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First-Year Chinese College EFL Learners' Identity Transformation Through *Perezhivanie*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of *perezhivanie*, a concept introduced by Vygotsky, in shaping learner identity in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. By adopting a holistic *perezhivanie* framework integrating environmental factors, personal characteristics, and the refraction prism for experience interpretation, it reveals how learners' identities are shaped by macro-situational and micro-level events. Focusing on two first-year Chinese college students (Tao and Li), it explores how their emotional and cognitive language-learning engagements influence identity evolution. Examining their high school-to-university transitions, it highlights the dynamic interplay between personal characteristics and environmental factors, emphasizing cognition-emotion integration in identity formation. Findings show learner identities are non-static, evolving via complex individual-environment and cognitive-emotional interaction. This study addresses a research gap by integrating psychological and social perspectives on identity formation, offering new insights into underexplored mechanisms of Chinese EFL learner development.

KEYWORDS

Perezhivanie; learner identity; identity transformation; EFL context

Introduction

The exploration of learner identity within second language acquisition (SLA) has attracted substantial interest over the past few decades (Ng, 2021). Research has consistently highlighted the significant influence of identity on learners' internal experiences (Block, 2007; Dörnyei, 2005, 2020). Additionally, identity is recognized as a socially constructed category that can either restrict or expand opportunities for language use and interaction (Bektaş-Çetinkaya, 2024; Norton, 2013). Learner identity, therefore, is not a fixed characteristic but a fluid and evolving construct influenced by various social, cultural, and psychological factors (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). Understanding how these identities are formed and transformed is essential, as students engage in diverse learning environments where their personal meanings of language learning are developed, constructed, and negotiated (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995).

Despite the recognized importance of learner identity, much of the existing research has focused either on psychological (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005; Henry, 2017) or social perspectives (e.g., Darwin & Norton, 2015; Jing-Schmidt et al., 2016), often neglecting the complex interplay between these domains (Bektaş-Çetinkaya, 2024; Ng, 2021). Penuel and Wertsch (1995) highlight the need for an integrated approach that considers both the internal and external influences on identity formation. From a sociocultural perspective, this integration is crucial for understanding how language-learner identities develop and transform over time (Roth & Jornet, 2016). In this context, Vygotsky's (1994) concept of *perezhivanie*—the emotionally lived experience—provides a valuable framework for

examining the intricate relationships between personal and contextual factors in identity formation (Bektaş-Çetinkaya, 2024; Ng, 2021).

Perezhivanie, as conceptualized by Vygotsky (1994), offers a holistic perspective on learner identity, emphasizing the unity of emotion and cognition and the dynamic interplay between internal experiences and external influences. This concept allows for a more nuanced understanding of how learners' identities are shaped through their emotional and cognitive engagement with the language learning process (Lantolf & Swain, 2019). Recent scholarship has begun to explore the application of *perezhivanie* in SLA research, highlighting its potential to reveal the deep emotional and cognitive currents that drive identity formation and transformation (Lantolf & Swain, 2019, 2020; Ng & Renshaw, 2019).

This study aims to contribute to this growing body of research by investigating the *perezhivaniya* of two first-year Chinese college students as they navigate their English as a foreign language (EFL) learning experiences. By focusing on their emotionally charged experiences, this study seeks to illuminate how these experiences influence the students' evolving identities as English learners. Through a detailed examination of these *perezhivaniya*, this research will explore the complex interplay between cognition, emotion, personal characteristics, and social context in identity formation, offering new insights into the processes that underpin language learner identities in the Chinese EFL context.

Literature review

L2 learner identity

Identity is a complex and evolving process through which individuals understand their relationship with the world, its changes over time, and their future aspirations (Norton, 2000). In SLA research, the concept of identity gained traction in the 1970s, notably through Gardner and Lambert's (1972) and Schumann's (1978) works. Although not the primary focus, Gardner's (1985) social-psychological model and Schumann's (1978) acculturation model implied that identity formation involves integrating into the target language community, where learners align with native speakers and adopt cultural values. Gardner (2001) argued that this integration helps learners develop a stable sense of self, echoing Erikson's view of identity as a coherent psychological construct (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995).

As English became a global lingua franca, defining the target language community by native speakers became problematic, prompting a shift toward understanding identity through internal processes rather than external affiliations (Ushioda, 2011). Dörnyei's (2019) L2 Motivational Self System reflects this shift, emphasizing internal self-conceptions over external reference groups. In this system, language-learner identities are internal constructs representing both present and future selves, with motivation driving identity development as learners aspire to their future selves (Ushioda, 2011). From a social perspective, language learning is seen as participation in new social contexts (Firth & Wagner, 2007; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Norton (2013) emphasizes how social norms and interactions shape language-learner identities, viewing identity as evolving through ongoing negotiations of power and social positioning. Wenger's (1999) notion of communities of practice similarly posits that language-learner identities are formed through participation in shared practices, where learners understand their roles within the community, mediating their engagement with language and learning activities. Recent scholarship, such as Miyahara's (2015) critique, advocates for a balanced approach that integrates both psychological and social perspectives on identity, highlighting the importance of emotional dimensions. Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie* provides a framework for this integration, illustrating the dialectical relationship between the individual and their environment. This relationship is refracted through emotion and cognition, which together shape the formation of identity (Blunden, 2016; Vygotsky, 1994).

Research has traditionally portrayed language learners as rational decision-makers, emphasizing goal-directed behavior and engagement in specific learning contexts (Dörnyei, 2005; Norton, 2013; Wenger, 1999). This cognitive focus often overshadows the role of emotion in identity formation, with

the connection between emotion and cognition in language learning being insufficiently explored (Roth, 2007; Swain, 2013). Vygotsky's (1994) concept of *perezhivanie* challenges this cognitive-centric view by highlighting the dual dependence of emotion and cognition, emphasizing their inseparable nature in the learning process (Swain, 2013; Vygotsky, 1994). Additionally, there is a need for a more holistic understanding of identity that recognizes its complexity, variability, and the interplay between psychological and social factors (Mercer, 2011). Traditional research has often isolated cognitive processes from broader sociocultural influences, leading to a fragmented view of language-learner identities (Ng, 2021). To fully understand identity formation, it is essential to integrate psychological, emotional, and social perspectives, examining how these dimensions intersect and influence each other (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). This comprehensive approach allows for a better understanding of how language learners' identities are shaped and transformed through personal aspirations, social interactions, and emotional experiences.

Taken together, in this study, L2 learner identity is defined as the evolving and multifaceted self-concept that emerges through the dynamic interaction of learners' emotional experiences, cognitive processes, and social engagements within the language learning environment. This study uses Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie* to investigate how Chinese university students experience English language learning both in school and at university, and how these emotion-rich experiences shape their learner identities (Lantolf & Swain, 2019, 2020). By focusing on *perezhivanie*, the research highlights the complex interplay between emotions and cognition and integrates both psychological and social factors, offering a comprehensive view of how these emotional experiences influence identity formation in educational environments.

Perezhivanie

The concept of *perezhivanie* was introduced by Vygotsky early in his career and was revisited later, highlighting its importance in psychological growth (Vygotsky, 1994). While *perezhivanie* is often translated as “emotional experience” or simply “experience” (Cong-Lem, 2025; González Rey, 2009), these translations fall short of capturing its full depth (Blunden, 2016). *Perezhivanie* deals with the dialectical relationship between the individual and the environment, as refracted through the lens of emotion and cognition within a historical developmental process (Blunden, 2016). Cognition here refers to “intellectual thinking or culturally developed forms of thinking” (Cong-Lem, 2023, p. 873). Cong-Lem (2023) provides a refined understanding of *perezhivanie*, building on Vygotsky's analysis, which identifies four key components, namely, the environmental factor, personal characteristics, the refraction prism, and influence. Following Cong-Lem's (2023) holistic framework, this study examines *perezhivanie* as a dynamic interaction in which the environment and personal characteristics serve as the sources, feeding into the refraction prism where cognition and emotion dynamically interact, which shapes the individual's experience and, ultimately, influences their psychological development (e.g., identity transformation) (see Figure 1).

Vygotsky (1994) described *perezhivanie* as an “indivisible unity” of personal and situational characteristics, which interact to shape how an individual experiences and is affected by an event (p. 342). The environment plays a controlling and directing role in development, influencing the individual through direct experience, but its impact is relative and depends on how the person engages with it (Vygotsky, 1998). Personal characteristics, on the other hand, determine how the individual experiences the event (Cong-Lem, 2023). Not all personal characteristics are involved in every *perezhivanie*—only those that are relevant to the specific situation are mobilized (Cong-Lem, 2023). Vygotsky (1994) noted that different events activate different personal characteristics, which may vary from one experience to another. For instance, one's emotional reactivity, cognitive style, or sociability might play a more dominant role in some situations but remain dormant in others. This principle of “selective mobilization” means that people with different personal characteristics can experience the same event in vastly different ways (Cong-Lem, 2023; Lantolf & Swain, 2020). As Vygotsky (1994)

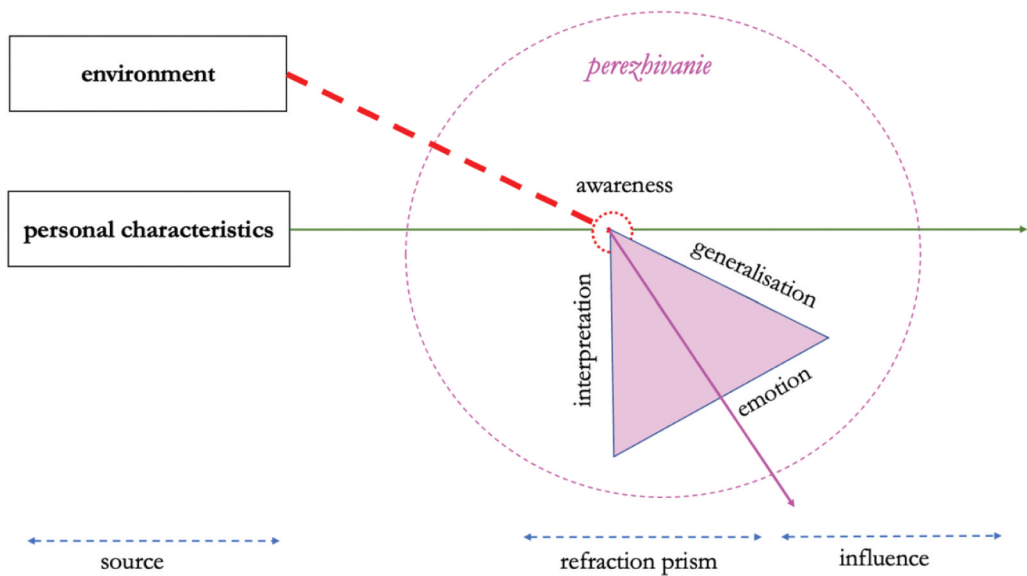


Figure 1. Content and functioning of *perezhivanie* (Cong-Lem, 2023).

explained, an individual’s constitutional characteristics, such as being excitable or sociable, will shape their response to an event. Therefore, it is essential to identify which personal characteristics are activated during a *perezhivanie* and how they influence the individual’s psychological response. However, the role of personal characteristics in shaping *perezhivanie* is relatively underexplored.

At the heart of a *perezhivanie* is its refraction prism, which ultimately determines the influence of the environment (Cong-Lem, 2023). This refractive process indicates that the impact of external events depends on the individual’s psychological organization and ongoing experiences (González Rey, 2009). Vygotsky (1994) emphasized the importance of identifying the “prism” through which environmental influences are perceived, highlighting that this refraction is key to understanding dynamic interactions and unique social development situations (Veresov & Fler, 2016). Blunden (2011) described a social situation of development as a “predicament” or “trap” that individuals navigate to transform their identities and relationships. This involves engaging with *perezhivanie* related to significant events, termed “dramatic *perezhivanie*” by Veresov and Fler (2016, p. 329). Vygotsky (1998) argued that dramatic life events drive development, aligning with the concept of *perezhivanie* in catharsis, which involves processing such events (Blunden, 2016). It’s also important to recognize that *perezhivanie* encompasses subtle, emotionally charged experiences that hold personal significance and can lead to self-emancipation or transformation (Blunden, 2016; Lantolf & Swain, 2020; Veresov & Fler, 2016).

Cognition and emotion are integral components of the refraction prism (Cong-Lem, 2023). Although cognition and emotion are often treated as separate processes for analytical purposes, they are inherently interconnected and should be understood as mutually interactive from the Vygotskian perspective (Lantolf & Swain, 2019). Vygotsky (1994) describes *perezhivanie* as how individuals interpret and emotionally relate to events, highlighting the dynamic interplay between emotion and cognition (González Rey, 2011). This “dual dependence” (Vygotsky, 1993) shows how emotions become more intellectualized over time, influencing cognitive processes and meaning-making (Zaporozhets, 2002). Development, therefore, is a genetic historical process where the evolving interaction between emotion and cognition drives new interpretations and actions, forming a social situation of development (Lantolf & Swain, 2019).

Perezhivanie and L2 learners' identity

Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) link *perezhivanie* to “funds of identity,” defined as “historically accumulated, culturally developed, and socially distributed resources essential for people’s self-definition, self-expression, and self-understanding” (p. 37). This view suggests that identity is shaped by the practices, beliefs, knowledge, and ideas individuals draw upon over time and across contexts. In learner identity studies, Blunden (2016) considers *perezhivaniya* as core to a person’s life story, while Renshaw and Tooth (2016) see it as crucial for understanding self-reorganization and future planning. Roth and Jornet (2016) align with this, viewing *perezhivanie* as reflective of the self’s developmental movement. Renshaw and Tooth’s (2016) research demonstrated that *perezhivanie* helps in meaning-making and self-development, transforming experiences into personal growth among primary students. Ng and Renshaw (2019) showed how an Indigenous Australian student’s reading identities evolved over three years, emphasizing the integration of past and present experiences. Ng (2021) investigated *perezhivaniya* in Japanese students learning English, revealing how specific instances influenced their identity formation. Bektaş-Çetinkaya (2024) explored how Turkish learners’ identities transformed through *perezhivanie*, showing how new cognitive frameworks and environments can impact identity differently among learners. These studies underline the significant link between *perezhivanie* and identity development, yet there is limited research using *perezhivanie* to explore L2 learner identities in Chinese EFL contexts. Among the few studies conducted in Chinese EFL contexts, the focus has primarily been on the interaction between cognition and emotion in shaping L2 learners’ *perezhivanie*. For example, Xu and Zhang (2023) explored the *perezhivaniya* of two Chinese learners of L2 Japanese and its impact on their language development. The study shows how cognition and emotion interact, with one often dominating the other, shaping each learner’s experience. However, there is a lack of a holistic view of *perezhivanie* that explores how L2 learners’ personal characteristics, their environment, and the refraction prism interact to shape their identity transformation, with particular emphasis on the role of personal characteristics in influencing *perezhivanie*.

This study seeks to address these gaps by adopting a holistic framework that examines *perezhivanie* as a dynamic interaction in which the environment and personal characteristics serve as the sources, feeding into the refraction prism where cognition and emotion dynamically interact, which shapes the individual’s experience and, ultimately, influences L2 learner identity transformation. As Cong-Lem (2025) explained, the primary goal of studying *perezhivanie* is to (re)construct the theoretical relationship between an individual and their environment, which in turn determines how environmental factors influence psychological development. By examining *perezhivaniya*, this relationship can be (re)constructed to better understand and explain the developmental impact of the environment. By applying this approach to the experiences of the two Chinese L2 learners, this research will contribute to the growing body of work on *perezhivanie* by offering insights into how Chinese EFL learners experience language learning and how these experiences influence their evolving identities.

Methodology

Participants and contexts

Tao and Li (pseudonyms) were purposefully selected for this study (Smith et al., 2009). Prior to the formal study, we informally engaged with a group of fifteen first-year English majors to explore their past English learning experiences. These students were randomly selected based on their willingness to share in a relaxed, non-academic setting, with no instructional authority over them. Permission was obtained from the course teacher to observe course activities. Through these informal interactions, Tao and Li emerged as typical cases of students who had experienced emotionally charged identity crises (e.g., a loss of purpose in learning English) related to their language learning (Ng, 2021). Both students struggled with their self-perceptions as language learners, facing emotional turmoil regarding their cultural and academic identities. These identity crises were considered significant due to their profound impact on their sense of self, academic motivation, and emotional well-being. Other

students, while insightful, did not demonstrate the same level of emotional intensity or identity-related challenges and were therefore excluded. Tao and Li were also selected for their contrasting overall attitudes toward English learning: Tao exhibited more passion and resilience, while Li showed more pessimism and disengagement. In-class observations further revealed that Tao was proactive and engaged in learning, while Li displayed more disengagement and boredom (e.g., frequent in-class phone playing).

Both students were in their first year of English-major studies at a leading university in China. Tao, aged 18, had been studying English for 12 years. Li, aged 19, had been studying English for 10 years. They had gained admission to this key university by passing the university entrance exam (Chinese *gaokao*) with high English scores, placing them among the above-average EFL learners. They started attending extracurricular English tutoring classes in elementary school, as their parents placed significant importance on their English education.

At the time of data collection, Tao and Li were enrolled in a freshman-level English course titled *The Introduction to Public Speaking (Presentations)*. This compulsory course is a part of the curriculum for students majoring in English language and literature. The course consists of three sections, each with approximately 30 students, all taught by the same instructor, C, who earned his doctorate in applied linguistics in 2017 and has been teaching EFL at the university for 7 years. The course spans 16 weeks, with 5 sessions scheduled every three weeks, except for week 7, which is reserved for the mid-term examination. The course objectives are organized into three levels: knowledge transfer, skill acquisition, and quality cultivation. Students are taught about presentation structure, audience analysis, and outlining techniques. Additionally, the course fosters individual awareness, collaborative instincts, and problem-solving skills. Instructional methods include lectures, workshops, group exercises, and presentations, supplemented by instructional videos and peer critique activities.

Data collection

Data triangulation in the study was accomplished by involving multiple methods to capture these experiences comprehensively. Students were asked to write five narrative journals, reflecting on both their past and present English learning experiences, with each journal corresponding to a specific session. Instructions emphasized that participants should focus on personal feelings, thoughts, and reflections about their learning experiences, including challenges, successes, and moments of personal significance. For example, participants were encouraged to write about the following prompts: Describe any emotional experiences you had during the session related to your English learning. What motivated you to keep going or disengage from the learning process? Reflect on any difficulties you encountered and how you navigated them.

In addition to the journals, five rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting between 40 to 60 minutes. These interviews, conducted in Chinese, were designed to delve deeper into the students' in-the-moment and beyond-the-moment emotional experiences related to EFL learning (Ng, 2021). The interview questions were tailored to each participant based on their journal content, ensuring follow-up on specific emotional episodes and providing clarification where needed. Example interview questions included: Can you further describe the moment in class when you felt particularly motivated or disengaged, as you mentioned in your narrative journal? What were you feeling at that time, and how do you evaluate that experience? Why do you think that particular moment had such an emotional impact on you?

Additionally, qualitative unobtrusive observation was carried out during five language sessions for each student (Ng, 2021). The researcher observed from the back of the room, focusing on class activities, students' emotional expressions, participation, and interactions, while maintaining a non-participating, silent presence, as the students were made aware. Informal face-to-face or online conversations were also conducted towards the end of the study. A strong rapport had already been established between the researcher and the students before the study started. Approval for the study was obtained from the institution. Furthermore, all participants and the teacher were thoroughly

informed about the study's purpose and procedures. Consent forms were obtained from Li and Tao for the use of their narrative journals and interview transcripts before these materials were submitted for analysis.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts, narrative journals, and observation notes were first read multiple times to develop a comprehensive understanding of the data. Their personally significant experiences and memorable events were then identified. Next, codes were developed to extract responses related to different aspects of how participants experienced these moments (experience) and how they made sense of them (awareness) within each identified *perezhivanie* (Ng, 2021). The codes were then merged into themes, and *perezhivanie* was used as a unit of analysis to examine the interplay between personal and contextual factors, highlighting the relationships among students' emotions, cognition, and behaviors. Finally, the themes were clustered into analytical categories based on meaningful relationships between experience and awareness.

To identify emotionally significant experiences, we analyzed participants' verbal expressions and observable behaviors that indicated heightened emotional responses. Emotion was operationalized through explicit statements reflecting affective states (e.g., "I felt very uncomfortable") and nonverbal cues from observational data, such as engagement in class activities, facial expressions, and body language. Cognition was operationalized through participants' reflective statements that indicated evaluation, sense-making, or reasoning about their learning experiences (e.g., "Looking at it in the long term, I know it won't lead to anything good").

To ensure reliability, an independent rater reviewed the transcripts and codes, with feedback incorporated and alternative interpretations discussed (Smith et al., 2009). The intercoder reliability, as measured by Cohen's kappa, was 0.83, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. In addition, findings were shared with participants in an informal meeting to verify the representation of their *perezhivaniya* (Bektaş-Çetinkaya, 2024).

Results

Tao's *perezhivanie* and identities

Tao's *perezhivaniya* illustrate a dynamic and multifaceted process of identity formation and transformation in the context of English language learning. From an initial phase of competence and pride, through periods of self-abasement and grievance, to moments of resilience, Tao's experiences of identity crisis highlight the intricate interplay between personal emotions and social influences.

Perezhivanie T1¹: I'm a competent and competitive English learner

In elementary school, Tao experienced English language learning as an exciting and rewarding endeavor, significantly influenced by her parents' strong emphasis on education. Despite their own limited academic backgrounds, her parents placed a high value on Tao's education, particularly in English. Tao recalls, "My parents, despite their own educational levels not being very high, always valued my education greatly ... They placed great importance on my English education from the first grade." Tao's parents enrolled her in English extracurricular classes, which significantly influenced her development. These classes, coupled with a supportive English tutor, who had high expectations on Tao, fostered an early interest and pride in her speaking abilities. Tao explains, "In the first grade, I attended English extracurricular classes, which had a significant impact on me. My English tutor was also very comprehensive in his teaching."

A particularly vivid moment of *perezhivanie* occurred during her early schooling when she struggled with the pronunciation of the "th" sound in English. She recalls:

I was very confused because I couldn't pronounce it correctly. After I posted a voiceover project online, many teachers commented, saying I read everything else well except that sound. But then I kept practicing and practicing. I have a strong competitive spirit, and seeing so many people pointing out this issue made me angry. Eventually, I solved the problem.

In Tao's moment of struggling with the "th" sound, a person—context connection emerges through her relationship with both her internal motivations and the external social environment. Her parents' high expectations, coupled with her tutor's focus on her English proficiency, create a context where she feels the pressure to perform well, especially as her voiceover project receives feedback from multiple teachers. The dramatic collision occurs when the feedback, highlighting the "th" sound, sparks a deep emotional response—confusion and anger—that disrupts her sense of achievement. This emotional reaction, rooted in her competitive nature, pushes her to practice intensively. The refraction of her identity transformation becomes apparent as she channels her anger into motivation, ultimately mastering the pronunciation. This process reflects a shift in Tao's learner identity, where her emotional and cognitive responses interact, allowing her to reframe failure as a challenge to overcome, solidifying her sense of competence and resilience in the face of adversity.

Perezhivanie T2: I'm self-abased

Upon entering university, Tao found English language learning stressful and overwhelming.

She describes:

Just entering university, my understanding of the "English major" was not clear. Facing teachers' all-English lectures and textbooks, I felt very confused. In this new environment, I also encountered many classmates with strong oral skills, feeling very defeated and somewhat aimless.

This collision between her previous academic success and the competitive, language-barrier-laden university environment heightened her anxiety, triggering feelings of inadequacy.

Tao's feelings of inadequacy were further exacerbated by experiences of prejudice, which deeply affected her sense of self. She recalls a particularly painful moment:

There are many misunderstandings about me. Previously, students from other departments were very certain and confident in telling me, "You (minority college applicants) kids are all admitted with extra points."² I felt a bit prejudiced against, this kind of bias. But I also knew that my conditions were definitely not as good as others, so I felt a bit self-abased.

This external judgment made her feel marginalized, further intensifying her anxiety and self-doubt, particularly as she also recognized her own perceived disadvantages compared to others. Tao's *perezhivanie* in this context was marked by intense emotional responses. She describes, "I was very overwhelmed, I cried many times, and I also cried to my parents many times. I care a lot about these things." Her *perezhivanie* reflects how prejudice as an external influence refracted through her cognitive understanding, amplifying emotional responses and deepening her sense of inadequacy.

Tao's cognitive efforts to adapt to her environment also played a critical role in this transformation. She took deliberate steps to manage her anxiety by creating a sense of control in her new academic environment. She explains, "I like to create a 'certain' environment for myself, so this anxiety and unease gradually disappeared as I adapted to the arrangements of university life." Her emotional resilience emerged as she reframed her frustrations as growth opportunities, signifying a shift in how she viewed both her limitations and potential. While Tao expresses frustration with her oral English skills, she also shows emotional resilience, recognizing her shortcomings but embracing the opportunity to improve: "I am also happy to have the opportunity to systematically improve my oral skills and to speak more." This interplay between cognition, emotion, and social context culminated in a transformed self-perception, with Tao moving from feelings of inadequacy and confusion to a more resilient, goal-oriented mindset, actively seeking improvement and embracing academic challenges.

Perezhivanie T3: *I'm an unjustly treated group member*

Tao's narratives reveal moments of *perezhivanie* where interpersonal conflicts and perceived injustices significantly impacted her learner identity. One such moment is described:

A group member was not very active in distributing tasks ... at that time, I and other group members were pushed away many times ... and were also unjustly accused. It was the time I went up to do a presentation, and during the process, I saw that a page of the PPT had a bit of a formatting issue. Then, coming down, I was criticized by her, and I felt very uncomfortable. I didn't react in class. It was only later that I realized, "This doesn't seem right! Why did she talk like this?" I felt very wronged, and she seemed very ridiculous.

This *perezhivanie* reflects a significant person-context interaction, where Tao's internal sense of fairness collided with the external social context of unequal task distribution and unjust criticism, creating a dramatic emotional and cognitive response. The person-context connection is highlighted by Tao's initial expectation of cooperation and fairness within the group, which was disrupted by a peer's lack of engagement and later criticism during the presentation. This situation prompted a dramatic collision of her emotional state, as Tao felt both burdened and unjustly accused, leading to frustration and discomfort. As she reflected beyond the moment, her emotions intensified, revealing how external social dynamics refracted through her cognitive lens, shaping her self-perception as an unfairly treated group member. In response to this, Tao underwent an identity transformation, marked by resignation—her emotional distress led her to adopt a more passive role in future group work, focusing solely on fulfilling her own tasks. She states, "Later on, when we had another group collaboration, my attitude was just to do my part well ... as long as the group cooperated, I had no other way." This transformation illustrates how her cognitive and emotional responses, refracted through the lens of unfair treatment, reshaped her learner identity and her relationship to group work.

Perezhivanie T4: *Resilience and refusal to quietly quit*

Despite the challenges she faced, Tao's narrative illustrates her resilience and refusal to passively disengage from her English learning journey. Tao describes a significant moment that reflects her resilience:

The teacher announced the class participation scores last week ... because class participation is part of the regular grades, and the teacher's intention was to encourage those who hadn't reached the interaction count to answer more questions and get more points. I had already answered a lot before ... My attitude changed a bit, feeling like I had done enough, and I didn't need to answer questions as much.

Tao's narrative reflects a dynamic person-context interaction and showcases her resilience in navigating the academic environment. Initially, Tao felt disengaged as a result of the teacher's grading system and the emphasis on class participation, which led her to believe that she had already done enough. This cognitive assessment of her efforts created a temporary emotional state of adequacy and fatigue. However, as she reflected on the long-term consequences of disengagement, her cognition refracted through her emotional determination to continue participating, demonstrating her refusal to settle. This is a clear instance of dramatic collision, where external academic expectations collided with her internal drive, shifting her emotional state from disengagement to renewed commitment. She stated, "Looking at it in the long term, I know it won't lead to anything good. So, this kind of situation definitely won't persist." In-class observations further supported Tao's resilience, with notable increases of her focused attention and active engagement in the second half of the last class, such as regularly volunteering to answer questions and engaging with class discussions. This example illustrates the refraction of external influences—academic expectations and grading systems—through Tao's personal cognitive and emotional responses, culminating in a transformation of her learner identity from passive to actively engaged, embodying her capacity for adaptation and resilience despite challenges.

Li's perezhivanie and identities

Li's identities in learning English were shaped by a series of *perezhivaniya* revolving around his transformation from an obedient student to an independent thinker. These events highlight Li's emotional and cognitive journey through his educational experiences and their impact on his learner identity.

Perezhivanie L1³: From obedience to rebellion: I seek independence

Li's *perezhivanie* as an obedient and introverted learner illustrates the interplay between cognition and emotion, shaped by his family's traditional, Confucian-influenced educational approach. His success in learning English, particularly his strong grasp of grammar, resulted from his diligent study habits. He recalled:

When I was in elementary school, I was quite obedient and diligent. I could patiently write down everything the English teacher taught. As a result, I had a strong foundation, and I didn't worry much about my English studies later on.

However, this cognitive diligence was paired with feelings of constraint and lack of autonomy, as his family's strict, command-based approach left him feeling controlled and restricted: "Their educational methods mainly involved verbal commands and imposing strict targets, leaving me feeling lacking in autonomy and subject to stringent control."

As Li progressed through high school, his cognitive divergence from his father's utilitarian values led to emotional tension and a sense of disconnection within the family. Li's rejection of his father's emphasis on economic success created internal conflict, as he felt increasingly alienated, stating:

I couldn't learn anything positive from him. He's very utilitarian, extremely so, and he wanted me to switch majors to study business. I feel like we're from two different worlds. I don't communicate much with my family, and that's the reason. Overall, I'm not very familiar with my family.

In high school, Li's academic performance remained strong, but his growing disillusionment with the traditional education system led to a shift toward self-study. He found lectures boring and often engaged in his own activities, saying, "During English class, I would often do English exercises instead of paying attention to the teacher." This cognitive shift was fueled by emotions of boredom and frustration with the conventional classroom setting.

Li's pre-university *perezhivaniya* illustrate the dynamic interaction between cognition, emotion, and external influences in shaping his learner identity transformation from an obedient and introverted learner to one seeking independence. Initially, his success in English, particularly grammar, was rooted in his cognitive adherence to a structured and controlled educational environment influenced by his family's Confucian values. However, this context also created emotional tension for Li, as the strict, command-based approach fostered feelings of constraint and lack of autonomy. The dramatic collision occurred as Li's cognitive divergence from his father's utilitarian, economically driven values grew more pronounced, leading to emotional alienation. His rejection of his father's career expectations, such as switching to business studies, deepened this disconnection, highlighting the stark contrast between his personal aspirations and familial pressure. This collision catalyzed a shift in Li's learning approach—he became disillusioned with the traditional education system, and his boredom and frustration with classroom lectures led him to self-study during English lessons. The refraction of these experiences through Li's cognition and emotions resulted in a shift in his learner identity from compliance to autonomy, as he began to prioritize his own intellectual interests over external pressures.

Perezhivanie L2: I am disappointed

At the university, Li's journey through the educational system is marked by a profound disillusionment, where his high ideals of profound and meaningful learning collide harshly with the superficiality

and impracticality of his current English learning experiences. This tension forms the core of his *perezhivanie* that significantly shapes his learner identity.

Li's frustration primarily stems from the lack of depth in his programming course. As he describes, "The code we write in programming course never exceeds ten lines. These are things we could easily learn on our own, yet an entire semester is spent teaching them. As a result, I don't pay attention in class." Li's *perezhivanie* thus reflects a profound struggle between his cognitive expectations and the reality of his educational environment, revealing a tension between his idealistic vision of meaningful learning and the superficiality of his experiences. His cognitive assessment of the programming course reflects his desire for deeper, more intellectually challenging content, clashing with the simplistic nature of the course, which fosters emotional responses of frustration and disengagement. In other words, Li's emotional disappointment highlights how deeply disconnected he feels from his educational environment.

Li's expectations of university life, characterized by academic freedom and a strong learning atmosphere, are starkly unmet, leading to a sense of disillusionment. Li shares:

Once I tried to discuss a social issue with my teacher. He often evaded direct answers to some seemingly sensitive questions, which was disappointing. I anticipated more open discussions, like those led by a sociology professor I know who discusses controversial topics freely. In contrast, our English courses lack discussion on current social issues.

This shows that Li's desire for intellectual openness clashes with the restrictive nature of his educational setting. Li's disillusionment is a result of how external factors, such as the limitations of his academic environment, refract through his internal experiences, intensifying his sense of frustration and shaping his identity as a disappointed intellectual openness seeker. This dynamic illustrates how an individual's cognitive and emotional experiences are intricately linked to their environment, while also highlighting how the external environment influences the development of their learner identity.

Perezhivanie L3: *I am a passive task receiver*

In group work, Li often assumes the passive role of a task receiver rather than an active collaborator. He observed: "Our group needs a stable, strong person ... who arranges tasks and speaks in the group. [I am] a task receiver." This cognitive observation highlights the reliance on a leader to drive the project, while others, including Li, passively receive and complete their assigned tasks. Li also attributes this to the influence of cultural tendencies, noting that his peers tend to be cautious and not very proactive in public settings: "Chinese classmates tend to not be very proactive, everyone is quite cautious in public groups." This cultural context and the structured nature of group tasks shape his passive role, highlighting how Li's participation is influenced by his educational environment and cultural background.

He describes the process as fragmented and lacking depth, where individual tasks are merely combined without true collaboration: "It's just everyone's individual work pieced together, no different from doing it yourself ... no depth." This disconnection between his cognitive expectations of collaboration and the reality of task distribution leads to a sense of disengagement and dissatisfaction.

The forced nature of group activities further exacerbates Li's sense of disconnection. He recounts an incident where a teacher mandated a group photo to prove collaboration: "Last week, our teacher even forced us to take a group photo to prove we were working together. It was really ridiculous. We just took a photo after class and then everyone left." Here, Li's *perezhivanie* as a prism refracting external influences is reflected in how the external pressure of mandatory group activities, such as the forced group photo, distorts Li's internal experience, intensifying his sense of disconnection and reinforcing his disillusionment.

Perezhivanie L4: *I'm bored and quietly quitting*

Li's cognitive assessment of his coursework led him to view it as repetitive and insignificant, causing feelings of boredom and a lack of motivation. In-class observations confirmed Li's disengagement, with noticeable signs of distraction, such as frequent phone use and inattentiveness during less engaging moments of the lecture. He explains, "I feel bored usually because I think the knowledge isn't important." In response, he selectively engages with the material, focusing only on content he finds valuable. Li describes his strategy: "I probably won't learn anything if I force myself to listen." For example, he disengages during less relevant moments, such as classmates' presentations or trivial PPT content, choosing instead to focus on lectures that are logically structured and engaging. One memorable moment illustrates this. Li recalled:

When I saw the key points listed as 1, 2, [and] 3 on the PPT, I knew the boring moment was about to start. At that time, my bodily sensory functions began to enhance, and I strongly felt the stuffiness in the classroom. The most intense signal is that my skin starts to itch. Then I start doing my own thing, of course not something as elegant as reading a book, maybe opening a social app or picking an e-book into my cyber bookshelf? In general, these are also time-wasting activities, but they are driven by biological instincts and are more fun than listening to the lecture.

Li's experience of boredom and disengagement in class highlights the interaction between his personal experiences and his educational environment, where the repetitive nature of the lectures and physical discomfort amplify his emotional responses. His *perezhivanie* reflects the dominant role of emotions over cognition. The stuffy classroom heightens his sensory awareness, intensifying his irritation and boredom. This emotional state is further reinforced by his cognitive recognition of the lecture's monotony, leading to a disengaged reaction. Li's subsequent shift to social apps or e-books, despite recognizing these as time-wasting, emphasizes the emotional relief they offer. This prioritization of emotional comfort illustrates how emotional discomfort can precede cognitive goals. Ultimately, the external influences of the classroom structure and content shape his learner identity as passive and disengaged, illustrating how both external and internal factors work together to shape his self-concept and learning approach.

Discussion

This study delves into the intricate relationship between *perezhivanie*, language learning, and learner identity, aligning with previous research (Lantolf & Swain, 2020; Ng & Renshaw, 2019). *Perezhivanie* is a valuable analytical tool that helps us understand how emotional and cognitive experiences interact with one's environment, social context, and personal characteristics, all of which play a role in shaping individual experiences and identity transformation. Empirically, *perezhivanie* can be analyzed on both the macro-situational and micro-event-specific levels (Veresov, 2020). At the macro-situational level, the analysis explored the learner's general attitude towards broader environmental factors, which tend to be more stable and are shaped through prior *perezhivaniya*. At the micro-level, the focus shifts to specific, concrete events within these environments. In this study, Tao and Li's emotional and cognitive responses to their shifting academic and social contexts were analyzed through this dual-level approach. At the macro-situational level, both learners' broader attitudes toward their educational contexts were shaped by their past experiences and their engagement with the social and cultural environments they navigated. These stable attitudes were influenced by long-standing beliefs, family values, and educational systems that deeply shaped their perceptions of self and learning. At the micro-level, Tao and Li's responses to specific events—whether the pressures of group work, challenges in the classroom, or experiences of prejudice—demonstrated the immediate emotional and cognitive reactions that spurred shifts in their self-perception and learning strategies. By integrating both macro and micro perspectives, *perezhivanie* serves as a holistic analytical tool, allowing for a deeper exploration of how learners' personal characteristics, their environment, and the interaction of cognition and emotion shape their identities (Cong-Lem, 2023).

This study examined the *perezhivaniya* related to English language learning experienced by Tao and Li as they transitioned from high school to university. The findings revealed that their learner

identities were deeply intertwined with these *perezhivaniya* in both pre-university and university contexts. These results align with previous research (e.g., Ng, 2021; Ng & Renshaw, 2019), which underscores *perezhivanie* as a key factor in the formation and transformation of learner identities. As noted by Roth and Jornet (2016), *perezhivanie* functions as “a generative unit” (p. 317), driving both identity development and change. The following discussion will explore three key theoretical properties of *perezhivanie* according to Vygotsky (1994)—the interaction of individuals with their environment, the interplay between cognition and emotion, and *perezhivanie* as a prism refracting external influences—to elucidate its connection to identity through the cases of Tao and Li.

Vygotsky’s (1994) dialectical view of the individual-environment relationship is central to understanding Tao and Li’s *perezhivanie*. Tao’s narrative, for instance, illustrates how her initial identity as a competent English learner, shaped by her teachers and family’s high expectations, was disrupted by the new challenges of university life, particularly the heightened demands of academic proficiency and exposure to highly proficient peers. The shift in her environment, from a supportive home context to a more competitive academic setting, significantly impacted her emotional state, which in turn reshaped her cognitive responses. This illustrates how identity is not static but evolves as individuals navigate different social and educational landscapes (Ng, 2021). Similarly, Li’s early identity as an obedient learner, cultivated through his family’s Confucian-influenced values, collided with his growing desire for autonomy. His experiences of frustration and boredom with the conventional educational system led to cognitive shifts that fostered a desire for self-study and independence. This dynamic interplay between cognition and emotion, driven by environmental factors such as family expectations and educational structures, illustrates how *perezhivanie* serves as a lens through which learners negotiate their identities in response to both internal characteristics and external influences (Roth & Jornet, 2016). This aligns with Vygotsky’s view that the individual and environment are co-defining elements in the developmental process, where the environment provides the conditions that shape and are shaped by the individual’s emotional and cognitive experiences (Ng, 2021; Vygotsky, 1998).

The study also underscores the significance of personal characteristics in shaping *perezhivanie* and the resulting transformations in their learner identities (Cong-Lem, 2023). Tao’s competitive nature, fueled by her strong desire to excel, enabled her to turn frustration into motivation when faced with challenges in English pronunciation. This personal characteristic, combined with the pressure from her parents and tutors, led to a dramatic shift in her learner identity as she reframed setbacks as opportunities to overcome and grow. In contrast, Li’s introverted personality and preference for autonomy played a significant role in his disengagement from conventional classroom environments. His frustration with the repetitive and superficial content, particularly in the programming course, was compounded by a lack of intellectual challenge, which led him to adopt self-directed learning. Both Tao and Li’s personal characteristics were selectively mobilized in response to different educational events, guiding how they emotionally and cognitively navigated their academic environments (Cong-Lem, 2023; Vygotsky, 1994). Tao’s competitive spirit and Li’s desire for intellectual autonomy demonstrate how personal characteristics dynamically interact with their environments to shape their perceptions and responses, highlighting the pivotal role personal characteristics play in shaping the process of identity transformation.

The interplay between cognition and emotion plays a crucial role in shaping learner identities, as emphasized by Vygotsky’s concept of *perezhivanie*, where cognition and emotion are inseparably linked (Vygotsky, 1987). In Tao’s case, her struggle with English pronunciation triggered frustration and anger, which not only reflected her cognitive challenge but also fueled her determination to improve, showing how emotions can drive cognitive efforts. Later, feelings of inadequacy in university prompted a cognitive re-evaluation of her identity, demonstrating how emotions and cognition together shape identity formation (Lantolf & Swain, 2019, 2020). Similarly, Li’s frustration with the superficiality of his courses led to emotional disengagement, reinforcing his disconnection from his learning environment. As seen in both cases, emotional reactions shaped and, in turn, were shaped by cognitive assessments (Vygotsky, 1987). This finding aligns with Xu and Zhang (2023), which illustrates how cognition and emotion dialectically influence one another—at times, one dominates the other—shaping each learner’s unique *perezhivanie* as they navigate L2 learning. These examples demonstrate that emotionally charged dramatic events act as

a driving force in L2 learner identity development, where learner identities are constructed through the dynamic interplay of cognitive evaluations and emotional responses, each influencing the other (Blunden, 2016; Veresov & Fleeer, 2016).

The process of identity transformation can be understood through the concept of refraction within *perezhivanie*, where personal experiences are interpreted through a unique emotional and cognitive lens (Ng, 2021). Vygotsky (1994) likened this to a prism, through which the same factors are experienced differently by each individual, leading to varied outcomes in their development. This refractive process is crucial in determining how external influences are internalized and how they contribute to identity development. In the case of Tao, the transition from high school to university marked a significant period of identity transformation. Faced with new academic challenges and social dynamics, her initial feelings of inadequacy and self-abasement were refracted through her emotional and cognitive lens. This led to a period of self-reflection and, ultimately, the emergence of a more resilient learner identity. Similarly, Li's journey from being an obedient student to a more independent thinker was heavily influenced by how he refracted his experiences of disillusionment with the educational system. His dissatisfaction with the superficiality of his courses and the lack of intellectual depth prompted him to reassess his identity and seek a path that aligned more closely with his values and aspirations. This refractive process was not merely about rejecting his previous identity but about integrating these experiences into a new, more self-directed identity as a learner. This finding aligns with Ng (2021), who emphasizes that refraction plays a key role in driving the development of emerging identities. Taken together, it is through this process that learners like Tao and Li make sense of their educational journeys, interpreting challenges and conflicts in ways that lead to the emergence of new identities. Refraction, therefore, plays a key role in the continuous evolution of learner identities, enabling individuals to reinterpret past experiences and integrate them into a coherent and evolving sense of self (Blunden, 2016; Lantolf & Swain, 2019, 2020).

The implications of this study underscore the importance of integrating emotional and contextual dimensions into our understanding of language learner identities. By highlighting how dramatic collisions and cathartic processes influence identity development, the study suggests that educators should consider the emotional experiences of learners as central to their developmental trajectories (Blunden, 2016). This perspective calls for a more holistic approach to language education that acknowledges the impact of intense, emotionally charged events on learners' evolving identities. Practically, educators should design curricula that not only focus on linguistic skills but also support learners in navigating their emotional responses to language learning challenges (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002). For instance, providing opportunities for learners to discuss and reflect on their experiences can help them understand and reframe their identities. Additionally, creating a supportive classroom environment that acknowledges and validates learners' emotional experiences can facilitate identity transformation and promote more effective language acquisition (Ng, 2021). This approach calls for a shift from a purely cognitive or skills-based focus to one that considers the holistic development of learners as they engage with their language learning experiences.

This study acknowledges limitations that may impact the generalizability and interpretation of its findings. First, the focus on a specific group of learners, Tao and Li, may limit the extent to which the results are applicable to other contexts or populations. The study's insights into identity formation and transformation are therefore constrained by the specific experiences and backgrounds of these individuals. In addition, the study's reliance on qualitative data from interviews and observations may introduce subjectivity and potential researcher bias in interpreting learner identities and experiences. While these methods provide rich, in-depth insights, they may not fully capture the broader spectrum of learner identities across different educational settings.

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by expanding the application of Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie* in the context of L2 identity development, particularly within Chinese EFL settings, which has been underexplored in existing research. While prior studies (e.g., Ng, 2021; Ng & Renshaw, 2019) have examined the role of *perezhivanie* in shaping learner identities, this study advances the field by integrating a holistic framework that emphasizes the

dynamic interaction between personal characteristics, the environment, and the cognitive-emotional processes that shape identity transformation. By focusing on how learners like Tao and Li selectively mobilize their personal characteristics—such as Tao’s competitive nature and Li’s introversion—this research provides a deeper understanding of how these personal characteristics interact with external social and educational contexts to influence their identity development. Furthermore, the study refines the concept of refraction within *perezhivanie*, showing how learners reinterpret their experiences through emotional and cognitive lenses, leading to new, adaptive identities. This study contributes to ongoing conversations in the field by offering a more holistic view of *perezhivanie*, highlighting its potential for exploring learner identities across diverse cultural and educational contexts. Future research could build on these findings by exploring *perezhivanie* in multilingual or cross-cultural settings, examining how different personal characteristics and social contexts further shape the L2 identity transformation process.

Conclusion

This study reveals the intricate relationship between *perezhivanie*, language learning, and learner identity, as framed by Vygotsky’s theoretical concepts. By examining Tao and Li’s experiences, we see how identity formation is influenced by the dynamic interplay between individual experiences and educational environments, as well as the integration of cognitive and emotional factors. Tao’s adaptation from a supportive home environment to a challenging university context, and Li’s shift from traditional values to a quest for intellectual independence, underscore the continuous evolution of learner identities. The concept of refraction highlights how learners interpret and integrate their experiences, leading to the development of more resilient and self-directed identities. This research underscores the need to consider both personal characteristics and social environment in understanding L2 learner identity development, offering valuable insights into how language learners navigate and transform their sense of self in response to evolving contexts.

Notes

1. T1–T4 represent four successive *perezhivaniya* capturing Tao’s key experiences and identity transformations in English learning.
2. It refers to the preferential admission policies in China, where ethnic minority applicants are often granted additional points in college entrance exams as a means to promote educational equality and access (Wang, 2009).
3. L1–L4 represent four successive *perezhivaniya* capturing Li’s key experiences and identity transformations in English learning.

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Consent to participate

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Data availability statement

The author confirms that all data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

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