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Experiences Learning English: A Case Study of Adult Immigrants in Portland, Maine, USA

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Experiences Learning English
A Case Study of Adult Immigrants in Portland, Maine, USA
Pamela L. Kasabian

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts in TESOL degree
at SIT Graduate Institute
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Advisor: Dr. Leslie Turpin

Abstract

The paper examines the process of English language acquisition for adult immigrants living in Portland, Maine, USA. The focus is on the process of language acquisition and integration into a new linguistic culture through analysis of personally narrated experiences of adult immigrants living in Portland, Maine. It seeks to expose similarities within highly individualistic linguistic journeys that contribute to investment and engagement in learning. In reviewing the data generated by the interviews, I hope to find situations to more deeply explore that could influence a more reciprocal learning culture for the mutual benefit of the language learner and the community at large.

Keywords: refugee adjustment, Second Language Acquisition, Ecological Approach to Teaching languages, language affordances, communities of practice, Language Experience Approach to Teaching languages

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Introduction

*For age is opportunity no less
Than youth itself, though in another dress,
And as the evening twilight fades away
The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day.*

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, "*Morituri Salutamus*"

How true this quote strikes me, a middle-aged teacher of adults since barely an adult myself. The phrase “life-long learning” is a mantra of sorts to me. It is the motto of the Portland Adult Education program, my workplace for fifteen years. And now, as I continue my own education as a mother of two young children, I am truly practicing what I preach. In doing so, I am able to see the “sky filled with stars, invisible by day.” True, the lessons I am learning now are different than those I learned when I wore a youthful dress. Just as the stars are only revealed with the emergence of darkness, time and experience have brought many things to light. Yet, one must reflect on *how* one is learning as well as *what*, for how one looks at the sky can indeed affect the visibility of the stars. This quote resonated with me through its imagery which elicited the triangular concept of *I, Thou, and It*, inspired by David Hawkins’ (1967) analogic conceptualization of these three fundamental components of learning: teacher, learner and content.

In this very engaging and applicable essay, Hawkins discusses the relationship between the teacher and the student not as being mutually exclusive of the *It*, but rather as being conductors of a mutable *It* which can “enter into the pattern of mutual interest and exchange between the teacher and the child,” (Hawkins, 1967, p. 50). For me, Longfellow’s poem alludes

to *I* as an older person accompanied by *Thou*, one in his or her youth, and pointing to *It*, the mutable night sky.

Contrary to the static image of a triangle or of my poetic image of a starry night, a curious student and an altruistic elder, Hawkins suggests that the roles of *I*, *Thou*, and *It* are in a state of flux and can change in accord with transitions in the situation due to both controlled and uncontrolled circumstances. Awareness of these fluctuations can enable the teacher to optimize their occurrences for the benefit of learning. First however, one must be conscious of the external factors contributing to such fluctuations.

Challenges of Language Learning for Adults

There is a myriad of obstacles to learning a new language as an adult; memory, opportunity, and time, just to name a few. Add the adjective ‘immigrant’ to the experience, and we have increased those obstacles exponentially. The term “immigrant” encompasses a wide spectrum of beliefs and values, experiences, educational backgrounds, learning styles, and, of course, languages. The participants in this study have immigrated to America primarily due to external forces rather than by independent decision. For this population, hindrances such as low-literacy or illiteracy in L1, cultural restrictions, and inaccessibility to language learning opportunities are common, according to the National Institute of Literacy (2010).

My teaching experiences have primarily centered around refugees, asylum seekers and other groups forced to emigrate as a result of compromised personal safety, economic distress or both. Many are affected by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder on top of the customary homesickness and culture shock. Other persistent challenges I have observed are related to scheduling, transportation, health, disabilities, housing problems, financial struggles, family needs and more. The hurdles are adeptly summarized by Khadija Guled, a Portland social worker

from Somalia, “Being a single mom with five to seven kids, trying to be on top of their education and upbringing, they have no time for themselves to pursue education or work. It’s a lot of pressure.” (Van Voorst Van Beest, J. and Nyhan, P., 2009). Impressively, some immigrants manage to squeeze in time for education, and I have often had these mothers and fathers in my classes. My observations correspond with previously mentioned impediments to learning. These students are frequently absent or late, consistently miss homework, have appointments necessitating leaving early, and suffer from exhaustion which causes inattentiveness. Consequently, they have no time or opportunity to practice speaking English outside of school. The list above acknowledges some of the barriers restricting this group’s ability to learn at the rate needed to sustain themselves independently in their new lives.

Teacher and Researcher

Indeed, the seventeen years of experience working with resilient and remarkable immigrants in various contexts has strongly influenced my curiosity about the current topic. In addition to a patchwork of work and life experiences that have contributed to my attraction to this type of inquiry, the process of investigating my own cultural identity, expertly guided by Dr. Leslie Turpin, Ph.D. professor of the Intercultural Communication for Language Teachers course at SIT, made me conscious of my personal identity negotiation based on cultural and linguistic differences. Cognizance of my own cultural identity developing osmotically through the linguistic and cultural forces around me, has afforded me a far less limited view of the triangles in which I am associated.

Evaluating my own cultural sojourn through various lenses of cultural and linguistic observation, I recognize the importance of constant assessment of the *I, Thou*, and *It* dynamic for effective teaching. The MAT program has heightened my awareness of these relationships and

has built my skills in addressing the teaching/learning/content correlation in order to foster learning. More so, I am now more equipped to utilize the tools, or lack of tools, at my disposal for such ends. Furthermore, my comprehension of the individual needs of my students have been enhanced by the exposure to the many interpretations of this concept. These lessons have helped channel the focus of my interest to the area of second language acquisition.

Finally, in addition to the mental gratifications, both pedagogical and cultural, propelling me toward this line of inquiry there is one, overarching and practical reason for my interest in expanding research in the field of adult pedagogy in my community: I live here. As an invested member of the local community, it is in my own and my children's best interest to seek ways to continue to improve and strengthen our community. As an educator, I naturally look toward education for my affordances. I have long sensed a gap between the educational services we provide and the educational services adult immigrants need. This inquiry begins my path toward the answer.

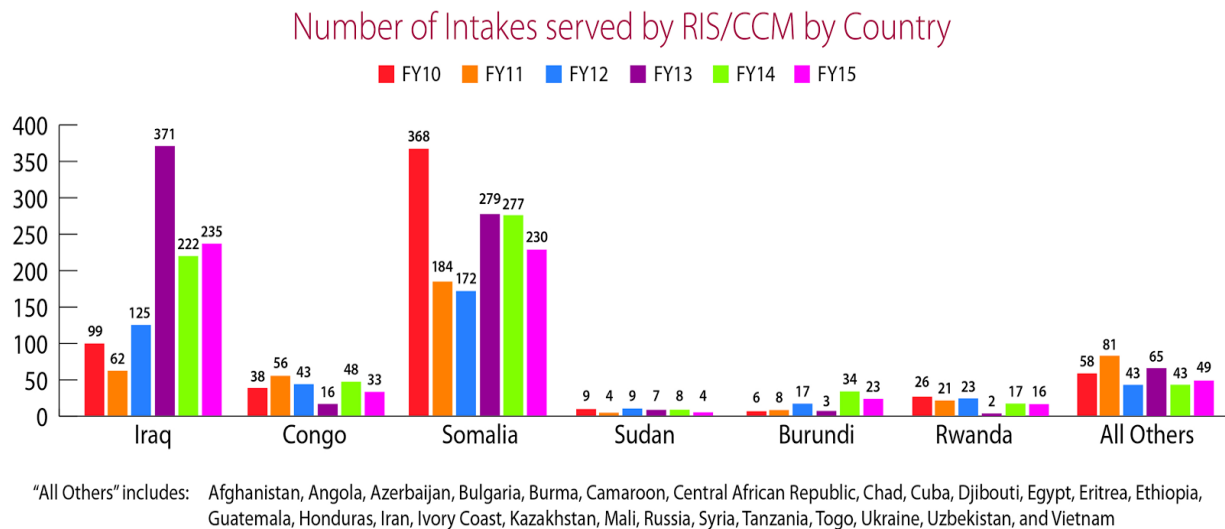
Research Context: Where is Portland, Maine?

Maine is the northeastern-most state in the United States. It has two hundred and twenty-eight miles of shoreline, the third longest on the Atlantic coast. It ranks first on the east coast in total miles of *tidal* shoreline which includes measurements of each of the Calendar Islandsⁱ in the Gulf of Maine. The drama and beauty of Maine's rocky coast has been captured by great artists such as Winslow Homerⁱⁱ and Andrew Wyethⁱⁱⁱ. Approximately 90 percent of Maine is forested, the highest percentage of any state. Its dense abundance was immortalized in Henry David Thoreau's essay series, *Ktaadn* (1848), "the glimpse at our whereabouts was soon lost, and we were buried in the woods again. The wood was chiefly yellow birch, spruce, fir, mountain-ash, or round-wood as the Maine people call it, and moose-wood. It was the worst kind

of travelling...” (as quoted in Glick, 1993.) Maine is proud of its natural beauty and abundant resources. Mainers have a deep reverence for nature because many livelihoods depend upon it still today.

Portland is the largest and most urban city in Maine. The working waterfront is one of the busiest on the east coast. It hosts two universities and boasts a vibrant arts and music scene. It is known as a foodie town with more restaurants per capita than San Francisco and a fervent support of local farmers and products. It has a population of under 70,000 which gives Portland a small-town feel. Perhaps that is why liveworkportland.org the website of *Creative Portland* describes Portlanders as “a different breed...even though not all come from the same place.” There is truth in their claim that, “Portland is a place to be at home. Even as the pace changes with the seasons and life changes with the years, you can find continuity here. Our port city will always smell like the sea. Life is layered; history is present, yet there’s always room for something new.” History is alive in Portland; it is in the cobblestone streets, the brick buildings, the statues of famous historical residents such as our native son, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow^{iv} and the son of Irish immigrants, John Ford^v, cemeteries, landmarks and markers indicating safe houses on the Underground Railroad and battle grounds during the American Revolution. The final sentence of Creative Portland’s online description leaves us with a hopeful sense about life in Portland and indicates a level of acceptance and tolerance perhaps not found as abundantly in other cities, “In our small city, it's almost true that everyone knows everyone, from social circles to the street. There's a way to make Portland your own.” This concept is what makes Portland a desirable location for transplants and immigrants alike. In fact, many refugees and immigrants who come here have moved from the state of their primary resettlement. According to their website, Refugee and Immigrant Services (RIS) resettled four hundred forty-two primary

refugees and assisted more than sixty-six secondary migrants and seventy-seven asylees in becoming self-sufficient new members of our community in 2015. Below is a graph by RIS indicating the numbers of refugees and countries from which they have primarily come over the past five years. RIS predicts similar populations and arrivals will be resettled this year also.



The Research Question

The seed was planted long ago, but my research question sprouted and has been germinating during my two years in the SIT Low Residency TESOL graduate program. Gaining access to great thinkers in education, linguistics, and culture, attaining a voluminous amount of information, synthesizing the information, practically applying that information, and reflecting on all of it, has expanded my pedagogy and awareness tremendously. Since my first paper at SIT, in which I stated, "My purpose as a teacher, as I see it, is to help students build skills and a base of knowledge to help them make a transition in their lives," my belief in this purpose has remained unaltered. What has changed is the perspective from which I consider how to accomplish it. Through awareness, discussion, interpretation, application, and reflection of various approaches to teaching, I discovered that what I was deficient in was direct information

from the actual people I was teaching about their experiences learning English. I gained access to their personal language experiences through anecdotal conversations before or after class, or at the grocery store, or an occasional community event. I pieced these together with the knowledge I had from reading and teaching experience and planned lessons that I thought would best develop the current skill. The context in which I taught presented both the benefit and the challenge of diversity. In a full classroom of busy adults from a multitude of different social, economic, religious, and educational backgrounds, coupled with the use of as many as ten different languages, teachers in a diverse adult education program can become overburdened with planning effective lessons that fit within the boundaries of the physical and perceptual classroom. Often times, due to time and curriculum restrictions, interaction is limited or superseded by writing practice. Asserted by Bremer, et.al., (1996, p.236) and quoted by Norton (2013, p.189) “Classroom learning needs to be complemented by structured opportunities outside the classroom for minority workers to interact with speakers of the dominant language.” This requirement is difficult to achieve for both workplace contexts and traditional classrooms.

Positing that contextualized methods for effective and efficient teaching English for multilingual groups of adult immigrants need further research, this study attempts to access possible areas of pedagogical research by identifying common positive language learning practices and experiences as well as common unmet language learning needs, as reported by English language learners living in Portland, Maine.

Methodology

Data Collection

Data for this paper was collected through two main devices: a review of literature and interviews with local English language learners. I chose the interview method for this small project for several reasons. First, it supports my underlying goal to engage and become engaged in multicultural discourse in my community. Second, interviews are considered method the best method of obtaining the type of personal experience information I seek. According to King and Kitchener (1994), "Interviewing may be the best approach if high quality information is needed on a small number of individuals." Using interviews to gather qualitative data affords the interviewer the opportunity to ask for clarification and seek more justification whenever anything seems unclear. Interviews also gives the interviewee the chance to provide alternative interpretations of survey questions and address any topics that may come up (Norton & Agee, 2014) Due to scheduling impediments, one participant completed the interview as a questionnaire. The literature review was the first method of data collection. The knowledge I gained there contributed to the development of my interview questions.

For the interview, I developed a series of twenty-seven questions focused on four aspects associated with language learning. The first aspect, labeled *The Facts*, details participants length of time in the USA/Maine, country of origin, languages known, educational background, and reason for emigrating to the US.

The next aspect and a primary focus of the research is entitled *SLA in Practice*. This section asks about prior and current contexts and methods for learning English. Additionally, this

section seeks to elicit classroom activity preferences and opinions about roles of teachers and learners.

Cultural Influence was the third aspect reviewed. Participants are asked to interpret their native culture's view of the English language and its role and status within that culture. Personal views on cultural norms regarding English were sought here.

In the final section of the interview, *Family and Community*, I inquire about the influence of family and home community on learning English as well as the participants' connection to the community in which they live now. This section attempts to assess the participant's awareness of affordances in the community, the effort exerted to exploit these opportunities, and the result of their effort.

Question development was further influenced by the final project assignment for *Second Language Acquisition*, a course at SIT taught by Elka Todeva, Ph.D., Summer/Fall 2015. In this study, I interviewed one speaker of English as a second language about her experiences learning English. The amount of information I gained was tremendous. Appraisal of these questions as they pertained to the current investigation helped generate questions used in this interview.

My review of the literature guided my attention to the aspect of family and community in the language learner's journey. Norton's (2013) dissection of the role that the target language community plays in the lives of immigrant women, impressed me with its coherent assessment of the multilayered process of joining an L1 community. The comprehensive body of data she presented in her study inspired my investigation. It also supported the line of questioning about joining communities as a means of engaging in discourse.

Another influence in the development of the interview and my choice of this qualitative method of data collection derived from an experiential learning assignment in ICLT, 2014. This

learning experience was scaffolded by classwork and readings. One reading that educated me about the complex process of interviewing was entitled, “The Art of Interviewing.” Reviewing this paper recalled my bumpy practice interview about a “cultural bump” conducted in a supportive learning environment with members of my cohort. This practice and the lessons on listening and awareness of one’s own cultural influence on perception, prepared me for the still somewhat uncomfortable process of interviewing others.

Participant Recruitment

The next step in this process was to find volunteers to participate. The requirements for participation were that the volunteers had to be 18 years old or older, currently living in America as an immigrant (refugee, asylee, another immigration status not a student or work visa), and learning English now or have learned English primarily as an adult in America. To recruit interviewees, I created simple flyers which were placed around the school and utilized my former teaching network at Portland Adult Education to reach out to students. I visited several classrooms, spoke about my project and requested volunteers. I also asked friends and acquaintances directly. I acquired eight interview participants and one participant who completed the interview as a questionnaire. Most volunteers were recruited from classrooms that I visited. One volunteer learned about the study by reading a flyer on the wall at school and reached out on his own. One participant is an acquaintance and one a good friend. However, as so aptly noted in Bonny Norton’s illustrative book, *Identity and Language Learning* (2013), “Research on natural language learning of adult immigrants is...less prolific than research on formal a learning.” She appropriately cites accessibility of data as one clear reason for the scarceness of research in this area. I found availability of immigrants to participate in my small study limited in part due to the strictly limited time available to adult immigrants in our busy society; many of whom work more

than one job, go to school, and raise a family. Hence, I found the greatest proportion of participants to be asylum seekers as they are unable to seek employment thus have more availability.

Interview Process

Interviews were intended to be one on one and indeed, several were. However, due to scheduling difficulties, several of the interviews were done with two participants at one time. These interviews presented the following difficulties for the interviewer insofar as data collection was concerned: note taking, keeping answers organized, and following the sequence of questions. Although the additional interviewee caused some organizational challenges for the researcher, some unintended benefits arose. These benefits became apparent during the process and support the hypothesis of the study pointing to the need for more social discourse. They will be discussed further in the findings. The interviews took place in several different settings, one interview with two participants was conducted in a library study room at the university, two individual interviews were conducted at my home, and two more two-person interviews were conducted in a classroom at Portland Adult Education. As previously noted, one participant completed the interview as a questionnaire. The interviews were recorded in order to be transcribed later. All participants signed consent forms. Their names have been changed for use in this paper.

Literature Review

Language Socialization in the Second Language Classroom (1992), by Deborah Poole, examines the types of cultural messages that white, middle class American second language teachers exhibit through classroom interaction. Poole focuses on socialization through language, which is implicitly conveyed, and is the prevalent form of socialization in a second language classroom. The article focuses on linguistic forms habitually used in American classrooms insofar as they contribute to socialization to cultural norms by involving “novices” in routine, repeated interactional acts, and sequences. The article’s main point is to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the role of cultural factors in second language classroom interaction and increase the understanding of and research on the teacher’s role in the “culturally constrained and motivated” environment. It emphasizes the importance of being aware that cultural information is encoded in student/teacher (novice/expert) interaction. It also points to the need to reflect on the roles, definitions, and expectations of teachers and learners and the potential need to move away from an educational system that propagates imbalance. Due to the institutionalization of the education system, roles are prescribed and immutable. However, if the classroom was no longer a classroom and the teacher’s role was expected to be learner as well, then perhaps the boundaries of cultural constraint and motivation would expand.

Second Language Socialization in Adolescence: Exploring Multiple Trajectories (2015), by J. Langman, R. Bayley, and C. Caceda, examines the concept of “expert” in a second language classroom by looking at the connected communities of practice within a single classroom and the multiple roles learners play within those. The study deconstructs the idea of expert in the classroom and reconstructs it from a perspective of multi-directionality rather than

uni-directionality. The study posits that the role of the learner can switch between that of novice to that expert among the communities of practice within one classroom. An example cited here considers the multiplicity of identities of one subject in the study. A recent immigrant from Mexico, who is still in the process of socialization and a novice in interactions with teachers and English speaking peers, takes the role as expert in order to help orient an even newer student from Mexico to classroom practices as well as the broader practices within the school. This observation points to the need for second language socialization research to “expand its work to the broader range of collaborative socialization activities,” (p. 47).

In the book, *Identity and Language Learning*, 2nd edition (2013), Bonny Norton investigates identity construction through language learning. She attempts to explain the particular paradoxical position of immigrant women language learners by asking two sets of questions based in the commonly agreed upon theory that interaction with target speakers is a desirable for adult second language acquisition (cite). The first set seeks to identify what opportunities are available for interaction with target language speakers outside the language classroom, how the interaction is socially structured, and how learners act upon these structures and why. The second set inquires into the ways in which an enhanced understanding of identity and natural language learning will inform second language acquisition theories and classroom practice. Through various methods of data collection, including interviews with five of the most involved study participants, Norton highlights the unique process of the adult immigrant learning English in Canada. The paradox she exposes is the need for language learners to access social networks of target language speakers to practice with and improve their speaking and listening skills. However, the findings revealed that most immigrant women have difficulty accessing these networks, which are so necessary for engagement in the target language, principally due to

lack of enough command of the target language. This suggests to me that a sociological inquiry into why the dominant monolingualistic culture, though derived from multi-ethnic roots, dissociate from new arrivals and more importantly, how we can change that. What methods can be engaged to address this issue, pervasive in many English speaking regions, and help shape a mutual respect and curiosity about the array of cultures all around us?

These studies illuminate social/cultural linguistic patterns within classroom settings and in the communities of a monolingualistic society. They demonstrate a need for further exploration of the numerous paths that language learners traverse in a particularly constrained, immersive second language context. I believe that the limiting element of monolingualism in the background of learning may restrict learner and teacher from fully realizing the potential of the I, Thou, and It energy that motivates and promotes development. Informed by the findings and engaged by the stories through which they were presented, I am thus prepared to undertake a miniature qualitative study into the feelings about and use of English by language learners in my community. My intent is to narrow the realm of possible trajectories of research to suit the particular community in which I live and work.

Study Design and Results

Data

Data was collected from a small sample of the immigrant population in Portland. Participation criteria was met; each participant was at least eighteen years old, currently living in Portland, Maine, and learning English now, or had learned English primarily as an adult in the United States of America. Due to the size of the sample and the time and availability of both researcher and participants, the sample is biased based on the countries of origin and first language. These facts are not representative of the population of immigrants learning English in Portland. Although the limited sample size might reduce the statistical validity of this study, the difficulty in obtaining a random sample of the population is informative to future research projects; it appeals to the need for investigating the causes of low participation. Furthermore, the recent popularity of less statistically oriented methods of research has stimulated the field of linguistics to find and analyze data in new and ways thereby obtaining another view of the aforementioned triangle.

Analysis of data

In maintaining the focus of the study, I examined the findings for recurrent reports of similar positive language learning involvement as well as common unmet language learning needs. I endeavored to discern areas for potential research into pedagogical expansion of adult immigrant language programs in the US. The procedure for analysis followed three steps: transcribing the audio, categorizing the data, and analyzing the data.

I first transcribed over nine hours of recorded interviews, some with difficulty due to poor recording quality. After laboriously entering pages of transcription, I sorted and organized

the interview data into a chart reflective of the interview questions. Next, I reviewed the data for commonalities within each category: Facts, SLA in practice, Cultural, and Community & Family. From here some themes began to emerge. I considered each theme in respect to how it connected to language learning needs and linguistic experiences of the participants. The study consisted of nine participants and one researcher. The subjects were three females and six males ranging from early college-age to nearly retirement age. The group spoke fourteen languages altogether, but there were four primary languages among them; French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Nuer. The highest percentage of participants spoke French as their primary language. Educational backgrounds prior to coming to the US spanned from literacy to doctorate of medicine. The level of spoken English also spanned from accented fluency to low-intermediate. Length of time in the US ranged from twenty-six years to just over six months, the median being two years.

Findings and Interpretation of Data

In my two investigative targets; linguistic experiences and unmet learning needs, three significant correlations emerged: the use of television as a means of learning, the challenge of pronunciation and listening comprehension, and finally, the expression for the need of more structured interaction. Presenting qualitative data in a narrative format connects the reader to the material on a fundamentally human level. It helps strip away the anonymity of the language learners and cloaks them with the name of neighbor, mother, co-worker, friend. For teachers, making a personal connection to pedagogical data helps us diagnose our own context and practice in relation to the stories from students like our own. Moreover, it enables us to conceptualize possible practical applications of the data within our own contexts. Ergo, I will make the effort to illustrate my findings within a brief description of the participants with

anecdotes related the research question and my interpretation analyzed in relation to the literature and my own knowledge and experience.

Television

In my experience, the key to expediting language learning is to identify and use affordances outside of the classroom. Knowing what affordances are and how to use them is complex when one is unsure of the cultural protocol and feels vulnerable by this lack of knowledge. As an immigrant trying to rebuild a life destroyed by external forces vulnerability, even perceived, are essential to avoid. The concept was applied to the field of education by Earl Stevick (1998) when he stated that, “the preservation of the self-image is the first law of psychological survival.” Survival is experienced in its literal form by many immigrants. To allow the feeling of impotence to encroach on their progress toward an American definition of survival; financial independence, would be disastrous. The element of safety along with accessibility are likely reasons that television and movies emerged as the primary means of “practice” or method for learning English for participants outside of language classes. Television and movies were cited by most interviewees as a chief way for them to process and reinforce the English they had already learned in class or heard elsewhere.

Sally, a beautiful and accomplished young businesswoman from Congo with an outgoing personality and infectious smile, states, “I watch movies, so the movies really help me also because I can understand what they been talking about, they can say something, ‘Oh! I heard my teacher say to me this.’ It’s correcting my mind.” Her utilization of an already enjoyable activity as a method to add to and reinforce her knowledge of the target language and culture shows an awareness of the existence of affordances and how to make optimal use of them. Humorously, *Sally* reports learning her first English sentence from *The Bold and the Beautiful*, an American

soap opera she enjoyed watching back home in Congo. The perseverant statement, relayed in character was, “Victor Newman never gives up!” (Laughter).

Phillip, a soft spoken and stately Sudanese man, too, expresses a great fondness for television and movies. American Westerns are his favorite, John Wayne movies in particular, “because they speak slowly and I can understand them.” Television is an easily accessible and psychologically safe affordance for input. It can provide reinforcement, listening comprehension practice, and cultural observation in a comfortable environment. Watching movies at home allows the learner to repeatedly examine, vocabulary, pronunciation, tones, conversation patterns, social conduct, paralanguage, and, depending on the movie, common social experiences of “typical” Americans, as portrayed by Hollywood. This affords the learner hours of engrossing language exposure in an environment requiring a low affective filter.

Daniel, an enthusiastic young man in his early twenties, is the most recent arrival in the group of participants, having settled in Portland last November after spending a few weeks with friends in Atlanta. Like Sally, movies were a method of learning English for Daniel, “Back home [in Burundi], I was making some effort to learn just for fun, I didn’t know it would help me someday, by listening, watching movies, reading book, but not too much book.” Daniel states that he “loved English” in high school and this inspired him teach himself the language. He claims English-language movies on the internet were influential in both his motivation to learn English, which he did “just for fun,” and his method of learning. “I was fond of watching those movies,” he said, “so you just have to know English so you can understand them.” His favorite actor is Kevin Hart^{vi} who recently released a new comedy called Ride Along 2 with Ice Cube.

Several other participants cited television and movies as a method of practice in their linguistic endeavor. As noted, it has many benefits to language learning and can be a useful tool

if it can be engaged in structured way that involves the output needed to more completely process skill in practice. However, by itself, television as an affordance lacks the capacity for interaction, a necessary ingredient in language acquisition. An affordance in language learning is the relationship between a learner and an object where the object does not trigger action but yields an occasion for the learner to actively engage in learning. In his ecological theory on learning, Van Lier states, “The environment is full of language that provides opportunities for learning to the active and participating learner.” (Van Lier, 2000.) All three participants introduced above expressed engagement in watching television and movies and each had an awareness of some ways in which this activity was helpful to them. It is this awareness and the ensuing thought and immersion in language that makes the television an affordance rather than a passive diversion.

Pronunciation and Listening Comprehension

A further use of television and movie viewing at home is to practice listening comprehension and pronunciation. Numerous pronunciation and accent reduction courses recommend listening to specific radio programs and watching certain television programs or movies while paying attention to and copying the production of sounds. One online source advises, “As you watch TV and movies, choose somebody who has your type of voice, communication style, and who you would like to emulate. If you don’t know, ask your friends to recommend somebody. You could even memorize parts of movies you like, imitating the actors.” (“Real Life Global” sect. 6. N.d.) This method of practice did not emerge in the interviews, however there was no direct questioning related to this type of activity.

Most participants mentioned the inability to understand the fast-paced American English dialect: “couldn’t understand well American pronunciation because it’s very fast,” “didn’t

understand what they talk to me at airport,” etc. Many also referred to the struggle to be understood. In fact, “to be understood” was reported by almost all participants as motivation for studying English. Most emphatically, Devin, an exuberant and intelligent man in his late thirties, declared, “I *must* learn how American person live, American people live, or I die!”

Devin speaks with the power of authentic emotion. He acknowledges the need for his continued effort to ensure his family’s survival by acclimating to and succeeding in his new and strange environment. Like others from the Central African region, Devin gave up a good job, a nice home, comfort, and connections to get out of his country. Devin speaks five languages, he received his university degree in customs administration, worked as a customs officer, and became a manager of more than twenty employees. He and his wife enjoyed their life in Congo. However, the political climate was so corrupt, he felt that in the interest of their safety and survival, they must leave. Although he struggles to find the words, he expertly describes the political situation, “In my country, there is no peace. The president of my country...when I have four years old...he is still! This is a crime!” Consequently, the freedom of speech we take for granted in America is non-existent there. “Because of political problem, there is no freedom of speech in my country, when you see something bad it’s like, ‘Shut up your mouth!’”

Devin is highly motivated to learn the language and culture of his new home. He began classes immediately upon his arrival in Texas last year. Desiring to practice his new language, Devin made an effort to stop and talk with neighbors when he saw them outside. This very outgoing activity implies a naturally low-affective filter and a high level of confidence or an ability to overcome the affective filter due to high level of confidence. It takes as much to pursue a potentially psychologically risky event. Devin exudes confidence and demonstrates a willingness to work for his well-defined goals. Unfortunately, his overall experience in Texas

was dismal. Since he and his wife came to the USA on their own and applied for asylum upon arrival, resettlement services were not available to them. Obtaining an apartment, transportation, and even changing money presented great difficulty for them. Devin relays the story of how, after being rejected and rebuked twice, once with the wave of a handgun, he finally met someone who helped him change his Euros to dollars. The interactions he had during his three-month residence in Houston felt restrictive and unwelcoming to Devin and gave him cause to move again, this time to Maine.

Kagues is an elegantly mannered gentleman, a former physician and director of Public Health, from Burundi. He speaks French, Kinyarwanda, and English. Indeed, he struggles with vocabulary and pronunciation, but the eloquence of his thoughtfully structured sentences is duly impressive. He came to Maine three years ago with his wife to seek political asylum. He is currently enrolled in classes at Portland Adult Education. *Kagues* acknowledges struggling with spoken English, especially with comprehension of the quick-paced spoken American English. He watches TV news but experiences difficulty understanding it all due to the speed of delivery. His engagement in television as an affordance was less enthusiastic than the other participants.

He has been active in his pursuit of fluency, participating in several informal discussion groups, attending free conversation classes around town and maintaining a friendship with two American English tutors, Gerry and Tom, who visit *Kagues* and his wife once a week for a friendly discussion in English. This type of interaction is exemplary of the type of authentic communication that allows for negotiation of meaning by the language learner that Norton's participants, as mine, have found difficult to engage for a variety of reasons. The linguistic opportunity *Kagues* and his wife have is rare.

Veronique's graceful demeanor seems somewhat subdued, more than may be her nature. Perhaps it's the location, her limited English vocabulary, the novelty of the event, or all three that contribute to her quietness. We met together with Sally in their classroom after class on a cold but sunny Thursday afternoon. Veronique is from Angola. Her primary language is Portuguese but she is fluent in French and Lingala as well. She relies on Sally to translate many of her responses, and Sally takes it upon herself to interject meaning while Veronique is talking. She takes no notice and doesn't seem offended. Having learned the term in Second Language Acquisition, I label them; polychronic: able to do many things at one time; multi-taskers.

Veronique received her high school diploma in Angola. She reports, like many interviewees, having taken English in high school. Like most others, Veronique didn't feel invested in the eight hour per week class. She laughs in camaraderie with Sally when she describes a typical EFL class in her high school, "you know like my country, in Congo, some like a many students when an English teacher come in, we are like (laughter) where are we going with this language? We go outside, whoever teacher come in we call them names like, 'Keep Silence'! (more laughter)." Sally elaborates, more seriously, and Veronique nods in agreement, "Because, you know, you are in a French country, we didn't imagine one day we would be here."

Veronique had a hard time adjusting to the new language and culture at first, "When I came here, I had big problem to make sense English. But, this time, I make so-so understand to say something." After one year here, she still struggles with vocabulary, simple sentence structure and basic grammatical forms. There are many factors contributing to an individual's pace acquiring a language, though it's important to consider the level of investment in practicing the language. Veronique reports no consistent practice methods or opportunities outside of class. Occasionally, she and her husband attempt to speak English together at home, but there is no

commitment to continual practice outside of class. Fortunately, Veronique and Sally both hold their current teacher in very high regard and express great admiration for her teaching style and capabilities as well as her kind personality and her dress. Specifically, she notes that her teacher has, "...a capacity, capacity? Yes, to give something in the class, she explaining very clear...pronunciation very clear..." As an example she animatedly tells of her coming to comprehend the word 'water' which she had learned prior to coming to America. However, she had learned the British pronunciation 'wôter' not the northeastern American pronunciation 'wada' she states with an exaggerated Maine accent and a giggle.

Sally clearly conveys why she needs to understand and be understood in terms of survival in her new country, "Like when I'm going to court, when I'm going to the churches, I can understand whatever they been saying before I give them my answer. But if there is an interpreter, the interpreter sometimes explains something different to what it means. That is my first motivation." Apprehensiveness about comprehending the facts and circumstances before making decisions is a vital and valid concern for all immigrants.

Jeffrey, a tall young man with a boyish face and intelligent eyes, joins Phillip and I in the small 'Wilson' spelling classroom at Portland Adult Education. It's a Friday afternoon and the building is mostly abandoned. The "Wilson" room is named for the reading curriculum developed by Barbara Wilson to address the needs of dyslexic adults. It's a takes multi-sensory and kinesthetic approach to teaching, and so the room is filled with manipulatives and peripherals. Some of us at Portland Adult Education (PAE) found the process helpful in addressing needs of our low-literacy language learners as well as several native English speaking students. Phillip was one of my students in such a class in our early years at PAE. Jeffrey, on the other hand, is a high school graduate with twelve years of uninterrupted education, including

foreign language instruction, his primary language of communication is French which has many similarities to English including the same alphabet, many of the same sounds, cognates, etc. and because of his command of oral communication, he presumably has a high level of phonemic awareness in English already, and he only arrived six months ago.

Phillip our friend from South Sudan has been in America for seventeen years. I remember when he started at Portland Adult Education in 2002. He was a strong and proud young man who had great expectations for his success in the land of opportunity. Phillip struggled in the classroom. His heavy Nuer accent affected his pronunciation and his ability to communicate his educational needs was hindered. Phillip and his brother were orphaned as young children during the extensive civil war in Sudan. In addition to losing his parents and most of his community, Phillip also lost a leg during the conflict. Physical and emotional loss are the dreadful consequences of war. Illiteracy is another less poignant yet still damaging consequence of war. Phillip's educational background consisted of barely literacy level English taught in a Ugandan refugee camp. Innumerable factors are involved in an individual's ability to be understood, including the local community's lack of familiarity with the linguistic structure of his first language. While Phillip's elocution of English is still progressing, his vocabulary use, sentence formation, and ability to use other skills and resources have greatly improved, he has not yet achieved verbal fluency.

In his fourteen years in Portland, Phillip has built strong and lasting relationships. He has advocated for his needs to be met and has persevered through set-backs and frustrations. His academic goal was finally realized when, in 2015, Phillip was awarded his high school diploma. Today Phillip continues his studies at PAE, taking a public speaking class for English language learners. Part of his success, he contributes to having a group outside of class to socially interact

with. He routinely plays dominoes with a group of friends. Though most aren't native English speakers, English is the shared language of all in the group. This Multilingual-English dynamic is recurrent for language learners, as we'll see in the discussion about learning needs, the third theme in this study. Despite that Phillip's dominoes game does not meet the requirement posited by Bremer (1996), in that the activity is not structured, nor is it optimal in terms of correction and assessment, it does at least afford some opportunity for engaged practice and negotiated interaction (as cited in Norton, B., 2013, 196.) In fact, Long (1996) called this kind of "free conversation...notoriously poor as a context for driving interlanguage development," (as cited in Van Lier, 2000, 247.) Social interactions are a desirable affordance for learning, but some are better than others. According to Van Lier (2000), "social interactions are not only a way to facilitate learning, but are fundamentally learning itself."

Negotiation for meaning in social interaction "facilitates acquisition" by connecting input, attention, and output in productive ways, (Long, 1996). Indeed, Van Lier (2000) asserts that negotiation of meaning is indicative of the learning process at work. He goes on to introduce Vygotsky's suggestion that when the child is engaged in practical tasks; eyes, hands and speech unite, (as cited in Van Lier, 2000, 253.) From my experience as an adult educator, I believe the same is true for adults. However, increasing the semiotic budget, the opportunity for meaningful action afforded in the situation (Van Lier, 2000), is more often than not unfeasible in the average multilingual, adult education classroom. We rely on our students to find and explore affordances for learning in the community outside of the six hours we have them in the classroom. What we don't do is teach them how. Fortunately for both Natalia and Robert, they have had a great deal of experience in negotiation of language and culture.

Structured Social Interaction

Natalia, a vibrant and caring woman from Peru, arrived here twenty-six years ago. She is the only participant who arrived prior to the age eighteen. She graduated from a public high school in Utah before her life's journey brought her to Maine. Here she is a mother of three bright and charming bilingual children. She works in education teaching Spanish and substitute teaching in the public schools that her children attend. Natalia's parents brought her and her brother to the United States as teenagers in the late 1980's. At that time, Peru was under a dictatorship and Natalia's father was obliged to leave his home and substantial business for the safety of his family and himself. They settled in Utah because there was one maternal relation residing there at the time. Though her parents were educated and successful in their home country, the language barrier demoted them to a much lower status in their new home. Natalia felt the loss sharply. Combined with the unfriendly and even "racist" attitudes and behaviors surrounding her at her new school, Natalia's prime motivation to learn English was to graduate early, which she did. As a junior, she got her diploma, an impressive feat that most native English speaking students do not accomplish. In retrospect, she wishes she had stayed the final year to learn more and practice her English. She found that outside of high school she had very little opportunity to practice her language skills.

Robert came here from Burundi via Belgium where he had been working in the solar industry as a consultant. He and his family, his wife and three daughters arrived in Portland, Maine in 2011. A boy was born three years later making them a family of six. He and his wife manage by working opposite schedules and sharing household duties, like most American families. Therefore, he was unable to schedule a time to meet with me for the interview and completed the questions in written format. I had met Robert and his wife on previous occasions

at our children's school and once at the library to discuss this project and possible tutoring. What struck me first about Robert, was the seriousness with which he approached his language and culture learning, but the importance he put on his role as a father. The amount of interest and involvement he shows in his children's upbringing was notable. Aligning, with my evaluation Robert reports wanting "...to offer my children an opportunity to have good education," as a reason for moving here.

Robert has been "awarded a Diploma of Engineering in Electro-Mechanical by the University of Burundi," as well as, "several and various certificates in Engineering and Computer programs." On top of his academic studies and continuing education in his field of work, Robert decided to pursue English as a foreign language after graduating from university. He reports having had some EFL classes in high school and credits his high school English teacher for influencing him to study English further. He explains, "2 years after my college graduation, I decided to enroll in a continuous English learning program at what was the American Cultural Center." With his level of education and achievement more affordances for practice become attainable. Robert cites two situations where his knowledge and use of English were tested, "I've had 2 great opportunities to practice English in workshops. One was when I participated at the 1st international biogas training workshop held at the Danish Volunteer Training Center in Tanzania. I made a 30 minutes' speech presenting my national biogas program. Four years later, in 1994, I was one of the participants and lecturers at an international solar energy training workshop held in Nairobi/Kenya."

Since settling here, Robert has noticed that more often he interacts with people who, "...have different English accents;" but states, "the most important is to understand each one of them without asking: 'Can you say it again!' more often." He says, "Adult Education has also

helped me to learn English,” but with the schedule of a father of four, he hasn’t been able to continue taking classes. “But I continue to learn English every day, by reading books, practicing with coworkers and friends, or watching Television.” In addition to these methods, Robert and his wife have three small teachers at home (the fourth doesn’t quite talk yet), “Actually all my kids use English at home, at school and outside. The only way to interact with them is by using the same language, English. However, sometime at home, on purpose, I interact with them in our mother tongue, because I don’t want them to forget about it.” Loss of one’s mother-tongue is another thread in the complex fabric of immersive language learning which was also touched upon by Natalia. Children bring us closer to Longfellow’s evening sky as they unveil lessons unsought. In other words, having children can afford us heretofore unimagined opportunities. One such affordance for Robert is, “...an association called *Dads Alliance*. This is a group of dads, grandfathers, other important men and women who support male involvement in the early care and education of children. In fact, research has shown that children with engaged dads have many positive outcomes leading to school success and increasing well-being in general.” Currently, Robert’s access to social interactions involving negotiation is high. At this time, he feels what is lacking is practice in writing which he knows he will need to further his education in this country.

Robert is different than the rest of the participants who all reported a lack of social interaction with native English speakers. Notwithstanding the quantity of practice speaking English he has, Robert has not yet achieved the goal which motivates him, “to reach the point that I’ll be able to speak perfectly English with a native American’s accent.” Speaking like an American is not all he wants, “I want also to learn written English, particularly academic English

in order to be able to write books, memories.” I, for one, look forward to the undoubtedly fascinating volume.

For the others, accessing the appropriate opportunities for structured social interaction with target language speakers is difficult. Four main causes for low participation in social interaction were cited by interviewees. First, the unannounced cancellation of free conversation classes; “I go to USM, free conversation class, I get there, nobody there! I am very disappointed. I don’t go back.” Second, the lack of knowledge about opportunities; “It is difficult for me [to find opportunities to practice] because I have no friends. I asked my caseworker, what can I do to practice?” Being “shy” was a third hindrance to socially interacting with target language speakers; “The first stage you just feel, you don’t want to talk, you feel shy, you afraid you will make mistake people laugh at you...poor performance.” Finally, schedule conflicts reduce participation; “I volunteer at another church. But it seems like a month since I’ve been there because it’s on a Tuesday and I’m supposed to be here (PAE)” Even when students are able to join some of the groups around the community, they frequently fail to provide optimal structure or enough opportunity for verbal negotiation with native English speakers. Several students who do participate in such groups find that many others from their language background attend as well and realize that, “when you are with your people from your country it is not really frequent to speak English with them because you feel at home and speak your native language.” Some or all of these deterrents have the possibility to impede progress and diminish motivation to practice outside of school.

Conclusion

You can speak well if your tongue can deliver the message of your heart.

John Ford

Summary

The undertaking of this study was to begin to examine opportunities for learning and practice that participants access and to ascertain possible areas where learning needs are unmet. I delineated common experiences that emerged from the interviews. Because second language learning is such an individualized operation, the small sample size did not take away from the diversity of perceptions on the process. The language learners introduced in this study have a great patchwork of experiences and each of their linguistic journeys have been different. However, there emerged one common need across the board; the necessity of more practice with spoken English. Not only was this identified by the language learners as an important component in their ability to use the language, but also as the most incommensurable activity to become involved in. Even the learners who actively sought outside interactive practice struggled to find an available or appropriate milieu.

Some participants relayed a difficulty in identifying affordances and insufficient skills or confidence to allow them to optimize affordances when they arise. This calls into question our responsibility as teachers and the content we must provide to enable our students to learn on their own. Are we expected to increase the semiotic budget within our classrooms or should we expose students to the potential affordances in and around the community as well? Students like Devin,

who came to the interview with his own notepad and pencil, used this interview as an opportunity to learn. He took notes, asked questions, and expressed satisfaction in learning several new vocabulary words. In my opinion, he is an exception to the adult education ESL student. More often, students similar to Veronique, spend much of their free time in comfortable settings with other speakers of their L1. This is understandable and necessary for acclimating to their new environment and healing from the loss of their old. However, to some extent, hibernating can become habitual when it is so burdensome to access appropriate contexts for beneficial discourse involving negotiating for meaning.

Suggestions for Future Research

“The environment is full of language that provides opportunities for learning to the active and participating learner.” (Van Leer, 2000.) This statement provides the researcher an area to pursue further study and provides the teacher alternative curricula to consider. Perhaps, rather than increasing the budget of opportunities within our classrooms we can *go* outside the classroom and explore this infinitely rich environment of language with our students.

Bayley, and C. Caceda (2015), examined the concept of “expert” in a second language classroom by looking at the connected communities of practice within a single classroom and the multiple roles learners play within those. This view of learning environments expands the role of expert to any person in the community of practice that is able to teach the learner. Hence, students can be experts at times by explaining to a less knowledgeable student about the current situation. These instances illuminate an area that may provide answers to the question of how to influence effective learning for adult immigrant and other non-traditional language learners. The concept of mutability between each role within the triangle of *I, Thou* and *It* enables a greater sense of equality in an adult learning program. In other words, sometimes the teacher can and

should be the learner. The concept of role flexibility within an adult language classroom is another area for potential exploration. Poole's (1992) interpretation of the teacher's role as inherently, "culturally constrained and motivated" resonated with the cultural-straddler in me. Of course, learning within any culture will involve cultural constraints and motivations, you are, after all, living and participating in that culture, whether by choice or not. However, as a basis for teaching adults, one must move away from the traditional roles of teacher and student. To engage in a productive dynamic with adults one must bring equity to the environment, both sociologically and culturally. For this to occur the roles of teacher and learner must be redefined. A move away from the typical "novice/expert" style of teaching should be attempted. From my interpretation of the data in light of my own experiences and learning, I propose that an experiment in alternative learning venues for adult immigrants is necessary to truly explore mutually beneficial and reciprocal learning contexts. It is my position that creating alternative, productive, collaborative, and reciprocal language learning contexts will enhance and streamline language acquisition of the adult immigrant population as well as affect positive social and economic change in the host community.

Finally, I can see the benefit of a sociological inquiry into why the dominant monolingualistic culture, though derived from multi-ethnic roots, dissociates from its newest members. As for myself, as I become more comfortable organizing and interpreting data, I will undertake a classroom-based social research project as suggested in Bonny Norton's inspiring conclusion.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The islands of Casco Bay in the Gulf of Maine were nicknamed The Calendar Islands based on a remark by Colonel Romer, an English military engineer, that there "appeared to be an island for every day of the year." www.calendarislandmainelobster.com

ⁱⁱ Winslow Homer was an American landscape painter and printmaker, best known for his marine subjects. He is considered one of the foremost painters in 19th-century America and a preeminent figure in American art. [Wikipedia](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Newell Wyeth was a visual artist, primarily a realist painter, working predominantly in a regionalist style. He was one of the best-known U.S. artists of the middle 20th century. [Wikipedia](#)

^{iv} Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a commanding figure in the cultural life of nineteenth-century America. Born in Portland, Maine, in 1807, he became a national literary figure by the 1850s, and a world-famous personality by the time of his death in 1882. <http://www.hwlongfellow.org/>

^v **John Ford** was an Irish-American film director born in Cape Elizabeth, Maine in 1894. He graduated from Portland High School, Portland, Maine. His well-known movies include Stagecoach (1939), The Searchers (1956), The Grapes of Wrath (1940), The Quiet Man (1952) and How Green Was My Valley (1941). He won four Academy Awards for Best Director. [Wikipedia](#)

^{vi} Kevin Darnell Hart is an American actor, comedian, writer, and producer. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is an actor and producer, known for the films; Let Me Explain (2013), Ride Along (2014) and The Wedding Ringer (2015).