HOW DO NON-IMMIGRANT ESL STUDENTS EXPERIENCE A COLLEGE-LEVEL ESL PROGRAM?

A dissertation submitted to the Kent State University College and Graduate School of Education, Health, and Human Services in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2017
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The purpose of this study was to uncover the experiences of ESL students at a college-level ESL program. Eleven participants shared their narratives of what it meant to be an ESL student and how they experienced living and studying in an authentic English language setting. The participants were full-time ESL students enrolled in advanced classes in the ESL program of a Midwestern university. Each participant was interviewed three times over the course of a semester and observed in each class in which he or she was enrolled.

Situated in a constructivist-interpretivist framework and inspired by phenomenological inquiry, this study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis to investigate the aspects of the experience of being an ESL student that stood out to the participants. The analysis of participants’ perceptions and interpretations showed that they experienced this lived experience in six key ways: developing a more independent sense of self and identity, social isolation from host culture, lack of immediate and continuous emotional support, language barriers, changes in the perception of the English language, and teachers and teaching styles.

This study has implications for current and future ESL teachers, ESL institutions and their administrators, universities and colleges that host ESL institutions, and ESL curriculum developers. By knowing how ESL students experience this change in their
lives, providers of education can make informed decisions regarding meeting students’ needs, empowering them as individuals with goals and aspirations, and understanding them at a deeper level that can lead to effective communication and productive educational and personal outcomes.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I knew that this would be the hardest part to write as I struggle to find words that can contain my gratitude, appreciation, awe, and humility.

I would like to express my endless gratitude to Dr. Alicia Crowe who continued to believe in me and support me throughout this experience. It was more than a privilege to have her as my advisor. She is an amazing woman bursting with brilliance and altruism. I could not have done this without her sincere care, encouragement, and truly helpful insight. I do not think that she even realizes how much she has helped me. I often find myself reflecting on what an amazing mentor she is and how her tireless support carried me through hard times. I am fascinated and immensely inspired by her. The first time I took a class with Dr. Crowe, she set the standards for the kind of teacher I wanted to become. She is a wondrous human being; selfless and strong, intuitive and compassionate. I am beyond lucky to know her and forever indebted to her guidance, patience, and wisdom.

I would like to thank Dr. Todd Hawley for his genuine efforts to provide me with invaluable insight and suggestions. The first time I took Dr. Hawley’s class, I was completely inspired by how he effortlessly made each and every student feel like they had something amazing to offer. It was effortless because it was real. I am sincerely thankful for the incisive advice and the necessary motivation he provided.

I would like to thank Dr. Sarah Rilling for her feedback and generosity. I am truly appreciative of her time and effort. She continues to inspire me to do better, to
move past the irrelevant, and to embrace what really matters. Her openness and sensibility have always been invaluable to me. I offer my sincere gratitude to her.

I am eternally grateful to Dr. Alexa Sandmann for her tireless support, unwavering encouragement, and genuine care. I truly appreciate the insightful feedback she provided me with in such a nurturing and reassuring way. I have always admired her dedication to her profession and to her students. She has the ability to inspire enthusiasm and curiosity in everyone around her. She is an absolutely inspiring woman that I have looked up to since the first time I met her. She makes me want to be a better teacher. There are no words to express how much I have appreciated her genuine interest in my scholarly pursuits as well as in my well-being. She is full of compassion, understanding, and warmth. I can never truly and fully express my gratitude to her.

I wish to thank my participants for making this research study possible. They trusted me with their stories; I hope I was able to do them justice. They will never know how much their supportive comments and genuine interest in my success touched my heart. I would also like to thank friends and colleagues who showed me love and support and told me I could do it. It truly meant a lot and I hope they know it.

My family, my loving, caring, beautiful family . . . My safe haven, my wonderland, my endless poppy fields . . . Thank you for always embracing my magical fairy dust covered dreams and loving me for who I am. Thank you for never giving up on me. Thank you for holding my hand and never letting go. Thank you knowing me, understanding me, listening to me. Thank you for what is in my heart. Thank you for all
that I cannot say as they are too dear to be confined to words. My mom, my dad, my brother . . . I love you all to the point that I become nothing and everything.

Finally, I would like to thank my Evren for loving me for the glorious mess that I am. He sees in me what I have always hoped people to see: a better version of me. I am thankful for his pure, unconditional, endless love. With you, nothing is impossible . . .

Seni çok seviyorum.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Today’s world is multilingual, multicultural, and increasingly globalized. Globalization has made flexibility necessary and interdependence inevitable. With a highly competitive global market and technology-driven global knowledge, it is only natural that utilizing resources is just as important as having access to them, if not more important. Naturally, the economic interconnectedness of world economies has brought about linguistic consequences and the utilization of resources can best and most directly be done through the language in which they have been created. Therefore, speaking another language is no longer a luxury or a desirable qualification; it is an indispensable necessity.

English is the indisputable global language of communication and commerce. It has become the international language or lingua franca (Berns, 2009; Kim, 2011), and people of all ages and nationalities speak it all over the world. It is a common linguistic medium that makes it possible to effectively send and receive information of all sorts. Its unparalleled and rapid spread in comparison to other widely spoken languages has been documented and confirmed by applied linguists and sociolinguists alike (Crystal, 2003; Dörnyei, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2001, 2004; Sharifian, 2009).

Changes to professional communication brought about by globalization and communication technologies have emphasized the choice of language in intercultural negotiations. Speaking English is expected, if not required, by employers in several sectors including corporations that have international business relations, government
affairs, education, telecommunications, Internet technologies, and healthcare (Nunan, 2003). In the global business environment, the status of English has long moved beyond being a foreign language; it is now a shared resource and tool for international communication. Moreover, many university programs require English as part of the admittance process in countries where English is not the official language (Erguvan, 2014). These programs utilize authentic sources of information in courses and graduates are expected to master English as international communicators and potential global employees. Universities also provide English preparatory classes for students who are not proficient in the language (Dayioğlu & Türüt-Aşık, 2007) and those who cannot fulfill the requirements of these classes lose their chance to continue their education. These reasons are among many that contribute to why learning English is crucial to participate and communicate effectively in the competitive global market economy and is no longer a mere credential.

English is taught and learned across varying contexts and circumstances and these have been categorized into two main concepts, namely: English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL). Teaching and learning of English takes the form of ESL in countries where the official and primary language is English. Similarly, in countries where English is not the official language, teaching and learning of it takes the form of EFL (Gass & Selinker, 2001). The amount and type of exposure to and immersion in English, its practical use, its place in everyday life, and individuals’ needs and reasons for learning it may and do vary across the two settings (Menard-Warwick, 2009); however, learners in ESL settings are by nature in more
immediate need of mastering the language than their EFL counterparts as they must utilize it in order to ‘survive’ in an entirely or almost entirely English based culture. On the other hand, ESL learners have more opportunities and access to authentic situations to practice the language than EFL learners do as there are no ready-made communication contexts for EFL learners. Therefore, English teaching programs, whether they are in public schools or private institutions, must design their curricula in accordance with what the learners need and what the setting requires. Even though the seemingly clear dichotomy between ESL and EFL has been blurred due to the spread of English as a world language and both concepts appear to be inherently similar, the experience of ESL and the experience of EFL indeed differ.

Since learning a language is not an isolated process and involves social, cultural, and psychological dimensions (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) as well as cognitive and physical ones (Lantolf, 2011), the richness and complexity of the experience of learning English as a second language comes from the diverse learners’ unique perspectives shaped by a variety of factors. The current research study examined the overall experiences of non-immigrant ESL learners at a college-level ESL program. The purpose of this study along with the guiding research questions is explained further in this chapter.

**Statement of the Problem**

The field of ESL has received and continues to receive well-deserved attention with its rapidly growing population of diverse learners from a variety of ethnicities, age groups, cultures, backgrounds, and experiences (Lynn Savage, Bitterlin, & Price, 2010).
The widespread of English places great importance on the field of teaching ESL. Programs that are specifically geared towards teaching English to learners who come to live and study in English speaking countries on student visas, pay for and attend English classes, and may or may not continue higher education in these countries are especially important in terms of bringing in international revenue, building intercultural relationships between countries, and promoting the fast and effective use of English (V. C. Tran, 2010). The success and reputation of such ESL programs depend on the satisfaction and academic achievements of their learners. Therefore, these programs should be designed in accordance with their learner populations’ needs, interests, motivations, expectations, and learning preferences. In order to predict what these learner populations demand, it is crucial to make an effort to get to know them, learn about their experiences of being ESL learners, and pay attention to their social, cultural, emotional, and psychological needs as well as their linguistic ones.

The end product of learning English seems to be the point of interest as the process itself is a very target-oriented one with a specific goal. However, that is not to suggest that the process is deprived of attention; it is generally viewed from lenses that focus on specific dynamics such as language skills (de Jong & Perfetti, 2011; Dilans, 2010; Lipka & Siegel, 2010; Wei, Brok, & Zhou, 2009), language structure (Chiu, 2009; Nassaji, 2010; Schauer, 2006), language socialization (Davis, 2007), cultural components (Lewthwaite, 1996; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998; Zimmermann, 1995), and academic success (Patkowski, 1991).
On the other hand, the phenomenon of the spread of English as the global language of communication and commerce has inspired research that looks into the role of English in education from a variety of perspectives that include the learners, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community. Especially, in the case of ESL, where the learner population usually consists of immigrants and international students, teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives are investigated in terms of professional development, humanizing educational spaces, and adapting to the new learner communities and student profiles (Burnham, Mantero, & Hooper, 2009; Fu, Houser, & Huang, 2007). Similarly, the perspectives of the parents and the community are studied from an adaptation and adjustment lens as they mostly consist of immigrants who are going through a transition or have been in an ESL setting for certain periods of time (Guo & Mohan, 2008).

As far as the learners’ perspectives are concerned, ESL research has concentrated on three major populations: adult immigrants, children, and adolescents (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003) along with a growing interest in international students who are taking mainstream university classes and ESL learners who are transitioning to mainstream university and college classes (Bifuh-Ambe, 2009; de Wit, 2011; Jenkins, 2013). As mentioned before, research studies that have taken on these populations as their subjects have centered on challenges, academic success rate, specific language skill development, issues of identity, acculturation, adjustment, anxiety, stress, motivation, beliefs, attitudes, and learning styles and strategies (Arnold & Brown, 1999; Hurd, 2007a, 2007b; Li, 2010; Kato, 2009).
As far as learner populations in higher education are concerned, there are several research studies that concentrate on international university students in mainstream university and college classes who no longer identify as ESL learners (Conway, 2014; Harklau, 2000; Skilton-Sylvester & Henkin, 1997; Stebbins, 1995) because they are officially part of the mainstream student population. However, research on ESL learners in college-level ESL programs is highly limited even though this is a prominent group of learners with specific goals and make up the most popular study-abroad context in the world (Kobayashi, 2006). This may be due to the understanding that official ESL learning is viewed as a pre-requisite for another goal. As far as international, nonimmigrant learners are concerned, the scope and interest of research seems to jump directly to settings where skillful use of English is expected both academically and socially. However, learners in college-level ESL programs embedded within native English speaking universities suffer a ‘state of stealth’ as their experiences are considered part of the product-oriented view of learning English with the end goals being either to function in mainstream university classes or to return to their countries of origin having mastered the language. In other words, these students’ experiences with learning English becomes of interest for research in cases where the student is either using it to continue his or her college education or the student is gaining academically relevant linguistic skills which he or she may or may not use in the future.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this interpretative research study was to gain a deeper understanding of how nonimmigrant ESL students from different nationalities and
backgrounds experience a college-level ESL program embedded within, but functioning independently (with its own budget) from the English department of a university in North America. The study was guided by the following research question: How do nonimmigrant ESL students experience a college-level ESL program?

**Definition of Terms**

Concepts and acronyms common to the field of teaching and learning a second or foreign language are used throughout this research. These need to be defined for the purposes of clarity for a reader of this dissertation.

Adult learners: This term usually refers to learners 18 years or older. However, when immigrant adults in community colleges are concerned, it may refer to much older populations.

English as a foreign language (EFL): This term is commonly used to refer to the learning and teaching of English in settings where English is not the native language.

English as a second language (ESL): This term is commonly used to refer to the learning and teaching of English in settings where English is the native language such as United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

English language learner (ELL): This term usually refers to learners of English in ESL settings, but can also be used to refer to EFL learners.

Foreign language learning: Learning a nonnative language in a person’s native language environment.

Generation 1.5: This term is used to refer to U.S.-educated ESL students who usually arrive in the United States after they have completed primary school in their
home countries. They are between the first and second generations and that is what gives them their nickname.

Native speaker (NS): A native speaker of a language is an individual whose mother tongue is that language and who is born in the country of that language.

Nonnative speaker (NNS): Nonnative speakers of a language are individuals who learn the target language after they have acquired their first or native languages.

Second language learning: Learning a nonnative language in an environment where that language is naturally spoken.

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language): A leading academic English proficiency test that assists institutions in evaluation, admission, and placement of non-native-English speakers seeking advanced education in North America.

Summary

The aim of this chapter was to introduce the current research study that explored the experiences of non-immigrant ESL learners at a college-level ESL program. It provided a rationale with regard to the necessity for investigating and understanding the many dimensions of the ESL experience in order to determine how each component of the experience affects the individuals and the meaning they attach to being ESL learners. It proceeded to shed light on the importance of the ESL process and its role in the shaping of the ESL learners’ futures regardless of the direction they choose to go when they are no longer ESL students.

Chapter 2 provides relevant literature that informs this research study in terms of specific language learner populations. One main learner population that ESL literature
has repeatedly investigated is immigrant learners, which includes refugees as well as immigrant children, adolescents, and adults. The other main population that international student literature has shown high interest in is non-immigrant international learners, which is a group made up of international students in mainstream university and college classes. This chapter explains in what ways these two main populations inform this research study while pointing to the gap in the literature in terms of ESL learners enrolled in college-level ESL programs.

Chapter 3 explains the theoretical background in which this qualitative research study was situated, provides rationale for the methods that were employed in the conducting of the study, and informs the readers of the ways trustworthiness was established and ethics were maintained. This study was grounded in a constructivist-interpretivist theoretical framework, was inspired and guided by the phenomenological approach, and engaged in interpretative phenomenological data analysis. There were 11 participants who were advanced learners of English. Two participants were from Kuwait, five were from China, and four were from Saudi Arabia with their own cultural perspectives and social constructions of past and current realities. Data were collected mainly through three semi-structured in-depth interviews. Participants were also observed during their ESL classes to provide supplemental data and information. Data were analyzed to determine the common and connectional patterns across participants’ accounts in order to arrive at a collective understanding of what it means to be an ESL learner in an ESL setting and to explore each individual’s meaning making process.
Chapter 4 presents the six main findings of this research study which are:

Developing a more independent sense of self and identity, social isolation from host culture, lack of immediate and continuous emotional support, language barriers, changes in the perception of the English language, and teachers and teaching styles. The theme of developing a more independent sense of self and identity centered around three key components. It occurred through building confidence and becoming self-sufficient, recognizing the impact of how they perceived the idea of family, and making important life decisions regarding their future. The theme of social isolation from host culture manifested itself in terms of remaining within one’s own cultural and ethnic groups, experiencing prejudice and encounters of discriminatory or racist nature, and dealing with the lack of institutional social activities. The theme of lack of immediate and continuous emotional support presented itself with regard to a highly challenging first month in the US, battling feelings of loneliness and anxiety, and a need for empathy and understanding.

The theme of language barriers was shaped by three elements: the presence of an ESL label, the fear of making mistakes, and the need for help with basic needs. The theme of changes in the perception of the English language manifested itself through a concept of English for higher life standards and the meaning given to the language learning process. Lastly, the theme of teachers and teaching styles included the distinctions participants made between their native and non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs).
Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the research findings in light of the existing literature on international students, ESL and EFL learners, issues of identity, and academic, social, and psychological challenges typically associated with international students enrolled in language programs in authentic settings. It provides the implications for teaching in the field of ESL including considerations for curriculum design to address learners’ needs. Additionally, recommendations for future research and the limitations of the current research are included. Lastly, the researcher shares and reflects on her own experience from the research investigation to provide a wider angle of the process while revealing the meaning she attached to what was uncovered.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of non-immigrant ESL learners at a college-level ESL program. The field of “learning English as a second language” is massive with a wide variety of subfields and a number of studies that have been conducted within each of these subfields. Specific skill comprehension, teaching approaches and methods, e-learning, teaching content, language learning strategies, computer-assisted language learning, English for specific purposes (ESP), sociocultural dynamics of ESL, using Internet sources, language acquisition, methods of evaluation, learner autonomy, motivation, and material development are just a few of these subfields. However, there is a gap in the ESL literature in terms of exploring ESL learners’ overall experiences strictly during their ESL program duration.

In order to contextualize the study, two learner populations were identified as the most relevant to its scope and aim. The two learner populations that closely inform the target population of this study and that have been studied previously in terms of learning and using English as a second language are immigrant learners and nonimmigrant international learners. The researcher analyzed and synthesized relevant literature that had investigated the experiences of refugees, child, adolescent, and adult immigrants as well as those of international students enrolled in mainstream university or college classes in English speaking countries. Since these populations learn and use English as a second language in an ESL setting, regardless of the origins of their goals and motivations, their experiences can inform and reflect our understandings of
nonimmigrant ESL learners’ experiences at a college-level ESL program. The unique and related experiences of these two populations, immigrant and non-immigrant, were connected to the overarching research question in an attempt to contextualize the overall experiences of the nonimmigrant ESL students in the college-level ESL program under study may be understood more deeply by investigating the common elements in these experiences.

Another element that makes the field of ESL vast and highly inclusive of a spectrum of dynamics is the fact that much of the research involves large numbers of children, adolescents, and adults from all around the world which grow rapidly in settings where English is the native and target language. These populations can be broken down into two main populations as immigrant and nonimmigrant English learner populations for the scope of this research study. Immigrant English learner populations consist of individuals with limited or no English skills who migrate to a country where English is the native and spoken language. Immigrant populations can be broken down into K–12 and adults due to the types of learning institutions they are placed in. Similarly, nonimmigrant English learning and using populations consist of individuals who visit English speaking countries and stay temporarily, usually for educational purposes. Since international students on student visas are typically part of the nonimmigrant population, as in they are coming to study and not to immigrate to the English speaking country, this research study refers to the nonimmigrant population as international students.

The rest of this chapter analyzes and synthesizes research that has been done in terms of immigrant ESL children and adolescents placed in K–12 education and ESL
adults placed in universities’ and community colleges’ ESL programs as well as nonimmigrant international students in mainstream university and college classes. It also explains the need to fill the gap in the literature where nonimmigrant ESL learners enrolled in college-level ESL programs are not addressed nearly as frequently as their counterparts even though they constitute the largest number of learners in study-abroad contexts and their experiences can inform the already exhausted fields in ESL research.

**Immigrant ESL Populations**

The rapidly growing numbers of immigrants and consequently, immigrant learners in English as a second language (ESL) contexts have led to linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse student populations in schools and institutions where English is the native and academic language (Davison, Leung, & Mohan, 2001; Slater & Mohan, 2010; Wolf, Herman, Bachman, Bailey, & Griffin, 2008). Due to this inevitable phenomenon, there is an extensive body of literature on immigrant children, adolescents, and adults in ESL contexts which is mainly concentrated on learner needs and challenges, updating and humanizing spaces and practices with regards to the new student population (Ashworth, 2000; Hébert & Reis, 1999; Macedo & Bartolomé, 2000; Spangenberg-Urbschat & Pritchard, 1994), socio-cultural aspects of ESL, adjustment, language stress, and identity (Arnold & Brown, 1999; Gregersen, 2003; Hurd, 2007a, 2007b). These works of literature suggest that institutions in ESL contexts should prepare for and adapt to the incoming learner populations not only to accommodate their academic needs but also to create warm, welcoming, and nonthreatening environments that will minimize the effects of the challenges these populations are anticipated to experience. Additionally,
studies of this scope reveal that ESL learners experience language stress due to not being able to communicate with the host culture, face challenges regarding constructing a new identity in a new culture and language, deal with adjustment and acculturation issues due to the impact of culture shock, and experience psychologically disabling emotions that stem from missing their families and home countries as well as their familiar routines and support systems.

**ESL in K–12 Education**

Literature referring to ESL programs in K–12 education focuses on the incoming student populations. It specifically refers to their educational backgrounds, native languages, cultures, and needs, and how ESL programs can be updated and adjusted in accordance with these notions (Early & Marshall, 2008). It is also concentrated on the social and psychological effects of being labeled “ESL” (Gunderson, 2004, 2007) and how rigid language policies with an English-only mindset negatively affect immigrant children and adolescents in ESL contexts (Salazar & Franquiz, 2008). These essentially show that an assimilation attitude should be avoided at all costs and these populations’ backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and native languages should be respected and celebrated in order to promote diversity while addressing and meeting social and academic needs through a positive adjustment process.

Several studies have taken into consideration the issue of immigration and its effects on the education system of the country to which it is being migrated. Similarly, several other studies are concerned with the support and services immigrant children receive in these countries in terms of language and schooling. It has also been argued
that when there are high concentrations of immigrant ESL students in a school, it is highly likely for the school to invest in its ESL program with trained instructors and well-designed materials and provide high quality ESL services (Callahan, Wilkinson, & Muller, 2008). These studies show that the needs of the learners have a direct impact on the shaping of certain aspects of an education system including its curriculum, materials, and even teacher education.

Ernst (1994), in her in-depth study of an elementary school’s ESL program that hosted students from as many as 20 nationalities, found three stand-out points that characterized the program. These attributes contributed to the way children experienced the program. Due to the highly heterogeneous student population in the program, the staff employed carefully constructed strategies to shape students’ learning experiences within the school and the classroom by providing instructional support in terms of conversational English and content-area instruction. The program effectively addressed students’ needs that went beyond linguistic ones; students’ emotional and social needs were addressed through individualized plans of study for each student while valuing their previous native language and culture experiences. Lastly, the ESL staff at the school provided a support/scaffold system to meet the academic, linguistic, social, and emotional needs of the students by encouraging and supporting the students in participating in everyday events. Overall, the program provided a strong scaffold system for its immigrant ESL learners going beyond the obvious language dimension.

Another study that addressed the needs of ESL students in U.S. classrooms was carried out by Miller and Endo (2004) in which they presented the personal histories of
immigrant children. They addressed the linguistic and cultural problems that immigrant ESL students face and suggested strategies to help students deal with language anxiety as well as ways to maintain their native culture while adding to it rather than replacing it. They also shed light on pedagogical and curricular problems that immigrant ESL students face due to the fact that their educational backgrounds are shaped differently than what the U.S. educational strategies offer. The authors proposed that the teachers should reduce cognitive load and make an effort to learn about their ESL students’ educational histories as well as re-evaluating their teaching strategies and approaches to accommodate the different variety of approaches their ESL students were exposed to before migrating to the U.S. They also suggested reducing the cultural load by paying respect to the students’ native language and culture and reducing the language load by skillfully breaking down the complexity of English that is used in the classroom. This study addressed important points in more effectively welcoming immigrant ESL students into U.S. classrooms and encouraged the readers to consider the many dimensions of being an ESL student.

Karanja (2007), in her case study of immigrant students in Canadian high schools, found that there was limited support for ESL students in Canadian high schools in small cities yet teachers created voluntary opportunities to help students succeed. However, she suggested that these efforts needed to be reinforced and supported by the administration, other school staff, and education planners and emphasized the need for extracurricular activities, peer tutoring, counseling, and creating positive classroom atmosphere to aid ESL students academically.
Li (2010) conducted a multiple-case narrative study with 12 immigrant students in secondary schools and universities to examine their home and school experiences from a critical socio-cultural perspective and found that the ESL programming that these students had been receiving had negative psychological effects, lacked cultural relevance, and proved to be ineffective. Students were concerned mainly about two issues: being placed in ESL classes for separate instruction and being isolated from peers with whom they could have social interaction. Being in separate ESL classes caused a social fear and lack of confidence and prevented the students from practicing language skills with their peers in natural environments. Instead of being given meaningful, real-life opportunities for language usage and acculturation, students were isolated in their own groups with no to few spontaneous social interactions with native speakers. This study is a strong indication of how ESL students are immediately isolated in cases where the schools believe separation is the best approach to teaching to immigrants. However, social and cultural opportunities for practicing language and getting accustomed to the language and the target culture can be achieved by inclusion and immersion.

Nero (2005), in her study that looked into English language learners’ acts of identity, stated the need for expanding the definitions and implications of concepts such as language, culture, identity, bilingualism, native speaker, non-native speaker, and ESL and suggested that ESL pedagogy and second language acquisition models should be revised in accordance with new high school and college level ELL students’ linguistic identity construction. The student questionnaires she conducted showed that ELL students built heterogeneous identities that challenged earlier categorizations and
placements of ESL students that depended on some standard constructs without taking into account the many dimensions of new ELL populations and more inclusive, extensive concept definitions.

Nesselrodt (2007), in her case study of an ESL program in a high school with a growing population of immigrant ESL learners, described how the program was revamped to meet the educational needs of the new student population as well as to prepare them for the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. She found that the school in general and the ESL program in particular established a safe and friendly environment that took into account the social and emotional needs of the students while respecting and appreciating students’ diverse backgrounds and cultures. The program also adjusted the instruction in accordance with the students’ academic needs and educational backgrounds and provided extra time on tasks to master the language and the content.

Salazar (2008) argued that rigid language policies and the NCLB act privilege the English language and diminish the value of linguistically and culturally diverse students’ heritage languages and cultures. In her longitudinal ethnographic case study of a high school ESL program, she found that the teachers adhered to the strict language policies of the school district and were not able to create humanizing practices in their language classrooms. She indicated that this prevented the students from expressing themselves and their experiences with their deep culture. She strongly recommended a more inclusive vision of ESL instead of a traditional approach that does not involve students’
cultural, linguistic, and familial resources and suggested moving beyond a mechanical view of emphasis on English acquisition only.

Gunderson (2008) commented on some critical points with regards to ESL and bilingual education and indicated that it is unfortunate to view ESL students as “unsuccessful” and “likely to drop out of school” based on statistical research that does not take into account the differences between these students and treats them as one big homogenous population. He stated that ESL students feel isolated and inferior because of the ESL label and since there are not enough qualitative studies, we do not get to hear from the students themselves how they feel about being ESL learners. He strongly suggested that research that addresses the complexities of instruction and uniqueness of the students’ stories is needed if we wish to move forward with ESL and bilingual education.

These individual studies possess unique elements that in combination point to the need to understand the ESL experience by going beyond the mechanical aspects of learning a new language in its natural setting. For instance, as some of these studies suggested, it is important to address learners’ social and psychological needs; not just their academic ones. Certainly, adjusting instruction and teaching strategies while keeping these learners’ educational backgrounds in mind is a complicated yet highly effective method to promote efficient academic adjustment. However, when it is performed in combination with a nurturing, empathetically framed, and socially and psychologically conscious approach, it provides a more well-rounded system of accommodating and internalizing these incoming children and adolescent English learner
populations. Additionally, these individual studies refer to notions such as identity building, social fear, lack of confidence, maintaining one’s own culture, and being separated from the rest of the student population. These notions together suggest that this learner population struggles with internal negotiations of who they were, who they are, and who they will be as they establish their identities as individuals in a new culture and language. Lastly, since there are more quantitative studies than there are qualitative ones, the voices and stories of the members of this ESL population are not typically on the forefront. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the overall experience of being an ESL learner in relation to the individual elements that shape this experience in order to make sense of the meaning ESL learners attach to this unique phenomenon.

**ESL in Adult Education: Universities and Community Colleges**

Similar to the literature centered on ESL in K–12 education, literature that refers to adults in ESL education is mainly focused on motivation (Conway, 2014; Martin-Jones, 2000), learner needs, styles, and challenges (Rossi-Le, 1995; Stebbins, 1995; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), the social and psychological effects of being labeled “ESL” (Blanton, 1999; Harklau, 2000; Thonus, 2003), learning experiences, socio-cultural dynamics of learning ESL, culture shock, and adjustment (Skilton-Sylvester & Henkin, 1997; Weinstein-Shr, 1993). However, since this is a different population of older and varying age groups, the studies naturally yield results that represent individuals with a wide array of backgrounds, needs, and worldviews and more life experience to make comparisons to. For instance, some of these studies show that an immediate need for employment is a motivator and adults may require specialty courses
in their fields of expertise. Additionally, some adults are indifferent to the fact that they are ESL students whereas others are uncomfortable with being categorized under a label that makes them feel inferior. As far as adjustment and acculturation are concerned, adults seem to experience a more challenging process than their younger counterparts because they have been accustomed to a certain way of living for longer periods of time.

It is important to remember that almost all adult ESL learners are immigrants (Chisman & Crandall, 2007) and that their motivations for learning English are dependent on the changes they go through in their lives. Language classes, usually the initial contact with the host society for the immigrant adults, play an important role in their integration, and the adults who take these classes have varying expectations and motivations (Kim, 2011; Springer & Collins, 2008). For instance, Paper (1990) found that such learners expected to gain cultural awareness, social skills necessary for daily interactions, and correspondence skills as well as basic linguistic skills.

Skilton-Sylvester (2002), after realizing that the traditional views of adult ESL learner motivation and participation did not effectively and adequately address the complexity of relationships among learners’ identities, their daily lives’ social contexts, and the reasons for wanting to learn English, set out to investigate how all these elements shaped their investment in participating in adult ESL programs. She addressed a critical issue of lived experience in terms of being a key element in curriculum development and pedagogy and emphasizes that the relationship between the language learner and the language learning context requires a deep understanding of learner identities, interests, and motivations as well as the complex nature of adult ESL learners’ language learning
contexts. Her study’s scope is related to the direction of this research study in the sense that it suggests investigating not only the language element in adult ESL learning contexts, but paying attention to the real life complexities adult ESL learners face that shape their investments in learning English.

Lincoln and Rademacher (2006) conducted a study that investigated the learning styles of adult ESL students in community colleges. They found that ESL students from different nationalities showed different learning style preferences and suggested that teachers take these differences into account when designing their courses. It is important to consider the educational backgrounds of ESL students as well as the instructional methods to which they have been exposed in terms of designing activities and assessments. There are instances where ESL students are misplaced simply because their learning styles are different from their native speaker classmates. Therefore, this study brings forth an important issue that has an effect on ESL students’ success or failure. It means that by educating ESL teachers about the educational backgrounds their students come from and the instructional methods they are accustomed to, ESL programs can better accommodate their learners’ needs.

In their article addressing the needs of immigrant students in community colleges, Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco (2011) suggested that community colleges should engage in ways to increase enrollment, help immigrant students to improve academically, and make the transition period of the integration of this student population into the U.S. workforce and society as smooth as possible. They suggested that one of the ways to achieve these goals is to invest in these students’ ESL skills as the majority of
this student population is accustomed to educational norms different than the U.S. norms and has completed high school education in mother tongue. They referred to the different needs of the various types of immigrant students and suggested different language curricula that can be adjusted to specific needs as well as a strong counseling system that can raise cultural competency along with academic direction.

Buttarro (2004), in her case study of eight adult Hispanic female immigrants enrolled in ESL programs, encountered important findings regarding experiences with culture shock, language stress, and social and educational adjustment. She found that some participants performed better than others due to their positive attitude towards learning English, all participants found the English-language environment to be a positive element, and all participants experienced feelings of isolation and anxiety. She also found that the participants expected empathy from their teachers, tried to utilize English as much as they could in social situations, and studied with their children as the children’s English skills were better. The participants were motivated by several reasons from basic social interactions to finding better job opportunities. These findings show that through support and nurture, ESL learners can receive the motivation they need in times of hardship whether it is academic or personal.

Song (2006), in her study that looked into the perceptions of factors contributing to ESL students’ failure in a college ESL course from both ESL students’ and instructors’ perspectives, reported back that even though the instructors’ perceptions support earlier research, there are additional elements that cause ESL students to fail in their ESL courses such as socioeconomic factors. In the interviews, students explained that there
were internal factors such as lack of motivation and negative attitude that prevented them from advancing further and added that supporting their families and working at their jobs pushed their ESL courses back in terms of priority. Interestingly, all instructors agreed that the main cause of ESL students’ failure was family and job responsibilities whereas some students blamed the instructors for failure and suggested working at their jobs helped with their English skills. This study is important in terms of comparing college level ESL students’ and their instructors’ perceptions of what factors cause failure in ESL courses. The difference in perceptions reveals a communication gap that could be avoided by effective interaction and feedback.

Hubenthal (2004) investigated the English learning experiences of older Russian immigrants and looked into their motivations for learning the language and the obstacles they came across in terms of acquisition. The participants stated that they wished to learn and use English effectively because they wanted to function as independent adults in daily life and wanted to be integrated into the American social and cultural life and feel like American citizens. They also wanted to be able to express themselves articulately and talk about sophisticated matters instead of being limited to subjects that only required rudimentary language skills. The participants who were culturally prominent and highly educated felt that because they could not communicate in meaningful ways, their personalities and levels of sophistication did not come across as much as they would have liked. As far as barriers to learning English were concerned, participants had difficulties with acquisition due to old age, had limited access to language classes, and had health problems that prevented from going to classes. In addition, they felt embarrassed when
they did not understand what was said to them and felt that Americans did not want to speak with them because of their limited English skills and as a result, participants shied away from starting conversations. This study is an indication of why students might refrain from speaking or interacting and what kinds of feelings they might be struggling with in terms of learning and using the new language.

A common yet inaccurate assumption is that due to their different and varying educational backgrounds and untraditional, nonstandard styles, ESL learners are deemed incompetent, inadequate, and even to be cognitively behind their non-ESL counterparts (Zamel, 1995). Fernsten (2008), in light of an offshoot of this assumption that claims that ESL writers are inferior, set out to investigate how an ESL writer constructed her identity. She stated that even though there are large numbers of nontraditional students in universities, they still felt like outsiders, and in the case of her participant, she felt that her lived experiences would conflict with the traditional American experience and that there was a bias against her and her family because they were immigrants who did not fully fit the ‘American’ label.

ESL students believe that being labeled and referred to as ESL learners and being placed in ESL programs or other special programs stigmatizes them and, as a result, segregates them from the rest of the student population (Blanton, 1999; Harklau, 2000; Thonus, 2003). Goldschmidt, Notzold, and Miller (2003) reported back on the outcomes of a 30 hour individualized program in a northern American university designed for incoming college students that included a group of Generation 1.5 ESL students who came from non-English speaking backgrounds and fell between the first and second
generation immigrants in the U.S. The authors indicated that what made this particular program attractive to the Generation 1.5 students was the fact that it was designed for all freshmen and not named an “ESL program” even though the majority of its participants were ESL learners. The program had positive effects on the students in terms of academic success and attitudes about going to college and did not separate the ESL students from the rest of the student population.

Marshall (2010) conducted a study that analyzed how a group of immigrant multilingual students at a university in British Columbia, Canada, went through the process of re-becoming ESL even though they thought they had left behind the ESL label in high school when they entered university. Students that were required to take the “academic literacy” course associated it with ESL courses they had to take during high school and initially had anxiety and negative attitudes towards this situation. Their negative reactions were a product of having to go through ESL as immigrants or Generation 1.5 learners and thinking they had proven themselves by entering university which is seen as a big accomplishment in and of itself, especially for children of immigrant families. They thought that they had left behind the deficit “ESL identity” with its social implications to take on the “university student identity,” but felt that they were interrupted.

Kanno and Varghese (2010) examined the challenges faced by immigrant and refugee ESL students while accessing four-year universities and found that in addition to limited English proficiency, students encountered structural constraints such as resentment for being re-labeled ESL, financial struggles due to immigration, and
self-elimination due to believing they will not be admitted or they will not be able to complete their studies. These findings are important in the sense that they go beyond the obvious linguistic struggle level and view the bigger picture that represents the overall challenges immigrant ESL students face during the university accession process. They act as a reminder that being an ESL student is comprised of many attributes; not just linguistic ones. As Bennici and Strang (1995) indicated that having limited English proficiency in the U.S. school context also suggests that you are poor and from a minority group. Even if this statement does not apply to all ESL learners, it still suggests that being an ESL learner has social, cultural, structural, economic, and other implications that need to be investigated.

Becker (2011) looked into the role that educational and socioeconomic background plays in terms of helping or hindering adult immigrants in their noncredit to credit transition and, through the narratives of the participants, found that the adult learners viewed language enhancement as a way to access academic and vocational advancement. She also found that learners with adequate resources were better able to access academic opportunities than their counterparts with limited resources.

Blumenthal (2002) explored the general concerns and issues with community college ESL programs and found five central points that constitute these programs’ attributes, namely: diversity within the ESL population, place of ESL within the institution, Generation 1.5 learners, financial concerns, and employment and training issues for ESL instructors. She suggested that the ESL student population is comprised of nonimmigrant students, immigrants and refugees, students with strong academic
backgrounds, and students who have not had good educational opportunities in their home countries. Another issue is the place of ESL programs within institutions as it differs across colleges and departments. For instance, some programs merge nonimmigrant and immigrant students whereas others merge groups according to educational background. Employment and training of ESL instructors is another issue as programs may hire instructors with varying degrees of academic credentials and expertise. Moreover, traditional community college ESL classes are not necessarily designed for Generation 1.5 students and these students resent being placed in classes with immigrants and being labeled ESL as they have had some sort of U.S. education before. Lastly, funding can become very problematic due to laws, public opinions, and politics and ESL programs end up having to rely on volunteers who are not stable employees. All of these concerns cause assessment of student success to be dependent on varying factors and present a picture of what community college ESL students face in their programs.

These abovementioned studies point to the different facets of the ESL experience for adult immigrant ESL learners. It is important to understand that adult ESL learners placed in various ESL programs are usually affected by socioeconomic factors, family and job responsibilities, and vocational requirements. Therefore, even though studies done on this particular group yield crucial results in terms of ESL experience, it does not directly address the ESL population this research study has aimed at. Nonimmigrant ESL learners at college-level ESL programs are adult learners, but they do not typically have the family and job related concerns that their older counterparts do; they are motivated by
different goals. Similarly, these individual studies show that older adult ESL learners are concerned about the fact that they are labeled as ESL because they perceive it to clash with certain elements of their identities; they view it as a regression, not a progression. In addition, members of this population struggle with identity negotiation, sociocultural and educational adjustment, and accurate self-representation due to limited language skills. Even though these findings collectively indicate that the ESL experience has several dimensions that determine the meaning an ESL learner will attach to his or her experience, their results speak to a generally older population. This population does not have the same motivations and goals as nonimmigrant ESL learners at college-level ESL programs that are usually not in immediate need to find a job to support their families and are not struggling with socioeconomic factors that can change the value and importance they place on learning English.

**Nonimmigrant International Students**

The number of international students seeking education in ESL contexts such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand has been rapidly growing and will continue to grow at elevated rates (Dekhinet, 2008; Misra & Castillo, 2004). There are several reasons why students from all over the world choose to study in these contexts and some of these reasons are the opportunity to learn about cultures other than their own, to receive respectable degrees from accredited institutions that will be appreciated in their home countries, and to gain new ways of thinking (Andrade, 2006; McClure, 2007).
A great deal of literature emphasizes the importance of English proficiency for international students in ESL contexts in terms of social and academic adjustment (Grundy, 1993). In addition, there is a considerable amount of literature, including both quantitative and qualitative studies, related to the challenges faced by international students such as language barriers, culture shock, personal problems, financial struggles, experiencing academic difficulties and differences, racism, discrimination, loss of social support, lack of appropriate accommodation, loneliness, isolation, alienation, adjustment and adaptation hardships, depression, and being homesick (Adelman, 1988; Baker & Hawkins, 2006; Barratt & Huba, 1994; Birrell, 2006; Bradley, 2000; Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Frijters & Beatton, 2007; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2004; Hsu, 2003; McClure, 2007; Mori, 2000; Msengi, 2007; Novera, 2004; Roberts, Golding, Towell, & Weinreib, 1999; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Zhao, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008; Zimmermann, 1995). These studies generally focus on the challenges and hardships that international students are faced with both upon arrival in the target culture and upon enrolling in their university or college classes. Since international students enrolled in universities and colleges constitute a prominent and growing learner population in countries where English is the native language, researchers show interest in the beliefs and attitudes of this highly diverse population.

Furthermore, there are a number of studies dedicated solely to the academic experiences of international students studying in ESL contexts (Arthur, 2004; Bayley, Fearnside, Arnol, & Rottura, 2002; Cameron, 2002; Gibson & Heartfield, 2002;
Nicholson, 2001; Tiwari, Avery, & Lai, 2003). As far as the experiences related to the challenges of technical aspects of academic life at English medium universities are concerned, international students have difficulty participating in classroom discussions and interactions effectively, mastering vocabulary specific to their fields, developing critical thinking skills, writing academically, and comprehending assigned readings (Blue, 1993; Evans & Green, 2007; Holmes, 2006; Kaldor & Rochecouste, 2002; Melles, 2008; Morita, 2004; Swales, Barks, Ostermann, & Simpson, 2001; Woodward-Kron, 2008). The reason why there is a considerable amount of literature on international students’ academic performance is because they are not an inherent part of the education setting where the expectations, instructional methods, educational approaches, and student-teacher relationships are different from their own. Therefore, their academic performance is explored in light of these factors to determine in what ways it is affected by the introduction of these new elements.

Li (2004), in her narrative study with four female Chinese ESL students who came to Canada as international students to pursue high school and college education, set out to investigate the transitional experiences and the challenges these students face while adapting to a different educational, cultural, and social context. She explained the main reasons for these students to move to Canada to live and study by referring to the competitive process for securing a place in the limited higher education system in China and the value that is placed in a degree from a North American university. Li found that the high school that admitted these students was not ready to host international students as it lacked the infrastructure to integrate the students into the existing student population.
The same applied to the university; it could not provide the necessary support for these students to efficiently transition to the academic environment as they lacked the academic language skills that are required at college level. This study realistically presents some of the reasons that international students move to native English speaking countries to pursue education and effectively raises issues that schools and programs need to pay attention to in terms of better accommodating their international student body.

Bifuh-Ambe (2009), interested in the transition period of ESL/ELL students who are advancing from ESL courses to mainstream university courses, conducted a case study of one Korean ESL student to investigate how she acquired academic literacy skills as well as strategies to comprehend subject matter. The author found that the student encountered difficulties in terms of academic writing, adjusting to teaching, learning and assessment models, linguistic input and output, and comprehending content area material. This study emphasizes a very important issue that arises in mainstream university courses; the assumption that all students who have advanced to university level courses have acquired all skills necessary to successfully complete those courses. Unfortunately, even though ESL students advance to these courses, they may still encounter problems. Instructors need to keep in mind that their nonnative speaker students might be struggling due to several reasons and plan their responses and actions accordingly.

Baik and Greig (2009), having realized the increasing number of ESL students in Australian universities, conducted a mixed-method study to evaluate the effectiveness of an ESL intervention program that focused on discipline-specific language and subject matter. They found that discipline-specific programs helped ESL students to improve
academically and that content-based instruction had long-term effects in terms of success in discipline area in university. They also stressed the importance of early identification of ESL students’ linguistic struggles and the need for early intervention in order to obtain positive outcomes in terms of academic advancement. This study contributes to a frequently studied area in ESL/ELL studies which is helping struggling learners; yet it still raises awareness in terms of paying attention to the needs of university level ESL students.

Shakya and Horsfall (2000) investigated the experiences of nine ESL/international nursing students in Australia and found that the biggest challenge these students faced was language. Even though these students had passed the standardized English test required by the university, they felt that they could not adequately meet the verbal and written academic demands of their mainstream courses. They suffered from language anxiety and were stressed about their accents and not being understood by peers which led to a lack of confidence and interaction. They expressed feelings of embarrassment and frustration in situations where they could not understand the native speakers. In addition, since most of the participants came from cultures that required speaking only when spoken to, they could not effectively take part in discussions and felt alienated in group-work activities. This study is an important reminder to avoid making immediate assumptions regarding students when it comes to in-class behavior. For instance, it may be true that the students are responsible for joining groups, but not all students come equipped with negotiation and management skills from their home countries.
Rubenstein (2006) talked about the educational expectations of various cultures around the world and compared them in terms of student behavior, student perceptions, student and teacher expectations, student and teacher relations, teaching techniques, activities, ways of communication and socialization. She pointed out how social, cultural, and religious norms of various nations affect the way their education systems are built and maintained. For instance, an Asian student might refrain from making direct eye contact because it is considered inappropriate whereas an American student would regard to it as a sign of straightforwardness and honesty. In addition, some ESL students might not wish to talk about certain subjects due to cultural or religious reasons and it might come across as unwillingness to participate. Similarly, the students’ perceived lack of engagement might be caused by the acculturation and adjustment process. Therefore, the author made the point that these matters should be taken into consideration when college-level ESL students are concerned as they are vulnerable populations going through a cultural transition.

An in-depth interview study carried out by Chen (2003) examined two Asian ESL undergraduate students’ experiences with “communicative language teaching” (CLT), a language teaching approach that promotes verbal interaction. It focused on the reasons for reticence and similar to the way Rubenstein (2006) talked about cultural implications for in-class behaviors, connected it to students’ native cultures and experiences with socialization in their native countries. The Japanese participant indicated that she had difficulty joining discussions in class because in her schools in Japan, there was no interaction and students were asked to be quiet. Similarly, the Korean participant did not
wish to speak in class because he was accustomed to classrooms where he would only speak when spoken to. He viewed silence as a virtue as it was respected in Korea. Collaboration and class discussion were not promoted in either participant’s previous school experiences and culturally, they refrained from speaking when they did not have to. This study emphasizes a crucial point in terms of analyzing ESL student behavior and has implications for ESL teachers who may experience reticence or other forms of unexplained behavior due to cultural foundations their students adhere to.

Skyrme (2007), reporting back on her longitudinal study of the experiences of 12 Chinese international students in a New Zealand university, concentrated on and talked about the very different experiences of two of these students. She set out to explore how these students experienced and adjusted to the new learning situation they were in and found that their experiences in this new setting were highly different from their past experiences and that English language requirements proved to be challenging, even though the students had not predicted so. Both students initially enrolled in ESL centers in order to practice their language skills and pass the IELTS (International English Language Testing System), a globally recognized English language test, with scores that would allow them to attend mainstream university classes. It took one student two years and the other student one year to attain the required score. They both found the ESL experience laborious, humiliating, and not motivating.

McLachlan and Justice (2009) investigated the experiences of international students in the U.S. and looked into how they coped with their new environment and the strategies they used to adjust and manage change. The students were initially affected by
physical changes such as weather and food. They felt lonely, isolated, and homesick which made them experience change at elevated levels. The need to perform well in order not to disappoint their families back at home and the new academic expectations put unneeded pressure and the language barriers prevented them from negotiating social, cultural, and academic differences effectively. Culture and transition shock was felt deeply and strongly and extended the adjustment period. All of these challenges caused emotional consequences such as mild depression and insecurity and for some, academic consequences such as leaving school and returning to their homes. In order to cope with these challenges, the international students utilized some strategies such as creating supportive networks at church or at school with professors for mentorship, making both American friends and same nationality friends, engaging in social activities and self-improvement activities to raise confidence and independence, and using university services such as the health center and counseling. This study shows the number of challenges international students face and how these challenges go beyond the linguistic level. When the overall experiences of international ESL students are concerned, one cannot afford to think one-dimensional; all facets of the issues and concerns that come with the territory of being an international ESL student need to be considered.

Another study that investigated the experiences of international university students in an ESL setting was conducted by Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2009). The authors recognized and emphasized the vulnerability of this student population and looked into the problems they encountered. Participants expressed their problems with authentic spoken English and suggested the university implement a language
improvement program or hold weekly meetings for socialization with native and nonnative speakers. The majority of the participants did not experience difficulty adjusting to the new cultural norms, but some participants referred to the initial loneliness and isolation and suggested they expected more empathy from teachers. Participants felt that their cultures were not sufficiently understood and they did not have enough resources on campus to practice their religious beliefs and cultural traditions. They also expressed financial concern due to high health insurance costs and low assistantship salaries (those who had graduate assistantships). Most participants had difficulty making American friends because they felt that Americans were not comfortable being friends with international students.

Khawaja and Stallman (2011), in their qualitative study of the challenges faced by international students in Australian universities, investigated the coping strategies these students used in order to maintain personal resilience. As far as adjustment was concerned, all students expressed difficulty adjusting during the first few months and since they came from collectivistic societies, they lacked the survival skills needed in an individualistic society such as the Australian context. They felt stressed, anxious, depressed, lonely and socially isolated; they experienced culture shock with their different beliefs, value systems, and cultural norms. They had problems with English proficiency and encountered difficulty understanding the Australian accent. In terms of coping strategies, students suggested preparing ahead of time (before coming to the host country), utilizing technology for gathering information and maintaining contact with family and friends, pushing themselves to join social activities and organizations,
recording lectures and getting help from senior students, sharing their problems with students from their own culture, and seeking professional help from school counselors. Different worldview constructions of different social and cultural groups create their own acculturation filters (Koltko-Rivera, 2004) and not all cultures experience living and studying in a new context similarly. Similarly, J. Lee and Rice (2007) argued that there are different problems in existence for people who belong to different cultures. In accordance with these arguments, Fritz, Chin, and DeMarinis (2008) set out to build on previous studies of the acculturation, stress, adjustment, and anxiety of international students and compare them to the North American students. When the international students were compared to the North American students in terms of the mentioned notions, no significant differences were found. However, when the international student body was not viewed as one big homogenous group and was divided into cultural subgroups, the authors came across important differences among these subgroups. Even though all cultural groups experienced acculturation problems, the authors found that Asian students had the most difficulty dealing with the English language and making friends whereas the European students suffered the most from homesickness and being away from loved ones.

In her phenomenological study of the lived experiences of female Arab-Muslim nursing students, McDermott-Levy (2011) interviewed 12 students who were in the U.S. to receive a Bachelor’s of Science in nursing. Her analysis elicited 12 themes that described the essence of these students’ experience of living and studying in the U.S. The women felt the pressure of being alone when they had to take care of things that
normally a man in their families would take care of or when they had health issues and had nobody that could take care of them. They endured episodes of racism and ignorance and were frustrated by the misrepresentation of Muslims. Despite the negative attitudes they faced, they were pleasantly surprised to see that Americans minded their own business and did not pay attention when they were walking around alone because in their home country, it is not acceptable for a woman to be alone in public. They also enjoyed their new freedoms and found the American life to be easy and comfortable in comparison to the lives of women in their own country. The women stated that since their worldviews are based on religion, they found it interesting and valuable to see how many different perspectives were represented in their classes. It was hard to maintain religious practices because the food on campus was not in accordance with the Muslim law and there were no places to engage in prayer. They felt that the Americans did not have enough information about the Arabic culture; felt rejected and even ridiculed by their American classmates, and found it difficult to make friends because they sensed that American students did not want to interact with them. As far as classes were concerned, the women realized that autonomous and independent learning was necessary and classroom discussions and sharing ideas were central to any topic. Lastly, being international students in the American context helped them to grow both professionally and personally and allowed them to become more confident and independent.

Wang, Singh, Bird, and Ives (2008) investigated the learning experiences of Taiwanese nursing students in Australia through semi-structured interviews and uncovered that despite obstacles, students enjoyed their learning process in the Australian
context. The main obstacles that the students encountered in relation to being international students were language barriers, social and cultural differences, unfamiliar teaching styles, strategies, and ways of assessment, and social isolation. However, in order to cope with their new environment, they managed to seek assistance when needed, took the initiative to make native speaker friends, and immersed themselves in English in any way they could.

In their study of the socio-cultural analysis of second language (L2) learner beliefs of two study-abroad ESL students, Yang and Kim (2011) uncovered an important notion that points to the changing beliefs and attitudes of L2 learners as they go through the study-abroad experience. In other words, they revealed that international ESL students’ beliefs and attitudes are not static and they change throughout the process of living and studying in the host context. The authors found that at the beginning of the study-abroad experience, both students attached a sense of importance to the study-abroad in developing second language proficiency; however, after they had gone through the study-abroad experience, only one student still strongly associated the SA experience with second language development. Similarly, one student maintained her second language goals and motivations throughout and even after the study-abroad experience whereas the other student whose initial motivation was speaking-oriented, showed signs of leaning towards more receptive skills that were required for the TOEIC (a test of English).

It has been suggested that ESL students construct meaning of new experiences based on previous experiences (Guidry Lacina, 2002) and it has been argued that for international students, previous cultural experiences and pre-established knowledge
systems may cause difficulty in their understanding of content (Wang, 2002). In accordance with these arguments, Sanner and Wilson (2008) set out to investigate the experiences of international students in a nursing program in the U.S. and to determine whether their ESL status contributed to their failure in their classes. The students reported that they came from very structured home environments and had pre-established value systems that promoted respecting authority; including their teachers’ authority. Their already existing value systems and educational backgrounds clashed with the new practices and teaching styles they were exposed to and caused problems. They were self-conscious about their ESL status and shied away from speaking in class. They were bothered by issues of stereotyping and discrimination and limited their interactions with faculty and classmates because they did not want to endure negative consequences by “standing out;” they preferred to keep to themselves.

These specific studies done on international student populations’ experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and coping mechanisms yield highly important results in terms of understanding how they are affected by the native English environment, what kind of challenges they face, and what kind of strategies they employ in order to function effectively in their new setting. Learning about their motivations to choose to study abroad and their reasons for wanting to continue with their education after their initial program is complete is crucial for higher education institutes that are aimed at recruiting international student populations. Certainly, assisting international students with their transition and adjustment to the host culture and the new academic setting can affect mobility and retention. Additionally, recognizing the needs, challenges, backgrounds,
and reactions of each cultural and ethnic group as opposed to the larger group of international students is important in terms of attempting to address these aspects of their experiences specifically rather than collectively. Moreover, the fact that research has shown international students’ beliefs and attitudes to be dynamic rather than static points to the idea that manipulating the aspects of their experience positively can have an impact on the overall meaning they give to the international student experience. However, even though some studies mention the ESL phase of these students’ experience, it does not go beyond being a part of a research study on international student experience. Therefore, these individual studies collectively point to crucial concepts that can change the way students and teachers communicate, impact curriculum and lesson plan design, and inform institutions about their current and prospective international student populations. Nevertheless, a considerable portion of nonimmigrant ESL learners enrolled in college-level ESL programs continue to become international students enrolled in mainstream university and college classes and their voices are not present in the current literature. Their experiences can provide valuable insight into what it is like to experience a new environment, a new language, a new academic setting, and a new lifestyle.

As can be inferred from the research and literature reviewed and cited, there is a gap that needs to be filled in terms of nonimmigrant international students who come to the United States to learn English purposefully and willingly. In other words, nonimmigrant ESL students’ main goal is to learn English for specific purposes in its authentic setting in contrast to immigrant populations that move to the U.S. for a variety of other reasons and learn English as a means to realize their goals.
Kobayashi (2006) stated that even though non-credit, private ESL institutes in
native-English-speaking countries are the most popular study-abroad contexts for
international, non-immigrant students, they still remain the least studied and explored.
Similarly, ESL centers functioning under universities with nonimmigrant international
ESL students are hardly ever studied. There is a considerable amount of literature on
immigrant children, adolescents, and adults, and international students at university and
college level; yet, there are hardly any studies that have taken on the notion of
nonimmigrant ESL students at college-level ESL programs. In addition, even though the
mentioned studies have investigated several dimensions of ESL along with a combination
of dynamics that shape the experience, they have not investigated the overall experience
of what it means to be a nonimmigrant ESL student in a college-level ESL program.
Therefore, this research study was an attempt to start to fill the proposed gap.

Summary

This chapter presented the existing literature on immigrant child, adolescent, and
adult ESL populations and nonimmigrant international student populations in order to
situate the nonimmigrant ESL learners at a college-level ESL program as the missing
population from relevant literature as far as their overall experiences are concerned. This
literature informs the current study in terms of the multiple aspects of ESL experience
they have focused on in particular and in the sense that these two populations in the
literature are indeed viewed as ESL populations, yet differ from the population in
question with regard to needs, expectations, motivations, backgrounds, and transition and
coping mechanisms.
Chapter 3 presents the research design and method for the current study. It refers to the recruitment of participants, collection and analysis of data, and the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and credibility.
CHAPTER III

METHODODOLOGY

In the preceding chapter, ESL literature on immigrant ESL learner populations and nonimmigrant international students was reviewed. Based on the existing literature, it was revealed that ESL literature lacks studies addressing the overall experiences of international, nonimmigrant ESL students in college-level ESL programs even though these students make up a substantial, prominent group of learners in study-abroad ESL contexts (Kobayashi, 2006).

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of nonimmigrant ESL students on international student visas in a college-level ESL program at a northeastern American university over the period of one semester of an academic year and to uncover the meanings these students attach to their experiences as ESL learners. The guiding research question was: “How do nonimmigrant ESL students experience a college-level ESL program?” A qualitative research design inspired by the guiding principles of phenomenology was considered to be the appropriate approach to explore this central research question.

Research Questions

Moustakas (1994) stated that in phenomenological research, “the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic” (p. 104), “seeks to reveal more fully the essence and meanings of human experience,” and “is illuminated through careful, comprehensive description, vivid and accurate renderings of the experience” (p. 105).
With reference to this focus on experience, the researcher created one question:
How do non-immigrant ESL students experience a college-level ESL program? and
several sub-questions to help develop an in-depth understanding of the meaning of
nonimmigrant ESL learner experience. These questions were in support of the central
research question and were as follows:

1. What meaning do these ESL students attach to their experiences?
2. How do ESL students describe their experiences?
3. Why do ESL students want to learn English?
4. What are the expectations of ESL students who are learning English in a
college-level ESL program at a northeastern American university?
5. How do ESL students perceive their native speaker (NS) and nonnative
   speaker (NNS) ESL teachers?
6. How do ESL students experience the context and the dynamics of a
college-level ESL program at a northeastern American university?
7. How do the experiences of ESL students compare to their previous
   experiences of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) if applicable?

Since the intent in qualitative research is to explore and understand the phenomenon of
interest (Creswell, 2013) through the participants’ frame of reference, these sub-questions
put into perspective the different dimensions making up an experience and the aspects
that shape the particular experience for the individuals involved.
Qualitative Research

Qualitative inquiry focuses on the meaning of a phenomenon constructed by those who experience it. It is a detailed, holistic process of an open-minded exploration of how people make sense of and interpret phenomena. Merriam (2009) indicated that, “the overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 14). Qualitative researchers draw on socially constructed realities and meanings in contexts while uncovering the ways social experience is created (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Lincoln & Denzin, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). With its inductive nature, qualitative analysis attempts to identify themes and looks for patterns in order to gain a more complex understanding and awareness of the phenomenon that is being studied (Creswell, 2007).

A qualitative research design informed and guided by phenomenology was chosen for this study for several reasons. In order to explore how nonimmigrant ESL students experience a college-level ESL program and to uncover the meanings they attach to this specific experience, it was necessary to gain an in-depth, detailed, and empathetic understanding of what it is like to be in that position. In addition, it was crucial to observe the phenomenon in its natural setting (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003) as it was happening in the real world since context is of essential concern when a holistic, interpretive, and naturalistic approach is taken.

Moreover, qualitative research is process-driven and reflexive (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) and the main research question along with the sub-questions in this study
lend themselves to a process-oriented understanding of how these ESL students make sense of and describe their unique, authentic experiences. Moreover, as Miles and Huberman (1994) indicated, qualitative research can reveal complexity and provide contextualized, thick, rich descriptions that will have an impact on and resonate with the readers (p. 10). To be able to communicate the complex and unique experiences of ESL learners to the readers, a rich, detailed description provided by qualitative inquiry was essential.

Furthermore, the researcher bases her thinking on an ambiguous, interpretative view of the world where there are multiple, subjective realities and strength in multiple perspectives. Therefore, the ambiguous (Merriam, 2009, p. 17) nature of qualitative inquiry and the embracing of the existence of multiple realities in the naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with no concern of predicting and/or controlling reality coincide with the researcher’s own worldview.

Additionally, Janesick (1998) explained how qualitative researchers use their five senses to collect data and as time passes, develop a sixth sense of intuition to investigate emerging information. It is important for the researcher as an individual to rely not solely but highly, on intuition and “emerging hunches” and she believes that qualitative research with its holistic, interpretive approach to the world allows these senses to be explored and followed when trying to make sense of any experience. Therefore, the openness and freedom that qualitative research provides the researchers with while taking their perspectives into account creates a unique and unmatched bond between the participants’
interpretation of their experiences and the researchers’ interpretation of the meaning and essence of such reflective rendition.

Lastly, this study was inspired by the phenomenological framework in qualitative research in the sense that it aimed at exploring the lived experiences of non-immigrant ESL learners at a college-level ESL program by examining all aspects of this phenomenon, finding meanings through participant reflection, and focusing on the descriptions of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). It was not concerned with explaining this particular phenomenon, but aimed at finding commonalities in why and how participants experienced this phenomenon by allowing all voices and multiple realities to be shared without disregarding certain aspects (Hatch, 2002). Since the phenomenological approach is based on a constructivist perspective, it was highly appropriate to employ its guiding principles in this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed by theories of constructivism and interpretivism in terms of the construction of reality, its subjective nature, and the transformative capacity of human experience. Also, it was inspired by phenomenological thought to gain a deep understanding of specific human experience as told by those who live the experience. It employed interpretative phenomenological analysis to make sense of the interpretations of the individuals who experienced living and studying in the US as non-immigrant ESL learners.
Constructivism

Constructivism stems from the notion of social construction of reality (Searle, 1995) and the capacity of reality to be understood in context (Willis, 2009). Constructivism is interested in each individual’s unique experience and values each way of making sense of the world (Crotty, 1998). Constructivists accept the relativity of truth and its being dependent on persons’ subjective perspective. They study multiple realities and the constructions of these realities as they view each and every construction as valid and their implications as real. They recognize knowledge as being astatic and variable and claim that its construction is dependent on each individual’s experience with it and takes place in its natural setting.

Schwandt (1998) explained that we do not find or discover knowledge, but construct or make it and we test and modify our constructions in the light of new experience (p. 237). Lincoln and Guba (2000) indicated that the constructivist perspective is relativist, subjectivist, and dialectic while recognizing its anti-foundational nature. It is this very nature of constructivism that relates it to life, lived experience, and constantly incoming new experience, if not gives it substance and relevance as life itself cannot be reduced to standards, universals, and absolute truths. Furthermore, constructivism takes into account the premise of the role of one’s background and experiences in the shaping of one’s interpretations of reality and knowledge. Creswell (2007) reminded that constructivist researchers need to keep this notion in mind and rely on the participants’ perspectives.
As far as a worldview is concerned, the researcher positions herself within a social constructivist view of multiple realities. She believes that people construct meaning as they interpret, interact and engage with the “worlds” in which they find themselves. She believes in the unique and complex nature of human experience and the multiple meanings of multiple realities. Therefore, she found it fitting to position this study of nonimmigrant ESL students’ experiences of being in a college-level ESL program within a constructivist understanding of meaning making because every experience and the meaning attached to it will differ from person to person and that each experience and its interpretation will be equally real and valuable.

In addition, the researcher appreciates the close interaction that the constructivist approach enables the researchers to engage in because it provides an opportunity for a deeper understanding and a platform for the stories to be heard. Since the nonimmigrant ESL students in this study had not had opportunities to tell their stories despite the fact that they make up a highly prominent group of ESL learners, it provided a chance to uncover what it meant to be a nonimmigrant ESL student. By going to the site, the natural setting, the researcher was able to observe closely how these students took on their ESL identities and socially constructed what they perceived to be an ESL student. The researcher was aware that, as the constructivist approach suggested, her interpretation of the participants’ interpretations of their experiences were shaped by her existing yet dynamic reality. Nevertheless, the researcher made a conscious effort to ensure that their constructions of reality and descriptions of what it means to be a nonimmigrant ESL student could come to the surface.
Interpretivism

Interpretivism, arisen in reaction to positivist thought on the purpose and legitimacy of science and objective “truths,” focuses on how individuals make sense of their subjective realities and how they attach meaning to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Schwandt, 1998, 2000). Social psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers such as Dilthey, Simmel, Rickert, Mead, Windleband, and Weber supported the notion that human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) are fundamentally different from natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften) and cannot be studied in the same way because social actions are inherently more meaningful than those of physical objects (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Positivists believe that only measurable and observable behaviors should be studied and that people’s meanings and intentions do not possess as much value as ‘facts’ that can be verified through empirical evidence. Therefore, unlike the causal explanation seeking nature of positivism, interpretivism aims at enhancing the interpretive understanding of individuals’ actions, meanings, goals, intentions, feelings, and beliefs.

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) stated that researchers who take an interpretative stand accept the existence of a subjective reality constructed by individuals in their natural settings. They indicated that interpretive epistemology centers in on the interpretation of interactions and the social meanings that people attach to these interactions and that the whole process is reflexive by nature. They also suggested that different social actors may understand social reality differently and produce different meanings and different analysis of the process (p. 78).
The researcher believes in people’s purposeful involvement in their experiences in certain situations or at least in certain parts of the process. She also believes that the positivist epistemology’s interpretation and application of “objectivity” is unrealistic and unattainable in terms of exploring human experience. The researcher concerns herself with understanding or at least trying to understand human behavior, meanings that people give to objects, other people, and experiences, social occurrences and contexts, and finds it to be a highly complicated and fascinating process that can only be taken on through an interpretive approach. Therefore, getting to know the participants and attempting to make sense of and understand their interpretations of what it means to be a nonimmigrant ESL student, the constructivist-interpretivist framework was the only plausible vantage point.

The aim of this study was to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of nonimmigrant ESL students through their own meaning making and constructing of their own realities of being in a college-level ESL program. Therefore, it was important to look into the process and ever-evolving product of each individual’s unique experience as it occurred while paying attention to the social meanings these students attached to being an ESL learner and importance of multiple realities created through interactions within the specified contexts where the participants defined themselves as “ESL learners” and engaged in social interactions.

**Phenomenology**

Van Manen (1990) stated, “phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). It is the
study of the “life world” or lived experience. Lived experience is considered to be unique to each individual, yet the essence of the experience is shared among those who lived it.

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), often regarded as the father of phenomenology (Polkinghorne, 1983), focused on studying phenomena as they appeared through consciousness and defined phenomenology as a descriptive analysis of the essence of pure consciousness (Laverty, 2003). He criticized psychology for applying natural science (Naturwissenschaften) methods to human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) and human condition. He wanted to return to “the things themselves” and explore the experiences that we take for granted by engaging in knowledge building through conscious awareness. He believed that a reality could be described by consciously and intentionally engaging with its essence.

Descriptive phenomenology intends to describe the meaning of an experience from the perspective of an individual who lived that experience (Laverty, 2003; Lock & Strong, 2010; Porter & Robinson, 2011) and researchers invested in descriptive phenomenology base their interpretations on these individuals’ descriptions of their experience (van Manen, 1990).

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), a student of Husserl, started out with Husserl’s phenomenological ideas in terms of gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of being, but later chose to move to a different direction. He concentrated on the concept of “Being in the world” (Dasein) and his interpretive phenomenology was centered on what it means to be an individual in the world and how we understand the world. He believed
that we must strive to understand human beings within the cultural and social settings they exist and that approach experience with a goal of obtaining a sense of understanding and creating meaning (Lock & Strong, 2010; Porter & Robinson, 2011).

Heidegger (1927/1962) claimed that the interpretation of every encounter was influenced by a person’s background and previous experience and could not be made explicit. This notion differed from Husserl’s idea of bracketing out biases and previous knowledge. Heidegger believed that all understanding is connected to “a given set of forestructures” (Laverty, 2003, p. 9) and since it cannot be eliminated, one must constantly be aware of these interpretive influences.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), influenced by both Husserl and Heidegger, extended Heidegger’s theories into application (Polkinghorne, 1983). He stated that “language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting” (1960/1998, p. 389) and believed that we interpret our experiences with the intention of understanding them. Gadamer acted on the notion that understanding and interpretation are inherently bound together and interpretation is an ever-evolving process; therefore, a definitive interpretation is not possible.

According to Hatch (2002), hermeneutic phenomenology combines interpretive and descriptive methods to explore and understand individuals’ lived experiences. Van Manen (1990) stated that:

To do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to
remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal. (p. 18)

The researcher concerns herself with interpretivist approaches to reality. However, unlike Gadamer, she thinks the idea of bracketing can be applied in terms of “suspending pre-judgment.” In other words, she believes that previous knowledge and experience can never be separated from new understanding and construction of reality, but because reality is ever-changing and multiple, trying to find definitive interpretations of experience free from bias is not viewed as an attainable or desirable goal. Therefore, existing interpretive assumptions were not disregarded in this study while attempting to gain a deep understanding of human beings’ (including the researcher’s own) interpretations of their own realities whatever those may be. Van Manen (2002) stated that:

> Common experiences require phenomenological attentiveness precisely because they are so common and unremarkable. Phenomenology aims to produce texts that awaken a sense of wonder about the order of what is ordinary. Wonder means seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary. It can only be offered as an invitation to the person who is open to it. (p. 49)

These words capture from many angles how the researcher views the world. Definitive statements regarding the human condition come across as problematic as they have the potential to disregard the many nuances that make up the essence of unique yet shared experiences. The idea of wonderment (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008) and fascination with life
and ‘being’ can be manifested through the guiding principles of the phenomenological approach.

Howe (2003) indicated that constructivism and interpretivism at least stand in a relationship of mutual entailment, if not designate the same idea. The connection between the two and the connection they both have to the phenomenological perspective led this study to be situated in the constructivist-interpretivist theoretical framework while being inspired and guided by the phenomenological approach.

Hatch (2002) indicated that the phenomenological approach is constructivist in nature and that it allows for all voices to be heard enabling multiple realities to exist at the same time. It is inclusive in terms of all aspects of the phenomenon. Willis (1991) asserted that human experience entails perceiving, thinking, and acting inevitably connected in certain ways; but it definitely begins with perceptions, which makes phenomenological inquiry the way of uncovering what is primary in human experience.

According to van Manen (1990), while traditional research is aimed at generalizing knowledge, hermeneutic phenomenology is aimed at uncovering and understanding the uniqueness of a phenomenon from the perspectives of individuals in their own worlds. Taking the hermeneutic phenomenology discourse of van Manen into consideration that combines hermeneutics and phenomenology, this study employed a qualitative design guided by the phenomenological approach. It drew on the accounts of individuals who lived the experience. By engaging with each participant to understand individual interpretations and giving each participant a voice, it detailed and illuminated individual accounts while forming an overall picture of the phenomenon. It included the
interpretation of the phenomenon as well as its thick description. Since the focus was on
the ESL students’ constructions of their experiences in a college-level ESL program as
they went through it in their natural context and since lived experiences can be referred to
as the raw experiences that exist with no philosophical thought about them, van Manen’s
concept of investigating experiences was taken into consideration while collecting,
analyzing, and interpreting the data.

Moustakas (1994) suggested that, in its most basic sense, phenomenology offers a
description of a person’s experience whereas hermeneutics is the interpretation of the
experience in depth. Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) stated, “Hermeneutics adds the
interpretive to explicate meanings and assumptions in the participants’ texts that
participants themselves may have difficulty in articulating” (p. 616).

Smith (1991) asserted that one of the most important contributions of
hermeneutics to social theory and practice is in presenting that meaning is arrived at
“referentially and relationally rather than absolutely” (p. 197). Concepts such as
subjectivity of reality with its multiple, if not infinite constituents along with the relativity
of experience were regularly revisited during the interpretation process.

Even though being an ESL student might not seem to have extreme implications
or uncommon ramifications that drastically affect the life worlds of individuals who
experience it, this does not change the fact that for the nonimmigrant ESL student who is
living and studying in a new context, it represents a significant, unique experience. Each
ESL student’s condition, experience, and meaning making process differ simply because
every human experience is different and is unique in its construction and its own terms.
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA (Eatough & Smith, 2006; Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2003) is a qualitative research method concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience. It aims at enabling the experience to be expressed in its own terms and exploring how participants are making sense of their personal and social world. Instead of attempting to produce an objective statement adhering to predefined category systems (Smith et al., 2009), it aims at exploring an individual’s subjective personal perception of a subjective personal experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It functions on three theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). Since the aim of this study was to gain a deep understanding of how non-immigrant ESL learners experience a college-level ESL program as an everyday experience and to know how they explained and made sense of their processes, IPA provided the phenomenological element that allows for a reflection on personal experience.

The second major theoretical underpinning of IPA comes from hermeneutics, which is the theory of interpretation. According to Smith et al. (2009), the researcher is implicated in facilitating and making sense of the phenomenon along with the participant. The participant’s meaning-making is first-order while the researcher’s sense-making is second-order since the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants who are making sense of their own experiences. As mentioned previously, hermeneutics calls for an enlivened form of bracketing that the researcher in this study has employed. Therefore, IPA provides the justification and the method through which the researcher
handled the central research question and recognized the reflexive practices that were necessary to explore the experiences of her participants.

Finally, the third theoretical underpinning in IPA is idiography which is concerned with the particular. IPA operates in idiography at two levels: (a) the first level addresses IPA’s commitment to the particular in the sense of detail that manifests in a thorough, systematic, and deep data analysis; (b) the second level addresses the commitment to understanding how particular events, processes and relationships are understood from the perspective of the particular people in the particular context (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, the idiographic nature of IPA was established through the data analysis and reporting back of the participants’ experiences.

The Researcher

Phenomenological research stems from a phenomenon of strong interest to the researcher (van Manen, 1990) and is dependent on the reflection and interpretation of the researcher. It is an interpretive process that inevitably includes the assumptions and presuppositions of the researcher, reminiscent of the very thing it is studying: multiple subjective meanings of lived human experience. Previous experiences and knowledge can provide insight, but at the same time can create a liability due to possible bias.

The intuitive and interpretive nature of phenomenological research solicits a need to be able to view the experiences of individuals through unbiased eyes by setting aside preconceptions and presumptions that might lead the researcher to prematurely judge and determine meanings that might otherwise be different and more informed. In order to avoid the clouding of judgments, Moustakas (1994) recommended a “freedom from
suppositions” (p. 85) and suggested engaging in epoché as developed by Husserl (Klein & Westcott, 1994; Osborne, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1983) and done through bracketing, in order to abstain from existing beliefs and knowledge of the phenomenon and prevent oneself from tainting the data. Bracketing can be referred to as a way to ensure that the researcher does not misinterpret the participants’ experiences and that the researcher is constantly aware of his or her preconceived ideas “ready to interfere.”

Merriam (2009) suggested that “rather than trying to eliminate these biases or ‘subjectivities,’ it is important to identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data” (p. 15). Bracketing might present a challenge for the researcher as it is rarely perfectly achieved (Moustakas, 1994) and through a purely interpretive lens, might even seem difficult and unnecessary to implement in its full sense. However, the researcher engaged in bracketing in terms of “suspending” (van Manen, 1990, p. 175) her existing beliefs and assumptions.

Creswell (2007) proposed that a researcher take the initiative to decide how and in what ways his or her personal meaning making will find its place within a study, and as an individual who does not believe in the absolute “vaulting” of personal bias for desired periods of time just to bring it out upon will, the researcher suspended her prejudgments relevant to the phenomenon of being a nonimmigrant ESL student in a college-level ESL program to the best of her ability by acknowledging and not acting upon them so that they do not influence or interfere with the research process. She adhered to Moustakas’ (1994) notion of a “rigorous effort” to immerse herself in the process so that she was more open and receptive to what the ESL students were actually trying to communicate.
In an effort to commit to self-reflection, to setting aside of biases, and to create a space within her free from prejudgments, the researcher put together the following list of her assumptions regarding being a nonimmigrant ESL student in a college-level ESL program based on her experience with teaching ESL courses at a college-level ESL program, being an EFL student in her country of origin, being an international student in the U.S., and having read literature related to ESL, EFL, and international student experience:

1. International students, in general, and ESL students in particular usually face social and cultural challenges such as culture shock, adjustment difficulties, racism, and discrimination.

2. ESL students feel isolated because of the ESL label.

3. International students’ and ESL students’ potentials are not fully recognized because they cannot always effectively communicate their level of sophistication due to limited language skills.

4. ESL students feel frustrated when they cannot communicate their messages in social situations.

5. ESL students seek empathy from their teachers and the administration, but cannot always ask for help.

6. Nonimmigrant ESL students want to have an extensive experience of the target culture and know how it feels to be a “native” of that culture.
7. International students might engage in ways of “blending in”/”fitting in” through trying to act “native” and by imitating social native cues/dress codes/manners/etc.

8. International students and ESL students miss their homes and this highly affects their academic performance and adjustment period.

9. ESL students and international students are usually vulnerable and emotionally stressed.

10. ESL students feel more comfortable in the presence of classmates who are at the same proficiency level, yet they want opportunities to practice language skills with native speakers without the pressure of making mistakes that might sometimes present a dilemma.

In order to suspend these assumptions, the researcher reflected on her thinking process in the researcher journal before and during data collection and analysis. For instance, when she found herself automatically categorizing participants’ responses in accordance with one or more of these assumptions while thinking back on an interview or reading a transcript, she made a conscious effort to remain aware of her relationship to the phenomenon and how the participants experienced this phenomenon. She made reflective notes in her researcher journal and strived to maintain transparency by not eliminating these assumptions, but by acknowledging and accepting them. This reflective process allowed the researcher to engage in an investigation of personal assumptions while striving to elucidate what it meant to be a non-immigrant ESL student through the participants’ renderings, not her expectations.
Research Design

This study aimed at understanding the overall experiences of non-immigrant ESL learners at a college-level ESL program through face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews and observations. The researcher recruited 11 participants who were full-time ESL students on non-immigrant student visas. Recruitment was carried out upon receiving approval from the ESL Center administration and ESL instructors. Detailed descriptions of the 11 participants are provided below.

Participants

The researcher engaged in purposeful sampling (Polkinghorne, 1989, 2005) consistent with the aims of a phenomenological study where the research participant must have had experienced the phenomenon that is being studied (Moustakas, 1994) in order for the researcher to gain varied descriptions (Polkinghorne, 1989) and a deep understanding. Patton (1990, 2002) advised the deliberate choosing of participants to ensure rich information and comprehensive insight. Similarly, Creswell (1998, 2007) encouraged the employing of purposeful samples in phenomenological studies to be able to determine the essence of the phenomenon through information-laden resources. Merriam (2009) referred to criterion-based sampling, used interchangeably with purposeful sampling, where participants meet certain criteria for inclusion to indicate that the pre-established criteria reflect the purpose of the study.

In this study, the researcher employed a purposeful, criterion-based sampling as the aim was to uncover and understand the experiences of nonimmigrant ESL students in a college-level ESL program and she could logically only recruit participants who were
experiencing the phenomenon and who met certain criteria. The criteria for inclusion were being a nonimmigrant ESL student, being an advanced level student, having prior EFL experiences, and being a full time ESL student.

The reason for selecting advanced learners was based on the premise that it was crucial for the participants to be able to express themselves as articulately as possible in a language that is not their own. In addition, it was important for the researcher to refrain from manipulating the data by repeatedly rephrasing the questions and mistakenly leading the participants to certain answers. Participants who have had English as a foreign language (EFL) experience were preferred in order to ensure that they had a past experience to which they could compare this new experience. The reason for selecting full-time ESL students was the assumption that full-time students who are constantly engaging in and interacting with the ESL context would have a more profound and informed perception of what it means to be an ESL student in comparison to part-time students who are relatively less involved and not as immersed in the environment. In addition, since the aim of the study was to gather in-depth information regarding ESL experience, it was important to approach the experience covering all bases; in this case, exploring the experience by investigating the experiences of ESL students who were involved in all aspects of the ESL context including a variety of classes such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, American culture, English for specific purposes (ESP), and English test preparation.

Even though the number of participants in phenomenological studies has varied (Creswell, 2007), the number of participants should depend on the purpose of the
qualitative study and the resources that the researcher has access to (Patton, 2002). Therefore, this study explored the experiences of 11 participants that fit the required criteria and that voluntarily agreed to participate.

**Participant Recruitment and Consent**

After receiving approval from Kent State University’s Institutional Review Board, the researcher contacted the ESL Center director and asked if he would contact the ESL instructors of advanced levels and ask for permission for the researcher to visit their classes to try to recruit participants. With the ESL center director’s permission, the researcher then e-mailed some instructors who were teaching advanced levels at the time and asked if she could visit and make a short announcement and hand out a flyer about her research study. Only one instructor e-mailed back and told the researcher to visit when she would like. After more similar attempts, more instructors agreed to allow the researcher to visit for an announcement. The researcher handed out flyers, explained what the study was about, and why she was looking for participants in those particular classes. After multiple attempts and class visits, a total of 13 participants agreed to participate in the study. After their first interviews, 2 participants had to be excluded from the study due to ethical reasons. The remaining 11 participants were active throughout the entire duration of the study.

One participant e-mailed the researcher to let her know that he wished to participate in the study. Another participant sent a text message to the researcher’s cell phone. The researcher e-mailed back to thank the participants and set up the date and time for the first interview. The remaining participants approached the researcher after
her recruitment announcement and told her in person that they wanted to take part in the study. They provided their e-mail addresses and the researcher e-mailed them to set up the first interview. Before the first interview, the researcher explained the research process in detail, gave the participants the consent forms, and took back the signed copies (see Appendix C). All participants signed consent forms and kept a copy for their own records. They were informed that they had the right to withdraw from participation at any point in the study. Confidentiality was of utmost importance and all data were kept secure. All participants were given pseudonyms and their real names were never used on transcripts.

**Overall Participant Description**

This section presents an overview of the participants of this study, but Chapter 4 includes detailed descriptions of each participant as it is important to depict as much as possible who they are as individuals. All participants were nonimmigrant ESL students at a northeastern American university’s ESL program as this signified the main purpose of the study. They were on F-1 student visas given to them to travel and reside in the United States during their time of ESL study. Being an immigrant ESL learner was a criterion of exclusion from the study. Table 1 details the overall participant demographics.

The participants were advanced learners of English who had proven a certain degree of mastery of the language. The reason for selecting advanced learners was based on the premise that it was crucial for the participants to be able to express themselves as articulately as possible in a language that was not their own. In addition, the researcher
### Table 1

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>ESL Level</th>
<th>Length of stay in the U.S.</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>1st ESL Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faridah</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>15 months</td>
<td>Biomedical Science</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiao</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamil</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>24 months</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malik</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>TESL</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miraj</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Level 10</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadirah</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>14 months</td>
<td>Art Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nianzu</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>13 months</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarif</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>10 months</td>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tung-Mei</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>17 months</td>
<td>Hospitality Management</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wen</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yin</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
wished to refrain from manipulating the data by constantly rephrasing the questions and mistakenly leading the participants to certain answers.

All participants had experience with learning English in a non-native English speaking environment. Participants who had English as a foreign language (EFL) experience were preferred so that they had a past experience to which they could compare this new experience. Even though this was a criterion that had seemed ambitious prior to the study, it proved to be a common attribute among all participants as they had all had some, ranging from very little to extensive, experience with the English language in an educational setting.

Lastly, the participants were full-time nonimmigrant ESL students who were enrolled in a variety of ESL classes. The reason for selecting full-time ESL students was the assumption that full-time students who were constantly engaging in and interacting with the ESL context would have a more profound and informed perception of what it means to be an ESL student in comparison to part-time students who are relatively less involved and less immersed in the experience. In addition, since the aim of the study was to gather in-depth information regarding ESL experience, it was important to approach the experience covering all the bases; in this case, exploring the experience by studying ESL students who were involved in all aspects of the ESL context including a variety of classes such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, American culture, English for specific purposes (ESP), and English test preparation.
Data Collection

The main source of data for this study was face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews. In addition to the three interviews with each participant, observations were carried out to provide supporting data and to paint a clearer picture of the experience by getting to know the participants further.

Interviews

Participants who e-mailed the researcher and confirmed that they wanted to participate in the study were contacted via e-mail to meet at a place of their choosing for the first interview. The researcher met with 10 participants at the university library and different local cafes and one participant at her apartment for the three interviews that were conducted. The researcher explained to each participant the goals of the study, the interview and observation procedures, and the issues of confidentiality and reminded them that they could stop at any point and it would not be held against them in any shape or form.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face and took from 60 to 90 minutes. Being face-to-face with the participants helped the researcher to build rapport, to connect on a more personal level, and to observe facial expressions to gain a more profound and holistic impression of their descriptions of the ESL experience. It also helped the researcher to eliminate any hierarchical situation that might have arisen by letting her showcase her belief in the empowerment of participants. The first interview was conducted at the beginning of the Spring 2013 semester, the second in the middle, and the final interview at the end of the same semester. All interviews were digitally recorded.
Van Manen (1990) talked about the purpose of interviews in hermeneutic phenomenological human science and suggested that:

(1) it may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, and (2) the interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. (p. 66)

This notion proved to be true for the interviews of this study where the researcher was able to build a relationship with her participants where the participants felt comfortable enough to share narratives of how they experienced being ESL learners in an ESL setting. The majority of the participants verbalized how they felt comfortable in the researcher’s presence, how they felt that they could trust the researcher, and how much they appreciated being able to speak and practice English without the pressure of being graded.

Polkinghorne (1989) suggested that someone who reads a phenomenological study should have a thorough understanding of the experience that is being described. In order to collect the type of thorough information that is needed to contextualize, describe, and elucidate the experience effectively for the readers, phenomenological studies require long and in-depth interviews (Seidman, 1991) where the researcher has the freedom and flexibility to ask follow-up questions and let the participants expand to further thoughts and experiences while remaining in the scope of the research’s aim. Therefore, the researcher conducted three semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Smith et al., 2009) to
allow the participants to have opportunities to express their perspectives and comprehensively reflect on their experiences of being a nonimmigrant ESL student.

According to Seidman (1991):

The first interview establishes the context of the participants’ experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (p. 17)

The researcher attempted to follow this model by composing specific interview questions to reflect the aim of each interview.

To prepare for the interviews, the researcher conducted a pilot interview (Maxwell, 2005) with an acquaintance who had had EFL experiences in his home country and was currently going to school in the United States which provided ESL experiences for him. He was told enough about the study to provide unofficial feedback regarding ESL experience, and interviewing him allowed the researcher to make adjustments where necessary.

An important point is to be mindful of the possibility of ESL students referring to the technical side of learning a language. Although the technical side of learning a language is within the scope of this study, it is certainly not central to the study. Therefore, the researcher constantly paid attention to clues that suggested that the participants were referring to an issue with a grammar rule or a listening activity and made sure that the question she was asking was fully comprehended with its original intent. For instance, when the researcher asked the participants about the hardships they
encountered and they started mentioning such issues, the researcher did not interrupt the utterance, but directed the focus towards her intended purpose which could be a hardship regarding adjusting to the classroom environment or seeking help for accessing services. Certainly, the participants’ statements about the abovementioned issues were not disregarded; they were simply beyond the scope of the study.

**Interview one.** The first interview focused on a general understanding of the participants’ experiences while gathering information about the history of the phenomenon experienced by the participants (see Appendix D). In other words, it investigated the focused life histories of the participants. The aim was to gather descriptions of being a nonimmigrant ESL student that would exhibit essential and common attributes of the experience. All first interviews were conducted in March to obtain a general idea as to the initial state of the ESL students’ perspectives regarding learning English and being enrolled in a college-level ESL program as well as a baseline of why these ESL students wanted to learn English, what their expectations from the program were, and what their initial thoughts and feelings about being an ESL student in a college-level program were. The first interview would have been conducted sooner; however, the researcher struggled to recruit participants when the semester first started. Certainly, not all participants had started going to the ESL center in that particular semester; such participants were asked to recall their initial experiences. The first interviews were between 60 to 90 minutes.

**Interview two.** The second interview focused on a more detailed understanding of the participants’ lived experiences by asking them to recall experiences that they
believed were significant and more noteworthy than others (see Appendix D). It also aimed at discovering the feelings and the meanings that participants attached to and associated with these specific experiences. It was conducted in April because the students were expected to have established an understanding and a perception of how they were experiencing being ESL students in a college-level ESL program and perhaps even reflecting on it because they knew they were going to be asked to. The participants were specifically asked to share and elaborate on memories of events and other experiences that held significance. The second interviews were between 60 to 90 minutes.

**Interview three.** The third interview included questions that allowed the researcher to arrive at a general reflection of the meanings of these experiences while revisiting what the previous interviews had covered (see Appendix D). It was conducted towards the end of the semester, in May, to determine the overall experience of being an ESL student and how the experience evolved from the beginning to the end with changing feelings, thoughts, expectations, and outcomes. The third interviews were between 60 to 90 minutes.

**Observations**

According to Patton (2002), observations help the researcher to better describe the context of the phenomenon and experience the context firsthand while learning things that participants might not wish to mention during a personal interview. Van Manen (1990) stated that close observations “generate different forms of experiential material than we tend to get with the written or the interview approach” (p. 68).
In this study, for the purposes of collecting supportive and enhancing data, the researcher engaged in non-participant observations during regular ESL class hours with the aim to capture as many verbal and non-verbal cues as possible, record as many details as possible, and pay attention to the physical setting, interactions, and activities along with expected and not-expected occurrences as much as possible. Observations provided the researcher with another lens for the journey into the participants’ constructed realities of nonimmigrant ESL experience and what it meant to be an ESL learner in a college-level ESL program.

The observed behaviors and patterns helped the researcher to better understand, assign meaning to, and reflect on the phenomenon. Through having a better understanding, the researcher was able to develop additional follow up and probe questions for interviews. Real activities, conversations, and interactions that took place provided the researcher with a gateway into the life worlds of ESL students “being ESL students” in an authentic context.

The researcher adhered to an observational rubric format (see Appendix E) that allowed for easy access to the necessary information (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Merriam, 1991, 1998) and the format included sections such as time, place, setting, participant pseudonym, reflective notes, and other related information. The researcher’s reflective comments (Merriam, 2009, p. 131) included initial interpretations, feelings, reactions, speculations, and thoughts.

Each participant was observed two times during one whole class hour for each ESL class. For instance, if the participant was enrolled in five ESL classes, he or she was
observed a total of 10 times. Some participants were observed at the same time as they were enrolled in the same classes. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated that the successful outcome of an observation relies on accurate, detailed, and extensive field notes (p. 119). Detailed descriptive field notes were gathered during the observations to be fully typed out and recorded within a day of the observation. All observation data were used as supplemental information to help the researcher make sense of the participants’ meaning making processes.

**Data Analysis**

To begin, all interviews were transcribed; the initial interviews were transcribed by the university’s transcribing services, and the second and the third interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The researcher followed the seven steps that IPA suggests for data analysis (Eatough & Smith, 2006; Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 2009; Smith et al., 1999; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Steps 4 and 5 had to be performed out of sequence to accommodate the large sample size (more participants than IPA studies usually go for).

The 7 Steps to IPA data analysis are:

1. Reading and re-reading the interviews
2. Initial noting
3. Developing emergent themes
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes
5. Moving to the next case
6. Looking for patterns across cases
7. Writing the analysis
As suggested by the IPA method, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts while listening to the digital recordings. This first step of IPA data analysis served to allow the researcher to actively engage with the data while focusing on the individual participant. Reading the transcript while listening to the participant’s voice at least once helped the researcher to get an overall sense of the interview data. Nuances such as changes in the tone and emotional pauses came alive when the static words on the page matched with the participant’s voice and provided relatable content. Reading and re-reading while listening to the audio recording helped the researcher to also identify patterns, follow the emergence of rapport, and synthesize the details without being overwhelmed by the amount and the complexity of the data. Reading the transcript multiple times also allowed the researcher to begin to understand how each participant structured his or her narrative of what it meant to be an ESL student. For example, the researcher noted that some participants’ narratives revolved around certain aspects of their experiences they found to be memorable or impactful; they repeatedly mentioned these specific aspects or focused on the same type of aspect that left a mark. At this stage, the researcher also made notes about the general attitudes of the participants toward their experience while using her researcher journal to reflect on her own sense of meaning making in comparison to what was actually uttered by the participant.

The second step of analysis consisted of initial noting where the researcher made notes regarding any thoughts, ideas, and insights that emerged while reading the transcripts. This step allowed the researcher to examine parts of the text that went beyond what was expected to be found. In this step, the researcher used different-colored
pens to underline and highlight the topics that the participants discussed. This allowed the researcher to take notice of certain aspects of the experience that literature had previously referred to such as the ESL label, removal of familiar support systems, and native versus non-native English-speaking teacher arguments. Marking the topics was also useful in terms of managing the data more effectively. Some participants’ accounts or excerpts were underlined or highlighted with multiple colors if they included notions that could be applied to multiple topics. The researcher was able to closely analyze the language and tie it to the concepts that had emerged by reflecting on the context of the lived experience. The decision of where an excerpt belonged was based on the overall context of the transcript. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), notes consisted of descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments. Descriptive comments included notes about content where the participants referred to key elements. For instance, when a participant talked about a specific incident regarding feeling socially isolated from the host culture, the notes read “example of social isolation.” Linguistic comments were made up of notes related to language use to determine how content and meaning were presented by the participants. For example, some participants repeated certain words over and over with a changed tone when they were clearly passionate about the meaning of the content they were talking about such as family and friends. Lastly, the conceptual comments included interpretative notes where the underlying meaning of an utterance was explored. Such meanings were investigated through reflecting on the overall depiction of the participants’ accounts of particular concepts and interpreting what was being said by referring to personal experience.
During the third step of analysis, the researcher coded the concepts that emerged from the data by going over every line and sentence one-by-one. The same process was repeated with each interview transcript. Some codes were similar and others differed from the previous interview(s). During the coding, some sentences received multiple codes representing different concepts. The emergent themes began to materialize where they were the recurring patterns of meaning (ideas, thoughts, and/or feelings) throughout the text (Smith & Osborne, 2004). By examining the codes and re-readings the notes, the researcher was able to identify themes. The codes were grouped into clusters by themes. These described and provided details and examples about the participants’ experience and meaning making processes. In this stage, interpretative notes took on more importance, but they were still interpreted in relation to the whole transcript. For example, the theme of “developing a more independent sense of self and identity” emerged from participants’ accounts of in what sense they changed as individuals and the researcher’s interpretation of what it meant to be able to perform tasks without familiar help or how it felt to make decisions without having to consult familiar figures. At this stage, the researcher created a table in Microsoft Word in order to categorize the participants’ excerpts and her notes based on the common points. Excerpts and notes that the researcher believed to share the same meaning were assigned a theme and put into the Word document. Similarly, excerpts and notes that did not match a category were placed separately with their own theme. This was repeated until the transcript was analyzed entirely. At this point, potential themes were placed under categories to be refined further.
The next two steps in the analysis, “searching for connections across emergent themes” and “moving to the next case” were performed out of sequence. This had to be done in order to accommodate the large sample. The researcher moved to the next participant’s transcript after each transcript for one participant went through the same analysis steps mentioned above. In order not to be influenced by what she had already found in previous transcripts, the researcher bracketed the ideas in the sense that they were suspended until the next step in the analysis process. She moved from case to case before searching for connections across emergent themes.

As more themes emerged, the researcher looked for connections across emergent themes. Writing the research analysis for a large sample size involves summarizing, condensing, and illustrating what the researcher identifies as the main themes (Smith et al., 2009). This stage engaged the double hermeneutic process while moving from the idiographic to the group level of analysis; in other words, from the particular to the group. The group level statements were supported by individual quotes that represented the themes. By pulling data from the 33 interview transcripts, the researcher started to form an overall depiction of what it meant to be an ESL student and what aspects this experience entailed. The researcher looked for patterns across participants’ accounts in order to determine the connections and the relations. Some themes needed to be rearranged and renamed. The themes had subcategories within them and the specific phenomenon the theme was representing manifested itself through these subcategories. At this point, it was crucial to narrow down the large data set to a more precise and manageable set of themes which required the researcher to make decisions about the
existing themes such as whether they could be merged with other themes or they needed to remain their own theme representing a different aspect or layer of the experience. The reviewing and revising of the table of themes came to completion when it became clear to the researcher that all sub-themes that manifested within the themes could not be placed under other themes and that the themes themselves were beyond expansion.

**Participant Narratives**

The researcher developed individual participant narratives in order to help the reader to get to know each participant at a deeper level. These narratives can be found in the next chapter. It was important to describe the participants in detail so as to depict a vivid picture of who they were beyond the static words on paper. Describing the participants and providing further details of their lived world served to provide some context for their meaning making processes. The researcher was able to construct these narratives by creating bonds with the participants through the observations, the conversations before and after the interviews, and the moments in interviews where the participants revealed parts of their individuality that helped to situate their understandings of the experience they were living.

**Ethics**

Researchers should make ethics a priority and carry out the entire research process with ethics as the basis of all decisions regarding participants, data collection, reporting of data, and distribution of reports (Creswell, 2007, 2012; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Throughout the research process, the researcher abided by the general ethical guidelines as suggested by Patton (2002) such as explaining purpose, risk
assessments, confidentiality, informed consent, and data collection boundaries. The objectives, intentions, and goals were stated explicitly and the participants were clearly informed about all data collection procedures during the recruitment process and before the initial interview including what these procedures entailed.

Participants were recruited by obtaining their informed consent that had been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study. Participation was voluntary and the participants were informed during the recruitment process and before the initial interview that they could choose to withdraw any time and that it would not be held against them in any way. Participants were given pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity. Confidentiality was maintained at all times. The participants were reminded that they could ask questions and express concerns before and throughout the study.

Creswell (2012) stated that it is important to respect the research site, and in order to do so, the researcher should gain permission from officials before entering the site. The researcher gained access to the ESL Center by consulting with the director and to the ESL classes by consulting with the ESL teachers in advance. She made sure that the people she came into contact with on a regular basis during the time of this study knew who she was and what her goals were as far as her being present in their domain was concerned.

The researcher did not engage in any type of deception. However, she realized that even though it was unintentional, her presence alone might influence or create some
sort of impact on the participants and the context (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012). This effect is virtually impossible to avoid. To minimize this and prevent harmful effects to the participants, the researcher kept any disruption to class to a minimum. She did not interfere with instruction, did not take away instructional time, and refrained from disturbing the research site as much as possible.

The researcher kept in mind that the participants might have been exposed to the added pressure of adjustment to a new culture and setting, language anxiety, and even the stress of being interviewed in a language other than their own; therefore, she reminded herself of these possible sensitivities of the participants during the interviews and let the participants know that she appreciated their time, willingness to participate, and their sharing of details of their lives. Since the participants were from different backgrounds, cultures, and social practices, the researcher engaged in a cultural and religious information gathering process (Creswell, 2013) in order to remain tactful and considerate.

The researcher strived to be attentive to auditory and visual indications of stress, discomfort, and uneasiness during interviews and acted accordingly. For instance, when a participant was visibly emotional, the researcher informed the participant that he or she could take a break and that he or she did not have to answer a particular question if it was making him or her uncomfortable. The participants were treated with care and respect. The researcher repeatedly expressed appreciation of the participants’ time and willingness to share and strived to be courteous to the participants’ cultures and backgrounds. In terms of accuracy, participants were informed that they could view the
transcripts and the researcher’s interpretations of data to show that no injustice was being done to their stories.

**Trustworthiness**

Establishing trustworthiness is an essential part of qualitative research as it helps the researcher to convince the audience that the study is credible and worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It can be clearly defined through the question of: “How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?” (p. 290). In this study, the researcher depended on the following procedures to establish trustworthiness: data triangulation, thick descriptions, peer review, and researcher journal. In addition, the researcher adhered to the four criteria that Polkinghorne (1983) had identified in terms of assessing the quality of a phenomenological study: vividness, accuracy, richness, and elegance.

**Triangulation**

Creswell (2012) stated that qualitative researchers triangulate information and provide validity when they locate evidence to document a code or theme in different sources of data (p. 251). Similarly, Patton (2002) indicated that “triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods” (p. 247). One of the basic types of triangulation is the triangulation of data which involves using multiple data sources (Denzin, 1978) and comparing types of data to one another (Patton, 1990, 2002). In this study, data sources were interviews and observations. Multiple interviews with the same participants also enhanced data triangulation.
Thick Description

Thick descriptions not only provide rich representations of research findings (Creswell, 2007), but help to build a comprehensive understanding of the whole research process and the experience. The more details the author provides the clearer and more relatable the picture becomes for the readers. Merriam (2009) strongly suggested that “the researcher has an obligation to provide enough detailed description of the study’s context to enable readers to compare the ‘fit’ with their situations” (p. 226). Therefore, the researcher provided thick and rich descriptions of her findings so that the readers are able to determine to what other settings they could be applied to in their own lives.

Peer Review

Peer review can provide the external monitoring of the research process (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The peer reviewer was not involved in the research process; however, she had experience in the field of teaching English as a second language. The researcher showed the interview questions to the peer reviewer and explained and justified how and why she chose each question. The researcher also explained the emergent themes she had arrived at and answered the peer reviewer’s questions about the process of determining these themes. Peer review was utilized in order to assure that the researcher biases were detected and investigated and that the emotions and feelings attached to the whole process did not influence judgments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 308-309). Peer review also assisted with the bracketing process internal to phenomenological inquiry in terms of probing biases regarding the phenomenon that is being studied so that presuppositions do not interfere with and affect data (Moustakas, 1994). The dialogue
that the researcher and the peer reviewer engaged in revolved around the researcher’s experience, her interpretation process, and her goal to accurately and fairly represent the participants’ depictions of what it meant to be an ESL student. Lastly, it allowed the researcher to gain another perspective and consider viewpoints she might have dismissed otherwise; consequently leading the researcher to build credibility in the final results.

**Researcher Journal**

A researcher journal (see Appendix F) was kept in an effort to document and reflect on thoughts, ideas, impressions, and feelings with regards to the entire research process with special emphasis on the interviews and observations. Journal notes included the researcher’s reflections, thoughts, and feelings during and after the interviews and observations, potential probe questions, and the steps taken during the whole research process. Ortlipp (2008) advised that keeping a journal can help a researcher in terms of facilitating researcher transparency, allowing the researcher to be reflexive, and seeing clearly any prejudices, intentions, and assumptions. In addition, any questions that arose during the reflection process were immediately included in the journal along with necessary changes that needed to be made in accordance with the flow of the research. The journal helped with the retention of the researcher’s ideas that may have been otherwise lost or forgotten and allowed the researcher to regularly evaluate her perspective as both an EFL learner and an ESL instructor. It also helped to organize the analysis stage by providing written account of the whole process.

In addition to the above procedures that were carried out to build credibility, the researcher employed Polkinghorne’s (1983) four qualities of determining the
trustworthiness of a phenomenological study of experience in terms of enabling the readers to gain a new, deeper understanding of what it is like to be a nonimmigrant ESL student in a college-level ESL program. She created descriptions that are vivid in terms of generating a sense of reality. She engaged in accuracy by helping the readers recognize and distinguish the experience either from their own experience or from being able to imagine it. She ensured richness by providing sufficient depth so that the readers can connect emotionally and cognitively. Finally, the researcher tried to register elegance by providing breadth and clarity.

Summary

This chapter served to demonstrate the need for the constructivist-interpretivist theoretical framework this study was situated in while explaining why it was inspired and guided by phenomenological inquiry. It provided the steps of the interpretative phenomenological analysis that the researcher employed in order to make sense of and interpret her data. In addition, participant selection, data collection and analysis, and trustworthiness procedures were provided. Chapter 4 provides the participant narratives and findings of this research study.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this study, the researcher sought to understand how non-immigrant ESL students experience a college-level ESL program and found that the 11 participants experienced it in 6 key ways, namely: developing a more independent sense of self and identity, social isolation from host culture, lack of immediate and continuous emotional support, language barriers, changes in the perception of the English language, and teachers and teaching styles.

Participants

This chapter starts by introducing the 11 participants in order to depict an overall sense of their individual identities and create a background context that can shed light on certain parts of their experience. Next, each finding is elaborated on including examples from participants’ accounts. It is revealed that, for these participants, six key statements could be made to explain their interpretations of the experience of being a non-immigrant ESL student at a college-level ESL program.

Faridah

At the time of this research study, Faridah was a 38-year-old mother of one from Saudi Arabia who had moved to the United States with her husband and daughter to learn English and upon completion of the ESL program, to receive a doctoral degree in biomedical science and return to Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, Faridah was a full-time instructor at a university. She had found out about the current university through an educational agency’s recommendation that the city and the campus would be safe for her
and her family. She had been living in the United States for 15 months and had been enrolled in the ESL program since she had arrived. She had started the ESL program from Level 1 and had worked her way up to Level 8 (the lowest of the advanced levels) and had not “skipped a level” which she had done deliberately. Even though she could have moved from one level to another that was exponentially higher, she wanted to make sure that she took advantage of each level properly and that she built a strong foundation for language skills.

Faridah was recruited for this research study during a class visit for an observation of another participant. She knew about the study, but had been hesitant to participate until she got to know me more and felt comfortable about being observed and interviewed. She, then, approached me during a break and let me know that she was interested in being part of the study. All three face-to-face interviews with Faridah occurred at the current university’s library. Upon meeting, she seemed comfortable and engaged throughout all three interviews. Her grammatical mistakes, typical for native Arabic speakers, did not prevent her from being reflective and enthusiastic. After observing her in her ESL classes and interviewing her and casually talking to her, I soon realized that she was strong-willed and resilient and that she got over hardships by patiently working towards a goal.

**Jiao**

Jiao was a 21-year-old female from China. She decided to participate in the study when her roommate and best friend from China approached me first and told me that she was willing to participate. Jiao mentioned that she probably would not have approached
me on her own if it had not been for her friend because she would have been shy about
the whole experience of being interviewed, observed, and even casually talked to. At the
time of the study, Jiao was enrolled in Level 9 ESL courses and was waiting on her
approval for the finance program. She had already started her bachelor’s degree in China
and was going to continue the program in the United States.

Jiao was undeniably shy and reserved. She did not speak unless she was spoken
to or was addressed directly by a classmate or a teacher. Despite her apprehension to
engage in communication or to simply initiate a conversation, her language skills was
impeccable. She completed all tasks successfully and usually before her classmates. She
excelled in grammar, reading, writing, and listening, yet, was not able to display her
skills in the speaking class because of the uneasiness she felt about speaking in public.

During the first interview, Jiao stated that it is typical for Chinese students to
remain silent during class because of the Chinese school culture to which they are
accustomed. However, she added that she knew she was shyer than an average Chinese
student in terms of participating in class discussion. Fortunately, with the encouragement
from her best friend and by getting to know me, she started to initiate small talk when she
met me, provide further details and examples for some interview questions, and even say
“I want to add something” during the second and the third interviews as I was about to
move on to another question. It was pleasing to observe her hesitance dissolve as time
passed and to see how she gained confidence in her speaking skills which made her proud
of her own progress.
Kamil

Kamil was a 24-year-old male from Kuwait. He had a bachelor’s degree with a major in political science and a minor in psychology. He wanted to pursue a master’s degree in one of these fields and was applying for both in several universities. He was deliberately enrolled in ESL classes to maintain a legal student status until he was accepted from a university even though he had already completed the requirements. He decided to participate in the study after he met me during one of my observations of Nadirah in his speaking class. When he told me his decision, he also explained that he was interested in research because he was planning to pursue a PhD degree in his country and wanted to familiarize himself with the process while helping me and practicing English speaking skills.

Kamil was intelligent, sophisticated, realistic, and spiritual. He had a clear and well-founded view of what life is and how all experience serves a certain purpose which is either immediately or subsequently revealed. He was passionate yet calm as he talked about his life in the U.S. and how it had changed him. Even though there were issues he was dealing with, he had created ways of coping and making the best of his situation. After our initial talk and his request from me to explain my methodology, his understanding of what phenomenology is helped to determine how he responded to certain questions. His thought and response processes had an added layer of the meaning and purpose of an experience. In other words, he tried to relate his responses to ESL experience and referred to the meaning of things when he elaborated.
Kamil showed a deep concern for what was at stake for me in terms of this research study because he was going to go through a similar path. After the data collection was over, he told me that he wished I successfully finish this chapter in my life and start a new one having gained knowledge from those with whom I could identify because I was an international student myself. This made me think about how the experience of conducting a research study with participants who have similar experiences to your own can deepen and strengthen the meaning of previous experience while elevating the current experience to new heights of understanding with awareness.

**Malik**

Malik was a 26-year-old male from Saudi Arabia. His then pregnant wife was in Saudi Arabia. He had a bachelor’s degree in English language and translation and had taught English for two years in his country. He had come to the U.S. to seek a master’s degree in teaching English as a second language and a PhD degree. He had already heard back from several universities regarding admission and was trying to decide where to study while waiting for his ESL approval. I was not aware of any of the above information until our first interview and, needless to say, I was surprised that he was enrolled in ESL classes. Later, I found out that the government scholarship required him to take English classes and he felt that he still had a lot to learn.

Admittedly, when Malik approached me to tell me he wanted to participate in the study, I did not think that he would be able to follow through because he had an attendance issue which he addressed in regret, as well. However, towards the end of the semester, he began to fix the issue and started attending class more regularly. In my
observations of other participants, I had noticed that Malik appeared to be disinterested in
the instruction and relieved when class ended. Upon meeting and interviewing him, I
learned that there were several matters he was attending to and his acceptance to some
universities had loosened his bond with the ESL program.

Malik was driven, confident, and compassionate. The more I got to know him,
the more I realized how quickly one can, even if not deliberately, form an opinion about a
person based on superficial observation. He was informative, open, and sincere during
the interviews. Even though he had taught English in his country, he was completely
satisfied with the idea of being an ESL student because he believed in lifelong learning.
In addition, since this research study concerned his field, he was especially interested in it
and indicated that he hoped to conduct a similar study in the future.

**Miraj**

Miraj was a 26-year-old male from Saudi Arabia. He had been married for four
years and had a son. His family was in Saudi Arabia and he lived alone. He had come to
the U.S. to seek his PhD degree in chemistry. He was in his last semester in the ESL
program and was waiting on his admission to the university. He was the first participant
to volunteer to be in the study. He contacted me via e-mail to offer his help and let me
know that he thought the study would prove to be beneficial to the field of ESL.

Miraj was a highly intelligent, level-headed, sensitive, and empathetic individual.
He was able to look at the ESL experience through a myriad of lenses and had already
formed his opinions about the different levels of the experience. Therefore, his input was
with forethought and included an analysis of the situation and the context he was in.
Miraj’s emotional maturity made it easier for him to deal with everyday ordeals; however, it was evident that he needed his family with him as a support system. At the time of the study, he had reached a point where he was ready to close a chapter in his life.

Interviews with Miraj provided a constant stream of valuable insight coming from an honest, sensible place. He was genuinely interested in the outcome of the study and wanted to make sure his answers satisfied the scope of the questions. He was extremely helpful and considerate and regularly checked with me to find out whether I needed further information. In class, he remained quiet at times on purpose because, as he explained, he did not want to monopolize the conversation. In addition, his intention was to let his classmates practice because he believed that someone who knows the answers should allow others to use class time to their advantage.

Lastly, Miraj was the only participant who provided me with writing samples from his journal which I appreciated greatly. His writing put into perspective another layer of the experience, especially regarding students’ emotional state and coping mechanisms.

Nadirah

Nadirah was a 21-year-old Kuwaiti female who had been informed about the study via her husband who was not a participant in the study but had heard about it. After my initial contact with her husband, she went on to contact me via text to tell me she wanted to participate in the study. She had come to the United States because her husband wanted to get his master’s degree from an American university. Upon arrival, she decided that she wanted to get a bachelor’s degree in art education and enrolled
herself in the ESL program in order to be able to apply for the degree. She had started to
learn English in Kuwait which enabled her to start the ESL program from a relatively
higher level and at the time of the study, she was in Level 8, waiting for her approval to
start her bachelor’s degree. She had all the other requirements taken care of and was
waiting for the semester to be over.

Nadirah wanted to do the interviews in her apartment because she wanted to be
comfortable and create a welcoming environment for me as a guest. She indicated that
she would have had no issues with doing the interviews in a public place, but she
preferred to “show her personality” in her own element. I had expected her to suggest to
meet in her apartment because she wore the niqab and she might have wanted to take it
off since she would be in the presence of another female. However, her proposal had no
relation to her wearing the niqab. Admittedly, upon initial contact, her quiet demeanor
had led me to assume she would be introverted and perhaps shy, but I was quickly proven
wrong. Nadirah was outgoing and enthusiastic, and she was excited about using her
language skills while helping me pursue my goal. It only made sense because she was
determined and passionate about her own goals and she believed that every person should
work towards achieving a certain goal that has a meaning for him or her.

Finally, the interviews, the observations, and the occasional outside contact
revealed, contrary to my prejudgment, that Nadirah was a strong-minded, high-spirited,
and conscientious young woman who knew what she wanted and enjoyed studying
English because it was going to help her get one step closer to reaching her goals.
Nianzu

Nianzu was a 22-year-old male from China. He had completed three years of his bachelor’s degree in business in his country and decided to transfer to an economics degree in the U.S. He was enrolled in the ESL program to prove that his English level was sufficient for him to be able to continue a degree at the university. He approached me after my third announcement in his reading class and informed me, shyly, that he wanted to participate in the study. He added that he had wanted to tell me before, but he was not sure as to what the study entailed and what his role would be.

Nianzu was calm, collected, reserved, and passionate. His unexpected jokes and facial expressions made it even more pleasant to get to know him. Because he was quiet in class, one felt compelled to assume he was not paying attention to what was happening. However, it soon became clear that he had gotten used to being misread due to his, at times, unresponsive nature. He was, on the contrary, completely aware of and interested in the interactions and the setting.

Additionally, the interviews revealed a considerable amount of information with regards to his personality, his understanding and interpretation of his current status, his assessment of his own situation, and his long-term goals that the observations alone could not have possibly uncovered. It was as though he was two different persons during class and during the interviews. He had accepted his introverted nature, yet, did not take himself too seriously and joked about how he must come across to his teachers. It was fascinating to hear his own evaluation of his personality and in relation to doing so in English.
Lastly, Nianzu was kind and courteous. He asked multiple times if I needed further help and insisted that I contact him if I needed additional input. He was a perfect example of what this study seeks to reveal in terms of unraveling what lies beneath when it comes to the human behind the experience when the label of the experience takes center stage and those involved in it need to be given a voice.

**Tarif**

Tarif was a 21-year-old male from Saudi Arabia. He was in the U.S. with his, at the time, pregnant wife and they both wanted to complete a master’s and a PhD degree in their fields of study. Tarif’s degree was in pharmacy and his wife’s was in interior design. His wife was not enrolled in the ESL program yet because her due date was approaching. Tarif wanted to complete his credits in his field by transferring the classes he had taken until then in his country. Therefore, he had to take ESL classes to show proof of language mastery and get approval from the university. However, he was ready to transfer to other universities if he needed to.

Tarif, without hesitation, approached me after an announcement I made in his speaking class and told me he was enthusiastic about being part of a study. He added that he found it interesting and that he liked challenging himself and volunteering to take part in things he has never experienced before. Given his personality, as I soon found out, this was a typical reaction from him because he was highly energetic, outgoing, confident, sociable, and adventurous. He enjoyed the experience of learning English because he was excited about the possibilities it would offer and the challenge of achieving a goal intrigued him.
Tarif asked me several questions about this research study. He was curious about the aim and what I was going to do with the results. He was genuinely interested in the topic and hoped that it would be a valuable addition to my field. He was highly active in class and even encouraged his classmates to participate. Likewise, he gave detailed answers during the interviews and was enthusiastic about the next interview after each one. Clearly, he enjoyed the process of being interviewed and even asked which question would serve which purpose when the data would be analyzed. Lastly, he tried to recruit participants for the study by telling them they would both be helping me and practicing their English skills at the same time.

**Tung-Mei**

Tung-Mei was a 20-year-old female from China who was waiting for her release from the ESL program. She had completed two years of college in hospitality management in China and wanted to graduate from the current U.S. university by completing the last two years after finishing her ESL classes. After my third announcement in her reading class, she approached me and stated that she believed it would be a valuable experience to participate in a research study. Additionally, she wanted to set up the time for the first interview immediately because she was curious as to what it would be like to be interviewed.

During my observations of other participants in Tung-Mei’s classes who had volunteered before her, I had noticed that she was highly organized and focused. Upon meeting and interviewing her, I saw that she was also independent, confident, strong-willed, and spirited. She was proud to rely only on herself to overcome any
challenge she was faced with and accomplish her goals without asking for assistance.

She found the ESL program to be too easy but was concerned about the regular classes she was going to be enrolled in mainly because the English context was bound to be different than the one she was involved in currently.

Tung-Mei was communicative and comfortable during the interviews. She was truly dedicated to the time frame she set aside for the interviews and made sure to use it effectively. She provided detailed answers and examples. I was especially appreciative that she did not hesitate to share personal stories to which others could have been apprehensive. Furthermore, the observations made it clear that she was genuinely invested in mastering the language skills she knew she needed for her future. Her energy and undisputable belief in herself to achieve her goals were inspiring and motivating to witness. In addition, her dedication and the way she incorporated English learning into her everyday activities were proof that one is and should be in charge of his or her learning inside and outside of school.

**Wen**

Wen was a 20-year-old male from China. He had completed three years of his bachelor’s degree in business administration in China and had come to the U.S. to complete his last year after finishing the ESL program. He volunteered to be a part of the study after his closest classmate, Nianzu, decided to participate. After his grammar class, he simply told me he would “do it” and nodded, so I did not have a chance to explain in further detail what his participation would entail during our initial contact. However, during our second interaction, it became clear that he knew all the details.
Wen was generally quiet in class with the exception of an unexpected joke quietly uttered in Chinese that was mostly related to his state. Therefore, based on my initial observations of his classes at which time he was not yet a participant, I had assumed that he would be somewhat reserved during the interviews. However, I was proven wrong in a pleasant way. Wen was funny and talkative. He gave examples and detailed explanations, sometimes even without my prompting. I was also surprised by the level of his English when I conducted the first interview. Because he usually chose to stay quiet during class, I had no way of knowing his English speaking skills would be as impressive.

Another impression I was under based on what I had observed was that he might not be following the instructions his teachers were giving. I soon found out that it was not the case and that he simply chose to be unresponsive which unfortunately made it appear as if he was not paying attention or he could not follow. These instances also explain why he already knew the details of the study participation when I had assumed he needed further instruction.

Finally, Wen’s enthusiasm and excitable manner as he talked about video games was a reminder for me to try to tap into an area of interest for the participants to feel relaxed and engaged. It also prompted me to ask him whether his speaking skills had been influenced by his gaming activities to which he replied in the affirmative.

Yin

Yin was an 18-year-old female from China who had come to the U.S. to get a bachelor’s degree in management upon completion of the ESL program, but had decided
to study finance instead despite her parents’ wishes. She was enrolled in Level 9 classes and had already received her release from the program due to her high grades. She volunteered to participate in the study shortly after I announced in her grammar class that I was looking for participants. After a class observation, she approached me with her classmate whom she had convinced to participate and told me that she thought it would be interesting to be part of a research study and help someone.

Yin was confident, outgoing, and expressive. She appeared to be in control of her life and going after what she wanted. Her facial expression and tone while explaining how she decided to choose a different major than what her parents had asked her to study was an indication of how independent and self-assured she was. She was not doing it as a way to rebel against her parents, but rather as a way to naturally pursue her own dreams regardless of the authority figures in her life. She was charming and had a delightful sense of humor. Similarly, Yin’s sense of learning English reflected her view on life. She believed that learning English would be a challenge if she regarded it as one.

Yin’s strong-minded and free-spirited nature established the unspoken, yet tangible bond between her and Jiao. She and Jiao were simply inseparable and did everything together. It was beneficial and comforting for Jiao to have Yin as her roommate and classmate because Yin was more communicative and direct in social situations where Jiao needed reinforcement. Yin appeared to have instinctively taken the role of a leader where her help was needed in this new setting in which they were.

Finally, Yin was comfortable and conversational during the interviews. During class, she successfully completed all given tasks and voluntarily participated multiple
times. After participating, she stated that she enjoyed the interviews because they were a way of practicing English and that she was happy to have been able to help me because she could tell I “needed help to find participants.”

**Summary of Participants**

All participants agreed that mastering English was important for their current status as well as their futures and were generally satisfied with the experience. One motive they all shared for participating in the study was to help the researcher. Each participant showed genuine interest and concern and offered further assistance in case it was needed. They were quick to schedule interviews and willing to spend time with the researcher beyond data collection procedures. Even though each participant had a unique experience with varying nuances and levels of complexity, there were common points shared among them in terms of what it meant to be an ESL student and what the experience entailed.

**Findings**

This study yielded six key findings that represented how the participants experienced being ESL students at a college-level ESL program in an authentic ESL setting. These findings were: developing a more independent sense of self and identity, social isolation from host culture, lack of immediate and continuous emotional support, language barriers, changes in the perception of the English language, and teachers and teaching styles. These six key findings manifested themselves through certain aspects that shaped how the participants interpreted their experiences. The first key finding, developing a more independent sense of self and identity, was facilitated through the
following: building confidence and becoming self-sufficient, perception of family, and making important life decisions. The second key finding, social isolation from host culture, was supported by three elements, namely: remaining within one’s own cultural/ethnic group, prejudice and encounters of discriminatory or racist nature, and lack of institutional social activities. The third key finding, lack of immediate and continuous emotional support, included the following key components: the first month syndrome, battling feelings of loneliness and anxiety, and need for empathy and understanding. The fourth key finding, language barriers, was established by the reporting of the following: ESL label, fear of making mistakes, and help with basic needs. The fifth key finding, changes in the perception of the English language, emerged through two important components, namely: English for higher life standards and meaning given to the language learning process. The sixth key finding, teachers and teaching styles, presented the following key element: native and non-native English-speaking teachers. The six key findings along with their essential aspects that surfaced are presented below in detail.

**Developing a More Independent Sense of Self and Identity**

A common theme addressed by all participants in the study was being able to develop a more independent sense of self and identity through the experience of living and studying in the United States as ESL learners. All participants held and described a belief that they had seen a change in themselves in terms of achieving short-term goals that required them to act on instinct and current knowledge rather than rely on immediate family and friends. Additionally, all participants referred to a process of self-discovery,
which helped them to uncover parts of their identity as well as build new components. Three aspects seemed to facilitate this growth in the participants, which were building confidence and becoming self-sufficient, perception of family, and making important life decisions. Below are overall examples of how these developed followed by detailed explorations of these three aspects.

Kamil’s account exemplified this by describing how he had initially assumed that learning English would be “the most important thing” but ended up being “the least important thing” because “learn[ing] how to be independent and how to adapt will help you in the future how to deal with anything you have or any problem won’t be very hard because you already experienced it.” He repeatedly stated that the main aspect that made the experience valuable to him was that it taught him how to deal with life on his own and how to be independent. He provided an example and recalled that,

I picked, my brother, picked him up from the Cleveland airport. He is older than me and he always like big brother, you know. There was problem with his luggage. My brother speaks English, no problem. I said I will take care of this, you sit. I talked in English and explained like what happened. Maybe this is small example, but you learn this, you know. You do this yourself and you are independent now. It’s ok, it doesn’t matter he is older or I know he can do it, but I can do it also. I think this is example for being independent.

This showed that although his brother was older and capable of taking care of an issue at the airport, Kamil chose to take initiative as a young, independent man who did not need to rely on his brother’s life skills and experience. His brother’s presence was not a
needed comfort; Kamil felt independent and confident enough to talk to staff in English and took care of a matter on his own. He had come to the realization that through his own experience, he had gained an important life skill that could be applied to multiple areas.

Yin mentioned that she noticed, “a change in [her] personality” because she believed that, “I became more independent. When I am home, everything my grandparents do for me. Here, I am by myself and I don’t need other people. I learned so much. I depend on myself.”

She added that she disliked being treated like a “child” in her family even though she knew in her heart that she was capable of more than she was being allowed to take charge of. Therefore, coming to the U.S. allowed her to “grow stronger” and build a more independent self-image. Her acknowledgment of a change in her personality showed the direct effect of this experience on developing a more independent sense of self that she valued. When asked why it was important for her to become independent, she stated that, “I prove something, so like, to my family and for me. I think, at home, they think I can’t do something or anything. Here I do so much. Yeah. It’s ok. My family shouldn’t worry, like she ok? Yeah.” This showed that her experience in gaining independence and feeling confident about her capabilities positively affected her sense of self she was presenting to family. She believed that her family’s perception of what she was capable of would change upon witnessing how much she was able to do on her own and how confident she felt about herself and her independence.
Tung-Mei found it crucial to “become independent so I made a decision to go abroad to study.” Her main incentive to come to the U.S., which she repeatedly mentioned, was to be more independent than she was being allowed to. She added that before I came to U.S. I was always like a princess at home, but I don’t want to be a princess because I need more skill to live alone. I hope I can have some individual time to do something by myself and not my parents help me.

Furthermore, her motivations were geared towards achieving her own goals on her own, without the help of her boyfriend, which she believed was the opposite of what other Chinese girls would do. As she explained further:

Actually, I think I can spend my life by myself without my parents or without boyfriend with me because many Chinese girl think they want to be princess. They always hope they need people, maybe parents, maybe a boyfriend together with her to spend the time or maybe they will think they’re alone or—they don’t like the lonely life—I think maybe I should have some individual time to think something like about the future—if you don’t think you won’t have a good future. Now, I’m independent. I have a boyfriend, but I don’t need him although it’s a good thing to have boyfriend. Coming to U.S. helped me to be independent girl.

Tung-Mei’s description of not needing other people, regardless of how closely associated they are, showcased the relationship between the experience of living and studying abroad and achieving the goal of becoming a responsible young adult capable of acting independently to perform basic and complicated tasks in an unfamiliar setting and situation.
Faridah’s culture-bound account was another example of becoming more independent in the U.S. as opposed to in his or her home country. Faridah indicated, “I changed for the better way. In Saudi Arabia, especially the women, depend on the men. For everything. Here is different. The woman can get anything and can do anything by myself. I don’t depend on a man. I really like this.

She further explained that she “learned new things about [her]self” and was proud to see this new side of herself emerge. Moreover, she believed it was unnecessary to wait on men to perform a simple task which could otherwise be done quickly if the presence of a man was not required. She mentioned that,

“Why I wait for a man? I don’t have time. [Laughs]. I can do it quickly. Here I can because is different. No one say why she alone. Because I want. I can shop very fast and something like that.”

She enjoyed doing everyday activities on her own or with her daughter, which she believed was more practical and convenient. Her identity as an independent woman had begun to form as a result of moving to the U.S. She started uncovering parts of her identity that came to life through changing her environment from a traditional one to a more progressive one. It was important for her that she was not being questioned about her decisions in terms of acting alone as a woman. Furthermore, she was fond of the positive effects of being able to carry out everyday activities on her own which she had clearly predicted to be the more efficient route. The validation of her own prediction further allowed her to develop her less-reliant sense of self.
Miraj, despite stating that his personal growth was in the direction of self-discovery rather than gaining independence, suggested that every experience creates an opportunity for uncovering new realms of identity and “growing as a human being—not physical, of course—psychological and mental.” He explained,

I see myself a new person. I’m the same, but when I’m alone, I think about my life and why I’m here. Instead of feeling bad, I try to understand what it means to me. Everything I see and do every day will help me maybe in the future or maybe people in my life. So I accept it.

The act of accepting life as it is showed a growth for Miraj in terms of developing an advanced sense of self. He was focused on getting the most out of his experience to discover what he would do in his given situation instead of dwelling on seemingly difficult or changing conditions. He provided an example and recalled,

Last week, my friends had fight, not fight, sorry, argument. It was simple thing. I told them, this is not serious, don’t fight, you will regret it. I think before maybe I can say, yes, I won’t talk to him again, but this situation show me now we must be mature, there are other important things, much more important. I think about these things here a lot.

This suggested that his situation of living and studying in the U.S. had helped him to prioritize the meanings of life events as they came and to grow into a sense of maturity regarding evaluating the relevance, importance, and worth of experiences. This experience had taught him how to determine whether a situation deserved the attention and response it was receiving. This meant that he had grown as an individual who had
learned to compare the value of life experiences to decide where his time and effort
should be placed for a productive outcome.

All participants’ accounts of developing a more independent sense of self and
identity centered around three key components that seemed to interact: building
confidence and becoming self-sufficient, recognizing the impact of how they perceived
the idea of family, and making important life decisions regarding their future. The
process of adjusting to, dealing with, and even conquering their current situation was
shaped by letting go of insecurities, inhibitions, and familiar routines. These factors were
replaced by positive elements that promoted personal growth and a heightened self-worth
brought on by overcoming the challenges of the experience.

**Building confidence and becoming self-sufficient.** Participants referred to
becoming more confident as well as self-reliant and self-sufficient after facing the reality
of everyday life in a foreign country where they had to perform tasks varying from doing
routine daily activities to solving problems and overcoming challenges, all the while,
learning a new language. All participants indicated coming from comfortable
backgrounds where their needs were met exceedingly well and where they did not need to
deal with any issues on their own.

Yin, with regards to building confidence, stated that even though she was “not
shy” in China, she did not like asking questions or starting conversations “with new
people,” but

Now I just trust myself I can do and I think I’ve become outgoing than China. In
here, when I maybe lost a way, I can ask people, but in China, I never ask. I like
this because I prove myself I can do things on my own. Now I know so many things I can do. In China, I didn’t know I can do those things. I feel more confident here. I can talk to anyone if I want.

Additionally, she explained that Americans’ everyday greetings helped her to ease into making small talk with “strangers” because it is part of the culture and not considered “weird.” Her account of becoming more confident and more conscious of her own capabilities was directly related to building an independent identity. In addition, she acknowledged feeling liberated as a result of the host culture’s dynamics which in turn gave her further confidence and independence.

Jiao mentioned that “I don’t like talking to people. I don’t feel comfortable. Here, I speak with many people and every day, I’m more confident. I become more confident. Probably, tomorrow I will speak even more. Maybe I’m not so shy anymore.” Additionally, she referred to her initial reactions to people who assumed that she could speak English well and tried to talk to her casually. She, in an embarrassed tone, stated that she would simply look away as a response, but now was able to ask them “to repeat” what they said which clearly was an important achievement she was proud of. Even though these victories may come across as small steps, they clearly meant a lot to Jiao who was aware of her shyness and inhibitions. Her decision to stop restricting herself and taking further steps in the direction of pushing herself out of her comfort zone proved that she was progressively building self-confidence and seeing a positive change in her identity.
Faridah was another participant who believed that the experience helped her to become “stronger and confident.” She mentioned that, prior to coming to the U.S., she did not feel like initiating conversations in an English learning setting unless she had to. However,

Now, I can talk with any person without a fear. Without scared. I don’t care about anything. Now I know this, anyone who in front of me, they understand me. Even if I grammatically wrong. Also, I’m stronger because I believe myself.

It’s because I’m in the USA. I’m a different woman!

Her experience with becoming more language-confident presented an anticipated positive outcome of learning English in an authentic setting. Additionally, letting go of fears and insecurities was a direct indication of gaining confidence which is also a crucial step in language learning. She showed further signs of confidence by believing that people with whom she communicated understood her whereas before she would have been scared of speaking assuming she would be made fun of. She associated believing in herself with becoming stronger as a person which is a sign of developing a high value of self and detaching from entities that are no longer needed to survive. Lastly, being in the U.S. provided her with a sense of freedom from both her traditional female image and her pre-conceived judgments about what she was capable of.

Nianzu mentioned that before he came to the U.S., his strategy for dealing with a problem was to “get rid of [it]” instead of trying to solve it. In terms of a change and a positive growth in his personality, he stated that
The biggest change for me is absolutely about solving problems. I think I’m very shy. When I have problem, I ignore. I don’t want to solve the problem because I think I can’t. Now, in America, I try—I do my best to solve it. I feel I’m not very shy anymore.

He added that even though learning English was his priority, he was more satisfied and pleased about having built confidence because he regarded it as a life skill. Shyness being an important determiner of how much the participants were willing to put themselves out there was a factor in Nianzu’s decision making as well as his counterparts. Yet, just as his counterparts, he found ways to overcome his shyness by the power he found in his experience. He even admitted that he did not effectively and proactively deal with problems before because he did not have enough confidence in himself whereas now he was able to face his weakness and even conquer it.

Kamil indicated that the way he spent his days in Kuwait was “totally different” than the way he spent his days in the United States:

First, here, when I wake up, I have to do, make my breakfast, but in Kuwait, I will just have someone do it for me. Here, you have to do your part and everything else, too. I learn how to cook and wash my clothes by myself and actually, it’s a good life and a good experience.

When asked if it was all worth it, he replied “definitely” and added that the experience helped him to grow as a person and taught him to rely on his own skills and knowledge to solve problems rather than expect immediate assistance. Considering the culture Kamil came from where teenagers and young adults are not required to take adult
responsibilities until they start a family of their own, performing tasks on his own meant that he needed to become self-sufficient and self-reliant if he wanted to function as his peers. He viewed it as a positive trait that he had gained rather than a burden he was forced to take on which is an indication of learning to depend on oneself and becoming confident in terms of problem solving without a familiar face’s help.

Tung-Mei strongly advocated the importance of “doing things on her own” in terms of relying on herself rather than friends and family and explained that even though she knew she could receive assistance in certain situations, she refused to do so in order to “grow” and learn to “rely on herself.” She stated that coming to the U.S. to learn English “helped [her] to start doing many things—like life basics—normally [her] parents would do for [her]” and referred to her “schedule” which was an important part of her then current lifestyle. She explained,

My schedule is very important for me. I make it myself now. Everything I have to do, I write and plan. No one else can affect my schedule. I need it because I have to depend on myself. Now, I do a lot of things myself. I’m the only person who makes these decisions. Even if hard, I like it because I’m mature now.

Tung-Mei almost challenged herself to rely on herself and herself only in order to consciously grow stronger and make educated decisions having been through an experience without another person’s help. Even though not getting help when needed may seem somewhat extreme, it shows a devotion to deliberately force oneself to grow in order to reach desired levels of self-confidence and self-reliance. The fact that Tung-Mei
saw this experience as an opportunity to build a resilient identity showed that she nourished her essence as an individual by believing in herself and her abilities.

Miraj made the point that it is never too late to learn to be self-sufficient, even for an adult male. He indicated that, in Saudi Arabia, men have certain responsibilities that are expected of them regardless of their situation. Therefore, every Saudi man is naturally self-sufficient. However, upon coming to the U.S., he found a new meaning of “self-sufficiency” because, with the changing setting, the concept of “doing things on your own” changed, as well.

In Saudi Arabia, I know I can do many things. But, also, if I need help, somebody will help me. Absolutely. Here is not the same. I can’t think like oh it’s okay, I will definitely find someone to help me. No, I can’t. I really have to do it myself. Therefore, becoming self-sufficient and relying on oneself takes on a different meaning because the relief that comes from the assumption of someone helping is removed from the equation. When that emotion of self-expectation is triggered, knowing one is enough for himself or herself helps to build confidence. Certainty replaces apprehension which in turn leads to growth and a stronger identity.

Perception of family. The concept and meaning of family was a strong determinant of state of mind and emotional well-being for all participants. They showed clear signs of emotional and psychological impact leaving their families behind had caused. All participants referred to family as a self-identifying factor that influenced important decisions in their lives. Their sense of self was situated in the understanding of what family means and how it influences thinking and perceiving the world. However,
there was an indisputable difference between the way Middle Eastern participants and Chinese participants perceived family, which could be attributed to the fact that the two cultures are inherently different (Xu & Davidhizar, 2005).

All participants from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait mentioned a need and desire to be close to family members. They emphasized the solitude brought on by being away from family and not being able to see them on a regular basis. They all stated that it is customary and expected to see and visit the whole family, including the extended family, every week. In addition, they indicated that they highly enjoyed the weekly visits and the social gatherings. They also suggested that spending time with the whole family was a source of strength, wisdom, and righteousness. Being able to define and shape who they were depended on their ties with family and they needed emotional and psychological support from family members, especially now that they were in the United States. Since it is culturally, socially, and religiously crucial to get married and raise children in Arabic culture as well as Islamic culture (Inhorn, 2012; Nydell, 2012), it was only natural that these participants regarded family as a highly important entity that life was built around. The participants’ sense of self emerged from being an active part of a family that would be there for them and a future family of their own they would raise based on their learnings and culture. Yet, these participants also mentioned that even though it was challenging to be away from family, they knew they had to live this experience and that it would add value to them as individuals and as a family.

Faridah talked about how important family was and how she felt “a little lost” and “not like herself” because she could not reach her extended family when she needed them
immediately. When asked to elaborate further, tears filled her eyes and she said she did not want to talk about her family in Saudi Arabia. Considering the fact that she had her husband and daughter with her, her emotional response made it clear that being away from the rest of her family was hard for her to cope with. In addition, admitting to feeling lost and not being able to recognize oneself as a result of failing to establish the familiar connection with loved ones when needed showed that her sense of self had been altered due to not having her reference point of meaning making as to who she was as a person. Nevertheless, she added that “I feel strong now because I do many things on my own. I miss my family, but I like myself like this,” which suggested that even though the circumstances were not ideal, her identity as an independent woman was starting to form and she seemed to enjoy this change. Therefore, physical separation from family members seemed to increase her confidence and help her see herself as a self-sufficient and strong individual.

Nadirah stated that she knew how important family was, but did not realize how hard being away from them was going to be until she “came to the U.S.” She had never been away from her family until she got married and moved to the U.S. and she found it to be similar to a “battle” she had to fight every day. She added that she sometimes, “[felt] lonely and I have friends, but it’s not the same.” With an unmistakable sparkle in her eye, she mentioned that she “talk[ed] to my mom and brothers every day on Skype. Sometimes I go shopping and show my camera and I say tell me what to buy.” Attempts to engage in familiar activities and routines made it easier for her to deal with her situation. Lastly, she stated that
My family is a big part of me. I’m missing that part. I was with my family all the time. When I do these things like talk to my mom, talk to my brothers, sometimes my father, I feel better. More relaxed. But it’s actually okay because here I can do things like not in Kuwait. It’s more free for girls. I like it.

This suggested that being away from her family made her feel like a part of who she was as an individual was missing, yet she was enjoying her new found freedom as a woman. As a result of the experience requiring her to be away from a comfortable, familiar setting, she had started developing an independent self-image of which she was proud.

Miraj was another participant who displayed signs of strong emotional and psychological reaction to being away from family. He was visibly demoralized by the effects of his situation, yet he was still trying his best to keep an optimistic mind frame. He believed that every situation presented itself with obstacles and opportunities and it was important to make the best out of any experience. He stated that:

It’s so important to be close to family. Especially, because you are studying in a foreign country. International students need the support. It’s hard to find the support to tell them about your life or your suffering or some problem that you have. Sometimes, you need someone to listen to you. I never tell them about this, but if they were here, they would see it in my face and my attitude. It’s a pleasure to be with your family. Here, I don’t even see my friends usually. I’m by myself, but I like doing things by myself now. I go on short trips and do some things alone. It’s nice.
His statements showed that even though he saw his family regularly in Saudi Arabia and needed them for support, he was not completely depressed about being alone. Importantly, he recognized international students’ common need to simply talk to somebody about their problems, yet did not rebel against being on his own to cope with his situation. Such resilience and acceptance without resentment in the face of unfamiliar challenges shows that the person is mentally building a defense mechanism which in turn makes him or her confident and strong.

Tarif was in the U.S. with his wife, but he stated that “it’s very very difficult to be away.” He also mentioned,

It’s really hard. I can’t talk to them when I want and I can’t see them. Especially now. My family is always together. Now it’s so different for me. My father, my brothers, sisters, uncles. You can share a lot of things with your family. I miss them because you know it’s difficult to be part from your family. Twice weekly we talk on Skype, but it’s not enough, of course.

When asked about how he was dealing with the situation, he indicated that he was a naturally strong and adventurous person, so he found many activities to keep himself busy and not to have negative thoughts. He explained that it was “important to make yourself better and stronger. Especially, if it’s a difficult situation. I have to be strong and like an adult. You can learn a lot from something like this. You grow you know.” Instead of dwelling on the hardship he was facing, he chose to focus on how he could turn the situation to his advantage which he believed would help him grow and become a more profound person. Taking advantage of a difficult situation to turn it into an
opportunity for growth is a clear indication of a calm, stable mindset which helps to build a more independent and confident sense of existence.

The Chinese participants’ perception of family differed notably in several aspects. Unlike the participants from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the participants from China did not see members of their family regularly. They all mentioned a conflict varying in degree between themselves and their parents. They all stated that their parents did not or could not understand them and that there were regular arguments about their life choices. Additionally, they indicated that their parents wanted to control their lives and make decisions for them which caused the participants to feel the need to separate themselves, at least in terms of distance, from their parents.

Wen was one participant who felt strongly about his need to “be away from [his] parents.” When asked if he missed his family, he said, “I miss them. I talk to them on Skype. But this is not first time for me away from my family. I went to school away from my home since I was 13. I lived with my grandparents.” He believed that the fact that he had previously spent time apart from his family made it easy for him to cope with being in the U.S. He remarked,

I think, for me, I must be away. My parents like to tell me do this or something like that. I want to do what I want, so sometimes we fight. It’s better for me. I’m ESL student. When I will finish, I will study business. In China, my father will pick for me.

He did not want his father to decide for him, so he made a choice to come to the U.S. to study what he wanted. Even the initiative to take action to become more independent and
unattached to family indicated a sign of building a sense of self as a young adult. He
needed the physical distance from family members who he believed would have hindered
his personal growth and identity building process in order to develop an independent self-
image and to pursue his ideals regardless of what his family would otherwise prefer.

Nianzu was another participant who was concerned about staying with his family
during his studies and had decided to come to the U.S. to be more independent and to feel
more like himself. He stated,

I think it’s the culture. All Chinese people, especially with their family. I don’t
like talk with my parents because I think they have some trouble understanding
me. I miss them so much, but in my opinion, I think, I must do my best, just
myself. I don’t want help from other people. I want to be independent.

He mentioned that he felt as if his family would not “let [him] grow. They want to help
and they tell me what to do. They don’t understand me.” Therefore, his decision to come
to the U.S. after he had already completed two years of college in China in business
management was based on wanting to become who he needed to be and trying to make
his own decisions as an individual who felt that he was not effectively communicating
with his parents. He seemed genuinely sad about the lack of communication, but certain
that it could not be resolved by spending more time together. He believed that it was
important for him to see how much he could accomplish on his own which showed his
desire to be independent was based on how much he wanted to become his own
self-reliant, confident person.
Tung-Mei was especially passionate about being on her own and away from her family. She felt strongly about her desire to be away from her mother’s “control” and to be herself. She stated:

I miss my family, but actually I don’t have time to miss my family because I’m so busy. I’m a teenager, so I’m always fighting with my family. It’s good now because I’m away from my family. My mother is very strict. She always wants me do what she wants, so I want to go abroad. In China, I wanted to move to an apartment and have roommates. My mother said you can’t. I want to be social. I’m outgoing girl. My mother always think I’m a student, just a student so I should use all my energy and time for studying and all my other time with her. With her slightly raised voice and excitable mannerism, she explained that she had hoped to have some alone time without her parents helping her. Even though her mother was not happy about her taking a year off to study English, she remarked,

I don’t care. It’s just one year. I learn more about the U.S. culture and have more friends and get used to the environment and life. I actually have plans for my future, but my mother tries to affect me about my plans. She wants to make the plans. She wants me to just obey her planning for me, but maybe a lot of Chinese parents do that.

Tung-Mei, similar to Nianzu, referred to Chinese family culture to be restricting and to have gaps in understanding the younger generation. She was highly determined to be independent and to do what she wanted. However, she was not rebelling or wasting her time just because she now had a chance to be “free.” She was concentrating on her
goals and investing in herself in many ways she felt she could not have had she stayed with her family. Out of all the participants, Tung-Mei felt the strongest about separating herself from her family members and did not show signs of emotional stress in terms of being away from loved ones. Her desire to develop a more independent sense of self and identity was being fulfilled by the experience of living and studying in the U.S. She had created her path that would lead to her dreams of becoming a self-reliant young woman capable of taking control of her life.

**Making important life decisions.** All participants, under differing circumstances and with varying expectations, had made the life-changing decision to come to the U.S. to study. However, the decisions they made after having experienced their changing life conditions and renewed sense of self proved to be more meaningful and more important than their initial decision to come to the U.S. to study. All the major decisions they started making and were going to make in light of this experience were coming from a confident, determined, and goal-oriented mindset with little to no influence from determining factors that would have affected the process prior to the experience. Making these important life decisions were a part of developing a more independent sense of self and identity process considering how the elements and the possible consequences of a big decision are complicated and require personal growth and freedom to be assessed by the individual in a healthy, sensible way.

Yin, based on what her parents were expecting her to study, had come to the U.S. to get a bachelor’s degree in management upon completion of the ESL program. However, she decided to change her major after having stayed and studied in the U.S.
She stated, “My major is finance. Actually, last week I changed my major. My original major is management. My parents like me study this, but I don’t like this. So I changed my major.” She had been allowed to study abroad by her parents because she had agreed to complete a degree in management. They were willing to part from her based on the premise that she would follow the path they had chosen for her. However, Yin made the conscious decision to follow her own path to pursue a different career than what had been planned for her. As with many Eastern cultures, it is customary to comply with parents’ wishes and plans for a future and children do not always have the urge or courage to question and disobey some particular wishes. Yin, on the other hand, made a decision to change her major though she knew there would be consequences such as potentially upsetting and perhaps disappointing her parents, breaking a promise she had made to gain access to an opportunity and coming across as not trustworthy, and possibly being summoned back to China because she did not proceed with the original plan.

Yin’s decision to go after her own desire rather than studying a major she knew she was not going to enjoy showed a level of identity development that had been reached through gaining more confidence and freedom of choice. Therefore, it was apparent that her becoming more confident and forming a more independent sense of self gave her the igniting force to make a decision to switch majors and follow what was in her heart which, in turn, made her feel even stronger and more confident because of her own independent decision.

Kamil was another participant who also made a decision regarding his studies. Originally, Kamil came to the U.S. to pursue a master’s degree in either political science
or psychology in order to be able to start a PhD program in Kuwait upon returning. During the first interview, he had indicated that he had no intention of staying in the U.S. for a PhD degree because he believed it would be “very very difficult to do PhD in the United States. Especially, for me because I’m international and my English is not enough for hard subjects. I don’t want to fail or not successful.” However, during the last interview, he was excited to reveal his decision to stay in the U.S. and complete a PhD program in communications and information. When asked about what made him change his mind, he stated that,

I think I can do it. Before I thought no, I can’t. It’s too hard. I have to do so many things on my own. My English is not enough. Especially, American students will be in the PhD program. I will look not intelligent. Now, I know I will do my best. I will try very hard. I think my English is improving. Also, I can talk about my experiences as an international student and I have interesting research ideas for the program. I think this experience helped me. I changed my thinking.

There had been a dramatic change in Kamil’s level of confidence, attitude about his own language skills, and opinion about his self-worth as an intelligent and capable individual who had a lot to offer. In addition, his fear of failure had turned into a self-belief that was enabling him to realistically determine under which conditions he would succeed. Instead of dreading failure, he had decided to pursue an initially difficult seeming goal by working hard for it. He viewed the experience of living and studying in the U.S. as a positive change agent for his way of thinking. The factors that had affected
his attitude and convinced him to make the important decision to stay and pursue a PhD degree in the U.S. were indications of a more independent identity developed through a reflexive process of self-realization and experience-based mindset change.

Tarif’s important life decision was different from Yin’s and Kamil’s in the sense that it not only affected him but also his family. Tarif had come to the U.S. with his pregnant wife and decided to move his family to another state after completing the ESL program. He indicated,

We know a lot of people here. We have friends. We are close with some friends, not all. I think yes, maybe we know people, but we can’t depend on people. Only we can depend on ourselves. So I say maybe I want to go to other places. I think if we go and we are alone, it’s okay because we understand oh, I can do this. I don’t need other people. I want my children to be strong, too. Now we are in America. I say why not I can’t do it? I can do a lot of things.

Even though he was in a relatively comfortable environment with fellow students from Saudi Arabia with whom he could communicate and spend time, Tarif decided to move to another state where he would challenge himself and his family to adapt to a new environment. Having experienced the life in the U.S. had confirmed his beliefs about striving to build a stronger personality and given him the further confidence to make the decision to move to another unfamiliar environment. He had also referred to depending on himself rather than other people which suggested that he had been developing a more independent sense of self and had confidence in his decision making. In addition, being and surviving in the U.S. had shown him that he and his family were capable of achieving
many goals that would require resilience, persistence, and motivation all of which could be acquired from the ESL process and be transferred to other areas of life.

His decision to move his family to another state where he knew they would potentially face initial challenges was an indication of how he had developed his independent identity as a family man who had risen up to the challenge of learning English and living in an English speaking country. Based on his realization of how much he had achieved and how much more he had potential for, he was setting up new goals to grow even stronger and more resilient while planning to teach his children how to develop independent self-identities, as well.

Tung-Mei displayed a strong inclination to make her own decisions regardless of the consequences. It was more important for her to be able to decide for herself than to consistently get positive outcomes. Prior to coming to the US, instead of having a study-abroad agency help with her paperwork despite it being what the majority of Chinese students were opting to do, she decided to write her own statement of purpose and put together her own paperwork because she wanted to “go abroad quickly” and accelerate the process. Her determination to get quick outcomes was due to the fact that she wanted to come to the U.S. as soon as possible and start making her own decisions without her parents’ interference. Therefore, she had already started taking matters into her own hands for a future she was designing and planning for herself. Upon arrival, she had also decided to translate her course descriptions from Chinese to English for credit transfer from her previous college in China whereas she could have had outside assistance with possibly more accurate translation. She stated that, “I’m getting better at
translating. It’s faster. I finished fifty credits. I have total ninety. I’m very confident now so I think I can finish translation fast.” Besides her wish to make the transfer process faster, her feeling more confident in her language skills played a role in encouraging her to translate by herself. She added that she wanted to take advantage of the freedom she had to be able to do what she could not have done in China: “I can have a good life by myself without my parents’ help. Right now I am living like this because I’m in America. My parents can’t touch me and make my schedule.” Making her own decisions without her parents’ involvement was her incentive to come to the U.S. After beginning to improve her English and adjusting to the life in the U.S., she began making other important life decisions that, according to her past experience, would not be approved by her parents.

During the second interview, Tung-Mei indicated that she had “set a long-term goal for a master in America maybe in Kent maybe another city. My parents won’t like it, but I hope after master’s I can find opportunity for internship to get more experience.” She had even started collecting the necessary documents and searching for schools and programs. In her comment, she acknowledged the fact that her parents would not be fond of the idea of her spending more time away from them, but it did not stop her from pursuing her decision she had come to on her own. Her dedication to the idea of reaching her goals by making independent decisions was reinforced through her experience of living and studying in the U.S. The ESL program equipped her with the language skills necessary to reach the goals she had set while living independently provided her with the confidence and mental tools to persevere and carry out these goals. Certainly, the
physical distance from her parents also played a role in creating the setting for her further decisions regarding her education, career, and life in general. Being able to construct future plans despite inherently emotional factors that can easily sway a decision is a strong indication of identity building based on an independent sense of self. Especially, for young adults who are somewhere between feeling the need to rebel and fearing the consequences of rebellion, making decisions with potentially powerful outcomes proves to be challenging. Yet, the fact that Tung-Mei was strong-willed in proceeding with her decisions that she believed would be beneficial for her future showed that she did not seek validation or approval simply because she did not doubt her own decisions. Since taking responsibility, standing by a decision, and accepting the consequences are all part of independent decision making, Tung-Mei’s actions proved that she was developing an assertive and collected self-image as well as a self-determining identity.

**Finding 1 summary.** All participants were engaged in the progressive development of a more independent sense of self and identity through the experience of living and studying English in the US. This multi-faceted and highly interactive experience provided them with situations and opportunities for growth as well as turning points for changing their mindsets. As the participants increasingly gained confidence and became self-sufficient, they started believing in and uncovering their own potential to achieve further goals. In addition, regardless of the way their families and loved ones affected their emotional identity, participants discovered ways of isolating their thought process from the effects of collective decision making within such familiar territory. Lastly, participants were able to make independent life changing decisions based on their
own motivations and incentives with little to no regard to factors that could have previously altered the course. These new three main methods of identity development shared by all participants helped them to ultimately unearth and flourish aspects of who they were and what they could become given the necessary circumstances and challenges not guaranteeing self-affirmation, but promoting growth.

**Social Isolation From Host Culture**

Social isolation from host culture emerged as a common element among participants’ experiences as an undesired effect of the experience of living and studying in an ESL program in the U.S. All participants mentioned a form of social separation resulting from a variety of factors both within and beyond their control. They showed signs of stress and anxiety in terms of failing to achieve a sense of social belonging (Walter & Cohen, 2011) in their new environment with their new roles. Even though they did not feel alienated from the host culture, their involvement in and interactions with their social setting were limited and inadequate and caused disappointment and confusion. The loss of the familiar cultural setting and limited contact with people who share the same worldview led the participants to feel debilitated and at times, discouraged. This key finding was supported through three key elements, namely: remaining within one’s own cultural/ethnic group, prejudice and encounters of discriminatory or racist nature, and lack of institutional social activities. First, the overall finding is explained through excerpts from the participants; then, the three key elements are explored.
For example, Kamil spoke about feeling socially isolated. He indicated that he made an effort to socialize with local students and townspeople and that his attempts to build casual relations had been somewhat successful. However, he added that he still felt like he was not a part of the natural setting and showed concern about not fitting in to the degree he had desired. He stated that he was,

... here, but I’m not part of it. I mean I don’t belong. I try my best and actually I think I’m really good with people but sometimes I feel maybe I will feel like this for a year or two years.

When asked to elaborate further about what he meant by not belonging and not being a part of his setting, he explained,

It’s about your feelings. I feel distance or distant. Sometimes it’s good and I talk to people and we laugh together or maybe they help me or explain something to me, but sometimes I feel like maybe they think oh he’s different, he’s not like us.

Kamil’s mixed feelings about not becoming an integral part of the social setting even when engaging in social relations revealed that he felt socially isolated at a level that went beyond the superficial everyday interactions and reached a deeper point of not being “one of them” and even feeling rejected. Even though he was trying to self-manage his isolation and succeeding to a point, he was still struggling with feelings of uncertainty and doubt, which was hindering his process of adjustment. In addition, expressing a sense of not belonging was an indication of the fear of social rejection which was counterproductive to his desired level of social adaptation and integration. Because he felt apprehensive about the relationships he was building, he felt distant from the
social setting and started second-guessing the investment of the people with whom he was interacting. He was feeling isolated from the host culture not because of the surface level cultural aspects, but because of the deeply embedded cultural blocks he thought could rise to the surface in everyday interactions between local people and international students. He also mentioned that, “I think American people are very nice and friendly, but sometimes the eyes are different. How to explain. Like Americans are nice because it’s culture, cultural, yeah, but maybe they feel different.” When asked about what he meant by the eyes being different, he stated that, “if something is real, like feeling or something, you can see in the eyes. Sometimes, it’s very very nice, but it’s just polite, so, not always, like I’m not excited.” This further showed his apprehension to believe that members of the host culture were actually interested in him as an individual and that they were not simply being polite because it was culturally inherent to them. Therefore, his enthusiasm to build social relationships was hindered by how he felt about the sincerity and the genuineness of the interactions he had been experiencing.

Nianzu pointed out his struggle with social isolation from the host culture as well. He regretted his shy demeanor and added that he sometimes chose to stay away from situations that demanded social interaction because he could not predict the complexity level the conversation could reach. He stated,

Sometimes I’m very shy and I get nervous. Especially, when someone speaks to me, I feel like I’m so nervous. If they ask me a question, I don’t know if I can answer. So sometimes I’m alone. I don’t talk to anyone.
In addition, he was highly apprehensive about communicating with Americans because he believed that, “Americans don’t know how to be friends with other countries, especially Asian countries. They don’t know that much because they don’t need to. Like they think, most of people here they think why should I learn about other cultures.”

Nianzu’s social isolation was caused partially by his own shyness and partially by the opinions he had formed through his observations of the local people. He did not want to be involved in social interactions with Americans because he believed that his linguistic skills would not be sufficient enough to carry on a regular conversation. Therefore, instead of practicing with native English speakers to improve his skills and become more social, he chose to avoid potential interactions which caused him to become even more socially isolated. He was aware of his own shy nature and apprehension, but he allowed his emotions to take over instead of trying to build social connections that could help him accelerate the process of adjusting and belonging. Interestingly, he also knew that his solitude was a result of his admitted self-doubt, yet he chose to remain alone.

Additionally, he had been observing American people and had come to the conclusion that they did not have the necessary tools to communicate and interact with the culture he belonged to. When asked to give an example, he stated,

When I tell people I’m from China, they just say “cool” or “ok,” maybe just shake their head, they don’t ask any question. I don’t think they care about China or other countries or maybe they don’t know about China, so they don’t want to talk about it.
He felt that he would not be understood or even be misunderstood because the host culture was not equipped with the foundational information of what it meant to be Asian or why it was important to get to know other cultures. The opinions he had formed about the host culture not being willing to and not feeling the need to learn about other cultures and not knowing how to build close relations with Asian people had led him to dissociate from the social setting. He added that “When I compare, I say, like in the USA and in China, like this, I think maybe people think like so what. When I talk to someone, maybe new friend, I think maybe he doesn’t care about that.” The desire to be understood by others was a strong determinant in influencing his behavior and attitude with regards to his involvement in the host setting.

Nadirah was another participant who expressed feelings of social isolation. She stated that even though Americans were helpful and genuinely interested in communicating in social situations, there were times that she could not help feeling different and as if she was on the outside looking in. In addition, she had been trying to find a social circle that shared her interests but did not know who could point her in the right direction. She also wanted to share her cultural background and provide information about her country and customs, but she could not find the right contact person. She stated that she thought Americans are friendly and very helpful. I know they want to help. I try to talk to them and they pay attention to me but maybe sometimes they see me like different from them. I want to do some things with American friends or neighbors, but I
don’t know anybody and I think maybe they don’t want to talk to me for long time.

She added that she wanted to

. . . find some people maybe they like things similar like me. I like art very much but I don’t know who can I talk to. It’s so hard for me because I don’t know anybody or where can I meet anybody.

She also mentioned that she was hoping to

. . . tell people about my culture, my country, but I don’t know where can I go. If they know about my culture, they will like it and understand it. Maybe ESL students feel alone because they can’t talk to people. Also, American people don’t know our culture so they will think oh, we are so different, but I think we are similar, too.

Nadirah’s observations of and social experiences with the local people had led her to form a positive attitude towards the American society. However, she still expressed feeling different because she believed that she was seen as an outsider that people might not want to socially engage with for long periods of time. As a result, she felt discouraged to take further steps to build deeper connections because she could not be certain about the involved parties’ intentions and degree of willingness to participate. Additionally, not being able to find a group of people she could relate to outside her own culture caused her to feel isolated from the host culture. She mentioned that,

Of course, I talk to my friends from Kuwait, but we know the same things. I want to meet new people because I want to talk about different things and my culture.
Sometimes I ask is it because I’m so different person or maybe I don’t know how to do, but in my class I’m okay. How I can do same thing with Americans, I don’t know.

She did indeed keep in contact with her own cultural group, but not being able to make the same connection with members of the host culture hindered her social integration. Lastly, wanting to share her cultural and social background in order to create understanding and empathy for better communication with the host culture and failing to find the sources and the means to do so caused her to feel socially isolated. She kept looking for ways to socialize and be an active participant in social situations but was not able to overcome the concept of “difference” that she believed to stand between her and the target culture.

Wen was another participant who referred to his own social isolation from the host culture based on his brief experiences with members of the student community.

It’s difficult for me to do social activities with local people. It’s really big problem for me. Culture is so different. In China, we have party too but they are totally different. In China, we don’t separate the group to subgroups. We speak as a big group. American students spend attention to not important things. They want to talk about weather. They make me feel like they don’t want to talk to me because weather is not important. I want to talk about other things like politics or more serious topics. Also, I want to be more with Americans, but language is important so I don’t think they will talk to me.
Wen had attended social gatherings that included members of the school community who were Americans and native English speakers. However, despite his initial social integration into the host culture, he had started to gradually remove himself from his environment because he had started to notice the differences in terms of cultural identity and practices. As a result, he had started presuming that the members of the host culture would not wish to socialize and communicate with him because of cultural differences and linguistic obstacles. He was going through a process of social integration followed by social isolation caused by a clashing of the practices and styles of socialization. Because Wen began to assume that his social and cultural identity would cause social distance, he had started to distance himself to avoid the complications of what he believed to be inevitable. He mentioned that, “If I talk about politics in China or something about serious topic, they will think like this guy thinks he knows so much or this guy better than us. I don’t want people think that for me.” This showed that he had started to feel withdrawn and alienated after assessing his situation and coming to the conclusion that an individual with his social values and habits would not be socially accepted into a circle with a separate set of social practices. Rather than suffering from intellectual solitude in social conversations, he had decided to avoid the conflict and remove himself from the environment. He mentioned that, “I don’t go to many party these days because I will bored and maybe forget some words and try to explain and explain. It’s too difficult, so stay with my friends.” He had also added the language obstacle into his argument, which had justified his decision to socially isolate himself.
from a setting where he believed he would not be understood both intellectually and linguistically.

Three important components shaped participants’ accounts of how they were socially isolated from the host culture to which they were trying to adjust. Participants’ feelings and perceptions of social isolation emerged from remaining within their own cultural and ethnic groups, experiencing prejudice and encounters of discriminatory or racist nature, and dealing with the lack of institutional social activities. All these factors played into creating distance between the participants and the social setting regardless of whether the participants were aware of them or not and how they tried to eliminate them.

**Remaining within one’s own cultural/ethnic group.** In terms of everyday living and socializing, all participants regretfully stated that they remained within their own cultural and ethnic groups as opposed to socializing with Americans who were native speakers of English. All participants expressed a desire to be able to build social relationships with Americans that fell short because they, both willingly and unwillingly, remained within their familiar circle of friends and family. Intentionally remaining in their circle was due to the fact that the participants felt a sense of comfort and ease brought on by not having to socially “put themselves out there” and make an effort to utilize the language skills in which they were not yet adequately confident. In addition, by socially remaining in their own groups, participants did not need to introduce or explain their social and cultural values and expectations. Similarly, they did not need to make themselves vulnerable to the risk of being misunderstood or not understood at all. However, participants also mentioned that they wanted to make new American friends...
with whom to practice their English skills but because they were with people from their own countries most of the time, they did not have a chance to socialize with native speakers. Additionally, even though they enjoyed getting to know other international students from different countries, they felt that remaining in their own groups and in the ESL setting prevented them from a natural and rapid transition into the local setting. As a result, they felt a social disconnect and a sense of isolation from the host culture.

Tung-Mei, when asked about with whom she socializes and spends her time, mentioned that

Right now I have to choose the Chinese group but I think it’s not a good habit because I will lose some skill in English and I will lose some opportunities to study some local language and slang. When I take major class, I will have more American friends and I will speak more English and I will enjoy it.

When asked to elaborate further on why she felt that she had to choose her own national group to socialize with, she stated that “it’s easy because we speak the same language, but I know it’s not good for me. I need to practice English and meet Americans. When I know more English, it will be easier.” Even though Tung-Mei was aware of the disadvantage in which she put herself by remaining in her own national group, she believed that her limited English skills were the reason she did not want to socialize with native speakers. However, pushing herself out of her comfort zone to practice English would have been the solution to her doubt about her language skills. In other words, remaining within her national group until she felt comfortable enough to step outside of it to put her language skills to use was slowing down her English practice process.
Tung-Mei added that, “Speaking skill will go if I don’t practice. It’s bad habit for me. I will lose this skill. Also, listening skill. I have to listen to Chinese. My ears will use to it, not English, but it’s easy.” Therefore, she admitted that only socializing with her Chinese friends would hinder some of the skills she had gained, yet she chose to continue with her familiar, safe, and convenient routine. As a result, she was socially isolated from the host culture partially by choice because her justification for not currently socializing with American people was based on the false premise that the whole process depended on a certain level of achievement whose quantity or quality had not been determined by any party. Therefore, by remaining within her group at the expense of not gaining as much from the experience as she could have, she was isolating herself from the very culture she was trying to learn about and adjust to.

Faridah was another participant who referred to remaining within her cultural group when asked about who she socialized with was and stated that,

I prefer person who speak English, but I can’t get any person to talk with me. Also, I want to learn something about culture and tradition but Americans don’t talk with me. All other students are always together so I have to be together with Saudi girls. I can’t practice English.

She was referring to the other nationalities in her ESL classes and how she was not even able to communicate with her classmates because they were in their own groups. Faridah’s account presented a new dimension to the group issue in terms of social isolation. Not only was she isolated from the host culture because she was not able to find American people to talk to, she was also isolated from her classmates who were in
their own relatively closed off groups. Therefore, even though she wanted to learn more about the host culture and its traditions from its authentic members, she was expressive about not being able to communicate with and have access to such sources. In addition, she could not even become a part of other nationality groups who could have provided her a means to practice language skills which, in turn, could have given her more motivation to try harder to communicate with the host culture. She stated that, “I can’t learn American culture from Saudi girl. I can’t say teach me this culture. She doesn’t know. Why I be with Saudi girls because only we talk, others no, so I must.” Therefore, since she thought that she had no other choice, she felt as if she was forced to be with her own cultural group where she could not improve her language skills and had no way of familiarizing herself with the host culture. Faridah also mentioned that “when I’m with Saudi girls, of course we speak Arabic. It’s easy for them. I speak English with them, but they reply me in Arabic. How can we learn English to speak with Americans if we do this?” She added that, “I think Saudi girls together because it’s so easy. They can talk, no problem, they understand, not teacher, not American, each other.” Her statements here indicated her genuine desire to practice English skills within her cultural group and that this was resisted by the members of the group. Such resistance does not always imply intentional disregard, but rather is a result of group members giving in to the temptation to feel comfortable and practical. Faridah’s account revealed an added layer of social isolation from the host culture because she could not gain access to the practice she felt she needed in order to get more involved in the host culture because she could not step outside her cultural group as other groups were not available.
Tarif talked about his experiences regarding socializing and communicating with members of the host culture and stated that,

I wish I had a lot of American friends, but I don’t have. I have two friends but they are my neighbors. I still talk to Saudi guys and I have some Chinese friends or friends from other countries. I’m with Saudis every day.

When asked to explain why he thought he did not have as many American friends as he wished to, he indicated that “it’s because of language. I don’t understand a lot of things they say. On the bus, I listen to American students, but I understand very little.” He added that,

I think that’s why they don’t talk to me. I think maybe they don’t understand my accent. Also, culture very important. They don’t know my culture so of course they don’t want to talk to me. So I stay with my Saudi friends. We understand each other.

Although Tarif wished to have many American friends he could socialize and communicate with, he found himself isolated from the host culture because he remained in his cultural group where he could be understood linguistically and culturally. When asked to elaborate on what he meant by his Saudi friends understanding him, he explained that,

For example, I can say one word and he will understand, but it’s like our culture. If my mother says something like my son you didn’t do this, you make me sad, my friend understand because his mother the same. Maybe American guy can’t
understand this or he will say why you are worry for your mother. You are a man.

He formed assumptions based on observations regarding the reasons why the members of the host culture were not willing to interact with him and these assumptions made it compelling to remain in his cultural group as opposed to making an effort to speak with Americans regardless of their reactions. Certainly, his apprehension to communicate is justifiable because the fear of rejection from the host culture can be a strong deterrent to initiate such effort. He believed that because the members of the host culture were not familiar with the Saudi culture, they were hesitant to interact with him which showed that Tarif regarded culture as an important factor in human relationships. In addition, he believed that Americans did not want to make an effort to communicate with him because of his accent which meant that he would have to eliminate his accent to a certain degree before making further attempts to interact with Americans. He mentioned that, “sometimes I don’t understand my friend when he speak English, how American can understand my accent. Maybe when I speak better, it will be much much more easier for me.” However, remaining within his cultural group because the members understand one another is not a practical solution to the problem of not being understood by the host culture due to linguistic and cultural differences inasmuch as the way to solve these issues is by getting involved in that specific setting rather than avoiding it and holding on to the familiar.

**Prejudice and encounters of discriminatory or racist nature.** Participants experienced incidents of prejudice, discrimination, and racism. They experienced these
incidents as unpleasant and discouraging occurrences that caused them to feel a social
distance from the host culture. Surprisingly, they did not seem to interpret these
incidents, even if repeated, as having serious implications or consequences. The
described events and situations pointed to the generally accepted definitions of what
prejudice, discrimination, and racism are despite the participants’ uncertainty about
whether they qualified as such. Participants responded to questions regarding
experiences with possibly being treated differently due to their racial and religious
affiliations with accounts they recalled even though upon responding, they referred to
these accounts as unfortunate events. They mentioned that they did not believe these
occurrences to represent traditional descriptions of the concepts of institutional racism,
harassment, or discriminatory treatment. Nevertheless, the experiences caused the
participants to feel a sense of social isolation and alienation because they had been
marginalized based on their appearances and level of language proficiency.

Malik referred to an incident that occurred while he was buying coffee downtown.
He recalled,

I was getting coffee and there was a group of college guys. One of them shouted,
“Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar.” He was looking at me and he made praying
gestures. All his friends started laughing and everybody was looking at me. It
was so childish and immature. Of course, I was angry, but my religion says to
take it easy. If he listens to me, that’s good. If he doesn’t, it’s up to him. I have
to let it go because Islam teaches you don’t make a bad image.
When asked to elaborate on whether he believed this incident to be of racist nature, he commented,

Maybe it’s a little racist, but I think it’s more childish. They don’t know what they are doing. But when that happened, I asked myself, should I leave? Now I don’t want to go to that coffee place because I don’t want to remember that day.

Even though Malik did not seem to interpret the incident as a serious racist occurrence, the comments and gestures directed at him because of his race and religion did lead to social isolation. The young men’s behavior upset Malik to the point that he had considered leaving the social setting he was in and had not returned to the coffeehouse since the day of the incident.

The fact that the incident had discouraged Malik from performing a daily activity he had become accustomed to in the host culture setting was proof that a social distance had been created between him and the target culture. He had started associating the coffeehouse with the incident and had decided to stay away in order not to remember the unfortunate event. The negative association that had formed as a result of a form of hostility from the host culture was causing Malik to distance himself from a social setting he would have otherwise continued to attend. Despite the fact that the incident was indeed childish and immature, it had been carried out in a racist manner. Additionally, regardless of Malik’s interpretation of its nature, the incident had caused Malik to suffer from a form of social isolation from the host culture because members of the host culture had engaged in marginalizing behavior.
Yin recalled a similar incident: “I was walking and two guys were driving next to me. One guy opened his window and he was like ‘You f***ing Chinese! Go home!’ Then they went away.” When asked to comment further on the incident, she stated, I don’t think that’s racist. It’s just rude. Yeah. Very rude, but not racist. I was a little sad, maybe upset. Yeah, I thought, some people don’t want me here. Why should I speak or go out? They don’t like me.

Even though Yin’s nationality had been the direct target of an offensive and racist remark, she did not perceive it to be of a racist nature. The reason for her to refer to the incident as rude rather than racist could be that her perception of racism may be different than what the host culture sees it as. Nevertheless, the utterance caused Yin to start thinking that she was not welcome in the host culture and she lost some of her motivation to communicate and socialize with members of the host culture because she felt that she was disliked based on her race.

Yin’s consequential withdrawal was a direct indication of social isolation and alienation. The fact that the hostile remarks included her racial profile and a sense that she did not belong in the U.S. discouraged her from trying to interact with people who could potentially be thinking the same way or considering a similar move. Therefore, she was isolating herself from the social setting in an attempt to protect her feelings and to avoid similar situations. Instead of being socially integrated by gradually developing a sense of belonging and adjustment, she was marginalized by being reminded that she was not a part of the host culture by birth. Even though she did not regard the incident as racist, she still felt the hurtful effects and this hindered her adaptation process.
Tarif and Miraj experienced social isolation in the sense that they were mentally and emotionally withdrawn and were at times resentful for how they were perceived. This caused them to pull away and engage in emotionally charged reflection of their place in their new context.

Tarif mentioned being pulled over by a policeman at night for no apparent reason and stated that:

He just stopped my cousin when we were driving from Walmart. We asked him why he stopped us and he said “because of your light,” but I know our light wasn’t broken. It was normal. He looked in the car. He told us to get out of the car. He looked more and he said “ok, go.” I know he stopped us because we are Arabs.

When asked to elaborate further on why he thought the policeman pulled them over because of their race, he explained that “it happened to me before. My uncle, too. They just do it. I don’t think Americans are racist, but I think they don’t like Arabs.” He added that, “They just follow the media and don’t do research. They don’t like us because of the media. It’s a really bad thing for me, you know. They don’t know me, but they think we are all the same.”

Tarif stated that he continued to be a part of the social setting because he knew it would hurt his language learning process and set a negative example for his soon to be born baby. He said that, “I will one hundred percent talk to people because I want to learn English much much better, but maybe some days I just talk to my Saudi friends if I’m feeling lonely like Americans can’t understand my mind.” This meant that his
willingness to communicate with members of the host culture due to the desire to improve his English was at times overshadowed by his perception that the target culture could not relate to his way of thinking and feeling. There were times when he hesitated to communicate with some people because he could not predict their reaction. He stated that, “I can’t never for sure know, I can’t be sure because even though I’m so so good, so so nice, they can think he’s Arab. Sometimes I just say something in my head, not with my voice.” Even though he chose not to isolate himself from the host culture, he was internally dealing with a mindset that he believed was against him because of his race. His social hesitance was a result of perceived prejudice and stereotypes of Middle Eastern nations. He could feel the effects of the negative associations people make based on what they see or hear rather than what they actually experience. He had accepted the notion that he might get pulled over by the police not because he had violated the law, but because he was he had been marginalized due to racial profiling. In addition, he felt that he was regarded as part of a group rather than an individual in terms of representing the stereotypical characteristics of what the Western culture perceives Middle Eastern culture to be. Even though he wanted to express himself as an individual with his own opinions and goals, he was not able to do so because he was being faced with roadblocks that had emerged from false representations and lack of interest in understanding the outside cultures. Therefore, Tarif was socially isolated in the sense that the host culture had preconceived ideas about him as “an Arab,” not as an individual.

Miraj had a similar experience to Tarif and recalled,
Two American men called me a terrorist when I wore my traditional Saudi clothes. Also, it was Halloween and I saw a man wearing clothes like Arabs and he had guns around his neck. This is very sad. I don’t think all Americans are racist, but sometimes they are ignorant.

Miraj was being emotionally distanced from the host culture because his own culture was being attacked by members of the host culture. He said that, “Things like this make you feel like cold or sad or maybe, I mean, you are not so exciting, excited, like okay, whatever. I don’t like this, of course.” Even though he was able to approach the subject from a mature and calm perspective, he was nevertheless being socially threatened because he had to physically endure racist and prejudiced remarks. Moreover, he had to personally experience a negative representation of his culture by a member of the host culture in a highly attended social gathering. Simply by wearing his traditional clothing, he was being labeled a “terrorist” because of superficial, false, and stereotypical knowledge of the Arab culture. Miraj’s social isolation was similar to Tarif’s in the sense that he was perceived to possess negative stereotypical attributes of a group rather than his own personal traits as an international student intending to share a piece of his culture. He wanted to express his individuality even though he knew it would possibly cause controversy among those who had preconceived opinions about the Middle East. Furthermore, he was being discouraged from representing his culture because he was facing resistance from those biased against “non-Americans” choosing to practice their customs and traditions in the US.

Nianzu also experienced a discriminatory event. He stated,
I remember two girls made fun of my accent. I asked a question and they make me say it many times. I heard them laughing and talking like Chinese person. I was so shocked. Now sometimes I don’t want to talk to other students because I think maybe they will laugh at my accent.

Though this incident was not as racially charged and overt as some of the others, imitating an Asian accent to make fun of a Chinese international student’s speaking does convey a message about the value of the culture. Therefore, Nianzu’s reaction to the incident he refers to as “a shock” comes across as normal because he had not expected such behavior from the members of the host culture who are constantly in contact with international students. As a result of the incident, he was discouraged from socializing and communicating with native speakers because he started viewing his accent as a weakness that would put him in an undesirable situation. He gave an example and said,

I don’t like to order food because sometimes they make me say again and again. If people are waiting behind me, I feel nervous. I don’t want people make fun. I just go to Chinese restaurant sometimes. Yeah. No accent in Chinese place [laughs].

The hesitation to make himself vulnerable by speaking English became stronger than his anticipation to communicate with native speakers which, in turn, caused him to become socially isolated. He felt a sense of threat because his accent and his appearance placed him in a group that was apparently, unlike his expectations, open to ridicule. Therefore, he began withdrawing from social situations that would require him to speak and reveal his accent and hoping that he could “get by” without putting himself out there as an
individual who did not feel the need to hide a part of him because he might be socially rejected.

**Lack of institutional social activities.** Participants expressed a desire to be involved in social activities organized by the ESL institution they were enrolled in. They indicated that social activities were among their expectations regarding the experience of studying and living in the US. However, they pointed out their disappointment in the lack of such activities which they thought would help them to get acquainted with the host culture. They believed that organized gatherings and social activities that involved members of the host culture could provide them with opportunities to practice language skills while expanding their social circle and learning about and getting accustomed to the American culture and lifestyle. Unfortunately, they felt a sense of isolation brought on by not being integrated into the host culture through activities hosted by their ESL institution. They perceived this to be a responsibility of the ESL institution because they, as international students who have limited language skills and are unfamiliar to the host setting, could not possibly organize such events, especially upon initial arrival in the US. Therefore, lack of institutional social activities caused the participants to feel as if a necessary link between them and the host culture was missing and that they were isolated because they personally could not create the desired opportunities.

Miraj emphasized the importance of social activities organized by ESL institutions and indicated that even though he wanted to take part in such activities, he could not find many opportunities. He stated that, “I think ESL centers should make activities for the students. Students can’t do it, but the ESL center can do something that
everybody will join. Students can meet people from the community.” In terms of socializing with Americans, he indicated that,

I don’t have American friends from the community. I know a few people, but they are not deep friends. If there were social meetings maybe once or twice a month, I would have more American friends. If there is activity that we all like it, you can socialize with them.

It became evident that Miraj associated participating in social activities with getting acquainted with the local people and expected the ESL center to organize these social activities. His remark about “deep friends” regarding being close friends rather than merely acquaintances showed that he wanted to build strong connections with American people from his community, but failed to do so, in part in his interpretation, because he was not able to find activities that would serve as a means to socialize and make new friends. He felt that he was socially isolated from his community because of the lack of shared experiences that would otherwise allow both parties to discover information about one another and connect at a deeper level to form long term friendships or even to create further opportunities for socializing regularly. He believed that the ESL center needed to take charge to initiate interactions between the local community and the ESL students for authentic social relations because the ESL center would be able to handle the logistics and arrange meetings with resources that ESL students did not possess. He indicated,

Some students I think don’t have anything to do. For me, I can go anywhere if there is event. Other students like me, maybe they can’t meet any people because they don’t know what to do or where can they go. ESL can do it for all students.
According to Miraj’s account of his social distance from the community and the host culture, the ESL center could intervene and create a social link between the students and the local people for a smoother transition and adjustment to life in the US. Even though it is not entirely the ESL center’s responsibility to organize meetings between ESL students and the local community, it is understandable from an international student’s point of view that a local institution’s involvement would prove to be more effective than the students’ efforts alone to reduce their social isolation from the host culture.

Yin also expressed concern about the lack of institutional social activities. She stated that she “was expecting more activities. I thought maybe every weekend ESL will make an activity. Maybe not every weekend but sometimes. I think it’s important because we are international students. We can’t do it ourselves.” When asked to explain why she believed that the activities would have been important for her as an international student, she replied,

If you do activities, you can meet new people and practice your English. Now we just sit at home because we don’t have anything. I want to meet American people and learn their slang also jokes, humor. I think ESL center can make activities for us.

According to Yin, international students would not be able to organize social activities that would include members of the community who are native speakers of English. She wanted to socialize with and get to know Americans as she perceived it to be a way of practicing her English skills, learning jargon from authentic users, and becoming accustomed to American humor which by itself is an important manifestation of
acculturation and adaptation (Davies, 2003). She had expected the ESL center to organize activities that would assist her to socially integrate herself into the community to accomplish her goals regarding learning authentic English skills. However, because there were no activities in which she could take part, she was spending her spare time isolated from the host culture. In relation to what she meant by not being able to spend time with members of the host culture due to the lack of institutional social activities, she said that, “I see my American neighbors, but I can’t talk too long because it’s not normal. If it’s party, I can talk and they can ask me questions. Now just sit at home with Chinese friends.” Since one of the main advantages of learning a language in its authentic setting is being able to socialize and communicate with authentic users of the language, not being able to come together with native English speakers was a roadblock that needed to be eliminated. Otherwise, the process of trying to master a new language in an authentic setting starts to become similar to the process of learning it in a vacuum as a foreign language which defeats the purpose of studying language abroad. Therefore, Yin’s frustration with involuntarily remaining isolated from the host culture because she did not personally have the means to create opportunities to meet local people was understandable. She had expected the local institution to arrange gatherings or activities that would have provided access to socially meaningful interactions and cultural integration.

Jiao expressed similar ideas and that she depended on participating in social activities organized by the ESL center as a way of socially adapting to the host culture. She referred to her shy demeanor and stated that, “I’m shy so it’s very difficult for me to
speak to Americans. I feel better if they start to speak. Usually I can’t start.” Then, she added,

I hoped the ESL center will make some activity. Maybe we can meet friends if we do something together. If I go to party and somebody speaks to me, it’s more easy for me. I think I need more practice.

Unlike other participants who had expressed their concerns about being socially isolated from the host culture despite their aforementioned outgoing personalities, Jiao had an added layer of an obstacle because she was naturally shy and introverted and she suffered from social anxiety. Therefore, it was even more problematic for her to socially adapt to and interact within the host culture. She needed an outside reinforcement that would make it less of a challenge for her to meet new people to socialize with. She mentioned,

Yin is my best friend. We do everything together, but she’s not shy like me. She talks more. I think if ESL Center make activity, I can talk more and more. Our friends can come. Also Americans. I think it will be good.

This showed that Jiao compared herself to Yin in terms of being outgoing and sociable and hoped that a social activity organized by her institution could create an atmosphere where she would feel comfortable to communicate with her friends as well as members of the host culture.

Even though ESL institutions are not typically expected to foresee and solve issues regarding students’ natures or personalities, they are advised to be flexible and somewhat equipped to handle situations that may arise from such circumstances. Therefore, Jiao’s expectations from the ESL center regarding social activities can be
justified based on the premise that some students may need further assistance concerning social adaptation to their new environments because, when left alone, they will not be able to take the initiative to start social relationships and will remain socially isolated from their surroundings with little to no interaction with the community.

**Finding 2 summary.** All participants expressed a sense of social isolation from the host culture that was formed based on a variety of isolated events as well as ongoing and unresolved issues. Even though the severity of their social isolation did not reach a point where they completely removed themselves from all interactions and social situations, it certainly affected the process and rapidness of their social adjustment and integration. In addition, it hindered the social belonging phase of their adaptation to the host culture where the participants felt the effects of being “an outsider” and became hesitant to freely socialize and communicate with members of the host culture. They both voluntarily and involuntarily remained in their own cultural groups because they could not quite establish an effortless connection with native speakers. Furthermore, they experienced incidents that demonstrated ideologies of prejudice, discrimination, and racism which made them apprehensive about being proactive in terms of socializing and communicating with Americans. Moreover, their expectations about institutional social activities organized by the ESL center were not met which caused a disconnect between them and the host culture as they were somewhat dependent on a local institution to initiate the social link. Therefore, participants faced social isolation despite their efforts and wishes to become socially more integrated and accustomed to the American culture.
Lack of Immediate and Continuous Emotional Support

Lack of emotional support surfaced as a common experience among participants with regards to living and studying in the U.S. as ESL learners without the familiar support from family and loved ones and other forms of immediate support that could be received from outside sources. Participants pointed out the importance of initial emotional support that could have helped them cope with the changing circumstances in their lives and how the lack of it prevented them from discovering ways to normalize the challenges they were facing. They were also expressive about the need for continued emotional support as a way to “anchor” themselves and reflect on their experiences and needs. It was essential to feel empowered when dealing with day to day complications varying in difficulty as well as feeling motivated in moments when they needed further emotional reinforcement. Therefore, immediate and continuous emotional support was mentioned by the participants as a foundational need that could act both as a coping mechanism and as an incentive to proceed further even when in distress. This manifested itself through three key components, namely: the first month syndrome, battling feelings of loneliness and anxiety, and need for empathy and understanding. First, the overall finding is explored by referring to participants’ accounts; then, the three key components are investigated in detail.

Malik was one of the participants who acknowledged his need for the familiar emotional support from his family members in terms of academic performance pressure. He stated,
Sometimes I want to talk to my family about my life, my school, you know things like that. I came here to be successful, maybe more successful than my country. So sometimes I miss talking to my parents because they always tell me “you can do it. You are smart, hardworking” you know. It’s good to hear because it’s not easy to just study, study, and not think.

Malik was missing the motivational component of his parents’ emotional support that would have given him the courage and power to strive to reach his goals. He was aware of his own reasons for coming to the U.S. and wished to realize his dreams of succeeding in his new environment. He wanted to rise to the challenge and avoid failure. However, his comment about studying constantly without giving in to negative thoughts “creeping in” and discouraging him revealed that he needed a push or some type of familiar reassurance that would provide him the emotional reinforcement to persevere. He was used to his parents restoring his faith in himself when he needed inspiration and not having their familiar guidance and encouragement as fast and often as before was causing him distress. Even though academic success presents a source of pressure for many students, it introduced an added layer of stress for Malik as an ESL student who did not have immediate or regular access to the emotional support he once had. Additionally, a sense of self-doubt and apprehension was emerging because he could not utilize the system that would normally suppress those feelings, bring balance, and replace them with positive energy. He mentioned,

Some days, I’m not sure can I do this or why I’m here now. Don’t understand me wrong. I know everything like I know why I came here, but some days I think
why. You feel better if your family say like we are proud of you or you are doing good. I wasn’t like this I swear [laughs], but some days I want to know this.

This showed that Malik had moments that made him question why he was doing what he was doing even though he was well aware of his reasons and the expected outcomes. He believed that he started needing his family’s encouragement and reassurance that he could succeed on his venture, especially when his self-doubt made him wonder whether he could achieve his goals or not. It was important for him to hear those words of support to get him through the hard moments where he doubted his tenacity and determination.

Nadirah was another participant who endured dismay due to not being able to connect with her family for their emotional reinforcement. She indicated that, “when I feel stress, I always talk to my mom. I tell her everything because she listens to me and gives some advice. I miss her and her voice. Of course, I talk to her, but it’s not same.” She added that even though she had her husband with her, “it’s different. I can’t tell my husband everything. Also, sometimes he gets bored. He wants to go with his friends.” For Nadirah, having been separated from her mother who was her “harbor” in times of stress had created a void. She did not have the familiar support system she once turned to when life became challenging. It is natural for people to turn to familiar patterns of stress relief and Nadirah’s coping mechanism was being able to talk to her mother when she needed to. Therefore, her stress relief pattern had been disturbed and she had been stripped off her safe harbor which would have otherwise provided her with warmth, tranquility, and support.
Even though Nadirah had a spouse with her in the U.S., his presence did not create the atmosphere she needed because he did not react the way Nadirah’s mother reacted when she shared her emotions. She said that, “Husband must be closest person, but you can’t tell your husband all things. For example, some girl things I just want to tell my mom. She can understand me because she knows me whole life, all my life.” She wanted her emotional support to come from the source she knew she could rely on and not having access to that source was a cause of further stress. Especially, since she mentioned being able to tell her mother “everything,” it involved a sense of confidentiality and trust. It was an indication of her need to confide in a reliable, trustworthy figure with whom she could have communicated in order to eliminate stress. As a result, the lack of her mother’s emotional support was causing her to feel withdrawn and lost as opposed to relieved and relaxed.

Miraj believed that the lack of emotional support was most problematic when he needed to “share” and “talk about problems.” He explained that “When you need a person or your family, they listen to you. They listen to your problems. You can say all your problems, you know. You can talk about anything or something that make you sad or angry.” When asked to elaborate why he thought he could not talk about his problems anymore, he stated,

My family is not here so if I want to talk, I can’t. They are so far away. Also, they know me. They know my emotions. I trust my family and I don’t have to explain anything. They understand everything.
Miraj needed emotional support from his family not only because they would provide unconditional love and understanding, but because they knew him at a deep level which meant that the support would be tailored to his personality and view of life. He needed reassurance and guidance that was relevant and meaningful. However, the physical distance between him and his family had caused an imbalance in his emotional world; his need to talk about his problems was not being met. It was natural that he felt the need to share his stories with people who would not require the process of “getting to know him.” In addition, he needed to feel trust before he could confide in a person and as it takes time to build strong relationships where problems and issues can be shared, he felt that he did not have the time or the means to attempt such a demanding course. He stated that, “Yes, of course I can meet new people, but I don’t have ten years to tell them everything. You must trust people to tell them everything. You can’t do it in short time.” Therefore, he was not able to benefit from emotional support built on trust and familiarity which, in turn, caused him to assume that he could not talk about personal problems anymore without engaging in a time consuming relationship building process. His dependable support system had been removed from his pattern of problem solving and he believed that he was not able to receive emotional and instrumental support.

Three important aspects shaped participants’ accounts of the lack of immediate and continuous emotional support. All participants referred to their first month of living in the U.S. as a highly challenging and emotionally demanding period that they wished to have had control over by having the support of those who knew and cared about them. Additionally, all participants mentioned experiencing feelings of anxiety and loneliness
brought on by not having access to familiar, reliable support systems and not knowing how to cope with changing circumstances and rising stress levels. Lastly, participants expressed a strong need for empathy and understanding from people in their immediate circle who did not share the same cultural, social, and religious perspectives but could make a difference in the participants’ lives with their emotional and instrumental support. These three aspects played an important role in forming participants’ perception and recognition of what it meant to suffer from emotional support from family and loved ones who are usually available and willing to offer selfless acts of kindness and camaraderie without hesitation.

“The first month syndrome.” In terms of the time frame that emotional support was most needed, all participants mentioned that their first month in the U.S. turned out to be the most challenging and emotionally and psychologically demanding phase. All participants held the belief that the first month they spent in the U.S. would have been easier and less stressful had they received emotional and instrumental support from people who cared about them or who were aware of the challenges this particular phase presented. The issues of the first month included having to find housing, means of transportation, access to places for daily needs, to prepare legal documentation such as identification, insurance cards, social security number, to manage school related issues, and to run several other crucial errands. Participants also had to adjust to their new environment and lifestyles, familiarize themselves with the host culture, and create social bonds. Needless to say, participants felt overwhelmed and frustrated and were in need of turning to someone for help.
Faridah was a participant who had a particularly difficult first month upon arrival to the U.S. She had come to the U.S. with her husband and daughter and they were not able to find a place to stay at first. Faridah stated that the first month was “the hardest time” and added,

The first time I feel disappointment and everything I feel this is difficult for me. I can’t study, I can’t do anything. I can’t get the house correctly. I sit in the hotel one month. Some days I cry because I don’t know what are we doing. I miss my home. I need my family.

Faridah’s unfortunate account of not being able to find a place to live for a month and experiencing feelings of hopelessness and uncertainty justified her missing a familiar environment where she felt secure and certain. Because her expectations were not met and she found herself and her family in an unforeseen situation on top of everything else she had to endure, she was yearning for known, familiar, and safe feelings her loved ones used to provide her with. She believed that it would have been easier to cope with her discouraging circumstances if she had had the support system she was used to.

It was especially difficult for Faridah to accept the changes she had to bear because she had an already established style of living and a certain order to her life in Saudi Arabia. She mentioned that, “In Saudi Arabia, I have home, I have everything, no problem. I come here and I have zero, nothing. I can’t talk to my mother, my father. They can’t help maybe, but they can say anything.” Having come to the U.S. upon disassembling her way of life and feeling disappointed because what she experienced was highly different from what she had expected had caused her to seek warmth and familiar
emotional support. She also had to cope with an added layer of discouragement and sorrow because her teenage daughter “hate[d] it” and “want[ed] to go back to Saudi Arabia.” She was not only suffering as an international student who was feeling lost and confused but as a mother who was being tormented by her daughter’s unhappiness. Therefore, she felt the need to connect with the feelings that would normally give her the encouragement to continue and persevere. The lack of familiar emotional support made it even more difficult for her to see ahead and think clearly about the time when things would be settling and she would have a certain order to her life again.

Nianzu reported that his initial experience was unpleasant and that he “hated the first month.” He continued by stating that

I think for me my first month was really terrible. Yeah. I thought all my friends are in China. I don’t know anyone. I can’t see my parents. I thought maybe I want to go back. So many things I have to do. I have nobody to talk to so I feel really bad. Even I miss my own house. I talk to my family sometimes, but I was so busy in the first month. When I was alone, I wish to see my family or talk about my problems. It was hard for me.

Nianzu had strong feelings regarding his first month in the U.S. and expressed his frustration repeatedly by referring to feeling alone despite his busy schedule. Keeping busy with many responsibilities and initial errands was not enough to silence his emotions of solitude and confusion. His sentimental account illustrated his need for emotional support from his family members because he did not want to or could not solve
the problems he was facing by himself. Even if he did not need instrumental support, he still needed emotional support for strength, reassurance, and perseverance.

Nianzu wanted to be able to talk to someone who could provide him with guidance and tenderness as he went through a difficult transition phase in his life. The lack of emotional support was distressing to the point that he even considered going back to his country. He mentioned that, “I look for plane ticket and I say no, what are you doing [jokingly slaps his face], don’t go back to China, but really I want[ed] to go back. My family in China. I miss them.” His account showcased how delicate the first month can be for ESL students and how important emotional support is in terms of their decision making. It is a crucial period when the students are highly sensitive and in need of the right ‘push’ over the threshold to make the conscious decision to stay in the U.S. willingly and continue the initial process to reach their ultimate goals. Therefore, the emotional support they need may act as the push that can help them carry on and progress whereas the lack of it seems to cause the students to feel agitated, insecure, uncertain, and even hopeless.

Finally, Jiao declared her first month in the U.S. to be the “hardest time” she spent in the U.S. upon arrival and indicated,

I don’t want to remember it. It was very stressful. Some days I cried because everything so hard. I feel so alone. I don’t have anybody. I talk to my family on Skype, but it’s not enough. I miss them so much. I wish they are with me. Yeah, the first month was I think the worst month.
Even though Jiao mentioned keeping in contact with her family through online communication tools, she also indicated that she needed a deeper and more frequent connection. Since the medium and the intensity of emotional support she used to have changed, she was having trouble adjusting to settling for how much emotional support she would have access to. She indicated that, “Yin my roommate and my best friend. She is so important in my life nowadays, but maybe it’s not enough for me because I miss my family. Yeah. Maybe something not finish for me.” She expressed feeling alone even though she had a roommate who was also a very close friend because it is understandable not to be satisfied with what one has if it does not compare to what one might have had before in terms of the type of emotional support that is provided.

In addition, it was possible that Jiao was finding her new routine difficult to adapt to because she was not psychologically and emotionally supported by the familiar forces she found comfort in. In other words, her perception of her new lifestyle was being altered by her feelings that needed some sort of ‘cocoon’ where she felt safe enough to realign her expectations, her circumstances, and her reaction to the changes she had to endure. This was supported by her statement where she said, “I think if my family here, I can do more, maybe come home and talk to my mother, she can say it’s okay. If something happen every day, many times, she can say again don’t worry Jiao. It’s okay.” Therefore, emotional support provided especially during the first month proved to be crucial for a smoother adjustment period with less stress and its lack thereof caused the participants to feel confused, stressed, and alone.
Battling feelings of loneliness and anxiety. When talking about their feelings regarding living and being an ESL student in the US, participants referred to moments in time when they experienced varying emotions and states of mind and mood ranging from loneliness to anxiety. They declared to have suffered from some type of psychological disturbance that interfered with their daily lives and activities. Additionally, they felt stress and pressure resulting from personal, social, and cultural changes and did not have the emotional and social support necessary to counteract these feelings. Even though the amount of interaction varied and was insufficient at times, participants were part of social groups and had made friends they were spending time with. However, their emotional accounts were indicative of personal loneliness resulting from the loss or lack of truly intimate ties with loved ones and were characterized by apprehensive and anxious behavior (Weiss, 1973). Separation from intimate relationships and deprivation of familiar social and emotional support of social networks were causing the participants to experience personal loneliness and anxiety.

Yin, despite her outgoing personality and confident outlook on relationships, stated that she felt

... lonely sometimes. I have friends and I have roommate. She is my best friend, but some days I feel lonely and little sad. Especially, before I go to bed, I think about many things. I remember one night I was shaking. I was so nervous because in China, I’m good student. I want to be good student here, too, but I have to do many things. It’s a lot for me.
Yin’s account was an indication that personal loneliness can occur despite the presence of friends and other social networks as she mentioned having a best friend which suggested closeness, but even the intimacy of such a relationship could not prevent her from feeling lonely. Even though people who are naturally shy and introverted are traditionally believed to suffer from loneliness more than their counterparts (Stokes, 1985), Yin’s experience showed that personal loneliness can depend on a variety of factors and can surface due to changing conditions. For instance, moments of solitude can cause one to dwell on aspects of his or her life that he or she is concerned or dissatisfied with and such deep thinking may result in a need for familiar emotional support that can spark hope and motivation.

Yin’s recollection of the night when she was physically shaking because she was under pressure and stress demonstrated how she felt anxiety and uneasiness. She wanted to be successful at school, but she felt burdened by the amount of work she was required to do and without the emotional support she needed, she could not effectively cope with stress and pressure. Her anxiety reached a point where her body physically reacted to the intensity of her emotions regarding the discrepancy between her self-expectations and her perceived performance (Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2006). She compared her student-self in China to her new student identity in the U.S. and wanted to achieve similar standards, which were possibly reinforced in her home country by the environment where there was regular and accessible emotional and social support. She recalled, “In China, if I get bad grade, I can fix easily because I understand. Here maybe if I make mistake, I can’t explain so I’m really worried.” When asked to elaborate on what she meant by
fixing a bad grade easily, she stated that, “My grandparents say I can do it. They say you are so smart. You can get good grade again. Just study. Yeah, so I feel good.” This showed that Yin depended on her grandparents’ support and encouragement to reassure herself that she was capable of keeping her standards of achievement. Now that her support system had been removed, she felt disoriented and unsure about whether she could adhere to her standards of success as a student while interacting with people who did not know her personally and closely.

Wen was another participant who expressed his feelings of loneliness and anxiety and stated, “I had so many friends in China. I was never alone because there was somebody with me all the time. I talked about everything with my friends like serious things and funny things” and explained further that

Sometimes I feel lonely like I don’t have any friends, but I do. I think like what can I do. Maybe just play video games so I can forget. I don’t want to think, think, and think. It make me nervous.

Wen had not been able to replicate his familiar social setting in the U.S. and was missing greatly the “having many friends” aspect of it. He needed the physical presence of a familiar figure to escape the feelings of loneliness and melancholy. Additionally, he was deprived of the daily conversation and the banter that used to make him feel calm and comfortable in a friendly environment. He had a tendency to try to avoid thoughts and feelings that he knew would cause him distress by distracting himself through activities that would occupy his mind. He did not want to allow negative thoughts to take over because they made him nervous and anxious about his situation and he could not
overcome them without the emotional support he was missing. It was natural that Wen was giving in to nostalgia because his mind wanted to wander off to a place where he had made happy memories. Not being able to access that place was a cause of stress and anxiety.

Wen had also mentioned that he wanted to be friends with people he could relate to and have serious conversations with because it made him “feel good” about himself. He was seeking the validation of his friends and family through a pattern he had become accustomed to socially and culturally. Therefore, not being able to find friends or acquaintances that could provide him the stimulating conversations and thought exchange was a reason for him to feel unsatisfied and withdrawn. He mentioned that, “It’s not same. My friends in America not like my friends in China. I know them for short time, not long time. If I make joke or I’m feeling sad, they can’t understand me. We not so close.” When asked about how that made him feel, he said that, “Nervous and I think sad. Not happy. I want to feel relax and happy, but I can’t. It’s difficult for me.” The uneasiness and the discomfort he was experiencing could not be remedied by the friends he had made in the U.S. Similar to Yin’s account, he still felt lonely despite having friends around him. Therefore, he was looking for ways to distract and occupy his mind to deflect loneliness and anxiety.

Miraj, despite feeling lonely and alone, mentioned his struggle with sharing his thoughts and feelings with his loved ones and stated,

I don’t talk to my family about everything because they can’t do anything for me. They are far away. Usually, they help me and when they see I’m okay, they are
okay, too. If I tell them my problems, they become sad, too. Also, they can’t do anything so even more sad. Why do I tell them? To make them unhappy? No. To be honest, I am lonely sometimes. I miss them very much and they miss me, but I love them so I don’t want to make them sad or not happy.

Miraj was anticipating the provoking of negative outcomes from letting his family know of his troubles and loneliness. He did not wish to cause his family distress by telling them of his emotional pain. Since they would not have been able to alter the process or assist him in the way he needed, he did not see a point in alarming his loved ones. He was also concerned that if his family knew that he needed emotional support and they could not do anything about it, it would upset them even further. Therefore, Miraj could not even ask for emotional support because the sole act of making it known would cause him more stress and regret with the added distress of having caused his family to feel hopeless and inadequate.

Miraj with his sensitive personality was even more prone to experiencing feelings of loneliness and anxiety. In addition, he knew that his family missed him which was an added factor for distress and worry. He needed emotional support more than the usual to cope with the problems he was having but felt that the only people who could provide him with such support were not accessible. Moreover, even if they tried to assist in some way, they might not be convinced that he overcame the obstacles and was feeling better since they were physically apart. He mentioned that, “Sometimes I tell my mother like I’m fine, but she say I don’t believe you, no, tell me the truth. She say she feel something. That’s hard when she say that. It makes me more sad.” Therefore,
considering all the nuances and the delicate balance Miraj was trying to maintain, he could not receive emotional support from his family, which caused him to feel lonely and heavy-hearted.

Malik, like Miraj, could not reach out to his family despite experiencing feelings of loneliness and anxiety because he was apprehensive about causing them worry and concern. He stated,

I think people are very friendly here. They really help you if you need help. They want to do everything they can so that’s great, but sometimes you need more. I mean, you need your family or your wife because they really understand your personality. Some days I feel very stressed. I want to hug my wife and tell her if something happens to me, but I can’t. Especially, my mom and my wife. I don’t want them to be worry or sad. My wife pregnant so I can’t tell her something like I’m sick or I’m lonely, you know.

Malik’s account indicated that even though the members of the host culture provided supportive actions and assistance in certain situations, such support could not replace the validation and satisfaction retrieved from the familiar emotional support of family and loved ones. One of the determinants of the success of support systems could be psychological and emotional closeness and familiarity with attached memories and predictability. Therefore, the support from host culture could not replicate the support of Malik’s family when he felt lonely and stressed.

As Miraj had pointed out, the added concern of causing distress to loved ones was present in Malik’s account as well and prevented him from opening up and sharing his
troubles. Malik added, “It’s hard because I want to talk about my life and worries, but I can’t because if I talk there will be more worry. It’s like impossible situation.” He was also careful not to cause stress to his pregnant wife by telling her that he felt lonely and needed her love and support. In addition, even the premise of telling his family of an illness was out of the question because it would have caused the same reaction and his family would have been upset about not being able to help. Therefore, Malik could not access the type of emotional support he was in need of and dealt with loneliness and anxiety on his own because not even the host culture’s support resembled the familiar comfort of his family’s support system.

**Need for empathy and understanding.** Even though participants referred to an increasing sense of self-sufficiency and personal growth resulting in fewer expectations from their surroundings, they expressed a need for empathy and understanding from the members of the host culture including the teachers and the officials at their English institution. This need for empathy and understanding manifested itself in situations where participants felt that the individual or the group they were interacting with did not understand their motives and intentions due to social and cultural differences and could not relate to them because said parties were not experiencing a similar phenomenon. In addition, participants were concerned about being misunderstood by the members of the host culture and their native and non-native teachers which they believed could have caused them to find themselves in difficult ordeals. They were specifically expressive about their expectations of leniency from their teachers because they believed that their
circumstances regarding living and studying in the U.S. called for more tolerance and compassion compared to American students.

Tarif, despite his strong and highly independent demeanor and his statements regarding self-efficacy and confidence, was expressive about his need for empathy and understanding from the Americans he was coming into contact with. He expected that Americans should understand us because we have feelings about some things and sometimes we can’t explain like not because of English, but, like I’m a student and also I’m a husband. There are so many things in my life like my culture. I’m in a different place. How can I explain that? If I make mistake, maybe I’m wrong, but Americans can say “Oh, he’s from another country. He doesn’t know. It’s ok” or something like that. We are all different. I hope they understand us. It’s not easy for us.

Tarif’s account demonstrated a potential fear or concern of international students regarding being misunderstood by the host culture in case of a social or cultural occurrence involving nuances the student is not competent in or aware of. He was expressively worried about not being able to explain himself in communication that involved more than just linguistic aspects. Additionally, he expected the involved parties to show empathy and understanding in consideration of his different social and cultural background, his upbringing, and his current life circumstances. Similarly, he referred to emotional concepts that go beyond limited language issues and that can only be explained in light of humanistic understanding such as having a family to take care of while trying to survive and hopefully thrive in a new environment as an international student. Lastly,
the fact that he mentioned people being different showed that he expected the host culture
to take differences into consideration when making a judgment or forming an opinion and
that people need to have at least a form of tolerance if not empathy for those who are
different from them.

Miraj was another participant who referred to a need for empathy and understanding. He was visibly emotional when talking about this particular aspect of his experience he had been reflecting on at times he was alone in his apartment or on one of his short trips he had been taking to clear his head and refresh his thoughts. He indicated,

I think for all people this is so important. I’m not saying for ESL students only.
Of course, it’s very important for us, too, but I mean like all human must understand each other. We live together. It doesn’t matter if I’m from Saudi Arabia or anywhere. It’s about understanding and feeling. Like I miss my wife and my son. Yes, it’s normal. I’m here. But another man can miss his family. It’s the same feeling you know. I don’t mean like I want anything special, but understand me, you know, my position. Yes, so I think this is for everybody. Especially, for ESL students maybe because they can’t speak English very well. It’s more difficult.

Miraj was referring to a universal understanding of what it meant to be a human being with feelings, emotions, longings, and aspirations. He focused on the commonalities between people that could bring them together and help them to see each other for who they are. Additionally, he pointed out that just because he was an ESL student in a setting considerably different than his own, it did not mean that he was expecting special
treatment; he simply wanted to be understood. The fact that he wanted the members of the host culture to understand his position meant that he was seeking empathy and hoping that they could put themselves in his shoes. This is especially important for international students because it is possible that the unexpected or even negative reactions they get from members of the host culture in everyday communication and interaction could be partially eliminated if empathy and awareness were practiced more often. International students can become oversensitive to socially rendered sensory input resulting in emotional reactions because of insecurities they develop upon arrival in a new setting and the lack of emotional support that once reassured them and boosted their confidence. Therefore, as Miraj indicated, ESL students are especially vulnerable because they are disadvantaged in the sense that their communicative skills are hindered which creates a risk of being misunderstood or dismissed.

Tung-Mei approached the need for empathy and understanding from a slightly different perspective than the other participants in the sense that she believed it to be a mutual process and that one had to show empathy and understanding before expecting it from others. She stated,

Actually, maybe Americans think, “I don’t know what I have to say” for Chinese students. Yeah. For example, I tell something and he thinks “I don’t understand” so he is maybe confused; he doesn’t know what to do. I mean it’s okay because they don’t know any Chinese people like friends. Just see some students. We must understand them. If I understand him, he can understand me. Sometimes I
think, yeah, I’m little sad. This person don’t know me. He thinks she’s just Chinese girl, but I’m not just Chinese girl. I hope they know me.

Tung-Mei’s account pointed out the fact that the lack of emotional support manifests itself as a roadblock in the process of making oneself acknowledged as a unique individual and understood by others. Since the participants are accustomed to a support system that is tailored to their personalities and individual characteristics, they do not normally feel the need to explain certain aspects that affect the way they react to different situations. Therefore, they might feel as though an extra wall has appeared between them and the members of the host culture because they need to make themselves known as individuals who are not defined on singular terms or categorized based on one basic attribute. With regards to Tung-Mei’s perception of empathy and understanding, it became apparent that her perspective included a mutual realization of both parties’ positions where members of the host culture are experiencing a communicative and interactive exchange with individuals who come from different backgrounds and see through different worldviews. When asked to elaborate on the mutuality of the empathy process, she indicated, “It’s simple because if I’m American, I can think this person is from another country, I don’t know her, I must know her or maybe I don’t care who is she. I hope they care.” She was somewhat discouraged because she felt that who she was as a person did not adequately materialize in the eyes of the members of the host culture and that they labeled her as a girl from China rather than Tung-Mei as a whole being. However, she had empathy for those who could not see her the way she wanted to
be seen and expected the same type and amount of empathy from them as an ESL student dealing with multiple notions affecting her situation.

Kamil communicated a heightened need for empathy and understanding due to the lack of familiar emotional support systems that existed in his everyday life in Kuwait. He mentioned that there were members of his family in different states in the US, but even their closer proximity in comparison to his family in Kuwait could not provide the emotional support he was seeking. He stated,

I am not a shy person. I am actually very outgoing. I like talking to people like asking them questions and learn about their lives. Every person is different so I like to know many people and what they’re thinking, feeling, like that, you know. Also, I like it when people ask me about my life and like my hobbies and my education. I think it’s very important—like if somebody doesn’t know me, they can’t understand me. Some days, I don’t want to talk—just sit and think because sometimes life is hard. Especially when I was small child and when I was teenager, I had so many problems. My family always said “don’t worry, we are here, we will help you, we love you”—it made me strong. Of course, I don’t want that from people here, but I want them to think like “maybe he has a problem or maybe he is sad or angry”—you can’t say everything in English, but you can look at my eyes and understand me.

Kamil’s explanation of verbal communication not being necessary or focal to understanding meant that he was seeking a deeper level of connection and empathy that could be achieved by knowing a person well and considering universal signs of human
contact and synergy. Even though he did not expect the same type and level of emotional support that he used to receive from his family, he did wish for empathy and understanding from the members of the host culture where they could at least make positive assumptions and not form negative judgments and speculations. He wanted a fair chance and a clean slate at being understood in a setting where he was stripped off his usual morale-boosting and reassuring pillars of assistance and support. It is true that people sharing a culture might tend to have more empathy toward one another than ‘an outsider’; therefore, ESL students’ longing for that familiar feeling could be based on the idea that they expect Americans to move past the superficial dividers that they believe them to have and act on.

**Finding 3 summary.** Participants felt the strong effects of the lack of immediate and continuous emotional support that used to exist in their everyday lives in various ways and levels of intensity. The impact of the deprivation of this familiar support system manifested itself especially firmly during participants’ first month in the U.S. when they felt vulnerable, exposed, and confused. These were emotions and states of being that could have been eliminated or reduced had they received initial and immediate emotional support they were accustomed to. In addition, participants mentioned feeling lonely and anxious without being able to confide in and open up to loved ones who would know how to listen and react in ways that would be comforting and reassuring. Even the presence of friends and classmates from the same country could not make up for the fact that the participants were seeking a familiar feeling reminding them they were not alone and that they did not need to be stressed about the hardships they were facing. Lastly,
participants communicated a need for empathy and understanding from the members of the host culture because they could not sufficiently express themselves as unique individuals and wanted the benefit of the doubt and the power of affinity in human relations that go beyond superficial categorization based on presuppositions. Participants viewed familiar emotional support as a coping mechanism to help with all these manifestations of vulnerability, insecurity, loneliness, despair, and confusion. Therefore, the lack of immediate and continuous emotional support presented itself as a common issue among participants that affected their adaptation and adjustment process negatively.

**Language Barriers**

Another common theme addressed by participants was the obstacles and complications brought on by limited language skills while living and studying in the U.S. as ESL learners. Even though the presence of language barriers is unquestionable since it is the very reason for the ESL learners to become ESL learners, their manifestation and implications are dependent on the student population, their varying situations, and their personalities. All participants referred to issues that had surfaced as a result of not having mastered English to the desired degree which varied from participant to participant in terms of their personal goals. These issues were naturally more predominant with participants who had arrived in the U.S. with little to no language experience or practice. It was also revealed that some language proficiency related issues were culturally based and needed to be evaluated accordingly. This key finding was determined by three key aspects of the experience, namely: ESL label, fear of making mistakes, and help with basic needs. The overall concept of language barriers as experienced by the participants...
is examined by referring to examples from excerpts and is followed by the exploration of the three key elements that shaped this particular aspect of the experience.

Kamil expressed his concern regarding limited language skills by stating,

I want to do so much. Now I can because my English is improving, but the first time, like the first semester maybe, it was difficult. You want to do something, like talk to someone or maybe plan something, like it’s so difficult, but you know, like, it’s so easy thing if you talk to someone from Kuwait. It’s like children’s toy. Oh, I was angry with myself maybe little. Sometimes I said maybe I will stay home. I was translate sometimes on my phone. I wanted to learn English so fast!

Kamil’s account demonstrated the issue of not being able to perform tasks or get involved in activities one would normally be interested in and perhaps even do on a regular basis in his or her regular setting due to limited language skills. The toy metaphor showed that he was feeling frustrated about not being able to do a simple task or utter simple sentences he would otherwise have no difficulty carrying out and that not being understood left him feeling discouraged about the plans he wanted to make and resentful towards himself. For ESL learners, language may act as a barrier between the world around them and the elements they want to access or be a part of. Therefore, they might tend to start viewing it as an obstacle preventing them from reaching their goal rather than viewing it as the goal itself. Even though the language they are learning does not necessarily need to carry a deep meaning or to become the ultimate goal they are trying to reach within a certain time frame, the negative association learners might make
can hinder the motivation and the learning process. For instance, Kamil’s being angry with himself cannot be justified in terms of language mastery because it is not some sort of error or mistake on his part. Therefore, it would be in his interest to understand that the anger and the frustration born from not being able to perform habitual activities and routine engagements need to be eliminated in order for him to have a more positive language learning experience.

Nianzu was another participant who ascribed a negative connotation to second language in terms of standing between him and what he wanted to do. He stated,

In English, sometimes I feel I’m not me. Or maybe I’m another person. Actually, to be honest, it’s very hard for me, for example, I want to introduce myself and say maybe I like this or I do this. I can’t sometimes because my English not enough. Now I can talk to you because I’m not worry. You can give more time, but, if I talk to normal person, I think they will not wait. Yeah. Also I want to do something, like in China, like things I do in China, it’s hard for me. A lot of work [laughs].

Nianzu’s account showcased the notion that language is strongly linked to an individual’s identity (Lauring, 2008) and that it can influence the perception of self-expression and the need to be recognized as an individual. Since Nianzu could not express himself to the extent that he wished to, he felt as though he could not be himself or demonstrate the sides of him that he believed would have painted a clearer picture of who he was as a person. A second language may provide a new sanction of identity as it creates a gateway to a realm of new practices and cultural implications. However,
Nianzu’s concern about becoming another person was not related to the discovery of a new side of him that emerged from being immersed in a second language, but rather related to not being able to access sides of him he wanted to showcase to build his existing self-image in the new medium he needed to communicate with. When asked about whether it bothered him to not be able to express who he was, he stated, “Yes, it bother me a lot. If you ask my friends in China, they will say he is funny or he a good guy. Here is difficult because, how to say, I can’t explain many thing like usual.” Moreover, he viewed language as a barrier that prevented him from participating in activities or everyday occurrences he was accustomed to. This left him feeling overwhelmed as he referred to the process of accessing such elements as an extra effort he would not otherwise have to put in. Another concern he expressed was the assumption that his language skills would prevent him from having everyday conversations at a regular pace. He indicated that, “when people talk so so fast, I just look at them. I hate it. Sometimes I don’t want to say anything because I don’t want to talk or look stupid like why he didn’t understand me.” This put pressure on him, which in turn, kept him from initiating and engaging in communication that he believed would have been more effective in his first language. Therefore, instead of viewing English as a communicative tool for him to express himself, he viewed it as the barrier that hindered his communication.

Participants’ experiences with language barriers were predominantly shaped by three elements that surfaced in their reports. First of all, the concept of an ESL label that they believed to carry seemed to have a negative effect on the participants in terms of
being categorized rather than becoming a part of the regular student population.

Secondly, participants expressed a feeling of the fear of making mistakes and how this fear prevented them from taking chances and taking initiative in situations that could create priceless communication opportunities they highly needed in order to improve their language skills. Finally, participants made remarks about how their limited language skills forced them to seek help with basic needs, which in turn, left them feeling frustrated and at times, helpless as though they were regressing, not progressing. These three important elements formed participants’ understanding and interpretation of what second language represented in their current situations and the connotations they attached to the process of attaining this communication medium.

**ESL label.** International students have traditionally been reported to find the ‘ESL label’ problematic and to dislike being categorized as such (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008). Their ESL identity proves to place pressure on them that carries into their regular college courses even after they have completed their ESL studies and proven competence of English for higher education readiness. In this study, participants’ reactions to the ESL label showed a divide based on where the participants were from. The participants from China held a stronger opinion about being ESL students in comparison to the participants from the Middle East. Even though neither party was smitten with being categorized or referred to as ESL students, participants from the Middle East showed more acceptance whereas the participants from China expressed concern and dissatisfaction. This distinction could have been caused by cultural factors that led participants to believe that being an ESL student puts them in an inferior position where
their intelligence and skills could be questioned and underestimated. Similarly, these
cultural factors could have had more of an impact in terms of potential negative
implications in the case of the participants from China.

Yin, one participant from China, indicated,

I don’t like this. Yeah. I think it’s okay if I can continue because teachers don’t
speak fast, but I don’t like to tell people yeah I’m ESL student. I don’t say it if
they won’t ask me like what you study. This point I don’t like so much.

When asked to elaborate on why she did not like telling people that she is an ESL
student, Yin stated, “They might think oh she doesn’t know anything or maybe they
might think like I can’t talk to her about anything. She can’t answer me or maybe she’s
not so smart.”

Yin’s interpretation of the ESL label entailed negative connotations that centered
on others’ assumptions about what she was capable of in terms of forming and
articulating intelligent opinions. She was worried that people’s perceptions of who she
was would be skewed because the ESL label would create an automatic barrier between
and her others that would affect communications negatively or prevent them from even
starting. Moreover, she was concerned about her social image because she believed that
people’s judgments would be clouded by a term that placed her in a category of learners
whose intellect could be undervalued. Additionally, she did not want to reveal the fact
that she was enrolled in ESL classes unless she was inquired about it which meant that
she felt a sense of embarrassment and uneasiness. She said that, “I don’t like to say
because I feel like I’m little kid. I’m not school, like small kid in school, but when I say
it, people will think why she is still ESL, she not so smart maybe.” It can be said that she was associating the ESL label with a misjudged capacity of intelligence and ability as perceived by non-ESL individuals. Her apprehension regarding making it known that she was an ESL student stemmed from the concern that non-ESL individuals or native speakers might confuse ESL learners’ limited linguistic abilities with limited intellectual abilities.

Nianzu was another participant from China who expressed discouragement regarding revealing his ESL identity. When asked what he thought and felt about being called an ESL student, he stated,

Actually, this is problem for me. In my language, I can talk about everything like politics, economics, business, like many things, like hard things. In English, because of my vocabulary, it’s hard for me. In my head, I know like I have many opinion, but I can’t say it. In the future, I will remember more vocabulary because my teacher will teach me. I know this, but now I don’t start to talk because if I can’t finish, they will think you don’t know this topic. Nobody will wait for me. I don’t like to say I’m in ESL program. Maybe people will think I’m stupid, I’m not smart. It’s just opinion, but it’s important for me.

Nianzu’s account was similar to Yin’s in the sense that he was concerned about others’ perception of his intelligence and skills. He was worried that not being able to have sophisticated conversations about complex topics he had opinions on would lead others to assume that he was not capable of tackling subjects that required advanced and critical thinking. Therefore, he believed that not being able to articulate opinions in a second
language would appear to others as not being able to form them in his first language. Even though he acknowledged the fact that such an assumption is simply somebody’s opinion, he was still expressive about its importance to him because he wanted to present himself as an individual capable of carrying on a deep conversation rather than someone who would get stuck in the middle because of limited vocabulary which he believed would be interpreted as limited intelligence. He added that, “it’s opinion, but why I want that. I don’t want people say he not smart person. Maybe when I know more word, I can feel good, better. Now I’m so so.” This prevented him from starting conversations because he was discouraged by his prediction that he would need to stop speaking and search for the correct vocabulary, which in turn would frustrate the people involved in the conversation. He perceived the ESL label to cause him a sense of shame and inadequacy because he believed that non-ESL and native speakers would have misconceptions about his intellect and capacity to talk about complicated matters if and when he tells them that he is an ESL student.

As mentioned above, even though not to the same extent as participants from China, participants from the Middle East were also hesitant about revealing their ESL identities and dissatisfied with being in the ESL learner category. Tarif was one of the participants who showed concern about the ESL label and stated that I think it’s okay. I’m not shamed because I’m learning, but maybe other people can have a problem. They can say he’s in ESL, he can’t do much or he can’t speak English. Maybe he failed a test. For me, to be honest, I don’t care. We have to learn English. I think it will, would be better if I was in my program
because I can tell my family and they can tell relatives like my son studying pharmacy or engineering or something. Now, I’m in the middle. It’s not crime, but it’s like better when you finish ESL.

Tarif did not identify with feelings of shame or embarrassment regarding an ESL label unlike his Chinese counterparts. He appeared indifferent to the idea that being categorized as an ESL student might have negative implications for him as he saw the process as a natural part of his journey in the U.S. He was, however, expressive about how an outsider might categorize ESL students because being placed in an ESL program might imply that the learner was unable meet certain standards that were required of him or her. Tarif was not concerned about the standards he needed to meet in order to advance to regular college classes; he had opinions about how others might perceive the meaning of meeting such standards. Therefore, he believed that others might have preconceptions regarding the abilities of an ESL learner and even though he was not affected by those opinions, he felt that finishing the program and moving on to his program of study would relieve him of his in-between status. In addition, he thought that his family would be more proud when they could announce that their son is enrolled in a specific program at a U.S. college. He said that, “if my mother tell her neighbor my son is engineer or doctor, she will say that’s good, but she doesn’t know ESL. So is better if my mother say he is pharmacist and be proud of my school.” This could be due to a cultural understanding that learning the native language of the target country serves a function and acts as a means to an end and is not as prestigious as studying and specializing in a specific field in that country. Therefore, even though Tarif was
unconcerned about being categorized as an ESL student, he could be waiting to get to the point where he is no longer an ESL student, but an international graduate student, so that those concerned about the label would feel more at ease about it.

Finally, Miraj was another participant from the Middle East who believed that the ESL label did not have a direct negative effect, but could cause a barrier between him and native speakers of English and some college instructors of regular courses. He indicated, When I think about this, I think it’s normal thing. Nobody can know everything. We must learn all our lives. Also, I think it’s good thing for a person, like experience, to tell your grandchildren maybe [laughs]. However, I know, for some students, they don’t like to be in ESL. I think because people will think this guy can’t speak with me because he’s ESL student, so the student will think they don’t want to talk to me. And when you take your major classes, your teacher can think you’re ESL so you won’t understand anything.

Even though Miraj did not mention any personal difficulties he had faced due to being categorized as an ESL student, he was mindful about how others, including college instructors, may perceive ESL students. He believed that the ESL label carried to regular classes and caused a misconception that international students with ESL backgrounds will have a disadvantage in comparison to their native speaker counterparts. Therefore, he was suggesting that even though a student has proven linguistic competence for college, the ESL label is perceived as an inseparable attribute of his or her scholastic identity. He believed that this would do disservice to the student who would naturally want to be seen at least at the same ability level as his classmates. Furthermore, Miraj
made a connection between being known as an ESL student and not being able to engage in communication because of it. He provided an example and stated,

Some people ask me what’s your major. I tell them and they ask more and when I say I’m in ESL, they say oh, okay. I think when I tell them they think like okay your English is bad, so you can’t start your major. Then they don’t talk too much, just short sentences maybe.

This meant that by being in an ESL program and making it known to the people he met, his opportunities for communication were being reduced in quantity and quality. He believed that it stopped people from engaging in conversations with complex wording and structure. He suggested that the ESL label created preconceptions that students had difficulty addressing and this series of preconceptions, instead of being a motivation to initiate language practice, acted as a barrier between the learners and the users of the target language.

**Fear of making mistakes.** Another barrier that stood between the participants and the target language, especially at the beginning of their ESL program, was the fear of making mistakes. Participants expressed apprehension and nervousness regarding communicating in English both in and outside the classroom due to their assumptions that they would make a mistake that would put them in a vulnerable position. This fear of making mistakes was more dominant in the accounts of the participants from China who seemed to be more concerned about their social image in comparison to their Middle Eastern counterparts. At times, it prevented the participants from participating in class, joining a classroom activity that required speaking out loud, initiating conversation with
native English speakers, and approaching teachers regarding a topic they were not clear about. Instead of trying to overcome their language anxiety by practicing it at every chance they could get, participants tended to succumb to the fear that created further anxiety.

Jiao was one of the participants from China who expressed a fear of making mistakes and appearing unintelligent and lazy. She stated that

If the class quiet and I speak, if it’s wrong . . . If it’s mistake, I am very scared. If I say wrong word, my classmates will laugh. Maybe my teacher will think I didn’t study hard. Sometimes I forget some words, but . . . I forget but sometimes I know the answer, but I don’t want say it because they will think it’s funny, she’s not so smart. Same thing for American. I’m little scared because they will think I don’t understand her, what she said.

Jiao’s account was an accurate representation of how the other participants from China felt about their apprehension to speak in the classroom as well as in public. She expressed and demonstrated a fear of giving the wrong answer which was supported by the observations of the researcher during Jiao’s classes. Jiao almost never volunteered to supply an answer, even when she knew the correct one, and only participated when prompted by the teacher. Her fear of appearing unintelligent in the eyes of her classmates and lazy in the eyes of her teachers prevented her from taking initiative and becoming part of the classroom flow. She was afraid of being ridiculed for taking a chance to utter words in a quiet classroom where she would stand out as the student who did not know the correct answer. She felt threatened by the potential destructive criticism she thought
she would get if she put herself out there as a language learner. Both the classroom
setting with other ESL learners and language teachers and social settings with native
speakers intimidated her to the point that she could not feel confident with what she
already knew and was capable of. She mentioned that, “when I speak with anyone, I
know the words, but maybe not sure, so I don’t want say something. I wait. Sometimes
they say for me. I don’t know why. I don’t like it, but I feel nervous.” Additionally, she
was not aware of or failed to acknowledge the fact that trial-error is an inherent part of
the language learning process. Her overseeing this can be understood because she could
not be expected to take such notions into consideration as she was letting her language
anxiety take over and control her reactions to situations that she could otherwise benefit
from communicatively.

Wen was another participant from China who referred to the fear of making
mistakes as an obstacle that prevented him from being an active communicator in and
outside the ESL classroom. He stated, “Usually, I have answer, but I don’t want to tell.
It’s because maybe it’s wrong answer or sometimes my teacher will say what’s your
opinion and I will not tell.” When asked to clarify why he would not give his opinion
when prompted, he replied

I don’t have good words, good vocabulary. I don’t want my classmates laughing.
I don’t like to say this, but I’m afraid. I don’t want the teacher to say answer this
question, so I look at my book [laughs]. Yeah, also I make jokes. I think my
teacher think I don’t care.
By the same token, he explained, “Yeah, I talk to Americans, but I’m maybe nervous if they ask like hard question. I’m like [imitates being frozen]. They will think who this stupid guy [laughs].”

Similar to Jiao’s, Wen’s account included multiple concerns regarding participating in class and engaging in communication outside of class. He had a fear of giving an erroneous answer that he thought would leave him susceptible to ridicule by his classmates. Even when he knew the answer to a particular question, he doubted himself and chose not to volunteer to give an answer. His negative self-assessment of his language knowledge and skills created a fear that acted as a barrier between him and immediate feedback. Due to this lack of immediate feedback caused by his language anxiety, he missed out on valuable learning opportunities. As supported by the observations of the researcher, Wen’s demeanor exhibited a sense of carefreeness and slight indifference which was his way of concealing his true emotions when he did not want to be put on the spot. However, he was aware that his behavior was leading his teachers to believe that he was not paying attention to the material and the instructions, which was not the case. Wen was worried that he would appear unintelligent if he made a mistake both in and outside the classroom. Therefore, he tried to avoid situations that he believed would cause him embarrassment. Even though he willingly communicated with native speakers, he sustained feelings apprehension and worry that brought on a sense of uneasiness regarding making mistakes.

Nadirah was a participant from Kuwait who referred to the fear of making mistakes in a slightly different sense than her counterparts from China. She stated,
For me, when I see I make mistake, I think why I make that mistake because I study hard. Really. I know it’s normal thing because I’m just student now.

Example, my writing teacher ask what the three things in essay. I can say, but if he tell me no, I don’t like that because I think I’m not good student, so sometimes I don’t ask question because why I don’t know this answer if my teacher tell me before.

In Nadirah’s case, high personal expectations of success and proficiency had created an apprehension to face a possible mistake or error. She wanted to avoid situations where a mistake would act as a confirmation that she lacked knowledge or had not mastered the skill yet. Therefore, she did not want to be discouraged by making a mistake and feeling as though she was not fulfilling her full potential. Her self-expectations were at such a high point that they prevented her from asking questions when she knew the material had been covered before. When asked to talk about her communication with native speakers, she indicated, “I think it’s okay because they know I’m not American [laughs], but I hope I can speak like American. I don’t want to make mistakes. I will be angry on myself.”

Similarly, her personal expectations of language competence were leading her to avoid disappointment and frustration by eliminating instances where she had the potential to make a mistake. Even though she knew that native speakers would not expect a flawless, accent-free spoken English from her as an international ESL student, her own expectations were causing her to doubt herself and to shy away from communicating because she was not yet at the competence level she desired to be. Therefore, her fear of
making mistakes and feeling discouraged as a result of it was a barrier between her and language practice opportunities both in and outside the ESL classroom.

**Help with basic needs.** All participants were expressive about the notion of asking for help with their basic needs, especially during the initial period of living and studying in the US. The main concern came across as the disappointment and frustration that rose from the failure to achieve basic tasks that they were otherwise able to do effortlessly. These tasks included asking for help at the supermarket with certain items, talking to school officials, purchasing books, clothing, and other necessities, learning to use the local public transportation system, and dealing with both regular and urgent housing and maintenance issues. The idea of having to require help with these tasks had a somewhat negative effect on participants’ outlook on their own abilities and motivation. As supported by the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), since their intrinsic motivation related needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, were not being met, the participants were feeling somewhat discouraged and unenthusiastic.

Faridah was one of the participants who were expressive about the struggle they went through when trying to meet their basic needs. She stated,

I go to Walmart, oh the first time I go, I look around. I want to ask question, but who I ask. I go around, just look, not buy. One woman say do you need help. I smile, but I want to cry. I say to me it’s just market. I need one thing for my apartment. I look and look, but don’t want to ask because what I will say. Yes. I remember that. I was sad, very sad.
Faridah’s language barrier at the time had prevented her from carrying out a simple task she was otherwise accustomed to achieving without any issues. She felt frustrated with the fact that she needed help, but could not even ask for it because she did not know how. Her telling herself that it was just a market is an indication that she felt intimidated by the situation and tried to calm down by reminding herself that she had done this task many times before. She was saddened in view of the fact that she was unable to form a sentence or a question that would easily and immediately provide her with a solution. She mentioned that, “I say to me, Faridah, why I am sad. I know because I do this. In America, I’m like little girl, especially first time.” It is also possible that, having been a university instructor in her own country and having had many achievements as an individual and as the mother of a teenager, she was disappointed by not being able to perform this task and feeling helpless.

Tung-Mei was another participant who verbalized the frustration of having to ask for help with daily living activities and skills. She indicated

I think I can do everything. As a girl, I can do so many things. I don’t need boyfriend, but this is actually problem for me first I come here. Yeah. I make my schedule, but I don’t want to ask my friends everything. I want to do it just me, no help. If I can’t, why did I come to America? How can I explain? I don’t say to my friends, like, can you do this for me or my teachers. Small things, like I do it every day. I hate this, but sometimes I have to say can you help me. When my English perfect, I will feel very good.
Tung-Mei had repeatedly mentioned the importance of independence and self-reliance and it was especially disheartening for her to have to ask for help with basic needs and everyday tasks. She viewed her initial lack of language skills as a barrier that stood between her and her goals she had set for herself to achieve by coming to the U.S. She was waiting for her English to improve to a point that she would not need help in areas she deemed unnecessary. As an individual who was determined to prove her competence and autonomy to herself, her parents, and others close to her, Tung-Mei regarded the need to ask for help as a daunting obstacle brought on by limited language skills and the initial unfamiliarity with the host setting. Despite the fact that her teachers could have provided her with information or sent her in the right direction to access sources of information, Tung-Mei did not wish to ask them for help, either, probably because it went against her determined state of mind to reach her goals on her own. She had high personal expectations and the notion of having to require assistance was bothering her. Therefore, she wanted to remove the language barrier as soon as possible and become her-capable-self equipped with English skills strong enough to provide her with the independence and the autonomy she desired.

Malik was also a participant who had concerns about the fact that he needed help with the basic, everyday necessities. He stated,

You know, it’s hard. Really, I must say this. Specially, as a man, you know I always do everything for myself and my wife and my family. It’s not shame, not to be embarrassed. I mean it’s very normal, right? But I like it when I take care of all the things. I’m not just ESL student, but when your English is not great, you
think, like, I can only be ESL student now. People look at you only like that.

Specially, when I need help, like you ask, if it’s just easy thing, I’m a little upset.

Yeah [laughs].

Similar to other participants, Malik’s account of the need to ask for help with basic needs centered around the notion that he was finding it hard to accept how he had no difficulty taking care of these simple matters before whereas now he felt inadequate. He was also disappointed about needing assistance in contrast to the times he was capable of handling everyday needs for his family. On the same token, he was struggling with the idea of needing help with daily living necessities because his view of traditional gender role assignments was making him believe that it was his responsibility as a man to be able to survive on his own. Another point he made was that being seen as only an ESL student with limited language skills was in turn making him believe that is all he was. He indicated that, “Absolutely, it’s normal thing, but I’m older now, I don’t want to go back. I want to go forward, like, do more things. I don’t want like, like need help with something like I did before.” Even though he knew he did not need to feel embarrassed or ashamed about asking for help, he was, nevertheless, feeling the pressure of trying to achieve goals by relying on his own skillset and knowledge. This could be explained by the notion that ESL students’ background plays an important role in their perception of self-assessment and personal expectations with regards to learning a language while trying to gain control of their new surroundings. It is possible that accepting the language barriers and their natural need to seek help when needed could allow them to be more lenient on themselves.
Finding 4 summary. Being categorized under an ESL label, having a fear of making mistakes when communicating, and feeling uncomfortable with the idea of asking for help with basic needs acted as language barriers for the participants. Their accounts of the struggle they endured due to these barriers were shaped around personally held beliefs about achievement, social image, and abilities. Even though language barriers are an expected and inherent part of the ESL learning process, the manifestation of participants’ attitudes was deeply embedded and highly personal. Participants’ issue with the ESL label carried a sense of concern about being perceived as unintelligent and incapable. They were not at peace with the potential misconceived notion that non-ESL individuals might have regarding their intellect because they could not express themselves fully and effectively. The fear of making mistakes during communication with native speakers and during ESL instruction affected the participants similarly, in the sense that they wanted to avoid situations where they would appear unknowledgeable and be ridiculed. They were apprehensive about participating in class and initiating conversations with native speakers because they were not confident in their language skills. Lastly, participants were uncomfortable with their need to receive language help for their basic needs inasmuch as these needs were simple tasks they had been performing with ease all their lives. The idea of having to rely on others and to depend on their assistance made the participants feel uneasy and unmotivated. All these factors led the participants to make negative connections between ESL learning and language barriers whereas they could have viewed these as learning opportunities that would actually allow
them to accelerate their skill building process in an authentic setting with positive challenges.

**Changes in the Perception of the English Language**

Changes in the perception of the English language emerged as a common experience among participants. Their accounts showed that there was a noticeable shift in their thinking of what English meant to them and the importance they placed on learning it. All participants agreed that they started taking the learning of English more seriously upon arrival in the U.S. and viewed it as an important tool they needed to gain for their current and future situations. In addition, they stated that prior to coming to the U.S., they were not particularly concerned with learning English and that they did not deem their language classes important as they had no way of using the language naturally. Becoming ESL learners as opposed to EFL learners and their immediate need for the mastery of English led the participants to prioritize English and to place more value on it. They quickly became aware of the positive implications of knowing English and started seeing their efforts as a necessary investment for their future. As a result, English went from being a mundane school subject to becoming an important part of their lives they associated with multiple benefits. However, even though they confirmed attaching importance to the English language, their comments also suggested that they viewed being in ESL as a means to an end or an obstacle that stood between them and their ultimate goals. The change in the participants’ perception occurred through two key aspects, namely: English for higher life standards and the meaning given to the language
learning process. These two key aspects are explored in detail below after the overall depiction of the abovementioned change is reported on.

Wen was a participant who noticed a shift in his perception of what the English language meant to him when he compared his prior experience to his current situation. He stated,

In China, I don’t—I didn’t care about English. I thought I don’t need it. Yeah [laughs]. I just go to class sometimes. The teacher say why you don’t listen. I don’t know. I think it’s boring. It’s just class. Many student don’t care.

When asked to describe how his earlier experience differed from his current experience, he indicated,

Actually, it’s different. Yeah. I go to class now [laughs]. I must learn English because I’m in America. It’s very important for me—for my future, because everyone speak English. Also, I need English for good job, so it’s serious thing.

Wen’s comments suggested that prior to coming to the U.S. and enrolling in ESL classes, his perception of the English language did not bear significance as his EFL experience did not provide enticing elements he could have related to. He saw the English language as just a class he was required to take and nothing more. He did not think that it deserved his attention because it held no specific meaning or relevance to his life back in China. English was not necessary for Wen’s survival and it did not fulfill an immediate need.

In contrast, his current situation caused a shift in his thinking and affected his perception of the importance of English for immediate and future use. He realized that English did not only serve everyday purposes, but that it was a tool he could utilize for
his future plans such as finding a suitable job. Being in an ESL setting attached meaning and importance to the target language whereas an EFL setting used to bear no urgency or criticality as the language was not an absolute necessity outside the classroom. The fact that he was willingly attending classes in a setting with no parental supervision where he was freer in comparison to a setting where he was relatively more restricted and his actions could easily be monitored showed that he had understood the importance of mastering the English language for personal gain. He stated that, “I don’t have to go to class, I know, but I go because I think is important, so it’s very different from China. If I don’t go, it will be bad for me.” He had begun to take it more seriously and pay it more attention because he had realized how his previous conduct was not going to apply well to his current situation with his changing needs and expectations. Therefore, Wen was reportedly aware of the change in his perception of how much value he had started to place on the English language. The shift in his thinking about the target language in its authentic setting caused a shift in his actions and made him reevaluate his situation with respect to using and mastering the English language.

Nianzu was another participant who reported having experienced a thinking shift in terms of what the English language meant to him as an ESL student as opposed to being a former EFL student. He stated,

In China, English not so important. That’s common problem. It’s about the experience. Yeah. I think it’s okay if your English not good. I’m not good at learning English. I don’t care so much. I don’t need English in China.
When prompted to elaborate on whether he thought English was now more important or not, he indicated that

Yeah, that’s so important. I know I’m just normal student. Not so good. I need more practice. But I feel so nervous when I write academic paper. It’s not physical harm to it. How much work do I remember or how much knowledge is basic. I think it’s emotion. English is very important. Before maybe I don’t care, but now I feel so nervous. I need idea that comes from good . . . I think it must be academic. Maybe I want to talk with native speakers and show my parents I grow and I will get good job.

Nianzu’s comparison of his EFL experience to his ESL experience in terms of his perception of the importance of English revealed that he based it on the level of comfort he associated it with. Since he did not consider English to be important in China, he was not worried about succeeding in his class or using it well. Based on his observations and experience, he saw it as a common issue among EFL students that they did not deem English important as they had no immediate use or need for it. However, upon coming to the U.S. and having to use English in academic settings with more demanding purposes and goals, his comfort level was highly reduced and he started feeling nervous. The importance he started placing on English meant that he had to put more effort into the products he was required to create using the language. He cared enough to make sure he was producing quality assignments that showcased that he had gone through a deliberate and careful thought process. Even though he felt that he was an average student in China, it had not bothered him. However, upon starting to take ESL classes in the U.S., he
realized that he was going to need more practice to achieve his desired comfort level with English that would indicate success. The fact that he was feeling nervous was an indication that English had gained importance in his life in terms of his academic success and personal growth. He was aware that he was going to need English as a second language for better occupational opportunities. In addition, he associated talking to native English speakers with success and growth and thought that mastering and communicating in English would allow him to physically display the outcome of the effort he was making.

Nadirah was another participant who reflected on how much her perception regarding the importance of English had been altered upon living and studying in the U.S. as an ESL student. She pointed out that

In Kuwait, you don’t worry about it because no one think about it. I can go shopping or go somewhere with my family or go to restaurant. I’m in Kuwait! Also, in Kuwait, there are many people speak English. What’s the word? It’s not big deal [laughs]. But me as student, no, I don’t think it was so important for me. If I want learn, I can learn, but why I will speak it. Probably I won’t. Who will talk to me?

When asked to compare her previous impressions to her current understanding of what English meant to her as a student and an individual, she indicated that

It’s absolutely changed. Very different now for me. You can’t do anything if you don’t know English. It gives you so much. If you speak it, ok, people say this person can do many things like travel, work, like that.
Nadirah’s earlier perception of the English language was dependent on the surrounding elements in her home country and the lack of urgent and crucial need for it, similar to Wen and Nianzu’s accounts. Her everyday needs could be fulfilled by using her native language. Additionally, since it was not uncommon for people to know English in Kuwait, she did not attach importance or meaning to the language as it was already a part of daily life that did not always apply to her. When asked to talk about the difference between the English language in Kuwait and the English language in the US, she said that, “I think it is different because in Kuwait, everybody speak my language. Here, not everybody, so I must speak their language. I think it’s good thing for me and for many people.” Her interactions in her academic and social life did not necessarily require the involvement of a foreign language to a degree that would alarm her and make her think it was a necessity. Furthermore, her willingness to learn and use English was a more important factor for her in terms of showing interest in the language than being required to learn and use it because she could not imagine a setting where she would have to speak to someone in English only.

After having lived and studied in the U.S. as an ESL student for a short while, she had started to see the English language in a new light. She was aware of the benefits of being able to speak a globally used language and the dangers of ignoring it in a setting where abilities and skills might be judged by assessing the mastery of the native language. She believed that being able to speak English would give others the impression that one would also be able to tackle other tasks that require the use of the target language and make the learner appear more qualified and capable.
Participants’ perceptions of the English language were mainly shaped by two elements that stood out. The fact that English would increase their chances of attaining higher life standards in the future was a reason for the participants to attach more meaning and importance to the mastery of the English language. They were aware that adding this particular skill to their background would elevate their chances of acquiring a desirable job that could make a difference in their lives. In contrast, they viewed the language learning process as an obstacle even though they were highly motivated to achieve the end goal of mastering English. The meaning they attached to the English language differed from the meaning they attached to the ways of achieving it. They perceived the language learning process as a burdensome and stressful interference they wanted to be over as quickly as possible.

**English for higher life standards.** All participants acknowledged the importance of learning English as an investment in their future and believed that mastering this language would allow them to take advantage of opportunities with promising prospects. Therefore, becoming ESL learners opened a door that could potentially lead to having extra choices in terms of wider job search and financial benefits. Additionally, participants talked about being global citizens and speaking the common language that would allow them to communicate across cultures and take part in endeavors across multiple platforms.

Tarif was one of the participants who expressed how learning English could create opportunities for higher life standards for him and for his family and indicated that
English is more important for me now, but English is always important because it’s the world language. It’s a global world. English brings everybody together. You can’t ignore this. Also, if I speak English, I can find more jobs and make more money. My wife is pregnant so I want to make a lot of money for my family. I must take care of my family, you know. My wife will work also. I tell her to speak English really well [laughs]. This is about future. If we go back to our country, it’s still good for us, you know. English is important for that.

Since globalization has minimized isolation and maximized international business and exchange, many jobs require a second or even a third language. For many career platforms, speaking or at least communicating adequately in English is the norm. Students, especially international students, looking to graduate and seek a well-paying job are aware that they need to increase their qualifications starting with the mastery of English. Therefore, Tarif’s account showed that he associated learning English with eventually living a better life as a result of being able to widen his job search with the added language skill he would have to offer. He also knew that if he had to return to his home country, he would still have more opportunities that could lead to financial security for his family as a result of being able to speak the globally accepted language of communication and commerce.

Miraj was another participant who talked about higher life standards as a result of learning and mastering English. He stated that:

Although the time for myself, I don’t know why, but I don’t give that high attention for it. I didn’t. I mean maybe before I didn’t. Like high attention of
what’s highly important for me, for my life, for my future study, for my futures here. Everything will be in English. So I try to do my best because it is highly important for me now. Also my family and my son, especially. So it’s highly important to master English. Academically, or the social life, daily life. It should be because I don’t live in cave. All world use English. All the jobs, like, they want it, of course.

Upon realizing that many aspects of his current and future life would involve the use of English, Miraj had begun to pay more attention to mastering the language. He believed that using English well would be an investment in his future as well as his son’s future because his chances of securing a job would be higher and his financial gain would be enough to support his family. Miraj was also aware that English was a part of everyday life, not just in the U.S., but all over the world that had access to it. He did not want to feel “left out” of interactions that he knew would take place in English medium settings because he saw the world as a global unit brought together by a common language. He indicated that,

I think in this world, you must speak English. If you don’t know any English or maybe some English words, they won’t accept you. Even like social media. You have to know English or you can’t be part of some things.

He had come to accept that English had become a considerable part of his life as he would be using it in academic and social settings as well as in future job prospects. Even though he did not pay special attention to learning English before coming to the U.S., his
ESL experience had allowed him to attach more meaning to mastering the English language as a way to have access to higher life standards for himself and for his family. Finally, Malik referred to the idea of reaching higher life standards by gaining English skills and stated that

I have bachelor’s degree in English language and translation, but let me tell you, to be honest, English is more important now. I think before, it was just my major, you know. I study it, so like other students, it’s normal. Not so important. I was surprised when they put me in ESL, but I think it’s good for me. I learn so much here. I want make sure that I learn everything because I want to be very successful. I must answer all questions, like tenses, you know how pronounce, evaluation, scoring, like that because I want to teach. If you want to teach, you must know English very well. Also, I can have better career and better life for my family. My wife eight month pregnant. We want healthy baby. We don’t care about boy or girl, but he’s a boy [smiles]. So you understand why I must take care for her and for my son. Life will be better if you find better job or better salary.

Even though Malik had studied English before to the point of graduating with a bachelor’s degree in English, he had perceived it as just a major of study. However, upon coming to the U.S. and being placed in ESL classes, he had become more conscious of his goals and more determined to gain English skills that would allow him to teach English and provide for his family. Even though he knew that his degree in English language and translation would be enough to find a teaching job, he was not satisfied
with the current knowledge he had. He expressed his desire and said that, “Who doesn’t want to have amazing English? I want to be more professional. That’s why I think this is great opportunity for me. I can be great professor, not just good professor.” He wanted to improve his skills because he believed that to be able to teach English, he would need to be ready to answer his students’ questions about all aspects of academic English. The fact that he was placed in ESL despite having a degree in English from his country did not discourage him; he saw it as an opportunity to gain new skills that he believed would allow him to have a more successful career, earn more money, and reach higher life standards as opposed to utilizing the degree he already had and settling for a standard teaching job.

**Meaning given to the language learning process.** Even though the participants experienced a positive change in their perceptions of the English language and the value they placed on it, they did not possess similar feelings for the language learning process they were engaged in. They were not particularly fond of being ESL students and taking ESL classes despite the fact that they knew it was the only choice they had in terms of gaining and proving English competency and proficiency given their circumstances. Some participants mentioned that they valued the overall experience, but that they would not want it to continue for an extended period of time.

Tung-Mei was one of the participants who had set clear goals for herself and was fully aware of the role English played in her future plans. She stated that:

Even though ESL class is very occupied every day’s time, it’s not difficult. Just in my worst hours, this program want use your mind, use your brain to think
something, to consider some idea to finish your homework. You need to use so many energy just to take class on time, just to do your homework. Maybe you have leisure time, like I will have more time compare with my classmates, I will have extra to relax. Too much time maybe. I think like have a dream and don’t forget it. Maybe this dream can come true. I do little every day because I want to get my release from ESL. I don’t want another semester. It was boring for me. I do it because I have a dream.

Tung-Mei’s account showcased that she perceived the language learning process as an obstacle between her and her dreams—as a requirement she needed to fulfill before she could move on to what she really wanted to do. Since she was highly organized and had created a highly structured schedule she strictly followed, she had free time she utilized by engaging in several recreational activities. Every day, she made sure that she was completing the daily ESL tasks before being involved in non-ESL activities. Therefore, she found herself feeling bored when it came to ESL related issues. She accepted the whole ESL process as a task that had been put before her and she wanted to complete it in the timeframe she had decided to be reasonable for that particular task. She was expecting to receive her ESL release confirmation and hoping that she would not have to continue for an additional semester. Even though she knew the importance of learning English and expressed its meaning for her goals and dreams, she found the process to be unengaging and monotonous. She indicated, “Classes are not fun. It’s okay, but sometimes you don’t want the same thing every day. So boring. My classmates think like me. I spend a lot of time for my classes. Teacher must make it fun for students.”
She believed that the most challenging times were when she needed to make an extra effort by devoting time and energy and even that did not discourage her because she was able to handle it effectively. Therefore, she bore with the process because she knew it would bring her one step closer to her ultimate goal rather than seeing it as an opportunity for learning and growing.

Yin was another participant who acknowledged the importance of mastering English and came to recognize its necessity for her future goals. She stated that,

Before I think English is okay. I don’t need it too much. Yeah. I don’t have to study. But now it’s so important. I can improve my English and make more friends. It’s more help for me for my future.

Prior to coming to the U.S. and becoming an ESL student, Yin did not believe that she needed to make a conscious effort to learn and master English because she did not feel like she needed it. However, upon realizing that learning English was providing both immediate and prospective benefits, she had started to see it as a helpful entity as opposed to a regular school chore that was part of her school life in China. However, when she was asked about the language learning process and the meaning she attached to the experience of studying the English language, she indicated that

For me, it’s painful. Yeah. It’s the same thing in every class. It’s so boring. The grammar, the reading, it’s all the same. If the vocabulary is difficult, you can’t focus on your class because if I study this, I don’t need to listen again or something. You have to choose. I like English now, but ESL is so boring. I want
to finish soon. I go to every class because I’m student, but sometimes I don’t want to go because it’s not interesting.

Yin was expressively frustrated about the ESL process even though she enjoyed the target language she was learning. She had become accustomed to the ESL system as well as the regular in-class instructions and activities; yet, she had trouble relating to and engaging with the material and its presentation. As supported by the observational data, she went to her classes regularly, but did not enjoy her time in the classroom. Her language learning process was starting to resemble her earlier EFL experience as a regular school chore she did not particularly find interesting. She said that, “First I liked this, but now it’s like China. I’m bored, but I will go to class. I won’t fail and I think I will get good grade, but I hope, I wish more interesting.” She did not miss classes because she felt responsible as a student; yet, she did not want to be an ESL student anymore as the process had become mundane and predictable. Similar to Tung-Mei, she wanted to receive her ESL release confirmation and start her program. Her account showed that she did not regard the language learning experience as an exciting endeavor, but as a mandatory process she needed to fulfill in order to move on to what she believed to be her end goal, which was studying her major as an international college student.

Kamil acknowledged the importance of learning English and felt that the ESL process should not be limited to the classroom. He expressed,

I think English is very important because it’s like the global language. It’s maybe not my native or my parents’ native language, but from Asia, Africa, Europe, and we speak in English everywhere. I think it’s like the best thing to do is learn
Maybe one day someone visits your country and in your work, in your job, or your travel. It’s like a duty or something everyone has to learn nowadays. It’s more important for me now because I want to do some things in my life and I must use English. But if you just study in the classroom, if you just came here to go to class and not anything else, your experience is not full. You must experience new people, new cultures, like the life in the United States. Everyone you will meet, you will learn. I’m done with ESL. It was too long for me. I made it interesting for myself because I get so bored with the classes. Maybe there are barriers, but think about why you came here.

Kamil emphasized the importance of learning English as the world language because it could have many practical uses for its speakers. He saw it as a necessary aspect of everyday life and believed that everyone coming into contact with people from other cultures should speak English. However, despite acknowledging that learning English was fundamental to being a world citizen, he found the ESL process to be uninteresting and had to find ways to make his experience more engaging and relevant. He thought that limiting the ESL experience to the classroom would not provide the ESL students with adequate insight as to what it means to live and study in the U.S. and believed that they should enrich their experiences by meeting new people and getting to know new cultures. The only way to learn from the experiences of the people one would meet was to be able to speak a common language they would effectively communicate in. He found the ESL process to be longer than he expected and did not want to continue for another semester. He came to the conclusion that he had acquired the necessary skills he
needed to proceed and start taking his regular classes, which emerged as a common belief among participants with regards to the timing of their ESL release into their areas of study. Like the other participants, his perception of English had shifted to become more focused on the end goal and how mastering English would help with reaching that goal; yet, the process of attaining the target language had to be made more appealing in order for him to feel more centered and enthusiastic.

**Finding 5 summary.** Participants experienced a change in their perceptions of the English language in the sense that they started to place more value on the target language they were trying to acquire upon realizing that it had now become a fundamental part of their academic and social lives and would continue to play an active role in their future plans. They believed that mastering the English language would allow them to start and complete their desired major of study, to have access to a wider array of jobs with better financial options upon graduation, and to reach higher life standards. Participants were optimistic about the opportunities learning English would provide them; however, they reported a sense of alienation from the language learning process in terms of ESL schooling. They expressed boredom and disassociation, especially towards their nearing ESL release dates and since all participants were in advanced levels, they were expecting to be released soon. They stated that they did not enjoy the language learning process as much as they enjoyed the target language and the benefits it was bringing them. Somehow, they did not make the connection between the process and the end goal and saw the two as separate entities where the former seemed as though it was an obstacle in
the way of the latter; a means to an end rather than an opportunity for learning and expanding their horizons.

**Teachers and Teaching Styles**

Teachers and specific teaching styles emerged as substantial determinants of the participants’ overall ESL experience as these two aspects differed considerably from their previous schooling experiences. Participants believed that teachers and their teaching styles played a crucial role in building the relationship between the students and the learning process and was a deciding factor at times for the students in terms of whether they liked their classes or not. Participants’ comments illustrated that, regardless of their home countries, all participants had experienced teacher-centered and traditional approaches to teaching and learning prior to coming to the U.S. All participants referred to their former teachers as strict, unapproachable, and intimidating and indicated that they were discouraged from asking questions and questioning the decisions of their teachers. With regards to their current teachers, they perceived them to be friendly, approachable, and easy going and their teaching styles to be more student-centered and open. They expressed appreciation in terms of being able to discuss issues with their teachers they could not before. This key finding had a determining component, namely: native and non-native English speaking teachers. The concept of teachers and teaching styles is examined by providing examples of participant accounts, which is followed by the exploration of the key component native and non-native English speaking teachers.
Faridah mentioned that the teachers in Saudi Arabia were not generally concerned with whether the instructions were clear to the students or not and to what extent the content was grasped. She explained that

Like in Saudi Arabia, I ask my teacher any question about anything in the class, he don’t care about if I understand or not. He explain for me one time or two time or three time. After that he don’t care if I understand he or not. But, here, no. Teacher don’t let me go until I understand everything I need. Something I really like here is that when I take any quiz, any test, always I go to BlackBoard, I get score and I don’t surprise for anything. But in Saudi Arabia, everything not clear until the end. More organized here. Student when he took any quiz or any test, our teacher again retell the paper for the student and the student read this paper. If anything don’t agree with this paper, you can talk with your teacher. In Saudi Arabia, you can’t see the test. The teacher say if you see your paper, I will lower your score. Here if I have any question with my grade, I ask my teacher why is so low and he explain and sometimes change my grade. Very different here.

Faridah felt that the ESL teachers were genuinely concerned about whether she understood the content or not in contrast to the teachers she had encountered in Saudi Arabia. This indicated that she appreciated a more student-centered approach where student needs are addressed and met. Faridah was also expressive about not being able to question the authority and the decisions of the teachers she had in Saudi Arabia as opposed to being able to approach her ESL teachers regarding a test score she was concerned about without the fear of negative consequences. She said that, “My teachers
like me. She explain to me or he explain to me everything. They not angry, very nice. I not afraid from teacher because she won’t change my grade if I ask question or say I don’t understand.” She was glad that her ESL teachers allowed an open communication where a disagreement did not necessarily turn into a dispute. This showed that she had more of a voice as a student in the U.S. than she did as one in Saudi Arabia because she believed that disagreeing with her teachers would be damaging to her academic goals in Saudi Arabia whereas in her ESL program, she knew that she could question a decision and not get in trouble for inquiring. Not having such concerns in her ESL program gave her freedom to openly and comfortably discuss issues with her teachers and made her feel more secure about being treated fairly. Additionally, she felt that her ESL teachers were more organized in comparison to her teachers in Saudi Arabia because she received coherent and consistent feedback that allowed her to monitor her own progress. She did not feel the same reassurance in Saudi Arabia where grades were revealed at the end of a school term and could not be negotiated even if the student believed that there might be an error. The change in teacher attitudes provided a positive aspect for Faridah’s ESL experience.

Yin was another participant who made a distinction between the teachers and teaching styles in China and the US. She indicated that

In China, I think my teacher teach English is so hard. Yeah, she just say something and then tell student you do this, you do this. She doesn’t explain. She doesn’t ask do you understand. Yeah, but in there the teacher and the student sometimes they have enjoyed your time, and they ask you would you like this?
Would you like that? Yeah, it makes me more comfortable. I can talk to my teachers. They are friendly. Also, not so strict like China. In China, I don’t like ask question and the teacher is very strict. I hope my major class teacher like my ESL teacher. Not strict and maybe repeat something if I don’t understand. I’m worried for speaking fast in major class and a lot of students. I like the small class because the teacher can help you.

Yin’s comments suggested that the teaching style she was accustomed to back in China was not particularly effective in terms of her comprehension and skill gain. She felt that there was not enough communication between the teachers and the students; once the instructions were given, students were expected to complete certain tasks without guidance and proper illustration. She felt lost and as though she could not ask the teacher for help. However, the ESL teachers with whom she had been interacting had been asking for her opinion, trying to find out how to make the class more enjoyable, and creating a relaxed atmosphere that would not intimidate the students and discourage them from asking questions and engaging. Yin found her ESL teachers to be friendly and approachable whereas her teachers in China seemed to practice stricter methods and displayed a more serious demeanor. She felt comfortable in her ESL classes in the sense that she knew she could openly communicate with her teachers if she had questions or requests which she hoped to find in her regular classes she was supposed to take after her ESL program was completed. Like many ESL students, she was concerned that the instructors she was going to encounter in regular classes would not have the same sensitivities and considerations towards her as her ESL teachers did since she would no
longer carry the ESL label; she would be an international student who would have proven mastery of English. She expressed her concern further and said that, “I don’t like to be ESL, but in normal class, major class, no one wait for me. Teacher will talk like I’m American. My English not so good. Maybe I’m worry now because now is easy for me.” She was worried that the teachers would not be able to attend to every student’s needs in crowded classes and that she would not be able to keep up with the instruction geared and designed for a student population proficient in English. It was as though the ESL program was a comfortable transition where students could receive special attention and tailored instruction before moving on to ‘real classes’. Yin’s experience with her ESL teachers and the atmosphere they had created had provided her with comfort, support, and encouragement which she did not want to leave behind when she were to start her major of study.

Lastly, Kamil compared his EFL experience in Kuwait to his ESL experience in the U.S. in terms of teachers and their teaching styles and mentioned that

In my country, we think like we have to respect the teacher. It can change the teacher’s treatment to you. We don’t have close relationship with our teachers. I like this kind of teaching here because like you feel same as, your teacher is your friend so if you have a problem or any stuff you can speak with that teacher. You won’t feel shy or stuff like that. And sometime like the teacher can make the class happy or can make the people have passion to study. Like if the teacher just speak and teach you and go away, okay maybe you’ll learn and you won’t care a lot and I saw this in Kuwait, but if that teacher has a unique way to teach or
making the class funny and like make everyone motivated in that class and
sharing their ideas, I think the people would like to be motivated to study even if
it’s hard. You’ll feel active and not sleepy and you want to share. I saw this here.
Not all teachers, but most of them try different things. I don’t like it when they
repeat the same things and skip other things like important things. So the way the
person teach I think affect the student.
Kamil saw his former teachers as figures of authority that demanded respect as
constructed by their images in society across many Eastern countries (Xu & Davidhizar,
2005). He believed that not showing respect to a teacher could affect the way the teacher
treated the student. It must be noted that the respect in this context refers to behavior that
is indicative of acknowledging the other party’s authority and not acting as though he or
she is an acquaintance or a friend. That is not to say that the U.S. context lacks respect;
the relationships formed between students and teachers in countries that practice
traditional methods of schooling are more distant and regulatory than their counterparts in
the U.S. Therefore, Kamil could observe the difference between the way he was
supposed to behave towards his teachers in Kuwait and the way he was allowed to
approach his teachers in the U.S. as though they were equals. He appreciated the fact that
his ESL teachers were friendly enough to talk to about any issues he might have without
the fear of being misunderstood or judged. Another point he was pleased with was the
methods his ESL teachers were employing in order to make the classroom experience
enjoyable and noteworthy as opposed to the traditional teacher-centered approaches that
fell dry and unengaging. He believed that if the teacher possessed passion for what he
was teaching, it would be contagious and would make his or her students motivated enough to engage and share. He talked about this further and said that,

> If the teacher look happy and excited, it’s good for all students. Some teachers don’t smile; they just come and teach and they leave like ok it’s your job, but if you’re not happy, how we can be happy in the classroom. Don’t expect us to do everything like perfect. I think most of my teachers now do many things for us, like different things. I like that. It’s motivation for me.

Additionally, he believed in the effort put into the instruction and the difference it would make for the students as opposed to simply citing the material unenthusiastically and placing the responsibility of learning solely on the students. He could see the differences in attitude and styles of teaching and related more to the teaching practices he experienced in the U.S.

The perceived differences between native and nonnative speaking teachers were elements that shaped the participants’ experiences in terms of ESL teaching. Participants reported advantages and disadvantages of both types of teachers and specific preferences in terms of what type of teacher they would want to be taught by.

**Native and non-native English-speaking teachers.** The field of English language teaching has been a witness to the native versus non-native English-speaking teacher debate (Braine, 1999, 2010; Kamhi-Stein, 2004; Llurda, 2005; Ma, 2012; Mahboob, 2010). Even though there is no substantial evidence as to whether native English speaking teachers can offer more than their counterparts or not, there is a socially and sometimes even academically supported preconception that the former is more
desirable than the latter in terms of providing authentic linguistic skills (Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009) despite the fact that the latter constitutes the majority of the world’s English language teachers (Canagarajah, 2005). Participants’ accounts showcased attributes of this long-existing debate in terms of the position participants took as to their concerns and preferences regarding their ESL teachers.

Miraj was generally content with his ESL teachers, but expressed a leaning towards a specific type of teacher for some specific courses. He stated that

I think for grammar it is better to have non-native teacher because he has to learn the rules. Just like students, like us, he has to learn grammar. American teachers can’t explain when you ask them why is this rule like this, but non-native teachers can explain everything. American teachers’ grammar not so great sometimes. I think also for writing, it is better to have non-native teacher because he has to learn the American rules. Everybody write different. My writing is different from yours. Of course, American teacher knows it, but non-native teacher can explain it better I think. For speaking, I want native teacher, American teacher, because the accent. Non-native teachers have accent.

Miraj addressed a common point that is repeatedly made in the native versus non-native English-speaking teacher debate, which is the internalizing of linguistic rules. It is common for language students to want to learn grammar rules from individuals who were taught these rules along with the reasoning behind the rules. They believe that a person naturally born into a language does not necessarily “learn” the rules, but “knows” the rules; therefore, cannot effectively explain where they come from. Miraj was expressive
about the accent issue, as he believed that native English speaking teachers would deliver better speaking instruction than their counterparts. This is another misconception among students as speaking is not solely made up of pronunciation; it involves several rules and strategies that do not require native English speaking teachers to teach. In addition, Miraj assumed that having a native English speaking teacher would assist him in eliminating or at least reducing his accent as non-native English speaking teachers have accents stemming from their native languages and varying years of exposure to the target language.

Another participant who carried similar beliefs was Tarif. His opinions regarding specific ESL classes and who should teach what class coincided with Miraj’s. Tarif stated that

Actually, I prefer native English teachers. Why did I come to America if my teacher is not American? Of course, all my teachers are nice. They are good people, but if I want any teacher, any good person like, I will stay in my country. My classmates are from Saudi Arabia, my teacher is from Saudi Arabia, why did I come here? [laughs]. Especially, for speaking. It’s normal, like native English teachers don’t have accent, so I want to learn from him. And they know the slang, like street language. I want to learn that. How can Saudi guy or Russian guy teach me slang? Also, American culture. Same thing. Maybe only for grammar, it’s okay to have not native because he can teach you the rules, like very good.
Tarif’s comments pointed out that one of the reasons he had come to the U.S. was to be able to engage in authentic language learning and that he believed that having non-native English speaking teachers would take away from the authenticity of the experience. He believed it would be pointless to learn English from individuals who had had to learn it themselves; it made more sense to him to learn it from “an original source” rather than “a secondary source.” Additionally, he believed that knowledge and skills relating to cultural aspects of the language needed to come from those who had been born into that specific culture and were natural parts of it. He further explained his opinion and said that,

I’m from Saudi Arabia. If you want to learn Arabic and some culture from my country, I can teach very good. Same for you. You can teach me Turkish, but also you can teach me your culture because it’s your culture. I know little about Turkish culture, but I will say she can teach better because it’s her culture. Same thing for ESL. My Russian teacher can teach me, but not like American because he’s not American. It’s simple thing.

He did not think it was logical to have a non-American teach concepts that only Americans could truly understand and relate to. However, similar to Miraj’s reasoning, Tarif thought that grammar could be learned from a non-native English speaking teacher as he or she would be expected to have internalized the rules and to explain and teach those more effectively than a native English speaking teacher could.

Nadirah saw a dichotomy between native and non-native English speaking teachers in a different sense than Miraj and Tarif and stated that
I always think that my teacher is from another country like me. She didn’t speak English before. She learned it like I’m learning now. But my other teacher is from America. English his first language. They are both very nice. Always so nice to me. but I always think my listening teacher can understand me because she was student like me. I mean, she learned English. She knows my feeling. She knows my situation. Also she knows how I think because she did same things. If I’m sad or upset, she will understand. If I make mistake, she will think I know why, but maybe American teacher will think she’s just lazy or she doesn’t care. So I think teachers from other country understand students’ situations.

Nadirah’s account was more focused on the concepts of having empathy and being able to relate to someone due to similar experience rather than what type of teacher should be teaching which specific skill. She felt that non-native English speaking teachers would be more understanding and empathetic towards ESL students than their counterparts because they experienced similar circumstances and situations. Additionally, she was concerned that she might be misunderstood by native English speaking teachers in situations where they would not be able to determine the reasoning behind her actions and feelings. She believed that a non-native English speaking teacher could empathize with her or at least identify the situations where she expected and needed understanding. However, she did not base this on the premise of how she had been treated so far by her teachers as she found both parties to be fair and compassionate; she was assuming that the non-native English speaking teachers would have a thought process that would involve more empathy and justification of why Nadirah was experiencing what she was
experiencing. Her experience with the ESL teachers was being shaped by her perceptions of how past ESL or EFL experience would affect a teacher’s outlook on his or her ESL students’ situations.

**Finding 6 summary.** Participants’ experiences were highly affected by their teachers and the teaching styles they encountered. They generally found their ESL teachers to be friendly, approachable, laid-back, caring, and responsible. They appreciated the fact that they were able to approach their teachers with any issue without having a fear of what their self-initiated acts would cost them. Additionally, it was important for the participants to be able to discuss matters of grading knowing that their teachers would not hold it against them and respond unfairly. As the participants compared their previous schooling experiences to their current one, their comments showed that they came from teacher-centered, traditional approaches to teaching whereas their current ESL program employed a student-centered approach focused on comprehension and communication. Participants felt that they were able to build closer bonds with their ESL teachers than they did with their previous teachers, both EFL and classroom as they perceived their former teachers to be strict figures of authority they could not communicate with effectively. Furthermore, participants made a distinction between native and non-native English speaking teachers in terms of which specific skills they would prefer to learn from which type of teacher. They believed that classes that involved authentic American qualifications such as speaking and American culture needed to be taught by those who were born into the culture and whose first language was English. In contrast, they believed that classes that required the teaching of specific rules
such as grammar needed to be taught by those who had to intensively learn and apply the rules as they were learning English. In addition, non-native English speaking teachers were perceived to have more empathy and understanding towards ESL students than native English speaking teachers since the former encountered similar experiences while learning English as a foreign or second language. Even though participants were responsive to all their ESL teachers’ attitudes and methods and reported to be pleased about the relationship they were able to build, they felt that the non-native English-speaking teachers were able to relate to their situations more than their counterparts.

**Summary**

This chapter served to introduce the participants in order to provide a vivid picture of their individuality and an overall background relating to their experience. It also introduced the findings of the current research study and explored the six key statements that were made based on the participants’ interpretation of their experience as non-immigrant ESL students at a college-level ESL program. The six key findings are: developing a more independent sense of self and identity, social isolation from host culture, lack of immediate and continuous emotional support, language barriers, changes in the perception of the English language, and teachers and teaching styles.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings, implications for teaching in the field of ESL, recommendations for future research, limitations of the current study, and researcher experience.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This study aimed at uncovering the experiences of non-immigrant ESL students at a college-level ESL program in order to understand what it means to be an ESL student. The guiding research question was: “How do non-immigrant ESL students experience a college-level ESL program?” This chapter discusses the research findings in light of the existing literature on international students, ESL and EFL learners, issues of identity, and academic, social, and psychological challenges typically associated with international students enrolled in language programs in authentic settings. Also provided are the implications for teaching in the field of ESL including considerations for curriculum design to address learners’ needs. Additionally, recommendations for future research and the limitations of the current research are included. Lastly, the researcher shares and reflects on her own experience from the research investigation to provide a wider angle of the process while revealing the meaning she attached to what was uncovered.

The results of this qualitative study showed that English as a second language learners enrolled in a college-level ESL program have multifaceted experiences that affect their thinking and perception of what it means to be an ESL student in an authentic language setting. Even though each participant had unique circumstances that shaped his or her experience, there were underlying commonalities between their accounts of the meaning making process they were engaged in. The data analysis identified six themes: (a) developing a more independent sense of self and identity, (b) social isolation from host culture, (c) lack of immediate and continuous emotional support, (d) language
barriers, (e) changes in the perception of the English language, and (f) teachers and teaching styles. These common themes addressed and reported by the participants shaped their experiences as ESL learners and they were reflected in the participant observations conducted by the researcher.

**Findings in Relation to Literature**

It is important to view the findings of this study in relation to existing literature in order to better situate what they mean and how they relate to what preceded in terms of individual aspects of ESL experience as well as its overall depiction. All six key findings are unfolded in light of literature that has referred to what it means to be an ESL learner, how this particular phenomenon is experienced, and what earlier narratives share with the current ones being interpreted by the researcher’s understanding.

**Developing a More Independent Sense of Self and Identity**

Participants’ accounts of their experiences as non-immigrant ESL learners at a college-level ESL program showed that they were able to develop a more independent sense of self and identity while taking on new responsibilities and getting accustomed to a new lifestyle that required them to take care of challenges on their own. This shared belief manifested itself through the following aspects: (a) building confidence and becoming self-sufficient, (b) perception of family, and (c) making important life decisions.

Literature on international students in general and ESL students in particular refers to issues of identity and confidence in terms of their effects on academic performance (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Shakya & Horsfall, 2000) and willingness to
communicate (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2003). Such studies suggest that the challenges faced by the abovementioned student populations cause the students to question their identities, second-guess their decisions, and hurt their self-confidence, which, in turn, affect their academic performances negatively. Studies that look into elevated self-confidence as a result of a changing context in terms of English learning are rare (Cameron, 2013, 2015). This is expected as the issues that arise from building new components of one’s identity and changing some of the existing ones while adjusting to a new environment and lifestyle are perceived to be challenging, discouraging, and laborious (Skyrme, 2007). However, no research studies investigated or demonstrated the potential of such challenges as opportunities for growth and moments of self-realization.

Participants indicated that they appreciated seeing their own potentials in terms of becoming independent individuals capable of handling situations that would have otherwise been handled by members of their immediate families. They perceived the process as one that provided skills that would be useful and necessary in the future which, in turn, placed value on the experience. Kamil and Tung-Mei repeatedly referred to the future and indicated that their current state of being alone and independent would help them deal with similar situations they would face after ESL. Kamil mentioned that this experience “taught [him] how to deal with life and problems” and it would be easier to handle similar situations in the future “because you’ve already experienced it.” Tung-Mei suggested that this experience gave her “individual time to think about the future” and make independent decisions that resemble potential future scenarios where
she will be on her own. Unlike earlier studies that have shown the negative impact of having to deal with the consequences of living and studying in a new setting on the international and ESL student populations in terms of declining self-confidence and alienation from known self, participants in the current study did not speak of their levels of perceived self-esteem and renegotiated identities in a negative light. This study showed that a more independent sense of self and identity was evoked due to experiencing challenges and problems. It showed that participants’ self-confidence did not decline; it inclined as a result of having to face the new daily routines of being an ESL student in the U.S. and being able to overcome obstacles related to this experience. Therefore, it was revealed that the participants perceived their self-realization, identity building, and self-esteem development processes positively and associated each with an elevated sense of self and identity. There were, however, moments of self-doubt and hesitance in terms of academic performance and willingness to communicate in relation to self-image, which is explained in detail as part of another key finding later in the chapter.

Yin and Miraj talked about “growing stronger,” gaining independence through self-discovery, and building a more responsible and capable identity by facing their new everyday challenges. Miraj talked about growing “psychologically and mentally” as a result of accepting what life was currently offering while Yin mentioned how she was no longer a “child,” but an independent individual who was finally getting in touch with the capabilities she knew she had. They had detected a positive outcome of the experience of living and studying in the U.S. as ESL learners and had embraced it as they could see
how taking on a challenge was allowing them to become who they were meant to be. Therefore, contrary to results of previous research that suggested that international and ESL students question their identities and fall into despair regarding who they are and how much they are capable of, this study showed that the participants were able to observe positive changes in their state of mind and experience a sense of independence that helped them to grow as individuals.

Faridah’s account of becoming a more independent female was similar to McDermott-Levy’s (2011) study of the 12 female Arab-Muslim nursing students living and studying in the U.S. as international students in terms of experiencing a culture where she did not have to rely on a male figure to take care of everyday businesses. Similarly, like the participants in that study, Faridah mentioned how the American context had helped her to become “more confident and independent” because “she [could] do whatever she want[ed] without any fear of mistake.” This finding resembled the results of this previous research study in the sense that it confirmed the observability of a positive change where progress is reportedly needed. In a culture where females might feel restricted at times and in certain contexts, it is justifiable that participants from similar circumstances experience similar sense-making of their own situations. The fact that this study confirmed the constructive side of identity building in terms of new-found female independence and voice shows that participants, even if previously unexpressive about the need for progress due to circumstances out of their control, felt that it was valuable to experience a shift in perception reinforced by action.
Yin and Jiao discussed how they were not as “shy [as they were] in China” when talking to people and stated that they were “more outgoing” and “confident” in their everyday interactions in comparison to the way they behaved in their own cultural context. Similarly, Nianzu stated that he was now dealing with and trying to solve problems instead of ignoring them like he used to before he came to the U.S. and enrolled in the ESL program. The experience was teaching him to have confidence in himself and in the fact that he would be able to solve a problem whereas before he chose to ignore any issues he had based on the assumption that he would not be able to resolve it on his own.

Kamil, Tung-Mei, and Miraj discussed how they had become more self-reliant and self-sufficient as a result of not being able to depend on familiar figures they would normally turn to for help. Their descriptions indicated that they were able to identify and separate the emotional effects of not being able to depend on family members from the mechanical effects of it and that they chose to see it as an opportunity for identity building. Even though literature points to the removal of the familiar as a stressor in terms of international students’ encounters with anxiety and stress in relation to academic performance (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008) and general well-being (Oei & Notowidjojo, 1990; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Yeh & Inose, 2003), it does not refer to its potential as a predictor of self-sufficiency and self-reliance in cases where problem solving and effective solution rendering are required. Participants in this study somewhat associated not being able to depend on family and other support systems in terms of academic encouragement and experienced the lack of the familiar as an anxiety inducer.
which are notions that are discussed in further detail as part of another key finding later in the chapter. However, contrary to the findings of earlier studies, the current study revealed the practical potential of the removal of familiar figures as a way to gain self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and independence.

All participants referred to family as a self-identifying factor that influenced important decisions in their lives as well as their thinking and perceiving the world. However, the way Middle Eastern participants and Chinese participants perceived family was undeniably different which could be due to the fact that cultural understandings and beliefs affect individuals’ constructions of social norms and values and these differ from culture to culture. For instance, Nadirah and Tarif indicated that being close to their families was crucial for their well-being and that they felt the effects of their families’ absence most at moments where they were in need of an emotional connection to those who could provide immediate comfort. However, they were also aware that withstanding such moments provided them with strength and confidence and they were still appreciative of the sense of “independence” and “freedom” this experience was providing.

Unlike their Middle Eastern counterparts, the Chinese participants mentioned having conflicts with their parents and that their parents did not or could not understand them which led to regular arguments about their life choices. Additionally, they stated that their parents wanted to control their lives by making decisions for them, which gave the participants an urge to physically distance themselves from their family environment. Wen and Nianzu expressed their concerns and frustrations regarding their families’
failure to understand and communicate with them. In addition, their families’ willingness to control parts of their lives that they felt strongly about made the participants come to the decision that a physical separation served a peace-keeping purpose. Despite having mentioned that they were indeed missing their families, they emphasized how being away from their families had provided the participants with freedom, independence, confidence, and self-reassurance.

Upon arrival in the U.S. and enrollment in the ESL program, participants mentioned having started to make important decisions that would affect their lives. What made these decisions special was the fact that they would have been influenced by the regular factors in their lives had they been made prior to this experience. Instead, participants felt that they were making these decisions by tapping into their newfound independent sense of self and by using a confident, determined, and goal-oriented mindset. International student literature refers to decision making processes in terms of the processes that students go through while deciding where to study (J. J. Lee, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) and the ones they go through while deciding whether or not to continue their education in the same setting (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Bratsberg, 1995; Han, Stocking, Gebbie, & Appelbaum, 2015). It analyzes the determining factors in these decision making processes and explains the reasons and the results in relation to different cultures, current market needs shaped by globalization, financial motivators, and career choices. However, it does not explore the important life decisions that ESL learners make upon arriving and studying in an ESL setting as a result of changing and evolving identities shaped by a more independent and confident mindset.
In this case, Yin and Wen indicated that they changed their majors against their families’ wishes because they felt that they were not going to be happy with the majors their families were hoping them to study. Additionally, Kamil stated that he decided to pursue a PhD degree even though he was initially hesitant to do so because he did not feel confident that he would be successful. However, he changed his mind after realizing that he was feeling more confident about his determination, language skills, and coping strategies. These were examples of how making important life decisions was influenced by developing a more independent sense of self and identity as a result of experiencing this ESL program in this authentic setting. This study uncovered the unexplored effects of living and studying in the U.S. as ESL learners on the decision making processes of the participants who felt confident and independent enough to make changes where necessary whereas prior to this experience, they could have acted differently and not as independently.

It is important to note that the participants did not deny that they were facing challenges; they simply saw them as opportunities to gain self-reliance, independence, and confidence. Even though the challenges they were facing were similar to those mentioned in earlier literature, participants were able to analyze their reactions to these challenges and to reflect on the positive outcomes of accepting their realities which provided angles that had not been uncovered before.

**Social Isolation from Host Culture**

Participants agreed that they felt socially isolated from the host culture in the sense that their involvement in and interactions with their social setting were limited and
inadequate. In addition, their familiar cultural setting was absent and they had limited contact with people who shared a similar worldview with them. Failing to achieve a sense of belonging (Walter & Cohen, 2011) caused them to experience stress and anxiety in varying degrees.

International student literature shows that emotional problems can arise from feeling excluded, unaccepted, or misunderstood by the host culture, which, in turn, can interrupt the acculturation process (Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima, 2010; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). It also reports that the negative thoughts associated with the disruption in the process leads to increased stress and anxiety levels as well as psychological problems such as depression and extreme worry (Lin & Yi, 1997; Mori, 2000; Williams & Berry, 1991; Zautra et al., 1989; Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991). None of the participants in this study mentioned feelings of depression or abnormal levels of worry, but they did report experiencing stress and anxiety due to external and internal factors.

Kamil and Nadirah expressed similar concerns in terms of feeling as though they did not belong and that the host culture did not understand them completely due to cultural differences. They were in search of a remedy to counteract these feelings and indicated that they were not certain as to when members of the host society were being polite and when they were genuinely interested in what these participants had to say and offer. They both possessed a positive attitude towards the host culture, but chose to retreat at times because they thought that their efforts to blend in and socialize would not be met with the same enthusiasm that they had. Literature has referred to this distance between the individual and the host culture and has suggested that the greater this
distance is, the harder it is for individuals to interact with those that can provide help with
the acculturation process (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, 1993b) depriving the individuals of
the skills and customs they need in order to function effectively within the host culture.
It has also been suggested that in terms of students who have made voluntary contact
with and have high mobility within the host culture, there is a willingness to eliminate
this distance (Berry, 1990). This study showed similar results regarding the participants’
willingness to eliminate the distance between themselves and the host culture. Similar to
what earlier literature has suggested, participants of this study reported being drawn
inwards at times because they felt distant from the host culture due to its being inherently
different from their own and not being able to determine the meaning of certain cultural
cues regarding sincerity, genuine interest, and cultural values and understanding.

Research has shown that personality characteristics play an important role in the
adjustment and acculturation process as well as the stress management process associated
with challenges regarding living and studying abroad (Brown & Brown, 2013; Lombard,
2014; Ward, 2009). Nianzu noted that “sometimes [he] is shy and nervous” and as a
result, there were times that he did not want to talk to anyone. Even though he knew it
was not the right approach, he felt that it was more convenient to retreat than to take a
chance and feel embarrassed as a result of being misunderstood. Similarly, Jiao stated
that “[she] is not an outgoing person” and that her shyness stopped her from starting
conversations with members of the host society. These personality traits caused the
participants to, at times, distance themselves from the host culture and to feel socially
isolated. Therefore, this study confirmed findings of earlier literature that emphasizes the
importance of personality traits in dealing with adjustment and stress management while trying to get accustomed to the ways of the host culture. It showed that introverted personality types, as in regular social life, found it more challenging to socially immerse themselves in the host culture.

Wen and Nianzu were apprehensive about socializing with their peers from the host culture because they believed that members of the host society did not have adequate knowledge about the Asian culture and the choices of conversation topics did not meet their social interaction needs. International student literature focusing on culture shock refers to cultural-specific knowledge and skills as well as sociocultural situations (Lombard, 2014) in terms of students’ creating of coping mechanisms where decisions to move forward or draw inward are dependent on a variety of factors. In this case, the participants formed opinions about the host culture after having been socially integrated to a degree and chose to withdraw due to certain sociocultural situations they experienced. Therefore, instead of creating coping mechanisms to remain socially connected to the host society, they isolated themselves from sociocultural situations where they predicted that they would be misunderstood or unaccepted.

According to previous research, establishing relationships primarily with others from one’s own cultural/ethnic group is one of the strategies that international students adopt when dealing with the stress of trying to fit in with their host culture (Singaravelu & Pope, 2007). When they adopt this particular strategy, even though they receive social support from those who share a similar worldview (Kashima & Loh, 2006), it causes the students to become socially ineffective within their educational institutions and the host
society. Unlike earlier literature, this study showed that the participants remained in their own cultural groups not as a coping mechanism, but because they felt that, at times, they had no other choice. Tung-Mei and Tarif were under the impression that members of the host society in general and their American peers in particular did not want to engage in social interactions or conversations with them due to their limited English skills. Therefore, they felt that they had to remain in their own cultural circles where they would be understood and accepted.

Faridah noted that “[she] can’t find anyone to talk to” and that she could not even enter other international student groups for social interaction because they appeared to be close-knit and private. This is a notion that earlier literature has not explored or brought forward since, traditionally, most comparisons are made between the target culture and the international student’s own culture in terms of adaptation, adjustment, and acculturation. However, it is important to note that international students experience sociocultural interactions with multiple diverse groups that exist within the host culture. Even though it may appear as though ESL centers that host a variety of students from different cultures can be highly inducive to cross-cultural communication, this study has shown that it is possible for ESL students to feel isolated from the host culture as well as their peers from other cultures within the institution.

Participants experienced a form of social isolation through prejudice and encounters of discriminatory or racist nature, which are issues that have been repeatedly explored and reported in international student literature (J. Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Sawir et al., 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sodowsky & Plake, 1992).
Previous studies report that such issues leave deep impressions and cause stress, anxiety, isolation, and even depression. However, the participants in this study referred to these as isolated incidents that were unpleasant to experience, yet were without overwhelming psychological effects. They believed that these incidents did not reflect the traditional descriptions of the concepts of institutional racism, harassment, or discriminatory treatment. This study also showed that, unlike earlier literature has suggested, participants did not associate the display of racist remarks with the host culture’s values and that they continued to have positive opinions of members of the host culture that were accompanied by occasional withdrawals from certain social situations. This might mean that the participants were not able to recognize these withdrawals and moments of social isolation as consequences of being exposed to such behavior or that they refused to acknowledge the negative connotations of this reported behavior because of their general positive outlook on the members of the host culture based on their overall interactions.

Malik and Miraj talked about incidents where they were directly targeted by the members of the host society in social settings and verbally harassed with remarks regarding their race. In addition, Miraj mentioned an incident that took place on Halloween with a member of the host culture dressed as an Arab man with guns around his neck, which clearly went beyond cultural appropriation. Similarly, Yin noted an incident where she was told to “go home” by a member of the host culture with more remarks including profanity that targeted her race. However, all three participants regarded these individuals as “rude,” “childish,” “ignorant,” and “immature” and stated that these stemmed from lack of knowledge rather than negative attitudes towards their
race. Therefore, they believed that if Americans took the time to learn about other cultures, they would not engage in such behaviors. Nevertheless, they still expressed feelings of discomfort, uneasiness, sadness, and isolation as a result of these experiences and showed a change in behavior, such as staying away from places where similar incidents might happen and change in attitude in terms of feeling unwanted and unwelcome.

Lack of institutional social activities presented itself as an aspect that contributed to the participants’ social isolation from the host culture. It is important for international students in general and ESL students in particular to go through a smooth transition phase that leads to adaptation and adjustment. Educational institutions are believed to have a responsibility in this process in terms of providing social activities (McDonald, 2014; Murphy, Hawkes, & Law, 2002; Sawir et al., 2007; Schweitzer, 1996) such as orientations, social events inside and outside of school, and community projects involving members of the host society. Student orientations are a prevalent activity organized by most institutions; however, social activities with a wider spectrum can differ from institution to institution. Additionally, literature has shown that international students do not necessarily join these activities frequently and that they might not even be aware of their existence (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

Miraj, Jiao, and Nadirah stated that they had expected the ESL Center to organize social activities where they would be able to socialize with members of the host culture. They believed that since they did not have the power or the means to organize such events, it was the ESL Center’s responsibility. Yin and Kamil mentioned that such
activities could help international students to learn about the host culture and to introduce their own culture, which, in turn, can create harmony and understanding. They felt that the absence of such social activities and gatherings that could be organized by the ESL Center was causing them to “sit at home and not do anything.” However, as the observations showed, the social events and activities organized or promoted by the ESL Center received minimal attendance by the ESL students based on two main reasons: students could not find transportation to go the event and they found some of the events “boring” and uninteresting. Therefore, this study confirmed the assertions of earlier research in terms of the importance of social events and gatherings organized by the host institution by showing that the participants had expectations from the ESL center they were members of to help them with their transition and sociocultural adjustment. However, it also revealed that the existence of such events did not necessarily lead to satisfaction on part of the participants. This might mean that the opinions and suggestions of ESL learners can be taken into consideration before organizing such events in order to maximize the efficiency, productivity, and satisfaction.

Social isolation from the host culture appeared to be a series of moments triggered by internal and external factors at varying degrees of seriousness rather than a constant state or a continuous phase that participants could not get out of. However, participants reported feelings of being an outsider, needing to be understood, hesitating to communicate with members of the host culture, and finding comfort in the familiar, which were the effects of becoming socio-culturally distanced from the host culture they were trying to become a part of.
Lack of Immediate and Continuous Emotional Support

Participants agreed that the lack of immediate and continuous emotional support had negative effects on their lives and overall well-being. The effects of not being able to access familiar support systems were felt deeply during their first month in the U.S., which they referred to as the “hardest time.” As they experienced moments where they felt the need to communicate with loved ones who knew how to listen and react in familiar, comforting, and reassuring ways, they felt lonely and anxious because they were not able to establish that specific immediate and continuous communication. Lastly, the participants discussed a need for empathy and understanding as they expected the host culture to take into consideration notions such as sociocultural differences and language barriers during communication.

International student literature has repeatedly addressed the issues of needing emotional support, experiencing loneliness and anxiety, creating coping mechanisms, longing for the loved ones that are left behind, and seeking familiar social networks (Bradley, 2000; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Msengi, 2007; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Sawir et al., 2008; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). It is suggested that international students grieve the loss of established social networks that provide them with emotional support and social reassurance. It is also reported that being deprived of these familiar social support networks causes the students to feel lonely, anxious, and depressed and in some cases to experience more serious mental health problems (J.-S. Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Mori, 2000). The findings in this study were in agreement with existing literature in terms of the effects of the loss of
familiar social networks and the need for emotional support. Participants reported their needs to reestablish the familiar connections they had with their families and other social support networks in order to cope more effectively in their new setting. Similarly, participants’ accounts showed that they were battling feelings of loneliness and anxiety due to the lack of immediate and continuous emotional support. Unlike the findings of earlier research studies, the participants did not report clinical depression or deep depressed feelings. It appeared that the sense of confidence and independence participants had been experiencing was also providing them with a newly established support system that did not necessarily replace their families and loved ones, but certainly gave them the encouragement to continue with their endeavors. Similarly, even though international and ESL students have been depicted as susceptible to feeling the effects of the loss of familiar emotional support systems deeply and experiencing a range of psychological and mental setbacks, no further issues concerning mental health were reported by the participants of this study.

Nadirah and Miraj discussed how they needed to talk to someone from their immediate families in times of stress and with regards to problems they were having. They mentioned that because these individuals knew them at a deep level, the process of explaining what was going on in detail would be eliminated and there would be more immediate gratification through understanding, reassurance, and encouragement. Additionally, Yin and Wen stated that they “miss [their] friends” because they could “talk about anything” and that their friends knew them well. They could not find the same type of satisfaction from their relationships with members of the host society and their
peers in school. It can be concluded that they were missing the familiar context in which they felt understood and unjudged and where they could be themselves without the added pressure of trying to explain themselves in another language.

As stated earlier in the chapter, earlier studies have identified the removal of the familiar as a problematic entity in terms of international students’ encounters with anxiety and stress in relation to academic performance (Sumer et al., 2008). This study showed that even though the participants did not report suffering from poor academic performance due to the loss of familiar social and emotional networks and support systems, they expressed the need to reconnect with these systems in order to feel a sense of encouragement, reassurance, and strength. Therefore, this study found different perceptions as to the relationship between academic performance and loss of familiar social and emotional networks in comparison to previous studies. Participants continued to academically prevail, even at times of hardship and trouble, but would have preferred to have the encouragement and support of family and loved ones to make the process more bearable.

As previously stated, the participants referred to the first month of being in the U.S. as “the hardest time.” International student literature describes several perspectives and models regarding the culture shock, transition, and adjustment periods (L. Brown & Holloway, 2008). Proposed models for culture shock and adjustment (Adler, 1975; H. D. Brown, 1980; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1960; Lysgaard, 1955; Mohamed, 1997; Oberg, 1960; Torbiorn, 1994) all depict the initial stage as a time of excitement, euphoria, and fascination followed by loneliness, confusion, maladjustment, homesickness, and
estrangement. According to Searle and Ward (1990), there is not enough empirical evidence to suggest that the initial excitement stage actually exists. Participants’ accounts in this study did not coincide with the proposed models of culture shock and transition where the initial stage consists of positive feelings and attitudes. There were no reports of excitement about this new journey the participants were embarking on or of fascination with the host culture they were familiarizing themselves with. All participants referred to their first month in the U.S. as a time defined by hardship, loneliness, anxiety, estrangement, and confusion. Therefore, the second stage suggested by the proposed models of culture shock and adjustment presented itself as the first stage in this study. It is possible that the anxiety and uneasiness that shaped the participants’ perceptions of the initial stages of their experiences as ESL students overshadowed or simply eliminated any positive feelings that could have surfaced as a result of getting closer to achieving a goal they had set for themselves.

Faridah and Nianzu stated that they felt disappointed, discouraged, and unmotivated upon arrival and mentioned that they “hated the first month” and that it was the “hardest time” for them. Jiao and Tarif mentioned that the first month was “the worst” and that they needed someone familiar to talk to about what they were going through. They were striving to adjust to the unfamiliar environment and establish their presence as individuals while trying to find accommodations, understand the school culture, and deal with language challenges. Their accounts showed that their transition period started off with increased stress levels and frustration instead of excitement and fascination unlike what literature has suggested. As stated earlier, literature about culture
shock refers to these reported feelings as part of experiencing culture shock even though it does not agree with the findings of this study as to when these feelings are experienced. Participants of this study did not report experiencing culture shock even though they experienced feelings related to the phenomenon. This could be attributed to the fact that the world is more interconnected than ever and international and ESL students travel to places having acquired information and become somewhat familiar with what they might find. It is possible that they are associating some elements of culture, such as arts, entertainment, sports, food, and tourism with what a culture truly entails in reality with its more complex structures. These elements represent patterns symbolic of what can be found on social media sites and on entertainment platforms such as movies and TV shows. Therefore, participants’ perception of the lack of culture shock could be due to the fact that they are referring to surface levels cultural elements they were familiar with prior to coming to the U.S.

Battling feelings of loneliness and anxiety emerged as an aspect that was both a result of not having immediate and continuous emotional support and a reason to have such support from familiar social networks. Yin stated that she felt anxious and nervous when she was by herself and had time to reflect on what she was experiencing. Even though she had a roommate who was her best friend, she still felt that she needed the support of those she had known for a much longer period of time. Similarly, Miraj and Malik talked about reaching out to their families and needing their comforting support at times when they felt like they did not belong or they longed for the intimate relationships based on trust and familiarity. The loneliness that the participants reported is in
accordance with Sawir et al.’s (2008) depiction of it to be resulting “from the absence of either intimate personal ties or social ties and social integration of a less intimate kind” (p. 5). Similarly, the anxiety that the participants experienced is described by L. Brown and Holloway (2008) and Furnham (1995) as the mourning of the loss of the familiar and being separated from social networks that provide emotional support in times of stress and frustration. This study rendered similar findings to those of previous studies that connected international students’ loneliness and anxiety to the loss of their familiar social and emotional support systems. It additionally showed that such support is especially needed during the initial stage of the experience of change and it needs to be maintained, even if not in the same intensity, throughout the experience for the participants to find strength and encouragement at times that prove to be more trying in comparison to the rest of the elements of the experience.

Literature has shown that international students seek empathy and understanding from the host culture as well as the members of their educational institution (Brown & Richards, 2011; Sawir et al., 2008; Tran & Pham, 2015). However, the concept of empathy has been explored more frequently in terms of teachers and other educational staff. Studies regarding empathy have focused on the entity as an interpersonal trait that affects the adjustment process and investigated it by comparing the empathy levels of the visitors and the hosts (Demes & Geeraert, 2015). Other studies have looked into how international students’ empathy, sensitivity, and openness to the host culture affect their adjustment and acculturation process (Matsumoto et al., 2002; Tran & Pham, 2015).
This study found that participants expected empathy and understanding from members of the host culture in addition to their teachers and administrators. In fact, they were more concerned with being understood by the local people than they were with receiving empathy from their instructors. Tarif and Nadirah mentioned that they hoped Americans to be understanding and to think that mistakes are normal in cross-cultural communication. Both participants were expressively confident and happy, yet there were times that they expected sensitivity and empathy. Such times were when they had issues with explaining their points, justifying a culture-specific action, or simply needing a break from their everyday lives that required emotional effort continuously. Tung-Mei was the only participant who mentioned that it was important for the ESL students to have empathy for the members of the host culture and the American students. She believed that the host culture was experiencing an adjustment period with international students because they were not familiar with the new cultures they were coming into contact with. This is seen as a construct that can help international students adjust to their new environment (Håkansson & Montgomery, 2003; Matsumoto, Hirayama, & LeRoux, 2006) since they will be able to form positive attitudes towards the host culture by employing empathy and understanding in their interactions.

Participants perceived and longed for familiar emotional support as a coping mechanism to help with manifestations of vulnerability, insecurity, loneliness, despair, and confusion. Therefore, the lack of immediate and continuous emotional support presented itself as a common issue among participants that affected their adaptation and adjustment process negatively.
Language Barriers

Participants faced language barriers in terms of being categorized under an ESL label, having a fear of making mistakes when communicating, and feeling uncomfortable with the idea of asking for help with basic needs. Participants’ beliefs about achievement, social image, and abilities shaped the way they struggled with second language related issues. Even though language barriers in an authentic second language learning setting are an expected and inherent part of the ESL learning process, the manifestation of participants’ attitudes was related to self-image and saving face.

Being categorized under an ESL label has proven to be problematic and even traumatic for immigrant and nonimmigrant language learners (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008). The issue of being labeled as ESL falls under the concept of identity in second language learning (Brown & Brown, 2013; Giddens, 1991; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013; Zhou et al., 2013). As students negotiate their new social and cultural identities in a new setting, they also try to maintain internalized aspects of how they see the world. Therefore, while struggling to understand and accept new aspects of their identities, a label that potentially places them in a category of learners whose abilities are questionable comes across as problematic and unwanted.

In this study, participants’ reactions to the ESL label showed a divide based on where the participants were coming from. The participants from the Middle East showed more acceptance in comparison to the participants from China who expressed concern and dissatisfaction. It is possible that cultural factors played a role in this divide and led the participants to believe that being an ESL student put them in an inferior position.
where their intelligence and skills could be questioned and underestimated. Similarly, these cultural factors could have had more of an impact in terms of potential negative implications in the case of the participants from China. For example, Yin and Nianzu mentioned that they “[did] not like this” because non-ESL and native speakers might think that they are “stupid or [don’t] know anything.” They were worried that the ESL label would reflect negatively in terms of their intellectual capacities and sophistication and associated this label with shame and embarrassment. Tarif and Miraj were more concerned about the barriers that the ESL label built between them and the host culture than they were about the negative self-image it might inflict. They expressed that members of the host culture might be apprehensive about approaching them to have an ordinary conversation because they see them as language learners with limited language skills. Therefore, they did not associate the ESL label with inferiority or questionable intellect; they wanted to be stripped off the label because of how others perceived it.

The fear of making mistakes and being perceived as “stupid” created a language barrier that prevented the participants from taking advantage of communication opportunities and participating in class. The issue of language anxiety has been explored extensively in literature (Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz, Tallon, & Luo, 2009; Liu & Jackson, 2008; MacIntyre, 2007; Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, & Daley, 1999) and resulted in the encouraging of humanistic perspectives, making connections between academic competence and anxiety, pointing to cultural differences and expectations as determinants, and referring to motivation and learner choice to communicate when the opportunity arises.
In this study, the fear of making mistakes manifested itself in terms of apprehension and doubt as to how the participants would be perceived by outsiders. This fear of making mistakes was more dominant in the accounts of the participants from China who seemed to be more concerned about their social image in comparison to their Middle Eastern counterparts. Literature shows that Asian students have a tendency to want to save face and are concerned about maintaining their public image (Major, 2005; Scollon & Scollon, 2000; Xu & Davidhizar, 2005). This notion was confirmed in the current study in the sense that the participants from China were highly expressive about this psychosocial concept that underpinned their communicative behaviors. For instance, Jiao and Wen expressed concerns about being ridiculed by classmates and Americans in social situations where they might use the wrong vocabulary or not understand a question they were being asked. Even when they felt that they had the right answer to a question in class, they stopped themselves from answering in case it was wrong so that the instructor would not have a negative opinion of them being “lazy” or “stupid.” However, Nadirah and Kamil discussed how they became frustrated with themselves when they made mistakes because they knew they were studying hard. There were times that they did not want to ask questions in class because they felt that they must know the answers. As stated earlier, literature on international and ESL students refers to issues of identity in terms of its effects on willingness to communicate (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre et al., 2003). Participants’ hesitations to communicate in certain situations, regardless of where they were from were in accordance with what the literature has
shown in terms of cultural differences in the perception and manifestation of language anxiety and not taking advantage of communication opportunities.

Lastly, participants experienced the negative connotations of language barriers in situations where they failed to achieve basic tasks that they were otherwise able to do without thinking twice. This led to frustration and disappointment, which, in turn, hurt their self-image and identity, especially during the initial phase of living and studying in the U.S. The basic tasks they needed help with included asking for help at the supermarket with certain items, talking to school officials, purchasing books, clothing, and other necessities, learning to use the local public transportation system, and dealing with both regular and urgent housing and maintenance issues. Faridah, Tung-Mei, Malik, and Nianzu expressed feeling frustrated, unenthusiastic, discouraged, and disappointed as a result of having to ask for help with their basic needs. The idea of depending on others’ assistance and relying on others for tasks they were more than capable of doing in their familiar sociocultural settings damaged the participants’ new social and cultural identity building processes.

With their roots in language anxiety and identity building in a second language setting, the concepts of the ESL label, the fear of making mistakes, and the compulsion to receive help for basic needs shaped the participants’ accounts of language barriers. These resulted in the participants making of negative connections between ESL learning and language barriers whereas they could have viewed these as learning and communicating opportunities that could have been ways to accelerate their skill building process instead of hindering it.
Changes in the Perception of the English Language

Participants’ attitudes towards the English language shifted upon arrival in the U.S. as learning it gained more importance due to immediate need. This sudden shift in their thinking was also based on realizing the positive implications of knowing English as well as understanding its value for future endeavors. Participants became aware that mastering the English language would enable them to plan for higher life standards and have access to multiple opportunities. However, even though they confirmed attaching importance to the English language, the same importance did not apply to the meaning given to the language learning process. Participants’ comments suggested that they viewed being in ESL as a means to an end or an obstacle that stood between them and their ultimate goals.

There are no known studies that have explored the modifications in the perception of a language based on lived experience. Similarly, second language learning literature and international student literature have not delved into the realm of changing attitudes towards and meaning of what the target language is for the learners. However, English as a foreign language (EFL) studies have looked into the concepts of language use, attitude, and motivation (Brown, 2000; Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Hubenthal, 2004; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Mori & Gobel, 2006). Since there is no immediate need to use the target language in an EFL setting, it is important to understand the motivations of the learners to learn and use the language and what their attitudes are regarding the importance and relevance of the target language. The participants in this study reported that prior to coming to the U.S., they were not particularly concerned with learning
English. They did not believe that their language classes were important, as they had no way and need of using the language naturally. Becoming ESL learners as opposed to EFL learners and their immediate need for the mastery of English led the participants to prioritize English and to place more value on it. As literature shows, EFL learners do not have the same reasons and motivations as ESL learners and the lack of the immediate need to utilize the target language affects the value they place on it in their daily lives (Nayar, 1997). This notion was supported in this study in the sense that the participants’ EFL experiences resembled those in early EFL literature. For example, Wen, Nadirah, Nianzu, and Tarif stated that they did not take their English classes seriously in their home countries because they did not have an immediate need for the target language; it was not necessary to continue their daily routines. The type of motivation they had was regarding media-based products (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006) and entertainment related domains, which remained at a superficial level during their studies. However, upon arrival in the U.S. and immediately needing the language for survival, their perceptions started to change. They realized that they needed to take learning English seriously due to urgent need, but also because it could provide them with multiple benefits in the long run. They also believed that being able to speak English gave others the impression that one would also be able to tackle other tasks that require the use of the target language and made the learner appear more qualified and capable.

Similar to EFL literature, international student literature has explored the concepts of motivation and language attitude as determinants in the success of the language
learning process (Brown, 2000; Clément et al., 1994; Gardner, 1985, 2001; Hubenthal, 2004; Kim, 2011; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Mori & Gobel, 2006). Positive attitudes towards self, the target language, and the native speakers of the target language enhance proficiency whereas negative attitudes decrease learner motivation and hinder the language learning process’ efficiency (Brown, 2000). As far as motivation is concerned, the two types that apply to this study are extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is based on the presence of an externally mediated activity or constraint whereas intrinsic motivation is based on a sense of fulfillment and personal enjoyment while performing a task which makes the learners more involved and invested (Deci, 1980; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Extrinsically motivated activities are seen as a means to an end where the task is carried out to gain a reward or to avoid a negative consequence. For instance, extrinsically motivated ESL students may say that they are learning English in order to raise their chances of finding a good job (Rubenfeld, Sinclair, & Clément, 2007).

One of the reasons why participants in this study had changing perceptions of the English language was that they realized how mastering this language would allow them to reach for higher life standards, showing that they were extrinsically motivated. Malik, Miraj, and Tarif agreed that English was a necessity to become a global citizen and to have a meaningful presence in social life as well as to plan for a financially secure future through finding a good job. They believed that mastering the English language would put them ahead of their competition in securing a desirable job in or out of their home
countries. Such motivation was extrinsic as they did not express any personal enjoyment regarding the process; only future-related gains.

The same type of motivation was reported in terms of the meaning given to the language learning process, which was seen as a means to an end and an obstacle they needed to conquer in order to reach their actual goals. Tung-Mei, Kamil, and Yin discussed that they found the process to be uninteresting and “boring” and felt that “it [took] too much time.” They acknowledged the importance of English in their current and future lives, yet expressed negative feelings regarding the process of acquiring it. They expressed boredom and disassociation, especially towards their nearing ESL release dates. Since all participants were in advanced levels, they were expecting to be released soon which could partially explain why their attitudes towards the language learning process became even more negative.

Now that English had become a fundamental part of the participants’ social and academic lives, they had started to place more value on it and noticed a shift in their perceptions of it. They showed optimism about the opportunities learning English would provide them; however, they reported a sense of disassociation and boredom from the language learning process in terms of learning English as a second language in this authentic setting. They stated that they did not enjoy the language learning process as much as they enjoyed using the target language and the benefits it was bound to bring them in the future. Somehow, they failed to make the connection between the process and their ultimate goal and viewed the two as unrelated notions where the process or even the mastery of the English language was simply a means to an end.
Teachers and Teaching Styles

Teachers and their varying teaching styles were reported as determinants of how the participants experienced the ESL program in which they were enrolled. All participants came from teacher-centered and traditional approaches to teaching and learning. They referred to their former teachers as strict, unapproachable, and intimidating and indicated that they were not encouraged to ask questions and were not allowed to question their teachers’ decisions. They perceived their current ESL teachers to be friendly, approachable, and easy going and their teaching styles to be student-centered and open to negotiation.

A number of studies have explored the idea of teaching styles in the EFL setting in terms of anxiety, language stress, learner attitude, and willingness to communicate (Arnold & Brown, 1999; Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Gregersen, 2003; Hurd, 2007a, 2007b; MacIntyre et al., 2003). However, little attention has been given to teachers’ teaching styles and how they affect students’ learning, motivation, and willingness to communicate in the ESL setting. There are also studies that have delved into topics such as teacher-centered versus learner-centered approaches, but one cannot come across such studies in the ESL literature realm. The existing literature on teaching styles generally refers to Grasha’s (1994, 1996, 2002) proposed teaching style model which consists of five styles, namely: expert, formal authority, personal model, facilitator, and delegator.

Participants’ accounts showed that they preferred the teaching styles they had experienced in the U.S. to the ones they were accustomed to in their home countries. For instance, Faridah, Yin, and Kamil referred to their former teachers as strict and
unapproachable and stated that their ESL teachers were friendly and easy to talk to. They showed appreciation for the fact that they could approach their ESL teachers with an issue without the fear of being punished for questioning a grade or asking them to clarify a point. Cao (2011) found that when students like their teacher, they are willing to ask questions and actively participate. Since the participants enjoyed the teaching styles and methods that were being employed by their teachers, they had formed a liking to their teachers who they saw as friends rather than authoritative figures.

The native versus non-native English-speaking teacher issue has attracted much attention in the field of English language teaching (Ma, 2012; Selvi, 2011). Even though it has not been determined whether native English-speaking teachers have more strengths in comparison to non-native English-speaking teachers in terms of knowledge and skill, there is a socially, academically, and commercially supported misconception that the native speakers constitute the target model for language teaching (Pacek, 2005; Thornbury, 2006). Participants’ accounts contributed to this long-existing debate in terms of their preferences and concerns regarding their ESL teachers. Miraj, Tarif, and Nianzu stated that ESL classes that include authentic linguistic and cultural elements such as speaking with regards to accent reduction and slang, and American culture with regards to sociocultural elements needed to be taught by individuals whose native language is English. However, they also suggested that grammar classes should be taught by non-native English speaking teachers who had to learn the rules that govern the language because they believed that such a teacher would be more in control of the subject matter. Nadirah and Jiao discussed how they perceived non-native speaking
teachers to have more empathy and understanding towards international students in comparison to their native speaking counterparts since the non-native speaking teachers lived the same experience of learning a foreign or second language like the participants. The points made by the participants have been mentioned in ESL literature in terms of student preference regarding native and non-native English speaking teachers.

Participants’ experiences were clearly affected by their teachers and the teaching styles they encountered. They appreciated the fact that they were able to communicate openly with their teachers regarding any issue since they had built a sense of trust based on the friendly demeanors of their teachers. Participants’ comments showed that they came from teacher-centered, traditional approaches to teaching whereas their current ESL program employed a student-centered approach focused on comprehension and communication, which the participants appeared to prefer. Their accounts supported the ESL literature that has focused on the distinctions between native and non-native English speaking teachers.

**Implications of the Study**

The current study has implications for current and future ESL teachers, ESL center and program administrators, and institutions with international student populations situated in settings where English is the native language. This study draws on multiple aspects of the ESL experience and demonstrates how each aspect plays a vital role in the participants’ overall meaning making and understanding of what it means to be an ESL learner at a college-level ESL program. It presents the big picture of the ESL experience through the analysis of the key elements that were discussed by the participants as a
series of defining, impression-leaving, and life-altering moments and processes. It also gives voice to a substantial learner population whose overall experiences have not been explored in detail.

This study showed that the ESL learners were able to construct a positive self-image by realizing that they had become independent, empowered, confident, liberated, and self-sufficient as a result of living and studying in the U.S. Even though they acknowledged the hardships and obstacles they faced, they appreciated and embraced the positive effects these had on their identities and outlook on their current and future situations. This shows that ESL learners have some truly transformative experiences that seem to outweigh the negative impacts of the transition process they go through. It implies that the traditional views of international and ESL students’ identity building processes and experiences that have pointed out the negative effects can be challenged in the sense that these populations have the potential to benefit from this process of change. Therefore, this notion that they can look forward to along with the fact that they have taken on a challenge not everyone would be willing to could be reminded and reinforced periodically in order to provide support and encouragement. Inspiring these learners to reflect on their own achievements, big or small, can provide them with an easier adaptation and acculturation process. This can be achieved by providers of education and practitioners involved in the teaching of ESL.

The study revealed that the sociocultural understandings and perceptions of certain concepts affect the way ESL learners experience and perceive them within the host culture. Additionally, it showed that regardless of how strongly they might feel or
associate their identities with concepts like family, social networks, and sociocultural belonging, they still find or build elements of themselves within the host culture and are able to create a bond that carries them through the entire process. This implies that the loss of identity that literature has referred to does not have to dictate what ESL learners experience in terms of identity crisis; it shows that such internalized concepts can be maintained with minor modifications to their manifestations while building positive character traits inspired by new elements experienced within the host culture. Therefore, it is important to take notice of the elements in the target culture that can help ESL students to make strong connections and engage in meaningful interactions. This can allow current and future educators and administrators at ESL institutions to make sense of the transition process these learners are going through and highlight aspects of the host culture that can promote a healthier and more effective adaptation period.

It was also revealed that the traditional views on Eastern and Western cultures being categorized as collectivistic and individualistic might need to be reevaluated in light of the globalized world that has profound effects on younger generations. Even though Asian cultures in general and the Chinese culture in particular are known to be collectivistic (Xu & Davidhizar, 2005), Chinese participants’ accounts showed that their perception of family did not reflect the traditional understanding of the concept within the culture. All participants from China expressed a strong desire to be away from their families because they felt like their parents did not understand them and could not relate to their wishes and goals in life. One could argue that this could simply be interpreted as youth rebellion, but the decisions these participants were making and the short and long
term goals they were setting for themselves along with the way they were explaining their reasoning made it clear that they were mature enough to analyze and assess their situations. This implies that a new element in terms of motivation to study abroad has been introduced to the field as far as changing cultural norms are concerned on a generational level shaped by globalization. Generation gaps are important to note for institutions with international student populations in general and ESL students in particular as these institutions host students who have expectations of globalized educational practices. Even though these generation gaps are partial products of younger generations learning new languages, traditional views of collectivistic and individualistic cultures might be prone to alteration simply because incoming non-immigrant ESL student populations bring with them globalized views of the interconnected world in which they live.

The ESL learners in this study reported that they had negative assumptions regarding the way they were perceived by members of the host society and that they experienced some isolated events that led them to withdraw and avoid similar social situations. They felt that members of the host society did not possess enough knowledge about their culture, which created a social connection barrier. This implies that it might be helpful for ESL teachers to familiarize themselves about the cultures of the incoming student population based on current and projected enrollment in order to create a bridge between the learners and the educators they come into contact with on a regular basis. If the learners see that some members of the host institution know about their cultures, this can project on a larger scale and make the learners realize that they are linked to the host
society through their teachers, at least at the beginning of their process. It is also possible for ESL institutions to host small seminars or webinars to talk about some key cultural aspects of incoming student populations in order to better equip the teachers and to create a welcoming atmosphere.

Learners also mentioned that they wanted to share their cultures with locals and their peers at the university because they believed it would create a bond and a social connection as well as cultural awareness and understanding. They also reported that they expected the ESL Center to organize social events and gatherings to assist them with their social integration into the host society. This shows that ESL learners should be given opportunities to share knowledge about their own cultures as it will help them with social integration if they believe that the target culture no longer sees them as “outsiders” and “different people” they are apprehensive to approach. This can be achieved by creating presentation opportunities and social international events at school that members of the community can join, as well. As one of the participants, Faridah, told the researcher, the interviews were “the most English [she] spoke with anyone.” It is important to create authentic language practicing opportunities and intercultural contact opportunities for these learners where they can interact with members of the host culture. Since ESL learners are not isolated from the communities they reside in, it can be beneficial to find ways of involving members of the target culture for meaningful and authentic communication opportunities.

As the interviews and the observations showed, teachers allowed students to determine which group they wanted to be in for in-class group work. Even though it is
important to let the students make such decisions, it also lets them remain in their sociocultural groups during class, which allows them to continue using their native languages and not English. Perhaps ESL teachers can create groupings in situations where learners keep falling into the dangerous comfort of remaining in their own cultural groups and deliberately place students in groups where they can interact with their peers from other cultures.

In terms of instances where ESL learners faced prejudice and race-based social distress, their interpretations of the situations demonstrated that they attributed such behavior to the host society’s lack of knowledge and experience with their culture. Even though some incidents displayed xenophobia and intolerance, participants did not acknowledge them as so. They did not believe that such behavior was racist; only rude and inappropriate. It is possible that the concept of racism in these ESL learners’ cultures might be perceived differently than it is in the U.S. culture. Another explanation for their interpretation could be that they have an optimistic view towards the host culture and refuse to believe that people can harbor such negative feelings with no logical reason; they could be justifying such actions by thinking it is a matter of a lack of intercultural connection. However, the fact that the isolated incidents they faced made them start to avoid the settings where these incidents took place and refrain from initiating conversations at times with members of the host culture implies that the participants were indeed affected by this particular aspect of their experiences. Therefore, a collective effort from administrators, faculty, and even counselors to educate U.S. students about
other cultures could help to eliminate some of the intercultural friction and misunderstanding between the two parties.

This study found that the culture shock and adaptation processes did not follow the typical stages proposed in models (Adler, 1975; Brown, 1980; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1960; Lysgaard, 1955; Mohamed, 1997; Oberg, 1960; Torbiorn, 1994) where the initial stage is presented as a time of awe, excitement, and hopefulness followed by confusion, homesickness, and loneliness. Given that the participants referred to their first month as the hardest time period of their experience instead of it being a time of excitement and fascination like earlier literature has suggested, it is important to be proactive about providing initial and immediate support to the ESL learners who have been deprived of their established social networks. As this lack of immediate and continuous emotional support affected the participants in terms of dealing with daily challenges and conflicts, it is important for faculty and administrators to take this into consideration when they analyzing situations that involves international students who do not have a regular access to their usual systems of support, encouragement, and understanding. Since ESL learners struggle with feelings of loneliness and anxiety and expect empathy and understanding, it is crucial for members of the host culture as well as faculty members and administrators to understand the reasons behind these emotions. Their actions can determine, to a degree, whether these learners feel welcomed and understood by the host institution and the host society.

The current study revealed that language barriers carried deeper meanings and implications for ESL learners than the surface level obstacles related to communication
for survival purposes. As these learners were constructing new identities in a second language, they were enduring “growing pains” in terms of self-doubt, fear of social ridicule, and inadequacy. They were not fond of being labeled as ESL students because they believed that it would give people the impression that they were intellectually inferior to their counterparts who were enrolled in regular classes. They preferred to hide this aspect of their social identities from people unless they were specifically inquired about it. For similar reasons related to coming across as “stupid,” they showed signs of language anxiety through a fear of making mistakes in and outside the classroom. Additionally, the fact that they had to get help with their basic needs due to limited language skills made them feel inadequate and as though they were in state of regression. All these insecurities and hesitations brought on by language barriers with the added pressure of assuming that they would be judged by those who did not know them personally made the participants doubt themselves and their capabilities, even if for short periods of time. This implies that the stress of ESL process is not limited to the linguistic and mechanical issues that are simply a given when learning a new language in an authentic setting; it shows that ESL learners struggle with deeper and personal issues that can have a negative impact on their self-esteem and even self-worth. Therefore, it is important to reassure them that living and studying in a country where they have not mastered the native language is indeed a challenging task not everyone would want to take on. Since they lack their usual support systems and social networks, it is partially up to the faculty, administrators, and the educational institutions to help make these learners remember that there is help and support available. It is also important to note that the
participants did not want to seek counseling or other psychological services, which could be due to cultural beliefs or social norms. Therefore, it is imperative that they are informed and educated about professional help and its role in today’s society where many people experience stress and anxiety.

The changes in participants’ perceptions of the English language were a result of their immediate need for the language for survival and the realization that it would help them attain higher life standards. However, they perceived the ESL learning process as a means to an end and an obstacle standing between them and their ultimate goals. Even though participants referred to English as “very important” and “necessary,” their justifications were almost always linked to a financially secure future with the exception of a few comments regarding becoming global citizens and did not involve any intrinsically motivated accounts. They were enjoying the cultural, social, and pragmatic benefits of learning a new language, yet they found the process of it daunting and unnecessarily long. This could be because of the negative feelings attached to the experience and the assumption that they will diminish by enrolling in regular college classes and becoming a part of the college student population instead of “being stuck in purgatory.” However, as literature has shown, international students enrolled in regular classes experience similar struggles and emotions (Ujitani & Volet, 2008). Therefore, it is important to create enjoyable learning experiences while reminding the students that their time in the ESL program offers valuable insight and a chance to observe and adjust to the host culture. Acknowledging their achievements and showing support can also help them associate the process with constructive emotions.
The ESL learners in this study compared their EFL experiences and their general schooling experiences to their ESL experiences in terms of the teaching styles they were exposed to and they all agreed that they had a preference for the teaching styles and approaches their ESL teachers had employed. The student-centered and interactive communicative language teaching approach that the ESL Center used was inherently different from the teacher-centered traditional approaches that the learners were accustomed to. In addition, participants in this study found their ESL teachers to be approachable, friendly, reasonable, caring, flexible, and relaxed whereas they referred to their former teachers as strict, unapproachable, intimidating, and unreasonable. This perception can be an entity to capitalize on as it is a crucial aspect of the learning experience that can affect the overall experience of ESL learners. It is important to understand the specific elements of the preferred teaching styles and further explore their benefits and advantages for incoming international student populations. Current and future ESL teachers and other members of ESL institutions can take this notion into consideration while designing the framework for ESL classes as well as engaging in teaching styles to which the ESL learners will respond positively.

Lastly, the native and non-native English speaking ESL teacher debate was addressed in the study in terms of learner preference. Participants suggested that they would prefer to take grammar classes from NNESTs because they perceived these teachers’ knowledge of grammatical rules to be superior to their counterparts. This assumption could be based on the fact that EFL settings are traditionally known to employ grammar-based language instruction. Additionally, participants showed a
preference for NESTs to teach classes that involved sociocultural aspects such as the American culture class because they believed that only an American would have full command of the subject matter as they would be the expert and the speaking class where they did not want to learn about accent reduction from a teacher who had an accent himself or herself. Even though there is no empirical evidence to suggest that one group is superior to the other in certain aspects, there is a common assumption that NESTs might be the better choice for teaching English because they are seen as subject matter experts (Braine, 1999). Participants were also under the impression that NNESTs had more empathy for them than their counterparts did because they had been through similar experiences with learning a language. Assumptions and perceptions such as these are important in shaping the ESL experience as even though they cannot be analyzed in separation from individuals, they tend to be held by learners as though they apply to general teacher populations even without empirical evidence. Therefore, institutions and faculty members can try to blur the lines that cause these generalizations by analyzing their teaching methods and approaches and engaging in self-reflection to determine what might be contributing to this phenomenon.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Since this study aimed at uncovering the overall experiences of ESL learners as they went through a college-level ESL program, it yielded several outcomes that can be explored further in future research. Moreover, variations of the current study can provide additional research opportunities as the scope of the study allows for a wide range of matters with its focus on the multiple aspects of the ESL experience.
The participants in this study were from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and China and some aspects of the key findings appeared to be shaped by the cultural differences between the Middle Eastern participants and the Asian participants. Therefore, a variation of the study could be conducted to explore the experiences of specific cultures or nationalities. For instance, the perception of family played an important role in Chinese ESL learners’ decision-making process in terms of being a motivator to study in the U.S. One of the reasons for becoming ESL learners in the U.S. was that the Chinese participants wanted physical distance between themselves and their parents. They felt that their parents and immediate family members were trying to control their lives and were not capable of understanding them. On the contrary, moving away from family was not a determinant for Middle Eastern participants’ decisions to study in the U.S. Therefore, the study can be replicated in terms of overall experiences of specific cultures and nationalities to explore in detail and to arrive at deeper cultural implications. Similarly, a variation of the current research study can be conducted in terms of a wider range of cultures and nationalities than what was available to compare the elements of experience that vary or coincide cross-culturally.

This study took place over the course of one academic semester. Another variation of the current research study can be based on the amount of time that the participants spend as ESL learners. A longitudinal study can be conducted to document the ESL experience from the beginning to the end of an ESL program. For instance, using a similar three-interview design, participants can be interviewed at the beginning, the middle, and the end of each year of their ESL programs instead of having to ask them
to recall memories from the earlier times of their experience. As a result, a more robust representation of the overall experience can be rendered. Similarly, the same research questions can be explored by using a case study design with fewer participants and by following the participants more in depth throughout their entire ESL journey.

This study did not directly refer to the ESL center in which it took place as a central element with its own dynamics and culture. Therefore, the study can be replicated by doing an interpretative analysis ahead of time to determine the cultural elements of the institution in order to establish a connection between the overall ESL experience and the ESL institution. Since the ESL institution constitutes a crucial portion of the ESL experience for ESL learners, it can be beneficial to understand how the culture of an ESL institution can affect its learners’ attitudes towards and perceptions of what it means to be an ESL student.

The current study yielded six key findings that are both substantial and crucial in terms of understanding the overall ESL experience. The particular key findings of this study can be examined further as individual follow-up studies. For instance, a future follow-up study can focus on the effects of language barriers on ESL learners’ self-perception and self-representation. Since the participants associated having language barriers with perceived inferior intellectual abilities, shame and embarrassment, low self-esteem, and frustration with oneself, a future follow-up study can explore identity building and negative self-image in ESL experience and can provide insight into how negative associations can be reduced while reinforcing positive ones. Similarly, a study can further examine the perceived lack of immediate and continuous emotional support
and its negative effects on ESL learners’ overall experience. This can be done while exploring the reasons why ESL learners are not inclined to seek professional help or counseling to somewhat fill the void left by the removal of established social networks. Even a further step can be added in terms of cultural differences in attitudes towards receiving counseling and guidance from professionals. Moreover, the concept of social isolation from the host culture can be explored in terms of external and internal factors to determine which group of factors is the stronger determinant in ESL learners’ social integration into their ESL settings.

This study was conducted within a community where the participants did not have access to established minority or ethnic communities with whom they could associate. The university where the ESL center was located did indeed host culture-specific organizations, but the participants were not aware of these or the ones they could associate with were not highly active in organizing events and gatherings. Also, the community where the study was conducted could be regarded as neutral and friendly in terms of cross-cultural relationships. A future research study could be done in an ESL context being affected by different factors. In areas that have more established cultural and ethnic communities, ESL learners’ experience may vary if one of those communities is theirs. For instance, an area with an established local Arab community can provide an element to the Arab ESL learners’ experience that the current study did not uncover. Similarly, colleges or universities with more functional and active culture-specific student organizations might introduce another aspect to the overall ESL experience where the ESL learners have more opportunities to be active members of a social group that is
already integrated in the social setting. Certainly, different settings can yield varying results in terms of ESL learners’ meaning making of their experiences. One example would be in terms of prejudice and encounters of discriminatory or racist nature where the attitudes of the local community can affect the way ESL learners experience such matters.

None of the Chinese participants in this study were older than 22, which could have introduced a generational aspect that an older generation might not possess due to being affected by globalization differently and perhaps not as intensely. A future study could be conducted to compare age groups in terms of cultural understandings and perceptions of the ESL experience. As this study showed, even though Asian cultures are known to be traditionally collectivistic, the participants from China displayed individualistic behaviors and attitudes. This phenomenon can be explored on its own. However, it would also create a substantial future research study if age groups were compared in terms of their perceptions. Comparing a younger generation of Chinese or any other specific cultural ESL group to an older generation ESL group might shed light on whether traditional understandings of collectivistic and individualistic cultures still apply in a globalized world where some educational and professional motivations and goals are being set around new and changing values and norms.

In this study, all participants had future goals that involved continuing to be in an ESL setting. A similar study with a different type of ESL learner profile can be done to determine how ESL experience is shaped when learners do not have further goals that involve an ESL setting. In other words, a future study can explore the experiences of
ESL learners who will not continue their studies or lives in the ESL setting upon completion of the ESL program. This would mean that they will not become international students and enroll in regular classes and that they will either return to their home countries or move on to other settings where the English language is not a necessity for survival. This difference can shape their experiences in terms of motivation for academic success, stress and anxiety, need for emotional support, expectations from the institution, stages of culture shock, perception of the English language and the meaning given to the learning process, and several other factors that will take on different meanings when the learner is aware that he or she is in a temporary state.

Lastly, the current study revealed the ramifications of the ESL label that seemed to put pressure on the participants. A future follow-up study can focus on the transition period from the ESL program to mainstream college classes to explore learners’ experiences in this possibly challenging time. Since they are no longer labeled as ESL and have proven mastery of the target language to be eligible to enroll in regular classes, it is expected that the initial phase of transition will render different results in terms of lived and perceived experience. It can be interesting to examine if this phase has similar elements to the ESL experience and whether it is viewed as an extension of ESL or a separate experience unaffected by the factors that play into the ESL experience. An offshoot of such a study could also be conducted with learners who have had ESL experiences and learners who have skipped the ESL stage and enrolled in regular classes upon arrival in the host setting to compare attitudes, perceptions, and other experiential elements.
Research Limitations

As it is the case with all research studies, this study had its limitations. First, since it employed a specific ESL institution, it was limited in the sense that the participants all came from the current student population studying at the same ESL Center. Working with one specific institution prevents us from drawing conclusions about the experiences of ESL students at other institutions.

As far as gender was concerned, it varied somewhat equally with 5 female participants and 6 male participants. However, there were 2 participants from Kuwait, 5 participants from China, and 4 participants from Saudi Arabia representing the Middle East and Asia. Even though this might look like a favorable distribution, participants from a wider range of cultures and nationalities could have provided more sociocultural variability in the findings. Even though the ESL Center had students from other countries, as well, they did not volunteer to take part in the study.

Another limitation was that the participants, having been in the ESL program for a while, between 12 to 24 months, were asked to recall and reflect on experiences that had taken place prior to the initial interview. In other words, some time had elapsed since the participants had had the experiences they were describing when asked about their first days in the U.S. This could have had an effect on how the participants remembered their first days and early experiences since they had time to reflect on those experiences over time and remembered them from the point of their experience now as opposed to the moment it happened. As well, examples may have been forgotten about some aspects of their initial experiences or that they might remember them differently because of other
experiences. It should be mentioned here that the notion of reflecting on and conveying what the participants took from the experience could be a variation that is as valid as an initial reaction or reflection provided at the time of the experience.

As can be recalled, prior to the first interview, one participant mentioned that she thought the interviews would be a chance to practice her English speaking skills. Similarly, some participants stated that the interviews gave them an opportunity to speak English more than they had been able to in their ESL classes. Even though the researcher did not get the impression that these particular participants solely wanted to practice their language skills, it is possible that for those who may have wanted time to do so, they might have provided a certain perspective that might be skewed or altered in a way consistent with their motives. In other words, perspectives of such participants might not have been as authentic or unintentional as other participants’ interpretations of their meaning making processes.

The data collection for the current study was conducted over the period of one academic semester. The interviews were spread out equally in terms of time passing in the semester, but it is possible that they might have been conducted too soon from one interview to the next, which might have affected the participants’ reflections upon their experiences. Participants’ accounts of their experiences might have been different had they been given a chance to reflect on each phase as it was happening rather than only as they got closer to being released from the ESL program and being ready to enroll in regular classes.
All participants had EFL experiences, whereas two participants had prior ESL experiences in other ESL settings. These two displayed a tendency to compare those experiences to the one they were having in their current situation. This likely affected their perceptions and meaning making of this particular ESL experience since they might have had specific expectations regarding how learning ESL should be experienced based on their other experience unlike the other participants who experienced this phenomenon for the first time as a major life event. For instance, when talking about social activities organized by the ESL Center, the two participants with prior ESL experiences showed more discontent in comparison to their counterparts because their former ESL institutions had regularly provided social activities and events that had helped them to be more engaged and involved in the ESL process as well as the ESL setting. Therefore, some of their expectations regarding institutional activities were not satisfied as they were comparing their previous experience to their current one.

Finally, it is possible that participants’ English language skills affected their responses to the interview questions in terms of not being able to understand the questions fully and providing answers limited to their vocabulary and articulation abilities defined by second language mastery. When asked to clarify, the researcher provided further explanation and rephrasing of the question. However, as the participants mentioned in the interviews, they could have shied away from asking further questions because they had already asked the researcher to clarify once. In other words, one of the findings in the study was that the participants did not feel comfortable making it known that they were not able to understand a communicative exchange completely and this
could have been one reason for the participants to shy away from asking for further clarification. Additionally, even though all participants were advanced ESL learners, because their vocabulary knowledge was limited, it is possible that they might have hesitated to attempt to explain in further detail some of their examples and that may have led to a less robust set of data for the researcher to draw from. There were instances where the participants needed to translate a word or a phrase using online tools; it is possible that their responses could have been affected by what they read and the examples that are provided by these translation tools.

**Researcher Experience and Reflection**

As I stated in Chapter 3, I believe that a qualitative researcher cannot and should not separate himself or herself from the research study with the intention of acquiring objectivity. Qualitative research revolves around researchers’ interpretations of their participants’ interpretations of their lived experiences. Therefore, researchers’ experiences of the research process takes on meaning and substance as they are the ones making sense of the data before them by relying on other experiences that made them who they are and shaped how they think.

As an ESL instructor and an international graduate student with prior EFL experiences, I had personal connections to the study in many aspects. At the time of the study, I had been living, working, and studying in the U.S. for eight and a half years. I did not identify with the participants during the course of data collection and data analysis, but when I had a chance to step away, reflect, and compare my own experience to the participants, I realized that I could relate more than I thought I would. I was never
an ESL student in the U.S., but some of the findings resonated with me on many levels.

Even though I was constantly engaged in reflection throughout the study, somehow I had managed to categorize myself differently and it allowed me to look at and interpret the data without trying to empathize or relate on a personal level.

Even though I had been teaching ESL classes for seven years by the time I started collecting the data, I had never taken the time to think about my students’ experiences as intensively. I knew that I possessed empathy and understanding, but I had not truly reflected on the times I might have misinterpreted a situation or misunderstood a student. As the observations in this study showed, it is possible for teachers to miss cues and misinterpret a situation such as when a student is looking up a vocabulary word on his or her phone or tablet and the teacher assumes he or she is texting and warns the student harshly. This reminded me and should remind us all that we do not have the luxury to ignore the little signs that could make a major difference in how an ESL learner experiences a particular moment.

Overall, I am truly and genuinely appreciative of the time and effort that the participants put into sharing their stories with me. It was a humbling experience in the sense that it confirmed how much more learning I have to do as a researcher and as an instructor. It was also a reassuring one in that it renewed my faith in the sense of wonderment I have always believed to nurture curiosity.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this research study was to explore the overall experiences of non-immigrant ESL learners at a college-level ESL program. A qualitative research
design informed by phenomenology was employed as it allowed for each participant’s voice to be heard and individual characteristics to come forward while uncovering the common patterns among participants’ unique experiences of what it means to be an ESL learner in an ESL setting. Six key findings with subcategories emerged as elements that the participants’ experiences were built around: developing a more independent sense of self and identity, social isolation from the host culture, lack of immediate and continuous emotional support, language barriers, changes in the perception of the English language, and teachers and teaching styles were the six main emergent themes across participants’ interpretations of their overall ESL experience. All six key findings have the potential to be expanded into future research studies to further explore the relatively under-researched field of ESL populations and their experiences.
APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL
Appendix A
IRB Approval

RE: IRB #13-011 - entitled “How Do Non-immigrant ESL Students Experience a College-level ESL Program?”

I am pleased to inform you that the Kent State University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved your Application for Approval to Use Human Research Participants as a Level II/Expedited, category 6 project. Approval is effective for a twelve-month period:

**January 28, 2013 through January 27, 2014**

*A copy of the IRB approved consent form is attached to this email. This “stamped” copy is the consent form that you must use for your research participants. It is important for you to also keep an unstamped text copy (i.e., Microsoft Word version) of your consent form for subsequent submissions.*

Federal regulations and Kent State University IRB policy require that research be reviewed at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but not less than once per year. The IRB has determined that this protocol requires an annual review and progress report. The IRB tries to send you annual review reminder notice by email as a courtesy.

**However, please note that it is the responsibility of the principal investigator to be aware of the study expiration date and submit the required materials.** Please submit review materials (annual review form and copy of current consent form) one month prior to the expiration date.

HHS regulations and Kent State University Institutional Review Board guidelines require that any changes in research methodology, protocol design, or principal investigator have the prior approval of the IRB before implementation and continuation of the protocol. The IRB must also be informed of any adverse events associated with the study. The IRB further requests a final report at the conclusion of the study.

Kent State University has a Federal Wide Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP); FWA Number 00001853.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 330-672-2704 or pwashko@kent.edu.

Respectfully,
Kevin McCreary | Research Compliance Coordinator
224 Cartwright Hall | fax 330.672.2658

Laurie Kiehl | Research Compliance Assistant | 330.672.0837 | lkiehl@kent.edu
Paulette Washko | Manager, Research Compliance | 330.672.2704 | Pwashko@kent.edu
APPENDIX B

APPROVED CONSENT FORMS
Appendix B

Approved Consent Forms

AUDIOTAPED CONSENT FORM

How do non-immigrant ESL students experience a college-level ESL program?
Deniz Ulu Kaptan

I agree to participate in an audio taped interview about the experiences of non-immigrant ESL students in a college-level ESL program as part of this project and for the purposes of data analysis. I agree that Deniz Ulu Kaptan may audio tape this interview. The date, time and place of the interview will be mutually agreed upon.

Signature __________________ Date __________

I have been told that I have the right to listen to the recording of the interview before it is used. I have decided that I:

_____ want to listen to the recording _____ do not want to listen to the recording

Sign now below if you do not want to listen to the recording. If you want to listen to the recording, you will be asked to sign after listening to it.

Deniz Ulu Kaptan may / may not (circle one) use the audio tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for:

_____ this research project _____ publication _____ presentation at professional meetings

Signature __________________ Date __________
APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT
Appendix C

Recruitment Script

Dissertation Research Project Title: How do Non-Immigrant ESL Students Experience a College-Level ESL Program?

Deniz Ulis Kursun Koptur

*Below is a script for a recruitment conversation with a potential participant.

Hello (Potential participant’s name),

My name is Deniz Ulis Koptur and I am looking for participants for my dissertation. The research study is focused on gaining a deep understanding of the experiences of non-immigrant ESL students enrolled in a college-level ESL program and the meanings that are attached to being an ESL student. Participation would include three, face-to-face, audio-taped interviews lasting around sixty to ninety minutes each; ten to twelve class observations, and collection of writing assignments from your ESL classes. These interviews, observations, and documents would be at your convenience, beginning January 2013 and expected to conclude around May 2013.

To be eligible to participate you must: 1) be a full-time non-immigrant ESL student in a college-level ESL program, 2) be at an advanced level in the ESL program. If you meet these criteria, you are eligible to participate.

Please let me know at your earliest convenience if you are willing to help me in my research.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to me,
Deniz Ulis Koptur
330-389-0534
dkursun@kent.edu
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

I will begin by greeting the participant, thanking them for being part of this project, providing an overview of the goals and content of the project, and obtaining the informed consent. I will remind the participant that she or he has the right to refrain from answering any question that she or he wishes not to. I will let her or him know that she or he can express any concerns at any time and that it will not be held against her or him. At this point, the voice recorder will be turned off. When the participant reads, signs, and hands over the consent form and the audio consent form, I will begin the interview.

Interview 1
Participant Pseudonym:
Date:

1) Could you please start by telling me about yourself?
   a. Can you tell me about your family? Are you here by yourself or are you with any family members?
   b. How important is it to be close to your family?
   c. Can you tell me about your schooling experiences? Your education?
   d. Can you tell me about a typical day here?
   e. How does it differ from your days in your home country?
   f. Can you tell me about things that you enjoy doing? Hobbies?
   g. Have you found any activities that you like since you arrived in the United States?
   h. Do you have any American friends?
   i. Do you prefer to socialize with friends who speak the same language as you?

2) What made you want to learn English? Can you tell me about the reasons?
   a. How important is learning English to you?
   b. What brought you/attracted you to this program? How did you choose this program? Why are these reasons important?
   c. What were your expectations prior to joining this program/coming to the United States?
   d. What were your expectations from learning English?

3) What are some of your initial thoughts and feelings about being an ESL student in this program?
   a. Can you tell me about your first few days in the program? Was it easy to adjust? Did you have a hard time or was it easier than you expected?
   b. How do you like it so far? Does it meet your expectations?
   c. What are some things you wish you could change?
   d. Can you tell me about some things that have surprised you? Any unexpected situations/interactions?
4) What do you know about culture shock?
   a. Do you think you experienced it? If so, how? If not, why?
   b. How do you feel about being an ESL student in the United States?
   c. Could you describe to me, based on what you have experienced so far, what it means to you to be an ESL student?

5) Additional comments/reflections.

Interview 2
Participant Pseudonym:
Date:

1) Could you please tell me about what you have been experiencing since our last interview in terms of studying English and being an ESL student?
   a. (If I have an artifact or if I want to mention an observation, I will do so and inquire about it).
   b. How has the process been so far? Do you feel like you have adjusted?

2) Could you please describe and reflect on an experience that has made an impression on you?
   a. Why was it important? How did it affect you?
   b. Any other instances you can think of?
   c. At this point, I can remind of an instance that I observed during the class observations.

3) Tell me about your relationship with your teachers.
   a. Are they different than your teachers in your home country?
   b. Do you prefer their treatment over your English teachers in your country or vice versa?
   c. What are some things you like about your teachers’ styles?
   d. What are some things you dislike about your teachers’ style?
   e. Do you prefer native speaker teachers’ instructions or nonnative speaker teachers’ instructions? Why?

4) Tell me about your relationship with your classmates.
   a. Can you think of an instance where you were engaged in a high energy interaction and felt empathy?
   b. Can you think of an instance where you felt frustrated and/or misunderstood?
   c. Do you associate any of this with language skills?

5) Tell me about what you think of the environment in general (program, USA, Kent, American friends, international friends, classes, etc.)
   a. Do you wish to be at home right now? Do you feel homesick? Do you compare your experiences here to your experiences in your home country? Social experiences? Educational experiences? Cultural experiences?

6) What does learning English mean to you?
   a. Has it changed meaning since you started the program?
   b. How important is it to you to master the language?
   c. Which uses of English appeal most to you? Social? Formal? Educational?
7) How does this experience compare to your prior experience of learning English?
   a. Which do you prefer? Why? Any advantages/disadvantages you want to mention in terms of both settings and experiences?
8) Could you please describe and reflect on an obstacle/hardship you may have encountered?
   a. How did it affect you?
   b. Why was it important?
   c. How did you deal with it?
   d. Would you have done anything differently if you were in your home country?
9) Additional comments/ reflections.

Interview 3
Participant Pseudonym:
Date:
1) Could you please tell me about your overall experience as an ESL student in this college-level ESL program?
   a. How has the process been so far when you reflect back on it?
2) How do your expectations compare to what you have experienced?
   a. What is something you would have loved to change? Why?
3) How do your previous experiences of learning English compare to this experience?
   a. When you compare the two, which values do you find to be important?
4) Could you describe and reflect on the most powerful instances that shaped this experience for you?
   a. Why were they important?
   b. In what ways did they affect you?
5) What does being an ESL student mean to you now that you have completed a semester in this program?
   a. Do you wish to stay longer? Why? Why not?
6) Why is learning English important?
   a. Does it still have the same significance?
   b. Did anything change? If so, why?
7) Tell me about your final feelings, thoughts, reactions, etc. to being an ESL student in this program.
8) Additional comments/ reflections.
Appendix E

Observation Rubric

Date:

Class Name & Period:

Participants being observed:

Handouts: Yes  No

Handout copies provided for the researcher:  Yes  No

The day’s topic:

Class activities:

Observation Notes:

Notes to Self:
APPENDIX F

RESEARCHER JOURNAL EXCERPT
Appendix F

Researcher Journal Excerpt

Below is an excerpt retyped from the researcher’s handwritten notes in her researcher journal:

Date: April 26

- Observed three classes (see notes)
- J (the instructor of the debate class) seems very shy. I overheard some students comparing him to another instructor. I wonder if J heard it, too. I don’t think he did. Made me feel a little self-conscious about whether my students compare me to other teachers.
- Tarif had a lot of energy today. He got in an argument with another student, but he was smiling the whole time. They ended up laughing it off. I sometimes find myself writing stories in my head – about how this all must be translating in their minds. I wonder how they were in their previous schools – in different environments. I can’t help thinking that they must come from stricter school settings. I could be wrong, but Miraj and a few other participants already told me, during the first interview, that the ESL center has a relaxed atmosphere. When I find myself daydreaming as such, I try to refocus. It’s easy to get lost in a story – watching – speculating – becoming a part of it
- I find myself wanting to help and the instructor told me I can help if I feel like it. I know I must remain in my corner and just take notes, but it is tempting to assist © must be the teacher in me – won’t do it, though…
- It was a nice day. Students seemed happier than usual. Could be the weather.
- After class, I told Nadirah that her 101 Dalmatians example was brilliant. She said she wished she hadn’t said it. She said it was stupid – it was not! I feel like the teacher should have praised her – I would have. I hope this is not because Nadirah is my participant – I hope I’m being objective, but honestly, it was such a great example. We need to give credit to students when they deserve it – it would encourage them to participate and I think they would be happy to know they are doing something right – not trying to criticize the teacher, just an observation =/©
- B (the instructor of the writing class) lets this older gentleman sit in on the class and help with the instruction – apparently, he volunteered because he gets bored at home – he is such a sweet man. The students love him! This class is a little unconventional, but the students seem happy and they are doing their work! I shall no longer question my own weird methods © hehe
- Faridah seemed upset with one of the Saudi girls in her group. I didn’t have time to ask her why after class. I will ask her next time ******* Do Not Forget!
Two Saudi girls told me they wanted to get coffee and chat about my country and my culture. They are not participants in the study – they want my participants to join, as well.

I wonder why some students don’t want to participate – they complete their worksheets – they write whole paragraphs – they just don’t want to participate.
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