English Language investment: A Qualitative Study on Transitioning Adult Language Learners to Postsecondary and Career Certificate Programs

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ABSTRACT

ENGLISH LANGUAGE INVESTMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON TRANSITIONING ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS TO POSTSECONDARY AND CAREER CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS

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This qualitative study elicited and examined the narratives of 15 adult immigrants learning English in a grant-funded program. The purpose of the study was to listen to student voices to understand persistence and investment from the perspectives of the students. The study utilized a process called reciprocal ethnography whereby participants analyzed their journeys with the researcher to determine what factors in their life histories, experiences, and identities had led them to invest sufficiently in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in order to reach levels of achievement that would allow them to transition into postsecondary and career certificate programs. The findings of the study challenge the notion that successful adults would be those with privileged backgrounds including extensive academic experience, status, and support networks. The success of this diverse group of participants questions the vision and expectations of adult ESL programs of the potential students who may successfully make these transitions and encourages programs to look beyond the more traditional factors that have been utilized to predict student success.
The narratives of participants focused on barriers including environmental, situational, cultural, and emotional challenges, and the ability to overcome these challenges was determined by participants as instrumental to their success. Findings indicated that identity and power of the learner is influenced by the social environment and that successful learners are those individuals who have found ways to negotiate these often-inequitable structures. Participants had to challenge the concept of others who concluded that their language skills, or interpretations of them, defined their intelligence or their sense of worth in the community. These individuals had to pursue their goals while being largely ignored or marginalized in their interactions with others. Findings indicated a number of factors that supported participant investment in language socialization and transition. These supports included turning points in their lives that required increased expertise, mentors, and academic environments that acted as “sanctuaries” that helped to counteract experiences and barriers in their social environments. These supports proved critical in the ability of participants to maintain investment in their academic language socialization.

(Keywords: Identity, investment, language socialization, adult ESL, transition)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Like the learners in the study, my journey from inception to publication of this study was one characterized by bumps in the road and detours. Remaining on this journey was, at times, a challenge for me. I am blessed to have had many supporters to help me navigate through this journey and guides who bolstered me when I was questioning my progress. I am convinced that without the confidence and encouragement of so many, I would not be writing this note of gratitude.

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conduct and complete this study. I feel blessed to be among this community of scholars, and I hope that this work will inform me and the community as we work to transition our students in the future. I also want to thank my mentor at the college, Elizabeth McNulty. I was blessed to be paired with you when I started my tenure at the college. I have learned so much from you through our regular reflections on our practice. You are the model to me of an effective practitioner.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The story of the U.S. is a rich history of immigration. Many Americans trace their family
roots back proudly to the time when their ancestors made the bold decision to leave familiar
surroundings and set out for adventure, a better life, or an opportunity to pursue a dream. This
“American Dream” was eloquently defined by Adams (1931) as the belief in a

land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone . . . not a dream of
motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and
each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable
and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances
of birth or position. (pp. 214-215)

This dream continues to motivate present-day travelers searching for its promise.
Driven by this dream, immigrants continue to compose essential chapters in the narrative of the
U.S.. According to U.S. Census data, in 2016, the foreign-born population in the U.S. was
13.2% of the total (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016b). Furthermore, the Census Bureau estimates that
the immigrant population in the U.S. is likely to increase by 41.2 million from 2012-2050 (Cohn,
2012), thereby increasing the percentage of the foreign-born population in the U.S.

This trend of immigration is likely to have significant impact on the demand for formal
adult education in the U.S. The 2010 U.S. Census indicated that 12.4 million adults of working
age, 4% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), did not speak
English well or at all. Based on these statistics, the need for English as a Second Language
(ESL) programming for adults must continue to grow as this population seeks out opportunities
to develop English language skills. A recent nationwide survey indicates that over 2.1 million immigrants reported that they had attended ESL classes at a variety of community and college-based programs (O’Donnell, 2006). ESL programs, according to the latest statistics, are a significant component of the nationwide totals of state-administered adult education programs, comprising 42% of the total enrollment for 2010 (U. S. Department of Education, 2011).

In spite of this identified need for English language education and a population motivated to improve language skills, adults continue to enroll in and drop out of programs. More than half of the enrolled adults drop out of their first class. According to the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), 47% of the participants identified as literate in their native language but not literate in English enrolled in ESL classes. Of this group of students, less than half completed the class. The numbers were less for participants who were described as not literate in either their native language or English. Of the second group, 30% enrolled in ESL classes, less than half, completed the class (Greenberg, Macias, Rhodes, & Chan, 2001).

Many studies have been conducted on the persistence and motivations of students in adult education programs (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Boshier, 1971, 1977; Comings, 2007; Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999; Cooke, 2006; Fitzgerald & Young, 1997; Houle, 1961; Porter, Cuban, Comings, Chase, & National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2005; Quigley & Uhland, 2000). The majority of these studies has examined adults in native language literacy classes and has focused on institutional and dispositional factors that influence persistence. Many of these focus on the emotional resistance to schooling as a concept (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Drayton & Prins, 2011; Quigley, 1992, 1993; Ziegahn, 1992; Ziegler, Bain, Bell, McCallum, & Brian, 2006). This dispositional focus on persistence, which is applicable to
students in literacy education who may have struggled in past schooling experiences, does not necessarily apply to the second-language learner who may have been quite successful in native language literacy instruction. Recent studies conducted at family literacy locations have focused on situational factors or life circumstances, including the effects of poverty on persistence (Prins & Schafft, 2009; Schafft & Prins, 2009). Residential instability emerged from these studies as another factor in the persistence of adult learners (Prins & Schafft, 2009; Schafft & Prins, 2009). Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs have worked to address many of the issues that have emerged from this work that plague persistence in literacy programming, including providing daycare, expanding class locations with community partners, planning around work schedules, and offering transportation.

Although persistence, as a concept, has been studied extensively, few studies have looked specifically at adult ESL learners or have disaggregated their findings to describe the motivation of this specific group of learners (Kinerney, 2007). Furthermore, many of the reviewed studies analyzed quantitative data, which identified institutional and dispositional factors of persistence and motivation. Although a part of the persistence puzzle, these studies lack the depth necessary to fully conceptualize the complex nature of motivation in language development.

Statement of the Problem

Second-language students face significant challenges to attain their educational, professional, and personal goals. Based on current employment demands, students who aspire to enter degree and vocational programs often face barriers that make transitioning to postsecondary courses a challenging and time-consuming process. According to Cummins
(2000), language-learners initially attain basic communication skills that allow them to interact in society within one to two years if exposed sufficiently to the target language. Unfortunately, this level of language competence is not sufficient to be successful in academic coursework. In order to function academically and transition beyond adult literacy programs, students must master cognitive academic levels of proficiency (CALP), which requires approximately 5 to 10 years of study based on the level of literacy of the student in his or her native language (Cummins, 2000). Given the previously cited NALS survey results, the majority of students who enter adult education programs fall far short of this required time. Understanding these dismal persistence statistics is a critical issue in a field that is increasingly connecting funding to student transitions to career, technical, and degree programs.

A review of the literature in adult education programs reveals that there is a lack of research focusing specifically on the adult ESL learner enrolled in the grant-funded system. This qualitative study elicited and examined the narratives of immigrants in order to listen clearly to student voices and aimed to understand the persistence and motivation issues from the perspectives of the students who have remained in programming to the point of transitioning to academic coursework. Through this study, I hope to more fully conceptualize those factors that contribute to persistence in the adult language-learner.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to seek out those factors in the life histories, experiences, and identities of first generation immigrant adults that have led them to invest sufficiently in ESL
programs in order to reach levels of achievement that would allow them to transition into post-secondary and career certificate programs. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do participants narrate their stories of immigrating to the U.S.?
2. How do participants describe their experiences with learning and schooling?
3. How do participants describe their identities as language-learners?
4. How do English language-learners describe their motivation in their second language?
5. How do the learners’ life histories, identities, and goals intersect with and inform this motivation?

Research Approach

This study explored the histories of 15 adult ESL students who transitioned to career, technical, or academic programs at a community college in the suburbs of Chicago. These participants completed a transitional learning community course that acted as a bridge from adult education programming to academic-level coursework. This study used a qualitative methodology called reciprocal ethnography (Lawless, 2010). Data collection occurred in two stages. The first stage, which was universal for all participants, was an in-depth interview exploring the life histories that brought the students to the United States and to enroll in ESL courses at a community college. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of these stories—including the possible undocumented immigration status of some of the participants—for the second stage, individuals chose either to participate in a focus group of three to four individuals or a second in-depth interview. The purpose of the second stage was for participants to make
meaning collaboratively of the themes that emerged from the histories that were recorded in the first session. This process gave the participants power to author and make sense of their own stories. Both the interviews and the “meaning-making” sessions were conducted in English, tape-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Given the advanced level and the linguistic diversity of the participants, representing nine native languages, English was used in the individual interviews and “meaning making” sessions.

Importance of the Study

Although retention and persistence problems have been studied extensively in ABE and Adult Secondary Education (ASE) contexts, few studies have focused on non-credit ESL students as a unique group with potentially unique factors that influence motivation. Seminal studies by Houle (1961) and Boshier (1971, 1977), which developed categorizations of the motivations of adult education participants, were conducted on ABE populations who lacked literacy skills or secondary diplomas in their native language. Acknowledging the implausibility that motivations would be standard across all groups, even in this ABE population, further work by Boshier (1977) differentiates motivations by demographics, including age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and race.

These studies indicated that student motivations in literacy contexts are normally multidimensional in nature, complex, and often difficult to define (Ziegler et al., 2006). Given this assertion, it is logical to question the applicability of motivational models from the bulk of the published research to adult English language-learners. One can theorize that adults who have made the decision to immigrate to a new country likely have motivations that are quite unique to
other ABE and ASE groups. Because there is a paucity of research focused on immigrant voices, this study is designed to elicit the stories of English language-learners in an adult ESL noncredit program to help expand the definition of motivation for this population. The stories or histories told in this analysis are those of individuals, so they are not meant to be generalized to a population. What these stories can serve to illustrate are the day-to-day constraints faced by English language-learners. The stories can illustrate the conditions that support success in this group of learners to guide the creation of spaces that foster motivation in language learning. The study provides richly detailed descriptions and critical analyses of the life histories and language learning experience of the participants to provide insights for designing engaging environments for language-learners. In the process, it can empower the participants to evaluate and author their own stories. The study is unique in its focus on students at the point of transition. Having successfully maintained their motivation over the lengthy process of academic language acquisition, the participants offered an expert perspective not present in the body of persistence studies.

Conceptual Framework

Learning a language is unlike learning other academic subjects. Competency in the subject requires more than the acquisition of a set of skills or mastery of vocabulary and grammatical structures. Language learning requires gaining expertise in the social norms of the language community (Gardner, 1985a). The process of language acquisition is described eloquently by Williams (1994):

There is no question that learning a foreign language is different to learning other subjects. This is mainly because of the social nature of such a venture. Language, after
all, belongs to a person’s whole social being; it is a part of one’s identity and is used to convey this identity to other people. The learning of a foreign language involves far more than simply learning skills, or a system of rules, or a grammar; it involves an alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviors and ways of being and, therefore, has a significant impact on the social nature of the learner. (p. 77)

This understanding of language learning is the foundation of my theoretical framework; it rests on the belief that language learning is a socially constructed process. This assertion is based on the writings of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), who is credited as the founder of the cultural-historical approach to human development. He theorizes that cognitive development is socially and culturally determined. Vygotsky posits that individuals develop cognitively through their interactions in society. It is through this interaction that they internalize the norms of the society and form their beliefs about the world and themselves (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, this perspective conceptualizes the process of learning a second language as language socialization, which is a lifelong process, instead of the more common term, language acquisition, which implies a sense of completion or attainment (Watson-Gegeo, 1988).

Resting on the foundation of social learning theory, this study is framed in a growing body of research that anchors the concepts of motivation and persistence in a broader socio-political context. This research theorizes that literacy learning is best understood in the social context in which it is situated. According to Watson-Gegeo (1992), “Context refers to the whole set of relationships in which a phenomenon is situated, [including] the long-term history of relationships in the immediate setting and the relevant larger historical and institutional processes” (p. 53). Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen (2003) posit that “there is no context-free language learning, and all communicative contexts involve social, cultural, and political dimensions” (p.157). Instead of trying to control or simplify the process, this research embraces
the complexities of the learning contexts. It theorizes that language-learners operate in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and that these communities shape the learner. Far from a static process, as the learner moves through various contexts, she or he “is constantly positioned and repositioned through discourse” (Baxter, 2002, p. 829).

Finally, this study is grounded in the understanding that language is connected intimately to an individual’s sense of self or identity. It is the way people express themselves to others and the way they define themselves in their environments. Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) argue that individuals form and maintain their social identity mainly through their language. The intimate connection between the language of the learner and the identity of the learner is defined by Norton and Toohey (2002):

Language learning engages the identities of learners because language itself is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols; it is also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning ascribed to an utterance are determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the person who speaks. (p. 115)

Given this framework that language learning is a socially constructed process that is intimately connected with the identity of the learner, conceptualizing the motivation of an individual requires understanding the narratives of the learners. If it is through language that individuals define themselves and interact in their environment, it is instructive for ESL and literacy professionals to understand, in the words of the learners, their academic language socialization process.

Definitions

Adult basic education (ABE): This term “refers to almost any fundamental skill that is regarded as essential for adult life” (Sparks & Peterson, 2000, p. 263). This definition includes
the development of social, cultural, and political competence so that learners can function in life. Students develop skills to access information, to voice their ideas and opinions, to develop competence in problem-solving, and to develop an attitude of lifelong learning to maintain expertise in a constantly changing world (Sparks & Peterson, 2000).

**Adult education programs:** Adult education programs include pre-General Education Development (GED) (basic education), GED (adult secondary education), and ESL courses.

**English as a foreign language (EFL):** EFL is a term used to describe the development of English language competency in a country where English is not the native or dominant language or a country that was never colonized by an English-speaking nation.

**English as a second language (ESL):** ESL instruction develops competency in all the components of language, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking for individuals whose native language is not English. This term is used for instruction in countries where English is the native or dominant language. Although many terms are used for learners of the English language, the term ESL is commonly used in grant-funded ABE programs, and it is the term used in the National Reporting System. It is important to note that many adult learners of English are multilingual.

**National Reporting System (NRS):** This term is an outcomes-based reporting system developed by the U.S. Department of Education’s Division of Adult Education. Through this system, state adult education educators are able to report the outcomes of students in their federally-funded adult education programs (U. S. Department of Education, 2013).
Second-language acquisition (SLA): This term is the process of acquiring a language other than one’s native language. Theories of acquisition are rooted in a number of disciplines, including linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychology, neuroscience, and education.

Summary

This document comprises seven chapters, including this introduction. The second chapter is a review of the literature relevant to the study. This review is divided into two broad areas: SLA and motivation and SLA and identity formation. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology chosen for the study and details the particulars of the participants, study design, and the methods of data interpretation. Chapter 4 provides profiles of the 15 participants in the study. It provides a brief history of each participant prior to coming to the U.S. and his/her early days in the country. Chapters 5 and 6, organized as a journey, detail the findings from the study. Finally, Chapter 7 provides implications for practice for providers of noncredit adult ESL programs.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review details the research conducted in two areas of SLA: identity and motivation. The aim of the review is to examine the research conducted on adult ESL students. The populations of each study are discussed in the review; these include international students learning ESL, high school and university students learning English as a Foreign Language, and adult ESL students. Following a review of these broad areas in language acquisition, I will give a definition of the perspective that framed this study.

SLA and Identity

Language is intimately connected to an individual’s sense of self or identity. It is the way one expresses oneself to others and the way one defines oneself in the environment. Academics have recognized this connection for decades. Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) assert that social identity is “in large part established and maintained by language” (p. 7). Weedon (1987) further states, “Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity is constructed” (p. 21). Language, as conceptualized by Norton and Toohey (2002), is a socially constructed process in which the power of the individuals largely determines the legitimacy of their speech. If it is through language that individuals define themselves and interact in their environment, it is instructive for
ESL and literacy professionals to understand how or if identity is affected during the language learning process.

This review begins with a brief overview of how identity has been conceptualized in the education field. Psychologist Erik Erikson (1994) conceptualized identity as a path through stages of development to a level of attainment or achievement. His view was that identity was a “unified, cohesive essence belonging to an individual whose core unfolds or develops in stages” (cited in McCarthey & Moje, 2002, p. 230). This movement was seen as linear, and although individuals could move both forward and backward or even temporarily stop in their stage of development, the end result was a stable state of identity. This positivist approach was based on laws and patterns of development that were thought to be universal, moving toward a fixed and stable notion of self or identity (Rogers, 2004).

From this conceptual framework, the context is abstracted from the process of development (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Erikson expected the development to occur in interaction with others, which was the first step toward a social component in identity formation, but this social component was not expected to have a significant impact on or alter the process. According to Davis (1995), context was viewed, at most, as a modifier of internal activity that occurred in language-learners, not as a significant contributor to the process. Social context, therefore, was not at the core of identity formation.

In contrast, much of the research in identity research since the late 1970s has shifted to include social context as a vital component of identity formation. This perspective is grounded in the seminal writings of Vygotsky (1978), who developed the social constructivist theory of learning, which asserts that the mind is developed through interaction with others. Learners
“interact in society; they internalize practices, knowledge of, and belief about the world and *themselves* as a consequence of their interactions” (p. 228, italics added). Instead of a static and universal view of formation, identity was seen as dynamic and constructed socially (McCarthey & Moje, 2002). Ochs (1993) defines the social constructive view of social identity as the “range of social personae, including social statuses, roles, positions, relationships, and institutional and other relevant community identities one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life” (p. 288). This definition expects identity to be in a constant state of flux and does not presume any eventual stability. It also conceptualizes identity as a plural noun, indicating that shifts may naturally occur based on social context.

Researchers who have followed this poststructuralist approach vary in the ways in which they interpret the interaction between society and self in identity formation, but all have acknowledged its importance. Several assumptions underlie this conceptualization of identity. First, from this perspective, identities are social, not individual, constructions (Moje, Luke, Davies, & Street, 2009). Identity is seen as a plural concept that is always in a state of flux. People, therefore, experience shifts in their identities and are expected to act variously in their many and varied social interactions (Mishler, 2004). This dynamic nature does not discount entirely the importance of personal history in identity formation. Individuals retain what they have learned from past experiences, and this history contributes to identity formation (Holland & Leander, 2004; Moje, 2004). Finally, identity is, in a sense, one’s presentation of self to others. It is expected to change over time as it is in conflict with new experiences and contexts (Hagood, 2002).
A brief summary of a few researchers serves to highlight some definitional variations. Sarup (1998) defines identity as a “construction, a consequence of interaction between people, institutions, and practices” (p. 11). Mishler (1999), in a slightly different approach, defines identity as relational. He concludes that people are defined by their settings and practices and their identities are understood in contrast to others. Suárez-Orozco (2000), through the concept of social mirroring, states that individuals’ sense of self is shaped by the images reflect back to themselves in their environments. When these images are generally positive, an individual builds a sense of self-worth. Similarly, scholars such as Tatum (1997), who focuses on African American high school students, and Anzaldua (1999), who studied Mexican movement across the border, believe that the perceptions of others are part of identity construction. Although these populations may be unique, they represent, not unlike the immigrant populations, individuals outside of the dominant group in society. Therefore, identity is constructed not only by one’s view of oneself, but also by how one is viewed by others.

The literature review that follows looks at the body of research conducted on identity and SLA and literacy practices. I have included some literacy studies and a few studies that include adolescents when they seemed appropriate to the population. In an attempt to make some sense of the research, I have looked at the categorizations used by Menard-Warwick (2005) and Moje et al. (2009). The organization that I have used in analyzing the studies included herein is based, in part, on my reconstruction of some of their categories. Instead of a chronological review of the literature, I have attempted to organize this section thematically. As Moje et al. (2009) suggests, it is difficult to categorize this body of research neatly, and many of the studies may easily belong to more than one category. Identity has been theorized along a spectrum from
being a fixed state that is attained through development to a concept of identity that is fluid, multiple, and situational. This review attempts to highlight the findings of this body of research.

Identity Stability

A fundamental debate found in the literature is the nature of the “fluidity” of the construct. Theorists such as Bourdieu (1991) have conceptualized identity as a durable construct that takes considerable effort to shift (Menard-Warwick, 2005). From this perspective, although identity is not viewed as static or fixed, shifting it is a process that is not simple or automatic. Other theorists see identity as constantly changing, based on the social context of the individuals. Weedon (1987) suggests that individuals shift social position through subjectivity, which is “precarious, contradictory, and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (p. 32). In fact, theorists who support this perspective have replaced the term “identity” with the term “subjectivities.” Research on SLA and identity has explored extensively this continuum of the stability of identity.

Bourdieu (1991) based his theory on the concept of capital, an economic metaphor. According to Bourdieu, people make choices based on the resources that they possess. Capital is made up of various elements. First, individuals possess economic capital, which is material wealth. In addition, cultural capital is “knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 14). Learners can also possess symbolic capital, which is derived from status or recognition received from others. Finally, learners may have linguistic capital, which is expertise in the standard form of speech by the dominant group in society. Capital can be converted from one form to another (De Costa,
2010; Rojo, 2013). For example, Goldstein (2007) states that learners can cash in their linguistic capital for educational qualifications. Similarly, they can trade their cultural capital for good jobs. It is important to acknowledge that positions in society are inherently unequal based on capital and social structures.

Social identity, according to Bourdieu (1991), is related to class and gender and defined as “habitus,” which are “durable dispositions” that these “schemes of perception, appreciation and action enable [us] to generate appropriate and endlessly renewed strategies, but within the limits of the structural constraints of which they are a product” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 138). Although habitus is formed through personal and social history, it is not a fixed construct. In Bourdieu’s words, through “a thorough-going process of counter training, involving repeated exercises” (2000, p. 172), habitus can be changed.

Studies have explored this concept of the durability of habitus in the second-language classroom. In a study of Central American women in a family literacy site in California, Menard-Warwick (2005) explored how personal and family histories influenced language learning in the women in her study. She found a strong connection between the educational experiences and attitudes of her participants and their families. These “intergenerational trajectories,” or patterns across generations, were seen in most of the women in her study. Menard-Warwick posits that the women in the study exhibited “considerable agency as adults in pursuing their educational opportunities for themselves and their children, despite the numerous societal challenges they experienced” (p. 176). Through their efforts, they were able to rewrite their discourses.
De Costa (2010) explored the concept of habitus in the writings of his participant, Vue Lang, a Hmong refugee studying in an ESL classroom. Family history was also a driving force in the motivation to pursue language studies, but it manifested itself differently in this study. The durable construct for Vue was the concept of his role as a male in the family. De Costa (2010) asserts that, in Vue's writings, “family bonds shape his worldview and will continue to influence his future actions” (p. 526). His identity is that of family provider, so his motivation in English is connected with the hope of improving his economic situation for his family. These stories demonstrate that some elements of one’s identity, including the concept of family and the social capital developed through family membership, are durable, even across cultures and in the face of significant struggle.

The studies cited above highlight the durability of habitus, yet Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), in their assertion that habitus is “durable but not eternal” (p. 133), acknowledge that it can be transformed. In a study of Cantonese-speaking adolescents, Lin (1999) explored the notion that students of higher socioeconomic groups are academically advantaged because of the cultural capital they bring to the classroom. Disadvantaged students enter school with habitus that is incompatible with the requirements of school. She concludes that “individual creative, discursive agency can make transformation of one’s social world possible, despite the larger constraining, reproducing social structures” (p. 410). This concept is seen in a range of studies, including Norton Peirce (1995a), in which women in the study “claimed their right to speak” (p. 25) to teachers or landlords. It is also seen in Ibrahim (1999), in which African youth invested in African-American discourse in order to improve their language through hip-hop. Given the
determination to succeed or change, habitus, in these studies, was transformed through significant effort.

On the other end of the continuum, identity has been conceptualized by British scholar Weedon (1987) as subjectivity, which is “produced in a whole range of discursive practices—economic, social, political—the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power” (p. 21). According to Weedon, subjectivities are inherently fluid and shift even within discourses. This shift naturally occurs as one moves from one social situation to the next. Norton Peirce (1995a), in her diary study in Canada, used the term investment to “signal the socially and historically constructed relationship of the women to the target language” (p. 17). Her findings suggest that learners often resist their identities when they are invested in some way in a social situation. Norton (2000) states that immigrants can “set up counter-discourses . . . by resisting the subject position immigrant woman in favor of the subject position mother” (p. 127). This movement from immigrant, lacking a voice in society, to mother, looking out for children, happened automatically based on the requirements of the social context.

Identity as Community Membership

Another theme of identity research is the social nature of identity formation. In her seminal study of illiterate adults, Fingeret (1983) studied how these adults identified themselves within their communities. In an effort to problematize the “deficit” perspective of illiterate adults as inadequate or dependent on others (Fingeret, 1983), her qualitative study investigated the social networks that these individuals created and maintained. Far from being asymmetrical support, members of the group provided support based on their own skills and talents.
Furthermore, Fingeret discovered that individuals were reticent to use the literacy resources available to them because they did not want to become separated from their communities. These communities were the source of their personal identity. The case study of Carmen Montana conducted by Kilgour-Dowdy (2001) supports the importance of the community as a source of identity. A GED graduate, her sense of literate self was not something that was developed from within; it was constructed from expertise developed in her worship community where she served as a minister. It was her status in her community that defined her identity, not any external labels of deficiency.

Subsequent studies have explored this concept of group membership as a source of identity and have looked at the ways in which this relates to language learning and literacy. In a study of 170 Mexican Yucatec Mayan immigrants in California, Whiteside (2006) chronicles the language usage of her participants across three languages. She found that language usage depended largely on the identity that the participants wanted to portray within the communities that they operated (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007). A cogent example of this connection of language to identity in a specific community is the relegation of the use of their native language, Mayan, to only private or family spaces. Most utilized Spanish as they operated in public spaces. This shift occurred because, within Mexican communities, Mayans are racially stereotyped and equated with “poverty and ignorance” (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007, p. 914).

English was valuable only for those whose legal status allowed them to envision long-term residence in the U.S. Membership, in this study, is linked to social and economic survival. From this study, it is clear that language learning and identity are strategic events. Participants aligned themselves with groups based on the roles they were trying to act out. In this sense, they
were constructing an identity that would associate themselves linguistically, socially, and culturally with a valued group. This phenomenon was also found in Potowski’s (2004) study of multiethnic adolescents whose position sometimes supported the use of Spanish in their interactions, and at other times conflicted with it. Their language usage was connected with the identity they wanted to enact at a particular time.

The concept of community has been expanded by SLA and identity research. Lave and Wenger (1991) view learning as much more than a cognitive process. They theorize that it is through interaction and participation in, what they termed, “communities of practice” that individuals gain expertise and become active participants. These communities in this concept are concrete and real. In a study of seven Japanese students at a Canadian university, Morita (2009) explored how international students negotiated their identity and membership in new academic communities. Although these students would have arrived with significant expertise in operating in the academic communities of practice of their native Japan, Morita found the process of entering a new community difficult and conflictual. Morita concludes that the students’ identities and membership were “co-constructed by the individual students and the various contextual aspects of a given community” (Morita, 2009, p. 458). This process of co-construction is likely to include challenges that require resolution. On a positive note, “it can also be a creative process in which students exercise their personal agency and develop new roles and strategies” (Morita 2009, p. 459).

A number of researchers have explored the concept of “imagined communities,” a term created by Anderson (1991) to describe the sense of unity that develops in a nation-state among individuals who never interact yet believe that they are connected via their shared nationality. In
an expansion to the concept of communities of practice, Wenger (1998) suggests that imagination, which he describes as “a process of expanding oneself by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves” (p. 176), can be considered a form of community. Norton suggests that this idea of imagined communities can help expand our knowledge of language learning and identity. Imagined communities “expand our range of possible selves” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 246). This concept acknowledges that identity is as much a concept of the future as it is one of the present.

These imagined realities or identities can influence the engagement of students, both positively and negatively, in language learning. Kinginger (2004) saw this imagined self in her study of college students learning a second language, and, through the process, envisioning themselves in an idealized and preferred environment to that of their current reality. In a study of two international graduate students, Chang (2011) found that the participants were able to exert their agency “to fight their academic battle” (p. 228) if the effort positively positioned them in their current and imagined communities. Similarly, Cohen (2012) found that the three Mexican teenagers in his study, who were in an ESL program, had created collectively an imagined community of the “mainstreamed” classroom that offered freedom or future success. Although all the participants shared this concept, not all invested in this identity to transition successfully to the imagined community.

In a recent case study, Darvin and Norton (2015) explored the importance of the imagined identities of the participants to their investment in the development of their English language and digital literacy skills. The extent to which the participants saw themselves as part of the conversation based on their positions of privilege or marginalization in the digital
community affected their investment. This study confirmed work with young adults in Uganda who remained invested in English language and digital literacy skills to maintain their place in their imagined communities of “people of the web” (Norton, Jones, & Ahimbisibwe, 2011).

Studies have also explored immigrants who resist changes in their identities. Norton’s (2001) study of women in Canada investigated nonparticipation in ESL classes. It was through the resistance of Katarina, a former teacher in Poland, that Norton discovered that, even though she had lost her professional status through the immigration process, she continued to imagine herself as part of a professional community. This identity dilemma is not uncommon as many immigrants lose professional status when they move into environments where they lack language competency. Similarly, Vitanova (2005) explored the identity shifts of East European adults in her ESL class. All the participants in Vitanova’s study were highly educated, and all experienced some loss of professional status when they immigrated. Success for her participants came from a repositioning of self from their prior professional affiliations to another meaningful career.

Construction of an imagined community was also chronicled in a study by Kanno (2000) in his study of long-term changes in bilingual students’ identities. Rui, a Japanese teenager who had lived most of his life outside of his native country of Japan, identified strongly with this imagined utopic version of his homeland; consequently, he was invested in the maintenance of his first language and culture (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Rui’s vision of “Japan was an imagined construct that had little resemblance to the 'real' Japan that he was later to experience when he returned to the country” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 243). Once faced with this reality, he lost
his motivation to maintain his identity as Japanese. This concept of an imagined utopic environment can be likened to the “American Dream” pursued by immigrant groups.

Another line of research on identity and community is the concept of scales, both sociolinguistic and time, that affect investment in second-language development. This research focuses on the histories of learners and explores ways in which identity and investment of learners evolve over time (De Costa & Canagarajah, 2016; Maloney & De Costa 2017). In a case study of Daniella, an international scholarship student studying in Singapore, De Costa (2016) studied the concepts of emotion and timescales. He concluded that the process of language development includes a complex renegotiation of social identity whereby individuals are struggling to find their voice in their environments. In a case study of sisters who were Heritage Language Learners of Japanese, Maloney and De Costa (2017) found that investment was connected to how each learner perceived herself in relation to other Japanese speakers across sociolinguistic scales. Wortham and Rhodes (2012), in their study of migrant workers, suggest that identity formation should be studied at critical points over the histories of the learners. This scalar approach acknowledges that investment in language development evolves over time in relation to the environment of the learners.

Identity as Positioning

A number of studies of identity and SLA investigate the constructs of position and power. According to Szabo (2006), this is a critical line of research because “power is created and reproduced through language” (p. 36). The studies that follow question the ways in which the constructs of race, social class, ethnicity, and gender help or hinder an individual’s or group’s
ability to construct or shift identities. The research acknowledges that groups are positioned by
others, often in an essentialist manner, indicating that all members of a community act in a
specific way. This identity can be positive, but often it is not. Investigations have centered on
these communities and the factors that limit or enhance their ability to reposition themselves.
According to Spolsky (1989), inequalities such as racism, sexism, and classism often silence
immigrant groups by limiting both their access to the language and reducing their opportunities
to speak.

A group of studies has examined the repositioning of immigrant groups from outside.
This repositioning is likely to occur when there is no known identity for a particular group.
Ibrahim (1999) explored this phenomenon with a group of Somali immigrants learning English
in Canada, who were “constructed, imagined, and positioned as Blacks” (p. 349). Defying the
marginalization of their position, they acquired English through African-American discourse rap
and hip-hop music.

Positioning from outside was also a finding in studies conducted on adolescents in
California (McKay & Wong, 1996; Wong & Zou, 1993). These studies followed eight ESL
students, four each from two language groups (Spanish and Chinese) for two years. These
students had no English language skills at the start of the study. An interesting finding is the
positioning of these two groups of students. The Asian students were seen by their instructors as
“model-minority” students, a discourse that positioned this group favorably in the classroom. On
the other hand, the Spanish-speaking students were often contrasted with this model and
identified as culturally and academically deficient (McKay & Wong, 1996). Although students
can and do exhibit agency to change these positions from others, they have an effect on their identities and, as a result, their motivation in the classroom.

Studies have also demonstrated that SLA is a gendered process. Traditional cultural roles often inhibit the opportunities of immigrant women to enact the identities that they envision for themselves. In a study of Western women learning Japanese, Siegal (1996) found that the language instruction itself was gendered as it positioned the learners in traditional feminine roles. The register that the women were taught automatically identified their position in the society. In defiance to this positioning, the women admitted that they spoke incorrectly in order to reject this traditional notion of femininity (Siegal, 1996).

These restrictions may be societal or familial, as in the example from Siegal (1996). In her study of Portuguese factory workers, Goldstein (1997) found that women were positioned in jobs that isolated them from language learning opportunities. Men in the same factory were in a role that included use and interaction with the target language, which positively impacted their ability to expand their language expertise. Similarly, Rockhill (1994) conducted life history research on 50 Spanish-speaking adults in Los Angeles. What she found was that although many women wanted to improve their literacy skills, they were prevented by their role in the family. Identity was positioned from the outside, based on the cultural norms of the community. Many women in this working-class study were prohibited from expanding their language and shifting their identities due to the insecurities of the male dominant figures around them.

The studies above indicate the ways in which individuals or groups are positioned and often relegated to marginalized positions by others. A number of studies have looked at the ways in which individuals position themselves within their own environment. It is interesting to
note that when individuals articulate their own identities, they may elect to align themselves with a group that is not the dominant or elite group in their new environment. Ivanic (1998) explored this in a study of working-class students who, although capable, were hesitant to use academic and professional skills in their writing. This somehow betrayed an allegiance to their established identities. Similarly, Goldstein (1997) found a shift to a nonstandard language in a group of Latino students. Unwilling to align themselves with the dominant (White) group in society, instead, through their use of language, they aligned themselves with the African American population, a kindred marginalized group in their community.

Identity as Power

Identity research has discussed the concept of voice in society and agency of individuals in society. This line of research asserts that “One can only ever be what the various discourses make possible, and one’s being shifts with the various discourses through which one is spoken into existence” (Davies, as cited in Vitanova, 2005, p. 152). This poststructuralist approach to identity and agency acknowledges the power and influence of social context. Individuals have agency to change or shift their identities, but not equally, as not all voices are heard equally in society. For marginalized groups, including immigrants, power is influenced by a number of factors that position individuals collectively. Intersectionality, “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins, 2015, p. 2), describes the interaction of many factors that influence the
agency of individuals. In the case of the immigrant, these layers also include language expertise and documentation status (Jiménez-Castellanos & Garcia, 2017).

Built on the tenets of intersectionality, the raciolinguistic perspective (Rosa & Flores, 2017) is a combination of critical language and critical race theory. Rosa and Flores state that one cannot look at language separated from the sociopolitical environment in which it is situated. They argue that, in addition to socioeconomic status, the significance of race and the stigmatization associated with it cannot be overlooked or minimized. They argue, “People are positioned as speakers of prestige or non-prestige language varieties, not based on what they actually do with language, but rather, how they are heard by the white listening subject” (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 160). From this perspective, immigrant groups are perceived as linguistically deficient when developing their language skills, although the dominant group in society would be praised or legitimized for the same development (Rosa & Flores, 2017). Rojo (2013) asserts that when the prior education, knowledge, and language expertise of these learners are not valued, they become positioned negatively in society and are discouraged in future development. These uneven power dynamics position adult language-learners negatively and limit their ability to be heard and valued in the community.

The identity and human agency of language-learners have come under investigation in several studies. Many scholars have focused on the individual motivation of learners to function competently in a language without examining the contribution of the social context and position in this process. The complexity of this process has been investigated by a number of scholars (Goldstein, 1997; Harklau, 2000; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton Peirce, 1995a; Norton 1997, 2000; Siegal, 1996). Language-learners often operate in challenging situations and are subject to
power relations in their community that can also interact with the learning process. Successful learners are those who are able to negotiate this challenging environment.

Agency, according to Ahearn (2001), is the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (p. 112). She acknowledges that there is significant debate as to the source of agency, asking “whether it is individual, collective, intentional, or conscious” (p. 112). Although individuals exercise agency differently, it is prudent to consider the environment and the background of the actors as contributors to this interaction.

What discourses are made available and to whom? This is a line of inquiry in identity research. In their study of expert language-learners, Norton and Toohey (2001) explored the ways in which groups of language-learners were situated in specific historical and cultural contexts and the ways in which individuals reacted to this positioning. They questioned why some language-learners were able to set up counter-discourses and gain access to the community but other students were not successful in this process. Their understanding of a good learner is a student who has “access to a variety of conversations in their community” (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 310). This definition is based on the approach posited by Hall (1993) that “the ability to participate as a competent member in the practice of a group is learned through repeated engagement and experience with these activities with more competent members of a group” (p. 148). Identity as a member of the community occurs through this repeated interaction in the activities of the community (Rogoff, 1994).

Norton (1997) uses the example of Eva, a Polish student in an adult ESL class in Canada, as an example of a successful student. Although she faced the same difficulties of the other members of the study, Eva was able to gain access to the “conversations” in her place of work,
which facilitated her practice of the language. It was through social interactions organized through her work that she gained entry into a community of practice that facilitated her language development.

This concept of power can also be illustrated by the aforementioned McKay and Wong (1996) study, in which the researchers found that various groups of students were afforded various social positions based largely on the identities attributed to their ethnicity and race. The example given by the researchers is the “model student” identity attached to the Asian students in the study. This power was evidenced in both the attention received by the “model” group in the classroom and the preconceived expectations of the instructors of their success. Performance did not always align with this vision; nevertheless, the “model students” continued to be evaluated based on their established stereotyped identities.

**Identity as Narrative**

Researchers have explored the connection of the stories individuals tell about themselves and identity. Narrative, therefore, is the focus of a body of research in SLA and identity. These studies explore the ways in which individuals make sense of the events of their lives, and the ways in which this understanding shapes their conception of self. Luttrell (1997) calls this process of defining self and personal identity “storied selves.” In her words, “Storied selves delineate the processes by which the [women] arrived at their senses of selfhood and social identities. Insofar as the women's stories are about the events and conditions of their lives, their stories are also a part of their self-understanding” (p. 8). These studies look at the narratives of literacy students and examine the constructions and coconstructions of identity that occur by
participant and researcher through the telling of life stories. These studies acknowledge that individuals live in a multiplicity of “life-worlds” (New London Group, 1996). From this perspective, “identities are fragmented and fluid, and respond to a combination of labels, a kind of patchwork which organizes and rearranges itself according to life circumstances” (Solé, 2007, p. 204). Gee (1996, 2001) terms these multiple ways of being as “identity kits” that individuals utilize as they go through life and adjust to various contexts.

For SLA researchers, narratives provide a long-term historical perspective that can add to understandings about the struggles inherent in the process (McGroaty, 1998). According to Early and Norton (2013), narrative inquiry can illuminate the identity negotiation of language-learners as social, cultural, and historical conventions influence the stories they tell. De Fina and Baynham (2012) suggest that narrative inquiry provides a space for immigrant voices to be heard. Their study of Spanish-speaking Latina immigrants found that the participants positioned themselves in relation to the current political climate on language acquisition, demonstrating that identity cannot be divorced from the sociopolitical environment (De Fina & Baynham, 2012).

Pavlenko (2001) asserts that the author is “negotiating a new self through the process of retelling one’s life in another language” (p. 224). In her study of 16 full-length autobiographies and seven essays of immigrant stories, Pavlenko (2001) examined the intersection of SLA and identity roles. A major finding from her investigation was that the stories told by women and men were different, leading her to conclude that SLA may be gendered as well as influenced by issues of race, social class, and ethnicity (Pavlenko, 2001). Women viewed language learning as the internalization of other voices or as a social process accomplished through the help of
friends. This is illustrated in the excerpt from Lvovich’s autobiography titled *The Multilingual Self*, speaking about her American colleagues:

I reinvented myself in these friendships becoming American: We laugh, make jokes, exchange news, cry on each other’s shoulders. . . . There are other meaningful relationships with people we met in the United States. . . . All of them contribute in one way or another to my new American identity building, to my life in contact with languages, since they interact with me socially, culturally, and linguistically. (cited in Pavlenko, 2001, p. 229)

For women, this motivation to fit into the new society was so overpowering that they accepted roles that were contrary to their sense of self. The relational nature of identity construction found in the memoirs written by the women was largely absent in the men’s stories. The narratives of men read, in her words, as “heroic quest stories whereby the protagonist wins over language, fails after a heroic battle, or is consumed or transformed by language” (Pavlenko, 2001, p. 226). Men, from her research, conceptualized the language acquisition process as an individual achievement (Pavlenko, 2001).

Using the concept of “figured worlds” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), Coffey and Street (2008) studied adults who had become successfully proficient in a foreign language. Figured worlds, according to Holland et al. (1998), are

Sociohistorically shaped cultural spaces that act upon and are acted upon by individuals who come into contact with them. Figured worlds are fields of activity in which actors use available cultural (including discursive) resources to develop identities. Figured identities are therefore social but are also improvised psychohistorical formations that develop over a person’s lifetime. (p. 5)

Through written narratives and interviews, these authors approached their study with an ethnographic perspective investigating the ways in which personal identities are constructed over time and personal agency is structured by narrative resources. Findings from the study indicate that the development of second-language competency was an important part of the life stories of
the participants (Coffey & Street, 2008). In fact, the language learning experience is seen as a move from a mundane to a more cosmopolitan existence (Coffey & Street, 2008).

If the social context is integral to the construction and interpretation of narratives, it is important to acknowledge that the positions of the participants in these studies do not represent the category of second language-learner in general. The narratives collected by Pavlenko (2001) come from a privileged position, as the authors are academics chronicling their second-language learning experiences. They would have entered the field with significant cultural capital, as respected members of their academic communities. Similarly, for the participants in the study by Coffey and Street (2008), the acquisition of a foreign language was more of an enrichment process (DeJong, 2011). It was not language acquisition in order to integrate or survive within a new environment. Many immigrants come from far less privileged positions, so they may not have the agency, will, and control of actions through language (Solé, 2007) exhibited by the participants of these studies.

In a study of university students, Solé (2007) studied how language-learners constructed their identities through their narratives. Through semi-structured interviews, she chronicled the ways in which language-learners exercised their agency through the construction of their stories. Through their choice of anecdotes that they shared about the process, the participants highlighted the voices they wanted to portray and positioned themselves as having power through the acquisition and use of their second language (Solé, 2007). This authoring function allows the learners to construct the new identities that they want to be told as successful students who were able to integrate into new communities.
In studies of adult literacy in Brazil and transnational high school students in New York City, Bartlett (2005, 2007) explored the concept of how social positioning is connected with literacy development and academic success. Her research is grounded in a sociocultural approach to literacy development, which posits that literacy practices and social identity work in tandem. From this perspective, learners who struggle against negative social positioning and who reposition themselves are more likely to be successful. Extending the work of Holland et al. (1998), she demonstrates that students use cultural artifacts to overcome negative social positioning by others. These artifacts—symbols, narratives, images—carry meaning for the adults and represent a way for students to position themselves favorably in a social environment. In this way, individuals can rewrite their narratives and effect change in their literacy trajectories.

The review of the literature on language acquisition and identity supports the concept that one’s language is tied intimately to one’s identity. Norton (2013) defines identity as “the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 4). The studies overwhelmingly indicate that the social context of the learner is a critical component to the construction of identity and that a change in context precipitates a subsequent adjustment in identity. The nature of this identity shift, both in its fluidity and the influence of power dynamics, is contested in the research. From this body of literature, one can conclude that people construct and reconstruct their identities based on the social context of their lives. Identities from these studies are seen as “flexible, multiple, and a site for struggle” (Szabo, 2006, p. 24).
Motivation, simply defined, is “why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, and how hard they are going to pursue it” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 4). Although this definition could apply widely to any learning environment, the motivation to learn a second language is further nuanced by the nature of the process. Language learning differs from other disciplines because to master a language requires the learner to be willing to “identify with members of another ethnolinguistic group and to take on very subtle aspects of their behavior, including their distinctive style of speech and their language” (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, p. 135). Mastering a language also requires some level of access to the target language in order to provide the appropriate immersion in the discipline. Sustaining the interest in and willingness to associate with the target group to acquire a foreign language, therefore, requires a unique type of motivation.

In the field of SLA, motivation has been researched extensively since 1959 when Gardner published his master’s thesis with his advisor Lambert (Gardner & Lambert, 1959). This groundbreaking study, which utilized a sociopsychological approach, spearheaded more than 50 years of research on the factors that support motivation in language-learners. To best categorize this body of research, this review is organized based on the theoretical underpinnings of the models of motivation that have emerged in conjunction with and in response to this seminal study.
Gardner and Lambert (1959) surveyed English-speaking Canadian high school students who were studying French. They theorized that academic success was due to more than linguistic aptitude alone. This research was driven by their observations that some individuals learn a second language easily but others struggle through the process. According to their findings, “a strong motivation to learn a foreign language follows from a desire to be accepted as a member of the new linguistic community” (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, p. 272). They concluded that because the successful language-learner is immersed in the culture and language of the target language group, the learners’ attitudes toward this group contribute to their academic success or failure (Gardner & Lambert, 1959).

The socioeducational model of motivation was developed following a series of studies (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner & Smythe, 1975). The model outlines the relationship between SLA and five attitudinal factors: integrativeness, attitudes toward the specific learning environment, motivation, integrative orientation, and instrumental orientation (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). In the SLA literature, the theory of socioeducational motivation is best known for the two orientations or goals of the motivated individual: integrative and instrumental (Gardner, 1985a). The integrative goal refers to the learner’s positive attitude toward the speakers of the target language and openness to interact with this group and acquire their language and culture. Instrumental goals refer to the practical gains that the learner may receive from competency in the second language (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). To test the model, an instrument called the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), a Likert-scale of subsets, was
designed by Gardner and Smythe (1975; Gardner, 1985b). This instrument has been used extensively in motivation studies since its development.

The most researched component of this model has been the concept of integrative orientation, defined as a “motivation to learn a second language because of positive feelings of the community that speaks that language” (Gardner, 1985a, pp. 82-83). This concept consists of three distinct components: integrativeness, attitudes toward the learning situation, and motivation defined as effort and desire (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). The importance of integrative motivation has been confirmed in many studies. In a meta-analysis conducted by Masgoret and Gardner (2003), which included 75 studies with a total of 10,489 participants, the analysis concluded that the integrative orientation was found to promote SLA.

Despite a half century of studies utilizing this model, the theory has faced a number of criticisms with regard to the applicability of the model in diverse environments. Some of the major criticisms of the model include the lack of focus on the importance of the particularities of the learning situation and the qualities of the learner (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). This criticism includes the accessibility or absence of the second language in the environment. The second major criticism is that motivation to learn a second language may differ significantly from the motivation to learn a foreign language because of the demands of living in an environment where the language is needed to communicate (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). The final major criticism is that the sociopolitical importance of the language in the particular environment likely influences motivation to become proficient in the language (Dörnyei, 1990; Dörnyei & Clément, 2001). These criticisms are largely in reaction to the fact that the bulk of the studies using the socioeducation model have been conducted in Canada and have focused on participants’
motivation to learn French or English as a second language. Critics argue that the motivation in this environment is unique and may not apply to other environments.

In response to these criticisms, a number of studies have been conducted in other environments. Dörnyei and Clément (2001) conducted a large-scale study of more than 4,500 participants in Hungary to test the model. The study confirmed that integrativeness was the most salient component in motivation to become proficient in the second language. The authors concluded that students with a positive attitude toward the target group culture and language are motivated to learn regardless of the learning context of the student (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). In his study of 166 college-aged students in Spain learning English, Gardner (2007) confirmed that a motivated individual was interested in communicating with the target language members because of positive feelings toward the target group or a general interest in the group and a positive attitude toward the learning situation.

**Cognitive-Situated Theories**

In the 1990s, there was a renewed interest in motivation and language-learners. A number of researchers supported a wider research focus of the motivational constructs that contributed to language learning (Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995; Wen, 1997). These researchers proposed the exploration of models developed by educational and social psychologists who were not involved in SLA research (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994b; Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Instead of a rejection of the social-psychological theories of Gardner, there was a call to expand the understanding of motivation. This group of researchers was focused on two trends: the movement toward cognitive approaches to motivation
and an interest in a narrowed focus on a “situated analysis of motivation in specific learning contexts” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 46). A number of approaches from this philosophical shift have emerged in motivational research.

**Self-Determination Theory**

Proponents of self-determination theory (SDT) supported an expanded approach, which combined the constructs of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation developed by Deci and Ryan (1985: Ryan & Deci, 2000). They argued that this approach would offer a more complete understanding of second-language motivation. The self-determination model includes three orientations of motivation: intrinsic orientation, extrinsic orientation, and amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic orientation refers to motivation to learn a second language that emanates from “one’s inherent pleasure and interest in the activity” (Noels, 2001, p. 45). Extrinsic motivation is derived from external forces including outside rewards or punishments, which stimulate the learning process (Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000). The model does not envision students as fitting into a category; instead it assumes that students fall on a continuum of self-determination. This movement on the continuum is based on how internalized the extrinsic goals are in the individual. The final orientation is labeled amotivation. Students are described as amotivated when they see no connection between their actions and the results or consequences they experience. Because of this disconnect, students have no reason to sustain any effort toward learning (Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 2001).

Much of the development of the SDT can be attributed to the work of Noels and her associates in Canada (Noels, 2001, 2009; Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999, 2001; Noels et al.,
The result was a questionnaire measuring intrinsic-extrinsic motivation that related the measures to the orientations of Clément and Kruidenier (1983): instrumental, travel, friendship, and knowledge and to antecedent and consequent measures of freedom of choice, anxiety, and the intention to continue language studies.

This model was first tested by Noels et al. (2001) with a group of 159 English-speaking university students in a psychology class who were studying French as a second language. Findings indicated that “instrumental orientation and the SDT external regulation orientation were strongly correlated, and that the travel, friendship, and knowledge orientations were quite highly intercorrelated with identified regulation and intrinsic motivation” (Noels et al., 2001, p. 427). In further studies, Noels explored the motivation of 96 university students learning German. These students were classified as heritage or nonheritage learners (Noels, 2005). This study confirmed the findings of Noels (2001) and others (Dörnyei, 1990, 1994a; MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998) which posited that at least two motivational substrates are integral to language learning motivation. From this, the researcher concluded that “the opportunity for contact and communication with the L2 group is essential” (Noels, 2005, p. 301). In addition, the study confirmed earlier work (Noels, 2001) that “autonomy, competence, and relatedness are important to learners regardless of the sociopolitical context in which the learning takes place” (Noels, 2005, p. 301).

Task Motivation

Another branch of research during this period was a focus on situation and task-related motivation. Kyösti Julkunen was one of the first researchers who applied this focus to the L2
field in a series of studies with Finnish teens learning English (Julkunen, 1989, 2001). This research redefined motivation in the context of a learning environment. The model suggests that the learning environment, including activities, materials, and tasks, can be a source of motivation for students (Dörnyei, 1994a; Julkunen, 1989, 2001). The model makes a distinction between trait motivation, which can be described as a general motivational orientation, and state motivation, which relates to the motivation for a particular learning activity.

Research has looked at contextual factors and their influence on motivation. Results have shown that a learner’s motivation is highly variable (Dörnyei, 2002; Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000) and changes day to day and even from activity to activity. Social factors figure prominently in a students’ motivation, including classroom environments, group dynamics within the classroom, and the motivations of classroom partners (Dörnyei, 2002). A number of studies have focused on the connection with the practices of instructors in the classroom to maintain and promote motivation (Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Noels et al., 2001). Findings suggest that there is a positive relationship between the motivational strategies of instructors and the self-reported motivation of students. According to research, instructors should use a variety of challenging materials and alter the classroom dynamics to maintain motivation in students (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008).

**Process-Oriented Theories**

One recurring theme from situated theories of motivation is the variability of motivation over time. Motivation ebbs and flows as a learner encounters various tasks or various learning environments. With the understanding that competence in a second or foreign language requires
sustained motivation over time, often years, the temporal nature of motivation has been a challenge for researchers to understand. The shift toward motivation as a process is rooted in the work of Williams and Burden (1997) and Ushioda (1996).

The dynamic nature of L2 motivation led to an expansion of the predominant methodology in the field. The vast majority of studies, starting with the work of Gardner, have been quantitative, looking at the factors that promote motivation to acquire a second language. Urged by the call for an expansion of the motivational research field (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991), Ushioda (2001) conducted a study with a qualitative ethnographic approach that focused on language-learners’ motivational thinking. Her aim was to use the approach to “cast a different light on the phenomenon under investigation” and to “analyze and explore aspects of motivation that are not easily accommodated within the dominant research paradigm” (p. 96). Her initial study was conducted in Dublin with 20 college-aged students taking French as a part of their undergraduate degree program. Ushioda concluded that motivation should not be conceptualized as a product but as a process about “how the learner thinks about and interprets events in relevant L2-learning and related L2-experience and how such conditions and beliefs shape subsequent involvement in learning” (p. 122).

Subsequent qualitative studies on university students learning French (Ushioda, 2001, 2009) emphasize the importance of the development of student self-regulatory techniques to maintain motivation in order to persist in the learning process. These techniques include a positive belief in their ability to succeed and the discipline to set goals throughout the process. Expanding on the notion of the temporal nature of motivation, Shoaib and Dörnyei (2005) investigated motivation over an extended period of time. In a qualitative study of 25 students of
English ranging in age from 18-34, the researchers found a number of recurring patterns and transitional events that altered motivation. Key among the life events changing motivation were completing education, entering the workforce, and traveling to an English-speaking environment.

**Sociodynamic Perspectives**

The complex nature of language learning and motivational factors precipitated another shift in research. Dörnyei (2005) identifies two major shortcomings of the process model. First, the model assumes that the concept of motivation can be delimited and defined. Second, the model assumes that this process operates in isolation. This “flat” definition of the motivated language-learner fails to acknowledge the dynamic nature of the process. Over 30 years ago, Gardner (1985a) asserted that language learning was socially and culturally bound. The sociodynamic perspective “views language as a complex dynamic system where cognitive, social, and environmental factors continuously interact” (Ellis, 2007, p. 23). From this perspective, motivation cannot be seen as a series of cause-and-effect relationships; instead it is a complex process that varies based on the individual characteristics of the learner (Dörnyei, 2009).

This research takes a more holistic approach to motivation and its connection with the learner and the context of the learning. This perspective developed as a critical response to the sociopsychological and cognitive approaches of the past. Norton Peirce (1995a; Norton, 2000), in a study of immigrant women in Canada, questioned the idea of a language learning divorced of social, political, and historical context. Norton Peirce (1995a) argues for a conception of *investment* rather than *motivation* to capture the complex relationship of language-learners to the target language and their sometimes-ambivalent
desire to speak it. The notion of investment conceives of the language-learner, not as ahistorical and unidimensional, but as having a complex social history and multiple desires. (p. 9)

Norton Peirce (1995a) sees motivation as an “individualistic term” and uses investment as a way of acknowledging the ways in which “relations of power affect interaction between language-learners and target language speakers” (p. 9). From this perspective, investment in SLA is tied intimately to the learner’s sense of social identity. This understanding of self is necessarily in a constant state of flux as the learner invests in the process of language acquisition. In response, in part, to the changes in communication due to technology, an expanded concept of investment has been developed by Darvin and Norton (2015). This more comprehensive model posits that investment “occurs at the intersection of identity, ideology, and capital” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 36). The model examines the ways in which power influences practices in the classroom and in the community. The model also acknowledges that individuals are positioned based on race, ethnicity, gender, and social class. Learners, it argues, must navigate environments where, based on their positioning, they are afforded or denied the right to speak or even denied access to the conversations (Darvin & Norton, 2015). According to Norton (2013), it is through an understanding of the ways in which power operates in a society that ideologies can be challenged.

Investment as an alternative conceptualization of the motivations of language-learners has been explored in a number of studies since Norton’s initial study in Canada (Norton, 2010; Norton et al., 2011; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Norton & Williams, 2012). From this perspective, a body of work that posits that language learning should be viewed as a sociocultural and sociohistorically situated process rather than a cognitive psycholinguistic process (Firth &
Wagner, 1997; Lafford, 2007; Menard-Warwick, 2005; Zuengler & Miller, 2006) has emerged in the SLA field. Menard-Warwick (2005) argues that the work of Norton Peirce did not adequately analyze the history of the learners and the influence of this history on the investment of the learners. In an ethnographic study of Central American women in a family literacy program, Menard-Warwick (2005) theorizes that understanding the intergenerational learning trajectories of the participants was critical to make sense of their investment in language learning. Using a life history approach coupled with participant observation, she explored how these histories intersect with sociopolitical constraints to influence the process of language learning.

Historically, the majority of the research in the field of SLA and motivation has been centered on questionnaires geared toward factor analysis that limits the number of variables explored in any model. The dynamic concept of motivation that calls for an expanded approach to research has been furthered explored by two veteran researchers in the field, Noels and Dörnyei. Noels (2009), criticizing the contextual nature of previous work, offers a theory of the motivation called the person-in-context relational model of motivation. Dörnyei (2005), with his theory of the L2 Motivational Self System, has ushered in a wave of research that combines the theory of possible selves from personality psychology (Markus & Nurius, 1986) with self-determination theories (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Possible selves are “the future-oriented aspects of self-concept, the positive and negative selves that one expects to become or hopes to avoid becoming” (Oyserman & James, 2009, p. 373).

The L2 Motivational Self System is comprised of three components: the ideal L2-self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience (Dörnyei, 2005). This model relates to the
concept of “imagined communities” (Norton, 2001; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001) that posits that the cultural and historical context of the learners is important to understand their underlying motivations. In the context of the language-learner, a student would be motivated if her future self-image includes competence in the second or foreign language. This component is related to the integrative motive. Additionally, if lack of competence in the language is a future position that an individual wants to avoid, he/she would also exhibit motivation. This component involves more instrumental or extrinsic motives. Finally, the model acknowledges the importance of the context of learning, which would include the environment, instructor, group dynamics, and the curriculum (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

A number of research studies have been conducted to test the model of possible selves. Large-scale quantitative studies have validated the “ideal-self” motivator and demonstrated that it is strongly related to the concept of integrativeness (Huang, Hsu, & Chen, 2015; Kormos & Csizér, 2008; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009). All these studies examined learning English as a foreign language in Japan, China, Iran, Taiwan, and Hungary. Overwhelmingly, the participants were secondary or university students. Two small groups of professionals were included in the studies in Budapest and China (Kormos & Csizér, 2008; Taguchi et al., 2009). In addition, a number of qualitative studies have also tested the model (Lamb, 2009; Noels, 2009). Kubanyiova (2009) applied the concept of possible selves to teachers’ motivation, finding that teachers were motivated to attend in-service training depending on how closely the materials connected with their vision of future ideal teacher selves and the self-envisioned discrepancy between their current professional self-appraisals and this ideal teacher.
Motivation research, as evidenced in this review, has a rich history in the fields of SLA and linguistics. One group that has been largely left out of the literature is the adult immigrant population. According to Moss and Ross-Feldman (2003), this population has not been studied because of the diverse, mobile population and the multitude of learning environments covered by adult ESL programming, including workplace education, community-based programs, and grant-funded community college programs.

In addition to the work of Norton Peirce and Menard-Warwick, the following studies have examined the motivators of language-learners in adult ESL programming. In a study on the motivators described in the socioeducational model developed by Gardner, Paper (1990) surveyed 580 adult students at a community-based program in Toronto. Students were motivated to study to meet basic linguistic needs for both instrumental and integrative purposes.

Motivation, in this study, varied due to age, educational level, and the length of time in Canada. Similarly, Bernat (2004) found that 20 unemployed Vietnamese students in a vocational program in Australia expressed the desire to acquire English to integrate into the culture and to improve their employment outlook. In a qualitative study of elderly Russian immigrants, Hubenthal (2004) concludes that integration into the community and the desire to have meaningful conversations were both strong motivators for this college-educated cohort of language-learners. This motivation was largely driven by the participants’ inability to express themselves with any complexity in English. In a study of Mexican adult men in Chicago who learned in an informal setting, Farr and Guerra (1995) conclude that their motivation to learn was driven by the social nature of the learning process and the comfortable learning environment.
with other men who had emigrated from their country. In a mixed-methods study of 10 advanced students, Igoudin (2008) found that integrative motives were much more influential than instrumental motives at this level. Social identity was also a critical factor as students worked to narrow the gap between their actual and desired identities, confirming the work by Sfard and Prusak (2005), who conclude that “learning may be thought of as closing the gap between actual identity and designated identity” (p. 14).

A number of studies have connected motivation of adults with more personal or instrumental needs. In New York City, a qualitative study indicated that students who had actively chosen to immigrate based on internal decisions were more likely to be motivated to acquire English (Brilliant, Lvovich, & Markson, 1995). In a study of two advanced Korean learners in Canada, Kim (2011) concludes that learners are motivated if they believe that classroom interaction is “efficacious and meaningful” (p. 115) to their personal development goals. The study suggests that even in a rich learning environment, a learner’s unique sociohistorical context determines motivation (Kim, 2011). These contexts likely change over time and with the life changes of the participants. Waterman (2008) conducted interviews with 87 Mexican mothers at a family literacy program. Participants were all motivated by the desire to help their children succeed in their schooling. The study found that “mothers who received meaningful support of their goals actively engaged with their children’s education and took steps to collaborate with teachers and principals” (Waterman, 2008, p. 144) and worked to improve their literacy skills.

In two studies of adult immigrants in London, Cooke (2006, 2008) found the classes of English for speakers of other languages often were not motivating because they did not equip the
participants with skills necessary to meet their employment or educational goals. Ciriza-Lope, Shappeck, and Arxer (2016) conducted focus groups with adult Latino ESL students in a family literacy program in Dallas. They found that the environment of the classroom helped learners “bridge the gap of communicative knowledge between themselves and English language interlocuters” (p. 297). Classes helped them move from feeling isolated to utilizing the support of others to aid their language socialization process. Finally, He, Bettez, and Levin (2017) conducted focus groups with immigrant and refugee students to discuss their prior education, their goals and motivations for education, and the supports and challenges they encountered, and their imagined community of “education” in their programs and communities.

The above immigrant studies focused largely on community-based and vocational language acquisition. Participants in these studies were acquiring skills to survive in their environment, apply for or improve their employment, interact with native speakers, and integrate into the society. Their goals often coincide with supporting their children or autonomously operating in the community without the need of support from more experienced speakers of English. Transitioning to academic coursework, although it has been studied with international student populations, is a less common theme with adult education students. In a case study, Suh (2017) explored the transition of adult ESL learners from English language courses to developmental education. The findings suggest that the educational context affects this transition. Another study that has looked at transition was conducted in a community college setting in California. Becker (2011) investigated noncredit to credit transition in a community college setting with a group of ESL learners enrolled in a bridge-to-credit program designed to facilitate this process. This study concluded that students possessing high cultural capital in the
form of "advanced degrees, active social lives, leisurely travel, and strong financial security" (p. 20) were able to transfer to credit classes successfully. It also demonstrates that participants with low cultural capital are less likely to transition, and those who did exhibited agency by consistently using supports available in the transition program. The study concluded that "transitioning to credit requires involvement and commitment from the entire community of practic–learners, instructors, administrators, and staff" (Becker, 2011, p. 23). As grant-funded adult ESL programs are increasingly tasked with developing transitions to college and career programming, more studies need to look at adult first-generation immigrants and investigate the sustained motivation necessary to enter NRS advanced-level coursework and to transition to academic English coursework.

Investment and Identity in Academic Language Socialization

Two major themes have emerged from the body of research that forms the framework for this study. First, the research in identity and motivation envision the concept of self as dynamic. As identity is not envisioned as a static concept in this study, neither is motivation for second-language learning viewed as a combination of factors that can be analyzed and quantified for a group of learners. Instead, motivation is conceived as a dynamic, complex, and nonlinear concept. The particularities of the social environment largely influence the motivation of the learner. The second salient theme from the research is the critical importance of the context to understand individual motivation in a learning process. Although this context has been largely explored in the reviewed studies as the learning environment, which does merit consideration, the concept of context, for this study, is seen more broadly. In addition to the particularities of
the learning situation, motivation, in this study, cannot be divorced from the cultural, historical, and sociopolitical status of the learner. This perspective acknowledges that individuals are “in part fashioned and yet also fashion themselves in historically and culturally specific ways” (Holland & Lave, 2001, p. 5).

This study posits that adult ESL immigrant students face environmental factors that are likely to be vastly different from international students in ESL or secondary or university students learning any foreign language. As the bulk of the research in the literature has focused on these groups, it is critical to hear the stories of another population and attempt to give voice to their motives to invest in the acquisition of their second language.

In addition to expanding the research on the motivators of adult learners, this study adds to the existing research by focusing on the factors that supported the transition of the participants to postsecondary career or technical and academic programming. Exploring the environments that support these transitions can add to the current research and help to inform the shift in design of adult education programs from integration into the community to language development for career and academic programming. Exploring the narratives of participants who have made this transition successfully provides some insights into this difficult process.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to seek out those factors in the life histories, experiences, and identities of first-generation immigrant adults that have led them to invest sufficiently in ESL programs in order to reach levels of achievement that would allow them to transition into postsecondary and career certificate programs. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do participants narrate their stories of immigrating to the U.S.?
2. How do participants describe their experiences with learning and schooling?
3. How do participants describe their identities as language-learners?
4. How do English language-learners describe their motivation in their second language?
5. How do the learners’ life histories, identities, and goals intersect with and inform this motivation?

This chapter describes the research methodology used in this study and examines the following decisions made to develop the study: (a) rationale for the research methodology, (b) participants and setting, (c) data collection, (d) data analysis, and (e) researcher role.
Rationale for the Research Methodology

The choice of research methodology must be driven by and align closely to the identified research problem and conceptual framework of the study. According to Norton Peirce (1995b), the “theory (implicitly or explicitly) informs the questions researchers ask; the assumptions we make; and the procedures, methods, and approaches we use to carry out research projects” (p. 569). Framed by post-structuralism and critical theory and based on the understanding of identity as “complex and multifaceted, changeable, and fluid” (Santoro & Smythe, 2010, p. 496), this study lent itself to a qualitative research methodology. According to Erickson (1986), qualitative research is most appropriate when the investigation “concerns issues that are neither obvious nor trivial, . . . [when it concerns] issues of human choice and meaning” (p. 122). He asserts that this approach is useful when the researcher is interested in the particularities of an event and when the research is exploring the “meaning-perspectives of the particular actors in a particular place” (p. 121). In this exploration, in which I theorize how personal histories, life circumstances, social and educational backgrounds, and politics have interacted with identity and SLA, qualitative research methodology allowed me to ask questions of the participants and to seek their answers.

This study used the principles of ethnographic research methodology. Because past history always figures prominently in present life circumstances, this study focuses on the collection of the life histories of the participants and has asked participants to reflect critically on these histories through a technique called reciprocal ethnography (Lawless, 2010). This focus on collecting the narratives of the participants was influenced by the design used by Menard-Warwick (2005) in her study of Central American immigrant women in a family literacy
program in California. She argues that Norton Peirce’s work in Canada, which developed the concept of investment that guides my concept of motivation, did not look at the histories of the learners; consequently, the sources of motivation were left unclear (Menard-Warwick, 2005). Designed to create collaboratively and share knowledge, reciprocal ethnography, according to Lawless (2010), is a “multilayered, polyphonic dimension of dialogue and exchange” (p. 60). Participants in reciprocal ethnography respond critically to the themes emerging in the study, thereby exploring and making sense of their stories collaboratively with the researcher.

This approach to research—ethnography and life history—can be understood by exploring the definitions of both approaches and how they, in combination, can provide meaningful data. Ethnography is defined by Watson-Gegeo (1988) as the “study of people’s behavior in naturally occurring, ongoing settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behavior” (p. 576). An ethnographer collects data by “combining long-term participant observation with sensitive interviewing” (Malinowski, cited in Erickson, 1986, p. 123). These techniques are combined with detailed ethnographic field notes and the collection of relevant local and historical artifacts in order to triangulate data (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). At the core of the analysis of these data is the belief that culture is an integral part of the process.

Culture, as suggested by Street (1993), should be treated as a verb. It is not something that is fixed or static; instead, culture is “unbounded, kaleidoscopic, and dynamic” (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 7). It is, according to Ochs (1988), “a loose set of guidelines and premises shared to varying extents by members of a society” (p. 6). This understanding of culture is in opposition to the “assumption that regularities in groups are carried by the traits of a collection of individuals” (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 21). The study utilized what Gutierrez and Rogoff
(2003) term a cultural-historical approach that “focuses . . . attention on variations in individuals’ and groups’ histories of engagement in cultural practices because the variations reside, not as traits of individuals, but as proclivities of people with certain histories of engagement with specific cultural activities” (p.19).

Although not homogeneous by racial or ethnic group, many ESL students experience marginalization by virtue of their limited English language skills. For this reason, the study follows a critical approach to ethnographic research. Critical approaches to ethnography acknowledge that there are inequities in society based on ethnicity, gender, race, and class that produce unequal power relations (Norton Peirce, 1995b). Although many of the participants fit into one or more of these broad categories, all faced, in addition, some level of marginalization based on language proficiency. From a critical perspective, these complex positions are an important lens through which data are to be viewed. This critical approach is supported by Kincheloe and McLaren (2011), who assert, “All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted” (p. 290). It is the responsibility of the researcher, especially one who comes from a privileged position, to work against the “reproductions of systems of class, race, and gender oppression” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 290).

As the ethnographer focuses on the everyday, perhaps mundane, this method “reveals the ways in which larger forces, both ideological and material, place limits and conditions on our actions” (Weiler, 1988, p. 62). When viewed from a critical stance, ethnography is capable of illuminating the day-to-day factors and the “opportunities and constraints” (Wenger, 1998) that mediate the language-acquisition process. In this process, the ethnographer is concerned with
understanding how the participants make meaning of their social environment (Watford, 2009). By listening to the voices that are often silenced, critical ethnography can be “a catalyst for change and empowerment” (Santoro & Smythe, 2010, p. 496).

Another important component of the research methodology adopted in this study is the use of life history research and inquiry. Life-history research was first developed and used extensively by the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s. Using this approach, an extensive amount of research was conducted with the large immigrant population in the city of Chicago (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984; Kouritzin, 2000). Although immigrants were the focus of the development of this methodology, it has been used infrequently in the field of ESL since its initial popularity (Kouritzin, 2000).

This study elicited and analyzed collaboratively the immigration life histories or narratives of English language-learners to examine the intersections of language learning, life history, and identity. The study delved into immigration narratives to explore the ways in which life circumstances, economic conditions, and family culture mediate language learning and identity. Pavlenko (2002) argues that, when one listens to the voices of the learners, one has a fuller picture of the motivations and struggles of the individual. Through the use of narrative, this study investigated the challenges that language-learners encountered and the resources the learners accessed as they attempted to persist in ESL coursework. More than simple storytelling, narrative inquiry is “the analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates” (Bell, 2002, p. 208). According to Menard-Warwick (2005), “Combining the telling of such personal stories with critical analysis of the social context may be a powerful space for language acquisition” (pp. 182-183) research. Including room for participant analysis
provides an additional layer to the meaning-making process and a perspective that is not always fully heard in ethnographic research.

This blended methodology proved to be particularly useful in this study for three reasons. It empowered the storyteller, it contextualized the present by acknowledging the importance of the past, and it was capable of revealing the many complexities of the learning process. The first, and perhaps most salient, endorsement of this blended technique is that collecting the personal histories or narratives of participants is a powerful method of hearing the perspectives or “voices” of the learners (Bell, 2002; Kouritzin, 2000; Pavlenko, 2002). Telling, listening, and reflecting critically on stories is an acknowledgement of the value of the participant. McCrea (1994) asserts that “the act of telling was itself a healing thing to do” (p. 215). By telling their own stories and defining their own world, the East European immigrants in Vitanova’s (2005) study “claimed their own voices and signed their own acts of authoring” (p. 156).

In addition to amplifying the voices of the participants, this blended methodology values the temporal nature of narratives. This approach places emphasis on the experience or the process, not just the outcome (Bell, 2002). According to Hall (1990), “Identity . . . is a matter of becoming as well as being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past” (p. 233). By recounting life histories, participants are actively making sense of their own experiences (Norton, 2000). They are connecting the present to past conditions and experiences; as a result, they are helping to shape their future. Narrative inquiry goes beyond a life story; it is “the analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates” (Bell, 2002, p. 208). As stories are told and retold, they are shaped and, often, altered by life events. They are constantly being constructed as new events happen in the narrator’s life. As noted by Kouritzen
(2000), every immigrant who enters a classroom is unique. Each leaves the social contexts of native lands, which are always changing, and enters an ever-changing, new environment.

Listening to and collaboratively analyzing life histories helps researchers and educators to understand the needs of their students and design curricula to help them reach the goals outlined in their stories.

Finally, life history research, particularly when used in ethnographic studies, is also capable of handling the complexity of the SLA environment (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Watson-Gegeo, 1988) because it offers a more holistic approach to research. Narratives that focus on the individual and story of the participant are, by definition, “powerfully shaped by social, cultural, and historical conventions” (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 214). Narratives can also be situated in history to reveal how the narrator makes sense of the events in his or her life. When narratives are approached in this manner, as a construction of the narrator, they reveal the “multiple sociocultural, sociohistorical, and rhetorical influences that shape narrative construction” (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 217) and, thereby, give the researcher a better understanding of “how the stories are being told, why they are being told in a particular way, and whose stories remain untold” (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 217). This methodology, therefore, embraces the “complex and multifaceted, changeable and fluid” (Santoro & Smythe, 2010, p. 496) nature of identity and investment.

Despite the advantages outlined above, some criticisms to the approach bear mentioning. One shortcoming, according to critics, is the factual nature of personal histories. According to Measor and Sikes (1992), the “truth participants tell can be quite different from the historical truth of what happened in their lives” (p. 224). The goal of the research, using this methodology,
cannot be historical fact. I was not searching for a set of verifiable events; instead, I was exploring how these narrators had made sense of these events in their lives. According to Bell (2002), “No matter how fictionalized, all stories rest on and illustrate the story structure a person holds. As such, they provide a window into a people’s beliefs and experiences” (p. 209).

In addition to the question of accuracy, it is important to recognize that narratives are coconstructed; they are a result of the relationship between the researcher and narrator (Kourtizon, 2000; Pavlenko, 2002). The story one tells depends largely on the confidence one has in his or her biographer. Through the analysis of the data, the researcher imposes meaning on the narratives (Bell, 2002). This practice is never neutral or unbiased because the way a researcher analyzes data is formed by her or his position and subjectivities (Santoro & Smythe, 2010). It is critical that the researcher acknowledges that the stories are necessarily influenced by the positions of the participants in the interview exchange. In the case of this study, I would be remiss not to consider my position in the community in this process. As a White, middle-class, faculty member, I understand the power dynamics of this interaction. It is also important to acknowledge that I am one of the initial developers of this transitional learning community. Despite the focus on collaboration inherent in the reciprocal ethnographic methodology, I also understand that the interpretation of the interactions is rooted to some extent in the perspectives that I bring to the relationship (Holland et al., 1998). In spite of these limitations, the principles of reciprocal ethnography using life histories as an interview method were a well-suited approach to handle the complexities of this dynamic and fluid research environment.
Participants and Setting

The participants for the study were recruited from a community college that is located approximately 40 miles west of the city of Chicago. The community college, in a town of approximately 112,000 inhabitants, is bordered on the west by farmland. The community is largely middle to lower-middle class with approximately 14.6% of the population living at or below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The college serves an area largely impacted by immigration and the need for second-language learning. In the community, 27.0% of the population is foreign-born, and, according to the 2012-2016 census data, 46.4% of the population indicated that they spoke a language other than English at home. Demographically, the largest group in the community is Hispanic (45.1%), followed by White (40.1%), and Black (7.3%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016.). According to its website, the college serves an area comprised of four public school districts containing a population of 436,000 residents. In addition to the community college, local organizations such as the YWCA and Literacy Volunteers of America serve the literacy needs of this linguistically diverse population. According to its institutional website, the community college served 15,211 students in Fiscal Year 2017. The student body of the college, a Latino-serving institution, was 42.1% Hispanic in FY 2017. The college has diverse program offerings, including university transfer programs in more than 25 fields, over 150 career and technical degrees and certificates, adult and basic education, and continuing education.

The participants in this study were enrolled in the Adult Basic Education Division (ABED). They are first-generation immigrants enrolled in a grant-funded, adult ESL program. According to the institutional website, this program, which is a major component of the ABED at
the selected community college, serves approximately 2,000 students per year or 13% of the total enrollment in FY 2017. Although the adult ESL program predominantly serves Latino students, the overall student population is diverse. Typically, students in the grant-funded program register for six credit hours of language instruction each semester, which focus on building their literacy skills, including reading, writing, listening, speaking, digital, and mathematics.

The location was chosen because of the commitment of the college to transitioning adult education students to career, technical, and academic programming. In addition to grants such as Accelerating Opportunities and the Illinois Network for Advancing Manufacturing (INAM) focused on credentials in technical careers providing livable wages for its students, the college has supported a learning community course that I developed with three colleagues to assist adult ESL students to transition to academic-level English composition. This course has enrolled students for six years. This program, although not unique, provides a pathway designed for adult first-generation students, which allowed me to differentiate this study from others in the body of research that has focused largely on international or Generation 1.5 students who have spent significant time in an EFL or bilingual program prior to their enrollment in adult ESL programming.

Students recruited to participate in the study were enrolled in, or had completed courses classified as, advanced-level ESL by the National Reporting System Functioning Level Table (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In the program in which the study was conducted, only 3.4% of students enrolled in the ESL program in fiscal year 2015 were taking courses classified as advanced level. Every student in the participant pool had been recommended for and enrolled in a cohort that combined ESL with college-level English composition. This learning
community cohort course has acted as a bridge or transition to academic coursework at the community college. Students enrolled in this cohort have navigated the grant-funded coursework successfully and are poised to transition out of ESL programming. Based on their position in the program, the participants are the “experts” of the grant-funded program.

Due to the limited number of students who attain this level of competence at the community college, every student who had enrolled in the transitional program since its inception was invited to participate in this study. This population included two cohorts that were enrolled in the ESL-English Composition learning community at the time of the data collection, a total of 25 students. It also included five cohorts that had completed the transitional course in the three years prior to data collection, a total of 60 students. Students were invited to participate in a two-phase data-collection process.

My goal was to recruit 12 to 15 students. These students were asked to participate in one recorded interview lasting 60 to 90 minutes, and then the students participated either in a focus group or individually in a session to analyze critically themes that had emerged from their narratives through the process of reciprocal ethnography. The purpose of the study was to illuminate the factors that had supported their successful navigation of the adult education program and had positioned the participants to transition to academic coursework. Although the sample for this study was limited to a particular learning environment and not generalizable to the entire adult education population learning English, I hoped it would generate themes that could be used to theorize sources of investment in adult ESL environments. (Profiles of the 15 participants of this study detailing their journeys are provided in the following chapter.)
Data Collection

The data collection occurred in two stages. The first stage consisted of in-depth interviews lasting 60 to 90 minutes to collect student narratives of the process of immigrating to the U.S. and their history in education, including their investment in gaining academic language skills. I recruited with the goal of interviewing 12 to 15 participants in the first stage of the data-collection process. Participants gave consent to participate in the first phase of data collection, an in-depth interview (see Appendix A). Interviews were conducted in English. They were recorded, with the approval of the participants, and transcribed verbatim. To protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned and used in the transcription process and in any paperwork associated with the study. The initial interview explored each student’s life history, including educational background, his or her decision to immigrate to the U.S., and her or his experience learning English (see Appendix B).

The second stage was a collaborative process whereby the participants worked with me to author the themes emerging from their stories. This process was grounded in the process of reciprocal ethnography proposed by Lawless (2010) as an alternative method of ethnography described as an “evocation” rather than a representation of a group. These sessions delved into themes identified by the participants as critical from their own review of their interview transcripts. In addition, participants discussed some of the themes that emerged from the first round of interviews to “engage in dialogue and discussion openly” (Lawless, 2000, p. 200) to make meaning of the histories and to determine collaboratively the ways in which an individual’s history interacted with language learning and identity (see Appendix C).
To protect the participants, I ascertained the willingness of each participant to analyze his or her history in a focus-group format (see Appendix D). Participants who elected not to participate in this forum were asked to consent to a second individual interview (see Appendix A) and to “make sense” of their histories collaboratively with me in a second individual interview. To accomplish this plan, every participant would first be invited to attend a focus group consisting of three to four participants. Although focus groups are generally designed with 7 to 10 participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), these groups were comprised of three to four participants to encourage the contribution of every member of the focus group. This design was particularly critical because having these discussions in their second language proved to be somewhat challenging for some participants, especially when discussing their lives and their challenges. The participants, although advanced in their oral English skills, in some cases lacked the confidence they would have had contributing to a discussion in their first language. Based on the language diversity of the participants, 15 languages represented in the potential participant pool, conducting these groups in the first languages of the participants was not feasible. With the smaller design, it was my intention to form a more comfortable community whereby the participants would be more confident to contribute.

In acknowledgement of the potentially sensitive nature of the stories shared in this study, participants who preferred not to analyze their histories in a group format were given the choice of doing the follow-up meeting individually. These participants were asked to meet with me and to consent to complete a second indepth interview (see Appendix A) in English lasting 60 to 90 minutes. The purpose of the interview mirrored that of the focus groups, to make, collaboratively, meaning of the histories shared in the first interview. This interview was
conducted in English, audiotaped, and transcribed verbatim. These sessions were organized in series so that the second set of questions were developed in a meaningful way to reflect themes that emerged in the individual transcripts through holistic coding, an initial exploratory coding method explained more fully in data analysis.

During the data-collection process, I recorded ethnographic field notes. These notes included both descriptive notes detailing the subjects, setting, events, activities, and interactions of the participants and reflective field notes or observer comments, including thoughts about the method, analysis, conflicts, dilemmas, researcher role, and preconceptions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Emerson et al., 1995). In order to refine the study, I wrote researcher memos that chronicled what I observed and learned from my interactions with the participants in the interviews and focus groups. These memos helped me to capture ideas that emerged in the various sessions with participants. The memos also served to catalogue themes that emerged during these data collection sessions.

Data Analysis

Language learning, as conceptualized in this study, is language socialization. In the framework of the study, this is a socially constructed process that values the cultural-historical backgrounds of the learner (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Data in the study, therefore, were collected and analyzed from this perspective using a critical lens (Freire, 1970; Santoro & Smythe, 2010). As stated previously, the sources of data include indepth interviews, focus groups, field notes, and researcher memos. Data collection varied, based on the nature of the history of the participant to include an indepth interview for all participants to follow by either participation in
a focus group or a second indepth interview. Due to the reciprocal design of the study, analyses and interpretation of observations and interviews occurred throughout data collection in order to guide the development of the study and the focus of the collaborative interpretation of the data in the second round of data collection.

The preliminary phase of data analysis was exploratory in nature. Using a holistic coding method, I read through transcripts in order “to ‘chunk’ the text into broad topic areas, as a first step to see what is there” (Bazeley, 2007, p. 67). Through this high-level review, the data corpus from the first round of interview was analyzed as a whole to determine the broad areas to address in the second phase of data collection (Saldaña, 2013). I wrote analytic memos at this stage to reflect on the data. According to Saldaña (2013), analytic memos allow the researcher to reflect on “the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data” (p. 41). Through this analysis, I developed broad themes to develop additional questions for the focus group and second interview sessions.

Once the preliminary coding phase was complete, data from the transcripts were read in their entirety and coded using a three-stage process. First, to develop a sense of how the backgrounds of the participants impacted the academic language socialization process, the data underwent a round of attribute coding. This coding included broad characteristics of the participants, including length of time living in the U.S., native country, length of schooling in native country, and length of schooling in the U.S.. These demographic data categories added detail to the histories of the learners (Saldaña, 2013) to support findings in the study.

After coding the attributes of the participants, each transcript was read and coded line-by-line using an inductive process. Based on the goals of the study, I utilized process- and values-
coding categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldaña, 2013). The choice of these coding methods was driven by the goals of the study and is briefly described. Process-coding is useful for studies that search for “ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations or problems, often with the purpose of reaching a goal or handling a problem” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 96-97). This coding process is useful for psychological concepts, including identity (Saldaña, 2013), a major focus of this study. I also used values-coding in this stage of analysis. According to Saldaña (2013), values-coding is appropriate for studies that “explore cultural values, identity, oral history, and critical ethnography” (p. 111). Values-coding explores the participants’ values, attitudes, and beliefs.

These coding methods supported the purpose of this study to seek out those factors in the life histories, experiences, and identities of first generation immigrant adults that have led them to invest sufficiently in ESL programs. I wrote analytical memos throughout the process of data analysis in order to conceptualize and elaborate further on themes developed through the coding process (Creswell, 2002; Emerson et al., 1995). The goal of this analysis was to describe “thickly” the particularities of this research setting in order to situate the perspectives of the participants’ history and learning (Geertz, 1973).

At this stage of analysis, I completed a stage of organization of the codes that had emerged from the initial data-collection phase: the in-depth interviews and analytical memos. Prior to second cycle coding, the codes were mapped. The goal of this stage was to distill the entire set of codes into larger categories. This iterative process then moved from categories to central themes or concepts (Anfara, 2008). Once categories were determined, the data were further analyzed through a process of focused-coding (Saldaña, 2013). At this stage, I looked for
the categories that were most frequent or significant with the goal of conceptualizing the themes emerging from the data.

The final stage of the project was to make meaning collaboratively of the data through the process of reciprocal ethnography (Lawless, 2010). To facilitate this process, I shared each participant’s transcript with him or her prior to the focus group. My request was for the participants to choose passages that were meaningful to them in their journey to transition to academic coursework in English. The participants were asked to share these passages with their peers in the focus groups. In addition, I used the themes that emerged from the first round of data collection and posed these concepts to the focus groups and/or second interviews. I asked the groups to analyze these themes and relate them to their histories and experiences. The transcripts from these sessions were transcribed verbatim and coded using process-codes and value-codes in the thematic categories developed in the first round of analysis. I also wrote analytic memos detailing this reciprocal process. The aim of this process was to develop collaboratively some themes that resonated through the two phases of the data-collection process and, from this process, develop some findings from the study.

Researcher Role

When conducting this study, it was critical to acknowledge both my position as a professional in the community college environment and my motivation, including any biases, to conduct this research. Because of the proposed population for the study, I consider myself both an insider and an outsider in this research field. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007),
researcher characteristics are an important consideration when conducting fieldwork, and these characteristics inform the design of the study and any interactions with the participants. I acknowledge that, in many ways, I was an insider in this research. As one of two full-time faculty members in ESL at the community college, I have taught and mentored many ESL students in the community over the past eight years. I am known in the research environment, and I had connections to some of the participants prior to the study, either directly or through their friends or family. Many of my former students were potential participants in the study. This status as an insider was beneficial in building trust with the participants in the study. Trust was an important component in the study, as I inquired about potentially sensitive subjects, including immigration. The level of confidence I had built with many of the participants encouraged openness and participation. Regardless of prior contact, my position and status as an instructor in the adult education program was a factor that I considered in my study as I recruited participants and worked with them to coconstruct the meanings of their histories.

My motivations to conduct this study were also clearly connected to my work and my educational philosophy. As a professional in this environment, I know that becoming competent in a second language takes time and persistence. I am invested in the success of this population of students, which, in itself, is a bias in this study. I believe it is my role, as an adult educator, to work with these students in developing their second-language literacy, providing information and opportunities for further education, and helping them to transition to their higher educational or vocational pursuits. These learners face a competitive work environment that requires postsecondary credentials in order to make a sustainable living for themselves and their families. Because research indicates that a person’s level of educational attainment is linked strongly to
career opportunities and income (Autor, 2011), I am personally invested in the success of students in the adult education program at the research site.

I also need to be transparent about my connection to this transitional program that was the source of participants for this research study. In 2011, I created this course with two colleagues from the college English faculty and a fellow ESL instructor to address a need that we had identified at the community college to support academic writing in English language-learners. Due to this involvement, I have a commitment to the curriculum and its goals. My interest in developing the curriculum was to create a space for second-language-learners to succeed in academic coursework and to question some of the barriers in place that often hinder their progress. This research came from a desire to contribute positively in some way to this challenge and to increase the number of students who transition to postsecondary and career programs.

Although I was an insider, in many ways professionally in this research, I was also an outsider as I do not share the immigrant experience of the participants in the study. I am an educated White woman who has lived in a privileged environment for most of my life. My great-grandparents were immigrants, so to me, as a fourth generation “immigrant,” family, stories of immigration are history lessons. Although I can empathize with the participants, I do not share any firsthand knowledge of their histories. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) indicate that “skin color, race, and cultural identity sometimes facilitate, sometimes complicate, and sometimes erect barriers in fieldwork” (p. 96). Although I have been a language-learner and have lived overseas on four occasions, the experiences of the participants were still quite foreign to me as an individual. My forays into language and cultural learning were all educational in
nature and temporary. They were exercises for my own enrichment. Although motivated to learn, my livelihood and that of my family did not depend on my ability to understand the cultural norms of a new home or on my acquisition of a new language. I certainly admire the task that these students were undertaking, but I have not shared the stress that comes with their narratives.

From a critical lens, I must also acknowledge the power dynamics present in this research relationship. As evidenced in much of the literature about language-learners and identity, language learning is tied intimately to the social context and agency of the learner. My position as teacher or expert in this researcher relationship was a position that I had to consider as I worked to hear the “voices” of the participants in the study. The participants had to believe that their voices were heard and critical to “make meaning” from the data. Finally, the participants had to understand, through these interactions, that they were equal collaborators in this process. To facilitate this collaboration, participants were given the transcripts from their interviews and were asked to read them and to choose excerpts that they believed were instrumental to their success. These excerpts framed the focus-group discussions and allowed the participants to make, collaboratively, meaning of the shared excerpts. An example of this process is the discussion and analysis that occurred in the focus group of two participants in the study: Minh from Vietnam and Asuka from Japan. These collaborators focused their meaning-making session on the cultural differences of schooling in their native countries and the U.S.. Although from different cultures, they both struggled with understanding the values of the American educational system. They discussed the importance, for them as students in the U.S., of understanding these differences and putting into practice the best lessons from both learning
environments. This willingness to analyze and to adapt was instrumental, in their eyes, to their success. As Minh shared, “Because I understand the differences between Americans and Vietnamese, I can develop things between them. I can, like, take the strong things, the good things from Americans and then the good things from Vietnamese, and I can combine it.” This focus on negotiating cultural differences was highlighted by these participants, and it guided our session. Each focus group or second interview was unique, based on the passages chosen by the participants and on how these experiences shaped their narratives.
CHAPTER 4
LEARNER PROFILES

In analyzing the factors that supported the participants’ transition to college-level English, it was important to me to value and share each individual’s story. Although all participants had the shared experience of attending the transition course, their journeys up to this point were unique. In this chapter, I provide the histories shared with me in the first round of data collection. These interviews explored issues of family, education, and, eventually, the decision to cross the border and begin their journeys as English language learners. They are organized by the date of our first interviews.

Rose

Rose was a tall striking woman who was always curious in the classroom. Although she shared that she was often frightened in her early days in the U.S., everyone who meets her now would attest to her outgoing nature and self-assurance. Rose was born in Hong Kong in the early 1960s. At that time, she recalled, everyone spoke both Mandarin and English because it was a British colony. Her family was quite traditional in the expectation for a woman to meet a young man who could support her. Her mother followed this path and has always been a housewife.

Rose recalled being a “naughty” girl during her years in school. She described herself as a “ringleader” who would tell the boys in her class what to do. They constantly played tricks on their teachers. When she moved on to high school, she was in a Catholic school that was
extremely strict, so she had to stop her bad behavior. When we talked about goals, she indicated that she did not really have educational goals: “Because I am just thinking about I am pretty. I get married. I get a rich guy.” Even though she expected to one day be taken care of, she wanted to work. In high school, she started as a salesperson in a department store. After high school, she began to work at a five-star hotel in Hong Kong, the Mandarin Oriental Hotel. She described herself as “choosy” because she believed that she had to marry a rich, successful man: “I’d been really picky because my family background. I cannot just marry somebody with no money, no education. I need to face my family.” She met her husband, 13 years her senior, when she was 32, and he was a guest at the hotel. He was an American businessman, and they eloped to get married in San Diego.

Unfortunately, business suffered during the recession, and they fought to keep their company. Rose wanted to go to school to perfect her language skills and to learn to drive, but her husband wanted her to travel always with him. In addition to the business struggles, her husband contracted cancer, which he fought for seven years until he died. At this point, Rose needed to support herself and rebuild her life. She remarried and, with the support of her second husband, went to school to learn English and to begin a technical career. After being in the U.S. 14 years, she started her educational journey.

Luz

Luz was a petite woman with beautiful long dark hair and was always wearing a smile. She was professional in her looks and her attitude. She was a strong woman who was born in a tiny village in Mexico. Although she has not been back since she left, she recalled it as a rural
area with long roads made of stone. Her family lived all together on a plot of land that her grandparents divided for their children and their families. Luz went to a small private religious elementary school in this town. She recalled dressing up in uniforms: a special blazer on Mondays and another uniform for the rest of the week. The family was committed to this education for the four children and sacrificed to pay the tuition for them to attend. Luz recalled the life as routine: going to school, doing their chores, and then playing with the children outside. Adults sat outside at night visiting with each other.

She did not recall having any goals when she was in school. She thought, like her mother, that she would get married and raise a family. Although both her parents were able to read and write, they did not have many years of education. Her mother attended three years of elementary school, and her father attended six. Her mother had been married at the age of 15, and she assumed that she would, too.

After 15 years in this idyllic village, her family moved to the city. Luz shared,

So I was old and not young enough to be admitted to regular middle school, so they put me, and I decided to go back to school, so my parents decided to put me in adult school. It’s only, that was only every Saturday, and I just got the basic subjects: math, science, reading, and writing.

After this, she went to a technical school to become a secretary. Her goal was to find work that was more professional than being in a factory. She studied for three years and completed the secretarial school.

When she finished, she met her husband. He had been to the U.S., and he knew that he could make a good living if he went there. After six months of marriage, he decided to return to the U.S. to work and send money back to his family. Although Luz was pregnant at the time, she
was determined to go with him. She did not want him to leave without her. She shared her concern:

   Ten, 20 years ago that was very common, to come here, forget about the woman over there, and start a new family over here in this country. It was my fear. . . . I was recently married, and I did not want to lose him, so I am going to follow him wherever he goes.

   Because she did not have any English language skills or family in her new community, she spent a great deal of time alone in their apartment. After a few months, she found the YWCA and learned that she could walk to English classes. Over the years, she had to start and stop classes several times, but since 2008, she has attended classes without a break.

   Julia

   Julia and I met at a local library in a beautiful window-filled room. We talked about her daughter and her visit to see her grandparents in Mexico. Julia, born in Mexico in the little town of Guzman, was the youngest of five children. She was raised, in her mind, as an only child because she was 14 years younger than her next older sibling, her brother. She described her family as “of low economic conditions.” Her father was a construction worker, and her mother was a housewife. Her older siblings helped to support the family, including providing money for tuition to a private elementary school for Julia.

   Guzman is one of the largest cities in the state of Jalisco. She said that although the city was large, there were still areas of small farms where families would milk cows and grow vegetables for themselves. The town was also close to tourist locations, including mountains, a lake, a volcano, and the beach.
Julia was fortunate that her siblings helped to support her education. She went to an all-girl Catholic elementary school in her town. She recalled it being a fairly large school with two classrooms at each grade level. It was a strict school, with religious education. Julia remembered enjoying math and English classes, saying that her English scores were better than her Spanish scores. After elementary school, she entered secondary school, which was co-ed, yet the students were still separated in the classroom.

When asked about her goals after secondary school, Julia shared that all she ever wanted to do was to travel to the U.S.. She was the last child in her family to be living in Mexico. All her siblings had already traveled to the U.S., the first when he was only 16 years old. She wanted to help support her parents, and she believed that coming to the U.S. and getting a job was her best route. Her parents and siblings did not agree. They wanted her to remain in school, hoping she would have a better future with more education. All of her siblings, except her oldest brother, had completed high school, but only one sister had finished a postsecondary program, in her case, secretarial school. Their hope was that Julia would complete a program. Julia acquiesced and entered an accounting course in a technical school. Although her heart was still set on traveling, she completed her program and started to work for a local business. Frustration from her work only strengthened her desire to join her siblings in the U.S. At her job, she worked hard, yet she made only 150 pesos, worth 10 dollars at the time, every two weeks. When her cousin asked her if she wanted to travel with him to the U.S., she did not hesitate. She quit work and left at the age of 18 to reunite with her siblings and her cousins in the suburbs of Chicago.
Yaris

Yaris was a serious young professional determined to be a success in America. He was born in Algeria in a small village near the town of Bejaïa. He described his village as agricultural and traditional. Women stayed home to raise their families, and the men were the breadwinners. In the mountains, the villagers lived in homes with basic services. Many lacked electricity, and the village had no technology.

Yaris experienced hardship as a child. He came from a family of eight. In 1996, when he was 11 years old, his father passed away. In addition to the tragedy of losing a parent, his country was in the midst of a civil war, which lasted from 1990 until 2000. Although his village was not directly affected by it, the prolonged war stressed villagers, including his teachers. He remembered them as being violent and quick to beat children if they did not understand something in school. He described this stress as being widespread: “It’s not only from my teachers. It was from my brothers, my cousins, so it was all . . . everyone was under the pressure.”

Yaris endured this violent environment until seventh grade, when he was fortunate to meet a local farmer who hired him to work after school. According to Yaris, this man changed his path. Prior to this time, Yaris confessed that he had become violent, too, and he was not serious about his studies. With this job opportunity, he was able to earn a few dinars and to help his mother, who was sick, and this made him feel good. He said that this man treated him as if he were one of his own children. He found ways to motivate the children by offering them small rewards for academic excellence. He challenged them every semester. Yaris found that he wanted to win, not only for the prize, but also for the praise he would receive from his employer.
Yaris did not succeed immediately, but he continued to work hard, and he rose to be the top student in the group.

From this point, he began to think about his future. In his second year of high school, he decided that he wanted to attend the university to study accounting. Getting to the university was not a guarantee; he had to pass the national entrance exam with a score that was high enough to qualify. He said that he was confident that he would be able to succeed. Yaris was the only sibling to go to and complete university. He said that his mother had sacrificed her life for her family, and he wanted to finish and be successful to thank her for everything she did.

Coming to the U.S. was not in his plan. He was preparing to go to Europe, specifically France, to improve his opportunities. During this time, a friend was selected through the Diversity Visa Lottery Program for a visa to the U.S. This friend encouraged Yaris to apply. He explained,

I said, I won’t win it. It’s . . . I don’t have luck. But he said, just try it. Just try it, and you will see. And I played it, online, and after a year I received, I received the letter that says that you are selected.

During this time, he was working on his thesis for his master’s degree, so he had little time to prepare for his move to the U.S. He took one English class online, and then he traveled to the Chicago area where he had a friend. His real journey learning English started when he arrived. He has continued taking classes since his arrival.

Minh

Minh was a quiet, polite young man, dedicated to his family and his studies. The most recent immigrant in this study, Minh was born in the Binh Dinh province in Vietnam. He described it as an agricultural coastal area, which had both mountains and beaches. In his
family, they farmed, fished, and were merchants. He lived in a small village where, he said, “everybody knew each other.”

Minh remembered school fondly. He called himself a crazy boy when he started school, with his friends, whom he described as doing a lot of silly stuff. He credited his fourth-grade teacher, whom he described as a very patient woman, with guiding him away from some of his poor habits. At that time his goal was to be a soccer player. In his family, there were many talented players, including his uncle who played at the national level. His uncle came to see him play, bragging before the match that Minh was his nephew. Minh was not a good player, and after the game, his uncle said, “You not my nephew anymore.” Instead of being discouraged by his harsh words, Minh dedicated himself to practice to improve his skills:

Everybody kind of look at me at that time and tell you what a bad player and a very athletic family, so it was a negative thing but a positive thing. Now I think that it was a positive thing for me to be motivated.

Minh’s parents had an important impact on his education. His father, from a family of 10 siblings, was the middle child. Although he did not finish high school, he worked to help support the family, so all of his siblings completed both high school and university. Minh knew that his parents’ goal was for him to go to university. They did not try to steer him in a particular field of studies; they just hoped that he would get his degree.

Minh, respecting their wishes, went to the university in Saigon to study business administration. It was a difficult adjustment moving from his small village to the city, but, in his ever-calm demeanor, he said that it was something that he had to accept. He realized, after a semester, that he was not interested in business studies, so he switched to computer science. In school, he became involved with a student organization that gave tours of the city to foreign
visitors in English. He credits this group and his English tutor for his language skills before he came to the U.S..

When asked about his decision to leave Vietnam, he said candidly that it was not his desire to emigrate. He shared his first opportunity:

When I was in high school, I have the opportunity to come here to take high school, but then when I go to the interview to get a visa, he asked me, just right away, do you want to go to the U.S.? I’m, like, no. I speak from my heart. I follow my heart, and I say no.

One of his sisters had moved prior to this interview, and then his parents followed before Minh entered the university. He realized that they had moved for him and for his future:

My parents, they think if I come here, it’s going to be a brighter future. It’s going to be better for me. So, they, they come here for me to come. And I’m, like, okay because they sacrifice for me a lot.

This sacrifice convinced him to follow his parents to the U.S..

Minh planned to continue his university studies after he moved to the Chicago area to reunite with his family. Unfortunately, his Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores were slightly below the minimum to enter the university, so he enrolled in ESL classes at a local community college. Within two semesters, Minh had improved his writing skills enough to transfer to a local university.

Ana

Ana was a young soft-spoken woman. In class, she was always friendly with her classmates, but always a little reticent to speak in front of everyone. She came from a very rural community in Mexico. Her family lived on a farm, and she remembered only three houses in her tiny town. She was 12th of 13 children, and her house was always full of family. The family
grew vegetables and her mother made cheese. Life in her town was quiet, but she loved riding horses and enjoying nature.

She had fond memories of school. She traveled there by horse with her brother. The journey was about 30 minutes each way. School was small and filled with the children of other farmers. She remembered it as a place where they did crafts and played outside. When I asked about her goals when going to school, she said, “They don’t teach you to have goals. I learned to have goals when I came here.” According to Ana, young women did not think about going to school.

To be honest, . . . when you are born, your parents tell you, you are going to have kids, you are going to get married with a husband that take care of you and your kids, and you are not supposed to work.

Ana’s parents wanted her to be able to read and write because many people in rural communities did not have literacy skills.

When Ana was born, her eldest sister had already left for the U.S. She settled in a western suburb of Chicago, and, one by one, Ana’s brothers and sisters left their village in Mexico. At the age of 13, Ana herself left her parents and traveled to be with her siblings. She did not want to come to the U.S., but her parents were in the middle of a divorce, and her brother decided to take her with him to the U.S. Two years later, when her mother came, Ana continued high school. She started without any knowledge of the language and was placed in an ESL program. She lamented that she had very little exposure to English during this time. It was not until after high school when she came to the community college that she started to really study English.
Monika

Monika was a petite woman with a perpetual smile on her face. As we started the interview, she talked quickly about her native country and her motivation to come to the U.S. 30 years earlier. I asked her to take me back to her home town. She was born in Poland in 1959 and grew up in an era during which the country was controlled by Russian communists. Monika grew up in a poor family with her parents, grandmother, and three siblings. Life was a constant struggle in those times. They all worked hard, including the children, growing vegetables and raising the livestock to have enough sustenance for the family. She remembered working from sunrise to sunset before and after the school day.

She grew up in a small shoemaker village where the residents made both shoes and purses. She also remembered it as a village filled with beautiful churches where she attended services with her mother and grandmother at a Catholic church. She attended a school where she recalled having music classes and making handicrafts for the home, including pottery, knitting, and crocheting. She enjoyed these classes because everything she created came from her heart. School was important to her parents, so Monika worked hard to do well. She studied after school with her sisters, and everybody ate together at night. This was important to her, to be together with her family. Her goal was to finish secondary school and enter the medical field as a nurse. Unfortunately, at the time, the government required students to pay for their education, and the family could not afford to send her. Instead, she went to horticulture technical school in a town about 20 miles from her home.

She decided to leave school before finishing her degree, and she moved to Warsaw to work in a publishing firm. She said that she was young and enthusiastic and excited to start a
new life. Everything changed in Warsaw, where she met her future husband. They loved music and enjoyed the culture in Warsaw. Her future husband, who worked for the science institute conducting research, was a member of the Solidarity movement. Monika joined the movement as well, and they spent their evenings in meetings and protests. As members of the movement, they were arrested occasionally for their activities. They married in 1985 and decided that they wanted to leave the struggles of living in a communist state:

I never forget waiting in the line when they bring the food, . . . the food stamps, where everything was limited, and, um . . . probably lot of people emigrated at the same time from Poland. Everybody, we were looking for a better life.

Before coming to the U.S., they took classes in English to prepare for their new life. Monika came first. They chose Chicago because Monika’s mother and brother were already here and they could support her when she moved.

Monika remembered being “hungry for everything” when she came to Chicago. There were so many items in the stores that they did not have in Poland. She began to work after two months in a cleaning agency. All the excitement of the new country ended just after she began working, when she learned that her husband had been murdered in Poland. Devastated by the tragedy, Monika began a long period of depression, which included drinking. She started and stopped English classes many times, but she did not dedicate herself to learning the language until 2011, 25 years after her arrival.

Mau

Mau was a bundle of energy and always an active contributor in every class. When she entered a room, she greeted everyone; her personality was magnetic. Mau was born in a small
town in the south of Thailand in the 1950s. Reminiscing about her town, she said it was quite different from small towns in the U.S.. She enjoyed her daily trips to the marketplace at five in the morning where she would buy their food for the day. Because her family did not have a refrigerator, they would cook with fresh food every day. She loved going to the market. She also recalled the sound of the rain falling on the tin roof of her childhood home. She described her family as middle class and indicated that, in Thailand, social classes were divided and they rarely conversed with people from other classes. In her village, most people sold things in the marketplace to make a living.

In Thailand, education was very important in the culture. Mau went to a private Christian school where the students wore uniforms. She never saw school as a choice; it was something that one had to do. Although the government had public schools, she said children from the lower class usually did not go to school. Then, and she thought still currently, there was a strong division of social classes and not much movement between classes.

Mau shared that she was not a good student in school. She said that if there were 40 children in the class, she would always be the last one because she never studied. Her school was an open-air classroom, and she remembered falling asleep on the rice field in the breeze. The encounters she recalled from class were mostly times when she angered a teacher and received punishment. All this changed when Mau went to high school in the city. She started to be serious in her studies and was able to express herself more freely there.

When she was young, her goal was to become a teacher. She said that people respected and listened to teachers, so she wanted to experience this admiration. After high school, she went to a university in Bangkok to get her teaching degree because the program was not offered
near her home. The first year, she enjoyed the freedom of being away from home, and her studies suffered. Ashamed of wasting her time and her parents’ money, she worked tirelessly to catch up and to graduate with her class. Her family was proud of her decision to teach because a teacher in Thailand was a role model. She taught high school for two years, but the salary was quite low so she began to consider other options.

Looking for a change in profession, she considered working in tourism. By that time, both of her parents had passed away and her sister was living in Spain. She decided to quit her job and move to Spain to learn the language and return to Thailand to work as a tour guide. When she was studying in Spain, a university classmate who had moved to the U.S. told her to come to Chicago. She said she could build her “American Dream” there. Without a hope of getting a visa, she went to the consulate in Spain to apply. She said it was sheer luck that her visa was approved, so she traveled to Chicago more than 30 years ago. Without any English skills, she got a job working in a Thai restaurant in the city where she met her husband. She learned most of her English language on the street and at the restaurant. It was not until her husband encouraged her that she attended classes in a few community college programs to improve her writing and pronunciation.

Brigitte

From Cameroon, Brigitte was born and raised in the capital of Yaoundé. In her early 20s, Brigitte was animated when she talked about her life story. Her parents were both from western regions of the country. Although her parents spoke different dialects in their regions, Brigitte grew up speaking her mother’s dialect, Bamenda, and French. Brigitte was the youngest of eight
children. Her father was a soldier in Cameroon, and her mother raised the children and had a small business selling flavored ice in the capital city. Brigitte recalled her childhood fondly. She described her family as middle class. “I was really lacking for nothing there. I mean always there, always they take care of us. Anything for school, for real, my dad always made sure we have everything for school because he want us to succeed.” She said that her mother, especially, taught them to work hard and to fight in life. She remembered school as a strict environment where students were required to work hard or they were punished. She believed that the discipline was appropriate and that it motivated her to do well. The most important quality of students was to respect their teachers and to study hard. Her goal was to complete high school and to enter university to study a profession in the medical field.

A series of crises led to Brigitte leaving her comfortable life prior to finishing her last year of high school and moving to the U.S. Her father, a soldier, applied for asylum to the U.S. because he believed the family was in danger due to a change in the political party. Fortunately, one of Brigitte’s older sisters had been awarded a visa through the Diversity Visa Lottery Program and was already in the U.S. Her father was the first to leave, and her mother was arranging the paperwork for the rest of the family to join him. Two months before they were scheduled to leave, her mother was tragically killed in a car accident. Her father, unable to return, missed her funeral so her sister represented him at the services. It was not safe for the children to remain in the country, so when their paperwork had been completed, Brigitte and three siblings traveled to the U.S. with her sister.

Life was not easy when Brigitte arrived in Chicago. She did not have any skills in English, yet she needed to work to repay her sister for the travel expenses and to find a place to
live. Her father was not able to work, so Brigitte and her brother found work in a factory. She said that the first year, they worked hard just to survive. It was a difficult time until they met a family who helped Brigitte and her brother get into classes at a community college when she was nearly 20 years old. It was there that she began to work on her language skills.

Katia

A thoughtful, intelligent woman, Katia shared her love of language and learning in our interview. Born in Russia, Katia moved often as a child because her father was an engineer in the air force. She described her family as close and stable. Her parents, in her words, were “intellectuals.” Her father was well read and gifted at science, and her mother was trained as a teacher. Because of the nature of her father’s profession, Katia shared that she had attended eight different schools before her graduation from secondary school. Although this might have been challenging for many children, she was always comfortable in academic environments. “I’ve never had the problems with studying, I was always an A student, it was my gift from God. It was very easy, and I never was hard working for this.” Even though she excelled in school, she found the Russian education system too competitive. The best and the worst students were publicly praised and criticized. She recalled that her mother was asked at a meeting with all the parents:

Tell all other parents how you rose such a great pupil like your daughter, tell us, what did you do for this? My mum was very, um, how you say it, she was not very public, and she was very private. When she came home from this meeting she said, I will never come again.

This competitiveness, which was uncomfortable for her parents, was part of the ideology of the Soviet Union where everyone strove to be the best.
In Katia’s family, education was a fundamental goal. She described this goal: “It was in our family goal, it was, like, silent, but silently, but goal was that we university or some kind of profession. It was like our everyday bread in family.” After secondary school, Katia studied in the university in the Ukraine. She recalled always being a lover of literature, being an avid reader of classics since she was young. She studied Russian literature at the university.

Katia began to study English when her daughter moved to the U.S. and married an American citizen. At this point, she was working at an airport, and she had hired an English translator who worked with the tower. She asked this woman to tutor her so she would be able to communicate with her daughter’s new family. She recalled coming to visit after her grandson was born: “I came first time when Michael was two weeks born, I spent my vacation here, one month with him, and it was at this time, that I realized that she won’t survive here without me because her family wasn’t stable.” Shortly after this visit, she retired from her position and planned her move to the U.S. to support her only child.

Lizzy

Lizzy was born in a city in Mexico, but when her parents moved to the U.S., they sent the children to live with their grandparents in a small rural town in Guerrero, Mexico. It was a place where everybody knew each other. According to Lizzy, “Since it was the only thing I knew, it was good.” In her community, if one had a little money, one was a farmer. If one did not have money, one worked for a farmer. Her father left for the U.S. when Lizzy was four because he wanted to provide a better life for the family. Three years later, her mother followed. Lizzy remembered being lonely at times because she was separated from her parents.
She recalled the school in her town as being quite strict. Students were disciplined and followed the directions of the teachers to avoid being punished. Lizzy remembered a teacher from seventh grade, which was her first year of high school. She was different because she told the children that she believed in them, and she found ways to help them learn. This was the first teacher who said positive things to encourage the students to do their best. Even with this support, Lizzy did not have educational goals. Her only goal was to go to the U.S. to reunite with her parents. In her words: “I didn’t seek for a future after, I didn’t even graduate from high school because I didn’t have a clear goal, a clear vision, when I was smaller.”

Coming to the U.S. was challenging for Lizzy and her youngest brother. The first time that they came there was a massive operation to deport undocumented workers. They began to hear stories of parents being taken by immigration officials when they were working, and children being left at home alone. Lizzy indicated,

I wasn’t afraid that it could happen because I wanted to be here. . . . It was not my fear taking the risk. I thought it was worth it. I always, always was brave, I thought that I would be able to manage if something were to happen.

Her parents were not as comfortable with the uncertainty, and they sent them back to Mexico after a year.

Lizzy returned to remain in the U.S. a few years later. The transition to life in Chicago was not easy. She started high school but dropped out. She believed that there were so many obstacles in her way, including the language and money. In her family, no one was educated beyond the high school level. Instead of focusing on her education, she was motivated to find a job and to help support her family. She attempted later to pass the GED test, but she was not
successful. It was not until years later that she returned to school, passed the GED in Spanish, and worked on her English language skills.

Juan

Juan was an outgoing, engaging man who connected easily with others. Always positive, it was surprising to hear of the struggles that he faced to get to this point in his life and studies. Juan’s history as a traveler began when he was a child. He was born in Puerto Rico in 1960, the youngest of six children. When he was five or six, his parents were divorced, and because his mother had no family in Puerto Rico, they moved to her native country Belize. They moved to be close to family in a small village of approximately 200 people along the Monkey River. His mother, a single mother supporting six children, worked hard to take care of her children. The town was beautiful, but it was very poor and lacked services. The closest school in Belize was 15 miles away, so instead, the children walked about five miles to a school in Guatemala in a small town. The journey to the school was long but scenic along the coast. He said that, as children, they played as they walked for 90 minutes to their school. He recalled that later they received some bicycles, which made the journey easier. Juan remembered this school fondly. It was one room and open air with no walls. He also shared the bond he had with his oldest sister who cared for him every day.

Although he had memories of the beauty of Belize, he also remembered how hard his mother had to work to support them. She had to travel to find work, so the children were split up in groups of two to live with their aunts and uncles. At this point, Juan was separated from both his mother and oldest sister. Shortly afterward, when he was eight or nine years old, his mother
left to find work in California. He recalled that, as her plane flew away, he ran after the plane until the security guards held him back. This separation was extremely difficult for Juan, the youngest in the family. His mother worked hard to send the children to school and eventually brought them—one by one—to the U.S. He described his mother: “She would sacrifice herself for us . . . to become . . . for us to become successful. That was her priority . . . and her goal for us was for us to graduate from college . . . university, so that we didn’t have to depend on anybody else.”

Juan was the last of his siblings to come to the U.S.. He finished secondary school and started university in Guatemala, staying with the family of a friend. He resisted his mother’s efforts to bring him to the states. For three years, he refused to join her, which he said broke her heart. Finally, as he was losing interest in his university studies, he acquiesced and traveled to join his family at the age of 19. He came to the Chicago area in December 1979 to live in an affluent northern suburb where his mother had been given a place to live rent-free.

Juan recalled the difficulties he had in those initial months. His first day in his new town, he was stopped by a police officer. He said he thought his Pepsi can was alcohol, but Juan believed that it was because a young Latino man was walking down the street in a predominantly White suburb. He believed that this discrimination as neighbors would go inside their homes as he walked by. Once again, he attempted to go back to school to study business at a college in Chicago. After struggling with the language there for 18 months, he dropped his classes and, as he indicated, partied with his friends. Juan found work and learned to speak English on the streets. He didn’t begin taking classes again until he walked into the community college more than 30 years later.
A strikingly energetic woman, Zofia was always a vociferous contributor in class. Her story is one of overcoming stereotypes and low expectations. She was born in a small village in Poland that she described as traditional—basically a church, a school, and houses. Men left for the city to work in the factories, and women stayed home to raise their children. Zofia remembered it as a very quiet and relaxing life. People met in the streets and the community gardens where they grew their produce. Her father was a heavy machine operator, and she was the oldest of four children. She lamented the poverty and the lack of opportunities of her family: “My parents were not educated. They didn’t finish high school because they didn’t, they didn’t have chance.” Although they were very poor, they were hard working people. Vacation was not a word in her father’s vocabulary; his entire life was devoted to work.

Zofia remembered moving when she was about to enter primary school. Her parents wanted to provide their children with a good education. They bought a nice house in a nice area but could not afford to furnish it. Zofia said it was like camping in their new home until they were able to slowly purchase the furniture. She recalled the school as being “rustic” with a large fire burning stove in the middle of the room to heat the classroom. She reflected that some teachers did not believe in her because her family was poor. They told her that she was not good at math and that she should focus on vocational school. She recalled only one teacher, a history teacher, who encouraged her to go to university.

Instead, Zofia listened to the negative comments and went to vocational school. It was during an internship at a factory of seamstresses where she decided that this type of labor would
not be her fate. She was determined to change her narrative, so she dedicated herself to study.

She said:

I have to be like a, like a soldier. I’m on a mission. I have to sacrifice, and I really was working hard, every day, staying up sometimes until 2, 3 o’clock in the morning. Get up early because I had to catch up.

She wanted to prove her ability and intelligence to others:

I want to show my parents that they can be proud of me, that I’m worth it. Also, the neighbors, they thought that we are like, you know, lower class, yes, so that was, that why I said, okay, I will finish this school.

She kept her plans a secret until she successfully passed the entrance exam into the university.

She entered the university to study law, a degree she completed just prior to coming to the U.S..

Zofia did not have a dream to emigrate to the U.S.. She shared, “I never thought about coming to the U.S.. I always thought that successful person can live in Poland, work for our country, and be successful in a country, in their own country.” She came, instead, to enjoy a long vacation with her boyfriend who had moved after winning a green card. She explained:

I wanted to stay here just for a while, just for a while. Probably, 80% of people think, oh yeah, that’s going to be an awesome one year, two years. I will make money, get experience, learn the language. I will go back.

Her plan fell apart when she discovered that she was pregnant 25 days after she arrived. She loved her boyfriend, and she knew she could not return to Poland.

Zofia did not have English language skills when she arrived. She figured that she would work and go to school at the same time. Everything changed with her pregnancy. They had no family or support in the U.S., so they both had to work hard to support their family. It was difficult. “I was 26, but I felt like 14. Well, if you don’t know how to speak. It’s, it’s the same thing. Yeah, you don’t know what to do. You can’t read…You can’t ask for help.” She
practiced her English by watching the television. When her son was two years old, she discovered an ESL program at a local community college and began her journey learning English.

Asuka

I was fortunate to watch Asuka grow in her language development over the three years that I had her in classes. Quiet, yet so creative in her art, crafts, and her writing, we met in a lounge on campus during the summer semester. As usual, she was thoughtful in her evaluation of her progress coming to the U.S. and learning English.

Asuka grew up in the Saitama prefecture in Toda City, which is next to Tokyo. Raised in a small traditional family with her older brother, parents, and her grandmother, she remembered her childhood as comfortable. Her father was, in her words, a general worker, and her mother stayed at home to raise the children. It was a time of prosperity in Japan. She felt fortunate because her parents were able to provide her and her brother extra education to expand their opportunities, a practice that was popular in Japan at the time. She recalled taking classes in swimming, piano, and art. This push for education did not come without a price:

I have to go to, attend the class, extra class after the school, whole week, every day. It was so, so tough. I wanted to play with my school classmates, but I didn’t have time. I have to hold my desire in my mind.

Asuka’s parents did not have the educational opportunities that she enjoyed. Born two years after the end of World War II, they grew up in a very poor nation with few educational options. Her mother was raised on a farm in a rural community that had no education system, and her father, because his father was ill with cancer, quit school and began working to support
his family when he was in junior high. These experiences motivated her parents to provide the best education available for their children.

School in Japan, according to Asuka, is drastically different from the schools that she has visited and attended in the U.S.. She recalled starting school where students learn basic subjects like language, and they learned respect for their teachers and their environment. She indicated that the children were responsible for getting themselves to school even in first grade. They also had to care for their school. She shared the philosophy of the system:

We have to clean-up our classroom and then, facility. No teacher does it. Just student does it. Because we used [the classroom]. We learn, we should keep, do it ourselves, because for thankful and learning social life...if you mess the environment and it makes people heart in a bad way.

In this strict environment, children listened and wrote what the teacher said. The greatest difference from her experience is the lack of discussion. This did not occur in Japanese schools.

One teacher had a large impact on Asuka because he recognized a talent in her. She said that she did well in school, but she never received any affirmation from her parents:

Every time [the] teacher tell me you are doing good. Very good. But I couldn’t believe [it] because my parents never say [it to] me. If you said, my parents always: “You are no good. You are no good. You are no good.” I was so sad, but the only that teacher accept me at that time.

Her fourth-grade teacher recognized her talent in art. Her face lit up as she described a project drawing grapes in class with the colors and shapes of each individual grape. She excelled at art and won numerous competitions at the school.

Students in Japan tested for entry into elite high schools. Asuka was selected to an elite international school that specialized in the arts. Unfortunately, her parents did not support her program, and art classes and materials in Japan were very expensive. Although it was against the
school rules, Asuka worked every day after school to support her program. The schedule was brutal, as she was in school from nine in the morning until three, and then she attended extra drawing classes afterwards. She described her routine:

[After dinner] I would go to work, in my neighbor’s fast food store. I close the store and come back home, and then I do homework, and then just one or two hours sleep. And then go to school. Yeah, it was really tough.

After high school, because of a family crisis, Asuka elected to go to a technical school in dressmaking instead of applying to university for art. In that time, Japan was in an economic downturn, so she chose to be more practical. She was hired to design a clothing line for children.

Asuka first came to the U.S. to visit a friend in Arizona, and this began her interest in moving to this country. She said she liked the freedom of being here. She met a man at work who had studied in the U.S.. When he was offered a transfer to the Chicago area, he asked her if she would marry him and come to live here: “I wanted to be on an adventure. I want to get an adventure in my life. Because I was really feel[ing] limitation with my parents, so I wanted to (flying with her arms like wings).” She had no time to prepare for the move or to work on her English as they left two weeks later. She had had language classes in school, but it was her worst subject. She said: “I thought English is like a space world. Space world. I thought. That’s because I, like a spell, like I cannot understand anything.” So, she moved, unprepared for the difficulties of adjusting to live in a new place but on an adventure.

Kasia

I met with Kasia at a playground. My son accompanied us as a babysitter for her three-year-old daughter so we could talk about her background. We sat at a shady picnic table and
talked about her journey. Kasia was a serious soft-spoken woman. In the classroom, she was a quiet yet valuable contributor to class and group discussions.

Kasia, born in Biala Podlaska, Poland, described herself as a city girl. As a child, the family lived with relatives until they purchased a small one-bedroom flat with a bathroom and a kitchen. When her sister was born, she described their environment as “squeezed.” When she was in middle school, around 14 years old, they switched homes with her grandparents to expand their space. It was a difficult time as her father was without a job, but she recalled fondly the traveling that they did as a family.

Kasia entered pre-school early when her mother returned to work. She remembered her years in school fondly. A self-described “nerd,” she was a good student and a prolific reader. She recalled those early years as fun and full of play. This love of school changed when she entered high school. She described the system in Poland as vastly different from the U.S.. In high school, she said: “You have to be quiet and you have to know everything.” You could not ask questions; you just listened, learned, and responded to questions. An experience in a math class, a subject that she excelled in, challenged her learning style:

We had to learn those rules. Like just put in your mind. And then next class, she was calling each of us...She would say, “ok, tell me this rule,” and you had to say it...I said, “you know, I can do every exercise for you with this, but I can’t learn math by just memorizing it.”

High school was challenging. She was in an advanced English program, but because her family did not have the resources to get her a tutor, she did not do well in the program. She was then transferred to another high school. This was difficult for someone who had always been one of the best students in class. She chose a Math course, but she was not supported by her math
instructor who asked, “Why are you doing this? You will not pass.” She said she angered him by having one of the top scores in her class.

One thing she has always struggled with is having clear goals for the future. Her parents wanted their daughters to have an education with the hope of having a better life. Kasia went to university for a degree in ecology. This program focused on environmental issues including, ground, air, and water pollution. In the middle of her program, she took a gap year to go with her cousin to London to work in the hospitality business. She returned to Poland and finished her five-year program. At the end of her studies, her father encouraged her to go to Baltimore to stay with her cousins. She explained:

I never, like some people in Poland and it’s probably in other parts of the world where who are thinking, oh my god, America, I always want to go there. My father always wanted to come here. But for me it was like, no, I am okay in Europe and I really like, after that first time when I was in London, I really liked what I saw. I thought, that’s more my thing. So, I went to the embassy, like, okay, whatever, I didn’t care if I would get that visa or not. So obviously, I got it.

She stayed in the U.S. for a year with her family. During this time, she met her future husband. She returned to London, and they began a long-distance courtship. It was this relationship that led to her move here in April of 2011.

Learner Profiles: Lessons Learned

These brief profiles introduced the stories of this group of expert language-learners. They attempt to humanize the participants and allow the reader to connect with all the struggles and successes in their journeys. They also provide the detail needed to examine, as an overview, the life histories and characteristics of each participant with the aim of understanding why they
have been able to successfully navigate the journey of learning a language. Research on language acquisition has shown that the resources or capital that adults possess greatly impact their language socialization (Bourdieu, 1991), and that although habitus or social identity is durable, it can be changed through considerable effort. In diverse populations, expectations are that the individuals with high capital will be more successful than marginalized populations, but there is also some hope that, through sustained effort, identities can be shifted.

The participants in this study represent a population that varied widely in prior education, resources, and social networks to support this transition. Their stories also differed with respect to age, length of the time in the U.S., economic status, and education in their native countries. The 15 participants in this study were invited because they all had successfully completed a learning community class that combines advanced level ESL with English Composition, a college-level credit course. At the time of data collection, this class had been offered for four years. One of the participants was from the first cohort from the spring 2012. The other participants completed the course in the spring semesters of 2014 and 2015. This diverse group participated in this study, and the demographics (See Appendix E) highlight some of the richness of the experiences of the group. The following brief summary provides an overview of these characteristics.

Participants in the study came from 10 native countries including Mexico (four participants), Poland (three participants), Algeria, Cameroon, Japan, Hong Kong, Belize, Thailand, Ukraine, and Vietnam. At the time of the interviews, participants in the study ranged from 22 to 60 years old with an average age of 40 years. This age range is representative of the adult education program at the community college where the research took place. In the adult
ESL program, 70% of the students are from 25 to 44 years old. What is not representative of the program is the cultural diversity of the participants in this study and in the transition program overall. In the adult education program where the transition course was offered, 87% of the students are Latino/a (Institutional Website). These participants also varied widely in the length of time since their arrival to the U.S. from just under a year, Minh, to 36 years, Juan. The average length in the U.S. of the participants was 15.79 years.

In addition to the varied demographics of this group, these students who had successfully transitioned to academic coursework varied widely in their educational backgrounds. The group contained individuals who had left their countries prior to completing secondary school including Ana, Brigitte, Lizzy, and Luz. Rose graduated from high school but had worked in an English environment prior to emigrating from Hong Kong. A number of participants came with some postsecondary work either at university or at a technical school including Julia, Minh, Monika, Asuka, and Juan. There were also a number of students who came with university degrees the equivalent of Bachelor’s Degrees including Kasia, Zofia, and Mau. Katia and Yaris had Master’s Degrees from their native countries. Although two-thirds of the participants had some postsecondary coursework prior to coming to the U.S. and, presumably, strong literacy skills in their native language, some of the participants expressed lacking skills in both English and their native language.

Examining these participants more broadly through the lens of capital (Bourdieu, 1991), who looks to the characteristics that students bring to the classroom to support their language socialization, demonstrates the unique composition of this group. In contrast to the findings of Becker (2011), in which almost all of the successful students who transitioned to academic
coursework in the study possessed high capital in the form of prior education, accessible resources, and a supportive network, participants in this study were not so homogeneous in their backgrounds. In examining the components of this concept—education, resources, and network—participants varied in the “type” of capital that they brought with them on the journey. In fact, many participants possessed some capital but did not mirror the attributes of the highlighted participants in the Becker (2011) study, who came from privileged backgrounds including advanced degrees and stable socioeconomic positions, possessing all the components of the definition.

An example of this concept is Yaris, who completed a master’s degree in accounting in Algeria. He came to the country with a high level of literacy and education, but because of the depressed conditions in his native country, he did not come with family resources or a supportive network other than a friend who traveled to Chicago just prior to his arrival. He also lacked linguistic resources as he had minimal knowledge of English, and due to financial constraints, worked in a factory to support himself. Others, such as Ana and Lizzy, came to supportive family networks that provided for their basic needs and a safe environment, but they did not have language skills, extensive financial resources, or strong academic backgrounds.

The diverse backgrounds of these participants are representative of the demographics found in a typical adult ESL classroom. Their cultural capital ranged from individuals who had advanced degrees and established careers in their native countries to individuals from poor families who dropped out of high school to contribute to the survival of their families. Listening to these histories is critical to understanding the success and determination of this group. Successful transition for the more “privileged” immigrants who possess high levels in all aspects
of capital is not surprising. What is rarer is that these participants, who encountered significant challenges, have also succeeded in this transition. Most have faced obstacles prior to coming to the U.S. and struggles during their initial days, months, and, in some cases, years in the U.S.. Their ability to overcome these challenges and the ways in which these characteristics have contributed to their success is the story of this study.

I have shared the participants’ histories to the point of them entering language classes. The findings in the next chapter chronicle their journeys of emigrating, of building lives in the U.S., and of gaining expertise in the American language and culture.
CHAPTER 5
STARTING THE JOURNEY

Sometimes I do not have enough words, but sometimes it’s because the culture . . . that maybe that kind of thing I know when I was young. From I was and until now, I still know it, but other people, they don’t know it, and usually people think that everybody knows that. Because that easy thing that you think. It’s easy to you, but it’s not easy to everybody, so, so when I say something, I have to think, do they know that? Do they know that Buddha is the god in my religion? Do they know that? (Minh)

I approached this research with a desire to develop an understanding of the characteristics that contributed to the success of a small group of adult English language-learners with the hope of understanding and creating environments that would support the transition of more students to academic and career programs. I set out to “know” more about the students that I am dedicated to support through their journeys. Conceptualizing a model to identify attributes that could contribute to the literature on investment in academic language socialization would undoubtedly support practitioners who are working diligently to transition students to college and career programs and to improve the lives of these adults and their families.

As I reviewed the transcripts from the interviews and focus groups, I was struck by the above quote from Minh because it reveals that there are so many factors that contribute to student success, so creating a “one size fits all” model or monolithic definition appears problematic. More complex than traditional international students who travel to the country focused on the goal of language acquisition, adult learners often come to the classroom with
histories that are varied with respect to prior education, socioeconomic status, motivation to immigrate, immigration status, and motivation for language socialization. Although many have worked earnestly to achieve their goals in the classroom, educators are often unaware of the challenges these students have faced in the process and those they bring with them to our classrooms.

In organizing the findings from this study, I wanted the reader to join these travelers on their journeys of academic language socialization. It is my goal, here, to share the narratives of 15 success stories to help myself and the reader appreciate the qualities that have contributed to their success. I hope, in the process of sharing these journeys, to more fully understand them and reflect on the ways in which the characteristics of the participants impact their success in the classroom. In sharing these stories, I want to help the reader hear the voices of the participants and to join their journeys as they have shared them in the interviews and focus groups. To achieve this goal, the words of the participants are interwoven throughout this chapter and the next, as they are the focus of my study. I hope the reader will experience the joys and struggles that the participants deemed integral to their success.

The sections that follow were developed from the passages chosen by the participants as critical to their success in transitioning to academic-level coursework. Participants were asked to read through their transcripts from the initial interviews and to choose a few passages that they believed were meaningful to their journeys. This process, whereby the participants are involved in critically reflecting on their histories is a technique called “reciprocal ethnography” (Lawless, 2010). These passages were shared in focus groups along with some themes that had emerged overall from the focused coding of the interviews for the participants to make meaning of the
stories. I have included passages here from both stages of data collection when they help to expand the messages of the participants. I have also allowed their choices to form the basis of this discussion, as they are the experts of this process.

Leaving the comfortable and familiar behind and moving to a new country is a daunting process. Making this move to a country with a different language and unfamiliar culture complicates the process and creates challenges along the way. When reviewing the conversations that I had with these participants, it was difficult to create a map that would illustrate the process and detail the findings in a coherent way that would be useful for other practitioners hoping to guide similar learners. In my final analysis, I determined that the findings in this study should be organized as a journey: a physical and emotional journey of individuals immigrating to a new country and an intellectual journey to become academically proficient in a new language.

The findings of my study are divided into two chapters, Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 examines the beginning stages of this journey in four sections. In Section 1, “Arriving to a New Country,” I begin by sharing the participants’ motivations for coming to the U.S. and their emotions in their early days in the country. These initial motivations and resources were instrumental in the decisions they made in their efforts to become more proficient in English, whether they began their academic journey immediately or years after their arrival. Section 2, “Setting Out on the Journey,” examines the challenges that the adult immigrants in this study faced when adjusting to the environment. Section 3, “Bumps in the Road,” discusses the existence of a myriad of delays, stops, and detours that they experienced as they tried to improve their skills and to address the importance of overcoming these obstacles. This focus on hardship
and challenge dominated the discussions in our interviews and focus groups. Section 4, “Without a Compass,” looks at the real loss of identity that many experienced due to their lack of language proficiency. Participants shared the sense of being lost both personally and professionally. The findings also highlight how participants processed this change and reconciled their understanding of self in this new environment.

Arriving in a New Country: First Steps on the Journey

The adults interviewed for this study, who all made the decision to immigrate to the U.S., expressed feelings of hope: hope to earn money to send to family back home, hope to find meaningful employment and earn a decent living, hope to find a secure environment to raise a family, hope to unite or reunite a family to make it whole again, and hope of a new relationship. They came with this desire for a better life, yet their dreams were as diverse as the environments they left behind. This section details their motivations for coming to this country and for starting this journey and shares the resources that supported these journeys.

Economic Success: “You can make a lot of money, and you can build your, like, your American Dream” (Mau)

For many, the motivation to immigrate as adults was an economic decision. The participants had heard the stories of success in the U.S. and believed that they could become part of that narrative. When Yaris was chosen in the Diversity Visa Lottery Program to receive a visa, he was certain that this would dramatically improve his life: “We always heard only good things about the U.S.A. And we thought, the fact that you are here, you are rich, and you will
have the food coming to you. . . . We thought everything is easy.” This dream was also evident in the story told by Mau. She indicated that it was only luck that brought her to the country 30 years prior to our interview. She had a school friend who had come to the U.S. and who encouraged her to apply for a visa. She indicated, “The thought was that you make a lot of money, and you can build your, like, your American Dream.” Monika also decided to leave the struggles of Poland after she married: “I decide to come to U.S. because we were looking for a better life. . . . In 1986, I come to U.S. as a young immigrant. I was 27 years old with, uh, with my dream.” This success theme appealed to immigrants from many backgrounds including those of Yaris, Mau, Monika, and others who were college-educated in their native countries yet certain that there was more opportunity to achieve financial success in the U.S..

Economics also drove many students to immigrate as a means of supporting their families both here and in their native countries. Allegiance to the family and their support were strong motivators for participants and often took precedence over personal goals. Juan remembered his mother leaving his home when he was a child to support his family:

She left us up there [Belize]. So while she was working here, we, . . . that’s the reason we all had the opportunity to go to college. We went to school because of my mom. My mom was here and working to send money.

This sacrifice was echoed by other participants who strongly valued their families and felt responsible to support them. Julia, a Mexican immigrant who crossed the border in her teens, talked about wanting to help support her family: “It was hard in there [Mexico] to support yourself, so my goal was to come to here.” She described the work environment in the U.S.: “It is better opportunity than Mexico because you earn more, and if you get educated, you will have
a better life.” For a number of participants, such as Ana, Lizzy, Julia, and Juan, this pattern of family support was a common narrative due to the lack of opportunity in their native countries.

**Finding Refuge: “We were not safe” (Brigitte)**

In addition to seeking economic security, participants of the study traveled for their own personal security and that of their families. A few participants came to the U.S. in an attempt to find a more secure environment. This motivation, the hope to find a safe space for oneself and one's family, is a resolve that is different from those who journey for economic success. Yaris expressed the vulnerability of existence in his native country:

My country is a third-world country. We still have dictators. We still have, at any time, we can have a civil war. We still have third-world management, so there is no place to go. It’s not the future.

This uncertainty was echoed by Brigitte, whose family came to escape the dangerous environment in her native country of Cameroon. Her father, an officer in the army, believed that the political environment made remaining in the country unsafe for himself and for his children. Brigitte described the threats experienced by her family:

We were not safe, like, you know, if the enemy plan to kill your daddy, even your children is [not] going to be safe. So the best way was like, okay, I (her father) just have to . . . have to come and we [the children] just have to follow him.

In both instances, the motivation of the participant was largely to leave an oppressive or unsafe environment. Both indicated that they were considering other options, particularly Europe, to take advantage of their language skills, as both spoke French. This motivation was significant because these participants arrived with minimal knowledge of the language of their new home and little time to prepare prior to arrival. Their motivation, unlike many travelers who
participated in the study, was one of escape from an environment instead of a journey toward a desired destination.

Family: “They come here for me to come” (Minh)

Another source of motivation in the stories of the participants in this study was the family. The needs and hopes of the family figured prominently in their immigration decisions. As mentioned previously, supporting the family was a motivator for many of the participants in the study. Family members, when given the opportunity, moved to the U.S. and started working and sending money home to their families. Family unification or reunification was another reason for the participants' motivation for immigration.

A number of the participants followed their parents or older siblings to the U.S.. This pattern was common for the younger immigrants, including Minh, Lizzy, Julia, Ana, Brigitte, and Juan, who all traveled to the U.S. in their teens or early 20s to join families already living and working here. The pattern was also true for Katia who chose to follow her daughter and grandchild to the U.S.. Many families followed this pattern where one parent, both parents, or siblings established homes in the U.S. and others came as resources were available. Ana, from a family of 13 children in Mexico, described her history: “When I was born, my oldest sister was about to come to the United States, and then, so little by little, they [her siblings] traveled to the United States.”

This pattern provided an easier entry for the traveler who had an established home in the new environment; it also reunited spouses and parents with their children. Lizzy, who lived with her grandparents in Mexico, recalled her desire to come to the U.S. to be with her parents.
“When I was in Mexico, I just wanted to be here. I could just think it. I wanted to come to the United States to reunite with my parents.” The focus, for Lizzy, was on being together; she was not motivated to travel for education or a better economic situation. In her words, “I didn’t seek for a future after [moving to the U.S.], I didn’t even graduated from high school because I didn’t have a clear goal, a clear vision when I was smaller.” She missed her parents and wanted to be with them wherever they lived.

Some of these children initially resisted coming to the U.S. Although given the opportunity to follow their parents, both Minh and Juan chose alternative routes remaining in their native countries. Minh recalled being in an interview for a visa to travel to the U.S. to study:

When I was in high school, I have the opportunity to come here to take high school, but then when I go to the interview to get a visa he asked me, just right away, do you want to go to the U.S.? I’m like, no. I speak from my heart. I follow my heart, and I say no.

Juan also refused to follow his siblings at the age of 16. “I said, I’m not going. And my mom, I broke my mom’s heart because she want[ed] to see me again.” Eventually, both relented and traveled to study. According to Minh, he came to fulfill the goals of his family:

My parents they think if I come here, it’s going to be a brighter future. It’s going to be better for me. So they, they come here for me to come. And I’m, like, okay because they sacrifice for me a lot, so why I have to put them down? I just come here.

For both young men, it was the selflessness of their parents that motivated them to come and work toward a better future rather than a strong personal desire to integrate into the country or to follow their own dreams.
Similarly, Katia made the decision to travel to the U.S. to be with her only child, her daughter, who had emigrated from the Ukraine. She described this move not as a choice but as her destiny:

It was no choice for me because I only had one daughter, and if she moved here, if she had moved to North Pole, I would have followed her there, too, because she was my only family. I was divorced by this time. My family life was just zero, nothing. And, uh, plus, she had divorced here, and she had baby on her hands, and she needed support, and it was no choice.

Her motive was to support her family, including her new grandson, which included helping him acquire and practice his Russian language skills.

**Relationships: “I am going to follow him wherever he goes” (Luz)***

Maintaining relationships was another theme that emerged from the stories of immigrating to the U.S., from participants who followed their partners or came for adventure, fear of losing a partner, and love. Rose met her future husband, an American businessman, in Hong Kong and “ran away” with him to get married and settle in the U.S.. Other participants followed dreams of their partners and traveled to the U.S.. Luz had seen the history in her native country of Mexico, where men came to provide financially for their families. These men often left their spouses behind, which damaged relationships. She resolved that this would not be her story:

We got married, and he says, I am going to go back there [U.S.], and so I decided, I told him, no, because we are married, we are going to raise a family. I was pregnant with my first baby. And he says, no, you stay here, and I go to make money. We have, and I come back, and I said, no way, I am going with you. So I decided to move when I was six months of marriage, so we moved to this country. I decided to follow him and not be there alone. . . . It was my fear about, . . . I was recently married and I did not want to lose him, so I am going to follow him wherever he goes.
This desire to stay with a partner was also the motivation for Zofia to come to New York from Poland when she was 26. She had completed a law degree in her native country and planned to practice there, but she decided to have an adventure and visit the U.S. Her plans changed because she followed her boyfriend, who went to the U.S. after he won a green card in the lottery. She shared,

I really was in love with him, and I wanted to go here so badly. I finished school. . . . I really badly wanted to come here; . . . after 25 days here, I got pregnant. I couldn’t go back to Poland. I stayed here.

Similarly, Asuka married her boyfriend and moved with him to the U.S. because she wanted to venture out of her environment, which she found restrictive. In her words,

I decided to come here with, marry him quickly, and then come here. So, I didn’t think how difficult [it would be] to live here. Just . . . I wanted to be on an adventure. I want to get an adventure in my life. Because I was really feel[ing] limitation with my parents, so I wanted to [flying with her arms like wings].

Asuka had been to the U.S. previously, to visit, and her goal was to experience a new environment. She came quickly without consideration for the challenge she might encounter when she arrived and her husband pursued his career goals.

Kasia also moved to start a life with her fiancé. She met him on a visit to the U.S. when she was working in London. To move forward in their relationship, they needed to choose a location where they could start their life together:

After two years, when I was there [Baltimore], we were thinking, okay, we have to do something because it’s too hard. . . . We were trying to do something. We were checking. We went to the lawyer to ask what’s the best option. . . . If we wanted to be together, and to be in such a long-distance relationship, it was hard, so there were two options. He will come to London, and we will try there, or I will come here. And I came here because I guess we figured out that it’s easier here to start life than London.
Their decision, as noted from her comments, was strategic. They determined that, based on their resources and professional requirements, they would fare better in the U.S., starting a life together.

Arriving to a New Country: Lessons Learned

As evidenced from the stories shared by these participants, the American Dream, or financial success, was only one narrative for these immigrants. Some participants arrived excited to be in the country and others came to satisfy the dreams and goals of others such as parents, children, or spouses. Others were not motivated by the destination, but, instead, by a desire to follow their heart and build a life with a loved one. Finally, some came to find a safe haven for themselves and their families, driven more by security than any other strong desire. These varied motivations to immigrate to the U.S. affected the travelers’ perceived need for and progress in academic language socialization.

None of the participants in the study indicated that their motivation to come to the U.S. was to learn or become academically competent in the English language. Unlike the more focused motivations of international or EFL students who are improving academic language skills to succeed in an academic environment, the adult immigrants in this study recognized the importance of language development, but it was rarely their central focus upon arrival. The need for and focus on the language socialization process for these participants was driven by their communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As individuals shifted from one community to another, the process of language socialization shifted to address the expectations of the new community. This focus was on language development as participation rather than
internalization; it “concerns the whole person acting in the world” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 49). This process, as posited by Baxter (2002), is a constant process of positioning and repositioning based on the shifting goals and communities of practice of the learner.

These findings indicate that the motivations to set out on the journey also influenced the process of language socialization in that only a few had goals that led them to seek out language learning programs immediately. Integration into a new environment, historically considered a critical motivator of language socialization, is, as shared by the participants of this study, more accurately viewed from a different lens when discussing the motivations of adult immigrants. Research has suggested that this motivation is largely driven by context (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), including the environment. For these learners, their motivations to develop language competency were secondary to establishing themselves physically and economically in the community.

The demographics of the participants, particularly the number of years they spent in the U.S. before completing this transition course, which ranged from less than a year to more than 35 years, demonstrate that few participants set an immediate goal of perfecting their academic language skills. Only Minh and Yaris, who began ESL classes immediately upon arrival in the U.S., articulated a need to build academic competence in the language. This goal was related to their desire to build or maintain professional identities that they were developing at the time of their immigration. Minh was determined to continue his coursework in computer science at the university level, and Yaris wanted to re-establish his identity as an accountant with an advanced degree. Their stories, especially that of Minh, reflect the more typical motivations of an
international student dedicated to the development of academic language skills to complete university coursework.

Motivation for language socialization for many participants was secondary to the immediate need of survival in a new environment. Although the participants acknowledged the long-term goal of perfecting language to improve their prospects, circumstances shifted their focus, for a time, to economic security. This reality was central to Brigitte’s story, a high school student from Cameroon who came with her brother. Their motivation initially was to earn enough money to repay the cost of their travel and earn enough combined salary to afford a place to live. Although her long-term goals included education and a professional career, she did not have the luxury to pursue them when she first arrived. She spoke about her early days in the U.S., working in a factory:

They would pay me eight dollars, and nine dollars, and I was, like, I am so young, I won’t continue working and get that. . . . I was thinking of, like, having a good, like, bigger idea, or why I don’t have to go to school and have a better job and get good money cause those, like, when I worked in the warehouse there was, it was not easy. Like, I was, like, I don’t deserve this work, so I have to go to school.

This reality was also expressed by Zofia, who remained in the U.S. due to her pregnancy. Educated in Poland, she understood the value of academic language socialization, but she experienced the reality of helping her family survive, which ultimately delayed her studies. In order to earn money, she worked cleaning houses. The experience was, in her words, "Horrible." Without language competency, her options were severely limited.

These stories, of attending to immediate needs, were common in the participants in the study. Until their circumstances stabilized, the goal of language socialization was secondary in their lives. Language socialization, based on these narratives, should be viewed as a staged
process whereby learners obtain levels of language competency based on current needs. These needs, as demonstrated by the stories of these participants, often expand and evolve over time to necessitate more advanced language proficiency.

Another group, including Kasia, Monika, Lizzy, Juan, and Ana, did not immediately perceive a need to learn the language because they relied on established communities that spoke their native language for support. They did not begin learning upon arrival, in part, because they could navigate in their communities without English. They moved into areas based on this support usually where they had guides who preceded them in the process. For some in this group, the issue of documentation also proved problematic as families, even participants who arrived as secondary-aged students, chose not to register them in classes because of their status. Instead, these individuals operated within their language communities and focused on more practical concerns, including finding employment to help their families in the U.S. and in their native countries survive or to manage other family needs, including caring for the children in their families or completing household duties.

Acknowledging varied motivations can also help guide the context of language instruction in attempts to provide meaningful and useful lessons. As demonstrated in the stories of the participants, meaningful instruction depends on the backgrounds and the goals of the individual students. Many indicated that their primary language goal was simple: the ability to communicate and navigate in the community. According to Zofia, she needed initially to learn to enroll her son in classes or speak to a doctor about a sick child. Their perceived needs included community-based knowledge, such as using local transportation or ordering a meal at a fast-food restaurant. As this type of traveler becomes more stable in the new environment,
his/her goals may eventually evolve to include academic language development and a desire to enroll in a career, technical, or academic program, although all stages of language development are important to the process.

The complexities of motivations and goals of these participants represent the reality in the adult education classroom. Understanding this complexity widens the vision of the practical needs of the adult population in search of language instruction. When these travelers have arrived in their new country, it is also important to listen to their stories of adjusting to a new environment. These stories inform professionals of barriers that they may not otherwise anticipate and help professionals meet the needs of learners.

Setting Out on the Journey: Adjusting to the Environment

The participants described their motivations to come to the U.S. in the previous section. These motivations were unlike many language-learners who have been participants in previous studies (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Clément, 2001; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Gardner, 2007; Kormos & Csizér, 2008; Noels, 2005; Noels et al., 2001; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi et al., 2009). These students, who acquired language as international students or learned English or other languages as a foreign language in their native countries, were largely academically motivated. Language acquisition was a goal to complete an academic program or to further their studies.

In contrast, in this study, participants came for economic security, for refuge, for relationships, and for family. Their views of remaining in the U.S., for the majority, were not temporary or short-term plans; rather, their moves were permanent or, at a minimum, long-term
decisions. Studies that have looked at the acculturation process (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008) indicate that adjusting to a new culture is influenced by both societal variables (political, economic, social, and cultural) of both the country of origin and country of destination and individual variables (personality, language fluency, cultural identity, values, acculturation strategies, and reasons for migration). According to the aforementioned studies, individuals must cope with the stress of the transition and develop skills necessary to operate successfully in the country of destination. These skills include building language expertise and cultural knowledge.

Through their conversations, participants described their struggles with this process of adjusting to their new environment. Few came with strong English language skills; in fact, six indicated that they had no English skills at all. The remaining participants had some English experience although not sufficient skills to enter postsecondary English classes. Most of the participants indicated a need to establish financial stability as their primary goal above the need to become proficient in the language. To this end, only two participants, Minh and Yaris, indicated that they started language learning immediately after arriving. Most focused on other goals and waited, often for years, to begin to learn the language formally. Their abilities to handle the significant changes encountered as a new immigrant took precedence over formal education.

This section shares reflections of adjusting to this new environment. These stories, based on the passages that participants chose to share in focus groups and initial interviews about their journeys, were significant to their histories, to their ability to overcome challenges, and to their determination to learn. In focus groups, many participants chose to highlight their emotions in
those early days in the U.S. Many struggled to overcome their feelings of fear and isolation. According to their narratives, the adjustment to the new environment was often complicated by their limited language skills and limited resources. Others expressed a sense of excitement and adventure. They described being bolstered by the chance to explore new opportunities in their lives. Organized thematically, the passages in this section reveal the experiences that participants determined, as evident in these passages, were prevalent in their early days in the U.S.

**Fear and Loneliness:** “I was thinking I left my family, I followed my husband. I didn’t know the language. I didn’t work. I was thinking, I don’t know what I was doing there by myself, most of the day, most of the time. I was feeling fear, I guess.” (Luz)

Moving to a new environment without knowledge of the language or the culture proved to be the source of much of the fear for the participants. This fear was present not only in participants who came without support in the new environment, but it was also mentioned by travelers who had a support system; family or friends that offered them assistance upon arrival. Some experienced this fear temporarily, but others, such as Monika, who came during a time of political unrest in Poland at the age of 27, experienced this fear for years. She shared,

When I come to the United States, I come from completely different country, tradition, environment, and I had a very difficult time to adjust with American culture, with tradition, for language, people from all over, you know, and yeah, that was just very scary moment in my life for so many years, for so many years.

Yaris, who traveled to the U.S. as a refugee from Algeria, described the nature of the fear that he experienced:

The fear, it is related to the language, to the people, the new environment, and the biggest fear, how you will deal with it. Are you able to prove to yourself? And you will be
scared also to say, I can’t deal with it, so you will have to go back, and you will underestimate yourself, and you will . . . it is a hard feeling just the beginning. . . . The first, . . . it’s almost the first year, yeah, I felt terrible.

Asuka had a similar experience moving with her new husband for a job opportunity that he had in the U.S. Although she was excited about the adventure, she was uncertain about surviving in an environment that was radically different from Japan. In her new suburban community, which lacked the extensive public transportation options of Tokyo, she no longer had the freedom that she had experienced in her native country:

I was sad because I left all my friends. I left everybody there. I was used to it, and even though I knew it was going to be better, but I missed it, and the freedom, I can do whatever I want to do, and when I came here, I was more worried about what am I going to do without speaking English. And . . . uh . . . that was kind of afraid, I would say, coming to a different country. With not able to communicate with people. See, I didn’t know anything about the United States.

Rose echoed this uncertainty about traveling away from her country where she was independent and culturally competent to one that was completely unknown to her and where she depended on others. She shared her frustrations: “I don’t know how to drive on the highway, and I don’t know the law. And I scared people take advantage of me.” Limited English language knowledge combined with limited knowledge of the culture and the customs was a daunting experience for many and one that defined their early days in the country.

Regardless of the age of the participant, fear of the unknown and of the ability to succeed in the environment delayed integration into the new culture. Ana, who came to the U.S. as a 14-year-old, remained out of school for two years before her sibling had guardianship and she could enroll in school. She was afraid and embarrassed to enroll: “Honestly I was feeling, I was afraid to come here. Because . . . especially because I didn’t . . . I didn’t feel comfortable with my English.” Being a teenager, she was concerned about the opinions of her classmates: “There
were students who spoke really good English, and I thought, oh my god, they are going to make fun of me. That’s why I felt strange. I didn’t want to speak with nobody.” As part of the bilingual program in high school, Ana reacted negatively when she was placed in the adult ESL program at the college. She recalled her schooling as separate; her peers in the bilingual program were isolated from the “regular” students and took their courses primarily in Spanish.

This fear, which could have prevented participants from reaching their language and educational goals, was, as Minh shared, something that they had to overcome:

I feel that there is more fear . . . the air . . . the traffic . . . the people . . . everything is strange to me, of course, but I think, but I kind of think that I have to take it. I have to adapt to it . . . When I come here, I think, okay, it’s kind of different, but I will take it, I will do better and adapt to it.

Luz, who traveled with her husband, experienced the fear of the environment and the people. She was isolated in her apartment, but she pushed herself to move out into her environment. As this memory demonstrates, the process was slow, but she was determined to overcome these fears, as she was motivated by a need to care for herself and her pregnancy:

I just stayed by myself. I didn’t know any English. I was living like two blocks away from a Burger King. So I was pregnant, like six months of pregnancy, and I was brave enough to go to walk two blocks and then go to Burger King. I saw the menu, and I didn’t know, like, what, what the menu was about, I just saw the pictures, and then the only thing I could remember was fish. I know that was pescado en español, and I know that it was good for the baby, so I always went to Burger King, not always, but when I go hungry, I went over there and see the pictures, and I pointed and they said, "Number 1" or "Number 2," whatever the number was in the fish burger, so I asked for that, and they gave me my burger and I went back to my house, my apartment, and then stayed right there by myself all day until they come in the night from work.

The fear of the unknown could have continued to be an isolating factor for Luz, but her growing family’s needs were and have remained a motivating factor for her in this country. She learned
to negotiate the bus system to get herself and her children to doctor appointments. She searched out educational opportunities for her children, and she found programs, including a family literacy program at the local YWCA, to improve her language and academic skills to provide a positive example for her sons.

Others credited their ability to overcome these initial feelings of fear to their previous experiences or their personalities. Minh believed that he had made a similar adjustment after his parents moved to the U.S. and he left their small village to begin the university in Saigon:

I have experienced that kind of fear when . . . I come from . . . I live in a small town . . . and then I go to a bigger city in Vietnam to go to university, and at that time, I was alone. So I have experience . . . I have adapted to new things. I have lived on my own. So when I came here, I think, yeah, there is fear, but it is kind of the same and similar, so once you experience this, you kind of know what to do. You have to have an open mind that you have to adapt to it.

Juan explained his ability to adjust connected to his outgoing personality and his willingness to try to communicate even though he might make mistakes in front of others. Although it took him almost three decades to get back to the classroom to work on his academic reading and writing skills in English, Juan felt that the fear of moving to a new environment was mitigated by his personality:

I am a very outgoing person, and I always have been a very outgoing person. I have expressed myself with a positive attitude, and when I do that, I think, I don’t know, it’s just people welcome me or whatever. No, I don’t know, but I am, what I am saying is that, see, if you continue with the fear, that’s what I thought, if I will continue with this fear that everybody is going to push me away or everybody is going to do something, so the fear will continue in my life. So in that period, in two months, I just, I just put it in myself that I was going to do things that normal people do in the United States. Go eat. Go take the bus. Go take the el. Take all these things, even though, with the sign language, but I did it, and that is how I overcame that fear.

For the participants who expressed this initial fear, all had indicated that they had found methods for coping with this stress. They also indicated that managing or overcoming this fear
was instrumental to their success as they could have remained fearful and isolated in this environment. Their narratives indicate that the timelines and the catalysts for these changes varied in the participants. Some quickly adjusted, and others, such as Monika, who indicated that she lived in fear and without language competency for years, did not seek out ways to improve her language skills until a crisis changed her life decades after her arrival.

Voiceless: “Not being able to express yourself, you’re like your own prisoner.” (Zofia)

In addition to feeling fearful of their new environments, the initial period for many participants was one of isolation. Without the ability to communicate, some were not confident enough to venture into the community, so they stayed at home and interacted only with family or others from their native countries. Asuka demonstrated what she felt in our interview. She said: “At that time I cannot move myself, like this.” She put her arms to her side as if they were bound to her body as in a straightjacket. She described the stress she experienced being at home and unable to move through the community. Asuka, a college graduate and professional in Japan, came to the U.S. for an adventure, yet she lost some of this spirit in the first year in the country when she felt imprisoned in her apartment, unable to move around the community by herself. Luz also experienced this isolation when she moved to the U.S. with her husband. She stated,

It seems like you are not having freedom even though you are free . . . because, if you do not know the language, you, you don’t go out, you just stay in, like me. I was just staying in my room, not going out to the stores or to shopping, to the park because I wasn’t able to talk. So, it’s like you’re a prisoner in your own house.
Some participants, although not “prisoners” in their homes, remained within their own communities, interacting in their native languages. For many, a large immigrant population from their native countries allowed them to delay integration. These participants also felt separated from their new environment. According to Zofia, a lawyer in her native country of Poland, “You can be successful among your own people, but you will always be on the edge, kind of, of the American people.” She believed that although she had a large community, the language barrier relegated her to a lesser position. Similarly, Kasia depended on the large Polish community in the area to support her. Feeling protected and comfortable in this environment, she initially chose not to venture out and build skills in English, limiting herself and her ability to interact with others in the community.

Integrating into society and having a voice in the community was important to these participants. The process, as conceptualized in the aforementioned literature (Ward et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2008), presumes that successful travelers can develop coping strategies to overcome these initial feelings of fear, loneliness, and separation. For an international student, this is conceptualized as culture shock, which is generally experienced as one initially arrives and integrates into the new environment. Culture shock, for these students, was an anticipated part of the adjustment process.

In analyzing the passages that participants chose to share in the focus groups, it became apparent that the process for these participants, who had long-term views of remaining in this environment, was a significant barrier. Although the timeline for these participants varied widely, all eventually worked on skills that helped them build confidence and regain their own voices. Participants highlighted this success in overcoming fear and finding their voices as
instrumental to their integration into their environments. According to Norton (2013), this process is more than the ability to exchange information; it is the process of “constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (p. 50). As Asuka confirmed, with her current skills, “Now I can move like this [flapping her arms like a bird in flight], and I feel less stress. I can fly now.” Gaining some level of competence with the language helped participants free themselves from their closed environments and allowed them to interact in their new environment.

**Excitement and Hope:** “I feel excited that I am going to come here. Even though I do not know what the future will hold, I am excited because it is the American Dream.” (Mau)

Although fear and loneliness were the most common emotions expressed upon arrival, many participants also expressed excitement and hope. These participants had been motivated to journey to the U.S. for new opportunities, so their initial feelings were of the expectation of positive changes to their lives. Yaris explained these emotions:

There was a fear and, at the same time, excitement. A fear from the unknown situation that is waiting for you. And excited to go, to leave the trouble, excited about the new opportunities, excited to go discovering the new world, the way how we dream to see it. Many, including Lizzy, echoed this feeling that they would expand their opportunities by coming to the U.S.. She was, in her words, “released”: released from the stress of living in an environment of poverty and hopeful for the future. Although she came as a young woman, a teenager, she understood that the atmosphere of this place was different:

I remember when I got here, I felt free. I felt that . . . as much as I said that it was nice being there, there is a lot of . . . Poverty? Poverty. Yes, so I felt released. I thought I would have better life here. Not only because I thought I was going to be with my parents but . . . at least I had chance to . . . to seek for a future.
She expanded on her experience on this adventure, even with the real possibility of deportation due to her immigration status at the time. She shared,

I think when we know what we want, the risk, it’s, it’s, I mean it’s not, it was not my fear taking the risk. I thought it was worth it. I always, always was brave, I thought that I would be able to manage.

Even with the dire potential consequence of being separated again from her family and being sent back to her native country, she believed this was an opportunity for her.

The energy of the new environment was also mentioned as a positive motivating factor. Zofia, who initially lived in New York, described the initial feeling: “It was absolutely amazing. I came from Poland; the next few days we went to Manhattan, and it was an incredible feeling, all the people. It’s like a mixture of colors, colors, smells.” Instead of a fear of the unknown environment, she was drawn to these differences as an opportunity to discover new things. Zofia came both physically and emotionally as a tourist, as a temporary visitor without the thought of becoming a permanent resident of the U.S., so this energy was not competing with questions about survival in this environment, which she did express when her circumstances changed and she had to face the prospect of remaining in the U.S. permanently. Katia, who came after she retired from her position in the Ukraine, also believed that the pace of the new environment was a positive factor in her adjustment:

I feel excited. Because this energy, it’s like, um . . . lift you above your level, your usual level of energy. It’s very, um, low speed in my country, everybody’s so calm, everything happens a little slower than here, we even eat slower, we speak slower, we are more slower than Americans. And here, you just shift for another level of speed, and you become more, you get more fast and quick, and everything needs more energy, and it’s like a surge of energy in you.
Katia embraced this change, this new energy, and explored her environment. She reflected on this reaction to the change of environment and why she believed she was never intimidated by the new language or culture:

Maybe one of the reasons is that I’m older, and it’s not wise . . . no . . . it’s only, no, the only thing is that I’m, I’m, I don’t need to be competitive here. So, it’s okay for me to get something, and it’s okay for me not to get something.

For Katia, like the initial reaction of Zofia, the lack of pressure to succeed, to find a means to survive, or to integrate into this new environment fueled this feeling of excitement. Katia's and Zofia's reactions were those of visitors.

**Setting Out on the Journey: Lessons Learned**

As evidenced by the reflections shared by the participants of this study, the early days in the U.S. were accompanied by strong emotions. The most mentioned emotion in the focus groups was one of fear of the new environment. For some, this fear led to isolation that impeded the learning process for these participants. In some cases, such as those of Asuka, Monika, Luz, and Ana, this fear lasted for years. Their stories illustrate how paralyzing fear can be when faced with an unfamiliar and often unsupported environment and no clear route to take. These individuals living in fear varied significantly in the capital that they possessed upon entering the U.S..

For example, some had strong academic backgrounds but lacked the support in the community to find and utilize available resources. Others came with few resources and did not venture far from their home to access programs to support their transition. What is consistent in these stories is that all lacked the symbolic capital or status to be recognized by others in their
new environments (Bourdieu, 2000). This lack of recognition as an individual who can participate in their environment stripped their sense of identity and sustained the isolation of many participants. Findings indicate that managing and overcoming the fear of the environment is a critical component of their success in maintaining their investment in courses and in integrating into their environments. It is important to consider that not every participant described this negotiation of the stress of the environment as manageable, especially upon arrival. Many struggled and lived in isolation, but eventually found the strength to conquer these fears.

Other participants came with a sense of excitement and hope, an expectation that their lives would be better, or that they could fulfill a purpose in this new environment. They were convinced that their new environment offered new and, in most cases, better opportunities. The findings indicate that these participants were, in many ways, more privileged than were other travelers. These individuals were able to overcome the uncertainties of their new environment because they came to a supportive environment or their expectations of the process were not complicated by the need to survive economically in the environment. Participants such as Minh and Katia had family support through their transitions and strong educational backgrounds, so even though some adjustment was necessary, it was not paralyzing. They benefited from the expertise in their families of local knowledge to locate and utilize resources available.

Although initial reactions and adjustments are determined by many factors, including the personalities of the individuals, it is critical to note that this group of successful learners was, in many cases, driven by the need to survive, which took precedence over every other need or goal, including language competency. Initially, language learning was largely based on survival
English. Participants learned the basics in order to operate within their communities, find a job, and secure a place to live. Some needed to repay loans from friends and family which help them finance their journeys.

The conceptual framework for the study acknowledges that the particularities of the social environment largely affect the motivation of the learner. This supports the finding of Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen (2003), who theorize that there is no context-free learning. These findings highlight the unique and often harsh environments encountered by many adult learners. These adult immigrants were required to overcome challenges to maintain motivation in the face of uncertain, unknown, hostile, and demanding social environments.

Regardless of the initial emotions experienced by the participants, all, at some point, set out on the journey to develop competency in the English language. Through their efforts, they were able to reposition themselves as language-learners (Baxter, 2002) and continue on their journeys. As evidenced in their stories of immigrating to the U.S. and of their early days in the country, their goals were different, yet all would share the challenge of learning the language because they were all novices in English. This journey was far from a clear path as, in many cases, it was further complicated by the needs, of most, to navigate the challenges of operating in this new environment. Journeys were also interrupted and abandoned, sometimes for many years, as evidenced in the next section.

Bumps in the Road: Delays, Detours, and Roadblocks

Common themes in the journeys of participants were delays, detours, and roadblocks along the way. In focus groups, participants shared these detours as critical parts of their
journeys, often as an explanation of how and why they returned to their studies in earnest. Focus-group discussions, which, due to the passages the participants chose to share, focused largely on the challenges and the interrupted journeys, suggest that successful negotiation of these factors was necessary to maintain investment in studies.

Learning as an adult, especially an adult trying to build a life in a new environment, is challenging. Research demonstrates that adult learners in ESL programs stop or drop out of programs regularly (Beder & Valentine, 1990; Boshier, 1971, 1977; Comings, 2007; Comings et al., 2003; Comings et al., 1999; Cooke, 2006; Fitzgerald & Young, 1997; Houle, 1961; Quigley & Uhland, 2000). In fact, less than half of the students who begin classes complete them (Greenberg et al., 2001). The participants in the study, even though they expressed the investment to become proficient in English, were faced with real-life challenges that they had to address, which affected their progress and participation in programming. Most participants started and stopped their courses, sometimes multiple times, for a variety of challenges on the road. Yaris, who started courses as soon as he arrived in the U.S., summarized these challenges in his reflection on transitioning to academic work: “I wish I had finished 101 after two years. A maximum in two years, but it took me five years for several reasons. Yeah, the money. Sometimes I got demotivated. Sometimes you feel tired. Yeah, so a lot of factors.”

What is unique about this group is that these delays did not sidetrack them permanently, that they all, eventually, returned to the classroom when they were able to focus and work toward the goal of completing the ESL coursework and transition to academic work. Participants were detoured for many reasons, including economics, transportation, personal frustrations, and other responsibilities.
Need to Work: “I was working very hard to survive.” (Brigitte)

The immediate need to work was a theme in the focus groups. The normal process upon arrival in the U.S., for most, was to search for employment, often with the help of family or friends who had arrived before them. Some travelers had borrowed money to make the journey, and they had to delay their educational goals to pay back their supporters. Yaris told his story:

The only thing that blocked me was work and the money. The first year, I had to work a lot just to reimburse people who gave me the money back in Algeria. Because my family was poor, and, at that time, I finished my school, I didn’t have the money. Yeah, so I borrowed the money from my two brothers and other people. I borrowed around $5,000, so I had to work a full year just to save up money.

This was also the experience of Brigitte. Her sister paid for their passages on credit, but Brigitte and her brother had to work hard to repay her, and they had to pay for a place to live. Being responsible for the support of herself and her siblings was a new experience for Brigitte, who had always lived in a comfortable environment in Cameroon. She wanted to study to finish high school and enter a nursing program, but she was unable to return to school until they had established themselves and paid off their debt:

I was working very hard to survive, you know, in the United States. My sister, she was going to school, it was kind of, everywhere living. . . . She found us a house. We have to work and pay bills, you know, I was kind of, oh my god, I was feeling, like, you know, we are independent. . . . I was, kind of, I don’t know, I was kind of shocked at that moment, like, . . . I was just like, okay. I think if my mom were alive, I could like working, even working that much, you know? How can I say this? Like, . . . life was not . . . life was not easy.

Although the participants in the study were motivated to improve their language skills, the reality of surviving in their new environment often sidetracked their efforts. Given their lack of language skills, many worked at demanding jobs, often at a low salary. They were not able to utilize the knowledge or experience they had in their native countries. Instead, most had
unskilled positions and were often treated poorly. Some employers took advantage of their lack of knowledge in the language and fair employment regulations. According to Yaris,

It was terrible because of the owner of the factory at that time. He was taking advantage of us. And he will make you come and work for four hours and ask you to leave. We were working hourly, so it depends on what he needs. He will put into operation the work of eight hours, he would do it in four hours. We would get paid only for four hours. And at the end of the week, you may see your check, they may take a few hours from your check. That happened.

In addition to recalling working personally to survive, Lizzy also recalled the impact her parents’ work schedules had on her as a young girl. They had come to the U.S. for a better life and to help their family in Mexico. Lizzy remembered being alone as her parents each worked two jobs: “My mother was working, and so was my father, but, uh, the only thing I missed was seeing someone before I left for school because I was basically alone. At home everyone else was working.” Instead of having an educational goal, Lizzy wanted to follow the path of her parents and grandparents, which was to work hard. She dropped out of high school and started to work. Loyalty and support of family, in the stories of a number of participants, took precedence over their studies and socialization in the language and culture.

Participants shared that money continued to be an issue as they began to take credit courses or worked toward certifying degrees obtained in their native countries. This transition from grant-funded to tuition-based courses was a challenge that many shared. Lizzy indicated that money was one of many factors that kept her out of school. Ineligible for many programs because of her immigration status, Lizzy was certain that she could not start college classes: “So the language was one of the obstacles, and the other one was the money because I know it cost money, so I didn’t have none of it.” Monika, also unaware of programs to assist her studies originally balked at enrolling in her first tuition-based class: “I had problem with my money and
that was time when I said, I don’t think I can take English 101 because how I will pay
everything?” Although not all students would be eligible for support available, many who were
eligible were unfamiliar with the programs that could support their studies or even the ability to
pay in installments. Understanding the higher education system and how students could obtain
support was a barrier for these participants.

Another financial challenge for participants was obtaining recognition of the coursework
that they had completed in their native countries, which would have eased the financial burden of
taking college-level courses and shortened their journeys. Many had completed technical or
degree programs and wanted to determine what, if any, courses were required to earn the same
qualification in the U.S.. Translation of transcripts and validation of coursework is costly, and
some students, such as Julia, have found it difficult to manage when they are faced with having
enough to support themselves and their families:

I want to transfer my studies from Mexico here. And I haven’t do[ne] it because the
economic aspect that I have to go send it and pay it. So sometimes you have to prioritize
what I need to do. Maybe, hopefully next year, I can send the transcript. Every time I
say, when I get the taxes, I am going to do it, but something happens, and I can’t.

As illustrated through these stories, a fundamental challenge for the participants in this
study was a financial one. From this group, only Minh, Asuka, and Katia did not express the
need to find a way to support themselves or their families when they arrived in the U.S. or a way
to pay for courses at the college. Almost all had to face these practical concerns before they
could begin their studies in earnest. This drive toward financial stability often detoured students
from their long-term goals of building academic-level English skills. Financial challenges also
contributed to the interruptions that often occurred during their studies.
Transportation: “I didn’t have a license, driver’s license and no car, no, no transportation. I was just sitting and waiting on my daughter come home and bring groceries and take me some place.” (Katia)

For a few participants, transportation was a major barrier in their continued studies. Located in a suburban area with limited public transportation, many, such as Katia, depended on others for transportation. Some participants, because of legal status, did not seek out a means of obtaining a driver’s license or were not aware of any available means to get one, so they depended on public options. Location was described as an isolating factor for some participants.

Asuka described her feeling of isolation her first months in the U.S.:

My husband, he was . . . after I moved here, he was really, his priority is his work. Always he left some, some state or, for his job, so I was alone in the hotel, apartment. . . . So I cannot . . . and when I want to go to grocery store, it’s far far away. I have no bus . . . and then there is no sidewalk. So . . . after that . . . I want, I want to tell my parents I am okay. I am not okay, but I say okay.

This inability to move around independently via a transit system, which was Katia’s experience in the outskirts of Tokyo, was compounded by her lack of communication skills. She expected to have support from her husband, but because he remembered learning on his own, she was alone on this journey.

Luz had a similar experience. She spent most of her time in the apartment that she shared with her husband and others who worked all day. Her excursions outside of the apartment consisted of short trips to fast food restaurants located nearby. She lacked the language to negotiate the bus schedules, and she was unfamiliar with the culture and was often intimidated by people who lived in her neighborhood. When she found a community-based organization that offered classes, the YWCA, within walking distance from her home, she began to attend classes.
Unfortunately, when they moved from their first apartment, she was forced to drop out of classes. Luz shared her barrier:

We moved far, far away from the school so it was another issue. I couldn’t walk. I don’t know how to drive, and I have to walk, so that was far away for me. I was really new to this country. I need to know the area first, so I could decide to walk again to the school.

As mentioned in our conversation, it was more than distance that held her back from attending. She also had to become more comfortable in the environment to venture out and find the opportunities available in the community.

In addition to the logistics of getting to class, Asuka shared another challenge that she faced every year: that of renewing her visa to remain in the country. This process, according to Asuka, always interfered with her completion of the semester:

I have to go back to Japan when final exam is usually, is usually the season of the final exam to renew visa. I, I talked to the teacher. I have to go back to Japan just a few days to renew the visa, but they didn’t accept. So then I drop, drop, drop. I take a class whole day, but I cannot take the final test always. Then drop and drop again. Drop again, and I have to continue same level many years. Yeah, it was tough.

This frustration highlights a characteristic of the environment, the expectation, or resignation, that a large percentage of students will not complete the semester. Instead of finding ways to satisfy the requirements of the semester, with the student advocating for herself and working with the instructor, coursework is repeatedly interrupted in adult education programs. It is important to note that when the participants had gained some level of confidence in the environment and improved communication skills, these were interruptions that they were eventually able to solve.
Another common challenge mentioned by participants was communicating in English. This finding may appear self-evident that language-learners might be sidetracked by communication, but it reveals some complexity about the process of learning and the self-confidence often required to publicly practice skills. Rehearsing language skills in the environment requires the willingness to fail publicly. Moving outside of the classroom and speaking with native speakers proved to be a daunting task for Lizzy:

I would say that the . . . language. And still is until now . . . To use it to talk with others, but I couldn’t communicate and I . . . I didn’t practice, I didn’t know how to speak, so I didn’t, I didn’t learn. . . . It’s a fear of trying to speak the language and to mispronounce words or not saying the correct word that I want to use. . . . It paralyzed me all the time, it has, as a matter of fact. I try not to speak.

Lizzy acknowledged that this fear of miscommunication, even with the expertise that she had developed over the years of taking ESL and college-level classes, continued to be a factor in her interactions with native speakers. Lizzy, like other participants, struggled with being, in the words of Bourdieu (1991), a legitimate speaker in her environment. Others, including Juan, who is outgoing by nature, expressed the challenge of struggling to communicate:

The biggest, biggest challenge that I had is the communications part. That I speak the English part. That I couldn’t express myself the way I wanted to even though I . . . many people, they were kind because they kind of interpreted by sign language and stuff. But the challenge was for me is the English part. It was very hard, very hard.

This barrier, which seems natural as one begins to learn a language, remained even as the participants became more competent and were placed in more challenging environments. Kasia experienced this challenge as she was working with professionals with her daughter. She wanted
to ask questions, but she hesitated because she felt incompetent both in the language and in the
system that she was navigating:

At the beginning when you don’t know anything, you are just learning, you can see that
you are learning. Yeah, that’s the thing, and later, you are on some level, and just, you
know, having that feeling that I can’t pass it. I, I understand a lot. I can really
understand a lot but with talking and trying to express myself. Even like things with my
daughter, like all the meetings and, you know, when I am hearing that others are fighting
for something, I’m like, I don’t even know about those things what about they are
fighting for . . . I want them to explain me everything, and I don’t like to ask for it. This
kind of stuff. I would rather, you know, I would go and try to find by myself. But then
it’s, it’s easier to ask, but that’s the other part from the school [indicating Polish schools]
that you can’t ask, because then you are kind of, maybe not stupid, but how you, how you
can come and don’t know this.

To compound her frustration, she came from a culture that did not encourage asking
questions. She had been taught that she should know the answers; she shouldn’t demonstrate a
lack of knowledge. She recalled that, as a student, one never asked questions. This impeded her
communication because she was never comfortable in demonstrating her lack of skills. The lack
of confidence, as evidenced by these passages, to practice publicly and to build skills delayed the
progress of participants as they were unwilling to demonstrate, as they perceived it, their
insufficient skills in their communities. This reticence blocked development even as participants
built their communication skills.

American Values: “Maybe the American values because people here,
they act, they do things different.” (Minh)

The communication style of the classroom is one example of the barriers students may
face when operating within an unfamiliar culture while they are trying to build competency in a
language. As asserted by Zhou et al. (2008), success in adjusting includes the ability to build a
cultural understanding of the new environment. This adjustment is not a simple process as the
differences conflict with an individual’s sense of what is normal or appropriate. For Monika, the adjustment took years. She explained: “I had a very hard time to adjust with American culture, with tradition, for language, people from all over, you know, and yeah, that was just very scary moment in my life.” Based on the conversations with participants, this required some reflection on their own cultural practices and thought about practices they were experiencing in this new cultural environment.

Minh illustrated this concept in relation to the individualistic and competitive nature of the school system that is focused on planning for personal success. He had been in the U.S. for less than a year at the time of this study, and this difference stood out to him:

They work, and they have goal, something like that. When I was in my school, I . . . in my country, I don’t have that kind of thing that push you to go to school, like, every day you go to school, every day you go to work to get a better life. I just normally go and work with the things I want to work, but I don’t think about my goal. But when I come here, now, 10 months I think, I think about the short-term goal, the long-term goal.

He thought more in terms of his duty to his parents and his family when he talked about his motivation to continue with his studies. He followed the wishes of his parents who taught him, “Education is the best thing that they think I should have, so I think, too.” He explained, “I want to come here because of my education. Because I want to know more about the world. I want to be a better person.” This push for personal goals and success is a clear illustration of adjusting to the cultural norms and this comprehension of the new environment and adjustment to it helping Minh transition and integrate more quickly than did the other participants in the study.

More specifically, participants shared the challenge of adjusting to the expectations and culture of the academic environment in the U.S.. Although the participants were from various traditions, one thread that ran through discussions was the adjustment to classroom culture and
the power dynamics present in the adult education classroom. For many, the traditional role of
the student is to listen, absorb the information from the instructor, and to learn material at home
to demonstrate knowledge in the next class. Asking questions for clarification or having a
dialogue in the classroom was not the norm. As Kasia shared, “You have to be quiet. And you
have to be quiet and you have to know everything. That part is completely different from here.”
She recalled a comment from the composition instructor who encouraged students to ask
questions to clarify whether they were or were not unclear about a concept. Instead of
demonstrating a lack of knowledge, she indicated that their questions would support the learning
of the entire class. According to participants, this shift in classroom culture is often difficult for
the adult student from a different academic tradition.

These drastic differences in values can often be confusing for learners. The participants
indicated that they were often uncertain about the expectations of teachers, especially if they
seemed to conflict with their understanding of accepted practices from their native countries.
This sense of confusion was clearly illustrated in a reflection that Asuka shared about the
conventions of writing in the U.S. Advanced instructors teach the organization of an essay to
students, perhaps with the understanding that the students have not had formal writing
instructions. What they do not always do is validate the knowledge of writing that students bring
to the classroom and acknowledge that the style that they are teaching follows the conventions
established in the U.S., so it is not better, but different. Because she had an extensive
educational background in Japan, Asuka expressed ways in which it was difficult for her to
accept that what she was hearing was correct. It conflicted with her experience, and instead of
accepting this new information as correct, she assumed that she was misunderstanding what was
expected from her. This reflection demonstrates the difficulty of integrating new academic expectations and culture into their knowledge of what it means to be a student.

**Bumps in the Road: Lessons Learned**

In addition to establishing a clear goal to develop language skills, this section demonstrates that participants faced challenges that are important to consider in adult ESL classes. For some participants, the reasons were similar to those found in the literature on literacy studies (Prins & Schafft, 2009; Schafft & Prins, 2009). Participants faced situational factors, including transportation, available childcare, and knowledge about educational opportunities in the community that prevented them from focusing on language socialization. This lack of community knowledge was exacerbated by the lack of oral competency in English.

Participants such as Asuka and Luz felt isolated from the community and, being unable to communicate in their new environment, described themselves as prisoners in their homes. Their lack of a support system left them fearful of venturing out into this unknown environment. Focused on earning a living or advancing in their careers, their husbands, the only support available, did not initially assist them in navigating these challenges. Many participants expressed the frustration of completing simple tasks, so they could not envision themselves in an academic English environment, even though some participants had postsecondary education experience.

These situational factors, such as employment and transportation, are basic needs that require consideration when offering classes to adults in order to accommodate working schedules. Even with these supports in place, participants shared that their goals tended to
address immediate needs, which supports this concept of repositioning goals based on developing needs (Baxter, 2002). To that end, it was common for participants to meet a goal (for instance, the ability to communicate in order to obtain a job) and to stop out of programming until they had the confidence or need to establish the next goal. For these adult immigrants, even those who had already established professional identities in their native countries, this process was more intimately connected with their ability to navigate in the new environment so that many delayed their entries into the academic environment until they had built a somewhat stable position. Only a few participants began their language studies with the goal of transitioning to academic-level coursework. As their skills and needs increased, their goals focused more on transition.

Confidence in the ability to communicate effectively emerged in the research as a major roadblock to student progress. Many were unwilling to demonstrate, in their opinions, their limited knowledge of English. This reticence to practice skills in the community was shared by participants with both low and extensive academic backgrounds. This resistance appeared to be more closely connected to how they believed they would be judged by others in the community. These adults felt effectively silenced in their communities because of their lack of competency in its “legitimate” language (Bourdieu, 1991). Confirming the work of Norton and Toohey (2002), learners believed that their value as an individual would be misjudged by their lack of language skills, which caused their reticence to communicate. Unlike gaining other skills, which would include moving from novice to expert, participants did not want to demonstrate novice skills in public. During the focus-group discussions, they shared their perceptions of their peers in the adult ESL classroom. They saw their peers as more advanced in their skills, and they assumed
that they had not experienced the same feelings of insecurity that they had in the community.

Finally, this lack of confidence appeared to be fueled, in some way, by the reactions of others to their skills. Many, such as Rose, indicated that because of her accent, she was largely ignored in the community. This lack of patience from the community also contributed to this lack of confidence in their abilities. The literature affirmed that social identity, the way one defines oneself in the environment, is “established and maintained by language” (Weedon, 1987, p. 7); therefore, these participants’ experience of being ignored or devalued in the community because of what was perceived as a lack of knowledge could have damaged their sense of identity and affected their progress. According to Carter and Henrichsen (2015), this hesitance to display perceived limited competence in the language is a common challenge faced by adult language-learners, one that they need to overcome so they can successfully perfect their communication skills. The effects of language competency and identity are explored in the next section.

**Without a Compass: Losing a Sense of Identity on the Journey**

Moving to a new country with a new language and culture can be disorienting, especially for immigrants who, like the participants in this study, did not travel with a well-planned itinerary. At times, participants felt lost on their journeys learning English. Although this confusion was evident in the “Arriving to a New Country” section, it also was present as participants improved their skills and looked for meaningful ways to integrate into their new environments. Often, they were without a sense of direction and had difficulties verbalizing their needs and their goals. According to the participants in the study, this inability to communicate
effectively and intelligently is damaging to one’s sense of self and requires strength of mind and purpose to overcome. In this section of the journey, participants shared how they continued to struggle to regain their former selves or, in many cases, created new identities for themselves on this journey.

A theme mentioned extensively by participants in the study and in the SLA literature is the intimate way in which language is connected to one’s sense of identity (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Weedon, 1987). More than a set of skills to acquire, language is the way in which people present themselves to the world (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982), and the value of the speech is largely determined by the value ascribed to the speaker (Norton & Toohey, 2002). Participants were keenly aware that their English language skills affected the ways in which they were perceived both personally and professionally. They also connected their ability to communicate to how they perceived themselves. Improving language skills was seen as a way to alter this narrative. Participants described initial perceptions of being isolated from others, of being ignored or devalued, of not being able to demonstrate their knowledge, and of being underemployed because of their lack of academic language skills. They believed that they had lost a sense of self with their lack of language skills. The participants also described the ways in which the acquisition of academic English had altered their stories.

*Less of a Person:* “At the time they cannot understand you, they just ignore [you].” (Minh)

One theme that emerged from the discussions of the data was how a lack of language skills makes an individual feel like less of a person. In the estimation of some of the participants,
this lack of ability to participate fully in their communities did not only affect their own sense of self, it also influenced how others perceived them as communicators and as educated individuals. Participants shared that they often believed they were ignored and judged by others because of their language skills. Changing this narrative was a motivation for many participants in the study.

Struggling to participate and contribute to conversations is damaging to one’s sense of self. Luz experienced this struggle as she tried to demonstrate her knowledge, but she could not fully express herself in English. She described how it affected her:

Less, less than, because even though they may treat you like you don’t know. You knew things that they may not know that you know, but you do not know how to express yourself, how to tell them, yeah, I know that, and I know how to do that, such and such, because you are not communicating.

To Mau, sounding educated to others was an important part of her identity. She recalled her experience in Thailand and how important language was to her concept of herself as a college graduate and a teacher:

Thai people, when they speak Thai, you can tell, these people, finished, I don’t know in the English language, but in Thailand, they are different. The way you speak, you can tell that this person has an education or not.

She believed that she was not received as an educated person because of her accent, vocabulary, and language skills. Minh echoed this thought: “I am trying to prove that when I speak English well, I am well educated. A good, a better person.” Beyond being understood, language skills would demonstrate their character or their worth to the society.

A consequence of this lack of communication skills, according to the participants, was the belief that native speakers lacked the patience to listen to and to speak to them. They were devoid of symbolic capital, the recognition that a person receives from others (Bourdieu, 1991).
They reported being ignored and judged when they tried to communicate. Rose described the ways in which she was treated by others: “People just ignored me, thinking I just don’t understand English. So just a smile and walk away.” Ana also described the lack of patience she encountered when trying to communicate:

There were many times when I wasn’t able to communicate with people. And sometimes people don’t want to . . . sometimes people don’t want to waste their time explaining you something if you are not understanding them. Because if they hear that you don’t speak good English, they hear you that your English is not good, they say, “Whatever. She doesn’t understand.”

This lack of patience with language skills can also alter the information that an immigrant receives in a conversation. Often, conversations were simplified or abbreviated based on the perceptions of other people concerning what they would understand based on perceived language skills. This was especially cogent for Kasia, who described meeting with medical personnel to discuss treatment for her daughter. She explained the ways in which improving her language skills would change the way professionals interacted with her:

It will change the way people see me. In those institutions, doctors, schools, those places. I am having the feeling sometimes that I am, okay, I’m not fluent, I am not talking proper English, but I am trying to at least go around and explain, but some people they don’t have patience and they think, okay, she will not understand, so I will not even bother any deeper, so I will just tell her whatever, you know, whatever I want, and I will leave out the other part.

These passages demonstrate the ways in which a language-learner’s sense of identity can shift from a capable and educated contributor in a conversation to someone who is not part of the conversation or ignored, based on the reception the learner encounters in the community. As a mother, Kasia wanted to help her child and to be able to ask questions about her diagnosis and treatment, but she felt stifled by her vocabulary and the time it took to formulate her thoughts. She recalled that her meetings always ended with her being asked: “Do you have any questions?”
Her response was, “Not now, but then, I am ending up after a day with questions.” She believed that this processing time would improve with her language skills, as would her active participation in her daughter’s treatment. At that time, instead of being a valued partner in the conversation, she received only the information that others believed that she could understand. Although being ignored or invisible was damaging to their sense of who they were in the community, Asuka suggested that what was even more painful was being judged and being treated like an outsider:

> They judge, always, I think. I think, I feel when I speak with American people, some people judge how we can speak English fluently or correctly, and then if you cannot speak the right way, they shut you out. I feel that.

> This judgment often was an indictment not only of the individual but also of their other identities, including race and ethnicity. Juan indicated that not being heard in a group made him feel like an outsider:

> It comes to a point in your life that you really feel like an outsider because when . . . when you are a part of the group and they are all talking, and you are trying to express yourself, but you can’t or you cannot follow the conversation, you know, it really, it makes it more, like, more shameful, I think.

Juan, who, as a student, was always gregarious and confident in class, struggled to communicate when he was learning the language. The reactions of others to his language overwhelmed him at times. He often walked away from conversations in frustration:

> I struggled in that because I want to say things, that for them to understand what I want, really, because I couldn’t come out with some words that could be interpreted in different ways in English. And, and sometimes they laughed to me because they thought I was saying things that wasn’t appropriate, and stuff like that, and, so that also I was kind of intimidated. So, I didn’t want, I didn’t want to talk no more. So I just decided, you know what, forget it. I walk away.
Their use of language radically changed the ways in which many participants saw themselves and the ways in which they interacted in groups. They believed themselves to be limited, voiceless, and unable to fully demonstrate who they were and what they could contribute. Their use of language also influenced the ways in which the participants were received in their environment. The participants, as demonstrated by the stories of Rose and Asuka, were ignored and judged based on their language skills. Responding to this caused some, like Juan, to walk away from conversations initially, believing that they had to overcome to succeed in the process of language socialization. This lack of social status and acceptance motivated many to continue to improve skills so they could regain a sense of who they were and their ability to demonstrate their knowledge.

Communicating Independently: “I can answer myself.” (Rose)

The drive to improve communication was largely seen as a way to demonstrate their knowledge and to share their opinions. The participants indicated that they were motivated to improve their skills so that they could be equal partners in a conversation and to show others that they were educated and they could share their experiences and their thoughts. It was telling that many participants experienced a need to prove their knowledge to others. This loss of identity as a knowledgeable or educated person was a struggle that they were motivated to overcome. Zofia described conversations at work:

Sometimes I feel that we are considered not real partners in a conversation, like when we are talking, let’s say, at work, I feel like I am not a partner when people are conversing like Americans. I can’t express. I can’t pronounce it very well even though I know in Polish how to say it, and I can talk about the subject for five hours, I can say just one sentence. So, we are . . . I think I am not a partner. Eh . . . she's just from . . . she doesn’t understand.
The limitations their language placed on their conversations were what drove some participants to improve their English skills. Many were motivated by the desire to speak independently and to express their thoughts clearly. As Mau shared, “When I speak English, I let the American people know my opinion myself. . . . When I speak, I hope they think, oh, this girl speaks correctly.”

Yaris also expressed a desire to share his opinions. He shared his experiences after almost five years of study and a dramatic improvement in his language skills:

You will be able to know people and speak with them, and you won’t look weird as I used to be. And also you will have confidence and express yourself and tell them what you think. Before, I just . . . I just . . . I was just hearing people talking, but now, sometimes I feel I am able to say stuff and give my opinion, what I think, and even debate.

Improved language skills allowed these participants the opportunity to be heard and to contribute to the conversations around them. Luz defined her improved ability to communicate as a way to share with others the things that she knows. This is a huge contrast from isolating herself in her home, which she did in her early days in the U.S.. Language development, for Luz, meant an increased confidence to interact in her community.

Beyond sharing ideas, language competency gives her voice in the community to speak out for her rights and to be a participant in community actions. According to Luz, “When you know the language, you can do a lot of things. You can fight for your rights. You can help others. You can just put your mind to something. Then you can just work your way out to do it.” Luz has made remarkable progress from her early days isolated in her apartment. In addition to earning her associate’s degree, she is a volunteer in the community on the Citizen Emergency Response Team (CERT). She worked in the community at events supporting the
local police and emergency services. Instead of experiencing her home as a prison, with her language proficiency, she is a voice in the community. This desire to be heard and to speak for themselves proved to be a motivating factor for many participants. They needed to demonstrate their knowledge and worth to their communities.

Career Identity: “They were not willing to listen to me; they didn’t know I was able to do something better.” (Yaris)

In addition to facing personal identity challenges, participants described their loss of professional identity when they moved to the U.S. For the participants who came after having completed degrees in their native countries, this loss was devastating professionally. Regardless of their qualifications, participants worked in minimum-wage positions in factories or in domestic positions such as cleaner, caregiver, or babysitter when they first arrived in the U.S. Yaris, who had earned a master’s degree in accounting in Algeria before moving to the U.S., was not prepared for this reality. He reflected on his first position working in a factory where nobody spoke English:

I had to work in the factory, at the minimum wage. And it was terrible. First, for the, I never thought that I would end up doing that, working in the factory with crude people, people who doesn’t speak English. So I started questioning myself. What am I going to learn from here? Just learn how to fix the doughnuts? What? And it was like you were in a high level, you were at the university, talking to people well-educated, and you end up working with the people using bad words and in their language.

Yaris was not alone in the belief that he had lost his professional identity. Zofia came at the age of 26, after completing a law degree. She had worked hard in Poland to change her path from her original placement after secondary school in a technical career to a career in law. She
recalled the moment when, still in Poland, she chose to take a different career path and her dedication to this goal:

Women sitting, woman by woman, doing the same thing over and over, year past year, probably, some of them have been doing this, I don’t know, 15 years, maybe longer. . . . They were sewing for Armani, Versace, and they paid very little. So that was the moment when I decided I am not going to do that. I have to start learning. And I prayed a lot, and I learned, learned, learned. Every day. It was like, I even tell myself, I have to be like a *mili*, like a soldier. I’m on a mission. I have to sacrifice, and I really was working hard, every day, staying up sometimes until two, three o’clock in the morning. Get up early because I had to catch up.

She believed that, because of this focus on her education, she would be successful:

Since I had a good education, I thought I would be a successful person, and all of sudden here, no language, you have to clean houses. HORRIBLE. It is like, you know, like a bird in a cage. You are closed. You can’t, you can’t go anywhere without language. Yeah, you can clean, you can take care of kids, and what else? Elderly people, you have three, four options, and all the education, everything, it is gone.

This reality changed how she viewed herself, and she expressed frustration at the effort that had gone into moving from the technical program preparing to be a seamstress in a factory in Poland to graduating as a lawyer. It was difficult to accept that all this work had been wasted:

I came here, and I felt like I am nothing, literally nothing. I swear, it was so hard even to process it. I was supposed to be a lawyer, and I am cleaning houses, and I am, like, my gosh, all the years, the money, everything went down the toilet. It is a very hard feeling.

Brigitte simply said that she did not “deserve” the type of work that she started when she came to the U.S.. She, like Yaris, did not expect to work in a factory for minimum wage. When they arrived in the U.S., the education and the experience that they had achieved through their efforts had lost its value. The reality for each of these individuals was that without an improvement in their language skills, they had no way of demonstrating the knowledge they had gained from their education.
Although this was not a universal reaction, many participants in the study who were in the labor market were motivated to improve their professional lives either by regaining positions in their past professions or by beginning studies in a new field. Given the population, students who had transitioned to academic English coursework, this group seemed to have confidence in their ability to improve their professional identities. Yaris approached the task by enrolling in bookkeeping courses along with his language courses. Although the courses would not provide him with information that was new to him, he argued that he would be learning the vocabulary of his profession through these classes. He believed that he had dedicated the first five years since he arrived to learning to communicate. Now, he was working to improve his professional skills. He shared an experience he had at his first internship:

I’ve seen problems in the accounting department, and I couldn’t explain them. I couldn’t tell them. I could’ve, I could’ve saved money for the company at that period, but I couldn’t say anything because of the language, and I tried to say stuff. They were not willing to listen to me, or they didn’t know that I was able to do something better. They didn’t have an idea about my knowledge.

This experience, when he knew he could make a positive contribution to his employer, was unable to share his ideas, and his employer was unwilling to trust his knowledge, motivated Yaris to improve his skills. Professionally, he needed to be able to demonstrate his expertise in order to convince his employer that he could be trusted with more responsibility. He described ways in which he was preparing himself to regain his professional status:

The only thing I need is to speak clearly, to express myself, to express my thoughts. . . . Now, I am not that good. I can’t . . . I saw myself . . . I saw myself in my work where I had to expose something to them, and by looking at their faces I knew when they understand me and when they are not. And I know where is the lack. The vocabulary. I know I have a lack of vocabulary. I know the accent. I need to work on my accent to make it soft, and I know also I need to be a good writer in my e-mails. I know also I need to work to be more professional in my job and learn the accounting stuff that I need to learn for my [degree as a] CPA [certified public accountant].
Although Yaris expressed hope in regaining his professional status, others, such as Zofia, Kasia, and Katia, did not expect to return to their previous careers. Instead, these participants elected to study for personal reasons or to enter other professions. Katia, a literature professor in the Ukraine, understood the challenges she would face in her profession based on her skills:

I need more practice, definitely, more practice. To find quickly, the very abstract word, this terminology, to find it quickly, I need more practice. This is maybe one of the reasons they want native-speaking English. [sighs] It depends what you teach.

Instead, she worked as a caregiver and cared for her grandson as she developed her language skills. What was important in her journey was that she was aware of the consequences of her decision to come to the U.S.:

I was a teacher, I was, um, and then I became a . . . I was a caregiver on the weekend. Sometimes it’s hard, but I always, how do I say, and it’s my vision that I choose it. I knew that. I knew that I won’t be a literature professor in Harvard [laughing]. I knew that.

Retired from her position in the Ukraine, she missed her professional life and looked initially for opportunities to teach Russian. Eventually, she came to school because, in her words,

I feel well when I study something. It’s like bread for me. It’s something cultural . . . I didn’t have the society to communicate, the cultural. I think it was cultural, for me it was the cultural environment. It was the most intellectual environment for me.

School, and interaction with instructors, provided an intellectual environment for her, and in a small way, helped her regain a sense of her professional identity. Not needing to develop a career in the U.S., she decided to study to support her daughter in her career. After completing her college-level English course, she studied and earned her real estate license with the intention of creating a small family business.

Similarly, Zofia did not expect to return to the legal profession. Similar to the participants in Vitanova’s study (2005), her goal was to improve her skills enough to enable her
to work in a more professional environment than her initial days cleaning homes. Currently working in a bank, she refused to accept the narrative that she was not qualified or intelligent enough for professional positions:

I don’t care, you know, they can’t put you down. I mean, they try, but I don’t let myself, you know, be down all the time. Sometimes, maybe it will sound bad, but I think I am smart, I know I tell them all the time that. Sometimes people are like, oh, yeah, maybe you shouldn’t apply for this job, blah, blah, blah. . . . No I’m good.

Another pattern that emerged from the discussions was that of individuals who were motivated to enter academic or career programs for the first time. These participants included both traditional-aged students and older students coming back to school after lay-offs or other personal challenges. Similarly, this group worked to overcome some of the barriers that they encountered in the classroom, including being placed in ESL classes prior to college-level classes. Juan recalled coming to the college to enroll in classes and meeting with an admissions officer who became a mentor in his life:

I do my placement test, and I am writing. I am writing. The way I am talking, I am writing. 600, 600 words. They only wanted 500, but I wrote 600 [laughing]. So, a couple days later, he asked me, you know what, I don’t know what kind of English this is. [everyone laughing] . . . So they sent me to Level 7. To ESL, they sent me to ESL. . . . In that moment, it didn’t discourage me. They give me more motivation to continue, and I put myself in that mode that I would, I was going to do it because I was already taking classes for my regular career, human services, but you know what, many people will get discouraged, I didn’t, I . . . that . . . that, to me, opened my eyes that I need to do something.

Being placed in ESL was an indication, in his mind, that he was lacking in some skills necessary to his success. Instead of being frustrated, Juan’s reaction was to work harder to achieve his goals. He improved his writing skills while taking courses for his counseling degree. This fighting attitude had supported him through the challenges he had faced in his journey to
earn his associate’s degree and supported him at a local university where he earned his bachelor’s degree.

Without a Compass: Lessons Learned

The participants in this study shared the disorientation that resulted from moving to a new environment as an adult. Although acquiring a new language and interacting within a new culture were identified as motivations for the participants, they often were delayed or relegated to a secondary position in relation to the immediate need of finding employment and a way to support themselves and their families. This reality was central to all the stories of the participants. These travelers operated largely outside of the privilege of the international student who has, as a primary purpose, the motivation to learn the language and interact in the new culture. As a result of this need to survive, many worked in positions that underutilized their knowledge or education. Even the younger travelers who came as high school-aged or college students—Minh, Ana, Lizzy, and Brigitte—found themselves questioning their sense of who they were in this new environment as their identities as competent learners were challenged. These travelers described the effects of this move on their own sense of identity and on the ways in which others viewed them in their new environment.

Although they expressed frustration at this “loss,” this group displayed the fortitude to maintain, regain, or reposition their identities in their new environments. This process, for most, was more difficult than they anticipated, especially for those who wanted to re-establish previous professional identities. Supporting to the findings of Norton and Toohey (2001), participants described the difficulty gaining access to and participation in professional conversations that
would have supported their ability to rebuild professional credentials. Instead of accepting the repositioning of their identities, participants shared the ways in which they worked to position themselves professionally (Hall, 1990; Pavlenko, 2001).

Some participants, instead, chose to reposition themselves and, in the cases of Zofia, Luz, and Kasia, enter new professions to expand their opportunities beyond the traditional jobs filled by immigrants and to careers aligned more closely with their own sense of identity. Some worked actively to deconstruct the stories created by others who underestimated their value, such as Yaris, who wanted to prove his professional knowledge and ability to do more than basic tasks. As he said,

They didn’t have an idea about my knowledge, and they got me there as an intern just to do the cleaning for them. To do the cleaning of paper, just help the accountant, just to organize the papers and play with the calculator. Just to add up, to add numbers. But three months later, they found out that I can do something better than cleaning.

Similar to other participants, he wanted to demonstrate that they were more valuable than just the “clean-up crew,” that they came with experiences and skills that were valuable.

These stories indicate the considerable effort required to reconcile one’s sense of identity upon entering a new environment. The findings also demonstrate that every participant, in some way, was challenged by this lack of identity in his/her new environment. For these participants, who were able to transition successfully to academic coursework, this involved a resolve to regain previous professional status, the determination to retrain to create a new professional identity, or an opportunity to improve skills for personal identity to interact in the community competently.
Summary: Starting the Journey

This chapter has illustrated some of the characteristics of adult language-learners and highlighted the challenges that are regularly faced by immigrants working toward language socialization and integration into their new countries. As demonstrated by the discussions of the participants, starting and remaining on the journey to academic language socialization requires the successful negotiation of a number of barriers. The participants were aware that they would face challenges on this journey, yet few were prepared for the reality of integrating in the environment both culturally and linguistically.

The first major challenge immigrants faced was establishing a stable environment. In this stage, participants faced the harsh realities of meeting their basic needs. Regardless of their prior education or experience, participants took positions in low-paying positions, including factories, domestic work, and caregiving. As detailed in their motivations to immigrate to the U.S., language expertise or development did not enter into their process. The need for and attention to the development of language expertise was based on their sense of stability for themselves and their families. In this stage, it was not uncommon for participants to work to build the initial skills required to survive and to begin working, indicating that their language socialization needs were constantly changing, based on their physical needs. The importance of this stage of the journey, which sometimes lasted far longer than originally expected, was the motivation and ability of participants to move beyond it to develop their skills when a semblance of stability had been attained and to set goals requiring language development.

After establishing a secure environment, participants had to be resilient as they adjusted to their new communities. Although they did share the excitement and the hope of the
opportunities presented to them in their new country, many also shared the fear and isolation that they experienced in their communities. Navigating this new environment proved to be difficult for many participants who lacked language skills or the ability to access available resources. Finding and accessing resources to build skills proved to be an important step, yet it is critical to acknowledge that this process often occurred years after their arrival in the country.

Another reality in the process was the presence of challenges that often sidetracked or delayed progress. Many of these “bumps in the road” are common for adult learners who may lack resources. The participants shared situational factors, such as transportation and the need to support themselves, and, in many instances, to help families in their native countries. Beyond these common barriers, participants described the walls that they experienced in their communities, based on their proficiency of the language and their cultural competency. To be successful, participants had to face these self-described weaknesses and to continue to interact in meaningful ways in the community.

Finally, participants highlighted the toll these challenges took on their sense of identity. A common theme in the focus-group discussions was the experience of being less of a person because of the lack of language expertise. The challenge of not being able to answer for oneself or being limited in one’s interactions with others can be debilitating. In addition to experiencing this frustration, participants had to absorb the judgments of others of their skills and their worth in the community. In order to move from this status as an outsider, participants had to be willing to practice their skills in this environment.

In order to continue on the journey to academic language socialization, participants faced and overcame a number of challenges. As these participants attested, adult immigrants must be
resilient in the face of these barriers if they want to remain motivated and regain their sense of identity on this journey.
CHAPTER 6
EXPERIENCED TRAVELERS

The previous chapter shared the overwhelming challenges faced by participants as they integrated into their new environments and began the academic language socialization process. The impact of the many challenges and barriers they faced was a topic chosen by participants to share in focus groups and, from discussions, was a critical component that had to be mitigated or overcome in order to gain the expertise to reach their language goals. This chapter shares the victories of these experienced travelers.

The first section focuses on components that contributed to the investment of participants in their academic language socialization. It begins with turning points that participants indicated as pivotal in many of their stories. These events or realizations served to motivate participants to dedicate, or rededicate, themselves to their language development. These events also provided the motivation that many needed to persevere and overcome challenges. Once back on the journey, the section also analyzes the underlying goals or principles that sustained this motivation. In the interviews and focus groups, there was usually a rationale, a reason, for this renewed or sustained motivation.

Section 2 shares the environments and supports that motivated participants deemed critical to their success in their pursuit of their studies. Many credited the nature of the adult education classroom as a safe environment to build skills and confidence. Other participants
were blessed with guides or mentors who shared expertise in the environment, encouraged them to continue studies, and bolstered their morale. This section also examines the personal characteristics of the learners and the ways in which these characteristics also supported their success.

The final section is focused on participants’ transitions or arriving at their destinations. It details some characteristics of successful travelers who have reached their goals of academic-level English competency and shares the renewed sense of identity that participants experienced as they gained the skill to communicate more expertly in English. Participants detailed how this expertise provided skills and confidence to continue academic coursework or to interact in more meaningful ways in their environments.

Turning Points and Motivators: Getting Back and Staying on the Road

Participants in the study ranged from less than one year to more than 30 years living in the U.S. when they participated in the learning community courses that transitioned them from ESL classes to academic English classes. Some started to work on their skills as soon as they arrived in the U.S., but many others, as chronicled in earlier sections, began to work and did not have the opportunity, or perhaps the perceived need, to begin studies. A number of participants indicated that they were able to survive within their communities with their language skills and largely operated at work and socially in their first languages. Others highlighted barriers that interrupted their progress through their academic language socialization.

One theme that emerged from the meetings was that, for many, there was a trigger—some life event or change in perspective—that motivated them to go back to the classroom and
to study in earnest. Some of these participants had started and stopped classes, and some came for the first time. The triggers or turning points occurred for a number of reasons. For some participants, the trigger was a crisis or life-changing event that necessitated an improvement in language skills to maneuver in this new environment. Others came for personal reasons. They were determined to make a change, to improve themselves in some way, often to ensure a better future for themselves and their families.

Once back in the classroom and determined to gain the requisite skills to transition to academic-level coursework, the participants discussed the factors that helped this group maintain their motivation. Given the literature in adult literacy, which indicates that students regularly stop out—interrupt education for a variety of reasons—or drop out of programming, understanding motivating forces is critical to these success stories. The participants in this study, as demonstrated in the “Bumps in the Road” and “Without a Compass” sections, were not immune to the common challenges faced by the adult learners, and their paths were not unlike other adult education students. In fact, one characteristic that was shared by most participants was the number of detours that they took in the process of transitioning to academic-level English.

Based on the stories of these participants, it is rare for learning to be uninterrupted. What is unique about this group of travelers is that, eventually, they were driven or motivated to succeed, and part of this concept of success was transitioning to academic-level courses in English. In describing this renewed sense of motivation, participants varied in the reasons for continuing in the classroom. After exploring the turning points that were instrumental in the stories of these participants, this section also explores the factors that sustained this motivation.
Participants reported being motivated for personal success, for the future of their families, for academic credentials, and to advance in a career.

Crisis: “So that woke me up very quick, that made me realize that without any education, you cannot advance, nowhere.” (Juan)

One major impetus to coming back to study for the participants was some type of crisis. For the adult learners in this study, this event was reminiscent of the theory of transformative learning whereby an adult is faced with a disorienting dilemma, critically reflects on the crisis, and affects change through the process (Mezirow, 1981, 1997). For the participants in the study, these crises included the loss of a job, divorce, losing a spouse, addiction, incarceration, and being taken advantage of on the job. Prior to these life-altering events, the need to acquire academic-level English was not the top priority of most of these participants. Juan’s story was not uncommon. He had a supervisory position and was making a good living. Juan narrated his story:

I think my turning point in my life was when they laid me off from my job. And the job that I used to do is a management, I couldn’t find that job anywhere as a manager because I didn’t have no education. So that woke me up very quick that made me realize that without any education, you cannot advance, nowhere. So, I, I didn’t know what to do. I was thinking what, what should I do? And one of the things that motivates me a lot is to volunteer. So when I do that, it makes me feel that I am . . . I don’t think about myself, but I think about others. So when I was thinking about that, when I was in a soup kitchen helping. Why can’t I go to school? I need to go to school for something . . . I need to go to school for something that I really love.

In thinking about this job loss, Juan reflected on which activities were meaningful and fulfilling in his life, and after being in the U.S. for over 30 years, he chose to improve his English language literacy and pursue a career in counseling. Without this crisis, he would have continued in his job without experiencing the need to improve his literacy skills in English
because he was satisfied with the status quo and would not have been motivated to change. Prior to his crisis, he was able to maneuver in his environment with the language skills that he had acquired, which were predominantly oral skills. Once faced with the challenge of retraining, he was motivated to improve his skills.

Similarly, Rose did not focus on her language development because she believed that her role was to support her husband in his career. He traveled around the world for business, and she worked by his side. She expressed an interest in improving her skills, but her focus was always on the business. This changed when her husband became ill and passed away leaving her to survive on her own. She was emotional as she shared her experiences:

After my husband passed away, I noticed I need more effort, rich or poor, I need to have an education. I always want to, in America, [to enroll] in the school, but my husband don’t like it. I need to travel with him. So I always support him; he is the first priority and making money and the income. But after he passed away, I have nothing and I need a job, so then I say, why I just let him put him first instead of myself? Now I am in a bad situation. I cannot go back to Hong Kong, and I don’t have a job in the U.S. And I don’t even have a green card. I even don’t have the citizenship. So that’s why I say, I have to go back to school.

Through conversations with Rose, it was evident that she believed that, in order to maintain her status in the eyes of her family, she had to improve her future prospects by studying for a career. When she had focused on her education and started taking classes, she remained enrolled until she completed her coursework and earned her Computer Numerical Control (CNC) certifications. Fiercely independent, Rose knew she needed to acquire a level of English to support her educational and career goals and to maintain her status for her family.

Lizzy was also motivated to return to the classroom by a similar story of loss. Although not through death, the loss of her husband changed her life completely. She was married and
raising her children. She was comfortable in what she called her “middle-class” existence. She described the motivation for her change:

I think it’s been struggles, more struggles. I divorced 12 years ago, and I was, I guess, part of the middle class where I had enough, more than enough than what whatever I had had back in Mexico. So I was very comfortable with that life. And when I got divorced and I ended up with nothing, it was traumatic. I think that was one of the things that made me wake up. That it shaked me. Seeing myself and my children under an unfinished basement. And I was working, and it wasn’t enough to survive, and then finally, I got a job that it was cleaning. Okay, but I wasn’t happy with what we was doing because it was hard work and I was getting home almost sick. Almost feeling like with fever, and I was so sore, and so it was really hard, and I, it was, I mean, making my, I guess making my, I guess it was my living, so that I could survive, but I wasn’t happy with that, and I couldn’t see myself in that place day by day.

This struggle led her back to school to get her GED and then to ESL to support her in her transition to college-level composition. As a teenager, she was not interested in school, as the focus was on working and helping her family. Now she wanted to provide a good example for her children so that they would continue to pursue their education, and she also wanted to change her own image of herself:

I think it’s more personal. At the beginning, it was seeing everything around me or seeing my children without the things that they had before, but now it’s just, . . . I made it personal. Now it’s “who am I becoming?” And I’m growing as a person, not only because I’m getting my education, I’m starting to feel little by little better, you know, the person that I am, so that’s the motivation to be a better person, to become a professional and to get something better for my life.

Monika also faced a crisis in her life that altered her entire existence and led her back to the classroom. An immigrant from Poland, she came with the American Dream to find success in this country. She started a cleaning business and employed a crew that worked to clean office buildings. Due to a series of personal problems including the murder of her husband in Poland, she became an alcoholic. One day, she woke up in the Cook County jail; she was told that she had started a fire in her apartment. After 16 months in jail, she was sent to a mental-health
facility for three years. It was during this time, struggling with both the legal and mental health challenges, that she realized that her language skills were not sufficient to help her navigate these institutions in the U.S.:

Big challenge start[ed] in Cook County jail because . . . um . . . well, I make communication with people, but I don’t understand a lot of professional words, what they are using in court system or doctors. So I always ask for an interpreter, you know, always somebody translate for me, and I just wanted to make sure everything will be correct, so the problem start in Cook County jail, but really, they not offer any education program, it’s like wasting time.

Although she did receive support through the services of an interpreter, she felt helpless in advocating for herself because of her lack of knowledge of both systems and her inability to follow the technical language. When Monika was released from the mental-health facility to independent living, she knew that she wanted to make a change in her life. Although she had survived, she knew that her skills were not sufficient. On the advice of her case worker, Monika came to the college to improve her language skills:

That was the turning point for me. When I recognized that I lost everything what I had. No material things, no place to live . . . um . . . worry about everything. Worry about my future, and I just, every day, I said, where I’m going? What I want from my life? . . . They release me in April, and I never look back. In June, I come here and took the test and applied for classes, registered for classes, so that was in June 2011 . . . I had a feeling that I want to do something. I wanted to write, and I don’t want to waste more time because I understand that I live in the U.S. a very long time. I communicate with people, and I had just feeling that it’s enough for me.

For Juan, Rose, Lizzy, and Monika, these major events altered their paths. Prior to the crises in their lives, they operated successfully in their environments with the language that they had acquired in the community. It was not until these major events occurred that they perceived the need to expand their skills to improve their lives. For other participants, such as Yaris, the crisis was connected with their position in the community and their professional identity.
Although the crisis for Yaris was not life-changing, the experience reinforced his goal to reestablish professional credentials in the U.S.. He had begun to take accounting courses at the college, and he had arranged an internship that he found in an accounting firm. He was optimistic that this opportunity would lead him from his work in the factory to future professional opportunities. Instead, he worked for the owner for the firm for a month and was never compensated. Being taken advantage of proved to be his turning point. After this negative experience, he decided that he would complete his studies and that he would not put himself in this situation again:

Actually, there was a turning point when I worked for one month for free for this company, accounting company. I was recommended by a friend, and I went to this automotive financial service company in Melrose Park, and I was driving from here to there. And we talked about the job, and I was doing the job for him, and he said, I will pay you, and we never talked about the pay. I thought, at least he will pay me minimum wage. At least I got something to start from, and after a month, after he got done with all the stuff that he wanted me to do for him, he texted me, and he said, you can take a break, and I will let you know if I need you. And from that point, he never called me. I tried to call him, he didn’t pick up. I tried to text him; he didn’t answer. . . . I kept doing that for a month, and this guy, he didn’t, he didn’t pay me anything, and there was a promise that they will hire me. That’s why I reduced my hours in the factory, and I end up losing both sides. . . . I was, I was like, the word rage, oh, I was dying inside, and I want one day to become a CPA, and go to him and shake his hand, thank you for giving me the motivation.

The crises faced by all these participants motivated them to evaluate their situations and to make conscious decisions to change; they were determined to rewrite their narratives instead of accepting their current stories. Although they indicated that they were surviving with their language skills, all saw language as a key to their transformations. This determination that they could alter their circumstances and change their outcomes was a quality shared by these participants and their main motivation to begin or continue their studies.
Family Support: “It’s a miracle that I can do this.” (Katia)

The turning point for other participants was a need to support their families. In most cases, this support was not necessarily monetary. It was to advocate for a child, to support a grandchild, or to be present after school to support the education of a child and facilitate educational enrichment opportunities after school. Navigating institutions is a daunting task for immigrants as it requires both the knowledge of technical terminology and an understanding of the culture of the institutions. Immigrants often find themselves needing a guide or interpreter to negotiate these institutions. which can be damaging to self-image, especially for adults who come to the U.S. with education and expertise from their native countries. Faced with the need to interact in these institutions, the participants in this section expressed their goal to improve their skills to be able to operate independently and with more expertise.

Katia originally came to school to be intellectually stimulated, to be able to participate more fully in conversations. She continued her studies because she found she needed to support her daughter and her grandson. She called her turning point a “mission.” Due to a medical condition, her grandson was approved for a medical trial in Italy. Because her daughter supported the family, they decided that Katia would accompany her grandson to Europe. This “mission” was only possible if she could operate in English, as the medical staff in Italy could communicate in English, not Russian. This motivated her to continue her studies. She became teacher, interpreter, and parent almost exclusively in English. She shared a small story about their experience:
I am on a mission now. It’s not easy. I am never relaxed. I am alone here. For example, just [a] small story. It was last week. I lost my passport. I lost my passport. I went online, filled out the form, report government about I lost my passport, and next day I found it. I called the government site and they said that if you report, it cancelled. You don’t have valid passport anymore [laughing]. Today, we went to the embassy, American Embassy. They made new passport for me in two hours. And I talked to council. I talked to all the personnel, and then I thought, it’s a miracle that I can do this. I can’t imagine that before I could do this.

Although supporting her grandson was not her initial motivation for returning to school, it became an important factor in her ability to handle the communications for his education and medical care. Without language skills, Katia, a confident and educated woman, relied on others to help her negotiate her new environment, which was demoralizing. Developing her skills increased her ability to support her family and share her knowledge with others.

Similarly, Kasia’s turning point was the realization that she needed to be an advocate for her child, who was born with Down’s Syndrome. She shared, “She had all the therapies. We had all the doctors. So it’s just technical things. And it was sometimes, I wanted to ask something, and it was hard.” Her skills were better than those of her husband, yet she still experienced a need to improve them to be able to participate fully in decisions with doctors and therapists. Her frustration was feeling that she received only a basic version of the options for her child. She attributed this to her language skills:

[speaking about doctors] They don’t, sometimes they don’t have that time and are not patient when I am trying to explain something what I want to know, so I think, yeah, that was the point that kind of turned that I need to learn more English, like higher English, and maybe when I will take classes in specific subject, this will push me as well to learning, not just that communication English, which I can survive on a daily basis, but something more.
She believed strongly that she would be the communicator for her family because her husband worked in a Polish environment and had less opportunity to develop his skills. As her daughter entered the public school system, she realized that she needed to be her advocate in the education system as well as the health system, which fueled her determination to improve her skills and her knowledge about these institutions in the U.S..

The motivation to return to coursework for many participants, as illustrated in these histories, was attributed to an event or trigger; this event shocked them into making a change in their lives. Other participants described this renewed motivation as more of a process that they wanted or needed to make an improvement in their skills. Instead of a singular event or crisis, this motivation came from personal, academic, professional, and family goals for improvement.

**Personal Motivation:** “Now, I have just different feeling. I just want to learn more. I really pay attention for my personal growth. Who I wanted to be, what I want to do, how I can improve my English. How I can have better communication with people.” (Monika)

For many of the immigrants in this study, their motivation to improve their language was maintained because they saw language and the ability to communicate as central to their personal growth and self-worth. They shared their frustrations of not being full participants in conversations in the community and with colleagues at work because of their limited English proficiency. Zofia shared her thoughts about the effects of limited language skills: “Not being able to express yourself, you’re like your own prisoner. You can be very successful among your own people [the Polish community], but we always will be on the edge, kind of, of American people.” Limited language proficiency disconnected participants from the community and
limited their abilities to contribute at a level that they expected of themselves in a conversation. The ability to be part of the community and to participate in conversations is critical to language socialization (Norton & Toohey, 2001).

This desire for personal growth, the decision that they needed to make some type of change in their lives, was the impetus for the renewed sense of purpose for some participants. Prior to returning to school, Mau had focused her efforts on her family by helping in the family business and raising her daughter. She had taken ESL classes in the past, but she did not study seriously. After her daughter was in school and independent, she decided that she needed to improve her skills. She didn’t experience an event that convinced her to return; instead it was years of believing that she could not fully participate in conversations with the friends of her husband. She described her frustrations communicating with the friends of her husband and daughter, who did not always understand her. She recalled how, before she took classes in social situations, she would “sit like a Barbie doll and won’t understand what they are talking about.”

In addition to speaking, she also lacked writing skills in English:

My husband kept telling me, you write what you said, like when you speak. So I am speaking; why I still don’t know how to write. So I said, oh, maybe I need to go to school. Like that, so it popped up in my head, so I said, okay, so I go to school. . . . I don’t know how to write, and all is wrong. So my husband said, you are wrong, so that’s the reason.

She further described this motivation:

I want my husband, also, proud of me, like when he goes with me to introduce his friends, so he doesn’t have to, “What did she say?” You know, I want to be able to communicate with his friends. And I want that he is proud of me so, . . . oh, you can speak English; you know that’s part of it.

Mau expressed a theme that was repeated in focus-group sessions, which was the way in which language determined how one was valued in the community and how this affected self-
esteem. If, as Mau mentioned earlier, language is a way of determining if a person is educated, not being able to demonstrate education because of accent or limited vocabulary must be damaging to an individual. Although Mau did not aspire to transition to college classes to complete a degree or technical program, once she started classes, she never missed a class. Her goals were personal, and she indicated that she never thought about quitting, even when she was challenged with academic-level coursework.

This personal motivation to communicate on a more advanced level was, for many, a way to share their backgrounds and knowledge. Without advanced language skills, the participants were unable, in their opinions, to reveal their true selves to others. This loss of self, which was explored in “Without a Compass,” was a major motivating factor as participants grappled with regaining their sense of self and with demonstrating their value to others. Their language skills were intimately connected to the ways in which others viewed them, which was often uneducated or unable to contribute. Minh saw language as a method of demonstrating his self-worth to the community:

I think of when I am here and I know English, people will accept me like a person. I can use my voice to define who I am, to say what I want, what I am thinking. So that is a big word, to really become a person here.

This statement of being accepted through competent communication was also shared by Luz, who described her motivation:

Self first. To be able to communicate with others and don’t just keep your thoughts to yourself because even you do not know the language, you know a lot. But if you communicate with them, then you share your knowledge, share your thoughts with other people.

These participants needed to be seen as intelligent contributors; they needed validation from others that their opinions were valuable. Asuka spoke about her conversations with her
mentor and her desire to expand her skills: “Then I realize[d], oh my English . . . still need[s]
more practice to talk smoothly, so then I wanted more share, . . . or I want[ed] to tell her more
what I think.” Asuka and others recognized the need to expand their skills to integrate more
fully into their environments and to demonstrate the skills and knowledge that they could
contribute. This desire was particularly important to the participants, who, through their
academic and professional status in their native countries, were seeking to maintain their senses
of status and identity.

Another personal motivation for many was connected with the participants’ drives to
challenge themselves to succeed. This drive was an inherent part of the personalities of some
participants. Rose connected this need to do well in her desire to demonstrate to her family that
she had made the right decision to get married and move to the U.S.. She was emotional when
she shared: “I just have to continue. I cannot lose.” This was also her approach in her studies.
She needed to prove to everyone that she was serious as a student and driven to succeed. Yaris
shared that he always challenged himself to improve. His motivation was largely derived from
comparing his progress as he improved his language and profession. He shared his approach:

I always try to put myself in a challenging situation. That’s what keeps me going. And,
and I always talk to myself and thought, if you cannot do it, go back to your country. Go
back to your place and stay there. But if you want to find yourself, who are you, you
need to fight and to keep going.

This personal drive to succeed and to demonstrate their self-worth was the key to maintaining
motivation as they were challenged in their coursework.

Katia likened learning new things to nourishment; being in an academic environment was
like “bread” to her. Once she began her studies, she was motivated to remain because the
environment “fed” her need to learn. She was particularly drawn to the possibility to interact intellectually with peers and instructors. She described the value of the environment:

I like to learn something. And it was like, for me, I feel well when I study something. It’s like bread for me. It was the most intellectual environment for me. And communicate with the teachers. The teachers were the most intelligent people in my surrounding. I think this is the reason.

She shared that she did not have to compete to get a better career or worry about earning enough to survive. Instead, Katia was trying to put herself in a comfortable environment, academia. A scholar of Russian literature, learning was integral to her professional life, so she gravitated toward language-learning because it offered her an opportunity to interact in a familiar environment.

**Academic and Professional Motivation: “I made it personal. Now it’s “who am I becoming?” (Lizzy)**

The decision to improve skills in order to pursue an academic program or to ensure better career opportunities was the most common source of motivation for the participants in the study. Once individuals had mastered the skills to communicate in English and built some stability in their lives, they often searched for ways to improve themselves and expand their resources, and for many of them, this required a more advanced knowledge of the language. This motivation included reestablishing professional credentials for some participants and pursuing new professional and educational opportunities for others. Some participants, such as the educated participants in the Vitanova (2005) study, gained language expertise to reposition themselves into different, yet still valued, careers. Others, such as Yaris, worked toward earning the credentials they held in their native countries.
Although the participants looking for employment upon arrival in the U.S., all described the ability to secure a job; even those with substantial education found themselves in manual labor positions, housekeeping, or as caregivers. Positions were usually low-paid and physically demanding. This lifestyle, which is the reality for many immigrant families, was a reality that many, such as Ana, wanted to alter. As she said, “I didn’t want to work all my life to be working in a place.” In her case, it was a minimum-wage job. Moving beyond this type of employment was a struggle for many. As Juan indicated, “A lot of us, the Spanish speaking population, we give up so easy because of the English barrier, because we need to work, we need to take care of our families. We, we quit success.”

Ana, who admittedly followed the pattern of starting, repeating, and stopping classes that is common to students in adult literacy programs, decided she was going to focus because she was not satisfied with her current opportunities. She acknowledged that language was a barrier, and she began to work on her skills:

I stopped for four years, and then I came back, but I was taking ESL classes, and I was taking ESL classes, but I didn’t, I never took them seriously. I took, I think, Level 6, I don’t know for how many times [laughing]. I don’t know what happened to me that I woke up and I said, I don’t want to be repeating the same level again and again. Uh-huh, and I said, I am going to take everything seriously. I am going to . . . I am going to make, and I start to make goals also, and that was when I decided to take the ESL classes seriously, and I decided to continue with the education.

Ana had a history of interrupted schooling, including a two-year break in her high school education when she immigrated initially to the U.S. to live with her siblings. She also acknowledged the importance placed on earning money to help support her family both in the U.S. and Mexico. Her observation of her lack of professional opportunities, given her current skills, motivated her to start taking her language development seriously.
For many participants in the study, education was seen as a way not only to improve work prospects but also to change their position in the community. Minh expressed his goals: “I want[ed] to come here because of my education. Because I want[ed] to know more about the world. I want[ed] to be a better person.” Similarly, Lizzy, who started learning English much later in life, after having children, saw English as a way to grow both personally and professionally:

I’m growing as a person, not only because I’m getting my education, I’m starting to feel little by little better, you know, the person that I am, so that’s the motivation to be a better person, to become a professional, and to get something better for my life.

Furthering education was seen as a means of changing the narrative for many participants who had settled in the U.S. and were limited in their options for employment due to their language skills. Juan, who had consistently dropped out of previous classes, shared his thoughts on returning to class:

That motivation, I think it was more for . . . that I want to be somebody, . . . I didn’t want to come back to the same thing that I was doing. The challenge that I put in my life was that I was going to try my hardest to be able to continue. And I think that was one of the first things that I put in my mind that I have to try. If I don’t try I won’t have no results.

Although Brigitte worked in a warehouse for two years when she first arrived in the U.S., she was determined to not allow this work to define her life. She reasoned,

When I started working, I was doing, they would pay me eight dollars, and nine dollars, and I was like I am so young, I won’t continue working and get that, I mean that amount. . . . I was thinking of like having a good, like bigger idea, or why I don’t have to go to school and have a better job and get good money.

This experience cemented her decision to work toward a different future and encouraged her to return to college to pursue a goal she had when she was a young woman in Cameroon to study for a career in the field of healthcare.
The professional limitations due to language proficiency were a major barrier and motivator for participants in the study. This included individuals who had completed educational programs in their native countries and individuals who were entering programs for the first time. Regardless of their past experiences, most of the participants underutilized their expertise in their employment laboring in low-skill and low-wage positions because their skills were not recognized in their new environments. They all expressed the necessity of increasing their language competency in order to reach professional goals.

For Family: “I knew that if I, uh . . . don’t speak English, I won’t communicate with my grandchildren, you know, it will be lost for me. So I started” (Katia).

Personal, academic, and professional successes were common themes that motivated many participants to focus on their studies. In addition, the importance of family figured prominently in the stories. Fulfilling the goals and dreams of parents and creating new dreams for their children drove participants to develop their skills. Many adults expressed the desire to offer opportunities that they had not experienced to their children. Respect for family and for the values held by their families sustained these participants through the challenges they faced. This dedication to the dreams of family can be seen in the stories of Brigitte, Yaris, and Minh. They credited the strong values and dedication of their parents to their own success. Born in a traditional family, Yaris lost his father at a young age. In his village, young widows often remarried and left their children with grandparents. Yaris was dedicated to his mother and her dreams because she chose to devote her life to her children instead of starting a new life. He described his motivation:
I always wanted to be successful for my mom because she said she gave up her life for us. When my dad passed way, she could go and leave us to my grandma and to get married again, but she decided to sacrifice her life for us, and she never, like, started a new relationship with anyone. She never thought about leaving us. So she said, I sacrificed my life for you, and I want you to, for us, and she wanted us to be successful. I always wanted to make her happy.

Yaris continued to push himself to study because his mother always told him that if he succeeded in life, she would succeed. This desire to fulfill the dreams of family was also a motivating factor for Brigitte who shared a similar thought. She came to the U.S. as a refugee not long after her mother was tragically killed in an accident. Her mother had worked hard her entire life as a vendor to provide a good life for her children. After two years working in a factory, Brigitte was determined to fulfill the promises that she had made to her mother:

My goal was learning the language. Since I was young, I want to be a nurse, and it’s something that I promised my mom, so that was my motivation. I have to go to school, learn the language, and do some career that I like.

Minh also expressed family as a motivating factor in his focus on academic language. He recognized the sacrifices that his parents had made to provide a better life for his sister and him. Although he was not initially interested in leaving Vietnam and starting a career in the U.S., he cited family and his culture instilling a strong sense of respect for elders as factors in his motivation. Speaking about his parents, he said, “They influence me by telling me what is the good things and what is the bad things. So education is the best thing that they think I should have. So I figured it out that, yes, I need education.”

Julia also indicated that her family was instrumental in her motivation to return to school and study to transition to college-level classes. She had a good job with good pay and benefits in the afternoon shift. Although she was satisfied with her position, she wanted to find an option that would allow her to actively support her daughter’s education:
I work in the afternoons and the night and she goes to school in the morning. So we only spend a little time in the afternoon, and I feel like she needs me, like, for right now for homework, events. She has assemblies and I can’t bring her. . . . So, I think if I get my degree, I can be an assistant teacher. And now, with the new contract, I can earn as much as I am earning right now, and I will be in the morning only on the school days that she has, which I think is good.

She also attributed her motivation to learn English to the values of her family who supported her through an accounting program in Mexico, and her desire to share these same values with her daughter. Her determination was to model success for her daughter. She shared her thoughts:

I think also I want to be like a sort of type of inspiration for my daughter, so she can go in college and do well. So, I can tell her, I finished college, you can do it, too. . . . I want her to see that we can work and study at the same time to be a better educated person.

Julia spoke about her daughter throughout our interviews. It was evident that her daughter’s future is Julia’s primary motivation. Similarly, Luz continued to study to provide an example for her children. She was disturbed by the patterns in her community of young people dropping out of school, especially Latino/a children of immigrants in her district. When a close friend of her children and her godson decided to drop out of high school, she decided that this would not happen to her boys. She believed that her example would demonstrate that with hard work, they could do anything:

I am setting, like, an example to them, to my kids. . . . I think they are going to follow their goals until the end, to reach whatever they need to. To, like, to a good college, to get a career, to get a job because of the things I pass on to them, like, I am right now presenting to them. Like, when I am doing my homework, I say, do you guys have homework? Because I have my homework. I have to do my homework. And I always tell them, you need to do this and that because if you don’t do it, you are not going to get anywhere.

Her motivation to be successful was a desire to see the next generation, her children, succeed.

This desire for a better standard of living for the next generation motivated many of the students
who were working hard to get ahead in the U.S. The focus of success, for this group, was to see their children complete higher education and, as Luz shared,

I always tell them, you don’t want to work hard like your dad. He works in construction. From, sometimes from five in the morning to eight or nine in the hot weather, cold weather. So I always tell them, you should study.

She also reminded them that they have the advantage of pursuing these dreams in their native language while she is accomplishing hers in a second language. She indicated that her sons see her work ethic every day. Luz shared the following passage with her focus group, indicating that it was critical to her success in her postsecondary coursework in the U.S. It illustrates how important her example of hard work was for the future of her sons:

I feel proud, proud of myself. I want to teach my kids that they can do anything if they pursue their goals or dreams, no matter how far they go or how hard they think they are. If they put their mind and the work into it, they can do it. Like I was trying to teach them, that even though I am not that good of a student, I’m not that smart in the class, I do it, I do my work, and I try to go on and on. So I am proud of myself.

The family, from the stories of the participants, was an important source of motivation to improve language skills. This factor was seen in the young immigrants who had seen the sacrifices that their families had made to bring them or send them to an environment that held opportunities for their futures. This motivation was also a guiding principle for future generations. Providing an example for the next generation, for the future of their families, was a motivating factor for parents who had worked hard to ensure that their children would lead better lives. In either instance, family was at the core of their continued efforts to increase their own language skills.
Turning Points and Motivators: Lessons Learned

The stories of the participants demonstrate that their motivations for improving language skills were as varied as their own lives. As highlighted in the previous sections, the literature on the pattern of adult learners in literacy programs, including English language-learners, is to begin and drop out of courses, sometimes repeatedly (Greenberg et al., 2001). These stories confirmed this pattern for many of the participants in the study, who were often detoured by necessities in their lives, related to their families or economic necessity. This pattern, which could be seen as problematic, is a reflection, in these stories, of individuals meeting current needs and reacting to their current environments. The importance of these challenges in the narratives of the participants was that they all were resilient and had found a path around the road blocks on their journeys to resume their coursework. This section examines turning points or triggers that encouraged participants to resume education. Findings indicate that many of these learners reached points where they determined that their skills were not sufficient to meet their current needs or goals.

The pattern of interrupted language development shifted for participants because of these turning points in their lives, which brought critical changes that sustained their motivation in language development. In focus groups, participants shared these stories and attributed their investment and success to these changes. Similar to the story shared by Kasia, their stories show that their skills were no longer sufficient to operate competently in a new arena, for Kasia, to communicate with medical and educational professionals. Faced with the realization that language development was instrumental and would appreciably change their situations, they maintained the motivation necessary to meet their goals. These participants evaluated these
changes and determined that they had to reposition themselves to operate successfully in this new environment.

This turning point may be precipitated by a crisis, such as incarceration or loss of a long-term career, but these narratives also indicate that people often reach a point in their lives where they decide that they need to make a change. Without this turning point, participants did not know whether they would have seen the need or been sufficiently motivated to expand their skills or stray from the status quo. They attributed the motivation to sustain efforts to improve their language literacy skills to the change.

Although some turning points are easily defined, such as the loss of a job, other shifts or changes were more gradual. For many, it was a realization that survival or building stability, which was the goal for many upon arrival in the U.S., did not fulfill their dreams and that they were now ready to challenge themselves. Participants cited personal, family, and professional motivators that maintained their efforts. At this point, possessing basic skills to survive, many reverted back to their initial dreams of success, education, and self-realization. They envisioned success, if not for themselves, then for the next generation that would benefit from their efforts.

Guide Posts: Support on the Journey

Given the challenges and the barriers faced by language-learners, it is instructive to consider the supports that the learners discussed as critical to their journeys to transition to academic-level English classes. In a study of adult learners in community colleges, Spurling et al. (2008) found that only 18% of adult English language-learners ever transition to credit classes. There are many reasons for dropping out of classes, including many of the detours
discussed in an earlier section. In addition to being detoured and delayed, many learners may leave before transitioning because they have reached their personal goals and are not interested in academic-level coursework. When they have achieved a level of competency to operate effectively in their professional and personal lives, many end their studies. The stories of the participants in this study also demonstrate that the process of learning a language may evolve in stages in which a student may obtain a goal and stop until they reach a point where they perceive the need for more advanced language development.

This section examines the supports that the participants identified as important to maintain their investment in language learning. Availability of supports and the agency to access and utilize them has been suggested as important to transition (Becker, 2011). This section looks at supports from an institutional perspective, and it examines the personal characteristics of the learners to try to identify themes in this group of successful participants. First, it reviews the classroom environment and the characteristics of the programs that learners indicate have helped to develop and maintain their confidence in their academic studies. It also examines the value of having the support of a guide or mentor on the journey, which was instrumental in the continued enrollment and success of a number of participants. These guides were both individuals at the college and individuals from the community that provided local knowledge that supported enrollment and transition. Finally, it looks at the characteristics that participants revealed as necessary to maintain the investment to transition to academic-level English.
The learning environment, to this group of adults, was the most cited and critical factor in their persistence and success. Participants suggested that the adult ESL classroom created a safe space where their goals and challenges were shared, cultures were respected, and their feelings understood. Participants also expressed confidence in this unique environment that allowed them to try out their developing language skills without the fear of making mistakes. This desire for a safe space was mentioned by participants who came to the classroom with a wide range of educational experiences before entering the adult ESL classroom and participants who lacked extensive educational backgrounds. Participants who were enrolled in other classes at the college emphasized the differences they experienced between the two college environments. A common thread in the focus groups was the importance of being in an environment with their peers, who were also language-learners, to foster their learning. This finding is significant as reticence to communicate in front of others, including peers in the classroom, has been identified as a barrier to language-learning in adult ESL students (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015).

Sanctuary: “I was a little confused, with no language skills, and when I was in the classroom, for me, it was like my tribe.” (Katia)

According to the participants, the formation of this community or tribe was instrumental in their learning process and in their adjustment to a new culture. Intentional community building in the classroom created a space where the participants in the study were confident to display their communication skills, even if they were struggling with a skill. This environment, according to participants, contrasted with the intolerance that many immigrants encounter in the
community. Yaris came to the U.S. when he was awarded a visa from the Diversity Visa Lottery Program. School, for him, was a safe haven. It was one place he could go that seemed secure and comfortable. He described the importance of this space:

I came here alone and I had a . . . I had these terrible times outside of the school by myself, so the school was, for me, like a house to go into, to talk to people, and especially the teachers here and the people . . . And school was a good moment for me. And I have learned a lot of stuff from school, and whenever I felt alone, I would just come here, even I don’t have a class.

Outside in the community, they were conscious of their limitations and their struggles. Inside the classroom, they could relax because they knew that, according to Kasia, no one would ridicule them if they made a mistake or said something incorrectly. She shared, “I think I was more open because I felt more comfortable in the ESL classroom.” In the adult ESL classroom, participants indicated that they did not feel like outsiders, which was a common experience for these students in their daily lives interacting in the community. This environment, according to the focus-group discussions and interviews, allowed participants to relax and concentrate on improving their communication skills.

**Shared Experiences: “We are the same level, same page” (Yaris).**

Participants reported a sense of camaraderie in the classroom because they all shared the experience of moving to a new country and the need to learn a new language as adults. This shared goal was seen as an equalizer for Juan who spoke about the experience:

When you are in the class and everybody is a foreigner, you look at each other like it’s the same. You don’t look at, like, you are smarter than I am because we are all in the same boat, and we are all rowing at the same time.
Although participants differed in their language skills and their motivations for transitioning to academic-level English skills, they all shared the desire to improve their communication skills outside of the class. According to Kasia, “Everyone wants to learn, everyone wants to be understood outside, not just in the class.” Katia, who had strong receptive language skills, lacked confidence in her ability to communicate outside of the classroom. She described a speaking class assignment of ordering food from a drive-thru window and how difficult it was for her to get the courage to complete this task. She thought she was alone, but when her classmates reflected on their experiences in class, she learned that others shared her fears:

I realized that not only I do have these problems. People like me [other ESL learners], they also have it, which is ridiculous for you, maybe, and for others. They just don’t know that I have this problem because it is obvious that it is easy to go. Now it is easy to go to the drive-thru. Even if I am wrong at this radio, I can repeat, . . . but before, I didn’t even come over to this radio.

This idea that others share the same struggles and insecurities was a comforting experience for many students as they often considered themselves as being the only person unable to communicate fully in their environments. This concept is common in adult learners who are often reticent to share their language struggles because they believe that their challenges are unique. Displaying their lack of competence to others, for adults, can be damaging to their self-image (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015). As evidenced by Katia’s comment, this insecurity prevented her from even attempting a task. Provided with a safe space where they can share their experiences, in the classroom, these anxieties about communication skills seemed to dissipate as participants realized that others made the same mistakes as they did and struggled to speak, read, and write in English. Openly reflecting on these feelings and insecurities was
critical to these individuals as it revealed their shared experiences. This environment, where participants shared this common immigration narrative, replete with familiar struggles, facilitated learning as participants were able to develop their skills while maintaining their positive self-images as intelligent and expert learners.

This safe environment described by participants was not, in their opinions, found in “regular” classes at the college. The participants, who were all in the process of developing language competency, were concerned about their perceived shortcoming in the other classes that they attended, which hindered transition. Brigitte began her studies in developmental English classes at a community college, but she was not comfortable in the class as she often felt like an outsider. She described the experience when she moved into the adult ESL environment: “I was really happy. I can tell in the way I was feeling that day, like be around other students who have the same issue like me.” Although she had met the prerequisites to take the English composition class without support, her advisor encouraged her to make that transition with the adult ESL cohort. She was amazed by the different atmospheres that she experienced in these two environments. Brigitte indicated that this respect for each other enhanced the communication in the class, and she contrasted this with the communication in other classes:

I think the communication was like—it was so different than like American, somebody who was, people who was born here and people who come from international, different countries, so it was like, we kind of, you know, understand each other. Like, you know, it was, the communication was so easy [laughing].

Although there was not one student who spoke Brigitte’s native language in her cohort, she maintained that the students communicated because they shared a respect for the cultures in the classroom. This respect, she indicated, was due to the shared histories of the students in the class. All had left their countries as teenagers and adults and were working to adapt to a new
language and to understand the norms of a new culture. This respect appeared to have lowered her anxiety allowing her to communicate easily with this group of colleagues.

In addition to sharing a common learning goal and histories of immigration, the ESL classroom, according to many participants, was an environment free from discrimination based on their country of origin. This perception of openness to all groups is also in contrast to their experiences in the community where they often experienced discrimination. They expressed the belief that the ESL classroom was one where all nationalities were respected and worked together. According to Julia,

> We treat everybody with respect, and we, I think, I believe everybody respected the cultures and the different backgrounds or thinking. Even though we are not the same nationality, in the classroom, in ESL, we become one. Everybody is interrelated with each other and help each other, . . . sometimes you see discrimination against one to another one, but in the class, everybody helped each other.

This respect for difference modeled in the classroom acted as a bit of an oasis for participants as they did not always feel this same level of acceptance in other environments, such as at work or in the community, where immigrants are often seen in a negative light or treated as outsiders.

**Having a Voice:** “In ESL, I started to speak. I didn’t speak really before . . . I read . . . I, I hear, but I never speak really.” (Katia)

The previous section shared the importance of being respected and comfortable in the learning environment. Participants shared that this comfort, which they did not encounter in other environments, provided the self-confidence that many needed to use their voices to share their thoughts in their classes. This reclamation of their voices was attributed to the lack of judgment by peers of their skills. Kasia, a college graduate from Poland, shared a sentiment
about the comfort of working with peers who are also developing language skills: “It’s easier in ESL because you know that all people came to learn English and they have; . . . like, they do mistakes, they don’t judge you, they don’t . . . I don’t know, kind of on the same level like you.” Juan, a gregarious student who always appeared confident participating in class, shared his thoughts about participating in the adult ESL classroom:

   It’s okay to make mistakes because we are all learning. . . . I always made mistakes, but I felt comfortable because I didn’t feel ashamed. I didn’t feel like you are going to criticize me or anything because other people that were there, we are in the same part of learning, and that makes a big difference.

This sense of shared needs and goals encouraged the development of community in the classroom, which supported the persistence of these students. This community, unlike other spaces, provided an environment that allowed participants to take risks. It gave them a space to use their voices without fear of making a mistake or mispronouncing a word. This environment served to lower anxiety, which helped to build language skills as they developed academic-level writing and vocabulary.

As mentioned in the previous section, a number of the participants contrasted this sense of community to the “regular” college classes that they had attended both before and after their transitional course. A notable difference, according to the interviews, was a feeling of being alone in their development and an unwillingness to contribute to class because of how they might be judged by other students. Ana described her experience in her college classes: “I do feel different because sometimes I feel that I am the only one in the classroom that doesn’t speak English properly, and sometimes I am afraid to ask questions; the teacher will not understand me.” Kasia admitted that she also felt inhibited in her English 102 class:
If I will try to say something and I can’t. It’s still me who is rethinking everything too much, but I will, unless I know exactly what I want to say, exact words, I will not speak up just to think in front of others.

Given the demographics of the community college where the study was conducted, a Latino-serving institution in a community with a large immigrant population, this sense of being alone in language development, is likely unfounded, but the feeling of being the only one with this development was echoed by many participants.

**Guides on the Journey:** “If Delores didn’t keep calling me to come back to school, maybe I didn’t come back here because it’s tough.” (Asuka)

As highlighted in the stories of these travelers, their journeys included continued setbacks and struggles. Faced with these challenges, it would be easy to give up, to settle for the status quo. Participants, especially those who had faced barriers in prior education or in the transition to their lives in the U.S., shared that they needed support to continue in their studies. This support, as previously discussed in the barriers section, may have been to find transportation or access to childcare to continue studies or supports to overcome other situational barriers. Some participants were able to access resources in the community with the help of friends and family who had already negotiated these organizations. Other participants credited mentors as instrumental in helping them navigate the educational system and resources in the community. These mentors came in many forms: professionals in the college and community, family mentors who had already completed coursework, and volunteers at local organizations.

The mentors provided resources and knowledge; they supported them when they were unsure of their abilities to cope, and they encouraged them to continue their studies especially
when they became difficult. Mentors often served in the role of cheerleader for the participant. These supporters kept them motivated and encouraged them to remain in classes when they were faced with barriers, including their own lack of confidence in their progress. Asuka described how her mentor, Delores, who was also an immigrant to the U.S., gently guided her:

> When I quit Level 6, Level 5, I couldn’t keep motivation, but then, at that time, I could, if Delores didn’t keep calling me to come back to school, maybe I didn’t come back here because it’s tough. She did. She called me many times. Come here, you don’t need to take a class, just come here, just I want to introduce you to a new friend or something. No . . . she didn’t give me a pressure. Just come here.

Asuka cited the patience of her guide as a motivating factor in her progress over many years as she moved from being largely isolated in her new environment to gaining confidence and interacting in the community. Delores, her support, was persistent in calling her back to study as she started and stopped several times over the years. She coaxed her back when Asuka was unsure of her progress. Delores, who was a tutor at the college, became, in Asuka’s words, like a grandmother to her. She shared the sense of comfort she had with her mentor: “I couldn’t speak English at the time, but I somehow feel that I talked to her. My mind is all clear with her, what we are talking about.” Asuka shared, “She inspired me to, how can I say, she motivated me to keep coming.” She believes that without this support, she wouldn’t have finished the ESL programs and transitioned to academic-level English. Even after her death, Delores remains an inspiration for Asuka, who is dedicated to helping other women, like herself, to adjust to the culture and language. Now she would like to be like a “bridge” to help others, like herself, adjust to environment by helping them, as Delores helped her.

Similarly, Brigitte credited her church family for inspiring her and her brother to return to school and to get a degree. As refugees, this family supported them through their adjustment to
the U.S. They provided institutional knowledge that helped both Brigitte and her brother, who was working on his bachelor’s degree, with information on school enrollment, financial aid, and transportation. Brigitte was focused on work, on finding a way to help support her family. The woman from the family encouraged her to return to school: “She was kind of worried, like, oh my god, you are so young. You have to go to school.” This conversation led her to her first classes at a local community college.

Juan also credits a professional at the college for his guidance and support. After losing his job, he walked into the college looking for a change. Like other nontraditional students returning to school, he was not confident. He stated, “When I walked through the door [at the college], I was shaking.” He was unsure that this was the correct path for him. “I was thinking that I wasn’t capable and able to continue my education. When you live in fear for a period of time, like 10 years, that fear gets into you.” He recalls that as he considered leaving, a gentleman saw him and asked if he needed help. Juan said, “He took me, and he just saw me like, I know you need help, man. Like that. And he grabbed me, and he took me to his office.” This guide, the director of admissions, assisted him through the enrollment process. Juan reflected on meeting his mentor and recalled his words to him that day: “As soon as you walk into these doors, you make a commitment that you want to be somebody, and that, right there, was the motivation that I had.” The presence of a guide helped Juan overcome the real fears he had about academic work as his history was of failure and dropping out of school. In their first meeting, Juan shared his transcripts with his mentor and completed a writing test. He laughed as he recalled this experience:

I brought my transcripts from . . . I laughed because he opened it and it was all Fs and Ds, and he looks at me, and he’s like, Mr. Juan, how about we start you from the beginning.
And you know what, but then I don’t know if I am doing it right. I don’t know if I want to be here. He says, as soon as you walk through that door, you are able to do this. And he started talking to me, and every time, even though I walked away from there, he called me a couple times, and he said, well, come on. We are waiting, we are waiting for you.

He realized, with the support of the guide, that he needed to build academic writing skills through ESL classes. Instead of being frustrated, the guide reminded him that this was his path to success. Years later and at the point of graduating with his associate’s degree, Juan recounted this story and confirmed that this guide was the reason he began classes. Without him, he did not think he would have started on this journey.

Brigitte, Monika, and Juan credited their mentors with the initial motivation and confidence to start classes. They were the catalysts to start them on their journey. Monika, similarly, had the assistance of her caseworker, who supported her while she was on supervision from the hospital and court systems. Her caseworker told her, “I think you should take English as Second Language classes in community college. And they release me in April, and I never look back. In June, I come here and took the test and applied for classes.”

In these shared instances, the students attributed their success, in part, to the support of a guide, which suggests the importance of individual and sustained contact and support throughout the learning process, especially for adult immigrants who are unfamiliar with the postsecondary education system and culture in the U.S.. These students, and others who mentioned the guidance of family members who had already navigated the system, faced many common challenges encountered by adult students, including balancing career, family, and school, but they also shared the challenge of insecurity in an unfamiliar academic environment. This apprehension was mitigated by the guidance of these experts of the American education system and culture. In addition to mentors, instructors were mentioned as helpful in handling challenges.
encountered. The critical factor seemed to be the availability of a trusted individual to communicate with when challenges arose that required outside support.

**Tools for Successful Travelers:** “I believe that everything is possible, if you really want to achieve something.” (Zofia)

In addition to the supports that participants identified at the institutional and community level, they also shared the ways in which their personality traits contributed to their success. When sharing the passages that they had chosen as critical to their success from their interviews, participants highlighted characteristics about themselves that supported them through their coursework and to academic-level English classes. These characteristics included both positive qualities that were part of their personalities and emotions that they had to overcome to achieve their goals. Although these characteristics were only one component of their success, they confirm the research of scholars (Ward et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2008) who highlight the value of personal factors in the acculturation process. Included in these factors is the personality of the individual. In analyzing the passages chosen by participants, the value that they placed on these characteristics of their personalities figured prominently in their successful transitions. In focus-group discussions, participants shared that they were persistent in their goals, driven to improve themselves, and confident in their abilities to succeed.

**Persistence:** “I will not quit.” (Julia)

A characteristic that was common in many discussions was that of persistence. Regardless of their backgrounds, every participant was faced with barriers to learning that they had to overcome to persist in their studies. In addition to overcoming language barriers, they
persisted through the arduous process of adapting to a new environment and culture. Persistence through these challenges was instrumental in their successes.

The source of this habit of persistence, for many, was the values they had from their families or their upbringing. Julia shared that this was a trait that she learned from her family, a sentiment shared by many participants. Her family had survived in Mexico through hard work and often in difficult conditions. She said quitting was not something that was allowed in her family: “Even in the struggle of the life, they don’t quit. Even if they have to work, like, in strenuous conditions for a low pay rate, they still don’t quit. They are still going to support the family.” She recalled that she had once wanted to quit her studies to come to the U.S. to work and send money back to Mexico to help her family. This was not something that her parents allowed. She described her outlook on quitting:

Something you start, I will not quit. I will continue. I may fail, but I will not quit. I don’t want to quit. They maybe fail me or fire me, but I am not going to quit. It’s a lifestyle. You have to be a survivor; otherwise, you are stuck in the bottom just wondering why you cannot be better.

She maintained this attitude with her daughter and the activities she started, saying once they began an activity, they had to finish it. This attitude supported her transition through academic English, which was difficult, at times, for her because of her limited knowledge of academic English vocabulary, grammar, and writing conventions.

This trait was shared by many participants who indicated that, although they had faced challenges, they understood that this was part of the journey to their goal of successfully transitioning to academic-level English. Brigitte also expressed this drive to persist, even in the face of challenges. She stated, “I never give up. I faced a lot of stuff but I believe I can do it.” This strength was instrumental in their journeys. As they faced challenges, they maintained the
belief that they would overcome any barrier to become successful. Zofia emphasized the need to believe in one’s ability to achieve one’s goals. She shared her philosophy: “successful people – they don’t quit. Whatever people say, they don’t listen. They believe in themselves.”

As demonstrated in the passages above, many persisted to reach their own personal goals, but others indicated that they did so to set a good example for their children. This focus on the future was important in the stories of many participants. Luz described why she works hard: “to set an example for them so they can do better than I and have a better life than we do, than we have right now.” Her goal was for her children to persist and to complete university degrees. She was dedicated because she believed that her persistence, which resulted in her successful completion of a degree, would demonstrate to her children that anything is possible with hard work.

Other participants indicated that they were motivated to persist in their studies because they were driven to improve themselves. As Kasia shared, “I always push myself to do better. I am never satisfied.” Participants shared that they always strove to improve their situations, and they were willing to work hard to effect the changes that they wanted in their lives. They indicated that they were not satisfied with the status quo and were motivated to constantly improve themselves. As Kasia shared, “I am not good enough, so I will dig deeper or try to do it.” Like Kasia, Rose reflected on her process when she was enrolled in classes. It was important to her, personally, to be seen as a serious student, so she confided, “I work harder than everyone else.” Her goal was for her peers and professors to take her seriously, to know that she was driven to succeed, and to this end, she advocated for herself and sought help when she needed support to reach her academic goals.
This drive to improve even when faced with obstacles built the character needed to overcome the many challenges they faced as they built their language skills. These trials were, according to Kasia, instrumental in building the character needed to succeed. As Kasia affirmed, “When you go through more education, you have met more obstacles, so you can go further even if it is difficult.” Instead of bowing to the challenges or settling for the status quo, these participants took on any challenges that they encountered on their journeys and understood these trials as instrumental to arriving at their destination.

Self-Confidence: “I am smart.” (Zofia)

Another characteristic that was mentioned by participants was confidence in their abilities and intellect. In the face of the doubts of others about their competence, largely based on their inability to demonstrate fully their knowledge due to language limitations, these participants did not allow the misconceptions of others to affect their sense of self. Individuals, who were able to maintain a positive sense of identity, even in an environment that did not validate their knowledge, managed to persevere to reach their academic goals.

The manifestation of this confidence varied, however, due to their professional and personal goals. For some participants, such as Zofia, who was trying to reestablish a professional presence in the U.S., it was important for colleagues to respect her abilities and intellect. She mentioned that some colleagues had discouraged her from vying for positions, suggesting that she was not capable. She replied: “I don’t care. They can put you down, but I think I am smart. I tell them that all the time.” Similarly, Yaris experienced the need in professional circles to demonstrate his abilities. He said that he had the skills to help his
employer, and his goal was always to demonstrate his value even with his limited language. Others, such as Katia, were not concerned about professional success, so her approach was markedly different. She had confidence in her abilities and knew, eventually, that others would come to understand her worth. As she reflected in her interview, she did not worry about the thoughts of others:

You know what, we are smart, intelligent people. . . . They understand who you are, in the end. Not at once, but step by step, they understand who you are, and if you are a Harvard professor and you are empty inside, they understand this, too. So, no, I told you, I never, I never reflect what people think about me. My motto, I heard it, people’s thoughts about you rent their brains for free.

Rose demonstrated her confidence in the focus group as having overcome her fear. She knew, based on the success that she had achieved through hard work, she can now take on any new challenge that she chooses. Rose described her current approach to new goals:

I don’t know [if] I will be successful, what do they call it, get [a] diploma or credit, but at least I don’t [feel] scared of English anymore, and I know I just need to spend time, I can continue to go to school. Maybe the interests I know, maybe interior design and anything so I don’t need to worry [that] I cannot go to school because of the English, and I don’t have that fear anymore.

Maintaining confidence is critical when faced with environments where one feels limited based on the ability to communicate intelligently and fully. Language limitations could lead to a feeling of incompetence or marginalization. These successful participants faced the misconceptions of others, but they did not allow these representations to diminish their sense of who they were and their value in this new environment. This self-confidence helped them maintain the motivation to overcome the attitudes of others and to achieve their goals.
Guide Posts: Lessons Learned

The personal characteristics of the individual students, including their persistence, drive for self-improvement, and self-confidence, are critical to the success of students in any classroom. The participants in the study confirmed that maintaining their confidence and being persistent in their studies contributed to their motivation to remain in programming and in their ultimate success. Participants who were able to challenge their negative positions in their communities and to set up counter-discourses (Bartlett, 2005, 2007; Norton & Toohey, 2001) remained invested in their studies and transitioned.

In addition to possessing characteristics that supported extended investment in studies, participants also credited mentors and the environment as critical to their success. The findings have demonstrated that the presence of a mentor or a guide was important for two reasons. First, immigrants are unfamiliar with the culture of the postsecondary education system in the U.S.. Immigrants, not unlike first-generation college students, need support to navigate the system and to understand the college-going practices (Becker, 2011). Second, they need someone to demonstrate confidence in their abilities, to keep them moving forward. These students, few with the resources that would allow them to focus exclusively on the academic work, regularly faced challenges and barriers to their progress. A mentor or guide helped them maneuver through these obstacles.

Finally, the adult education environment, from the focus-group discussions, proved to be the most important factor to the success of the participants in the study. Terms such as “sanctuary” and a “house to go into” and being with their own “tribe” indicate how critical this secure environment was to the transition of these students. Notably, participants such as Brigitte,
who had initially enrolled in developmental English courses as a route to transition to academic coursework quickly, shared the importance of being in a cohort of language-learners. Although not one peer in her cohort spoke her native language, she indicated that “the communication was so easy.” The participants’ shared history lowered the anxiety for students and allowed them to practice their skills without fear of being ignored, misunderstood, or ridiculed. This comfort is critical as reticence to practice language skills has been found to impede language mastery in adult ESL students (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015). Although they came with various forms of capital in the form of education and resources, every participant admitted to some level of insecurity about interacting in the college classroom and in their communities. The ESL environment gave these individuals a voice, an ability to demonstrate their expertise and knowledge. They built confidence in this environment to share their opinions without fear knowing that their peers would not judge them for any imperfections in their language.

Arriving at the Destination: A New Identity

The purpose of this study was to listen to the stories of a group of adult ESL students who had successfully navigated their language classes and had transitioned to academic English classes. My goal was to share the experiences and characteristics of this group in order to support professionals in responding to the challenges of these students and in designing environments that might support success. A theme that emerged from this group of peers was the transformation that they experienced academically, professionally, and socially because of their successful transition to academic coursework. Language, as posited by Norton and Toohey (2002), is more than an acquisition of a skill; it is a social practice. Language determines how
one is valued within a community. The arduous process of academic language socialization, for this group of participants, challenged their social identity, and the development of expertise, for many, served to redefine, in many ways, their positions in their communities. Therefore, this final section shares the reflections of these participants on how this transition has changed their lives.

Participants in the study reported some powerful changes in their images of themselves and their abilities to advocate for themselves based on their academic achievements. The successful completion of a college-level English class and the transition out of adult ESL classes transformed the participants in the study. For many, accomplishing this goal was a long-term project that had once seemed unobtainable. They shared the results of this accomplishment in their lives and in their interactions with others in their communities. More than a mere confirmation of their academic skills, this success, according to participants, changed the ways in which they spoke about themselves and their roles in their communities. It acted as a catalyst to set future goals and brought with it a belief that these new journeys were possible.

Accomplished: “It makes me feel that I am worth it.” (Juan)

With the acquisition of English skills, participants shared a renewed sense of self and confidence in their abilities to contribute in meaningful ways in their communities. This confidence was displayed in many arenas, including academic life, professional life, and social life. Participants were both astounded at the progress that they had made and, perhaps more importantly, confident in their futures. They acknowledged that they still were developing their skills, but this lack of perfection did not seem to deter them as it might have when their skills
were not as developed. Brigitte expressed her amazement at the progress that she had made from her start at the college when she was placed into developmental reading and writing courses to getting her associate’s degree. She came without any English language skills as a refugee, yet, with her renewed confidence, she was determined to be prepared to pursue her goal of a nursing degree. She described the confidence that she experienced in the classroom and in conversations:

When I see myself today, I can’t imagine that I have done, like, many things. . . . Maybe before, I didn’t understand, but right now, I don’t think it will happen because I know, at least, for one sentence, even if you use hard words, I mean hard words, our vocabulary list, I have an idea of what you are talking about, you know. . . . Yeah, the concept, at least the . . . I am going to have at least an idea of what you are talking about. I won’t be lost.

This certainty, that she is able to navigate any conversation or text, is a major accomplishment for a young woman who came with no English language skills and with the fear of negotiating the community and college culture. After completing the transition language course and beginning her pursuit of academic work, she knew that she had the English skills that would support her in her courses. She was aware that her skills were still developing, yet she had the confidence that she could survive the work even if she were to face challenging materials.

Similarly, Juan is a striking example of how academic language socialization can improve one’s sense of identity. Reflecting on his first day at the college—when he was certain that he would fail—to his status at the time of this study—having transitioned to a university to complete his bachelor’s degree—he has made remarkable strides in his education and his integration into the community. Although he was always confident speaking to others because of his more than 30 years living in the U.S., he lacked reading, writing, and academic vocabulary skills in English. He had attended college-level courses when he came initially to the U.S., but,
as a young man, he was not serious about his studies, and he was able to find meaningful work, at the time, without postsecondary education. Based on his academic history, he was proud of the progress he had made since he expanded his reading and writing skills. He shared his thoughts about his success:

To be able to accomplish what I am accomplish[ing] right now is being overwhelmed with happiness that I can, I just, I don’t know how to explain it, but it makes me feel good. It makes me feel that I am worth it. It makes me feel that I am able to accomplish things that I never thought in my wildest dreams that I can ever accomplish.

Language development, for these students, changed their outlooks on their abilities to succeed in an academic environment. Experiencing success at the academic level, which for many seemed unobtainable before the transition class, acted as the foundation for taking on additional challenges in their lives. Beyond academic competence, this success altered how individuals described themselves. Juan’s comment that this accomplishment made him feel like he was “worth it” demonstrates the connection between communicative competence for these participants and their definition of their value in the community (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015; Norton & Toohey, 2001, 2002).

Confidence: “I am in charge, independent.” (Rose)

In addition to the pride that the participants experienced on transitioning to academic coursework, these skills also supported their confidence in integrating into their environment in meaningful ways. Instead of being fearful, isolated, or ashamed due to their lack of communication skills, they were more confident of their abilities to navigate in their everyday and academic lives. In the focus group, Luz provided an example from a recent class that demonstrated the ways in which her academic language socialization had changed her
confidence and her reactions to feedback from others. The same day as the focus group, she had participated in a class discussion and was corrected by a professor when she said the word *católico* instead of *catholic*. She recounted her experience:

Today, the teacher, he corrected me, and I’m, I’m not. I was upset a little bit, but I, he is, “Ok, he is right.” He is trying to teach me how to pronounce the word. But I might have two different ways to say it, and that’s okay. In other times, maybe 20 years ago, I would be crying, like I was first in the beginning, and I asked for a sweater in Wal-Mart. I was crying, and I said, “I am never going to speak English. I am never going to talk to people.” But now, okay, he corrected me, that’s okay. He is trying to teach me how to do it. No big deal. Okay. Go ahead. Next. That’s a huge change. I got more confident. Yeah. Because I didn’t know how to pronounce the word doesn’t mean I don’t know anything, so that’s again my point. I know a lot.

Students who did not previously believe in their ability to succeed in academic coursework were fortified by the success they experienced in the composition course. As expressed in her quote, being corrected was no longer an indication that Luz was not educated as she had often believed when she started her journey learning English. She also was not ashamed, as she once might have been, of her use of Spanish in the classroom. Confident in her English skills, she accepted the feedback without emotion and moved on. This is a shift in her confidence in herself and her abilities. Juan indicated that: “the sky is my limit. It [the language] opens doors. Without education, you cannot go nowhere.” Although participants had previously seen themselves as different, as outside of the academic realm, they began to see themselves as part of the college, as equal to native students in their classes. Yaris shared his assessment of the change:

It is a big transition for many reasons. And one of the reasons that I can cite, first, go to the new environment, the college level, and meet native speakers and get to know another teacher who is using the college level, not like ESL, and also put yourself in a new spot, you are here, and you are not anymore, an ESL student. You are considered as everyone.
As indicated in his reflection, the movement from the adult learning environment to the “normal” college environment was akin to crossing another border. This transition gave participants a sense of integration into the mainstream college environment that they did not experience in adult ESL classes. Being treated just like anybody else, not as an outsider, was significant in building confidence in participants to continue their studies. This transition gave them a sense of belonging to the academic community.

In addition to building confidence in academic environments, increased language expertise provided the self-assurance that participants required to interact in the community in ways that were previously challenging or, in their estimation, impossible. Participants reported being uncertain about completing day-to-day tasks, such as communicating in stores or schools without the support of a friend or an interpreter. Simple tasks, such as ordering a meal, were often avoided because of the participants’ perceived lack of skills and concern about how they might be judged in the community. Acknowledging that their skills were not perfect, this newly acquired expertise reduced the level of anxiety some had previously faced and encouraged them to engage in activities and conversations that they might have previously avoided. Julia shared a simple example of interacting in the community. She recalled her reticence to contact a customer service agent to question a charge on her statement and how she thinks today: “Even though I knew a little bit of English, I was afraid of my pronunciation. Now, I know it’s not perfect, but I can try to repeat myself or explain in a different way or just smile and say sorry.” This comment displays a confidence that had previously eluded many participants. Julia now was certain that she could find a way to make herself understood in a conversation, and this fact seemed to eliminate some of the fear and anxiety connected with interacting in the community.
Instead of avoiding an interaction or enlisting a guide, she was able to operate independently.

Asuka shared a similar feeling of independence due to her academic language socialization. Although she was not interested in furthering her education, she wanted to be able to operate independently, without the help of her husband and friend, when selling her crafts or hosting visitors from her country. This independence was critical for the woman who had believed she was bound in a straightjacket, unable to move for so many years, in the U.S.

Asuka explained how this confidence affected her interactions:

Now, I could take my parents everywhere myself, and then I could drive to another state. Also, I can explain, for example, if we go to tour or something, downtown Chicago or something, I can explain for them directly... If I find a nice article or something in the newspaper, I could tell them more easily [about it]... I can tell them that this country is nice system or something. Japanese people don’t know [about this]... Next month, I will meet my parents in Hawaii, and then I will try to take them to sightseeing by a rental car, and then I try to do it by myself. Not my husband... So that is really something big for me.

As Asuka described her plan, the difference this independence meant to her life was palpable. Instead of depending on others, she was willing to venture out and lead, explain, and assist her parents and others. Instead of being “imprisoned” in her apartment, she was able to navigate through her environment and teach others about it.

Advocate: “You can fight for your rights. You can help others.” (Luz)

The last significant change that participants shared about their shift after transitioning to academic classes was an experience of empowerment. Many expressed the freedom of being able to speak out for their rights and for the rights of others. Rose shared that “knowing the language gives you freedom, the freedom to understand.” It allowed her to express herself and,
unlike her experiences in the past, she thought that now people would listen to her instead of smiling and walking away. Being listened to was critical to their integration in their environments; it made them feel like insiders instead of invisible, ignored, or valueless. For Mau, this freedom allowed her to participate in conversation and question others: “Now I can tell my opinion, about what they said, and now that I have a bigger vocabulary, if I don’t understand what they say, I ask right away, what do you mean?” Instead of retreating from discussions because of a lack of confidence in their abilities to make their opinions known, participants engaged in them and shared their thoughts. The ability to participate fully in conversations and to share opinions is critical to the participants’ integration into their communities. According to Luz, with these increased skills, “you are part of the community.”

In addition to the ability to integrate into the community, language expertise empowered participants to advocate for themselves and family members. This was expressed clearly by both Kasia and Katia who, because of the health needs of family members, needed to understand and be included in discussions about the therapies available to Kasia’s daughter and Katia’s grandson. As Kasia confirmed, “I need to speak to fight for my daughter.” She realized that her limited language when her daughter was born also limited her ability to question decisions and advocate for a plan that would best suit the family. Her interactions, although supported by interpreters, were limited because she did not have the words or the confidence to question decisions being made on behalf of her child. As her daughter approached school age, she realized that she would have to negotiate the education system, which was challenging, not knowing the culture of schools in the U.S., and she did not have the language to interact. Katia was much blunter about the importance of her increased language literacy: “I need these skills to
survive.” Speaking directly without the filter of an interpreter appears to improve their perceptions of their comprehension of interactions and, perhaps more importantly, alter their positions in that exchange. Kasia shared that after she had expanded her communicative skills, health professionals were willing to discuss more fully the options for her daughter because they knew she was able to comprehend the discussion.

Asuka, who shared the struggles she experienced and her feelings of being isolated when she moved to the U.S., viewed her increased language skills as a way to advocate for other immigrants like herself, others who were suffering from loneliness and isolation in their new environments. She likened her increased communication skills to a bridge. Being able to communicate to others allowed her to understand American culture and to explain her Japanese culture to others. Although at the time of the study she was not enrolled in classes, she described her new mission:

To connect, like a bridge, to the culture to culture, and then mind to mind, to share. It’s really important I think. It’s like a tool for me. Even though, when I sell these accessories [speaking about a small craft business she had started with a friend], all to American people, and then they ask me a question or something or . . . I have to tell them the right way, and then, if I can speak English, and then I can make, connect with them. And then also, if some knowledge or special skill, if there is no language skill, I cannot make a bridge.

This mission was personal to Asuka because she needed a bridge in the form of friends and college employees who encouraged her to improve her skills and learn about her new home. Her mentor, Dolores, was the true bridge that brought her out of her isolation and encouraged her to stay in school and improve her skills. She saw her current role as being a bridge for others, especially immigrants like her, who are struggling. Asuka shared her vision:
I want to be like Dolores, like helping the . . . ESL students from different countries. I already learned the process. I have experience. I want to share, and then I want to, if I can, I want to support somebody, if I can, who needs help.

Asuka believed strongly about giving back to other immigrants who would be navigating the same isolation that she experienced when she arrived. Although she did not have to support herself financially, she lacked the capital necessary, in the form of a supported environment and language expertise, to make an easy transition when she followed her husband to the U.S.. Asuka understands the critical need of having a guide to negotiate the challenges of communication and culture, and after transitioning to academic-level skills, she has the ability to use this expertise gained from the transition to guide others.

In focus groups, participants indicated repeatedly the importance of their current ability, derived from the improvement of their communicative skills and their confidence, to advocate for themselves and for others. This advocacy was demonstrated in the previous narratives in ongoing and critical tasks, such as advocating for a child in need of a myriad of services. The participants also shared specific instances in which their skills allowed them to question what they interpreted as unfair. For example, many indicated that employers would manipulate hours or work conditions in order to cut the pay of their employees. As Yaris shared, being an accountant, he was aware of the manipulations, but he was not confident in his verbal abilities to challenge the practice. In contrast, now, he not only can question unfair practices in the workplace, but he is also able to share his professional expertise when he sees an accounting practice that can be improved in his current position. Luz also shared a similar transformation in her interactions at work:

In the beginning, I didn’t speak anything, I didn’t say anything because, first of all, I couldn’t, even though I thought about it, and I said “no, it’s not fair.” And I saw
everything, but I couldn’t say anything and other reasons, but I learned more English and get the English level, the college level. Then, I be more powerful, and I say, yeah, I can do it. Even if it is not right, I am going to say it. So I started talking to them until the point that I am the person in charge of one area. So now I have more power. Now I can say. If I see it is not fair, I say, you know what, that is not fair. If they blame something on us, I tell them, no, it’s not right. I spoke to the bosses, and they straighten it out. You know what, this is not right. We . . . and I think this, so now I get more confident, and then I even talk to them like they are my friends. So I am not afraid anymore of them.

Monica also shared that she was comfortable to advocate for herself with landlords, counselors, and in the court system. Understanding the procedures and being able to interact intelligently in them transformed her sense of control in her future, which led her to pursue a degree in substance abuse counseling. Similarly, Zofia transformed from working in a domestic position to customer service in a bank. As she shared in her focus group, she did not allow the negative comments of others to alter her aspirations. When others doubt her ability to handle a new challenge, she tells them directly that she is capable and that she intends to reach out for new challenges.

**Arriving at the Destination: Lessons Learned**

These reflections demonstrate the loss of identity that many participants faced when they arrived in the U.S. and the transformations participants attributed to the acquisition of academic language skills. It is critical to understand that the loss of competent communication skills in the form of lack of language proficiency diminishes one’s voice in the community. The participants shared that this inability to share their knowledge, experience, or expertise altered the estimation by others of their worth in the community. At first, participants expressed a sense of being less than their former selves when they could not operate independently in their environments. Requiring support or interpretation for mundane everyday tasks was damaging for participants.
They were stifled because they had no words to express their knowledge or their opinions. In addition to lacking words, many lacked organizational knowledge of the communities. They did not have the expertise to navigate systems such as education, health, and employment services. Out of necessity, they worked in positions that underutilized their skills. They were often ignored or treated as if they were not intelligent enough to participate in conversations because of their accents or lack of vocabulary. Many participants shared that they were effectively shut out of conversations in their environments because they did not encounter others with the patience to listen to them.

Faced with these barriers, many immigrants find ways to survive, yet they may never reestablish the careers, reach their original goals, or utilize their many talents to improve their communities. This group of students, who had transitioned successfully to academic coursework, unlike the majority of students (Spurling et al., 2008), did not abandon their studies when they hit roadblocks or were detoured. Many had a solid sense of self. As Katia asserted, “We are smart, intelligent people.” Others, such as Zofia, disregarded the opinions of others because of this confidence. What was evident in the transcripts was a transformation in the self-confidence of participants as they became more competent in English and were able to participate more fully in their environments personally and professionally.

For participants, the successful transition to academic English was a confidence booster that supported interactions not only in the classroom but also in the community. Participants were able to use their voices to advocate for themselves and for others. Regaining their voices, participants interacted more readily in conversation or debate, they pushed for better opportunities at work, and they served in advocacy groups in their communities. Instead of
remaining isolated, as many described their experience before language development, they were poised to support others in their community struggling with the fears and insecurities that they experienced.

Summary: Experienced Travelers

The stories of the participants illustrate the many barriers and challenges that are faced by immigrants. The ability to navigate these challenges was key to the success of these participants who transitioned to academic-level English courses. This chapter looked at the motivators and the supports that participants shared as critical to their success. One theme of these stories was that development of academic language proficiency was a process that often took years and one that, in many cases, occurred only when the participant identified a need for change. These turning points were triggered by a wide range of events, from crisis to self-improvement. The common thread was the ability to pinpoint a moment of change. Prior to these turning points, participants shared patterns of starting and stopping their development based on their immediate needs or goals. The events shared by the participants motivated them to focus and complete their transition.

In addition to having a clear purpose for academic language socialization, participants shared that a supportive learning environment aided the development of their skills. Discussions illustrated two important factors in the classroom environment. First, the classroom should act as a “sanctuary” for the learners. It must be a safe space to allow for practice and the inevitable failure that comes with language socialization. Second, the classroom must challenge and motivate appropriately based on the needs and skills of the learner. Given the diverse
backgrounds of the adult learners in programs and the many demands in their lives, targeted instruction is critical.

Participants also acknowledged the importance of guides and mentors on their journeys. These guides came in many forms. Some were individuals in the community who helped them navigate their new environment. They also mentioned the support of academic guides, including advisors, tutors, and teachers who created connections with them and encouraged them to persist through their challenges. Having a mentor or a guide helped participants navigate through an often unknown education culture and helped to ease the transition to academic work in English. Creating an environment with personnel tasked to help facilitate transition is important to this process.

A clear purpose or goal, coupled with a supportive environment, provided the opportunity for success, yet individuals indicated that their individual characteristics and strengths supported the process. Perseverance and self-efficacy were characteristics deemed critical by the participants to their success.

The impact of a clear goal, supportive environment, and strength of character were evident from the narratives of the participants. Maintaining investment in the process of academic language socialization to the point of transition transformed these participants. Beyond the ability to communicate, they attribute their value to the community to this accomplishment. Through the process, not only did they gain communicative skills, but they also now indicated that they had a voice in their communities. With this transition, they were confident and independent.
CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION

Listening to the voices of the participants in this study was a valuable experience for me as a scholar but, more importantly, as an educator who endeavors to be reflective in my practice and dedicated to improving the experiences and the outcomes of the adults whom I encounter in my classrooms. This study has given me the opportunity to hear actively their stories and to conceptualize more fully the journeys of this group of 15 participants who successfully transitioned to an academic-level composition course at a community college. The study revealed the presence of significant road blocks that participants encountered on these journeys, and it has revealed some of the characteristics deemed important by successful travelers. In this discussion, I return to the questions posed by this study and summarize the findings. Also, this chapter highlights some overarching thoughts distilled from both the interviews and the focus groups in which participants shared the stories from their journeys that they had chosen as important to their success. After sharing these thoughts, I provide some implications of the findings for constituents in ABE with the intention of designing programs to promote transitions to both academic and career programs as these transitions would serve to expand opportunities for adult learners. Finally, I discuss the scope of the study and make recommendations for future research for this population.
I conducted this study with the following purpose: to investigate first-generation adult immigrant participants’ perspectives on factors that have led them to invest sufficiently in ESL programs in order to reach levels of achievement that would allow them to transition into postsecondary and career certificate programs. My approach was to collect narratives of the participants’ life histories and to ask the participants to examine critically their stories to explore factors that supported their transitions.

Language learning, as conceptualized in this study, is more accurately defined as language socialization. In the framework of the study, this is a socially constructed process that values the cultural-historical backgrounds of the learners (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Watson-Gegeo, 1992; Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2003). Language learning, from this framework, is connected with the identities of the learners as it is through language that individuals define themselves and it is through language that learners access or are denied access to social spaces in which their voices can be heard (Norton, 2013). The conceptual framework also acknowledges that the power dynamics and struggles of the social environment affect the investment of the learner (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

In distilling the stories shared by the participants, a number of characteristics in the narratives of these learners served to expand the concept of what is required for successful transition to academic-level language courses. The narratives also highlighted the characteristics that were integral to the success of this group of learners. Included in this study were individuals who, in many ways, possessed characteristics that support transition, yet a number of participants
managed, without this background, to transition. The following sections share what I have learned from the stories of these learners about transitioning to academic coursework in English.

**Diverse Backgrounds**

One theme that emerged in this research was that learners transitioning to academic programming, based on an analysis of these participants, are quite diverse in their education and experience prior to their entry into adult education programming. Although this finding in itself is not surprising based on the composition of students of grant-funded English language programming, what is instructive is that these participants, who have maintained investment in their academic language socialization to the point of transition, are a highly diverse group. In effect, acknowledging the diversity of this group of participants challenges the vision and expectations of adult ESL programs of the potential students who may successfully make these transitions and encourages adult ESL programs to look beyond some of the more traditional factors that have been utilized to predict student success.

Analyzing the factors that have often been associated with the successful language socialization in the research, including economic, cultural, symbolic, and linguistic capital, the findings demonstrate that, for this group of participants, these types of backgrounds or level of support were not universally found in the stories of these learners (Bourdieu, 1991). The findings are also contrary to those of a recent transition study with a similar population of adult ESL learners (Becker, 2011). In fact, the findings demonstrated that although most participants' stories identified at least one of the identified supports, with the exception of two participants who lacked any of the identified resources, only two participants shared evidence of all identified
resources: educational experience, resources, and a supportive network that assisted them on their journeys.

These narratives challenge the notion that programs can predict student success based on the backgrounds of the learners. The successful transitions of this group of students and their experiences in academic coursework question the existence of the “model” ESL student (McKay & Wong, 1996) in that these successful students came from both privileged and marginalized backgrounds. The diversity of this population confirms research on other language-learner populations, which conclude that “individual creative, discursive agency can make transformation of one’s social world possible despite the larger constraining, reproducing social structures” (Lin, 1999, p. 410). This finding suggests that the expectations and the scope of adult ESL programs should be expanded to include learners whose backgrounds lack some of the predictors used typically when setting goals for students. Although having cultural capital in the form of prior postsecondary education in native countries supported some participants who were able to transfer their academic and literacy knowledge to their English language learning, this background did not prove to be a necessary component for transition to academic coursework. In fact, this academic background was not a requirement of success or one that alone facilitated the language-learning process.

Instead of the more stereotypical definition of successful language-learners, these narratives suggest a more holistic view and acknowledge the importance of other attributes of the learners, including the ability to negotiate and position themselves in the social environment that facilitated the language socialization process. In addition to the capital possessed by the individual, the findings demonstrate that there are a number of factors, discussed below, that
students believed supported their investment in adult ESL coursework and transition and their navigation of often-hostile out-of-school environments to achieve success.

**Instrumentality**

The narratives of these participants indicate that a critical component to the success and transition of the participants to academic-level coursework was that they identified academic language socialization as instrumental to their vision for the future. This finding confirms recent research, which argues that as the histories of the language-learners evolve over time, their investment in improving their skills also changes (De Costa & Canagarajah, 2016; Maloney & De Costa, 2017). Similarly, the findings from this study indicate that the investment in perfecting language skills, for these participants, was tied to specific goals based on events or opportunities in their lives. Participants such as the advanced students in the research by Kim (2011) indicated that their language development must be related and meaningful to their specific goals. These goals varied based on their current needs, so the investment to increase skills was tied largely to these plans. As shared in the histories of the participants, language socialization goals were met and often new goals were established that supported them through this process.

Initial language socialization plans were often associated with a goal to operate competently in the community. Although participants came with various histories, including vastly different education and professional experiences, this need to interact in the community generally was their first goal in their language classes. As goals were accomplished and new goals established, participants indicated that they returned to adult education to elevate their
skills. This approach acknowledges the instrumentality of the education adults pursue. Tasked with first establishing some stability in their lives after immigrating, students who start and stop out of classes may have accomplished their immediate goals. When they have met their current needs, such as finding housing, securing transportation, or repaying travel expenses through initial employment, they often return to language classes with a focus on education to reestablish professional credentials or to enhance their professional opportunities. This pattern, although not universal, was followed by a number of participants who were focused on the needs of themselves and their families while pursuing their language development. As evidenced by the number of years that participants had been in the U.S. when they transitioned to academic-level programming, this process of reaching and redefining language goals confirms the instrumentality of the process. Participants returned to adult education only when their current language skills were insufficient to meet new challenges in their social environments.

Participants also shared the importance of turning points in their lives—some related to crises but others to a realization for a need to affect a change in their lives or the lives of their families—that reinvigorated their investment in their academic language socialization process. Tasked with a challenge or a goal, participants shared that they were able to maintain their investment regardless of the barriers that they faced in this process. These events caused the participants to challenge their current positions and to focus on rewriting their narratives in order to reposition themselves in their environments (Bartlett, 2007; Norton & Toohey, 2011). These turning points also provided a concrete goal that required academic language socialization for success, which thus sustained the participants in the study.
The stories of many participants shared included the many challenges that they faced on their journeys. This focus on barriers, including environmental, situational, cultural, and emotional challenges, figured prominently in the passages that participants chose as instrumental to their success. These challenges occurred both during their early days in the country and often continued for years as participants navigated to sociopolitical environment and struggled to be heard (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017). Some challenges continued even after they had transitioned and were successfully completing their degree programs. Although participants did not focus as extensively on their coping mechanisms in the passages that they shared in focus groups, having the strength or support to overcome the challenges that they encountered in their environments was instrumental in persisting to the point of transition to academic work. This emphasis supports the notion that successful language learning is not a factor of individual backgrounds and motivation alone. These stories demonstrate that the identity and power of the learner is influenced by the social environment, and successful learners are those individuals who have found ways to negotiate these often inequitable structures (Norton, 2013).

In addition to having the strength to overcome the challenges inherent in the environment, many participants indicated the importance of outside support in the form of guides and mentors. Creating a support network to negotiate academic or environmental challenges allowed participants to understand and conquer challenges in their environment. Some guides were more knowledgeable family or friends who directed students to services. These guides
proved to be essential in introducing participants to programs, including language services in the community. Other mentors were college employees or community members who recognized their need for support and provided it.

The supports described in interviews and focus groups were personal initiatives taken by individuals who recognized that their mentees needed encouragement and guidance to persist. Without these mentors, participants expressed doubts about their success navigating successfully through programs. This focus by the participants in the study on the need to be resilient in the face of the many challenges and barriers they encounter encourages educators and programs to consider their programs and to create environments that would more formally support these students. Research has demonstrated that learners who exhibit agency and access support are more likely to transition (Becker, 2011). The challenge is to create supports and make them accessible to a wider range of students. Given the finding that a guide, or someone to consult when faced with a challenge in this environment, was instrumental in their progress, creating accessible expert support may be one way to facilitate and maintain language-learner investment. Focusing on building this type of environment with these supports in place would increase the percentage of students who persist and, eventually, transition to academic coursework.

**Positioning and Repositioning Identities on the Journey**

A final overarching theme during focus groups related to maintaining or creating a sense of identity in their social environments. The findings support the research of Norton (2015), which views SLA as both the development of linguistic skills and the relationship of the learner and the social world. In the process of this development, learners are constantly negotiating their
positioning in their new environments (Norton, 2015). Participants indicated that they had to find ways to cope with and challenge the perceptions of others based on their language skills and their lack of expertise in the culture of their respective fields. On a basic level, they had to challenge the concept of others that their language did not define their intelligence or their sense of worth in the community (Morita, 2009; Norton & Toohey, 2001). They had to pursue their goals while being largely ignored or marginalized in their interactions with others (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Increased competency in the language supported this process as with increased skills they were able to use their voices to demonstrate their value. To reposition themselves, though, participants needed to develop the confidence that came from increased communicative ability to change their narratives and to demonstrate to others that they were valuable members of the community.

Academic language socialization was instrumental to participants to gain a voice in their environments; yet the findings indicated the challenge of defining or, in many cases, redefining, their professional identities. Participants with established careers in their countries often came with the intention of finding a position based on their credentials. For many, the reality that they would never regain their professional statuses in their new country could have been devastating, and for many, this reality challenged their sense of identity. Similar to the findings of Vitanova (2005), the participants in this study had largely redefined their goals and were working toward utilizing their education and skills in new careers. Reestablishing the same credentials, especially for those in fields that required a license, was a dream that most participants believed they needed to abandon. The findings demonstrate that participants had to make this shift and imagine new professional and personal identities for themselves in order to maintain their
investment. This resiliency was a key to improving their senses of who they were in the community and to elevate their standing in their environments.

Implications of the Research

This section provides some lessons for each of these constituents and offers some suggestion to consider as programming in adult ESL focuses increasingly on the goal of transitioning adult ESL learners to career, technical, and academic programming. Given the barriers shared in the narratives of the participants and the understanding that participants, even those who have encountered a myriad of roadblocks, are capable of making these transitions successfully, the following sections are directed to practitioners and programs. The findings from the study have implications for a number of constituents in adult ESL grant-funding programming. The recommendations that follow offer guidance to facilitate the transitions of adults in ESL programs.

Lessons for Programs and Administrators

One of the findings indicated in the previous section is the wide range of ages, experiences, backgrounds, and goals of students in adult language classrooms. Meeting the needs of this population poses challenges for programs because of this diversity and the responsibilities of adults, including caring for families and maintaining employment. In addition, adults have limited time to dedicate to study. To retain students in programming to the point of transition to career and college-level coursework, instruction must be designed to meet
their needs. The following sections offer some suggestions for program administrators to encourage persistence and success of their students.

Placement Challenges

Placement is clearly a challenge in adult education classrooms where, based on the stories of the learners, it is common to find, within the same class, students with significantly varying backgrounds and, consequently, language skills. What complicates the placement process is that most adults have uneven development in their communicative skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The process and speed of language development depends on many factors, including prior education and access to the target language. To illustrate this challenge, two participants expressed frustration with the placement process in a focus group. The discussion focused on maintaining motivation in the classroom and dropping out and stopping out of programs, challenges faced by most grant-funded programs serving adult immigrants. One participant’s suggestion was “to put challenge in the class.” This individual came with minimal English language skills, and he was placed in a low-beginning NRS level class. The class was not challenging for him, and thankfully, an instructor recognized his potential and moved him quickly out of the class into the next level. He had heard from other students that they too were bored in classes, and many chose to leave classes because they could not “waste” their valuable time.

However, another participant was quick to disagree. Her example was her mother who came to English classes in her 50s. She could read and write in her native language, but she lacked formal schooling. Sitting in the same low beginning level, she struggled with the speed of
instruction. As the participant explained, “For her, it was a challenge to come to class.”

Frustrated with the pace that had her relying on a peer to help her follow the classroom instructions, she elected to stop attending classes. She did not believe she was making progress in her language development.

These narratives illustrate a challenge faced by programs serving adult language-learners, the challenge of developing placement protocols to best serve the diverse backgrounds, goals, and needs of the students in their programs. At a minimum, programs need to commit to doing a more comprehensive evaluation of all language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking in order to have a clear picture of the language development of each student. Although a program might assume, based on conducting an oral interview with a student with low productive oral skills, that the student should be placed on this assessment in a literacy level section, it is possible that other skills, such as reading, are fairly advanced and may indicate a more rapid language socialization process. Therefore, a comprehensive picture of skills would provide a better placement decision.

In addition to the assessment of skills, participants indicated that an understanding of their educational histories and their language goals would also be beneficial in placement decisions. Norton (2015) argues that, in order to maintain investment, teachers and programs must value and utilize the cultural capital that students bring to the classroom. As programs are increasingly tasked with outcomes geared toward the transition of students to college and career programs, gathering a more comprehensive history on an incoming student can assist in the process. If a student has an extensive background in education, yet a low level of proficiency in English, the program would expect the student to be able to make connections with prior
knowledge to support new learning. Programs also assume that the student will have developed techniques for learning that can be utilized with this new academic challenge. These students are likely to progress at a pace different from that of students who do not have strong first-language literacy or extensive experience with education in his/her native country. In order to prevent frustration on both sides, a more nuanced placement process might prove an effective way of providing the appropriate education to each group.

The challenge to placement, for many programs, is the ability to conduct this type of screening in the number of languages that they might encounter in their population. An efficient, yet more meaningful placement might be challenging due to time constraints and resources, but technological advances in the form of easy to use and affordable or free translation programs are readily available that can assist in the process. Adding a short survey or interview that could detail the history and the goals of the learner would add a dimension to the placement of students. Understanding the experiences and language goals of the students would help programs design courses to meet the transition needs of the students. Placing students based on this comprehensive evaluation and goals would also motivate students to remain in programming as they are likely to believe that they are on a path to their end goals. Given the time constraints in the schedules of many adult students, the perception that instruction is meaningful and instrumental in moving them to their ultimate goals might help to motivate students to remain in programming and to find ways to balance all the demands that they encounter. Instead of the concern that they are wasting their time, this attention to needs will move students more efficiently to their goals.
In conducting this nuanced placement, programs must be conscious of offering opportunities for advancement to all students invested in the language socialization process. Acknowledging background is informative, but it should not be used as a method to weed out students from pathways to transition. A regular evaluation of progress and goals would be a more targeted approach to transition for all learners.

Valuing Stages of Development

The narratives indicate that in addition to conceptualizing a more nuanced placement procedure that would include individual backgrounds and goals, programs need to be aware that, by necessity, students' goals may be organized in stages so that stopping out of programming before transition should not always be considered a failure of the student or program. As evidenced by the stories of some of the participants in this study, initial language development was instrumental in acquiring stable employment in a position with good benefits. When students had mastered a level of proficiency to meet this goal, they elected to stop out of programming. Although this language socialization might not include a transition to a career or academic program, it allowed the students to reposition themselves in their environments, so it represented an initial success in their journey. Developing career or academic-level skills became a goal once they were stabilized and looking for expanded opportunities.

This process is representative of the experiences of many adult immigrants and is supported by emerging research that suggests that language practices evolve over time and are connected to the personal histories and goals of the learners (De Costa & Canagarajah, 2016; Maloney & De Costa, 2017). For many adult learners, especially those with extensive academic
and professional histories, their long-term goals may include establishing or re-establishing professional careers, but reality requires most to approach these goals realistically in stages. The necessity to build a stable environment for themselves and their families is the initial concern of most immigrants, and adult ESL programs serve this stage of development building skills to find stable employment. Assisting immigrants at this stage to build these skills should be considered a success for programs. Adult programs should support the initial stage and, at the same time, make students aware of the programs and supports available at later stages of student development. Even at the initial stages of language development, exposing students to and assisting them in setting long-term goals for the future would also support this stage of development approach. As students move to the next stage of language socialization, advising them on the culture of education and the supports available would also facilitate the process. Being open to this staged approach would encourage and support eventual transitions to career and academic-level language development and enlighten students to the possibilities that are available as they improve their skills.

**Lessons for Teachers**

The process of language socialization, as defined earlier, is more than a motivated learner developing skills. It cannot be divorced from the social context of learning in which individuals are able to access environments to develop their skills. In the stories of the learners, this negotiation was often difficult and, at times, hostile (Collins, 2015; Vitanova, 2005). In this environment of daily challenges, the participants indicated the importance of the role of the instructor and the atmosphere of the classroom in supporting their investment. The design of this
space must build confidence and allow students to be comfortable enough to take the risks required to develop skills. As shared in the stories of the participants, adults learning a new language regularly encounter environments that cause them to "lose their voices." A critical role of the classroom is to validate the voices and appreciate the backgrounds of these adults. The classroom must serve as a space that encourages participation and understands and validates future goals.

**Classroom Environment**

Designing programs that align more closely with the goals and needs of the students was one factor shared in the narrative that supported transition. In addition, participants in this study indicated overwhelmingly that the environment of the adult language learning classroom was instrumental to their success. Previous studies have explored the classroom environment, the instructor, curriculum, and group dynamics as motivating factors (Dörnyei, 2003; Kim, 2011; Noels et al., 2001). Participants in this study shared another critical component of the environment, indicating that the environment, if well-designed, acted as a sanctuary for them. This supports the *school as sanctuary* concept of Antrop-González (2003), who found that high-school students thrived in an environment that included positive teacher-student relationships and valued the cultural and linguistic skills of the students. According to participants, the school and the classroom were places where they could escape the challenges of the outside environment and "a house to go into" where participants could relax and be comfortable, to not feel like outsiders. This sentiment, that of being understood and of being in an environment with peers who shared their stories, was a common theme in focus groups. Participants shared that
not all educational environments that they experienced in their language learning journey and in other courses were designed to build this community of learners who could support each other.

Given the reticence of adult learners to demonstrate their perceived weaknesses in front of others (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015), it is critical for teachers to consider how they can create a positive community in the classroom to build sanctuaries for their adult learners. Knowing that adults have full schedules, often with full-time employment and families, building this supportive environment and offering meaningful instruction, as mentioned in the placement section, can support the retention and transitions of adult learners.

According to the stories shared by participants, one component that facilitated their sense of security was problem-solving exercises that addressed shared roadblocks or barriers. These exercises make participants aware that they are not alone, that others also are struggling with building skills or interacting in the community, and that their feelings of being different are shared. Although it may seem counterintuitive for faculty, even students with extensive academic experience, to express feelings of uncertainty interacting in the community (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015), the simple exercise of sharing students' reflections can raise the awareness in the classroom that students are not alone in their anxieties. This realization can provide the confidence that adult language-learners need to venture out into other conversations. Seemingly a simple exercise, depending on others to speak on one's behalf is demeaning for adults. These community building exercises work to lower the affective filter of students, which encourages students to take risks and to practice their language skills in the open, in front of others. In this secure environment, the participants developed their skills and met their goals.
The challenge to teachers is to strive to create this comfortable environment in which all students are respected and where they are willing to fail in front of others. Participants mentioned that spending time on team-building activities was critical to develop this supportive environment. Beyond initial class introductions, faculty must create opportunities for adult students to learn about each other throughout the class. Participants indicated that working together, including collaborating on projects and participating in group discussions and reflections, built their confidence in their skills. This team focus also made participants aware that their peers brought various language skills to the classroom, which allowed them to demonstrate their strengths in their group interactions.

Valuing Identities of Learners

In addition to creating a strong classroom community to build student confidence and security, faculty must be aware, in designing their classrooms, that students bring “funds of knowledge” to the classroom that should be acknowledged and, if appropriate, utilized (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Educators must appreciate the value of the linguistic and cultural capital that students bring to the classroom and to focus on the richness of their experiences rather than on their constraints (Darvin & Norton, 2014, 2015; Norton, 2015; Rojo, 2013).

Participants indicated that, because of English language challenges, they had lost their ability to participate in conversations and to share knowledge. As adults, they had lost their voices, which damaged their sense of identity. Learning about the resources that learners bring to the classroom would serve a number of purposes for the instructor. First, valuing the expertise
of adult students would allow them to express a part of their identities that is often disregarded when they arrive. Participants shared the sense of loss they experienced when they moved to the U.S. after establishing careers or completing education in their native countries. Participants, who had completed undergraduate or graduate-level studies, often found themselves in jobs in factories or in domestic work, unable to demonstrate or utilize their skills. Instructors, through the expanded placement protocol suggested in the implications for programs, would have more knowledge about the backgrounds of the individuals in the classroom. Knowing that the classroom contains students trained as lawyers, accountants, clothing designers, and teachers, an instructor could create lessons and activities allowing students to demonstrate their expertise. The instructor could also find ways to capitalize on this knowledge in classroom instruction. Students trained as nurses could share expertise on a unit focused on health, perhaps even providing some information on cultural differences in health and wellness which could encourage further dialogue in the classroom thereby improving the sense of community in the classroom. This acknowledgment of the expertise present in the classroom, something not always acknowledged outside of this environment, would help students to gain the confidence to express themselves and encourage them to continue to upgrade their language skills.

In addition to integrating the skills, education, and experiences of the students in the classroom, teachers can also ensure that the voices of the students are heard in the classroom, in their institutions, and, with some support, in the community. A common struggle expressed by the participants in the focus groups was the loss of their voices interacting in the community. They expressed their frustration with being largely ignored in conversations, and they shared their hope to communicate at a level at which others would be willing to listen and value their
input. In their communities, they believed that they were negatively positioned because of the way they were “heard” as immigrants (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017). Although it is not within the scope of the classroom teacher to improve the reactions of others to adult language-learners, it is possible to create a classroom where all voices are encouraged and heard. Instructors can set up an open and supportive environment where, although the students are from various countries with various beliefs, they all share the same goal to be heard when they are communicating. This goal, to express themselves in their new environment, can be achieved only through practice to build fluency. In addition to practicing within the classroom, teachers can create opportunities for students to communicate at the college and community-level building on their expertise. With the goal of transitioning out of this supported environment, these opportunities will build confidence in students' abilities to communicate their opinions and expertise with others, thereby altering their voice in their environments.

Lessons for Policymakers

Adult education programs are in the process of shifting their focus to one that centers on the transitioning of their students to postsecondary career, technical, and academic programming, with the goal of economic self-sufficiency for their students (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Funding for programs is tied, in part, to meeting these new objectives. As programs and educators redesign their current curriculum to ensure that they meet the key provisions of the Title II Adult Education and Family Literacy Act Program established by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2015, it is critical to consider whether this shift is likely to improve outcomes overall for language-learners working to improve their skills and to
improve their lives. The challenge for programs, in particular, is the narrowing of their focus to the transition of the students currently being served in adult education, including adult immigrants who are building language skills (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016).

Examining the narratives of transitioning of this small group of learners illustrates the complexity of this process and suggests that this narrowed focus may ignore the importance of much of the progress attributed to language learning that is not specifically connected to transitioning or related to employment. The ultimate goal of students is undoubtedly to improve their lives, and this certainly includes finding opportunities to increase individual or family income, yet this process needs to have a broad approach that is likely to value the smaller victories that contribute to integration into community and ultimately expand employment opportunities. Even small initial improvements in language competency, according to the participants in the study, do improve interactions in the community, competency in navigating a new cultural landscape, and, in fact, the expansion of job opportunities for immigrants. Ignoring these initial gains could effectively shift the focus to address only the immigrants who come to programs with higher cultural capital and, presumably, those who are most likely to make the transition to postsecondary work.

This approach, unfortunately, shifts focus away from the groups that would benefit most from language development. Students who lack cultural capital, with appropriate support, can also make these transitions that would serve to improve their lives and the lives of their families. Students who come without prior educational experience have made transitions to postsecondary work because they have qualified for adult education programming, and they have built a foundation through these courses. In this study, one third of the participants had no prior post-
secondary education before taking adult ESL courses. Even though they represented a minority of the total in this study, they clearly illustrated that adult language-learners who are determined to persist through their academic language socialization journey can make successful transitions to postsecondary coursework. Individuals, such as a number of participants in this study, who have successfully earned degrees and technical certifications and have contributed to the community and their families, might not be given the opportunity to develop these skills when the outcomes necessary for funding programs are narrowly defined to employment and transition to academic programming. Ignoring the initial language development that helps learners build the communicative skills to interact competently in their communities, eliminates effectively a group of adult learners who may eventually continue their language development and transition to career and academic programming.

Policymakers should acknowledge the value of the integration of adult learners into their communities that occurs as a result of expanded language skills, and they must be cognizant of the importance of these improvements in building the ability and confidence to pursue more advanced coursework. Adult ESL programs, in addition to promoting employment and transition, should be supported if they are able to demonstrate that these skills are being developed among participants in their programs. This approach can have a broad impact on communities with immigrant populations and encourage a more lifelong learning approach that meets the needs of adult students.
Discussion and Suggestions for Future Research

The voices of the participants of this study provided a critical assessment of the environments supporting transition and the personal attributes of this group that maintained their investment in the development of academic language skills. Although the participants were diverse in background, it is critical to acknowledge that they were recruited from the same transition program at one community college. Participants had distinctly different journeys leading up to the transition learning community, but once in the program, they had access to the supports of the community college, and all but one participant had had the researcher as an instructor during their tenures at the college and in the transition courses. Expanding this research to examine the characteristics of successful transitions in other environments would expand the understanding of the characteristics that lead to investment in adult ESL learners and provide guidance to practitioners building transition programs.

The findings, although not generalizable to the population of adult immigrants working to transition to career and academic programs across the country, acknowledge some of the challenges faced in the process and offer some suggestions for building supportive environments for adults. Certainly, the specific challenges are limited to this group of participants, but the need to understand and attempt to mitigate challenges must be considered by programs working to build bridges to transition more adult ESL students to enhance their opportunities.

The stories of this group of adult learners demonstrate that many of the barriers experienced and the supports suggested in their stories are unique to adult immigrants who are tasked with earning a living, integrating into their new communities, and caring for their families while they are developing language competency. The social context of this development is
critical to understanding their language socialization process because all had to negotiate this environment to succeed. Although many researchers have analyzed the motivation of students to acquire language skills, much of this work has been conducted on international students or students learning English or another language as a foreign language (Dörnyei & Clément, 2001; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Gardner, 2007; Kormos & Csizér, 2008; Noels, 2005; Noels et al., 2001; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi et al., 2009). Investment in these contexts is not representative of the experiences of adult immigrant learners as it cannot approximate the experiences of adult learners whose focus is on survival in a new home. As posited by Norton (2013), it is critical for researchers to acknowledge the social context and how the power dynamics in this context supports or impedes the language learning process. For this reason, conclusions on investment in language development must acknowledge the positionality of the learner.

In analyzing the narratives of the 15 participants in this study, further research targeting this group of students is critical as the field of ABE is shifting from focusing on integration into the community to preparing immigrants to transition to career and academic programming required by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2015. Grant-funded programs in the process of redesigning curriculum in order to meet the outcomes set out in the Act would benefit from expanded research on the investment of adult immigrants to guide this program development.

The findings from this study also suggest a need for research on the importance of the classroom environment as a support to maintain investment in language socialization. Prior research has explored the practices of instructors, including the presentation or challenging and relevant materials in the classroom (Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Guilloteaux &
Dörnyei, 2008; Noels et al., 1999). This study suggests an expansion of this research to include the design of the classroom as a safe and supportive space for learning. Research should be focused on understanding which environments support adults in their development of skills without the reticence that is common in the language socialization process for these learners. Research on building a sanctuary or an environment free of some of the barriers faced by adults developing language socialization skills would benefit the field as adult educators grapple with issues of retention and transition of the adults in their programs. Participants emphasized the challenges that they faced both inside and out of the classroom, and they credited a supportive environment as a method to help them negotiate these challenges. Investigating environments in order to create practices for programs would be valuable for these adult students.

Final Thoughts

Listening to the voices of the participants and their journeys transitioning to academic English was an honor as an educator and an opportunity to more fully experience the struggles and barriers that adult students face in their academic language socialization process. Having the perspective of learning a language as an international student with all the benefits of a strong support system, I understood, but did not fully appreciate, the challenges that my students have to face and overcome in order to be successful. I have never experienced discrimination based on my language skills or experienced a loss of my identity because of my lack of academic-level skills in my second language. Perhaps, I was naïve and did not recognize the signs of this present in the environments where I studied, but this is unlikely. From hearing the narratives of my students, my conclusion is that my experience, like other international students, came from a
position of privilege and did not approximate the experiences shared by the participants of the study. I did not have to negotiate the environment in any comprehensive way; I just had to manage my studies and the culture shock related with being in an unfamiliar place.

The students in this study had to survive in an environment that would become a permanent, or at least long-term, home for them. This included finding housing and employment, navigating health systems, participating in the education of their children, and integrating into their communities, all while developing their language skills. Hearing these challenges from successful students who, despite the many barriers and roadblocks, have transitioned to academic work has altered my perceptions of the needs and attributes of successful students and of my own contribution to this process.

This study illustrated that my role is to be a true partner in the academic language socialization process. In addition to sharing expertise in language development, I understand that I need to create an environment in the classroom that will build the confidence for learners to practice their skills. I need to understand that adults are reticent to demonstrate their developing skills because language is how they navigate confidently through their new environments, and it is connected to their identities. I learned that building student confidence in the Adult ESL environment is not sufficient for learners. Adult educators should be conscious of creating opportunities for students to experience competency in the postsecondary environment. As shared by the participants in this study, these opportunities should include supported transitional courses that pair academic-level credit-bearing courses with language support. Creating this bridge and maintaining the rigor of the academic coursework assists participants in their transitions.
In addition to technical expertise and creating safe and supportive environments for learning, I have also learned that I must assist students as they endeavor to meet their goals by helping them understand the culture of postsecondary education in the U.S. Participants indicated that the “road map” to their success was not always clear; in fact, it is often difficult for adult learners, even those who have successfully negotiated the process in their native countries, to decipher. Identifying goals and focusing on the opportunities available to them in their current environment is critical. With this “navigational” support, students are more likely to be more successful in re-establishing their careers or training for new careers in order to acknowledge and utilize their talents.

Finally, as a community member, I need to be conscious of and work against the hostility found in this society against immigrants. Although it may be impossible to eradicate the marginalization of immigrants, it is important to acknowledge their skills and praise them for their language development. Instead of viewing their skills as deficient, it is important, as professionals, to make sure that these students are heard and legitimized for their language development (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

I believe that the insights that I gained in conducting this study can serve to make me a more informed, effective, and conscientious practitioner. I am indebted to the participants who volunteered to share their stories with me. I thank them for having the confidence in me to share their struggles and their strengths. Their stories reminded me of the difficulties of learning a new language, and they illustrated to me the ease of completing the process as an international student. I learned that the road I traveled was much smoother than the journey of these immigrants, who were challenged to learn a language and, at the same time, worked to earn a
living, care for families, and integrate into a new culture. Their stories have inspired me and made me realize how fortunate I am to work with you on your journeys.

Epilogue: August, 2018

This research chronicled the journeys of 15 immigrants who successfully transitioned to academic courses at a community college. The participants shared their struggles and their successes in their language-socialization process. They shared the many challenges they faced in order to persist, and they described the supports they encountered as they developed their academic language skills. As I near the end of my doctoral journey, I want to reflect on this work and how it has impacted me and my practice.

Considering the narratives of the participants in the study, I cannot help but wonder how the current sociopolitical environment might affect a study conducted currently instead of in the fall of 2015 when I met with the participants for the initial interviews. In a time of border walls, family separations, travel bans, and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) uncertainty, I question whether the participants who accepted my invitation to participate in the study would be willing to share their journeys with me. I wonder, even though I envision myself as an approachable and trustworthy member of the college community, whether participants would be comfortable sharing and interpreting their experiences with me. I am certain that many stories that contributed so much to this study would have remained untold if conducted in the current climate. I might not have heard some of the real barriers and struggles faced daily by the students that I am privileged to teach.
The research that I have conducted over the years has confirmed the temporal nature of narratives and their interpretations by participants. As I reflect on this reality, it is certain to me that as the environment shifts, the challenges that adult immigrants face also change radically. The increased stress from the hostility of the community toward immigrants has become palpable in the adult ESL classroom, and the uncertainty of the futures of students and their families continues to impact practitioners as they work to create a supportive environment in their classrooms.

As I reflect on the findings of this study, I cannot ignore the impact that this changing environment is likely to have on the adults in my program. Given this reality, I believe that it is my responsibility and that of others working with our immigrant students to educate ourselves on how to best serve our students experiencing these changes in their communities. If it is our goal to improve the lives of our students through education, we must be prepared to help them with more than their academic challenges. With the support of our institutions, we need to expand our knowledge of the resources available to students and be cognizant of the ever-changing landscape of immigrant rights. To support this, programs need to offer professional development for faculty on how to help our students navigate the changing environment and provide them with “houses to go into” when they need some relief. Institutions must foster environments that will help students negotiate some of these challenges, and they must assure students that the institutions do not accept the marginalization of any group of students on campus.

To maintain their investment in their language socialization process, the participants in my study indicated that they had mentors, fellow students, instructors, and environments that supported them on their journeys. My concern is that future students might not encounter these
resources. If the goal of our programs is to improve the opportunities of our students, this commitment is critical to our success. It is clear, to me, that this commitment is as important to the transitions of our students as the language skills that we develop in the classroom. In the ever-changing sociopolitical landscape, I am committed to this support, and I am hopeful that others, both at the personal and institutional level, share this commitment.
REFERENCES


Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp 119-161). New York: Macmillan.


APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWS ADULT (18 OR OLDER)
CONSENT FORM for INTERVIEWS
ADULT (18 or older)
Northern Illinois University – College of Education
Colleen Stribling, (630) 234-1816, cstribling@elgin.edu

I agree to participate in the research project titled “Second Language Investment: Listening to Student Voices” being conducted by Colleen Stribling, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to investigate the motivations of first generation immigrant adult language learners at the level of transition to academic or career programs.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: participate in an in-depth interview lasting 1.5 to 2 hours.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Colleen Stribling at (630) 234-1816. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588.

I understand that the intended benefits of the study include contributing knowledge that can contribute to the design and implementation of transition programs for English language learners. I have been informed that there are minimal risks associated with this research, but potential discomfort could arise during this because I will be asked to share my history of immigration as some of these details may be sensitive personal information. I understand that all information gathered during this experiment will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms within interview transcripts and notes. These transcripts will only be viewed by the researcher and her advisor, Dr. Laura Ruth Johnson, and will be maintained on private, password protected computers accessed only by the researcher. I understand that my decision to participate will have no bearing on my status in the ESL program.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

__________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                      Date

I consent to be audiotaped:

__________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                      Date
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW 1 PROTOCOL
INTERVIEW 1 PROTOCOL

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me for this interview. My name is Colleen Stribling, and I am conducting this research as a part of my dissertation study. The purpose of my project is to investigate what factors have made you a successful language learner. I appreciate the knowledge you have as an expert learner. This interview is voluntary. Please feel free to provide only the information that you are comfortable sharing.

Interview Guide:

1. Tell me about your background.
   a. Where are you from?
   b. Describe your hometown. Family.

2. Tell me about life growing up in your town.

3. Tell me about your education in your native country.
   a. Can you describe the school(s) you attended?
   b. Can you describe a strong memory or a teacher that your recall from your schooling?
   c. What educational goals did you have as a young person?
   d. How did these goals connect with the goals of your family?

4. When did you decide to come to the U.S.? Tell me about how you made that decision.

5. How did you prepare yourself for this move?
   a. Did you study the English language before you emigrated? Explain.
   b. What did you know about the culture of the U.S.?

6. Can you walk me through the day you came to the U.S.? If I had followed you with a video camera, what would I have seen?
   a. How did you feel that day?

7. Describe your early days living in the U.S.
a. Where were you living?
b. Who were you living with?
c. How did you adjust those early days?

8. What was your greatest challenge during your early days in the U.S.?
   a. How did you deal with this challenge?
   b. How did you feel during this time?

9. Tell me about your journey learning the English language.
   a. What resources did you use?
   b. When did you decide to come to the college?
   c. Why did you make the decision to study at the college?

10. Tell me about your motivation to learn the language.
    a. You are at the end of the ESL program. How have you maintained this motivation?
    b. Was there ever a time that you considered giving up? Can you describe this?

11. Tell me about your goals? How will improving your English contribute to your goals?

12. What does it mean to you to learn English?
    a. How will being literate in English affect your personal life?
    b. How will being literate in English affect your professional life?
    c. How will being literate in English affect your future and the future of your family?
APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP/SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
FOCUS GROUP/SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me again for this second phase of my research. As I mentioned in our first interview, my name is Colleen Stribling, and I am conducting this research as a part of my dissertation study. The purpose of my project is to investigate what factors have made you a successful language learner. My objective today is to talk about the main ideas that I learned from your first interview. I need you (all) to help me analyze and understand your story(s), so I will be asking about some of the things that you mentioned earlier.

This focus group/interview is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time. To protect your anonymity, I will use pseudonyms in the transcripts. While I ask that the focus group participants maintain confidentiality regarding what is shared in the group, I realize that I cannot guarantee confidentiality. Please provide only the information that you are comfortable sharing.

Interview Guide:

1. In our last interview, we discussed your journey as a language learner. Why is learning English important to you?

2. What factors, in your mind, contribute to your success as a language learner?

3. Today, I would like for you to help me understand your stories as learners. I recorded our last session and made a transcript of your history. Today, I want you to reflect on some of the important details of your story. (The guide will vary depending on the themes that have emerged from each individual transcript.)
APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUPS ADULT (18 OR OLDER)
CONSENT FORM for FOCUS GROUPS
ADULT (18 or older)
Northern Illinois University – College of Education
Colleen Stribling, (630) 234-1816, cstribling@elgin.edu

I agree to participate in the research project titled “Second Language Investment: Listening to Student Voices” being conducted by Colleen Stribling, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to investigate the motivations of first generation immigrant adult language learners at the level of transition to academic or career programs.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: participate in a focus group lasting 1.5 to 2 hours.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Colleen Stribling at (630) 234-1816. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588.

I understand that the intended benefits of the study include contributing knowledge that can be instrumental in the design and implementation of transition programs for English language learners. I have been informed that there are minimal risks associated with this research, but potential discomfort could arise because I will be asked to share my history of immigration, which may include sensitive personal information. I understand that all information gathered during this experiment will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms within interview transcripts and notes. These transcripts will only be viewed by the researcher and her advisor, Dr. Laura Ruth Johnson, and will be maintained on private, password-protected computers accessed only by the researcher. However, I also understand that, when participating in a focus group, confidentiality among the members of the group cannot be guaranteed.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

__________________________________________  _________________________
Signature                                           Date

I consent to be audiotaped:

__________________________________________  _________________________
Signature                                           Date
APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Native Country</th>
<th>Age at Time of Interview</th>
<th>No. of Years in USA</th>
<th>Age at Arrival</th>
<th>Education in Native Country</th>
<th>Education in USA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>23 years</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Finished high school</td>
<td>CNC - 2 certificates. English 101 and 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luz</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>23 years</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Middle school and then technical school: Secretarial School</td>
<td>Associate degree completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Accounting Certificate</td>
<td>English 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yaris</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Master's Degree in Accounting</td>
<td>Finished accounting classes and English 1012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minh</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10.5 months</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2 years of university studies in Vietnam</td>
<td>Taking college courses to complete Bachelor Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>One year of high school</td>
<td>English 102. Completed 9 hours of college classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monika</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>29 years</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Associate Degree in Horticulture</td>
<td>Training for substance abuse counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mau</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30+ years</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Bachelor Degree in Education</td>
<td>College-level Spanish classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigitte</td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Three years of high school</td>
<td>Completed Associate Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katia</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Master's Degree in Russian Language and Literature</td>
<td>Finished English 101, earned real estate license</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzy</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Completed 1 year of high school</td>
<td>GED, English 101, and English 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>Puerto Rico/ Belize</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>36 years</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Finished 1 year of university</td>
<td>Finished Associate Degree, enrolled in Bachelor Degree program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zofia</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>After she had finished university, she studied law</td>
<td>Completed 9 hours in community college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asuka</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Finished dress-making course</td>
<td>Finished English 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kasia</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Completed a technical degree in Ecology</td>
<td>Finished English 101 and English 102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>