency and proactively sought help from teachers to overcome her own English learning difficulties, such as strong and weak form or intonation. In addition, outside of class, she also insisted on singing English songs and doing English dubbing exercises in the hope that her English phonetic rhythm is closer to that of native English speakers.

"Interviewer: What effort do you make for the imagined identity?
Chen: In fact, there are not so much English pronunciation related learning activities in daily learning. In our English listening and speaking class, the teacher occasionally held English oral interactive activities that I would like to participate to practice my fluency. Sometimes, I also ask her to correct my mistakes like strong and weak forms in the words.
Interviewer: How about out of class?
Chen: Despite my classmates don't learn, I still insist on doing some English dubbing and singing English songs. I think it can help my English phonetic rhythm."
(CIT2-103-111)

4.3.2 Ping

After entering university, the status of English pronunciation changed in Ping's mind. She no longer treated it as *Cinderella* but began to understand it was concerned with English listening and speaking. This change first benefited from the English phonetic courses. In the freshman year, there was an 8-week English phonetic course open for the English major students. In written narrative, Ping expressed that her teacher was very demanding of them. When they were doing English IPA exercises, their teacher were asked to prepare a small mirror to check whether their mouth shape was correct. Moreover, they were asked to do many minimal pair exercises to distinguish the differences among phonemes. If they didn't followed the English phonetic teacher's instruction and made mistakes, they would be published. Nevertheless, she felt thankful for a responsible teacher who corrected her wrong English pronunciation habits formed in the early schooling days and at the same time made her realize that correct pronunciation was more conducive to listening and speaking.

> *"In the first year of university, there was an 8-week English phonetic course. For the first time, an English phonetic teacher explained to us the articulation manner and place of the 48 English International Phonetic Alphabet. She corrected the wrong pronunciation habits I had formed in my previous learning experiences, and it also made me understand that pronunciation has an impact on listening and speaking."*

(PWN-70-75)

Besides, Ping observed that unlike her as a mute English learner, some of her classmates around her can speak English fluently. This sharp contrast not only made her aware of the gap with her classmates but also made her reflect that English learning was no longer limited to written English tests. Good oral expression skills and standard English pronunciation were also indispensable for a qualified English major student. Due to her worry that poor pronunciation would bring disgrace to her status as an English major, Ping no longer treated English pronunciation as a marginal role like that in junior and senior high school.

> *"The core reason for me was because I felt that I was an English major and I must not lose the face of an English major. I hoped my English pronunciation was good."*
> (PWN-80-81)

Moreover, born in a poor family, Ping was determined to be an English teacher to make her life different from that of parents of migrant workers. She depicted in the written narrative that although her previous English teachers had poor pronunciation, as long as they had a bachelor's degree, they can all obtain a teaching position job in the junior or senior high school. However, the requirements of being an English teacher nowadays has increased a lot. Not only are English teachers required to have a master's degree, but they are also expected to have standard English pronunciation. Ping used the word "involution", the most popular word in China today to describe the intense competition to be an English teacher. Avoiding at a disadvantage in future job hunting, Ping thought she should emphasize English pronunciation learning. In the interview, she further explained her concerns.

> *"Interviewer: Can you explain more about the importance of English pronunciation in terms of your future jobs?*
> *Ping: If I want to be a teacher, there will be a face to face interview. In the process, I had to answer the question in English. As soon as I speak, people will judge my pronunciation. If my pronunciation are not good, the interviewers would think that I will make negative influence on students' English learning. There is probable that I will lose the chance to be an English teacher. "*
> (PIT2-138-144)

Hence, since freshman year, in order to realize her imagined identity as an English teacher and a qualified English major student, Ping has kept on investing in English pronunciation learning out of the classroom by reading aloud along with the audio to imitate American English pronunciation as there was lack of English pronunciation learning activities in the classroom to learn.

> *"Interviewer: When you find that English pronunciation is no longer something that can be ignored, has your learning behavior changed?*
> *Ping: Yes. I have. However, there are few activities about English pronunciation in the classroom. I usually read along with English audio like VOA and BBC from Monday to Friday evening."*
> (PIT2-160-165)

4.3.3 Lan

In the university, there was an around 8-week English phonetic course set for the freshmen in their first semester. The teacher told them importance of English pronunciation for listening and speaking, placing great emphasis on manner of articulation and place of articulation. However, Lan's belief about the status of English pronunciation hadn't changed. She persisted that English pronunciation was not necessary to get much attention, as written examinations have been the "baton" that conducted the whole college English major education. For example, English certificates like CET4, CET6, TEM4, and TEM8, which neither required oral tests nor involved English pronunciation tests, were the main proofs of the ability of English major students to be employed in China. Although Lan didn't deny the role of English

pronunciation in English learning, its role was very limited compared to that of other English micro-skills such as vocabulary and grammar. Hence, she was more willing to be a test machine rather than waste time on English pronunciation.

> *"I have been like this since I was a child. We first learn the words, then the text, and then memorize the words and the text. In the college entrance examination, the first step is to choose the correct words to fill in. Now in university, nothing has changed. The vocabulary and grammar are still the main assessed skills. That is, if you don't know the skills relevant to the written test, you're in trouble. But if you don't know the pronunciation, that would be fine."*
> (LWN-78-83)

It is also worth noting that, unlike other English majors who want to engage in English-related careers, Lan had an open attitude toward her future career. She expressed that she could either work as a teacher, a foreign trade employee, or a job that does not need much English usage. If she had to choose a career related to English, she would opt to be a junior or senior high school English teacher with low requirements for pronunciation but more focused on written exam skills like vocabulary and grammar. She would not want to be an elementary school teacher with high requirements for pronunciation. If she chooses to work as an administrative staff in a foreign trade company, she would choose one that does not need much proper English pronunciation usage. Thus, the choices of careers that Lan had in mind were the ones that did not demand much of her English pronunciation. The following interview excerpt illustrates this;

> *"Interviewer: Do you have any plans for the future?*
> *Chen: It's not very clear yet. I want to get a teacher qualification certificate. But I think the profession of teacher is too saturated now. I would like to first do an internship at a foreign trade company. If I don't like it, I will choose to do other jobs. Maybe it will not be related to English. For me, it's okay to transfer to other professions. Just work hard to achieve it. Anyway, I don't want to do jobs with a high requirement for English pronunciation."*
> (LIT1-746-749)

Table 4.3: English pronunciation learning belief and identity construction in university

Participants	English pronunciation learning belief	Identity construction
Chen	English Listening and Speaking	An English online blogger
Ping	English listening and Speaking	A qualified English major
		An English teacher
Lan	Cinderella	Test-machine

5. Discussion

This multi-case research illustrated the life experiences of three Chinese English major students to explore their belief and identity construction in their different English pronunciation learning phases. The following sections will discuss in depth the themes pertaining to the results of the current study.

5.1 What are their English pronunciation learning beliefs throughout their different English learning periods?

5.1.1 English learners' beliefs about English pronunciation learning are stable.

Chen has believed that English pronunciation was beneficial for English listening and speaking since primary school. Her positive belief about English English pronunciation status has never changed throughout her English learning journey from primary school to university. In Chen's case, early experiences learning English pronunciation in training institutions and extracurricular English communication in Hong Kong and Macao, China, allowed her to form a positive belief about English pronunciation even though she was also an EFL learner exposed to a relatively non-communicative learning context like Ping and Lan. It is also possible to utilize the socio-cultural value, which is a crucial component of her socio-cultural environment, to explain why she was able to acquire positive English pronunciation learning beliefs and was not subjected to the same social institutional procedures as his female counterparts. That is, Chen's positive belief in English pronunciation was shaped by the emphasis placed on the social meaning that comes with being good at English pronunciation during her early years. As mentioned before, influenced by the foreign teacher's praise for her standard English pronunciation in the training institution and English oral communication experiences in Hong Kong and Macao, China, Chen at an early age had formed the belief that English pronunciation is good for English listening and speaking. This belief that English pronunciation is vital and intertwined with good English speakers has implanted in Chen's mind since her early age. This belief helped Chen develop a positive attitude toward pronunciation, which in turn helped her

learn English pronunciation. Later on, to some extent, this belief inspired her to pursue her career as a certified English monitor and English online blogger.

However, different from Chen's positive belief in English pronunciation learning, Lan held negative learning beliefs about English pronunciation from primary school to university. She treated English pronunciation as a neglected Cinderella, saying that there was no need to invest too much energy and time in it. Her negative belief in English pronunciation learning is attributed to China's long-term English exam-oriented education system. As evidenced by the results section, her English-learning experiences took place in the school that prioritized written-examinations. In this learning setting, she were exposed to de-contextualized teaching methods including vocabulary, grammar, and translation instead of much or any communication language practice. Thus, passing the exams with competitive scores was her main objective in studying English. It makes sense, then, that she would believe herself to be an English test machine. In light of this, it is reasonable to argue that institution and instructional practices she encountered prevented her from developing positive beliefs about English pronunciation learning and strong identity as an English user, which may have encouraged her both to invest more fairly in her English pronunciation.

5.1.2 English learners' beliefs about English pronunciation learning are dynamic.

Unlike Chen and Lan's unchanging beliefs, Ping's belief in English pronunciation learning has undergone a developmental process from ignorance and neglect to positive emphasis from elementary school to university. That is, in primary school, due to the shortage of English education resources, Ping knew nothing about English pronunciation. In senior and junior high school, she chose to neglect it as Cinderella as the written-examination oriented English teaching and learning. It wasn't until college that her negative English pronunciation learning beliefs turned positive as the English pronunciation course and peer influences prompted her to realize that English pronunciation promotes listening and speaking. This result confirmed the contextual approach's assumptions that learner beliefs are embedded in and dynamically mediated by the social, experiential, and interactional context (Barcelos, 2003; Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; Mercer, 2011). It can vary in response to changes in learners' motivation, attitudes, and emotions (e.g., Aragao, 2011); additionally, it may be mediated by learners' experiences with learning and utilizing L2 (e.g., Navarro & Thornton, 2011).

Learners' English pronunciation learning belief transformation is related to their imagined identity. This finding echoes that of other researchers (Trofimovich & Turueva, 2015; Sung, 2014; McCrocklin & Link, 2016) who found that the degree to which learners believe that their pronunciation will impact their future membership or desired identity in the imagined group can have a significant impact on how much effort they place on improving it. In present study, a key factor that led to Lan and Ping's divergence in English pronunciation learning beliefs during university was their different imagined identities. Because Lan lacked the idea of pursuing an English-related job that required high English pronunciation, her negative beliefs about learning English pronunciation remained unchanged from her early learning. In Ping's instance, nevertheless, a positive belief in learning English pronunciation emerged thanks to her own imagined identity as an English teacher.

5.2 How do their English pronunciation learning beliefs interact with their identity throughout their different English learning periods?

5.2.1 English learners' pronunciation learning beliefs, and identity are tightly related.

As Barcelos (2015) points out, "we are what we believe and what we feel. Beliefs form and are part of our identities" (p. 315). In Chen's case, whether it is a good English pronunciation that represents good English speaker in primary school, a good English class monitor in junior high school and high school, and an English online blogger, it all reflects the importance she attaches to English pronunciation at different learning periods. Moreover, at each stage, she treated English native-like pronunciation as the standard for her imitation. It means that "a good English speaker", "a good English course monitor", and "an English online blogger" require her to be an active pursuit of English pronunciation learners with pronunciation similar to that of native English speakers. That is, Chen's English pronunciation learning positive belief is intertwined with being like a native-likeness English speaker. In the same vein, Lan treated English pronunciation as Cinderella that can be ignored so that she regarded herself as a test machine from primary school to university, which clearly indicated that her negative English pronunciation learning belief is connected with her negative English pronunciation learner identity.

5.2.2 The beliefs and identities of the English learners engage in intricate, reciprocal interactions, exhibiting a symbiotic relationship.

For example, Chen's early learning experience in training institutions in primary school prompted her to form a positive English pronunciation learning belief. It helped her establish a positive English pronunciation learner by actively communication with English native speakers in Hong and Macao, China to imitate their native-like English accents. In turn, this positive English pronunciation learning belief was further consolidated and strengthened by her positive English pronunciation learner identity that appears as English class monitor who proactively seek help from teachers under the pressure of written examinations in the junior and senior high school as well as English major student who wanted to be

an English online blogger in the university taking advantage of opportunities to invest in English pronunciation learning in and out of classroom. On the ground of the analysis, as both identity and belief appear to interact with each other in complex ways, they could be seen as "all part of one network and cannot be looked at separately" (Barcelos, 2015, p. 315). However, their relationship is not one of causality and the ways in which they relate to each other can be characterized by mutual interaction and reciprocity (Sung, 2021).

5.2.3 The changes in English learners' English pronunciation beliefs lead to the changes in their identities.

Consistent with earlier studies (e.g., Malcolm, 2004; Mercer, 2011; Zhong, 2015), it was discovered that Ping's beliefs changed in response to changing circumstances and her own learning experiences. As Malcolm (2004) suggests, "the set of beliefs a learner holds is not static but is modified and refined in relation to changing contexts and experiences" (p.69). According to Yang and Kim (2011), belief modification may be viewed as a remediating means to rebuild the individual's relationship with their surroundings, which may have an effect on the behaviors they engage in and the identities they construct. Indeed, when changing our beliefs, "we are constructing different identities within what is possible or allowed to construct given the power structure in society" (Barcelos, 2015, p. 315). In current study, unlike Chen and Lan whose beliefs and identities in terms of English pronunciation learning remained stable, Ping's learners' beliefs and corresponding identities changed at different stages of learning. As shown in the research results, from being ignorant of English pronunciation in elementary school to treating it as a Cinderella role from the perspective of a test machine in junior and senior high school, and then to hold a positive attitude towards English pronunciation under the influence of English phonetic course, classmates as well as imagined identity, which in turn resulted in the development of a positive English pronunciation learner identity by overcoming the dilemma of lacking English phonetics related courses through self-learning out of classroom. It is important to note here that Ping exercised her agency, in accordance with her modified beliefs, in response to the new circumstances, thereby achieving a change of identity.

Considering the relationship between belief and identity, it can be observed that these two concepts are not only interrelated but also dynamic and context-specific. They may alter and adjust to fit shifting circumstances. In addition, it is likely that these two constructs mutually influence each other and potentially make change and adaptation in a bi-directional way. The manner in which identity and belief interact, however, might not always be known since they would probably depend on the agency of the English learner in reaction to the particular contextual factors (Sung, 2021).

6. Conclusion and Recommendation for Future Studies

The findings of this article are based on the English pronunciation learning experiences of three mainland Chinese English learners, which shows that as interrelated parts of English pronunciation learning, the participants' identities and beliefs appear to be closely related and interact in a two-way manner, affected by students' specific circumstances and agency. This study has made a theoretical contribution to existing work, providing urgently needed empirical evidence on the interrelationships between identity and belief, as well as their complex and dynamic interactions in various English pronunciation learning contexts. It supports the view that English pronunciation learning, as a complex and dynamic process, needs to be studied from a holistic perspective, whereby identity and beliefs should be considered together rather than separately (Sung, 2021).

Meanwhile, the findings of the study have some pedagogical implications for English pronunciation teaching and learning. Given the relationships between belief and identity in terms of English pronunciation learning, it might be able to help students create a more positive identity for themselves through modifying their beliefs about English pronunciation learning. Even if it could be impossible to implant some views in students, it seems crucial that they be taught to express and check their beliefs on acquiring English pronunciation. It is especially critical that students become aware of the limitations and opportunities presented by various English pronunciation learning contexts and adjust their beliefs about their English pronunciation learning objectives in accordance with those contexts to support the development of a desired English learner identity. By thinking critically about their own beliefs, students can become aware of those that might be detrimental to their English pronunciation learner identity and concentrate on cultivating beliefs that might result in more favorable English pronunciation experiences, which might then help the development of a more favorable English pronunciation learner identity.

Furthermore, some limitations in this study. First, more research is still required to collect data from more EFL university students, even if the goal of this study was not to generalize to all EFL learners. Secondly, due to the study's brief duration, it was challenging to regularly follow up with informants and get more detailed data. Thus, it is necessary to carry out long-term research observing students' EFL learning experiences. Thirdly, more sources of data ought to be gathered. The results can be strengthened, for instance, by observing how children learn in the classroom and during extracurricular activities. Fourthly, the way one perceives status of English pronunciation may have an impact on one's English pronunciation learning identity construction, which in turn influences their investment. Therefore, this study highlights the need of investigating the contextual, institutional, and individual elements that affect the relationship between belief and investment in learning English pronunciation learning.

Acknowledgement

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