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Analyzing Deeper Strategies: Environmental Ways Adults Learn English

by

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### Abstract

In this action research project, I examine how adult English language learners (ELLs) develop strategies to learn a new language, strategies that are often innate to native speakers. Language learners make meaning by using deeper strategies that emerge, for example, by engaging with social networks to help them negotiate new meanings, such as the understanding of a rental agreement or learning how to use public transportation. These strategies are not taught formally to them. English language learners co-construct meaning with other people, whether speaking English or their own native language. In this project, I identify three learning environments that support deeper language acquisition language strategies: the social learning environment, the interior learning environment, and the political learning environment. If these learning environments are explicitly taught to adult ELLs, then their learning and language acquisition needs can be affectively addressed. This project looks how these deeper strategies are employed in a class of adult learners of English .

*Keywords:* adult English language learners, ELL learning environments

## Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW .....	7
Research questions .....	9
Organic Ways of Learning English .....	12
Literature Review .....	15
CHAPTER 2: METHODS AND ANALYSIS .....	19
Setting .....	19
Participants .....	20
Data collection .....	20
Observation .....	21
Teacher interview .....	22
Student interviews .....	22
Analysis .....	23
Limitations .....	24
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH FINDINGS .....	26
Teacher interview .....	26
Description of student participants .....	28
Learning strategies used outside the classroom .....	29
Children as language brokers .....	29
Cultural artifacts and mediation .....	31
Collaborative dialogues .....	34

Use of L1 .....	36
ELL interviews .....	38
SoYung .....	39
Irena .....	39
Antonio .....	40
Nadia .....	40
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS.....	49
Findings .....	26
Dialogic Collaboration .....	28
Mediation .....	29
Non-verbals .....	29
Inner speech.....	31
Social learning environment.....	34
Interiority learning environment .....	36
Political learning environment .....	38
Implications .....	39
REFERENCES .....	40

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## Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

### Introduction

The intent of this action research project was to examine the language acquisition processes of adult English Language Learners (henceforth, ELLs) who were placed for the most part in a beginning-advanced level English as a Second Language class. I witnessed learners continuously making meaning of English outside of the foci of the classroom setting. Although the lessons were important, and ELLs did learn from them, what caught my attention were the ways students learned English extrinsically and without formal teaching. The ways ELLs made meaning beyond a lesson's objectives were essential to understanding English. I used the word "essential" because its root is the Latin "esse" meaning "to be"—these ways or strategies seemed natural to the students' identity formation process.

The fact that students were talking to each other about the lessons and discussing other matters besides the lessons was one of the essentials of being human: that is, to communicate with each other. I identified the essentiality of communicating between one another as the *social learning environment*.

Another essentiality I observed and learned from interviews with ELLs was that their interiorities were being altered because of accommodating another language. I found these mental "border crossings" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 163) into another language and what happened to a learner's inner life and self-identity present as well. I identified this essentiality as the *interiority learning environment*.

Finally, I identified a third learning environment. I called it the *political learning environment*. I defined political as the ways that an individual could become empowered in his or her community, in economics matters, and, yes, in political involvement too. This environment had to do with the power that an ELLs obtained if he or she had the knowledge of and the effective use of a dominate language, in this case, English. An ELL needed to address this environment in order to make changes, or, to put it more directly, in order to liberate himself or herself socially, economically, and politically.

I labeled these areas learning environments because they appeared to be what ELLs needed to attend to in order to learn English. If a student nourished these learning environments, the making-meaning of English appeared to become more efficient.

**Research question.** Therefore, I focused my action research project on the ways ELLs learned another language beyond the formal lessons. The research question developed into the following: “What ways or strategies do adults use to learn English that address the three learning environments: social, interiority, and political?” I wanted to look at these deeper strategies that ELL employed which were beyond those that took place exclusively in the classroom.

**Formal ways of learning English.** I thought about the four domains of a language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and wondered, “How would an ELL negotiate his or her way through English?” I observed that the formal ways one learned English in school involved the following characteristics: in lesson form which were teacher-devised and teacher-directed, were often accompanied by a textbook or worksheet, and were implemented in the classroom. For instance, one formal strategy I witnessed in the ELL class was how to begin to read an article or chapter using

prediction. One started by reading the cues, such as the title and subtitles, by looking at pictures and illustrations and reading their captions, and by reading the first sentence in every paragraph.

**Deeper or organic ways of learning English.** However, there were ways of learning that I observed ELLs using that went beyond the parameters of the formal instruction. These appeared to be a set of urges that compelled a student to construct the multiple meanings of English. I called these kinds of ways “deeper strategies,” such as peer-to-peer talking for clarification about a lesson, because they appeared anchored and hardwired into humans. Also, these strategies addressed the three learning environments. I used the words “urge” and “compel” because I observed that ELLs mainly learned English from innate, psychological needs that addressed the social, interiority, and political learning environments. These kinds of strategies were used inside of class and outside of class, and were initiated by the students. The students appeared to be intrinsically motivated to use them and did not have to be taught them. These ways or strategies emerged as a part of the natural, human thinking process.

**Problem.** Even though the teaching quality was effective, I think the ELLs could have benefited by being explicitly introduced to the three learning environments. Also, although I observed students using deeper strategies, they often were not cognizant that they were using them. In other words, they did not have the vocabulary to name how they were making meaning of English in the three learning environments using deeper strategies. They were not taught to name and recognize the metacognitive skills which would have rendered learning English more effective.

## Literature Review

In my literature review, I did not find any author that specifically identified and named the three learning environments. Many researchers discussed parts of these areas. Nevertheless, what was absent in the ELL literature I reviewed was the delineation of these environments. Nor did I find researchers who had put a name to “deeper strategies;” this was my coinage. However, my classroom observations and interviews called for such frameworks. The following review is discussed within the frameworks of the three learning environments and their relationship to deeper language acquisition strategies.

**Social learning environment.** The literature of the sociocultural perspective of L2 acquisition focused on the social learning environment. If learning were to be actualized within social engagement, then the precept of “*school* [her italics] is always a performance...constituted through the participation of a group of actors” (Cazden, 2001, p. 40) that might need to be put aside for a moment in order to look at learning beyond classroom performances.

Mitchell and Myles explained that in the sociocultural model, “consciousness and conceptual development are seen firstly as inter-mental phenomena...later individuals develop their own consciousness” (2004, p. 198), and “all learning is seen as first social, then individual; first inter-mental, then intra-mental” (p. 221). Indeed, one of the tenets of Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) held that learning or “problem solving” took place “under the guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Walqui and van Lier added to this point, “knowledge arises in social activity, and all learning is co-constructed, with the learner transforming the social

learning into psychological, or individual, learning over time” (2010, p. 8). All learning begins in the social learning environment.

Within the social learning environment, I observed that peer-to-peer negotiation of meaning engendered a deeper comprehension of English. In a more horizontal (peer-to-peer) rather than vertical (teacher-to-student) mode of learning, the ELLs constructed meaning among each other rather than relying solely on a designated expert, whether they were speaking English or speaking another language about English. Lantolf claimed, “Not all development emerges from expert/novice mediation. People working jointly are able to co-construct contexts in which expertise emerges” (2000, p. 84). Swain and others asserted, “collaborative dialogue in which peers engage as they work together on writing, speaking, listening, and reading activities mediates second language learning” (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Bellar, 2002, p. 181). Further, Swain (2000) stressed that “collaborative dialogue is problem-solving, and, hence, knowledge-building dialogue...Through saying and reflecting on what was said, new knowledge is constructed” (p. 113). I observed that when ELLs talked to each other about English, this deeper strategy of collaborative dialogue was spontaneous and effective.

Before moving on to the next learning environment, I want to discuss van Lier’s ecology theory of L2 acquisition. I thought this perspective important because I viewed it as bridge connecting the social learning environment to the interiority learning environment which is the inner or intra-mental process of a learner. He maintained, “Ecology educators see language and learning as relationships among learners and between learners and the environment...*it connects...cognitive processes with social processes* [emphasis added]...The ecological perspective thus places a strong emphasis

on contextualizing language” (2000, pp. 258-259). I now move from the inter-mental to the interiority learning environment where the intra-mental, cognitive processes reside. I was ever mindful, however, that the intra-mental processes of learning would be contiguous to the inter-mental processes of learning.

**Interiority learning environment.** In my interviews with the participants, and with talking to ELLs in general, I found that they felt frustrated because they could not adequately express their ideas in English. Some said that there was not a word in English that matched a word in their native language to express a certain idea or feeling. Some said that they sounded stupid in English and that wanted people to know they could express smart ideas in their L1. Some said that with their family and close friends, they spoke their native language because it was who they were. So what did happen to someone’s identity and imagination when he or she needed to learn a new language?

I used the term “interiority” because it suggested such affects as attitude, identity, and imagination, in addition to cognition. Although difficult to document with empirical evidence, one could safely assume that an ELL’s inner life would be altered by accommodating a new language into his or her mind. However complicated, I wanted to *begin* to parse the inner life of an ELL’s L2 acquisition. Obviously, reams of paper could be dedicated to this mission. I present my humble attempt. I disaggregated interiority in to the following parts.

**Agency.** I observed that the ELLs wanted to learn English. No one was forced to be in class. They attended because of their own initiative in order to satisfy whatever reason(s) brought them to the classroom. This could be seen as agency; van Lier defined

it as self “initiative” and “self-regulation” (2008, p. 172). Pavlenko and Lantolf’s definition of agency touched deep and looked into the realm of interiority:

Agency is crucial at the point where individuals must not just start memorizing a dozen new words and expressions but have to decide on whether to initiate a long, painful, inexhaustive, and for some, never-ending process of self-translation. (pp. 169-170)

Not only were words being translated, but one’s self was being translated too as English was being learned. van Lier also argued this; he claimed that L2 acquisition “involves adjusting one’s sense of self and creating new identities to connect the known to the new” (2008, p. 177). An ELL’s inner self was being translated, transformed, as it adapted to a new language.

***Border crossings.*** Again, Pavlenko and Lantolf spoke to this phenomenon, “crossing a cultural border is about ‘renarratizing’ a life... the individual’s mental organization changes” (p. 179). So an ELL reorganized his or her interior life and retold the life as he or she adapted to a new language and culture. One might find evidence in the beginnings of the renarratizing through first utterances of the new language.

***Inner speech.*** McCafferty claimed that inner speech (private speech) attended to ELL’s “efforts to succeed in a task situation through setting goals, forming strategies, and using inference skills to assign meaning or promote understanding” (1994, p. 429). Vygotsky’s definition reached beyond the academic applications and further into the psyche. He called inner speech “a dynamic, unstable, fluid phenomenon...that is, between word and thought” (1987, p. 280). In the watery realm of inner speech, an ELL’s nascent English integrated into his or her interiority and rearranged it. Pavlenko and Lantolf maintained that inner speech functioned to “create our experiences; that is, in inner speech we organize and integrate the events that occur in space and time into the

plot of our narrative life” (p. 165). The reorganization or the renarration of one’s life could be read in an ELL’s written narrative in the L2 language.

***Renarrative.*** I inferred from the ELL interviews and casual conversations that when students began to write they could see their inadequacies around English language acquisition more than when they spoke English. At times, by writing they could see their English had improved. These writings were more than sentences responding to homework questions. ELLs were struggling to write paragraphs about aspects of their native cultures. Writing was evidence of the interiority of an ELL being affected by learning a new language. It was through writing that “a new voice and...self...emerges” (Pavlenko & Lantolf, p. 168). From spoken English to written English, an ELL’s inner self was reordered, thus changing his or her reality. Olson pointed out that “written language...produces an instrument of considerable power for building an abstract and coherent theory of reality” (1998, p. 172).

If written language were a way to build one’s theory of reality, of how one viewed the world through the veil of one’s ideation, then the voice as an instrument carried the process forward in the narrative. In L2 acquisition, voice was the medium that unveiled an ELL’s interiority to the outer world or the social world. Silva and Brice claimed that “voice is personal and social...historical and situated” (2004, p. 75). Prior maintained that one’s voice or utterance “is personalized...in the sense of bearing...[a] person’s sense-making in a specific, interested, historical trajectory” (p. 71). Renarratives were ways to understand and find evidence of an ELL’s changing interiority because of adapting to new language. In the narrative, the writer or speaker had the opportunity to develop and hear his or her voice in the L2. Voice was situated in the context of history

and culture. It could be viewed as a bridge that spanned between the inner self and the concrete, outside world. Often the opportunity to hear or read one's voice was a political act because it could be empowering.

**Political learning environment.** Friere connected learning to liberation, learning to action:

Speaking the word is not a true act if it is not at the same time associated with the right of self-expression and world-expression, of creating and recreating, of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society's historical process. (1998, p. 253).

The political learning environment held characteristics that were somewhat different than the social learning environment. Within language acquisition, I distinguished this environment as political because of its phenomenon of an ELL situating himself or herself in relation to power. The power in the community could be in associations, schools, media, economics, and politics, wherever it was attached to an organization.

In the political learning environment, learning English was political; again, Friere reminded us that "adult literacy process must engage the learners in the constant problematizing of their existential situations" (p. 258). The implication of this quotation was that if one were to learn to read and write, then one had the right to demand for his or her voice to be heard. Literacy could speak to power in order to make societal changes. Existential considerations were always attached to learning another language, especially if the new language owned high cultural status and dominance. Roberts pointed out that "the dominant language [English] of the nation state produces and enforces a linguistic capital that serves to maintain and reproduce linguistic and ethnic inequalities" (2010, p. 216). An ELL should be linguistically well-armed to confront the dominant language. I

observed that the students who attended class regularly, and many did, appeared to be very motivated to learn English. Schlage claimed, “intrinsic motivation was tied to learners’ strong desire to integrate into American society” (2008, p. 153). They knew what it took to be noticed by people speaking the dominant language.

**Interconnected.** Briefly, I want to stress that these learning environments are interconnected: one collapses without the other two. Sometimes I observed them going on simultaneously as an ELL learned English. Nevertheless, it is important to make the distinctions for the learners in order to teach them metacognitive skills which supports the language acquisition process.

## **Chapter 2: Methods and Analysis**

### **Setting**

This study began in October, 2010 and ended at the end of November, 2010 at the Western Hemlock satellite campus of Willow Goldfinch Community College. The main campus sat in a small suburban town. The campus was beautiful with lots of evergreens and with walking paths leading to two-story brick buildings. According to its catalog, the student enrollment count for Fall quarter of 2009 was 6, 920 which was comprised of 60% Euro-American, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% Latino/a, 5% multi-racial, 3% African American, 1% American Indian, and 15% undeclared (WGCC Catalog, 2010-11, p. 3). The college offered associative arts degrees for transferring to four-year colleges and universities. In addition, it offered vocational programs of one to two years of training in various areas from computer-aided drafting to baking. The Basic Skills Department supported students in remedial learning of English and math. Students who need remedial classes and whose first language was English were placed in the Adult Basic Education, and students who were learning English were placed in English as a Second Language (henceforth, ESL) classes.

The Basic Skills Department offers 24 different classes in ESL (WGCC Catalog, 2010, pp. 112-113). Not every class was offered each quarter. There were six levels of ESL from level one where students could speak no English to level six where students were proficient enough in the four literacies of listening, speaking, reading, and writing so that when they passed this final level, they could move on to English 091 or 092. The

goal of the college was to provide to an ELL a course pathway leading to college level English 101, which was the gateway class for entrance into the vocational programs as well as the transfer program to four-year colleges or universities.

The community college had an open door admissions policy. The Basic Skills department accepted all ELLs and required \$25 tuition per quarter. However, if this sum were too much for someone, there were scholarships or waivers available. There was an entrance test and an exit test students had to take called CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems) which was a standardized test used nationally in order to receive federal funding. The test helped instructors determine placement levels for ELLs. Students could attend the same class over again and again. There was no limit to as many times one might take a class.

The main campus had a small satellite campus about ten miles north called Western Hemlock campus. In addition to the main campus, ESL classes were held here too. It near a freeway and located in a complex of strip malls next to a bus line, but parking was available next to the building too. The building was 10 years old with a pleasant atrium in a large foyer that had tables and computers and served as a study area too. It was on this campus that I observed the ESL class. The class met Monday through Friday from 10:30 am to 12:30 pm. The classroom had six tables with five to six chairs at each table. A bank of six computers ran along side the back wall. The class had an enrollment of 32 students but on an average day anywhere from 18 to 23 students attended.

### **Participants**

***General participants.*** The population of the classroom was comprised of speakers of Asian languages and speakers of Spanish with the exception of one Russian speaker and one Arabic speaker. Close to half were Asian-Americans and the other half were Latinas/Latinos. Their ages ranged from 18 to mid-60s. There were over 30 students registered, but during the days I observed (on the average) approximately 18-22 people attended class. Woman made up the majority of students with about six men attending too. Some students had lived in the United States for over 30 years while others had lived here for only months. All were first-generation Americans having arrived in the United States as adults. The native Asian languages spoken by students were Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Tagalog. Most of the Spanish speakers came from Mexico, but there was one student who came from Honduras and one who came from El Salvador.

Some students had taken ESL classes at WGCC off and on for five or six years while for other students this class was their first ESL class in the United States. As I got to know the students, some of them would share with me their personal and educational backgrounds. Some students had no or very little formal schooling in their native country; some had taken some high school classes or had even graduated. The people with whom I spoke did not have college experience in their home country. There was one exception: Irena had received her Ph.D. in music in a conservatory in Russia. Most students could read and write in their native language but not everyone. Under the dire circumstances of poverty and/or war, students who were children at the time their countries were at war did not have the opportunity to go to school.

Although most members of the class did not take part in the interviews, I considered them participants because I was able to talk to them about their struggles and triumphs when learning English, and why they were studying it. I was free to observe their school work. All the students knew I was collecting data for a research project. Their generous and insightful responses to my inquiries informed my research.

***Interviewee participants.*** I selected four students out of the class to interview. They represented for different world languages: Spanish, Korean, Arabic, and Russian. There were three women and one man—about the same ratio as in class. Their ages ranged from 36 to 64. Indeed, most of the students in class were in their 30s and older. All of the interviewees had worked in the United States. All of them had children, either grown or still attending classes in the public school system. My point of selecting these ELLs was to hear the narratives of people who were working class and had to work at least sometime in the United States and who had to support their families. I thought their backgrounds and experiences represented the class members as a whole.

### **Data Collection**

I used qualitative methods for my research including, observations, interviews with ELLs, and an interview with the instructor. These sources enabled me to triangulate my data, while codes and themes began to emerge.

**Observation.** I observed over 40 hours of class time. My observation was in the classroom during instruction, before class started, after class, and on break times. I also observed ELLs in the hallway and in the foyer of the building. I observed as a “participant-as-observer” (Merton, 2010, p. 367) because I was also a volunteer tutor.

Sometimes my role was as a participant helping ELLs, and sometimes it was as an observer. The instructor introduced me on my first day and told the students I would help as a volunteer aide. She also informed them that I was gathering information for my research paper. I felt I wore two hats in my observation mode.

*Notes.* I used a standard data notebook often used in high school biology classes. I began my observation noting down the setting, the layout of the classroom, the demographics of the class, the textbook, and the agenda of the class.

Also, in my notes I recorded what I considered important learning moments. I noted topics of lessons, teaching methods, student interactions and responses. I paid attention to what aspects of English students were talking about in class, such as helping each other with word tenses, pronunciation, pointing in the book where they were, helping with spelling. I noted what students were saying outside of class either about English or about other topics. I noted how they communicated with each other using their native languages or English. I noted their gestures, repeating, or discussing something, or using an artifact such as a brochure or a text message as a mediation tool.

My aim was to allow the students' narratives, whether casual or in interviews, to guide my research. Again, these narratives were in the form of casual conversations among students or between the students and myself; classroom-anchored dialogue among students or between teacher and students (the extra talk besides lecture and response); and interviews with four selected students. I started to categorize these narratives which then began to build my generalizations.

In particular, I noted the teacher's positive rapport with her students and her clear way of explaining. For instance, she would often ask if there were questions; she wrote

on the white board a lot of what she said; she used gestures, acting, a document camera, cds. Importantly, she allowed students to quietly talk among each other about the lesson while she taught.

**Teacher interview.** My interview with the teacher, Ms. Cunningham, lasted about 45 minutes. It was a “semi-structured interview” (Henning, Stone, & Kelly, 2009, p. 96). I asked her about her philosophy of teaching; how did she determine the needs of her students; what evidence did she look for to determine if learning was taking place. She was very forthcoming in all her answers. The interview was not taped; I took notes.

**ELL interviews.** The student interviews were also semi-structured. They lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour. Three of the interviews were recorded in the foyer of the building but away from other people. One was recorded at her home in her kitchen. I taped them and transcribed them for close reading. I asked the following questions:

- How long have you been speaking English?
- Did you study English in your country?
- What areas in your life require that you speak English, read English, and write English?
- What do you find is the most difficult when listening to English? What do you do if you cannot understand what someone has said? Do you listen to English on TV, radio, and other places?
- What do you find is the most difficult when speaking English? Do you practice speaking English outside of class and to whom? What sounds or words do you find difficult to pronounce? What do you do to improve your spoken English?

- What do you find is the most difficult when reading English? Do you read English outside of class? What do you do to improve your reading of English?
- What do you find is the most difficult when writing English? Do you write English outside of class assignments? What do you do to improve your written English?

I found a variety of answers to any one of these questions. Often there were elaborations of the answers that could lead to other important matters, such as, what a student's early life was like. Many elaborations revealed attitudes about English and living in this country.

### **Analysis**

Through the observations and interviews themes or generalizations emerged. In order to analyze them, I coded the phenomena which supported the emerging themes.

The codes were the following:

- Dialogic collaboration: students speaking in English to make meaning of English and students speaking in their native languages to make meaning of English
- Mediation: use of something physical, or artifact, to make meaning of English
- Non-verbals: use of gestures, humor, facial expressions, and pointing called "deictics" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 95).
- Inner speech

- Emergence of the three learning environments: social, interiority, and political

**Grounded theory.** I had no idea what I was going to be looking for before I stepped into the ESL classroom. It was only after observations and joining in conversations with the students that themes or theories emerged “out of the data themselves and not prior to data collection” (Merton, p. 236). This is known as grounded theory. After contemplating my data frequently, I saw patterns develop that lead me to theories of deeper strategies and the learning environments.

### **Chapter 3: Research Findings**

#### **Teacher Interview**

Delores Cunningham taught English to ELLs for 35 years. She was white, a native English speaker, in her middle 50s, and had an undergraduate degree in secondary English from a university on the east coast. After graduating from college, she volunteered in the Peace Corps and served in Thailand for two years. It was her experience in the Peace Corp where she was first introduced to tonal languages. Before working in her assigned area, she was schooled in Teaching English to Foreigners (TEF). She said it is there where she learned a lot about teaching English to students just learning the language.

She told me that throughout the years she had taken foreign language classes at the first-year level in Spanish, French, Italian, and Chinese. She liked languages, but more importantly she said that she wanted to remember what it felt like to learn a new language in order to be sympathetic to her students' feelings.

She had a good rapport with her students. She spoke clearly and her pacing of teaching seemed to be on par with the average-performing students in class. She asked often if there were any questions, and she was generous giving extra explanations and examples if needed. The textbook the Basic Skills department used for level 4/5 was entitled *All-Star Book 3*, which came with a workbook. It had short articles that were accompanied with lots of meaning-making cues such as pictures, captions, word banks with definitions, titles and subtitles, and audio-video accompaniments. Delores also used

worksheets that she devised. During class she frequently wrote on the white board in clear print words, phrases, and sentences that were being learned.

When I asked her about her philosophy of teaching ESL, she responded that she tried to use methods that best met the students' needs. She said she tried to be as accommodating as she could with each student within the framework of a two-hour class with lots of other students needing attention. She added that it was important for her to know the educational goals of the students. For instance, she found out what students were determined to be ESL graduate bound which afforded them entrance into non-ESL English classes. Also, she tried to find out what vocational programs some of her students were aiming to be accepted into. Lastly, she said it was just as important to know what an ELL was giving up as it was to add English into their lives. Adult students, especially older ones, might feel a loss of their native culture and values. For instance, in Asia elders are very respected and honored in the family and in society. They might have felt that they lost their children and grandchildren to English and to American culture. Their native language will not live in their grandchildren.

She said the students' greatest need was confidence in their own abilities. They needed to trust themselves at whatever level in order to make their needs known to her or to anyone else. She stressed the importance of practicing oral communication in class with her and among other ELLs. The second need was continual development of skills in the four literacies. Job requisites came next. What kind of language skills do ELLs need for jobs? Some jobs are working with other people who share the same native language. However, other jobs require proficient skills not only of speaking English but of reading and writing it proficiently too.

I asked her how do students know what are their greatest needs in learning English? She said that for those looking for work or who are already at jobs, they know if their needs are met by meeting the work requirements. In the class I observed, one student was sent to college by her employer in order to improve her writing. Also, students know if they are meeting their needs if they advance to a higher class level of ESL. Another way for students to gauge if their needs have been met was to be cognizant of their own writing skills and English vocabulary. Delores said that most of them were, in the advanced-beginning and intermediate ranges of English proficiency. Lastly, she said that they know if their meeting their needs if they know that their pronunciation is holding them back from employment, advancement in employment, or in social settings.

I asked her what evidence did she look for that showed that the students were learning English? She said if they self-correct in speaking, reading, and writing, then she knew they were learning. If they could identify when they were wrong, then they would be able to self-correct or to attempt to. Also, if the students used the material in more than one skill or literacy, then she knew that they had a solid knowledge of a particular aspect and could transfer into other domains. For instance, if a student could transfer into writing what she uttered in English.

What motivated students to learn English? She said employment or lack thereof, education and socially, such as could they understand and be understood at the grocery store or by their children's teachers?

Lastly, I asked her what she thought were effective strategies for teaching English. She determined that good strategies for students in lower-level ESL classes, the people just beginning to learn English, included using realia and hands-on material. But

in every level, she said students must speak, read or start to read, and write or start to write. For some of her lower-level students, beginning reading and writing instruction could be learning the English alphabet. She had sympathy for the nervousness the ELLs felt when trying to speak English, but she said they needed to produce comprehensible output in order to communicate in everyday circumstances. In the level 4/5 ESL class she said she needed to teach how to develop a paragraph and to develop a bit more sophisticated sentences—more than a simple sentence containing only subject→verb→object.

### **Observations**

**Description of class members overall.** The population of the classroom was comprised of speakers of Asian languages and speakers of Spanish with the exception of one Russian speaker and one Arabic speaker. Close to half were Asians and the other half were Latinas/Latinos. Their ages ranged from 18 to mid-60s. There were over 30 students registered, but during the days I observed on the average about 18-22 people that showed up for class. Women made up the majority of students with about six men attending too. Some people had lived in the United States for over 30 years while others had lived here for only months. All were first-generation Americans having arrived in the United States as adults. The native Asian languages spoken by students were Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Tagalog. Most of the Spanish speakers came from Mexico, but there was one student who came from Honduras and one who came from El Salvador.

Some students had taken ESL classes at WGCC off and on for five or six years, while for other students this class was their first ESL class in the United States. As I got to know the students, some of them would share with me their personal and educational

backgrounds. Some students had no or very little formal schooling in their native country; some had taken some high school classes or had even graduated. The students with whom I spoke did not have college experience in their home country. There was one exception: Irena had received her Ph.D. in music in a conservatory in Russia. Most students could read and write in their native language but not everyone. Under the dire circumstances of poverty and/or war, students who were children at the time their countries were at war did not have the opportunity to go to school.

**Economic pressures.** Some students held down jobs and others did not. The jobs people worked at were: nursing assistant, kitchen work, factory work, office cleaners, and one person had a volunteer job as at Goodwill. There possibly could have been students in class who worked white-collar jobs, but I did not talk to anyone who had one. Many students worked swing or graveyard shifts which allowed them to take a class in the morning. Maintaining an income was a pressing issue for many. One student left often in the middle of class to go to work. One student could not attend Fridays because of his work schedule. Most of the students had children.

Economics was the primary motivator for students enrolled in the ESL class. People either needed to secure work or find better paying employment or to advance in their current jobs. However, this was not true of everyone. Some of the older people were retired or some did not have to work, but for the majority, the necessity to keep or gain employment pressured them to learn English. People had dreams of having good careers, of course. I know three of the Latinas who wanted to enter the Registered Nursing Program at WGCC. One student wanted to study philosophy and psychology at a four-college. Another wanted a job in a business corporation.

**Other areas of the public domain.** There were other areas of the public domain that pressured ELLs to learn English. Mothers of children in schools expressed to me that it was important for them to be able to read the school information bulletins that were brought home and be able to talk to their children's teachers. Also, it was important that they could read stories in English to the children and help their kids with homework. One father expressed this to me, as well. He said sometimes he could not help his 6<sup>th</sup> grade daughter with her homework because he "didn't know what was going on."

English language learners felt compelled to know and speak English when receiving and paying for services. For example, they felt that they needed to be literate enough in English when dealing with doctors and health care, shopping in stores, going to the library, filling in rental agreements, talking to the utility companies, and going to the bank and paying bills.

***Learning strategies used outside the classroom setting.*** A strategy one student offered was that she tried to get everything in writing e.g., a pamphlet, flier, or letter, and take it home for one of her friends or family members to translate rather than merely receiving oral information.

One student told me he had a friend who knew English help him, for instance, read and understand a rental agreement. Others who sat around a table in the foyer before class, nodded and agreed that they did the same thing. Many sought help from friends and acquaintances who were from their native country or who spoke their native language. Some ELLs asked and received help from their church. Church volunteers helped them at agencies and other places and offered to drive them there.

Most of the ELLs in the class I was observing still struggled at times—not all the time—to negotiate meaning in English. But they kept at it. Persistency was another strategy used when it was necessary to understand English. One student told me if he did not understand, he would keep going back to the utility company or agency in order to understand. Two students said that talking to a native English speaker on the phone was difficult and often had to ask that person to repeat what they said. One person said that he listened to English on the radio as much as he could even when he was just starting to learn it. He said that now he understands more than half of what is being said. Radio is hard to understand because there are no pauses in speech such as in conversation and no visual cues to read.

*Children as language brokers.* Another strategy students told me was that their children would sometimes help them by acting as language brokers. For example, during a teacher/parent/student conference, their children would help interpret for their parents, especially when the parents were first learning English. I came to understand that all the parents were *very* proud of how much English their children had learned; however, they were also keen on becoming as fluent as their children. There were power and family dynamics supporting this urgency for adult ELLs to learn English. They were still the parents and needed to maintain their parental roles of providers and protectors of their children.

Some students used their children's homework as another strategy to learn. One mother told me she read her son's middle school social-studies textbook in order to improve her reading. A father told me that he was learning to spell and to know the

definitions of the same vocabulary that his 6<sup>th</sup> grade daughter was learning. He showed me his quiz which his daughter graded; he missed only one.

**Authentic discourse in the margins.**

I observed that much making meaning of English occurred outside of the class work, or in the margins. I call it authentic because most of conversations were about the real world, whether the topic was about bus schedules or what dish to bring to the potluck. The ELLs would talk among themselves before class, during, after the class. These discussions would not be part of the course curriculum—they might relate to it, but often it was a sort of subtext to the formal schooling. It was a *social* need to authentically communicate with others—a fundamental need of humans—that initiated these conversations. Consequently, language negotiation, which led to learning more about English, was going on all the time among ELLs.

*Cultural artifacts and mediation.* Authentic discourse in the margins was continually occurring throughout my observations. I selected two examples to analyze. This particular language interaction was example of discourse that was unrelated to the course curriculum. SoYung, a Korean-American and long-time U.S. citizen, was talking to Nadia, an Iraqi woman who has lived in the United States for only a few months. While waiting in the hall before class, SoYung admired Nadia's head-scarf. The scarf, a cultural artifact, was the mediating object of the conversation in English. Nadia explained the importance of the scarf, called a hijab, and that she wore it in public everyday. She indicated that the hijab represented for Muslims the modesty of women. It was a religious symbol of a woman's virtue and adherence to Islam. SoYung said that knew Muslim

women wore them and asked Nadia if she wore it at home. Nadia said she did not wear it at home unless there was a man in the house who was not part of the family.

Nadia did not utter words “symbol,” “virtue,” or “adherence.” However, she made the point in English by using words such as “women must wear,” “good women,” and “Islam.” The point was understood by SoYung. The strategies they both used for understanding each other were the following: making gestures about the scarf, showing admiration for its beauty, and using short, simple words of English. The importance of the hijab, an icon of Nadia’s cultural identity, was shared between the two who were making meaning in English.

*Extension of the lesson.* Another occurrence of authentic discourse was when I observed a discussion about allergies. The unit the class was studying was about health. Ms. Cunningham was leading the students in the first couple of pages of the textbook. She then said that part of learning English is speaking it. She said there would be times in their lives where they might be asked to speak publicly; therefore, as an assignment, groups of three to four students each would be giving class presentations at the end of the quarter about any topic having to do with health. Ms. Cunningham gave suggestions such as exercise, diet, blood pressure, and asthma as possible topics. Pilar raised her hand and said that her young son suffered from severe asthma. Irena got very excited and said she knew of a home-grown remedy for it. Irena, a very social and emotional person, proceeded to tell the class the remedy. The teacher asked her to wait till break to share it, but Irena felt compelled to share it then. Since it was close to the break, Ms. Cunningham told Irena to go ahead. She suggested that Irena write the remedy on the board, but Irena said her English was not that good. So as Irena spoke, the instructor wrote the following

remedy on the board: find stinging nettles (Irena assured everyone that nettles are all along the roadsides), cut and dry them, crush them into a powder, and smoke it. Irena maintained that Pilar's son's asthma would go away.

This was a case where course curriculum got extended into real-world interests and concerns of the students. Some students wrote down the remedy and one student wanted to know what a nettle looked like. Both Ms. Cunningham and Irena were co-constructionist in making meaning in English as Irena spoke and the teacher wrote.

The class work was a mix of textbook work, worksheets (such as clozed sentences and wh-questions), vocabulary lists with definitions, verb tense exercises, reading and writing, class discussion, and practice in pronunciation. The new material Ms. Cunningham was bringing to the class fall quarter, which at the lower levels of ESL was not taught, was the introduction of more complex writing, namely writing longer sentences and developing a paragraph.

The class climate was friendly. The instructor chatted easily with students before and after class. She would encourage her students to actively participate by speaking in class. In addition, she encouraged people to ask questions, and if students wanted to add information to what was being taught, she was generous in allowing time for it. Some students who were not too shy shared anecdotal accounts. For instance, two class periods dealt with how to read and understand rental agreements; a sample of one was in the textbook. Students shared their experiences with class about apartment living and having to fill out agreements. Here was another example of a language-learning strategy: the textbook learning being extended into authentic situations. Ms. Cunningham made space

for students to use prior knowledge and experience for the benefit of expanding the learning of English.

*Collaborative dialogues.* There was often an undercurrent of talk in class while the teacher had the floor. She had taught ELLs for so many years that she knew when students were on-task talking about the lesson. She allowed for a lot of undercurrent of talk because students were using English in order to understand English. For example, for paragraph development, Ms. Cunningham introduced the pre-writing strategy of writing a cluster diagram. She drew an example of one on the whiteboard and explained how each circle held a word that represented an idea that could be used as a topic sentence or held a word that could be used as detail in a supporting sentence. From where I sat, I could hear students saying to each other in English that they had never seen anything like that and were confused. The instructor paused a few minutes and allowed people at their tables talk to each other for a time. The strategy of peer interaction for the purpose of co-construction of meaning seemed to help. After several minutes, she asked if there were questions about this new concept of a cluster diagram. Several students asked questions. The strategy of making meaning worked in the following way:

a) Teacher lectured

b) → Students listened

c) → Student to student talk with some understanding  
and meaning made

d) ← Students asked teacher

e) ← Teacher explained

f) Students understood

better

The above schema relates to the following finding about peer interaction in a Japanese language classroom, “students’ questions to one another overwhelmingly received correct answers from peer interlocutors, with many of the questions unresolved...being subsequently resolved by asking the teacher” (Ohta & Nakone, 2004, p. 235).

Collaborative dialogue occurred consistently among ELLs where the making of meaning was successful.

*Use of L1.* Lastly, I observed group preparations for the health presentation. One group had brochures about children’s health, including information about nutrition, exercise, diet, and common childhood illnesses. Two of the students were speaking Spanish to each other as they discussed the brochures. The written material in English served as a platform or mediation for clarification. The ELLs used their L1 to begin the process of making meaning of L2. Anton and DiCamilla (1998) explained that “the use of L1 in collaborative interaction emerges...as a means to create a social and cognitive space in which learners are able to provide each other and themselves with help throughout the task” (p. 245). The ELLs returned to their prior knowledge in the architecture and system of their L1 in order to negotiate meaning of the L2. Again, this strategy illustrated that “L1 serves as a tool that helps students...to understand and make sense of the requirements and content of the task; to focus attention on language form, vocabulary use, and overall organization, and to establish the tone and nature of their

collaboration” (Swain & Lapkin, 2000, p. 273). Their presentation at the end of the quarter was one of the best: cogent and engaging.

### **ELL Interviews**

I ended my observations of the students who were presented as a whole group. I now turn to my taped interviews. I interviewed four students individually. I wanted to know how they learned English. I wanted them to speak about their strategies, regardless if they viewed them as strategies or not.

**SoYung.** SoYung was a 64-year old Korean-American woman. She had been married and had lived in the United States off and on for the past 40 years. She married an American soldier who was stationed in South Korea. Her English had fossilized: she spoke with a “heavy accent” (her words). She was a lively and engaging student—known as the funny one in class. She was outgoing and talkative both in and out of class.

She grew up in Korea amid the devastation of the Korean War. Her parents were killed, and she and her two brothers were sent to live with their grandmother. As a child, she stayed at home and helped her grandmother with house chores. I asked her about how she learned English:

7- Interlocutor: You learn English in the work place [in the USA]?

8- SoYung: Mostly.

9- Interlocutor: Where did you learn how to read English?

10- SoYung: Reading, my husband help me. I have no time to go to

11- school, so he help me. [Later she said her son, who recently graduated from college, helped her with reading too.]

89- Interlocutor: what is the most difficult when you're reading English?

90- SoYung: The meaning of words. Writing difficult.

91- Interlocutor: Other than homework...do you read much English?

92- SoYung: Yes. I read newspaper. When he's [her husband] watching TV, take over the words to him.

Later, she talked about having to read and write in public situations such as filling in a form at a doctor's office:

98- SoYung: I can't write, That's hard. Even sentences I can't do.

101- Interlocutor: Filling out forms?

102- SoYung: If I don't know, I ask nurse. I don't know words, she

103- explain.

SoYung's English fossilized; it had not improved over the years but stayed at a level that she described as "broken English." She said that other than her time speaking English in class and with her family, during the day she spoke Korean to her friends. She said there were a lot of Korean-Americans in the area.

Nevertheless, she attended class regularly and often asked questions of classmates for clarification. She learned by asking people questions about English in order to understand new words and concepts. SoYung employed the strategy that Mitchell and Myles pointed out, "Dialogic communication is seen as central to the joint construction of knowledge" (2004, p. 220). As a deeper strategy, SoYung employed dialogic communication in order to co-construct the meaning of English.

**Irena.** Irena was a 57-year old Russian-American who had lived in the United States for ten years. She was very outgoing and social. She received a Ph.D. in music from a conservatory in Russia. She shared with me some of her living circumstances when growing up. Her mother left the family when Irena was young, and she was left with her father who was extremely harsh to her. But she always had the pleasure of music. Music was a source of spiritual healing and a source of joy, and it served as an ambassador to her in this country. It was a tool for mediation of English in order to make friends and for employment: she was self-employed as a piano teacher.

She married an American, who, while visiting her country, came and listened to her piano performance at her church. He asked her to marry him. She moved out of economic necessity. She decided to leave in order to make money in the United States so that she could send it back to her son and daughter. Making a living wage in the Ukraine was very difficult; academics paid hardly anything. She could not make a living as a music professor. After the fall of communism, academic salaries plummeted and corruption became rampant. Her children, although grown and with some college, were barely making living wages. She desperately wanted to help her son and daughter.

When she first moved here, she knew no English. She took a couple of Level 1 ESL classes but had to start working as a cleaning lady. Later, she had the opportunity to return to ESL classes. Also, she began teaching music lessons out of her home, which gave her a lot of pleasure.

In the interview I asked her how she learned English:

- 25- Irena: I, um, learn English several ways. Some Russian give me some
- 26- book with question with answer with two tapes. And I, uh, sometime
- 27- when we go with my husband on long trip, I put tape and peruse this book...
- 28- just now I not need because my English already understandable...
- 30- YouTube help me. In YouTube I found that many different quality English
- 31- lesson. And sometimes from Russian side...
- 32- But this lesson and so because easy for me...
- 34- She [a teacher] first gave me idea watch TV and with subtitles.

She said that if she got interested in a movie:

- 36- ...I'm hook this words I go and faster, uh, uh,
- 37- writing and someday I translation. This way when I'm interesting to
- 38- to understand the situation...
- 39- special about some dramatic situation interest, of course, I'm
- 40- very fast remember these and use this words.

She continued to say more about YouTube:

68- one for the interesting thing I learn in English, I, um, I find in Google,  
 69- exact words, um, president's speech. I like our president. I proud of our  
 70- president. And I, I like him. And uh, I, uh, listen again and again in  
 71- YouTube because, because in YouTube's speech of president without  
 72- subtitles.

[She heard the president's speech on the radio and then later went to YouTube to print  
 it out in order to read it while she played it over on the computer.]

73- And I read and I stop. I can, um, again listen his pronunciation. I  
 74-learn very deep political intelligence style of his language, of his,  
 75-of his communication because he's fluence [fluent], uh, language  
 76-is very, very intelligent, very deep, and very nice, understandable  
 77-articulation.

Irena was interested in American culture and used her interest as a strategy to learn English. She was very interested in American popular music. She found songs with lyrics on YouTube and sang along which she said improved her English. She listened to Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, Tony Bennett, Nat King Cole, and Doris Day. She also listened to music on the radio and later would buy sheet music of some of the songs she that heard. She used the media of talking books, movies with English translations, radio and music, and the YouTube in order to glean meaning. Two factors compelled her to employ strategies to meet this need: her sociability and her music.

She described herself as being social:

15- Because I am just now a citizen of this  
 16- beautiful country. Because I want to be social. Because I'm  
 17- a social person.

And she felt compelled to teach piano music:

18- And I have many to give different...people to improve

19- their talent because I'm a teacher of music. Yes.

She showed me comic books in English which were designed to teach beginning piano. She said that these books helped her communicate music theories in English to her students. Music theory, in this case, written in comic-book form, was an object or artifact that mediated the co-construction of English between Irena and her students. Donato and McCormick (1994) commented on how deeper strategies emerged from mediation, "developing their own strategies was a direct result of an environment [in Irena's case, music] that mediated language learning in reflective and systematic ways" (p. 462). Irena's strategies of learning were not formal constructs found in the classroom but rather arose out of her need—a social cultural need—to communicate in English.

She said that when she had time to read for pleasure, she would read Russian novels. She read Russian because it was "her mother."

**Antonio.** Antonio was a 36-year old Latino from Mexico and had lived in the United States for 15 years. He married a native Spanish-speaker in the United States, and they had three children: a daughter in sixth grade, a son in fourth grade, and daughter who was not in school yet. He worked in this country for over ten years. For a long time, he worked at a local plant nursery in Yelm but injured his back and finally had to quit. Within the last year, he found a job as a cook at a tavern.

He grew up on a farm, "My, my daddy he's a farmer. So I grow up like growing, planting corns, beans. Take care of cows, horses, donkeys, chicks." After he graduated from high school, he tutored elementary school children who lived in the Mexican countryside. I asked him why he came to the United States. He said that he could make

more money here and that he was curious to come. He wanted to see a “new horizon.”

This was the first quarter he had taken an ESL class at the community college.

I asked him how he first learned English:

- 4- Antonio: ...first time I got here I start just try to learn myself
- 5- like listening to other people and really trying to, trying to
- 6- really ...listening to the radio, watching TV. Yeah, I just try
- 7- to learn myself.

- 22- Interlocutor: Did you study English in your country before you
- 23- came here?
- 24- Antonio: I studied in English when I was like in how do you say
- 25- high school. But it is not the same. We, we, we have a class like a
- 26- maybe, uh, twice a week. But it is not the same pronunciation
- 27- It's ...I would say it's not the same. You learn, probably have to
- 28- write, er, just basic words.
- 29- But when I came here was totally different. So seems to me like
- 30- everything I learned over there, uh, it was not helpful.
- 31- Because when I try to speak here to the people they don't
- 32- understand what I, what I say.

He said the he learned his rudiments of English at the nursery plant. But he did not have to learn too much because many of his co-workers did not speak English. The job at the tavern was a swing shift which allowed him to take a morning ESL class. However, it was this job at the tavern where he had to speak English a lot that he noticed his L2 improving. The workplace put pressure on him to devise a strategy to understand English by asking the cashier or bartender to translate food orders. It was imperative for him to learn his L2 in order to keep his job:

- 189- Interlocutor: So, so you're constantly speaking English at work.
- 190- Antonio: It's been a year since I changed my job. Because before
- 191- work in a job where job didn't require much English.

He continued on to say how he needs to understand English on the job:

- 210- Quickly, especially when we have orders...
- 211- And also when a, when I'm at the kitchen and here comes the
- 212- ticket. Just gonna, you, you just have to look real fast what they
- 213- want. You cannot concentrate on word, word by word.
- 214- Interlocutor: Yeah, you can't bring out a dictionary.
- 215- Antonio: Yes. So what I don't sometimes if I don't understand
- 216- something I ask to the cashier or the bartender so what does,
- 217- what, what does she, what does she means? What does she
- 218- really means on the, on the ticket?

He said his children's English is "wonderful." I asked him if they could read and write Spanish:

- 51- Antonio: Um, my oldest daughter she can read, um, better than
- 52- write Spanish.
- 53- Interlocutor: What areas in your life do you have do you have to
- 54- know how to write English?
- 55- Antonio: Well, there's no, there is no specific area I like to write.
- 56- Interlocutor: Eh, at home with your family do you usually speak
- 57- English at home or Spanish at home?
- 58- Antonio: Most of it, ah, I speak, eh, Spanish. But with my kids
- 59- sometimes I speak English with them.
- 60- My kids practice the English with them. And I been learning a lot
- 61- from them too.

- 75- Antonio: I wish for, for my kids they be bilingual in English and
- 76- in Spanish. And at the same time I would like to they know how
- 77- to read Spanish and write Spanish. And if they have
- 78- the opportunity to learn another language—that's good.

I asked him if he had an English dictionary at home:

- 84- Antonio: I do have English and books.
- 85- Interlocutor: At home?
- 86- Antonio: Yes.
- 87- Interlocutor: So if one of your children or if you get stuck on a
- 88- word, word meaning, do you go to the dictionary and look it up?
- 89- Antonio: Um, most the time I ask my, my daughter. Yeah,
- 91 because she, she knows a lot. So I ask her how do you pronounce
- 92- this.

As a strategy, Antonio tapped into the fund of knowledge that his children had in English. He showed me his vocabulary and spelling test that his daughter gave him. They did this on a regular basis. She would give him tests that she had taken in her sixth grade class. He also wrote down some of her sentences from her notebook into his spiral notebook. His daughter took on the role as a teacher for her father. However, I viewed her role as more of a co-constructionist with her father in order for both of them to develop a larger English vocabulary.

Antonio worked hard in class and did his homework. He knew that English was his way out of physical labor jobs.

300- Antonio: And, uh, I been thinking also about why a lot of  
301- people have office jobs. They have, uh, good jobs. And they,  
302- they have good positions like in government. I talk myself,  
303- I said, "Why I cannot do that?"

A few days after the interview he said that wanted to study philosophy, history, and psychology in college. He thought that he might have to get his education vicariously through the education of his children. However, later said he would really like to go to college too.

**Nadia.** Nadia was a 40-year old Iraqi woman whose native language was Arabic. She, her husband, and four-year old daughter had lived in the United States for only eight months. They were on a refugee status as political refugees of the Iraqi War. Her husband was an engineer and had helped American soldiers on engineering projects. She said, "The terrorists people know my husband, especially my husband because he goes to the American gate." Because of this, Nadia and her family received on their front door a death threat delivered as a note with a bullet attached stating that they would be killed if

they did not leave. For three years she and her family slept at different houses and could not return to their own house. Finally they were approved for political refugee status and could leave to go to the United States.

Nadia told me that in Iraq she witnessed so many people being killed. She recounted to me that in her old neighborhood just down the street she witnessed a dog gnawing on a man's body with one of the arms missing. Her own father was kidnapped for a few days and had to be ransomed back. She said that life under Saddam Hussein was difficult. Saddam did not trust professional people like her husband. Therefore, educated people could not make good salaries; her husband often had to drive a truck to earn a living. Still she said that the United States war on Iraq was not worth it—too many killed, too many suffered because of it.

Nadia was a very good and serious student.. This was her first ESL class. She attended high school in Iraq, but married before she graduated. Nevertheless, she was a reader of books and had many books in her house in Iraq. Along with the loss she felt because she had to leave her country, she also had to leave “everything in my country, my, my book[s], my family.”

Like Antonio, Nadia used the strategy of learning English from her child. She said her daughter, Eman, had picked up so many words in English by playing with neighborhood children and by going to daycare. She recounted learning a new English word “nap” from her daughter.

- 22- Nadia: I don't know. Yesterday my daughter “nap.” I don't know
- 23- what's nap. “Mommy, mommy, go to my school and tell them
- 24- have to take nap.” A nap? Like a snack? Like you want a snack?
- 25- “No, mommy, it means sleep.”

Like with other mothers, Nadia said that she read very carefully her daughter's school notices.

72- Interlocutor: Do you read a lot of English outside of the class...?

73- Nadia: Yes, yes, yes. Uh, especially my daughter's papers...

75- Every word I look [up], especially my, eh, daughter's,

76- yeah, my daughter's, eh, papers.

87- Interlocutor: Do you read English for fun?

88- Nadia: For now, no. For now I read [homework]. I can translate,

89- but I don't have time. Now, I study.

90- Interlocutor: Do you read books in English to your daughter?

91- Nadia: Yes, yes, yes, I can.

92- Interlocutor: Stories?

93- Nadia: Yes, yes, I have, yeah, many stories for kids.

94- Interlocutor: Um, is she picking up English very quickly?

95- Nadia: Yeah, yeah, yeah, very quickly. [Eman can write] alphabet,

96- ABC, yeah, her name.

Nadia was proud of all the English her young daughter had learned; however, she wanted to make sure that Eman would not forget her Arabic.

442- Nadia: Cuz she's very young, as you know, and, eh, I'm,

443- I'm afraid to lose the, eh, my language. And if, if she lose

444- my language, she will lose my culture, of course, and maybe

445- later she will lose everything about mine, yeah. That's why

446- I, I want to, yeah.

447- Interlocutor: You said that you wanted her to be able to read

448- the Koran?

449- Nadia: Yes. Yes. Yes. I learn her in my house, I learn her.

Nadia wanted to improve her listening and speaking skills in English. She took the initiative and walked over to a Goodwill store near the school to apply as a volunteer. At first, the manager said no, but Nadia got her refugee counselor to call and ask again. This time the manager agreed, and she started to work there as a volunteer. Nadia used

the deeper strategy of using real-world situations, such as volunteering at the store, in order to learn more English.

As mentioned before, she was a reader. She said she liked to go to Orca bookstore. There she saw “many book...in Arabic...but translate[d] to this language [English].

53- Nadia: Yeah, many writers. I know these writers, [Kahlil]

54- Gibran...I buy, I buy one and then when I, eh, I speak fluently,

55- I read it.

Nadia wanted to do more than read English; she wanted to write in English a book about her life in Iran—not to publish but to give to her children (she has an older daughter still living in Iraq with her grandparents). She said, “When I write, I do better than speak. Because when I...write, I can write this book, I can move.” Being able to write in order to express her thoughts and feelings was an existential act for Nadia. She employed deeper strategies in order to eventually learn a register English sophisticated enough to express her ideas.

532- Nadia: Sometimes when I, when I can’t express my idea, I

533- feel bad, I feel I’m bad. I can’t. Sometimes I want to cry. I

534- want to express my ideas, my feelings.

She told me that sometimes she almost knew the words in English and how to put them together to express what she was thinking in Arabic, but not quite. She wanted her writing to be good. Here was an example of Nadia negotiating with inner speech. She intuited what Read made specific about ELLs learning vocabulary. He claimed, “learners need to have more than just a superficial understanding of the meaning: they should

develop a rich and specific meaning” (2004, p. 155) of the vocabulary terms and their varied use in language registers (Finegan, 1999, p. 348).

In the following chapter, I discuss how this qualitative data informed generalizations for further analysis and teaching recommendations. I then explain these findings can influence future instructional strategies and research for adult ELLs.

## Chapter 4: Research Implications

### Research Findings

Through the data I collected and analyzed, I found that the students whom I observed and interviewed used deeper strategies to make meaning of English.

**Dialogic collaboration.** English language learners talked to each other in class or out in the foyer about their English assignments. But their conversations were not restricted to homework; they talked about every day events in English. I noted often that they would correct one another in English about wrong language usage whether it had to do with homework or not. Students would make meaning of English using their native languages. Spanish speakers or Korean speakers would talk in their languages to each in order to make sense of English. Dialogic collaboration refers to the theory of Vygotsky's ZPD, Walqui and van Lier's claim that learning is co-constructed, and Swain et al. claim that learning takes place first by inter-mental processes and then by intra-mental processes.

**Mediation.** ELLs used objects to mediate the meaning of English. I observed them using different "culturally constructed artifacts" (Lantolf & Thorne, p. 60) such as the hijab or a local bus schedule to co-construct with each other the meaning of English. The mediated objects served as ways to help facilitate students make meaning (Donato & McCormick, 1994).

**Non-verbals.** Whether in class or out, whether discussing class work or matters in general, ELLs would use additional ways to communicate. They would gesture, make

facial expressions, use humor, and use deictics (Lantolf & Thorne, p. 95-96). These non-verbal means of communication co-occurred with speech.

**Inner speech.** I observed during class some ELLs talking quietly to themselves as they were working on class assignments. Later, I told a Cambodian-speaking woman that I heard her speaking quietly while she worked on an assignment. I asked her what she was doing. When she was confused, she needed to talk a little in English and Cambodian to herself especially if she had to learn new vocabulary. It helped her to make sense of it. When I thought back to Pavlenko and Lantolf's definition of inner speech, it was occurring all the time as ELLs were learning (2000). Students were continually reorganizing and reintegrating their intrapersonal lives as they learned English.

All of the above strategies were spontaneously used by ELLs without having to be taught by a teacher. I thought of them as being organic in nature.

**Social learning environment.** This learning environment was closely tied to the strategies discussed above. I observed learning began in the interpersonal world (Mitchell & Myles, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978; Walqui & van Lier, 2010). English language learners would help classroom table partners all the time. There was often a slight buzz of talking as the formal teaching was taking place. A community of learning was taking place in subtext of class teaching (Ohta & Nakone, 2004; Swain et al., 2002). Students were making meaning of English with each all the time whether it was in class or out, whether it was lesson related or not. I pointed out in my observations how ELLs used friends and associates to help them negotiate English in the real world. For instance, help was available for making sense of rental agreements, insurance forms, bus schedules, and school notices. In my interviews with SoYung and Antonio, both specifically said that

they turned to their family members living at home, spouses and children, in order to learn the definition of words whether it was in context to reading a word in a newspaper or to building a larger vocabulary word bank. English language learners relied on their social learning environment: learning began there.

**Interiority learning environment.** I looked back at the moments which revealed the inner lives of ELLs. For example, Nadia expressed her desire to write a book about her country of Iraq for her children to read. She said that it would be hard because she did not know English that well. I recalled her words; she felt bad about herself and sometimes she wanted to cry because she could not adequately express her ideas. Her journey was her “painful... process of self-translation,” agency, as Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) defined it. In order to accomplish her book, she was going to have to renarratize her previous life in another country, another culture in order to accommodate her new American life. She was about to cross a cultural border.

Her inner speech of English would enable her to integrate events into the new “plot” of her new life. I selected Nadia’s interview because it spoke so well to the interiority learning environment. However, every learner of a new language had his or her life renarratized (Olson, 1998; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Prior, 2001). Part of one’s imagination included the words that lived there and that altered one’s voice. Nadia’s book will be a testament to her voice being situated in a foreign culture. It will be a testament to the renarration of her life.

**Political learning environment.** Politics is about power. Who has the power? It is internalized in all institutions such as the economy, education, and legal status and the law. It resides in the recesses of language. One has power if he or she can make

transformations of one's society by first able to use the dominant language of the land in an effective way (Freire, 1998).

I was reminded of the words Antonio said about employment, "They have good positions...why can't I?" The external pressures placed on ELLs, such as the economy, spoke to the political learning environment. The language of politics addressed economics concerns. In our culture, power is embedded in economic well-being. Most of the ELLs, who chose to discuss their financial circumstances with me, were barely making a living for themselves and their families. Many of the students who were raising children worked in labor jobs such as in kitchens, nursing homes, plant nurseries, house keeping, and factories. Participants mentioned their children met the income qualifications for medical coupons. Some families did not own computers. Many families lived in apartments. The knotty problem was how to transition low-paying jobs and into higher paying jobs, especially if proficiency in English was an issue.

Politics and learning entered the immigration issue too. One Latina who was 30 years of age shared with me that this was her first ESL class. She moved to this country when she was 14. Her mother decided to illegally cross the border into the United States with her two daughters because where they were living in Mexico was too dangerous. This ELL finally attained American citizenship last summer. She was so happy because with this status she would be eligible to earn a college certification in the health field. She and her husband, a native Spanish speaker who worked in a kitchen, had three small children, two of whom were old enough to attend public school. She said her children spoke far better English than she or her husband spoke. They were struggling to make

ends meet. Her illegal status had prevented her for well over ten years from taking ESL classes. Without English improvement, she would be relegated to lower-paying jobs.

The politics and education intersected too. At least four of the ELLs told me that they wanted to enter the registered nursing program that the community college offered. Passing English 101 was one of the requirements to be considered for admissions into this program. I could see that their current level of English was inadequate. I estimated that with hard work on their part, maybe they could have developed sufficient enough written skills in English in a couple of years to pass an English 101 class, *maybe*. In this instance, language could be a barrier to someone's educational aspirations.

Politics entered into spoken language too. For example, how well was English spoken, and if one spoke with a low-status accent. When Antonio said he wanted an office job, I wondered if he were aware there was a language register for white-collar employment, indeed as there was for any social group. How one spoke English and knowing what kind of vocabulary to use could promote or prevent landing a higher-paying job or a job in a different milieu (Read, 2004; Roberts, 2010). He had not worked in an office in Mexico or here. How could he know unless it was specifically pointed out to him.

Finally, there was the political learning environment of politics. How could one run for office or become part of community organization if one's first priority was paying the rent and putting food on the table? I did not think it was impossible, of course not. But I did think it would be a lot harder for the ELLs in the class that I observed to enter politics as they struggled to learn English and to make a living.

## Implications

**Deeper strategies.** For advancements in teaching and learning English, adult ELLs should be informed that they can, and do, generate their own strategies for learning English. They must know that it is permissible to talk to each other in their native languages and in English about English in order to understand the lesson's tasks. As I stated before, I inferred from the ELLs that they thought what they were doing might be construed as cheating or relying on someone else. On the contrary, they should know that these strategies or ways of learning are exactly how we learn a new language. Educators should explicitly teach the concept of metacognition. Students must be explicitly encouraged to recognize when they are employing deeper strategies and how these strategies are helping them acquire more of the target language.

**Social learning environment.** My research revealed that learning English would make more sense to ELLs if they were directly taught about the three learning environments. They would come to understand that the learning environments that language is situated and historical as Freire maintained (1998). Learning language is intricately tied into one's "existential situations" (Freire, 1998, p. 258). For the people whom I observed, learning English is an existential endeavor.

In the social learning environment, students need to know that the deeper strategies which they employ (without having been taught) help them build a foundation for learning English within a community of English learners. The most efficient ways to know a language are ways that are incorporated into one's daily life. Socialization of

learning provides for these opportunities. Group work, paired work, cooperative learning are effective ways for students to listen and speak English. Educators need to promote as much social learning of a language as possible and to teach students how to recognize these social learning skills. Language is primarily used for communicating between humans via listening and speaking. Learners of English should explicitly know that these deeper strategies used within the social learning environment is one of the most fundamental and efficient ways of learning a language. It is how we naturally learn; we look for an expert to guide us as Vygotsky (1978) reminds us.

**Political learning environment.** Again, it needs to be pointed out that language has power. Being fluent or not being fluent in the dominant language often means what job one gets, where one lives, how one's children fair in life, and in essence, the quality of life. Learning a language is a political act that can lead to liberation (Freire, 1998). If directly taught the connection of language to existentialism, it would empower ELLs.

**Interiority learning environment.** Learners should know that the attitudes they have about the new language affects how well they learn. They may not like to have their life experience retold in a new narrative by a new language. If directly taught about the interiority learning environment, they could identify their agencies and inner speech. They could identify their attitudes about learning English, that is, if they are resistant to English or if they embrace it or are experience emotional shifts. I think this knowledge would empower them too. Perhaps they could develop target language proficiency faster or with more ease if they knew the effects of learning a new language on their self-identity.

**Limitations**

Because I was not teaching the class, I could not implement explicit teaching of aspects of strategies and the learning environments. While my data showed strong indications towards the use of deeper strategies amidst three learning environments, more research is needed in the ways adult learners develop target language proficiency both in and out of the classroom.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, my action research paper sought to answer the research question regarding: what are the ways adults learn English? As a result of observations and interviews, I found the innate strategies (deeper strategies) and three learning environments emerged as the primary factors that affect how adults develop their English proficiency. I recommend that if teachers would explicitly address these learning environments, then the needs of the ELLs would be met more precisely.

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