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entitled

Exploring Issues of Language Ownership amongst Latino Speakers of ESL

by

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in English

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An Abstract of

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This Master’s thesis seeks to gain further understanding of the issues confronting Latino speakers of ESL with respect to language learning and identity. Specifically, through group and individual interviews that I conducted with Latino immigrants involved with a community-based ESL program in Southeast Michigan, I investigate the factors that shape these individuals’ attitudes towards the English language as well as the ways in which pedagogical practices may foster or impede the development of ownership, confidence, and a positive sense of self in the target language. In the first chapter, I examine how recent applications of poststructuralism in second language acquisition (SLA) research serve as the theoretical underpinnings of the present study. Additionally, I outline some of the social, political, and cultural hegemonies impacting the lives of Latinos living in the United States and how SLA researchers have investigated these as they concern the social aspects of language learning. Chapter Two not only delineates the ethnographic methods I used to carry out the current research, but also aims to describe in detail many of the difficulties I encountered as a novice researcher in the hopes that it may benefit other newcomers to empirical exploration. The third chapter of this paper is dedicated to elucidation and analysis of the insights shared
by interview participants. Amidst findings that life circumstances and the opinions of others (both native English speakers and Hispanic peers) often preclude these individuals from feeling they can take legitimate claim to English, I offer implications for the ESL classroom that may help students to explore their relationship to the language. Lastly, I propose the limitations of my research as well as directions for future inquiries.
I dedicate this thesis to all of my family members. Being a Nedorezov not only made for a very colorful and unique upbringing, but also imparted me with the drive and perseverance to pursue all my dreams. I feel so very blessed to have been born into such an extraordinary family. Equal dedication is given to my husband, soul mate, and biggest supporter, Jordan Edelman. Without his unending love, patience, and encouragement, I could not have mustered the strength to complete this undertaking.
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Table of Contents

Abstract iii
Acknowledgements vi
Table of Contents vii
List of Abbreviations ix
I. Review of Literature 1
   A. Introduction 1
   B. The social nature of language 2
   C. Breaking down the NS/NNS dichotomy 6
   D. The situation of Latinos living in the United States 10
II. Research Methodology 19
   A. Background of the present research 19
   B. Methodological framework 21
   C. Research questions 25
   D. Research place 25
   E. Recruitment of participants 27
   F. Data gathering procedures 30
   G. Participants 33
      a. Group interview participants 33
      b. Julio 34
      c. Daniela 35
   H. Data analysis 36
III. Results 38
A. Findings

a. How are these ESL speakers’ attitudes towards English and their language abilities shaped?  
   i. Views on the importance of English  
   ii. Opportunities to use English  
   iii. Opinions of NESs and Latinos  
   iv. Inability to fully express themselves  
   v. Passing on Spanish to children

b. What pedagogical factors may impede or foster the development of ownership, confidence, and a positive sense of self in the target language?  
   i. Initial experiences learning English  
   ii. Differences amongst students  
   iii. English-only in the classroom  
   iv. Feeling secure in the classroom

B. Discussion and implications  
C. Limitations of research  
D. Future research  
E. Concluding Remarks  

References
List of Abbreviations

EFL ........................... English as a Foreign Language
ELL ........................... English Language Learner
ESL ........................... English as a Second Language
FUMCY ..................... First United Methodist Church of Ypsilanti
L1 ............................ First Language
L2 ............................ Second Language
NS ......................... Native Speaker
NES ......................... Native English Speaker
NEST ....................... Native English Speaking Teacher
NNS ........................ Non-Native Speaker
NNES ........................ Non-Native English Speaker
NNEST ..................... Non-Native English Speaking Teacher
PALMA ..................... Proyecto Avance Latino Mentoring Association
SLA ........................ Second Language Acquisition
TESOL ...................... Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
Chapter One

Review of Literature

Introduction

In recent decades, questions of identity have come to the forefront of scholarly research on language learning and pedagogy. Block (2007) very eloquently describes the underlying motivations of this trend: as he explains, “Concern about such issues has led many scholars to frame identity not as something fixed for life, but as fragmented and contested in nature. In particular, when individuals move across geographical and psychological borders, immersing themselves in new sociocultural environments, they find that their sense of identity is destabilized and that they enter a period of struggle to reach a balance” (p. 864). These points may ring especially true for Hispanic immigrant English language learners (ELLs) living in the United States, whose unique socio-political positioning impacts not only their sense of belonging in American society but also their sense of ownership, or claim to legitimacy as speakers, regarding their abilities in the English language.

The present study makes further inquiries into the relationship between language learning and identity, primarily as it concerns Latino speakers of ESL. Employing techniques of ethnographic research and narrative inquiry, I conducted group interviews amongst adult students at a community-based ESL program run by a church that primarily serves the large Hispanic community in the surrounding area located in Southeast Michigan. Specifically, this investigation seeks to answer the following questions:
1. How are these Latino ESL speakers’ attitudes towards the English language and their own language abilities shaped?

2. What pedagogical factors may impede or foster the development of ownership, confidence, and positive sense of self in the target language?

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are rooted in the poststructuralist tradition, which has become increasingly influential in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) since the 1990s. Largely in part based upon the linguistic philosophies expounded by literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986), among the assumptions made by poststructuralism with respect to SLA are that 1) rather than being confined to the psycholinguistic properties of the individual, language is a dialogical process governed by multiple, often externally-motivated, voices within the speaker and 2) non-native speakers (NNS) of a language are not merely deficient counterparts of the idealized native speaker (NS). The following sections will be devoted to further discussion of these points as they are relevant to the current research.

The social nature of language

Although he primarily devoted himself to literary criticism, Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984) later writing theorized about the nature of language itself in quotidian matters as well as high literature. In particular, he criticized the nineteenth century structuralists, namely Humboldt, Vossler, and Saussure. These linguists viewed language as a process confined to the individual, “[arising] from man’s need to express himself, to objectify himself” (Bakhtin 1986, p. 67). Meanwhile, in communicative situations, the listener is seen as a passive participant whose sole function is to comprehend the language of the
speaker; in this way, the communicative function of language is subordinate to the speaker’s agency and creative expression.

Conversely, Bakhtin opposed the notion that language is confined to the individual speaker, arguing instead for a linguistic philosophy that takes into consideration the impact of the interlocutor on the speaker and vice versa. In his words, “[L]anguage is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (Bakhtin 1981, p. 294). According to Bakhtin, language is a fundamentally dialogical process in which the speech is deliberately crafted to accommodate the Other, “for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created” (Bakhtin 1986, p. 94). As part of this process, Bakhtin (1986) notes the centrality of the speaker’s “speech plan or speech will” (p.77), which is governed by the anticipation of the listener’s response, verbal or silent. This understanding of language is very useful to the realm of SLA, including my own research. It seems to be the case that the language employed by ELLs is often judged at face value according to what the individual knows about the target language. From a Bakhtinian perspective, however, ELLs are portrayed in a much more nuanced light as individuals, who make deliberate language choices based not solely on their knowledge of grammar or idiomatic expressions but also on their acute perceptions of the person with whom they are speaking.

Yet another important aspect that underlies the dialogical nature of language is the social environment in which the speech is framed. Bakhtin (1981) describes every word as living a “socially charged life,” possessing “a ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the
day and hour” (p. 293). Moreover, he asserts that each social context maintains *generic forms of speech genres*, which cast the tone and expressivity of the language according to the “situation, social position, and personal interrelations of the participants in the communication” (Bakhtin 1986, p. 79). Thus, while the language forms themselves may be standardized and fixed, there remains an intentionality to the language as the speaker must make deliberate choices regarding the social sphere in which the dialogue is constructed.

Although Bakhtin (1986) did not deal explicitly with language learning, he did comment on the necessity of fully mastering speech genres in order for the individual to successfully navigate social discourse and to express themselves freely. He further remarked that those who have an “excellent command of a language” but struggle to communicate do not suffer from an “impoverished vocabulary or…style” but rather that “this is entirely a matter of the inability to command a repertoire of genres of social conversation, the lack of a sufficient supply of those ideas about the whole of the utterance that help to cast one’s speech quickly and naturally in certain compositional and stylistics forms…” (p. 80). Based on these notions, rather than gaining proficiency in a collection of rules and vocabulary in the target language, it might be speculated that Bakhtin would view language learning as “a process of struggling to use language in order to participate in specific speech communities” (Norton & Toohey 2011, p. 416).

With the popularity of poststructuralism in the last two decades, many SLA researchers have untangled and reinterpreted Bakhtin’s theories as they concern second language learning. Kostogriz (2005), for example, explored the application of Bakhtinian notions to the ideologically divided context of English as a Second Language (ESL)
education. For Kostogriz, discussions surrounding ESL education are often polemicized between conservative and liberal schools of thought, both of which he views as inadequate philosophical approaches. While conservative thinkers, he argues, view the ESL classroom as a venue for the cultural and linguistic homogenization of non-natives “within the broader production of a monosemic and unitary cultural space” (p. 190), the “celebratory pluralism” (p. 191) of liberals tends to exoticize ethnic identity to the point of essentialism, thereby further reinforcing the societal dichotomy of the mainstream (natives) versus the periphery (non-natives). As an alternative, Kostogriz offers what he calls a “Thirdspace ESL pedagogy.” Drawing on Bakhtin’s ideas of the inherently fluid, incomplete Self in dialogue with the Other, in the Thirdspace, ESL students may freely cross linguistic cultural borders as a means of engaging in transformative learning and of subverting oppressive discourses that favor the cultural binary over diversity.

In the empirical realm, one study that is particularly relevant to the present one is that of Vitanova (2005), who analyzed the experiences of five Eastern European immigrants living in the United States from a Bakhtinian perspective. Though the participants differed in age and backgrounds, each of them experienced the upheaval that resulted from no longer being able to express themselves with ease in their first language and losing the prestigious social and professional status they once held in their home countries. Each participant was acutely aware of this struggle as they shared anecdotes about being unable to understand or to be understood by their American counterparts. In Bakhtin’s world, this is of paramount importance as one’s personhood, Vitanova points out, “is synonymous with having a voice, being heard, addressed, and responded to” (p. 166). At the same time, the participants’ recognition of their new positioning incited them
to seek out venues in which they could reshape their identities to suit their new surroundings and circumstances. For example, 51 year-old Vera, a former journalist who had prided herself on her eloquence in the Russian language, was able to channel her creativity into the fusion of Russian and American recipes in her new job as a kitchen manager and aspiring caterer. Through her newfound innovation and expertise, not rooted in linguistic skill (something she had once greatly valued), Vera was able to find her voice and expressed a renewed sense of confidence in her English abilities, especially when it came to communicating with American customers.

While the current paper does not seek to explicitly draw upon Bakhtin’s ideas in its analysis of the Latino experience, the concepts put forth by Bakhtin certainly underlie the aims of this study. In particular, I seek to identify situations in which Latinos, as a group that has historically been marginalized, may find themselves in the problematic position of being without a voice not only due to lack of linguistic resources but also feelings of disempowerment in the face of the dominant social and political discourses prevalent in the United States. At the same time, I investigate how Latinos may carve out new facets of their identities that traverse and cross the border between the Self (Spanish and the heritage culture) and the Other (English and American culture) and to what extent the ESL classroom may serve as a locus for such negotiation of identity. In these ways, the Bakhtinian school of thought is central to the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

Breaking down the NS/NNS dichotomy

One of the many, but perhaps most powerful, discourses that may influence language learners and immigrants in particular is the dichotomized relationship between NSs and NNSs that has taken root in both the field of SLA and the social sphere. The first
paper to critically examine attitudes towards NNSs within SLA research was Firth and Wagner (1997), who challenged the Chomskyan notion of NS superiority. According to the authors, cognitive approaches to language (i.e. communication strategies and input modification studies) consider language learners to be deficient speakers when compared to their NS counterparts, who are considered the “warranted baseline…from which judgments of appropriateness, markedness, and so forth, can be made” (p. 291). As subordinates to the NS norm, they explain, these researchers view communication involving NNSs, particularly with NSs, as inherently problematic, often pointing out the so-called “difficulties” apparent in the discourse. Such challenges derive from the opposition between the NS’s fully developed and complete competence of the language and the NNS’s interlanguage, the underdeveloped speech of the learner (i.e. “foreigner talk”) as they undergo the systematic transitional phase of acquiring competence in the target language. In turn, NSs oversimplify their own speech to mirror that of the NNS’s so as to meet them “down” at their perceived level.

In response to these notions, Firth and Wagner (1997) emphasize that it is imperative to balance the rhetoric of such mechanistic, idealized theories of language and L2 learning with the understanding that acquisition takes place through social interactions in which the speaker maintains multiple, fluid identities that they assert in diverse, purposeful ways. From this perspective, purported failures of communication among NNSs, such as codeswitching, and the consequent responses from NSs that employ communicative strategies including repetition or clarifying questions may be viewed as a collaborative, sometimes reparative, effort to negotiate meaning and mutual understanding.
Since the publication of Firth and Wagner’s (1997) canonical paper, SLA research has turned towards a more holistic view of the NNS, especially in terms of legitimizing these individuals as rightful owners of the target language as opposed to cognitively underdeveloped NSs. Nevertheless, as some empirical studies have shown, many NESs amongst the general population continue to actively mark their NNES counterparts. One such study by Shuck (2006) revealed how a group of U.S. born, White, middle-class, NES college students positioned themselves as unmarked (that is, normal or neutral) individuals in comparison to their international instructors and peers by means of various strategies in their conversational discourse, including explicit mention of race or ethnicity; use of linguistic markers (i.e. the pronoun “them”) to refer to the Other; drawing connections between language, nationality, and race and group membership status (i.e. linking Americanness to unaccented speech); and employing terminology and concepts from other discourses concerning race, such as colonialism and reverse discrimination. Shuck suggests further probing into how colonialist ideological models come about and are propagated by dominant and subordinated groups in individual, conversational settings as well as in farther-reaching discourses, such as advertising and national policies on language and education. This critical reflection, she concludes, may help even the “most multilingual-friendly among us” (p. 274) to examine areas in which hegemonic discourses remain hidden and unquestioned.

In contrast, Park (2012) demonstrates how some NNES ESL teachers are empowered to claim their non-native identities in spite of hegemonic discourses. Part of a larger exploration of the experiences and attitudes of five East Asian women before and during their M.A. TESOL training, Park’s study contributes to work done on the NEST
(“T” for teacher)/NNEST dichotomy in recent decades, which has revealed how many NNESTs grapple with lack in self-confidence and feelings of diminished authority due to their inability to sound like an NES. Specifically, Park tells the story of Xia Wang, a Chinese woman who came to the U.S. to attain her M.Ed. in K-12 TESOL. Upon the start of her studies in the U.S., Xia was quickly confronted by the dominant ideologies surrounding ownership of English language and identity, leading her to compare herself to her native-speaking counterparts, which resulted in feelings of inferiority and powerlessness as she began to question her previous achievements in China and her suitability as an ESL teacher. However, Xia’s attitudes towards her abilities in English began to undergo change once she started student teaching under the tutelage of a fellow NNEST, Ms. Tomiko from Japan, who showed Xia that effective language instruction has more to do with teacher-student relationships than proficiency on the part of the instructor. As a result, Xia’s positive experience with Ms. Tomiko led her to take a sense of pride and ownership in her NNES identity as well as to reclaim her authority as an ESL teacher. As Park illustrates through the narrative of Xia and Ms. Tomiko, in the face of the intimidation and dejection with which ELLs may struggle, the ability for ESL educators to empower their students to view their NNES identities through a dignified lens rather than a pessimistic one is crucial. For Latino ESL speakers, this may be especially necessary due to publically pervasive misconceptions and prejudices engendered by American socio-political discourse and policy-making. Though I do not wish to seek out any sweeping solutions to avoid the risk of being overly facile, I do hope to draw from Ms. Tomiko’s example and explore the ways in which teachers may provide students with increased self-confidence in their language abilities.
The NS/NNS dichotomy is central to discussions on language ownership as the attitudes held by society as a whole have significant implications for understandings of who has the right to claim a language as their own. In the present study, I examine how these attitudes may play out in the microcosm of the English language classroom and what impact this might have upon individual learners.

**The situation of Latinos living in the United States**

While it is important to understand the broader theoretical ideas that underlie the present study, it is equally necessary to gain perspective on the practical issues facing the Latino population in the United States, particularly with respect to English language learning, as ESL practitioners must have an understanding of the challenges that ELLs experience in order to thoughtfully craft pedagogical approaches that will best serve students’ everyday needs. These areas have largely been impacted by the nation’s immigration policies, which have become increasingly limiting over the past century in reaction to economic and political conditions within the country. Kilty and de Haymes (2000) draw specific attention to how these restrictions have engendered preoccupations over undocumented (or more colloquially, “illegal”) immigration. Such anxieties have incited further significant policy changes over the last three decades, including most notably the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which gave amnesty to current undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. while also imposing penalties upon employers who hire undocumented workers; the Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act of 1996, which instituted procedures for employers to verify the immigration status of their workers as well as a sponsor program to ensure that immigrants would have enough financial support in order to not require public assistance;
and the militarization of the U.S. border with Mexico with the expansion of patrol agents specially trained to carry out “special,” military-like operations to catch undocumented individuals in the act of illegal border crossing.

The effects of anti-immigration measures reach far beyond border protection, crossing over into policy-making over linguistic welfare, which is often motivated by misperceptions of Hispanic immigrants that guide the institutionalized exclusion of these individuals. Kilty and de Haymes (2000) identify language policy in the U.S. as being informed by popularly-held erroneous notions that describe Hispanics as unwilling to learn English, which not only costs the country through the funding of otherwise unessential bilingual resources but also threatens national identity and the foundations of American society. Consequently, there have been increased attempts to pass legislation in exclusive support of English as the country’s official language as well as requirements of English-only policies in the public sector. While English-only advocates have not enjoyed much success at the national level, several states have passed laws that range from symbolically uphold the official status English to prohibiting the use of languages other than English in the handling of business with medical or safety emergencies as the only exemptions.

Due to the pervasiveness of such public policies, the ever-increasing visibility of Latinos in the U.S. has sparked an interest amongst SLA researchers, particularly those concerned with the social aspects of language learning. Several studies published in the last decade have examined the issues facing Hispanic ELLs of varying backgrounds, a few of which I have chosen to highlight in this section for the manner in which they
fundamentally situate language learning and pedagogy within social environments and, thus, resonate with my own work.

In their study of a second grade classroom in the Southwest United States, DaSilva Iddings and Katz (2007) investigate how various classroom practices may impede beneficial integration of NNES, recently-immigrated Mexican students’ home and school identities. The authors seek to extend such research to the realm of studies on immigrant identity, which has been described as purposefully multi-faceted and dynamic as immigrants must often and actively (re)negotiate their identities to accommodate newfound social positioning. The classroom from which data was collected was one in which the teacher had begun implementing a family and literacy-based academic support program for ELLs through regular parent-teacher conferences concerning how parents could further their children’s academic growth in the home.

Through observation of the parent-teacher conferences as well as student interactions and ongoing interviews with all participants, DaSilva Iddings and Katz (2007) found three overarching conditions that precluded the blending of home and school identities. Firstly, there was a noticeable discrepancy in the perception of the roles performed by children in school and at home, which seemed to be engendered by the exclusive use of English in the classroom as well as the maintenance of curriculum standards intended for NES students. The second constraint found by the researchers was that the families’ voices were devalued and silenced not only by peers but also by the students and parents themselves. Finally, the authors assert that certain classroom activities (namely those requiring one word answers or fill-in-the-blank exercises) prevented ELLs from taking part in meaningful interactions with their peers. Moreover,
the practice of pairing ELLs with their native-speaking classmates based on assumptions about the students’ (and even their parents’) English abilities often placed them into subordinate positions or excluded them entirely by denying the ELLs access to familiar language.

To conclude their article, DaSilva Iddings and Katz (2007) reaffirm the entwined relationship between immigrants’ multiple identities, which are necessarily entrenched in the “historical, political, cultural, social, and interpersonal contexts and practices one engages” (p. 312). Given this, the authors contend that it is important for these students and their families to be able to “exert will and autonomy and to affirm themselves as active social agents” (p. 312). This may be more effectively achieved by bridging the home and school environments and their respective identities through classroom practices that create overlap between home and school experiences; that allow for bilingual means of communication (i.e. code switching; use of L1 and L2 for instruction) and embrace multicultural perspectives; and that fashion a space for ELLs as well as their families to see themselves as competent individuals. Though my own research does not deal with children as the targeted group of study, the insights provided demonstrate how the responsibility that ELL parents shoulder for their children’s performance at school as perceived by NES teachers and peers may have significant bearing on how a NNES may view their own value not only as a speaker of English but also as a capable caregiver. In this study, I hope to uncover the ways in which Latino adult ELLs may absorb the opinions of important people and institutions and how these may influence them in their home lives.
Another factor that may be of significant importance in how a person measures their self-worth is the link between profession and social status. Dávila (2008) explores the relationship between language learning, social and professional mobility, and gender among Latina immigrants, specifically those who come from a background of privileged upbringing, education, and achievement. As part of her study, Dávila interviewed four women of varying ages from ESL community college classrooms, who were immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Peru, and Ecuador. Prior to coming to the United States, all but one of the participants earned university degrees and were working professionals. Overall, the researcher found that all four women had similar experiences in that they had all faced downward mobility with respect to profession, living standards, language, cross-cultural adjustment, and loss of community upon immigrating to the U.S. Their language barriers coupled with the immediate need to provide for their families forced them to initially take physically-demanding, low-paying factory and warehouse jobs; as a result, the women felt degraded and unhappy because they were not able to make use of their education and find positions that were personally and professionally satisfying. All of the women were motivated by their jobs to improve their English, which they saw as the only way to attain employment equal to what they held in their home countries. This attitude proved to be beneficial to two of the participants, who reported feeling much more secure in their English language abilities and had since experienced upward mobility. Still, they found themselves frustrated with their native-speaking co-workers, whose insensitivity to their struggles with the language, especially with regards to accent (a factor they accepted no control over) often made them feel discriminated against and powerless, decreasing their motivation to continue learning.
Based on these reportings, the author offers some implications for ESL instruction that are social justice-oriented and may address some of the issues outlined in her research. Dávila (2005) first suggests giving English language learners ample opportunities to interact with native speakers outside of the classroom so that ESL students may become more comfortable and native speakers may see “the importance of working with the marginalized students as equal partners (p. 366). Secondly, the author writes, classes should be created to specifically address the needs of working-class immigrant women; moreover, these classrooms can be venues for critical discussions of the issues facing these women, such as gender and power differentials, as well as for empowerment and cooperative learning. While many of the participants in the current research greatly differ from those in Dávila’s in terms of background, the prospect of upward mobility is very much a shared commonality. For many Latinos from Mexico and Central America (the primary populations from which this study draws), the bleak economic situation in their home countries has driven them to seek refuge not only in the employment opportunities and increased financial stability the United States offers but also in breaking free from the harsh social realities that stem from living in an environment where the only solution to joblessness may often be a life of crime. At the same time, the prejudices Hispanic immigrants often face in American society, particularly as NNESs, can pose challenges to upward mobility. With this study, I intend to further investigate this complicated social positioning and how Latinos perceive their English language abilities as an influential factor in their capacity to achieve success in these new surroundings.
While the home and work may be at the center of many Latino ELL immigrants’ lives, the time that they spend in the ESL classroom also has considerable implications for the way an individual perceives their language abilities. Menard-Warwick (2007) investigates gender and social positioning vis-à-vis employment opportunities, classroom discourse, and L2 learning. In her ethnographic study of an adult intermediate-level ESL classroom at a community-based program in California that primarily serves Latinas, Menard-Warwick focuses on two students and their teacher. Among the two students was Fabiana, a wife and new mother, who came to the United States after her husband was laid off from her family’s pharmaceutics business in Peru, where she had also spent fourteen years doing administrative work. The author describes that she was timid when it came to using English and would revert to using Spanish with interlocutors who also spoke her L1. Menard-Warwick also features the instructor of the intermediate level class, Kerrie. Kerrie, who had several years of TESL experience abroad and in the U.S., originally took up English instruction as a way to pass the time while living in Japan with her husband. Though she endeavored to understand her students’ purposes for studying English, Kerrie made mention of the fact that she would often re-use lessons year to year, perhaps indicating that her intentions and classroom practices were not always so congruent with one another.

In her analysis of the interactions that followed from a lesson on employment, Menard-Warwick (2007) asserts that the social processes underpinning Kerrie’s (albeit well-intentioned) attitudes and activities, specifically that “all” her female students do not recognize marketable skills, in fact perpetuate the stereotypical notion that immigrants, particularly women, may only come to occupy entry-level, low-paying jobs. In reality,
students like Fabiana with extensive work experience disprove this assumption.
Nevertheless, when Kerrie tried to ask Fabiana details about her previous career, because Fabiana did not possess the language skills to fully express herself, she was unable to make Kerrie understand and position herself as a businesswoman. Menard-Warwick points out that even the most well-intentioned instructor may actually end up disempowering their students often as a result of curriculum and materials that echo assumptive societal tendencies. In order to mitigate this problem, she maintains that ESL educators should “adapt course materials to the backgrounds and aspirations of currently enrolled students...[and] to determine and build upon students’ educational and employment histories” (p. 286). In this way, teachers may be able to better facilitate learning and critical reflection through the engagement and support of learners’ identities.

Besides looking at the educational and professional backgrounds, it may also be useful for ESL instructors to take into account the specific settings and occasions in which students express that they felt particularly successful and/or ineffective in their communicative efforts. My own research seeks to take the testimonies from Latino ELLs regarding such experiences in and out of the classroom and to evaluate how these insights could inform the ways in which ESL teachers shape their pedagogy.

As poststructuralist-oriented SLA research has endeavored to show, language learning and the positioning enacted upon an individual by their social milieu are inextricable from one another. For Latinos in the U.S., this relationship is still more complex. Previous investigations into this often marginalized community have revealed the importance of the home, the workplace, and the classroom (all encompassed and deeply affected by the wider dynamics of American politics and society) in the shaping of
how Hispanic immigrants may view themselves. The present study aspires to make further contributions to existent findings by exploring the ways in which these venues influence Latinos’ perceptions of themselves as language learners and as rightful owners of English. With this aim in mind, I wish to shed light on how ESL practitioners may employ pedagogical techniques that value students’ opinions and experiences; in this way, educators may be able to encourage positive renegotiation(s) of the self that empower students to confidently claim their identities as NNESs rather than to shrink away in the face of disheartening hegemonic discourses. Chapter Two, research methodology, is devoted to detailing the steps I have taken to work towards the goals of my investigation.
Chapter Two

Research Methodology

Background of the present research

The personal account that serves as the background to the current study illustrates the path that has led me to pursue language ownership amongst Latino speakers of ESL as my area of research. As a first generation American, the daughter of Russian Jewish parents who left the USSR to seek freedom from religious and social persecution, I have been surrounded by the immigrant experience my entire life. While I was always very proud of my Russian heritage, I recall situations in my childhood where NESs would not be able to understand my mother’s thick accent; after three times of her repeating the same phrase, feeling uncomfortable, I would interject with my “American voice” so that the interlocutor could finally understand what she was trying to say. Later, my siblings and I would all laugh about the whole thing as my mother would try to correctly pronounce her “w’s” and “th’s”. It is now in retrospect that I am aware of how I unconsciously positioned myself as a rightful owner of the language over my foreign-born, NNES mother, whose inability to match the American norms of pronunciation precluded her from being part of the in-group.

Only much later in my life did I fully begin to understand the important, often thorny role that English plays in the lives of immigrants. During a semester abroad in Madrid my sophomore year of college, I became close with a young Moroccan man named Adil. Adil had come originally come to Italy as a small child with his family but had lost his status as a legal resident as an adult since he decided not to continue with his studies after high school and was unable to subsequently secure a stable job. Deciding to
try his luck elsewhere, Adil travelled to Madrid, where he had some family. In our time spent together, Adil would often ask me to teach him phrases of English. When I asked him one day about why he was always trying to get me to teach him English, he explained to me that he was tired of the open discrimination he faced as a North African immigrant and wanted to prove to those around him that he was not “stupid” despite his inability to find success in Spain. Adil’s acute awareness of the prestige of English began to open my eyes to the power that language has, particularly for minorities facing oppressive circumstances.

With my interest piqued, upon returning to the United States, I enrolled in a service learning course offered through the University of Michigan’s English Language Institute, which paired volunteer work at local ESL programs with classroom discussion about various approaches to teaching as well as the struggles that often face English language learners (ELLs). One of the site placements I elected was the ESL program at the First United Methodist Church of Ypsilanti (hereafter, FUMCY ESL), which primarily serves the large Latino population in the surrounding area. As part of my assignment, I sat in as a classroom volunteer for the Level 2 class, intended for those with an intermediate level of proficiency, where I assisted the main teacher with running classroom activities. During my time with FUMCY ESL, through conversations with the director as well as students, I became increasingly appreciative of the social hardships confronting these Latino immigrants as a largely working class people of color often dealing with unpredictable legal situations due to many of the restrictive immigration policies mentioned in Chapter One, as delineated by Kilty and de Haymes (2000). Additionally, I noticed that for many students, speaking English was an out-of-
body experience of sorts: perhaps because of the combination of their positioning in society as well as their linguistic limitations, they seldom seemed to consider English part of who they are as a person. Seeing this phenomenon, it thus became my overall goal as an ESL teacher to help Latino ELLs create English-speaking identities for themselves. This did not entail attempts to acculturate or make the students view themselves as Americans, but rather to show them that the English language can serve as a meaningful medium through which they can communicate to others that which is most important to them.

It is this aim that ultimately motivated me to pursue my graduate studies in English language instruction and to investigate the ways in which English plays a part in the lives of Latino immigrants in the United States; how Latinos perceive their ability to use English in these different roles; and how ESL educators can harness such information to create more compassionate, empowering pedagogical tools in order to foster ownership and a positive sense of self in the target language. The following sections of this chapter describe the methodology I used in my exploration of these issues.

**Methodological framework**

Having extensively read other papers related to the social aspects of language learning over the course of my graduate studies, I found that the ethnographic approach to research most resonated with me for its ability to so amply express the richness of individuals’ experiences. As I began to conceive and shape the methodology for my own study, I turned to three primary texts as the main informants for conducting ethnographic research: Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999), Clandinin (2006), and Connelly and Clandinin (1990).
Drawing upon previous notions of culture and ethnographic research, Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) seek to bring the definition of ethnography up to date, describing it as “…a species of research which undertakes to give an emically oriented description of the cultural practices of individuals…” (p. 49). They add that it is important to bring in multiple perspectives (as opposed to drawing conclusions from a single individual’s data) in order to more completely and validly describe the “complex social realities” within a particular culture. More specifically, the authors turn to contemporary concerns and developments in ethnographic research on education. Among one of the defining features of current ethnography that Ramanathan and Atkinson point out is the favoring of critical ethnographic approaches, which are centered on the idea of reflexivity: rather than positioning themselves as “unknowing strangers” (p. 50), the authors write, practitioners of critical ethnography take on the more personal, subjective role of the “deeply interested observer” (p. 60). This view of the ethnographic researcher was central to the development of my methodology, given my prior work with Latino speakers of ESL. Indeed, it was not through mere curiosity that I selected the Latino community as my target group of study. Rather, the profound sense of connection and concern that I felt for the students of FUMCY ESL ultimately caused me to return there in search of further insight into the experiences of this diverse group of individuals.

Because of this sense of personal involvement, ethnography must take on a much more sensitive and nuanced approach to empirical research that goes beyond the cold objectivity that is associated with more traditional methods. A closely related methodology that perhaps more specifically captures the concerns of ethnographic research is narrative inquiry, whose nature and application has been expounded upon in
Clandinin (2006) and in Connelly and Clandinin (1990). In conceptualizing narrative inquiry, Clandinin (2006) establishes two fundamental criteria: interaction (the importance of social context to individual experience) and continuity (the connection between past and future experiences). He goes on to describe narrative inquiry as a collaborative field of research in which researchers and participants negotiate stories of experience in social milieus. Therefore, as researchers go through the motions of participant selection, data collection, and data analysis, they must recognize their own placement within the research space as an additional co-constructor of narrative within the research at hand.

Connolly and Clandinin (1990) expand upon the role played by the researcher in their comprehensive outline of the practical aspects of narrative inquiry with respect to educational research. To begin, Connelly and Clandinin describe the “negotiation of entry into the field of situation” that occurs at the beginning of narrative inquiry (p. 3). According to the authors, researchers must establish a relationship with their participants beyond acquaintance; rather, a sense of caring, empowerment, investment, and mutual construction of the research must be cultivated so that both researcher and participant feel they have a valued voice. The relationship between participant and researcher that narrative inquiry seeks to establish seems to be especially fitting for the present study not only for its emphasis on building trust and openness but, more importantly, for its potential to empower individuals that may feel disenfranchised by their social or political positioning.

Having built rapport with participants, the researcher must next grapple with the empirical challenges of capturing the individual’s multiple perspectives, which are both
continuous and reflexive. The authors list and briefly explain a variety of possible sources for such data, including field notes, journal records, interview transcripts, others’ observations, storytelling, letter writing, autobiographical writing, documents such as class plans and newsletters, and alternative approaches such as the creation of rules, principles, pictures, metaphors, and personal philosophies. In designing the methodology for this study, I originally decided on conducting group interviews. Because I wanted the whole procedure to feel more like a free-flowing conversation than data gathering, I reasoned that group interviews would put participants at ease and make the atmosphere a little less formal. In particular, I was concerned about appearing to be an “interrogator” to participants. I felt that a group setting could allow for participants to question each other about their experiences, which I hoped would make the process feel more organic and less intrusive.

Once data has been collected, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) write, the researcher then may move on to (re/de)constructing the narrative in document form, a process that is complex and often not so straightforward. As part of this quest, the researcher may have to break down and restructure the narrative’s sense of time, place, and continuity in nonlinear ways in order to fully tease apart and develop multiple threads of inquiry. At the same time, while it is important for the researcher to construct the narrative in such a way that is inviting and authentic to the reader, the authors caution against the creation of “fiction” in which “everything works out well in the end” (p. 10); rather, the researcher should take care to critically examine choices (both additive and subtractive) made, the possibility of alternative accounts, and limitations in the reporting of the narrative. With respect to my own work, while I hope that my research will be of use to other ESL
practitioners who work with the Hispanic community, I do not wish to extrapolate my findings such that I end up falsely essentializing the diversity of experiences had by Latinos living in the United States.

Research questions

The diverse array of individuals that I have had the pleasure of meeting through my past and present experiences with the FUMCY ESL program elicited two particular queries:

1. How are these Latino ESL speakers’ attitudes towards the English language and their own language abilities shaped?

2. What pedagogical factors may impede or foster the development of ownership, confidence, and positive sense of self in the target language?

Research place

To investigate these research questions, I centered data collection at the First United Methodist Church of Ypsilanti (FUMCY). Since the church lists “community outreach” as one of its guiding principles, FUMCY has sought to accommodate the area’s large Latino community in its ministry, offering special religious services and programs conducted in Spanish, including ESL classes. The ESL program runs from September to April with classes meeting at the church for two hours every Monday and Wednesday evening. While the program does request that students contribute fifteen dollars to fund class materials, this fee is always waived for families who are unable to pay. FUMCY also provides childcare at no cost to accommodate students, who are parents, as well as to allow these individuals to be able to focus their attention on learning while they are in
class. Another unique aspect of FUMCY ESL is the social justice programming that it occasionally provides for students. These talks occur during the 20-30 minute break-time and aim to educate immigrants about their rights in the United States.

While the program has primarily catered to the needs of Hispanic learners of ESL (its largest demographic), English language learners from a variety of national backgrounds, including those from countries in East Asia and Africa, have also actively participated in the classes over the years. The majority of the Latino students in the program are from Mexico and the Central American countries. Because of dire economic and political situations in their countries, many have come to the U.S. in search of work to support their families both here and often times back home. The program attracts individuals from a diverse array of social and educational backgrounds: there are some who never completed high school and have a very low literacy level, while others are college-educated and may have been working professionals in their home country.

Classes are organized into three levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. The beginner level is primarily comprised of individuals who have just arrived to the country and have little to no speaking abilities in English. This level focuses on teaching students “survival English” so that they may have their basic needs met. Intermediate level students have often lived in the United States for several years but continue to have difficulty expressing themselves in situations where more complex language is required (i.e. the doctor’s office, the bank, their children’s school, etc.). With this in mind, while communicative competence still takes precedence, the intermediate class aims to expand students’ understanding of grammar and vocabulary particular to various aspects of day-to-day life. Students at the advanced level typically have very good fluency in English;
however, they wish to increase their ability to understand and use idiomatic language as well as to develop skills in reading and writing. Instruction for this level has often taken on a more conventional approach that is centered on developing metalinguistic knowledge of the language (though, notably, students have sometimes expressed their objections to this approach).

Each level is led by one or two “main teachers,” who are responsible for coming up with material to teach as well as the primary instruction of the lessons. The main teachers are all volunteers from the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti community, and most have a certificate or higher degree in ESL as well as extensive teaching experience. Additionally, the program relies on undergraduate students from various internship and service learning programs at the University of Michigan and Eastern Michigan University to serve as classroom volunteers. Classroom volunteers often sit amongst the students during lessons and assist individual students as needed.

**Recruitment of participants**

Given my knowledge of the many ESL programs that the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti area offers, when I originally planned the recruitment process for this study, I envisaged that I would reach out to organizations and ask them to distribute invitations to a recruitment session that I would hold sometime during the course summer of 2012. However, as I initiated contact with a number of individuals, I found that my emails and phone calls would go unreturned. Though I cannot be certain, I imagine that this might have occurred in part because many ESL programs heavily rely on volunteers from the two major universities in the area, both of which had ended their spring semester a few weeks earlier.
Towards the end of the summer, I was eventually able to sit down with the coordinator of the FUMCY ESL program, Julio\(^1\), a week or so before the start of their classes in mid-September. In an interesting turn of events, when I approached Julio about recruiting participants for my study from the FUMCY ESL program, he also invited me to teach the intermediate level class once a week. Because of the significant delays I had experienced in recruitment for my study up until this point, I quickly seized this opportunity so that I would have a guaranteed pool of participants from which to draw. Moreover, I recognized that some of the issues I wished to explore relating to work, family, or classroom experiences might be considered sensitive topics for participants; therefore, I saw the chance to work directly with prospective participants as a valuable way to establish trusting relationships so that they might feel more comfortable sharing their experiences with me.

In order to cast myself as a concerned, approachable, and non-judgmental person, I made sure to be especially attentive during lesson time while also casually conversing with students before and after classes. Having spent several weeks trying to build rapport, I finally felt comfortable with sharing my intentions to collect data with the students. While the students were aware I was a graduate student working towards my degree in ESL, they did not know that I was required to write a master’s thesis or that I was conducting primary research. I thus began by telling the class, in Spanish, that part of the requirements of my graduate work was to put together “un gran trabajo de al menos treinta páginas” (a very large paper at least thirty pages in length), hoping they would be able to appreciate the magnitude of the task put before me. I went on to explain that my

\(^1\) Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper in order to protect the identities of the individuals to whom they pertain.
previous work with the Latino community, particularly with FUMCY ESL, has made me increasingly conscious of the struggles that Hispanics living in the United States face; that I felt language learning was one way for Latinos to fight for their rights; and that I, as an English teacher, wanted a part in that process by helping to give them a voice.

After this brief preamble, I laid out the consent forms for my study in two piles (one for the English forms and another for the Spanish) and asked the students to select whichever language they felt most comfortable with so that they would be able to fully understand the study’s procedures. Interestingly, all of the students opted for the Spanish language consent form. Once I saw that everyone had a consent form, I proceeded to read through the entire form in Spanish, stopping periodically to ask if there were any questions or concerns, particularly regarding the study’s procedures, risks, or issues of confidentiality. I especially tried to reassure class that I would do my very best to protect participants’ anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and by ensuring that any original papers and/or recordings would be promptly destroyed upon the completion of my project. Finally, I made certain that all the students understood that participation in my research was completely optional, and if anyone wished to not take part, they could continue the evening’s lesson with Robert, my co-teacher.

Although I told the students that they could take the week to think about whether or not to participate in the study, I was pleasantly surprised to see that I immediately received written consent from the entire class. However, despite my reassurances, I did notice many students marked that they wished not to be audiorecorded. Realizing that all participants would likely be more forthcoming without the audiorecorder present, I
ultimately decided to forgo recording in order to maximize the number of voices in the data.

**Data gathering procedures**

When I first designed the methodology for this study, I had planned to conduct a series of two hour group interviews over the course of five weeks. During these group interviews, participants would be given a bilingual English/Spanish list of guiding questions. Participants would then have a few minutes to look over these questions, think about them, and write down any thoughts, if they so wished. Following this “brainstorming” portion of the session, I would open up the discussion, allowing participants to start with any answers to questions or other comments they may have or by directly addressing one of the guiding questions in order to spur the conversation. However, the difficulties that I encountered with recruiting participants unfortunately carried over into my data gathering procedures, which have changed drastically over the course of the last year.

With the idea that I would be the main instructor of the intermediate level, I had shaped a plan of action that I thought would allow me to conduct the group interviews in a timely manner (especially given how far behind I had fallen in terms of my original timeline). However, as I walked into my first evening of teaching, I was greeted by both a familiar face and another perceived setback for my recruitment and data collection endeavors. It turned out that I would not be teaching the class by myself, but rather would be a co-instructor alongside Robert, who has been with FUMCY ESL as a main teacher of the intermediate level for the last few years. While I was thankful to have an
experienced person with whom to collaborate in teaching the intermediate class, I quickly realized that I would also have to completely overhaul my data collection plan.

When I originally strategized how I would collect the data I needed, I imagined that I could take an entire class period or two to focus on the interviews, if needed. However, upon being confronted by the fact that I would have to fit another individual’s plans into my own, I realized that I would not only need to be forthright with Robert right away but also respectful of his time and ideas in the classroom. Therefore, after giving Robert a brief idea of my study a week or so into the semester, we both came to the agreement that I would take the last twenty to thirty minutes of class to conduct my research over the period of a few weeks.

Once I finally embarked upon the process of data gathering about halfway through the semester, I hoped I would be able to complete this step of my research without further difficulty but quickly saw that my expectations were perhaps a bit too idealistic as I began to run into more logistical problems. Because the FUMCY ESL program does not have any attendance requirements and allows students to come to classes as they are able, there were fluctuating numbers of participants each session. In addition to this, although Robert and I had allotted time for me to do the interviews, I still found myself very limited in this respect. As most teachers very commonly experience, certain lessons took more time than expected, leaving me with little to no time to collect data. Robert and I tried to remedy this by allowing me to carry out the interviews during the first twenty to thirty minutes of class; however, this often resulted in me going over my allotted time, noticeably irritating Robert and causing me to rush the interviews more than I would have liked. In the end, I was able to conduct four group interviews, each
lasting between twenty and forty minutes, with three to eight participants in attendance during a given session.

Although I did complete the group interviews, the volume of data I had collected was substantially smaller than I had hoped for. Contrary to my beliefs, the group setting did not elicit increased participation amongst the students. Furthermore, their general quietness during the group interviews was not compensated for by their pre-writing, which often consisted of one or two short sentences addressing the questions posed. More significantly, however, I attribute my inability to gather any sizeable amount of data to my own anxieties as a novice researcher and as a speaker of Spanish as a foreign language.

Seeing that I would need to supplement my existing data, I reconsidered my data collection methods a third time, eventually resolving that it would be helpful to conduct one-on-one interviews with two individuals I had gotten to know quite well through my previous experiences working with the Latino community in the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti area. This approach, I reasoned, would allow me to go more in-depth and to further explore some of the themes elicited in the group interviews. The first individual was FUMCY’s ESL coordinator, Julio, whom I had periodically worked with during my first two years with the program. Julio and I were able to come together for two conversations, once after ESL classes at FUMCY and another time over Skype. Each session lasted around an hour in length and was audiorecorded. In addition to being an ESL speaker himself, I felt Julio could contribute a great deal of valuable insight to my research because of his background as a language teacher and advocate for the Latino immigrant community. The other person I approached for an interview was a young woman named
Daniela. Daniela was my tutee for two years during my time with Proyecto Avance Latino Mentoring Association (PALMA), a student-run organization at the University of Michigan, which pairs Latino adults and children with English-speaking tutors. Because of Daniela’s relatively advanced proficiency in English, our tutoring sessions together were mainly conversational, allowing us to develop a more personal relationship. Because of this relative closeness, I felt very comfortable asking deeper, more personalized interview questions (something I had struggled with in the group interviews, likely due to my own desire to not be overly intrusive) and, thus, only needed one hour-long, audiorecorded conversation with Daniela to elucidate much of the insights I had been looking for.

Participants

**Group interview participants.** Over the course of the group interview process, there were a total of eleven participants comprised of eight women (Sandra, Vanesa, Rebecca, Alejandra, Cármen, Abigail, Adela, and Claudia) and three men (Diego, Aarón, and Pablo) between the ages of 19 and 65. Several participants hailed from Mexico, though other countries of origin included Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Brazil. In terms of education, participants’ backgrounds were very diverse: while some individuals did not pursue any further education after secondary school, others had associate or bachelor-level degrees. Similarly, the professions maintained by the participants in their home countries were equally varied, ranging from factory worker to small business owner to nurse. When asked what motivated them to come to the United States, there was a resounding consensus amongst all the participants: security. Many described dire economic circumstances in the areas they lived, which have led to
increasing violence and instability. As one participant described of the situation in his home country, El Salvador, “Hay dos opciones: venir a los Estados Unidos y trabajar o quedarse en El Salvador y ser un gangster [There are two options: come to the United States and work, or stay in El Salvador and be a gangster].”2 Desiring a better life for themselves and their families, several sought employment in areas such as construction, restaurant work, and domestic work upon their arrival to the United States. Additionally, some of the female participants, who had started families in this country, opted to be stay-at-home mothers. In this new chapter of their lives, not only did these individuals quickly see the need to learn English for the sake of their jobs and children, but also because, as one participant put it, “Todo el mundo usa esta lengua; es el estándar [The whole world uses this language; it’s the standard].”

**Julio.** Julio, a man in his late 20s originally from Oaxaca, Mexico, has been the coordinator of the FUMCY ESL program since 2010. Although he had begun studying English from elementary school, Julio began to take a strong interest in the language in high school because of his fascination with American sports and music. His family did not have much money but managed to pull together enough to send him to a well-known English language school. Unfortunately, he did not do very well at the school, which he credits to an uninspiring teacher who had little patience and even told him, “dedícate a otra cosa [dedicate yourself to something else].” When it came time for college, Julio had wanted to go into business administration or international studies; however, his family’s financial struggles prevented him from pursuing either of these careers. Still desiring a profession that was internationally oriented, his experience with English (albeit negative)

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2 All translations from Spanish are my own.
led him to choose language instruction as his major. In college, where he was much more successful with his English studies, Julio had many opportunities to interact with native English speakers from the United States. In partnership with another school in California, the university that Julio attended hosted American exchange students. Julio became involved with a young lady, whose family sent him an invitation for a visa that allowed him to spend a summer with them in San Francisco learning English. In 2001, Julio applied for and was admitted into a very competitive fellowship program that sent students to lead Spanish language labs at a private college in western Michigan, where he met his future wife, Sandy. Once Julio and Sandy finished their undergraduate studies and decided to marry, they embarked upon a seven year long legal process to bring Julio to the United States, which they happily achieved five years ago. Once he returned to Michigan, Julio became increasingly involved in FUMCY’s ministry through his wife and began serving as a volunteer in the English program. When the former coordinator stepped down in 2010, Julio was offered the position and has enthusiastically taken it as an opportunity to advocate for the Latino community across southeastern Michigan, particularly with respect to education and immigrant rights.

Daniela. Daniela is a woman in her late 20s and comes from Alajuela, the second largest city in Costa Rica. Although she had several years of compulsory English courses in her home country, the language caused her a great deal of difficulty and anxiety. She describes her language education in Costa Rica as very basic and formal with a strong emphasis placed on grammar, which she recognized as problematic given that her desired field of work, international business administration, would require advanced communicative abilities in English. Having completed a couple of years of university
coursework, Daniela decided to spend a year working and learning English in the United States after what was meant to be a short family visit to her aunt. However, an opportunity came for her to extend her stay, and now she has been in the U.S. for close to seven years, working as a housekeeper for several families in the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti area. With regards to her English education here, Daniela has participated in several different programs over the years, including an adult learning program offered through the Ypsilanti Public School District, FUMCY ESL, and PALMA. According to her, she has enjoyed and found the most success with PALMA largely due to the personal attention she receives in the one-on-one tutoring sessions. Although words may escape her occasionally, Daniela speaks English with good proficiency. Still, she is very modest about her abilities, often saying “I can’t do it, but I keep trying.” Within the next year, Daniela shared that she plans to return to Costa Rica, where she hopes her English skills will give her an advantage in getting a job or returning to college to finish her degree.

Data analysis

Analysis of gathered data took place in three parts, reflecting my data collection process. Firstly, upon completion of the group interviews, I organized the notes I had taken as well as participants’ written responses. I then coded the interview questions and responses according to which of the two research questions they best corresponded. Although I did initially subdivide the data according to the participants’ experiences in the classroom, in their daily lives, and in society, I found that these categories were far too vague. At the same time, I had difficulty elucidating more comprehensive themes since I sensed that I did not have enough information to truly put forth a nuanced analysis. It was at this point that I realized I would need to gather additional data, which
resulted in my two individual interviews with Julio and Daniela. Following these interviews, I transcribed the audiorecordings. Because I did not ask exactly the same questions of Daniela and Julio, I could not code them in the same manner that I did the group interview data. Instead, I created annotated commentaries of how their responses might relate back to my original research questions. From here, I reviewed my entire compendium of notes several times in order to extract and synthesize emergent themes in the participants’ responses, which are reported in the subsequent chapter.
Chapter Three

Results

Findings

How are these ESL speakers’ attitudes towards English and their language abilities shaped?

Views on the importance of English. In order to get a sense of the participants’ attitudes about the English language, I opened the group interview session by asking them to describe the process of learning English. All of the participants made note of the importance of knowing English not just for their day-to-day affairs but also because, as Diego put it, “Todo el mundo habla esta lengua [inglés]. Es el estándar [The whole world speaks this language [English]. It’s the standard].” For some, the perceived necessity to know English appeared to place additional pressure on them, making their effort to learn the language that much more difficult. As Abigail voiced, “Me cuesta mucho entenderlo [inglés] [Understanding it [English] is very hard on me]. I try and try and try.” Agreeing with Abigail, Alejandra interjected, “Es difícil porque el idioma siempre parece al revés gramáticamente [It’s difficult because the language always seems backwards grammatically],” to which Cármen added, “Los americanos usan varias formas de una cosa y tenemos que acostumbrar [Americans use many forms for one thing, and we have to adjust].” Apart from these three, however, the other group participants expressed a degree of enjoyment in meeting the challenge of learning English; to use Rebecca’s words, “El poder entender y hablar lo que antes no sabía es muy lindo [Being able to understand and speak that which I didn’t know before is very nice].” Diego also ascribed a certain exoticness to English as he described learning the language as “interesante
porque me gusta ver cómo la gente habla inglés [interesting because I like to see how
people speak English].” Added Sandra, who had more of a utilitarian outlook, “Me gusta
aprender porque estoy en este país y es necesario para comunicarse [I like to learn
because I’m in this country and it’s necessary in order to communicate].”

For Julio, English played an important role in his life even before he came to the
United States. Growing up in Oaxaca, Julio was exposed to American popular culture
through migrant workers, who travelled between the United States and Mexico and
brought back various English-language artifacts, including music, videos, and sports
paraphernalia. As Julio grew older, he found himself increasingly dissatisfied with his
inability to comprehend all of the things that so interested him, saying, “That’s partly
why I wanted to do this [learn English], to learn what being said in the songs, what was
being said in those videos, in interviews with Magic Johnson [and] Isaiah Thomas.” What
is more, he began to wonder what existed beyond the borders of his small village, which
led him to the decision to pursue international business as a career. Determined to
succeed, Julio eventually enrolled in a prestigious language school that he hoped would
help him achieve his goals.

Like Julio, Daniela’s life was also significantly affected by English in her home
country, though not in such a positive way. Throughout her scholastic career, Daniela
struggled to keep up with the compulsory English language education that was enforced
in Costa Rican public schools due to the language’s importance as a “universal
language.” Still, when she entered college, she elected business administration as her
career, where “you have more contact with international business [and] different people
from other countries.” Ultimately, Daniela reasoned that the only way she would be able
to learn English was to leave school and come to the United States, which she calls “la cuna del ingles, like, la cuna en el buen pronunciar, los modismos, everything [the homeland of English, like, the birthplace of good pronunciation, idioms, everything].”

Nevertheless, according to Daniela, she still has not had much success learning English:

“I have six years [in the United States], like seven years more, and it’s slowly, so I know I don’t practice. That is my fault. I don’t practice, I don’t take more time, but I know other people, they learn more English than me…Now it’s supposed to I have more possibility for learn more, but my problem is I am in a circle with the people speak Spanish, I see the soap operas in Spanish, and watch just in Spanish, and my family speak just in Spanish. My boyfriend speak Spanish, he don’t want to speak English with me. That is the problem.”

In contrast to the students of FUMCY ESL, while she does hold English in the same regard, here Daniela does not express a particularly strong obligation to use English. Rather, it seems she views it as her prerogative to take advantage of the opportunity to be in an English-speaking environment.

**Opportunities to use English.** As I learned in my interview with Julio, isolation from both English speakers as well as peers is a major obstacle for many Latinos. A problem especially for stay-at-home caregivers and domestic workers (roles typically fulfilled by women), the lack of interaction hinders these individuals’ social well-being as well as their linguistic growth in the English language. I began to understand the effects of isolation more deeply when I asked participants which languages they speak at home, with friends, and at work; whether the participants had ever found themselves in a situation where they felt as though they did not have adequate English skills; and if they could think of a time when they felt proud of their English skills. Based on the responses gathered, the extent to which an individual has the opportunity to use English outside of the classroom has a significant impact upon how they view their language abilities.
Interestingly, the answers provided by the two male participants in this particular session, Pablo and Aarón, differed quite drastically from those of the women (including the fact that they were the only ones to solely use English in their written responses). At home, most of the participants said they use a mix of English and Spanish, “Espanglish,” or Spanish only (additionally, Claudia, who hails from Brazil, only uses Portuguese in the home). Notably, however, Aarón only wrote down English in response to this question. When it comes to speaking with friends, all of the participants said they use their native language, though Pablo did say he has many English-speaking friends with whom he uses English. The most discrepancy between the men and women was evident in the language used at work. Of the female participants that work outside the home, either as domestic workers or kitchen staff, only one responded just English; the others said they use Spanish or both languages. In contrast, the men, both of whom work in construction, said that they use English a great deal, if not exclusively.

The divergence in responses given by the male and female participants carried over to the questions regarding positive and negative experiences with English. When asked about a situation where they felt their English skills to be inadequate, all of the women responded with “yes” with some including other qualifiers, such as “muchas veces” [often] and “muy mal” [very badly]. On the other hand, Pablo said he only sometimes has found himself in such situations. Aarón did answer “yes” to the question, but unlike the female participants, he cited specifically, “when I need to show to my boss how I do my work.” He also said “Not enough” in response to being asked to describe a time he felt proud of his English; still, Aarón’s answer to the question implies that there may be times he feels proud, even if they are infrequent. More positively, Pablo replied to
this question with “Yes, when I was able to handle a conversation by phone.” When it came to the women in the group, unfortunately the majority of responses were not quite so confident. While Sandra did respond straightforwardly, “Yes, I do,” the only other woman to give a relatively positive response was Adela, who said, “Bueno, ahora me siento que estoy aprendiendo mucho [Well, now I feel that I’m learning a lot].” All of the others stated that they could not think of a situation where they felt proud of their English abilities, with Rebecca, adding, “…because I need more English.”

Like the women of FUMCY ESL, Daniela shared that she has very limited exposure to English outside of her tutoring sessions as she is surrounded by primarily Spanish speakers at home and in her social circles. Daniela also expressed that she sees herself at a disadvantage as a domestic worker in comparison to those who have more contact with English speakers in their work. She explains, “Because my work, I don’t see the people every time, just sometimes. And then when I go talk with they, it’s less, it’s not that big, just “Hi, how are you? How was something?” or it’s too small, like five minutes, just five minutes and I beginning my work and they continue their things.”

Following up, I asked Daniela how this made her feel and whether she would like more opportunities to speak in English. She responded that she feels better speaking Spanish because she can “know everything,” but she recognizes the need to use English in her day-to-day affairs, adding “That’s why I’m in this country, right?” Still, in spite of her attempts to speak English as often as possible, the difficulties Daniela feels with the language at times seem to be more than she can handle: she says, “I trying but when I beginning and I have a stop, o me trabo, me da un poco de miedo, entonces ya no continuo [or I get tongue-tied, it makes me a little afraid, so I don’t go on]…I trying to
use the English, but I feeling bad when somebody say me, ‘What?’ or ‘What do you…?’ or ‘Pardon me?’ or oh my God, I felt bad, I speak bad.”

In contrast to the female group interview participants, when I asked Daniela about a time when she felt proud of her English skills, she was able to think of a few examples, including being able to understand what others are saying and helping friends who may not understand English so well. However, Daniela also described a specific scenario that occurred with an elderly client of hers: “I call him and say something, I don’t know for what, for cancel or for reschedule, and then he told me, ‘Oh, Daniela, you speak very, very wonderful, but I can understand more for phone than you be here!’ Oh my goodness, oh that’s great!...Yeah, maybe when I don’t see the people, I feeling more comfortable to talk English.” It is interesting that what could be construed as a backhanded compliment given by Daniela’s client, she very much valued. Moreover, based on this appraisal, it seems, she concluded that her English abilities are at their best when she does not have to face the person with whom she is communicating, perhaps adding a degree of comfort to being isolated from other English speakers.

In Julio’s case, although I did not ask the same questions of him, the life experiences he shared with me were also relevant to the issue of battling isolation. Even before immigrating, Julio sought out many avenues to enhance his English language education, especially through a number of opportunities to study in the United States, which proved to be very beneficial to him. In Oaxaca, Julio shared, he had no other practice with English outside of classroom due to a lack of additional resources as well as people with whom to speak the language. It was only when he came to the U.S. that Julio asserts he began to see a significant difference in his language abilities as he was thrust
into authentic communicative situations. Julio cited a specific example that occurred when he was living in San Francisco, where he was given the wrong order at a fast food restaurant. He ended up in a confrontation with the employee, who insisted she had given him what he asked for, scathingly adding “Your mistakes are not my problem.” In the previous times that such a scenario befell him, Julio confessed he would have begrudgingly accepted what was placed before him, even if he did not like it, because he did not feel comfortable enough to engage in conflict. However, in this particular instance, Julio gathered up the courage to dispute the employee’s assertions and to ask to speak with the manager, who righted the situation. He credited his newfound empowerment to having the linguistic knowledge “to finally realize my thoughts and find a solution for a problem that I was having at the time... I was like, ‘No I’m not going to do that’ because I feel that I know how to say what I want to say.”

In sum, all of the participants shared that they had had experiences where they felt underequipped to handle the situation because of their English; however, to the extent that a person has the opportunity to use their English outside of the classroom, they may also have more opportunities to have positive experiences with the language.

Opinions of NESs and Latinos. When queried about whether they feel more comfortable speaking English with native speakers or other ESL learners, all but two participants in the group interviews said they prefer to speak with NESs. However, this was quite puzzling as a few went on to frame their encounters with NESs in a rather negative light. In response to Diego’s assertion that “the majority of people are very nice about it [speaking English with him, a NNS], Sandra countered, “Hay muchas personas que están dispuestas a ayudar, pero otras no [There are many people that are willing to
help, but others are not].” Cármen also shared an experience, where she told the receptionist at an appointment that she had been living in the United States for eight years, to which the receptionist responded, “‘And you don’t speak English?’ así que me hizo escribir en papel y me sentí mal [so she made me write on paper, and I felt bad].” Chiming in, Alejandra added, “Comprendo más que puedo hablar. Tengo vergüenza cuando no me entienden; me da miedo [I understand more than I can speak. I feel ashamed when people don’t understand me; it makes me afraid].”

Despite these disconcerting sentiments, it may be that the group interview participants feel even more judged by their own. Many of the participants agreed with Diego when he said, “When I’m alone, I’m just fine. When I’m in a group, me quedo mudo [I remain silent]. I feel more comfortable in situations where I feel like people aren’t going to laugh at me.” Cármen affirmed the same attitude, telling of the many times she and her Latina friends go to the store and end up bickering over who should approach the salesperson, even though neither would have a problem speaking up on their own. I tried to gain some insight on why this might be in my interview with Daniela, who also said that she feels more comfortable speaking English with native speakers of English: in addition to the fact that Spanish simply comes more easily in conversation, according to Daniela, Latinos are quite critical of each other when it comes to speaking English. Daniela explains, “Se ríen, o sea, algunos u otros se hacen sentir mal porque dicen, ‘Oh no, eso no se dice así, se dice así.’ Entonces se siente incómodo [They laugh, or some make you feel bad because they say, “Oh no, you don’t say it this way, you say it that way.” So you feel uncomfortable]. But the problema [problem] is that’s the same people, you know, the Latin people and they don’t help you.”
Daniela also shared that she feels NESs have more patience with her, particularly in those times that she experiences difficulty communicating. In her words, “They put more attention, and I can try to saying again and they, ‘Oh yeah, I got it!’…I know I don’t speak good but some people say, ‘Oh no, don’t worry, I understand good.’” Not only does Daniela sense less judgment amongst native speakers but she actually appreciates it when NESs correct her use of English, even in potentially embarrassing situations: “I always pronounce the wrong form, and I can say other things. But like, por ejemplo, sábanas es ‘sheets’ y siempre me sale mal entonces [for example, sábanas is ‘sheets’ and it always comes out wrong, so] I saying ‘shits.’ They [NESs] trying to correct me. That’s good…Like the old man [a client of Daniela’s], he try to help me. He try to correct me, but the good form. Yeah, the good form, with respect, and that’s good because I need to be open with the people try to help me.”

**Inability to fully express themselves.** One of the most trying aspects of speaking English as a second language as expressed by the participants is the helplessness that comes with being unable to fully understand and express themselves in the language. Daniela in particular described feeling “sad and worrying and feeling bad, really bad because you can’t try to help with your basic things.” The inability to articulate all that she wants to say has been particularly problematic with her clients. Even a small accident, Daniela reveals, can become an entire ordeal, as she painstakingly attempts to explain to her client what happened, often needing to take the client to the site of the incident, which can be quite embarrassing. Especially frustrating to Daniela is the fact that she cannot use her Spanish to her advantage since none of her clients speak the language; in her own words, “Entonces es como no puedo decir, ‘Ay, Olivia, se me cayó
un vaso allá’ y me vas a entender normal…en este momento tengo que explicar estas pequeñas cosas que para mí son pequeñas porque en español son tan básicas [It’s like I can’t say, ‘Oh, Olivia, a glass fell over there’ and you’re going to understand me just fine…in such moments, I have to explain these little things that, for me, are little because in Spanish they are so basic].”

For those in the FUMCY ESL group who are parents, feeling limited in their English capabilities has a significant impact upon their family life. Both Cármen and Alejandra shared that they regularly find themselves unable to assist their children with homework, especially in subject areas like language arts, because they cannot understand the assignments, nor do they possess the language skills to answer the questions. As a result, their children must learn to be self-sufficient in their studies or turn to the Internet for answers. Perhaps even more damaging, having to exclude themselves from what they see as one of the most fundamental aspects of raising children is devastating to mothers like Cármen and Alejandra, who so deeply desire to be involved in every aspect of their children’s lives.

Despite the native-like level of fluency he has achieved, Julio confessed that he, too, occasionally feels insecure about his language abilities, revealing, “And sometimes I’m intimidated outside, too, even speaking English. People speak too fast, and I feel scared. I’m like, ‘Oh my God, I don’t think I’m understanding what they are saying.’” Though he is now able to cope, Julio reported feeling quite overwhelmed during his earlier years in the United States, particularly in fast-paced scenarios, such as ordering food. Consequently, Julio would only patronize restaurants like McDonald’s, where, according to him, “they give people really easy choices…so I pretty much used only like
two or three words in that place, but it was like a number and Coke, so I didn’t have to use language at all.” Moreover, when Julio did put himself in situations that required him to utilize more complex language, things did not always turn out the way he wanted; for example, he spoke of an occasion when he tried to ask for creamer for his coffee but unknowingly ended up ordering sour cream instead. Fortunately, he found the resilience to look at the situation with humor; however, Julio also recognizes that going through such incidents may be harmful to English language learners’ progress, causing them to become even more anxious and introverted.

Passing on Spanish to children. Though I did not originally plan to investigate the participants’ attitudes towards Spanish, this theme emerged during the course of our conversations, specifically when I asked the group which languages they speak or plan to speak with their children. Of those who have children, all responded that they speak both English and Spanish or “Espanglish” with them. The only individual that said they would use just English with their children in the future was Diego. His opinion was based on what he observed in the household of his sister-in-law, who only speaks Spanish to her children since she reasons they will gain exposure to English in school. As a result, according to Diego, one son understands English but cannot speak it. Even with Diego’s anecdote, others expressed that keeping the Spanish language alive in the home is essential for children. As Aarón asserted, “It’s important for kids to know Spanish so they be ready for trips [to their/their parents’ home country].” Added Pablo, “Children will be more successful if they have knowledge of Spanish.” Thus, the group participants are not just inclined to use Spanish with their children out of comfort or convenience but because
they feel Spanish will allow their children greater participation in family life as well as an advantage amongst those who speak only English.

Moreover, as I learned from Daniela, parents may use Spanish language education as a means for their children to be more appreciative of their struggles in learning English. Daniela recounted a time several years ago when she lived with her aunt and American-born cousins, then eight and ten years old. She described the conflicts that arose with her young cousins as they taunted her, making her feel even more insecure about her language abilities. At the same time, her cousins’ Spanish was, in Daniela’s words, “un poco cortado [y] feo [a little choppy and ugly]” since they almost exclusively spoke English. Not wanting her children’s Spanish to regress any further than it already had, Daniela’s aunt decided to move her family to Costa Rica for four years, where Daniela says “they learned very well español.” Since returning to the United States two years ago, not only do her cousins just use Spanish in the home, even amongst themselves, but they also are much more respectful of their NNES family members. As Daniela states, “Entonces ahora es más fácil hablar con ellos en inglés porque se sienten la dificultad de su idioma. Entonces ya no se burlan como cuando eran niños. Entonces más te ayudan a pronunciar [Now they don’t tease like they did when they were kids. They help you more with pronunciation]. It’s el respeto [respect] and it’s nice. Yeah, good for us!”

**What pedagogical factors may impede or foster the development of ownership, confidence, and a positive sense of self in the target language?**

*Initial experiences learning English.* Of all the participants in this study, only Daniela and Julio had studied English in their home countries. While one might think that such previous knowledge would afford them an upper hand upon coming to the United States,
it so happened that both had very dejecting learning experiences due to a lack of quality instruction as well as uninspiring teachers.

In Costa Rica, Daniela describes, the language presented to students is very rudimentary and inauthentic with a large focus placed on learning grammatical rules. Moreover, according to Daniela, because the instructors received the same quality of English education, they were unequipped to teach anything beyond grammar: “It’s different en Costa Rica porque pronuncia como se salga y prácticamente en español…They [the teachers] can, you know, put in the blackboard, in the pizarra just activities or just writing or grammar. So when you try to [talk], you can’t. No tuve ninguna experiencia con la pronunciación ni con la conversación [I didn’t have any experience with pronunciation or conversation].” Consequently, Daniela experienced much anxiety when it came to learning English. Yet, even though she could have dropped English in exchange for French over the course of her academic career, a language at which she excelled, Daniela resolved to persist with her English studies “because in my country it was more important the English than the French.”

Julio faced a similar situation in Mexico, where the public education he received left him unprepared for the rigor of the private language school he attended in hopes of increasing his chances of being accepted into a private business school. Julio was particularly attracted to the prestige of the renowned language school, which was thought to be “really good, and people are supposed to talk really good English.” Moreover, not knowing any English, he initially was very impressed with his instructor’s proficiency in the language. With all his trust as well as a considerable amount of his hard-earned money placed in this esteemed program, Julio took it deeply to heart when he failed his
first examination and the impatient instructor scornfully assessed, “...I think you should dedicate yourself to something else. Really, English is not for you.” In the words of Julio, this appraisal “really sent me all the way down” and haunted him as he found himself forced to take on language instruction as a career on account of not being able to afford tuition at his preferred university.

In contrast to Julio and Daniela, the group interview participants, all of whom began studying English in the United States, related that their first encounters learning the language were considerably more positive. Specifically, I asked the group what they thought learning English would be like and whether it turned out to be what they expected. Vanesa cited her difficulty learning the language, saying “No fue lo que yo esperaba porque yo siento que el inglés es muy complicado [It wasn’t what I expected because I feel that English is very complicated].” Even so, she described learning English as “algo muy dificil, pero no imposible [something very difficult but not impossible].” Rebecca shared similar feelings as she modestly said, “Antes de saber las pocas cosas que sé ahora, era muy dificil para mí. Pero al aprender cosas nuevas y poder entenderlas, es más interesante [Before knowing the few things that I now know, it was very difficult for me. But after learning new things and being able to understand them, it’s more interesting].” Perhaps the most self-assured individual in the group was Sandra, who asserted, “Yo esperaba aprender y creo que lo he conseguido un poquito [I expected to learn and I think I’ve achieved that a bit].” Like the others, Sandra shared that learning English became increasingly more challenging as she discovered that, unlike Spanish, English is not pronounced the same way that it looks. Still, she found herself motivated by the need to know English in order to communicate with non-Spanish speakers. In her
words, “Es necesario saberlo [ingles], especialmente cuando no estás con latinos. Alguien te dice ‘Siéntate’ y te quedes, ‘What?’ [It’s necessary to know it [English], especially when you’re not with Latinos. Someone says to you, “Sit down” and you’re like, “What?”]

**Differences amongst students.** According to Julio, one of the most complicated aspects of coordinating a program like FUMCY ESL is the diversity of the student population. Although two individuals may have the same proficiency in English, the level of education they received in their home countries can pose special challenges. As Julio describes, “For some of them, it’s going to be a lot easier, because if you’ve been in education for most of your life, you at least have an idea [of how to study]. But if they’ve been working since third, second grade and barely, even in the Spanish, barely learned how to read and write, it’s going to be a huge challenge…” Julio sees such disparities as indicative of greater social problems that affect less educated students and their likelihood to thrive in the classroom: “A lot of people we have in our classes are not as educated as, for example, someone who’s about the same age, who has the opportunity to be educated, to be able to concentrate, to focus on education and not worry about being working and affording school and not being fed properly.” Furthermore, Julio explained that the implications of a person’s nationality can generate additional divisions between students. Throughout much of Latin America, citizens face dire circumstances, forcing many to flee to the United States in search of refuge. Yet, due to the dynamics of American politics, only certain nationalities are granted formal asylum in this country. Julio specifically cited the situation of Cubans, who are able to “get the asylum so that as soon as they step on U.S. ground, it changes the whole environment, and they are safe
once they are here.” Those who do not receive the luxury of immediate political asylum must embark upon a rigorous application process, which takes an exorbitant amount of time and money to complete and frequently results in denial. Nevertheless, since returning to their home country would pose grave danger to themselves and their families, these individuals often choose to remain in the United States and evade the immigration system, which not only places them in a precarious situation but can also create further distractions to learning.

The differences that occur in a group setting do not only affect each individual but can spawn conflict amongst the students, as well. In our interview, I learned that Daniela attended FUMCY ESL for a brief period of time but opted to leave the program due to the classroom environment. She often found herself falling behind in the coursework since her classmates knew more English than she did at the time. Moreover, rather than explaining the material again, the instructor would either tell Daniela to move on or would pair her with another student, who “te ayuda con poca disposición. So, se siente mal [helps you with little willingness. So you feel bad].” However, even more troubling for Daniela was the disregard she experienced from her peers. As she contends, “Entonces quería escoger un lugar donde no hayan personas irrespetuosas. Es que sí sucede, que se burlen de usted o cosas así. That’s the problema. Hay muchas personas de diferentes lugares y de diferentes niveles de educación [I wanted to find a place where there weren’t disrespectful people. It does happen that they make fun of you or things like that. That’s the problem. There are many people from different places and with different standards of upbringing/manners].” Ultimately, because of such negative experiences,
Daniela sought out one-on-one tutoring through PALMA, where she reports being much happier with her English language education.

Although in my own experience it rarely occurs, I, too, have witnessed conflict erupt amongst students, who had very different expectations of how one should conduct themselves in class. During one particular lesson, Robert and I asked the students to go around and share the responses they wrote down on a worksheet. When it came to be Adela’s turn, rather than directly answering the question, she instead made a vulgar joke in Spanish that played off of the question’s wording, a gesture I took to signify nervousness on her part, perhaps from not knowing how to respond. While several students found Adela’s witticism to be quite clever, from across the table, Sandra reprimanded her for not taking the assignment seriously and for wasting the class’ time. Soon, more students became engulfed in the conflict; some, especially Cármén, supported Adela, telling Sandra, “Usted no puede mandar a nadie” (You can’t tell anyone what to do), while others actually came to the defense of Robert and me, chiding all the parties involved for disrespecting us as teachers. Following a few more minutes of back and forth, eventually the class settled down. For the remainder of the evening, tensions remained high as both Adela and Cármén refused to speak. Though we did not know whether it was intentional or simply coincidental, we saw neither Adela nor Cármén in class for the next couple of weeks. Thankfully, both returned, seemingly with no ill will, with Cármén even approaching me after one class in order to apologize.

*English-only in the classroom.* One of the chief complaints that Julio had about the language school he attended in high school was the strictly-enforced English-only policy. Since his instructors refused to speak to him in Spanish, Julio became
increasingly confused about the grammar-centric material presented to him, even joking, “I remember when they said ‘the third person,’ I was like, ‘what’s the third person?’ I used to think, like, standing here in a group, like the third one.” Furthermore, Julio never fully comprehended what he was learning because he was unable to obtain an explanation that was intelligible to him. Very aptly, he likened his knowledge of English to most people’s understanding of an alternator: while a select few could explain its role inside an automobile, the majority of us simply know an alternator to be a car part. As a result, Julio became progressively more dejected as he lamented, “When you’re probably very unknowledgeable of the language, when you don’t know a lot, you really just get discouraged.”

It was not until he entered university that Julio was able to break free from the burdensome methods of English-only instruction. Since first year courses were taught by student interns, who were about to graduate, these individuals sympathized much more with their fellow students and understood how explanations in Spanish could be used to clarify concepts in such a way that Julio began to understand not just what words meant but how they functioned. Now, as a language teacher himself, he strongly advocates for strategic use of Spanish in the classroom, though it may seem counterintuitive to some professionals, asserting:

It’s just something I try to address even though that might not be the best. From the academic perspective, that might be the worst thing to do. You’re going to speak Spanish to someone trying to learn English? And I try to say, ‘Yeah, but I’m not using Spanish just to use it.’ It’s to try to avoid confusion to our students the most we can because then things happen, things can be a little crazy…[and then they become] more intimidated than they were before the situation.
Though she does not seem to hold the same despondency as Julio, Daniela also faced difficulties with an English-only approach to language instruction in the first adult ESL program she attended. Like her English education in Costa Rica, lessons were primarily academically-oriented with a great deal of focus on grammar and writing over conversation. Nevertheless, Daniela’s familiarity with this method of learning did not work to her benefit since, in her words, “because you never have just English for all these, it’s really hard in the first time.” However, unlike Julio’s teacher, who was simply unwilling to use the native language in the classroom, the instructor of Daniela’s class was unable to use Spanish as the group was comprised not only of Latinos but also individuals from African and Asian countries. Still, from what Daniela told me, it seems that the instructor was not entirely tolerant of students using their native languages amongst themselves. When I asked Daniela whether there was any time to converse with classmates, she joked, “Muchos podían hablar pero en español [Many could talk but in Spanish]!” More interestingly, however, she went on to reveal, “But she [the teacher] don’t like when everybody speak just Spanish because she don’t understand and then you supposed to be go there learn English.” Here it seems that Daniela’s instructor was reluctant to allow students to speak in their native languages because she did not want to be excluded from the class she was supposed to be leading.

**Feeling secure in the classroom.** Although they may not always feel confident about their language abilities outside of the classroom, the participants generally had a very optimistic outlook about what they were learning in their English classes. In the group interview, all of the participants shared that they have learned a great deal in their time with FUMCY ESL; that they were satisfied with the quality of education they were
receiving; and that they felt very grateful for all of the efforts put in by the teachers. Additionally, several expressed that they felt less anxious during English classes, Alejandra articulating, “Me siento relajada cuando estoy aquí. Es como todo desaparece…aquí no tengo miedo [I feel relaxed when I’m here. It’s like everything goes away…here I’m not afraid].” It is interesting to note that this increased sense of comfort did not seem to stem from any additional feelings of competence in English. In fact, when I asked how the participants how they felt about speaking up in English class, Vanesa answered, “Con un poco de miedo porque mi pronunciación es muy mala [With a bit of fear because my pronunciation is very bad].” Rather, it seems that, they feel freer to express themselves, even if their attempts at speaking the language are not so successful. As Sandra articulated, “Aunque no puedo contestar, me siento a gusto. No me da pena hablar porque, aunque no lo sé, trato de hablar el inglés como lo que me salga. Me siento orgullosa—salgo lo que puedo [Even though I can’t answer, I feel comfortable. I don’t feel ashamed because, even if I don’t know, I try to speak English as best I can. I feel proud—I do what I can].” Rebecca added, “La verdad me siento muy segura sobre todo cuando puedo preguntar algo de lo que no sé [Really I feel most secure when I can ask something I don’t know about].”

Speaking about her experiences with tutoring at PALMA, Daniela expressed many of the same positive sentiments as the group interview participants. Over the course of her time with PALMA, Daniela has had three very influential tutors, each of whom have helped her grow in different ways. Her first tutor, Daniela says, was a “wonderful tutor because she prepare for me everything for doing and she just speak me English.” Although Daniela described the tutoring sessions as being “so hard,” this was
compensated for by the chemistry she shared with her tutor, resulting in her achieving “my first step in English.” From 2009 until 2011, I was Daniela’s tutor, during which time she affirms (to my delight) that she learned a lot, especially quotidian language, and was able to develop self-confidence while speaking, which in her words, “was important for me because everything was more easy when you have a little confidence with you.”

With her most recent tutor, who focuses mainly on listening and speaking in her sessions, Daniela appreciates the personal relationship they have grown, likening the time that they spend talking to “two amigas [friends].” Overall, Daniela expressed that she feels less pressure in English class because of the level of comfort she has with her tutors: whereas she sometimes feels judged by other English speakers, thinking to herself, “Oh, everybody think, ‘This girl is here for six years and can’t even learn English?’,,” with her tutors at PALMA, she feels safe to make mistakes because “you can asking how you can do it good, and then I think it’s different, in especial feeling good because I have opportunities for learn the good form.”

Discussion and Implications

The insights provided by the participants of this study shed additional light on a Latino ESL speaker’s capacity to take ownership of their language abilities. Despite the linguistic hurdles they may confront, all of the interviewees expressed strong motivations to take part in English language speech communities, indicating a desire to forge an identity that reflects them as competent speakers of the language. However, even the most fluent individual can be made to feel that they have only a peripheral claim to English due to negative encounters with NESs and even Latino peers, who continuously draw attention to their position as an NNES and frame it as unfavorable.
To consider this from a psychological perspective, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as expounded by Ryan and Deci (2012) serves as a particularly appropriate point of reference, being described by the authors as “a theory of motivation and personality within social contexts, that is concerned with the relative assimilation of goals, values, and identities” (p. 227). The authors maintain that individuals may take on a particular identity in order to fulfill the fundamental psychological needs of relatedness (a feeling of connectedness to others), competence (a sense of effectiveness that is supported through skill and knowledge), and autonomy (the sincere belief by the individual that an identity wholly belongs to them). Simultaneously, individuals seek out endorsement of their identities by others whose opinions are valuable to them (i.e. significant other, family members, society, etc.). Thus, according to SDT, the degree to which a person is able to achieve equilibrium between fulfillment of their basic needs and approval from others determines how deeply and successfully they will be able to integrate an identity into the self as well as the level of well-being that they will experience. Evaluating my findings against the viewpoints of SDT, it appears that the participants in the present study struggle with realizing this complex and fragile balance: not only is it disheartening to encounter significant challenges in day-to-day communication, but also, when they do reach a point of feeling capable to freely express themselves in English, those around them, NESs and NNEs alike, create barriers to English ownership, often times through humiliation as in the McDonald’s employee, who told Julio that “your mistakes are not my problem,” or the taunting by classmates and family members that Daniela underwent.

The principal place that participants expressed a sense of reprieve from feelings of fear, disappointment, and judgment was in their ESL classes. Although many participants
acknowledged that they have learned a great deal in their ESL classes, they were not under the perception that they spoke English with any increased fluency or accuracy. Rather, the openness and acceptance afforded by the sheltered classroom environment and understanding instructors allowed them to feel more at ease. Thus, for the participants, it seems that the ESL classroom is not just a place for learning English; here they can dissociate themselves from the sometimes hostile responses they receive when using the language in everyday settings with people who do not necessarily appreciate their struggles.

What may contribute to this perception of escape is the decontextualized, occasionally inauthentic nature in which language is frequently presented in the classroom. For example, the material presented by Robert, who was the primary lesson planner for our Level Two class at FUMCY ESL, was often oriented towards creating metalinguistic awareness of the differences between Spanish and English. I recall on several occasions Robert asking the class to read one by one from sizeable packets that contained numerous lists of Spanish/English cognates in an attempt to show students that they if they recognized the root of a word, they could exchange the Spanish suffix for an English one (i.e. total-mente becomes total-ly; real-idad becomes real-ity). Perhaps pragmatic approaches such as this stem from teachers’ assumptions that students will come across or seek out opportunities to encounter and use English outside the classroom in ostensibly authentic situations, positioning classtime as an academically-oriented space for fine-tuning specific language skills. However, such notions are challenged by the fact that, as the participants in the present study conveyed, ELLs do not always have access to varied, authentic language due to isolation, or they may avoid situations that require
extensive use of English as a result of feeling underequipped to use the language to their benefit. Thus, although approaching language instruction in such a mechanistic manner may provide students a brief diversion from confronting the real-world problems associated with using English, it also does nothing to help them explore and negotiate solutions. Delving deeper into this matter, Leung, Harris, and Rampton (1997) assert that ESL students are often simplistically defined in terms of two categories: their ethnicity and the language they speak. What such attitudes fail to acknowledge is that bilingual speakers, no matter their ability, are constantly negotiating their identities in their present cultural contexts, presenting challenges for teachers that reach far beyond addressing issues of contrastive analysis between English and the student’s native language.

Therefore, as the researchers assess, teachers must reframe their view of students in such a way that not only defines them by their native language, but instead addresses students’ relationships to the languages they speak in terms of expertise, or proficiency in a language; affiliation, defined as the bond an individual feels to a language, regardless of whether they identify with the social group generally correlated with that language; and inheritance, which refers to an individual’s familial and communal relationship to a language heritage to which they may or may not profess affiliation or expertise. In doing so, ESL instructors can craft flexible pedagogical methods that are sensitive to the contexts of their students, thereby more effectively serving their needs. Additionally, when teachers take a genuine interest in the multi-faceted identities of their students, they, in turn, open constructive avenues for students to explore and negotiate these for themselves.
One model for approaching language and identity in the classroom that may be especially useful to and could be easily expanded upon in programs like FUMCY ESL is put forth by Morgan (1997), who maintains that “ESL teachers would need to conceive of their students as having social needs and aspirations that may be inseparable from linguistic needs if language instruction is to be most effective” (p. 435). In his reflections on the Canadian adult ESL program at a Chinese community center, where he regularly teaches, Morgan depicts a lesson on intonation that was spurred by a previous text study of the hypothetical but very plausible situation of Yuen-Li, a woman living in the United States, who speaks no English and deals with feelings of isolation due to the fact that she stays at home to take care of her family at the request of her very traditional husband, Chian. As part of the lesson, students evaluated and discussed a variety of solutions provided by the text. The following day, Morgan brought in a dialogue between Yuen and Chian in which she reveals to him that she has been secretly attending English lessons at the community center. Although the script was initially intended to be a guide for paired students to create their own dialogues, the focus of the class turned towards a discussion of how Yuen’s intonation could be varied to express either timid cautiousness or dismissive resistance in light of her husband’s tentative reaction to the news. In addition to the fact that the lesson directly spoke to issues that students personally intimated to him, Morgan describes the activities as “particularly advantageous for identity work” (p. 440) since the students are able to privately examine their own experiences while also having the opportunity to openly voice their opinions on Yuen’s situation. The degree of anonymity afforded by such an approach may be beneficial to students like Daniela and the FUMCY ESL group, who expressed anxiety over being
criticized by their Latino peers. More importantly, however, language lessons like the one presented by Morgan allows students to embrace, reject, discover, or construct intersecting identities connected to complex cultural values, including gender, power, familial obligations, and heritage language maintenance, to name just a few.

To be sure, although the teaching style Morgan (1997) describes is the only one that I consider here, it is not the only or the ideal way to incorporate issues of identity into ESL instruction. Indeed, in her appraisal of research concerning the challenges faced by ESL/EFL teachers and researchers with respect to language and identity in TESOL Quarterly’s Autumn 1997 issue, Norton (1997) aptly “cautions against drawing neat conclusions about the learning of English in either EFL or ESL contexts” (p. 426). What is paramount to helping Latino ELLs achieve success, I believe, is for language instructors to distance themselves from the forces that seek to impose labels and expectations upon these individuals in favor of creating environments for students to navigate their relationship to the English language on their own terms.

Limitations of research

From my experiences collecting data, a significant shortcoming of my research design was the decision to conduct group interviews. Contrary to my beliefs that being amongst their peers would allow participants to feel more open, the group setting did not elicit particularly elaborative responses. As I learned from my research, this may have been due to these individuals’ desire to save face in front of other Latinos. Moreover, as a novice to ethnographic research and non-native speaker of Spanish, I found it difficult myself to keep up with all of the details provided by the participants, particularly in those few but critical moments when they did begin to open up and converse more freely.
Based upon the much more constructive experience I had in my interviews with Julio and Daniela, I believe my data would be even richer had I conducted individual interviews with the FUMCY ESL students, which would have allowed me to delve further into why they possessed the feelings they expressed.

Furthermore, although I used my research as a channel through which to gain a better understanding of Latino identity with respect to the English language, in no way can this study be seen as conclusive. Indeed, in this very research paper, the responses obtained from participants excellently demonstrate how multifaceted and complex each individual’s experience can be, even amongst a group of only twelve people. Were I to conduct this study outside of Southeastern Michigan, with individuals from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds, or with ELLs studying English in programs that are not community-based (i.e. through a college or language school), I believe that the results would vary in significant ways.

Finally, I must entertain the idea that I, as a White, upper middle-class, American-born individual, who stood before many of the participants as a person in power being (or having been) their English teacher, could have skewed the interview responses. Although I do my best to not remain complicit in the oft-silent but oppressive forces that affect Latinos living in the United States, I recognize that I will always have some part in the hegemony due to the invisible advantages I possess. Moreover, even though I myself come from a family of Russian-Jewish immigrants and have heard numerous stories of discrimination from them, I have never experienced such prejudice in my lifetime. What is more, because my parents were well-educated and had the opportunity to come to this country as refugees from the Soviet Union, I was fortunate to be raised in a privileged
environment. In sum, to put it straightforwardly, I am an outsider attempting to explore experiences about which I have no idea. While I do not think this completely invalidates my research efforts, I do wonder how this study would differ if it were to be carried out by a Person of Color, immigrant, or someone of a different socioeconomic status.

**Future Research**

The insights garnered from the participants in this study reveal new avenues for exploration of the issues facing Latino English language learners. One such field of interest that arose through the course of my research was the role of gender in an individual's ability to develop a predominantly positive outlook towards their language abilities. In particular, the experiences shared by the female participants suggest that Latina women, in comparison to their male counterparts, may face more obstacles, stemming from greater isolation. More research into this area of concern (that, in fact, may be prevalent amongst women of other nationalities and ethnicities) would provide ESL practitioners a greater understanding of the challenges faced by their female students.

Another direction for future research that merits increased attention is the social dynamics amongst Latinos as it concerns language learning. In her study of a workplace communication in a culturally heterogeneous, Chicago-based factory, Weiland Herrick (2005) challenges the assumption that people who share the same native language will be able to more easily communicate. In interviews with Mexican employees, who were charged with translating work procedures into Spanish, Weiland Herrick discovered a great deal of conflict marked by dialectal disagreements, which when examined more deeply, were the product of social and educational divisions between the team.
members. Specifically, two of the team members, Roberto and Miguel, both college graduates, contended that their counterparts’ translations were incorrect due to their poverty and lack of education, direct results of being brought up in rural Mexico. In similar fashion, Theresa and Eduardo, the targets of these comments, claimed that Roberto and Miguel’s translations were not to be listened to since urban “ricos” (rich people) do not understand how “the people” talk. Similar feelings of distrust were expressed by the participants in the present study, encapsulated by Daniela’s assertion that Latino people do not help each other when it comes to learning English. It behooves ESL researchers to further investigate the factors that influence these sentiments to dispel the assumption that members of cultural groups answer to the same “common and predictable behaviors and loyalties” (p. 374) as well as to work towards harmony in the classroom without falling victim to such cultural essentialism.

Lastly, there arose a largely uncharted realm of investigation that I regretfully was not able to explore: the insights of Claudia, a Latina from Brazil. While Claudia does speak some Spanish, during the group interviews in which she participated, she remained silent. She did, however, provide some short written answers to the interview questions, where she conveyed feelings of distress when she finds herself amongst Latinos, who do not share her native language. Unfortunately, because I did not anticipate having a non-Hispanic individual in the group, thereby designing the interviews to be conducted in only English and Spanish, I fear I may have furthered Claudia’s feelings of exclusion by not giving her a proper chance to express herself. From my brief scanning of the literature available, it appears that I am not the only researcher to overlook the experiences and attitudes of non-Hispanic Latinos living in the United States. Although I did encounter
some SLA papers that focus on Brazilian Portuguese speakers as the subjects of study, these were primarily oriented towards pragmatics, phonology, and specific pedagogical techniques; additionally, the extremely limited sociolinguistic research on Brazilians that I was able to find only concerned speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). If the field of SLA to develop a truly critical body of research on the experiences of Latino ESL speakers, it must address the perspectives of those, whose first language is not Spanish.

**Concluding remarks**

Through the course of this study, following new trends in SLA research that reach beyond the linguistic knowledge of ELLs, I have ventured to further illuminate the intricate dynamics that shape Latino ESL speakers’ perceptions of their English language abilities, paying special attention to the role that pedagogy plays. Findings gathered through individual and group interviews indicated that, even being highly motivated, external influences (namely life circumstances and the opinions of others, NESs and NNES peers alike) often hamper Latinos’ capacity to develop a positive sense of self when it comes to speaking English. When it comes to addressing these issues in the classroom, it is important for ESL practitioners to employ pedagogical methodologies that not only focus on linguistic minutiae, but also, more critically, help Latino ELLs to contest the inaccurate characterizations and beliefs forced upon them by cynics such that they reclaim the power to forge their own identities.

To conclude this paper, I wish to share one last anecdote from my interview with Daniela. At one point in our time together, I asked Daniela how she would respond if someone were to ask her what languages she speaks. Having personally witnessed the
immense growth in her English language skills, I must admit my heart sank when she replied “I say just Spanish always.” As I probed further to find out why she would not include English now and under what circumstances she would say she speaks English, Daniela added, “I think I know English like twenty percent or thirty percent. Yeah, because I really need learn more and my talking is really bad and I need to practice. I know my limitations…I think so when I feeling comfortable and when I can, I don’t know how to say that but, pero cuando pueda hablar más flúido then puedo decir, ‘Ok, hablo inglés’ [but when I can speak more fluently then I can say, “Ok, I speak English”].”

In the relatively short time I have spent in the field of ESL, I have heard countless students express similar sentiments. From my observations in and outside of this study, prevalent are notions that a person must fulfill some idealized quota in order to lay legitimate claim to a language. Through changing the way that we as ESL teachers approach instruction, it is my hope that these individuals come to realize that they have the right to call themselves not just learners but speakers of English, if they so choose.
References


