

Immigrant workers/learners at a university:
The benefit of an opportunity to learn academic English

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Abstract

This paper is a case study of immigrant learners in a particular U.S. research university's English language program. A contextual description of the learners, who are/were also employees at the University, attempts to capture the complex intersection of identities, opportunities, and power. Inquiry addresses the suitability of the program for this particular population, the preparedness of the learners, and what has affected their investment in learning academic English. The voices of program instructors and former learners articulate issues of purpose and effectiveness at this academic English site. As the paper suggests implications and recommendations, it argues that the public education institution under discussion should offer ESL learning opportunities that meet the diverse needs of immigrant workers both on campus and in the surrounding community.

Introduction

Workplace English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in the U.S. teach employees English through informational content such as workplace cultural expectations, job-particular terminology, safety and policy standards, organizational structures, and pathways to career development (Grognet, 1996). Although the primary goal of these programs would seem to be the improvement of employees' work performance (to the benefit of the employees, employers and company), one would hope that instruction aimed to engender confidence and transferability of language skills for use in the social sphere at large. This critical case study investigates a population of immigrant learners whose employer is a U.S. research university. The English language program (ELP) under investigation is academic in nature--nothing about it bears the characteristics of a workplace ESL program. It was not created around the particular needs of the employees. Nevertheless, the context begs the question of what this powerful public employer is ultimately offering its employees through the opportunity of ESL instruction and how this opportunity could be improved.

The basis for this inquiry comes out of the bits and pieces that were revealed to me about this post-secondary ELP as a graduate student in English as a Second Language (ESL) at the same university. The specific program is known as the Minnesota English Language Program (MELP). When citing examples about the student population, one salient category that people who were familiar with the MELP often referred to was the *Regents Scholars*. A Regent Scholar is someone who is both enrolled in a degree or certificate program at the University or taking prerequisite classes and is also an employee at the University (University of Minnesota, n.d.). As I heard it used in the context of the MELP, "Regents Scholar," beyond reference to its basic

definition, signaled a red flag: “here is a special case” and, sometimes, “here is a sensitive issue unresolved.” Indeed, here was a complex intersection of identities, opportunities, and power.

The picture was vague, but the bottom line appeared to be that the Regent Scholar students in the MELP often had unique and challenging needs. Around this general consensus the educators and staff of MELP recognized other distinguishing characteristics about the Regents Scholars. They were often immigrants or refugees who held maintenance positions at the University. They were often older than the other students¹.

Of course, then, “the other students,” the majority population, had their own set of traits. Besides being more likely to reach the standard definition of success in the classroom, these students were at the University on a student visa, they were generally from a well-off family (which meant they didn’t have to work and were limited in doing so under an F-1 visa) and they were the typical undergraduate age. I learned that the term “international student” commonly described this population.

Thus, discussion of the reality of teaching at a university ELP, like the one on campus, had reared an unsettling binary of learners: the Regent Scholar and the international student. This loaded binary perplexed me, but, eventually, I was able to articulate some of the questions that were bound up inside it. What are the apparent differences between a Regent Scholar and an international student? What do they suggest about the ideal design of a university ELP? How do the institutional constraints of a university affect one’s chances for success, personal or otherwise, in an ELP? How do the factors of one’s background and the multi-faceted nature of her identity influence academic English proficiency?

As here-and-now as these questions plead, they are somewhat retrospective. Thus far, I have referred to the past because I am telling the story of where the impetus for this paper

originated, but also in light of the fact that, because of recent tuition adjustments, the number of Regent Scholars in MELP has noticeably diminished from past figures. Although this investigation looks at specific conditions that have come and may be gone, the main questions it seeks to answer are forward-thinking due to their purpose of imagining transformation. As Pennycook points out, research that seeks to raise awareness about the complex contexts in which TESOL takes place “needs some vision both of what a preferable state of affairs might be and how one might start to work towards it” (Pennycook, 1999, p. 335).

Having set the stage of curiosity, this paper reviews literature relevant to the study. First, the conceptual setting of the study is described. This includes qualitative concepts used to guide other studies on immigrant learners and a macro-political view of English language learning, which has, in part, contributed to a critical approach to TESOL. Next, two studies are detailed that explore how particular variables appear to affect the English language proficiency of immigrants in the Twin Cities for whom English is not their first language. One of these studies focuses on the acquisition of academic language and the emphasis of the second is that of “everyday” English. Finally, statistics are given on the foreign-born population of the state of Minnesota and the Twin Cities.

Literature Review

Qualitative Concepts

The decision to learn English as an additional language at a post-secondary institution may be driven by a desire for occupational advancement, personal development, or advanced interaction with others. Metianu (2008) uses Boshier’s (1973) “Education Participation Scale” (EPS) as a tool to gain insight into immigrant learner’s motivations for learning the target language. Motivation, defined as learners’ needs/desires and attitude toward the second language

community (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), has been a key area of study in the field of second language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). The EPS focuses on motivation in regards to a learner's needs and breaks them down into seven categories: communication improvement, social contact, educational preparation, professional advancement, family togetherness, social stimulation, and cognitive interest. The EPS suggests that desires can pull learners in multiple directions (i.e., one may wish to spend more time with family, but may also need to dedicate a large portion of time toward professional advancement). Likewise, Gebre (2008) refers to learners' commitment to satisfying their communicative needs in the face of self-identified adversity in terms of their "resiliency score." This score is based on how they align themselves with internal and external factors, such as themselves, their family, their community, and institutions. The EPS and resiliency scores attempt to capture motivation and also hint at learners' "investment" (Norton Pierce, 1995).

The notion of *investment*, a nuanced companion to motivation, is largely concerned with the relationship between the language learner and the language-learning context in terms of power dynamics. Investment recognizes learners' histories and their ever-changing, complex identities: "Identities are not given, but negotiated" (Ros i Solé, 2007, p. 204), and, as such, learners adopt positions both inside the language classroom and out of it as they interact for complex and dynamic purposes. Investment underscores the fact that learning English as an additional language contributes to the value of learners' cultural capital (i.e., skill/knowledge recognized as valuable by the dominant class) whatever their particular aims may be. The English language classroom is a place where learners should be guided to gain agency and "the right to speak" English with other target language speakers in the community (Norton Pierce, 1995). Norton is not concerned with quantitatively measuring investment, but rather, she sees it

as a productive theoretical construct to discuss the stories and insights of her students (Norton, Sharkey, Shi, & Thompson, 2003). Ultimately, she hopes that exploring students' investment leads to fostering ideas that respond to social inequalities.

In Skilton-Sylvester's (2002) study on Cambodian women's participation and investment in adult ESL programs, she discusses the ways that these women's multiple family and workplace roles affected their learning differently. For example, one woman felt encouraged by her teacher's ability to tap into her experience as a wife and mother; another woman dropped out of the program because she didn't feel she was getting enough work-related communication practice; many other women in the class found it difficult to keep up all three the roles of family member, worker, and student.

Although learners' identities in terms of their *actual* familial or community roles is important to understanding their investment in learning, Norton and Gao (2008) comment on the identities of Chinese learners of English in terms of "imagined communities," a group that one longs to be a part of. In the work Norton and Gao review, they point to examples like higher social class, Christian groups, urbanites, and content knowledge experts as imagined communities. These communities have discourses and practices that a learner desires to have access to and be accepted into. This means that the learner is sensitive to specific language usage and opportunities to be "legitimized" (Ros i Solé, 2007). Learners are challenged to keep a positive focus as they move toward their imagined community, instead of seeing their relative proficiency as deficient. This means "embracing a self-constructed identity as confident multilingual immigrants, rather than as perpetual second-language learners" (Cervatiuc, 2009, p. 260). Keeping such a positive outlook would seem to require some support from outside sources like family, friends, or institutions, as in the case of Gebre's external resiliency factors. Whereas

motivation has often been described as internal or psychological phenomenon, investment is focused on the social world of the learner (Norton Pierce, 1995).

In addition, the standard notion of investment as purely financial is a very important aspect as well. The majority of learners in many ESL classes at U.S. universities are international students of privilege who will likely “return to their countries and step into positions of power, wealth, and influence” (Vandrick, 1995, p. 375). If immigrants of low socioeconomic status are to improve their English skills, advance their occupational positions, and contribute to the U.S. society and economy, they need financial support to join advanced English programs such as MELP. In 2003, the short-lived “English College Readiness” provided an opportunity to study English at an advanced/pre-college level at the University of Minnesota specifically for immigrants with a limited background in formal English instruction (M.D., Kelly, personal communication, October 7, 2009). This free program, created by individual private donations, could not be sustained for longer than a year. Vandrick cautions that “ignoring the class privileges of elite students may allow them to continue having these privileges, without comment or the possibility of more genuine equity” (p. 377). However, it is one thing to resent *individuals* of privilege and another to take issue with the systems that perpetuate “pay to play” in education. As Lee and Rice (2007) explain, in the economy of universities, students are the currency, and, foreign students are a well sought out commodity:

Increasing the demand for study in particular institutions added prestige and value to marketable educational products. Indeed, higher education leaders and policy makers recognize the economic advantages international students contribute; most international students pay full tuition benefiting their institutions and the local and national economies as well (p. 384).

If the university ELP is an exclusive learning site, what determines who is allowed to participate in it? Although those with cash-in-hand for full tuition fees paints part of the picture,

there are country-specific historical, political, and social forces at work as well. Those individuals entering college or pre-college ELPs in the U.S. come with years of English language instruction under their belt—instruction that has often been specifically tailored to pass the necessary entrance exams to these ELPs. Often, however, access to such instruction in English as a Foreign Language² (EFL) operates as a divisive force in many world countries. These divisions in education may appear blatant and unjust in the eyes of those socialized in the U.S., where the championed slogan persists that the educational opportunities exist for anyone to soar as high as their ambitions take them. Arguably, inequitable educational conditions surrounding ESL instruction exist in the U.S. in more subtle or hidden ways, and justice requires continual advocacy. An informed ESL educator in the U.S. should understand how learners have been shaped by EFL conditions in their home country, especially in developing nations, in order to frame discussions on education with students in a meaningful manner and to discourage a fixed link between privilege and high-quality English language instruction from developing in this country.

EFL in Developing Countries

Both Brock-Utne (2001) and Rumnaz Imam (2005) discuss the fractures caused by Western-style schooling and instruction in English (and other colonial languages) in less-developed countries. Speaking in regards to African nations, Brock-Utne takes issue with the notion that national economic autonomy can only be achieved by side-lining native languages. One force responsible for driving a wedge between students and the cultural heritage of their languages is the profit motives of the World Bank and commercial publishers. They claim that it is too costly to print textbooks in a variety of African languages. Brock-Utne counters, “It should be remembered, however, that many of the ‘local’ languages which are also often termed ‘tribal’

languages have many more speakers than many of the European languages” (p. 117). Related to the effect of a textbook monopoly, although not mentioned by Brock-Utne, is the standardized testing industry (i.e., TOEFL), which has been criticized for culturally, socially, and politically shaping knowledge into a gate-keeping measure (Brown, 2004).

Capitulating to the pressures from 21st century colonial forces, the policy makers of the African elite also play a major part in displacing power from both their languages and their fellow citizens. Says Brock-Utne:

Many Africans belonging to the élites feel that the use of a foreign language as a language of instruction, even though their own children would also learn better in a more familiar language, still will strengthen their children in comparison to other children in the country. This will happen since their children are likely to get more exposure to the foreign language. In this way language becomes a powerful mechanism for social stratification (pp. 119-120).

Brock-Utne does not denounce the instruction of English all together, but, rather advocates an approach where instruction remains primarily in the native language. She points to research that corroborates the effectiveness of such an approach, “...most linguists agree that the best basis for learning a foreign language is the best possible command of your own language which means using your own language as language of instruction up to a high level of schooling” (pp.125-126).

Rumnaz Imam sees similar issues occurring in Bangladesh. She, too, discusses concern with the prominent position of the Western publishing market and echoes Lee and Rice’s statement on the export of students and their tuition dollars out of the country, “which is three times the cost of local education and generates revenues for the developed nations” (p. 480). Within Bangladesh, a premium price grants those who can afford it the access to English medium schools. A growing trend involves schools marketed as a cheaper version of the elite model. Teachers at these schools require little in the way of English proficiency. Rumnaz Imam

believes that these “trendy” schools lack overall educational quality. Beyond the commodity of the English language, both the elite schools and their imitators grant access to British and American culture. “The global utility of private English medium education is one of its main attractions. Notably, global utility has been defined so as to exclude Bangla-formed national identity” (p. 478-479). Thus, the value systems of these schools threaten Bangladesh in terms of a brain-drain as well as pride in national and cultural unity.

In the contexts describe above, the English language as a commodity has challenged national educational infrastructures. Cambridge and Thompson (2004) distinguish between two ideologies driving these trends. The globalist ideology sells an education attached to global certification and a specific value system, creating “the privileged position of the transnational capitalist class.” This allows the social and global mobility of an elite group, while other citizens are left with a fractured education system. In contrast to the globalist ideology, the internationalist approach

is founded upon international relations, with aspirations for the promotion of peace and understanding between nations. It embraces a progressive existential and experiential educational philosophy that values the moral development of the individual and recognizes the importance of service to the community and the development of a sense of responsible citizenship (p. 173).

Broadfoot (2000) also takes issue with the de-valuing of education into “the coveted passport to occupational success” (p. 366). However, she believes that scholarly investigation needs more than analytic descriptions of flawed systems and policies. In order to bring the integrity of the internationalist approach to educational systems, Broadfoot calls on scholars to conduct qualitative studies on particular learning settings that focus on culture and the viewpoints of individuals. She believes that such studies “add significantly to our collective

capacity to engage fruitfully with the process both of diagnosing the cause of some identified weaknesses in particular educational systems and of searching for remedies” (p. 362).

The reason I bring up this macro-context of EFL is to recognize the threat of social divisions created in part by limited access to high-quality education. Adult immigrants arriving in the U.S. may very well come from compromised educational backgrounds that have restricted their opportunities to develop their first language skills. As mentioned above by Brock-Utne, a sophisticated command of one’s first language lays a strong foundation for learning an additional one. As a powerfully wealthy nation with a well-developed educational system, it is not the case that the U.S. lacks the resources to offer promising support to all of its immigrant residents and citizens’ investment in learning English. Critical scholars of TESOL are aware of this positive potential, but actively seek to draw attention to the gaping wound between promise and reality, as well as the hypocrisy, racism, sexism and discrimination that threatens to marginalize immigrants who need to advance their English proficiency. As the internationalist ideology promotes commendable ethics in cross-cultural education, so, too should an informed and honorable ideology guide the field of ESL. A critical approach to TESOL is one response to situations of social injustice. A description of what this approach looks like follows in the paragraphs below.

Critical Approaches to TESOL

A critical approach to TESOL highlights language as a cultural arena of power. It acknowledges the former and current imperialistic role of the English language in (re)producing inequality, injustice, and oppression. However, as Pennycook (1999) cautions, while a critical approach entails political positioning “it is important to avoid a narrow and normative vision of how those politics work” (p. 334). That is, rather than defining itself as something static, as an

ideology that already exists, a critical approach to TESOL embodies the movement of reorientation to the conditions of power.

Awareness defines the starting point. Awareness involves active exploration and questioning of the context, of the multiple domains of identity--class, race, gender, ethnicity, country of origin, sexuality, legal status (to name a few)--that define difference and assign social and cultural value. Because TESOL occurs all over the world, in myriad evolving formats and conditions, the critical urges particularity. As a guiding principle for critical pedagogy, “*Particularity* seeks to facilitate the advancement of a context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy that is based on a true understanding of local linguistic, social, cultural, and political particularities” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 69, italics original). Additionally, Kumaravadivelu urges *practicality* and *possibility* (p. 69). *Practicality* means combining the role of researcher and educator, to generate theoretical ideas from the ground up, rather than from the top down. Similarly, *possibility* acknowledges the learners’ language learning experiences and interactions as a key source of understanding how identities are negotiated in the ebb and flow of power dynamics. Thus, these three *p*’s, provide a basis for exploring ideas that lead to tangible change. As stated in the introduction, critical questioning falls flat without real intentions for transformation.

The notions of identity, investment, and imagined communities; the divisive aspect of EFL in developing countries; and the spirit of a critical approach to TESOL create the conceptual setting for this study. An explicit return to these concepts occurs in the discussion section. What follows next is a description of the factual setting where this research is carried out. It begins with two informative studies on groups of English language learners in the Twin Cities of

Minneapolis and St. Paul, and is followed by a statistical glimpse at the state of Minnesota's current foreign-born population.

Two Proficiency Studies in the Twin Cities

Generally speaking, it can be argued that individuals with low-level English proficiency in the U.S. suffer slim chances for upward mobility in the job market or in formal education (Boyle, 1999). Whatever specialized skills or educational background that an adult enters the U.S. with, everything is for naught unless one has or acquires a particular command of English. Adult immigrants' acquisition of English depends both on how their background and experiences outside of the U.S. have positioned their "starting point" for learning English (as an additional language) and the quality of the opportunities that are accessible for learning English once they are in the U.S. In an effort to articulate what such cause and effect relationships might look like, the following section describes two studies on the English language proficiency of residents in the Twin Cities.

The first study investigated a sample population in a post-secondary program, where the emphasis is on acquiring academic language. The second study includes a large, randomized group of non-native English speaking residents. In this study, acquisition relates to social or "everyday" language proficiency. Among the basic differences between social and academic language are the latter's specialized vocabulary and complex syntax. It has been demonstrated that social language takes anywhere from 2-5 years to develop, whereas the acquisition of academic proficiency can take as long as 4-10 years (Collier & Thomas, 1997; Hakuta 2000). As both of the studies indicate, a salient factor in second language acquisition pertains to one's educational background.

Bosher and Rowekamp (1992) focused on immigrant and international students enrolled in an academic bridge program at the University of Minnesota's (former) General College (Collins, 2008). The researchers compute statistical analyses using empirical data from standardized tests and grade point averages (GPA), as well as background information from student questionnaires.

One finding from this study highlights the statistical correlations based on whether a student graduates from high school in the U.S. or in their native country. Those who graduated from high school in the U.S. tended to have higher scores on the listening test. However, the more time students spent living and studying in the U.S., the lower their second-year GPA tended to be. As the researchers explain, in the second year of the bridge program students were allowed to take any academic courses at the University. This means that included in their second-year GPA was their performance in regular content courses, not just the content-based language courses.

Bosher and Rowekamp point to quality of language education and continuity of general education as telling factors of their findings. They conjecture that EFL courses tend to pay more attention to grammar and reading skills, whereas ESL courses tend to take a more communicative approach (p. 8). The former skill-focus more closely reflects the demands of academic work, and, thus, students who have more practice in these areas will be better prepared for college-level tasks. What the researchers stress even more is the importance of educational continuity. If first language abilities are interrupted before being put to the test in a fairly sophisticated context (i.e., high school), learners lack a major resource when trying to navigate academic tasks in English. In addition to this disadvantage, learners of interrupted education do not possess the same of base of content knowledge as their counterparts.

The refugee learners who did not have an educational interruption scored similar to the international students. Therefore, instead of a “refugee” versus international student dichotomy, there should be an emphasis on the distinction between permanent residents with uninterrupted versus interrupted educational backgrounds in order to avoid “a label that many refugees who are now comfortably resettled in their new country, find stigmatizing” (p. 22). At the same time it’s important to acknowledge that a person who is ascribed the legal status of refugee carries a higher probability of having a particular educational background that has been tied to increased difficulty at the post-secondary level. In their conclusion Boshier and Rowekamp argue for the creation of more post-secondary programs that are specifically designed to meet the needs and recognize the advantages that permanent residents with interrupted education have. As they explain,

Non-credit ESL courses, designed for international students who have recently arrived in this country, and who are not yet matriculated into a college or university, quickly deplete the financial aid resources of permanent residents, and frustrate students who have good oral proficiency in the language, are knowledgeable about the culture, have been mainstreamed in high school, and are anxious to get on with their education (p. 23).

An understanding of how a post-secondary ESL program might be designed to meet the unique needs of permanent residents also requires looking beyond those currently enrolled in a program to the metropolitan community of immigrants at large. Fennelly and Palasz’s (2003) study investigates the English proficiency of the four largest immigrant groups in the Twin Cities at that time: Russians, Somalis, Hmong, and Mexicans. They refer to the former three groups as “understudied.” In addition to making proficiency comparisons among these national origin groups they sought to discover the background factors associated with varying levels of proficiency. Data were collected through a multilingual telephone survey in which English proficiency skills were self-reported by participants.

One important statement on their findings debunks the argument (Espenshade & Fu, 1997) that refugees in particular have higher levels of English because of a stronger commitment to the U.S. (i.e., because they know that they have less chance than immigrants to return to their native lands). On the contrary, Fennelly and Palasz found more variation among the refugee groups than among immigrants and refugees. On average, they found that Somalis had the highest level of overall English ability and the Hmong the lowest.

Among the reasons they cite to support their statements on each group's proficiency level is the relative amount of schooling and exposure to literacy and English prior to emigration. Two-thirds of Somali participants had graduated from high school and 41% had completed some college. By contrast, only 34% of the Hmong individuals in the study had a high school diploma. In the study, having a college diploma versus not having a high school diploma meant that an individual was more than 29 times more likely to speak English well and more than 20 times more likely to read English well. Although the Russians' educational completion rates far surpassed all the other groups, the majority of them were near retirement age when they emigrated. Because they are less likely to be employed, these older immigrants do not have the advantage of routine encounters with native English speakers and are at risk of isolation (p. 103 & 111). Also, older immigrants tend to maintain stronger attachments to their native language and culture (Gould, McManus, & Welch, 1983), which interferes with the acquisition of a new language.

In addition to schooling, the Somalis' prior exposure to literacy and English differs from that of the Hmong. Both the Hmong and Somali language have relatively recent ties to literacy. While this fact acts as a barrier to acquisition for the Hmong, the colonial rule of the British in Somalia is presumed to have positively affected the spoken English language ability of this

national group. In addition, before emigrating many Somalis spent years in refugee camps in Kenya, where English is widely spoken (p. 116).

In general, women in all of the groups were less likely than all men to be proficient in the speaking, reading and writing English because of men's societal status advantage (including educational and occupational opportunities). However, when comparing college-educated groups, women were much more likely than men to have a higher speaking proficiency. The authors conjecture that women with high levels of education are more likely to participate in occupations that facilitate their language acquisition. Also, they may belong to a privileged class that also provides influence and assets for learning.

What the aforementioned studies of permanent residents in Twin Cities share is an indication of how previous education affects the acquisition of English. Likewise, the results of both studies highlighted instances where there was more variation among groups identified as refugees rather than between refugees and immigrants or refugees and international students. This reinforces the need to exercise caution when making generalizations about the proficiency of individuals based on these group terms. Because of its more specified and formal context of learning, Boshier and Rowekamp's study is better suited for making recommendations at the institutional level. Recent dissertations by Gebre (2008) and Metianu (2008) also stress the importance of institutional support for immigrants in community colleges and four-year institutions, where they are underrepresented. Among both of their suggestions for English language programs are offering courses on "student success skills" (time management, study skills, library research); offering courses in tandem with content courses; designing a holistic approach that incorporates students' life experiences; and actively supporting legislation that would provide additional immigrants access to higher education. The paramount institutional

factor that learners described in Gebre's study is the availability of financial aid and scholarships. The important issue of financial support is topic that returns in the discussion section.

The participants in Fenelley and Palasz's (2003) study reflect the four largest ethnic groups in the Twin Cities. By collecting specific data on specific populations, they have helped to identify a diversity of needs and encourage policy and action in accordance with their findings. Likewise, robust census data can be utilized to support the creation of broad measures to strengthen the immigrant population and advocate for more in-depth needs analyses. The descriptions, trends and projections of the population of Minnesota's foreign born in the next section provide a quick overview of collected information to give a sense of the population's characteristics. In particular, the information on working immigrants, educational attainment, and language spoken at home provide credence to the call for supportive opportunities to learn advanced English.

The Current Foreign Born Population in Minnesota

The following statistics on Minnesota's foreign-born population paint a very broad portrait of Minnesota's diversity. In reality, such figures and categories are not neatly determined. Among the sources of complexity are immigrants who move from one state to another, undocumented individuals, and the inherent generalizations in terms such as "Asian" or "Latino." However, this section is meant to orient the reader to the local context of residents for whom English is not their first language.

According the U.S. Census Bureau, the term "foreign born" refers to anyone who is not a U.S. citizen at birth. Included under this term are naturalized U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents (immigrants), temporary migrants (such as foreign students), humanitarian migrants

(such as refugees), and undocumented people in the United States. The 2006-2008 American Community Survey estimated the foreign born population in the U.S. was 12.5% while in Minnesota the figure was about half of that at 6.6% (U.S. Census Bureau). Still, the number of immigrants coming to Minnesota continues to increase. From 1990-1999, 73,333 immigrants came to Minnesota, which represented a 130% increase in the state's foreign-born population. The national average for this time period was 57%. In the shorter time span of 2000-2007, the 1990s' influx increased another 30% (The Minneapolis Foundation, 2010). Immigrants' attraction to Minnesota can be attributed to its "relatively robust economy" and "its excellent network of social services" (p. 6).

Although the total number of foreign-born individuals in Minnesota pales in comparison to states like California, Texas, Florida, and New York, the number of immigrants who are refugees in Minnesota largely surpasses the national average. A refugee is a person who leaves his or her country of origin because of well-founded fear of persecution (League of Women Voters, 2006). In a given year the national average of all refugees is about 8% of total incoming immigrants whereas in Minnesota it is estimated between 25-50% (Davies, 2004). The recent era of refugees began after the Vietnam War when people from Southeast Asia resettled in Minnesota. Then, starting in the late 1980s, a population of refugees came from former Soviet Union (Minneapolis Foundation, 2004). This wave was followed by another influx of refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, most notably, Somalia. Between 1999 and 2003 about 13,500 refugees from 30 different countries resettled in Minnesota. However, in the last 20 years the majority of the refugees have come from the former Soviet Union, Bosnia, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (Advocates for Human Rights, 2006).

In 2007 Minnesota's Latino³ population surpassed 200,000 and the Asian⁴ population grew to over 180,000 (Immigration Policy Center, 2009). Also, the Twin Cities are home to the largest population of Hmong outside of Asia (60,000) and the state of Minnesota contains the largest number of Somalis (30,000) in the United States (Advocates for Human Rights). Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of foreign-born individuals in Minnesota reside in the Twin Cities area (U.S. Census).

According to the latest report from The Minneapolis Foundation (2010), while Minnesota's total population of adults is increasingly growing older than working age, the peak of adult immigrants are aged 25-44, well below retirement age. Working immigrants in Minnesota largely fall into one of two extremes: very low- or very high-skilled jobs. The low-skilled jobs that are projected to grow significantly in the next 6 years in Minnesota include personal and home care aides, landscaping and grounds keeping workers, combined food preparation and serving workers, and janitors and cleaners. The concentration of workers at the low-skilled end of the job spectrum speaks to the fact that almost 50% of adult immigrants in Minnesota do not have any education past a high school diploma.

A crucial factor tied up in job type and educational attainment for immigrants in Minnesota is, of course, their level of English proficiency. The 2000 U.S. Census reports that 9.6% of Minnesota's population speaks a language other than English at home. In Minneapolis and St. Paul the percentages are 18.9 and 23.5, respectively, with Spanish being the most commonly spoken language other than English. Should an immigrant wish to pursue higher - education in the Twin Cities, there are a host of options from community and technical colleges to 4-year colleges and universities--the most attended option in the state (by anyone) being the University of Minnesota Twin Cities (the site where this research was conducted).

Research Questions

Over time and immigration trends the population of adults in the Twin Cities has changed and continues to do so. Both simultaneously with population development and independent of it, educational institutions alter their course of operations, as is necessary or desirable. Active awareness of the language-learning context involves accounting for these shifts with specific and in-depth attention to their implications for ESL education. Tuition adjustments at the University of Minnesota have appeared to lower the enrollment of Regents Scholars in MELP. Even before the adjustment, as stated in the introduction, Regents Scholars carry (carried) a reputation as a marked group of MELP learners. This descriptive study of Regents Scholars in MELP is based on these two research questions:

- 1) From the viewpoint of the instructors, how suitable is MELP as a learning site for Regents Scholars?
- 2) How has the strength of the Regents Scholars' investment in learning English been informed by their past learning experiences and identities?

After the Findings and Discussion sections deal with these immediate questions, a broader response to the case of the Regents Scholars is addressed in the section on implications and recommendations.

Method

Setting

The research setting for this study was the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, a highly-ranked public research institution that enrolled over 50,000 students at the Twin Cities campus in the fall of 2009. International students (students in the U.S. on an education visa) made up 8.3% of this population (University of Minnesota, 2010). The majority of international students at the

University in 2009 were enrolled in masters or doctorate programs (58%). International undergraduates made up 33% of the total number and 9% were professional or non-degree-seeking students. While the figures for graduate and professional/non-degree matriculation have remained relatively stable over the past five years, the number of international undergraduates has surged in just the past three years. From fall of 2007 to fall of 2008 the increase in enrollment was 65%; in 2009 the enrollment had jumped up another 66%.

Any student, international or otherwise, must demonstrate proficiency in academic English if they are to participate in and complete a course or program at a four-year university (Davis & Kimmel, 1996). English is the vehicle through which a variety of specific skills need to be carried out, from reading large quantities of material to writing cogent essays to communicating with instructors. The University of Minnesota has offered ESL courses and programs for students since 1968. Today, international students who would like to improve their English language skills may take courses through the University's Minnesota English Language Program (MELP).

As stated in the introduction, international students have traditionally made up the majority of the learners in MELP. Until the fall of 2009, another group of learners accessed MELP through their roles as employees at the University. Through the Regent Scholarship program these employees were encouraged to take classes because the University covered up to 100% of the cost of tuition fees (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

According to an October 2009 report from the University's Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action coalition (D. Murphy, personal communication, August 23, 2010), the Twin Cities campus employs over 17,000 people. Included in this number are positions held in crafts/skilled labor and service/maintenance. Employees in these two categories total 1,435

individuals. Immigrants (naturalized citizens and permanent residents) make up 8.4% of the employees in crafts/skilled labor and service/maintenance. For the immigrants working these typically low-skilled positions, upward mobility is not possible without a sufficient level of English language proficiency (Boyle, 1999). Understandably, University employees looking to advance their English proficiency level would be attracted to the convenience, quality, and affordability of MELP.

The core of MELP (<http://www.cce.umn.edu/Minnesota-English-Language-Program/>) includes the Academic English Program (AEP) and the Intensive English program (IEP). The AEP and IEP represent roughly 5 levels of proficiency. The AEP features three credit-bearing courses at two different levels, academic and advanced. The courses separately tackle English grammar, reading and composition, and speaking and listening. It also offers about five elective courses per semester with a more narrowed focus (i.e., Academic Writing for Graduate Students, and English Pronunciation). While learners in the AEP must have already been admitted to the University, learners in the IEP need not be admitted. The courses in the IEP do not grant credit. The IEP breaks down courses into 3 levels, high-beginning, intermediate, and advanced. As in the AEP the courses focus on grammar, reading and composition, and oral skills. During the summer, the AEP and IEP are augmented with a community integration component. The learners prepare for, participate in, and reflect on interactive field trips in the Twin Cities area on a weekly basis. In addition to the AEP and IEP, MELP also provides customizable group learning and several professional/business English courses. This information on MELP can be found from links on their website.

MELP had about 200 students enrolled in the AEP and 100 in the IEP in 2008, including 22 Regents Scholars in the IEP. In 2009 this number dropped to just two (M. Anderson, personal communication, October 1, 2009).

I conducted my semester of teaching practicum at MELP and also taught a summer semester as an instructor. Through my personal experiences there, I believe that MELP encourages the meaningful learning and exchange of language and culture. It aids learners' adjustment to their surroundings by developing a supportive learning environment that gives individuals the confidence to express themselves and navigate, in fact, *construct* a new terrain of multicultural interaction. At its core, it promotes the spirit of the internationalist approach to education, with students as ambassadors of intercultural understanding. All this said, however, it cannot be ignored that MELP operates within a very large and powerful educational system, with high financial stakes.⁵

Participants

Two groups of participants provided data for this study: MELP instructors and Regents Scholars. The decision to include MELP instructors came from my expectation that their time spent shaping and teaching the course curriculum and evaluating learners' performances would make them a strong source of information in regards to the program's general suitability for the needs of Regents Scholars (Research question #1). As Regents Scholars only made up a portion of the student body in MELP, instructors were also in a position to provide a comparison to the more "typical" MELP student, the international student. Because I would not be able to interview every former Regents Scholar, it was hoped that the instructors could help provide a well-rounded picture of these learners in context.

In the introduction I provided background on why the case of Regents Scholars in MELP compelled me to undertake this study. The decision to seek out Regents Scholars themselves as participants in the study is summarized by Kumaravadivelu's (2006) post-method operating principle of *possibility*, which is defined by the attempt to frame the sociopolitical act of learning an additional language as it is conveyed through the learners' personal experiences with the vision of advancing confident identities and vibrant communities. Thus, each Regent Scholar who participated in the study would be encouraged to share details about themselves before, during, and after their time at MELP in order to understand how their previous education and other aspects of their lives shape their investment in learning English (Research question #2).

Before participants were solicited, approval for the study was granted under expedited review by the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board due to the probability that some potential participants fell into the category of protected populations (<http://www.irb.umn.edu/guidance.html>). Informal consent was also obtained from Michael Anderson, the Director of MELP. The materials for collecting data were revised with suggestions from Michael Anderson and the author's advisor, Anne Lazaraton. These materials include: the consent form for the instructors (Appendix A); the consent forms for the Regents Scholars (Appendix B); the written survey for the instructors (Appendix C); and the questionnaire for the Regents Scholars (Appendix D). Oral interviews of the Regents Scholars were recorded with the built-in microphone of a laptop computer and factory-installed recording software.

Procedures

A solicitation e-mail was sent by the author to the total 16 instructors who were working at MELP in the spring of 2009. The email requested that potential participants had taught at least two courses with Regents Scholars in attendance. Five instructors participated in the study and

all five participants' responses were included in the data analysis because the data they provided was suitable for the size and descriptive nature of the study. Their pseudonyms are Michelle, Richard, James, Olivia, and Emily.

Interested MELP instructors were given consent forms and open-ended, written surveys via e-mail that asked them to share their perceptions of the learning experiences of Regents Scholars in their classrooms. Participants typed responses to the five questions and returned the completed surveys via email. The first question in the instructors' survey served to establish each of the instructors' familiarity with teaching this group of learners. The number of courses that each teacher has taught with at least one or more Regents Scholar in attendance ranged from 4 courses to 20 plus. At 4, Michelle has taught the fewest number of courses; Richard and James estimate 10 each; Olivia has taught 20 and Emily figures 20 plus.

A MELP administrator sent out solicitation e-mails and, subsequently, postal letters to all current and former Regents Scholars on file who had attended MELP. Four Regents Scholars participated in the study and all four participants responses were included in the data analysis because the data they provided was suitable for the size and descriptive nature of the study. Their pseudonyms are Elena, Nuneya, Birhanu, and Vison.

Questionnaires were sent to the home mailing address of interested Regents Scholars. The purpose of the questionnaire was to capture some of the participants' background information and to serve as the basis for the interviewer's questions. It was intended to mentally prepare the participants for the nature of the interview, and, also, gave them the chance to decline the interview. Prior to completion, consent for the questionnaire and oral interview was obtained in written and oral form. After completed questionnaires were returned in the mail, face-to-face oral interviews were set up over e-mail and phone. Each one-on-one discussion lasted

approximately 45 to 75 minutes. The protocol for the oral interview was primarily a reflection of the items on the questionnaire (along with follow-up questions), but the participants were encouraged to say whatever they felt was relevant to the conversation about themselves and their language-learning experiences. The audio was recorded for later review and partial transcription.

Findings

Instructors' survey

The data reported here receives commentary in relation to the first research question in the discussion section. As stated in the *Procedures* subsection, the first question of the instructors' survey served to establish how many semesters each instructor had taught Regents Scholars. The second question asked the instructors to speak to the similarities and differences between the learning needs of international students versus Regents Scholars.

Richard and Emily are the two instructors that named similarities. Richard notes, "...all the students need communicative language practice in class, and they all benefit from participating in games and activities that make learning fun." Emily talks about the students' similar needs from another angle:

1) Both international students and Regents Scholars need "education" in the cultural aspects of the American educational system—what the expectations are about homework, participation, asking and answering questions, volunteering, plagiarism and academic honesty, and they need even stuff like checking your email, using computer labs, and using the class web sites, etc.

In terms of language skills, Emily says, "both groups usually need a lot of work on their writing, listening, and speaking, but often for different reasons, often depending on the language background."

All five instructors mentioned areas in which Regents Scholars and international students differ in learning needs. In terms of language skills, Michelle notes that the Regents Scholars were generally “inexperienced writers.” She elaborates:

2) Relative to most other students they lagged behind in all areas of writing from lowest (spelling, mechanics, handwriting, formatting) to highest (audience, purpose, content, development) level concerns in the writing of a paragraph or simple essay.

Richard also mentions that the Regents Scholars’ tend to have difficulty with writing. He states that their oral skills and vocabulary, compared to both their writing and reading skills, “are so much stronger.” Olivia and James likewise note that the Regents Scholars don’t need as much attention to oral skills and vocabulary.

James states that “[Regents Scholars] often have a hard time keeping up with a course,” but does not elaborate. However, Olivia and Richard offer possible explanations for why that might be. Olivia states

3) What Regents Scholars need much more than int’l students: computer skills!!!, general studying and test-taking skills (even just understanding **how** to answer multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank questions---I wonder how many tests many of these students had ever even taken in their lives); handwriting improvement; reading speed improvement; having the same thing explained over and over again (it just never seemed to ‘stick’!)

Richard adds

4) Regents Scholars often lack the foundational grammar and mechanics knowledge that international students acquire before they enter our program. Many Regents Scholars also need more extensive work on study and test taking strategies than other students, and they need more review and recycling of new material in order to retain what they’ve learned.

Beyond the need for particular strategies and skills, Michelle discusses how international students display less emotional and social competence in the classroom. In her experience, Regents Scholars have been around ten years older than the international students. Thus, Michelle says:

5) [Regents Scholars] have exuded a kindness and wisdom commensurate with their age and life experience. By kindness, I refer to an extra willingness to help other students in class and a demonstration of a self-effacing attitude relative to classroom disputes, turn-taking, and good-natured tolerance for joking when the joke was on them. By wisdom, I refer to patience and perseverance in the face of failure (to understand an explanation, to succeed on a test, to successfully revise an essay the first or second time around). I would say that the Regents Scholars offered the younger students more than they received.

Another take on the difference of needs beyond strategies and skills comes from Emily.

6) Some differences are that the international students often feel more pressure to perform because they often have a certain amount of time that they've "budgeted" to ESL and, regardless of how unrealistic those expectations are and how underprepared they are for academic life and classes, they agitate to be out of ESL. (Now that the Regents Scholars pay more for their classes, we may see more of it with them as well.)

The third question for the instructors asked how having both international students and Regents Scholars affects the atmosphere of the classroom. This question sought to discover how the social environment of the learning site appeared to impact the investment of the learners.

Michelle responds:

7) I enjoyed having Regents Scholars in the classroom mix because those I worked with seemed so grounded and serious. They regarded the opportunity to study writing or grammar as something valuable and had high hopes for the leg up that their education promised offer to them and their children.

Emily's response is similar to Michelle's, but she adds a qualification.

8) I think both groups can contribute to a good class atmosphere. The Regents Scholars are often older, more mature, and more serious about their studies. However, in many cases, Regents Scholars seem less prepared for the academic nature of the class.

Emily then offers an explanation as to why this challenge may exist:

9) It's likely that their educational backgrounds have been sporadic and interrupted—or otherwise having less than normal progress—often due to the conditions of the country from which they came to the US. In addition, some Regents Scholars have many outside (financial or family) pressures on them, which cause them to miss class and assignments, participate less often, and/or eventually drop out.

James concurs with Michelle and Emily about the positivity that the Regents Scholars bring to the class. "RS in my experience are open-minded and eager to interact," he writes. However, he

goes on to speak to the fact that having both Regents Scholars and international students in the same classroom was a recognized issue during the years of the University of Minnesota's Minnesota English Center (MEC). The MEC was founded back in 1968 along with the Master's program in ESL (<http://sls.umn.edu/about/>). After 9/11, new visa restrictions in the U.S. slowed international student enrollment in the MEC to the point of closure in 2004. Two years later MELP was created in its stead. James explains that whether MEC or MELP, the notion of separate classrooms has not gone away:

10) In the MEC, we entertained the idea of offering courses just for RS, and rejected it. I was glad of that because I thought it would be a loss to other students. (And the RS reacted negatively to the idea.) In MELP, the idea has come up again.

The responses of Richard and Olivia to the question of classroom atmosphere lend evidence to a divide. Although he does end his statement with accord, Richard notes fractures between Regents Scholars and international students:

11) International students sometimes became frustrated with Regents Scholars who asked very basic questions or who failed to catch on to new concepts as quickly as the international students. Occasionally the Regents Scholars seemed uncomfortable working with some of the international students, who were generally much younger and sometimes rude. However, in general the two groups got along fairly well.

In Olivia's experience, division was more prominent:

12) International students couldn't relate to the Regents Scholars because they were generally much older, their lives (past and present) were so very different, and their needs in the classroom were at such variance. It was a VERY hard balance to strike: Keeping the Regents Scholars from answering every question I asked (they were just so comfortable talking!), and keeping the international students from being bored while I explained things again and again to the Regents Scholars. It made the atmosphere more tense, and there was an almost tangible wave of relief and relaxation the days the Regents Scholars couldn't be in class.

The fourth question asks the instructors in what ways they believe that MELP contributed to the realization of Regents Scholars' personal learning goals. Personal learning goals, in part, define a learner's investment. Emily's view is as follows:

13) I think MELP contributes to the Regent Scholars' personal learning goals by helping them deal with the English language, with American culture, and with becoming more academic in their use of language. If they've been in the U.S. for some time, they probably speak English, but often it is more informal, so they need to be able to change the register to more academic types of language and language usage. Having a good understanding of English should make it easier for them to achieve their other specific academic or study goals.

Michelle's response has a similar tone, but she adds a qualification at the end.

14) Helping these students to acquire the knowledge and confidence necessary to sharpen their language skills seems like an essential contribution. From everything I observe in my own teaching and that of my colleagues, we do the best job possible in helping students to succeed. In my case, providing considerable extra help to the Regents Scholars was necessary, and I did so with pleasure.

Olivia expounds on Michelle's observation of the Regents Scholars' need for "considerable extra help." She says:

15) We tried, but we had too many other students to really focus on the Regents Scholars' unique goals and needs. I was generally able to schedule my classroom assistants to coincide with our days in the computer lab so they could help the Regents Scholars and teach them some of the very basic things (like using the 'enter' key), and I spent hours after class and in my office going through things one-on-one with them. They certainly needed to improve their academic English skills in order to achieve their goals of obtaining degrees from the University, but our courses were not designed to help them in the ways they needed help.

Richard's response has shades of Emily, Michelle, and Olivia's words:

16) I think the Regents Scholars appreciated being able to take MELP classes, and I'm sure that the classes had a positive effect on their English skills, but I don't think the classes provided the foundational skills in writing and grammar that most of the Regents Scholars really needed. The Regents Scholars I taught all hoped to go on to pursue undergraduate degrees at the university. MELP classes probably helped a few of them toward their goals, but generally MELP classes did not adequately prepare Regents Scholars for college, especially in their writing skills.

Unlike the others, James responds to this question in brief. He says, "I don't feel I can judge that very well. I can think of some success stories and (I think) at least one failure."

Finally, the instructors were asked how they think the tuition rate change will affect Regents Scholars' investment in learning. James has a fairly positive outlook. He says, "I'm not

in a good position to predict, and I'm not sure how much more they now have to pay. Something tells me that they are mostly highly-motivated enough to find a way to continue studying."

Michelle remains more neutral. She briefly states, "I can't say, but I've had fewer in recent semesters than in 2007-2008." Emily also speaks to a decline in enrollment:

17) I think fewer will attend our ESL classes (or perhaps any classes). I've already seen a drop this year in the number of Regents Scholars in my classes over past years. As I mentioned in #3 above, I think they're also more likely to be agitating to get out of ESL and into "regular" classes even if they aren't really prepared for them.

Olivia addresses the decline with conviction, "They are no longer able to study with us. I think we only have a single Regents Scholar in all of MELP this semester. Unthinkable, compared to the past three years." Unlike the other instructors, Richard provides a lengthy reflection. He has this to say:

18) I have not had any Regents Scholars in my classes since the tuition rate change went into effect. I am saddened that they no longer have this opportunity available to them, but at the same time I don't think that MELP was designed to meet this population's needs in the first place, and they might actually learn more by going to a program that fits their needs better. I believe that community college ESL or A.B.E. is a better fit than an IEP for most Regents Scholars. However, I realize that A.B.E. instruction isn't always consistent, and community college would probably be too expensive for many Regents Scholars. I'm not sure what the solution to this problem is. It would be nice if MELP could design classes specifically for immigrant and refugee learners, but I'm afraid that the cost would be prohibitive for any students from the community who are not working for the University, and I doubt it's possible to run classes that are filled exclusively with Regents Scholars.

Combined, the MELP instructors have taught over 64 courses with at least one Regents Scholar in attendance. Their statements provide insight on the academic preparedness of the Regents Scholars in terms of their perceived needs; the social atmosphere of the classroom; the personal learning goals of the Regents Scholars; the effect of the tuition rate change on their participation in MELP.

Regents Scholars' interview

The next set of data is a summary of the Regents Scholars' questionnaire and interview responses. Both research questions are addressed by the cumulative data from each participant, but their responses unfold in a more or less chronological fashion. This narrative style helps to present the view of investment as it changes over time.

Nuneya.

Nuneya immigrated to the U.S. from Eretria in 1999. She's between 30-39 years of age. Nuneya is the oldest sibling in her family. Her brother has recently come to live with her in her apartment. Not too long ago she returned to Eretria to get married. Her husband still resides there, as do most of her family, and she's not sure when he'll be able to come live with her. I ask her if she would prefer to be in Eretria with him. "If I'm rich I can stay there," she responds.

Nuneya informs me that at the school system she attended in Eretria, instruction in English was compulsory starting from grade 6. In high school English was the primary language of instruction, though explanations were sometimes given in her native language of Tigrima. She expresses some doubt in the quality of the English instruction that she received. "That's why when everybody come here he is confused," she says. After Nuneya graduated from high school in Eretria she moved to Los Angeles. She came to the U.S. "to learn, get a good job, everything." Soon she was encouraged by a cousin to move to the Twin Cities area.

It took time for Nuneya to get accustomed to her new surroundings. She felt limited because she couldn't yet drive a car, the weather was harsh, she had very little money and she didn't really know anyone. Ultimately, Nuneya wanted to enroll in a post-secondary degree program, but first she needed to be financially stable and improve her English.

Her cousin, with whom she lived, introduced her to free English language courses at an Adult Basic Education facility known as the Hubbs Center in St. Paul. In terms of a language learning environment she said the Hubbs Center was, “Okay, but a lot of people.” Still, she enjoyed it as a social outlet. In addition to Tigrima and English, Nuneya also speaks Amharic. Many of the people she encountered at the Hubbs Center also spoke Amharic. The same is true of many of her co-workers at the University of Minnesota.

Nuneya has worked at the University since 2000 in a custodial position. She heard about MELP through her co-workers, and in the summer of 2009 she enrolled in MELP’s summer program. I ask her what impressed her about the program. She tells me that she really liked her instructor, and she beams about the opportunity to learn computer skills. She wishes that MELP offered a class solely on computer skills, “even if it was one day a week, even Saturday.” She explains that she got along with her classmates and would have liked to partake in the social events and field trips of the summer program, but they conflicted with her work schedule.

When I ask Nuneya which aspects of the program she found challenging, she tells me, “Writing is hard.” She received some general writing practice through the Hubbs Center, but she expresses neutrality about its effectiveness to prepare her for college-level expectations.

Nuneya wanted to continue at MELP in the fall of 2009, but because the Regents Scholarship program would pay only 75% of costs instead of 100%, as it had been paying, she could not afford the tuition. In reference to the cuts made to the Regents Scholarship program Nuneya says, “I wish they will do it like before. That is my dream.” She is further discouraged by the fact that if she chose to return to MELP she would be paying for non-credit bearing courses.

Nuneya says she may return to English courses at the Hubbs Center. She might also look into courses at St. Paul College where her cousin now attends. However, she still has her sights set on the University of Minnesota. She tells me that compared to St. Paul College, a degree from the University “is much better to get a job.”

When Nuneya first moved to the Twin Cities, she found listening and speaking in English extremely challenging. She soon discovered a successful strategy in interrupting conversations to ask for definitions, clarifications and repetitions. Later she tells me she would like to call the University and persuade them to reinstate the 100% tuition benefits.

In the meantime, Nuneya will continue to work at the University in order to pay the bills and save what she can. She anticipates the unknown arrival date of her husband from Eretria, and says she’s eager to start a family.

Birhanu.

Birhanu is between the ages of 30-39 and has lived in the U.S. for 6 years. The rest of his life was spent in Ethiopia. In addition to Amharic, English entered in the instructional language for Birhanu beginning in the third grade. In high school, English became the primary vehicle of learning. After Birhanu graduated from high school he took a technical skills course in order to work as an electrician and carpenter. Then he won a visa lottery to immigrate to the U.S.

Birhanu tells me he moved here with dual plans in mind: learning and working. He worked at *Subway* on the University’s campus, and then heard from a friend about the opportunity to work at the University. He explains that it took repeated efforts to get hired at the University because of the volume of competition. First, he worked in a food services position, and then moved up to a custodial position. Birhanu has been employed with at the University for 3 years now, and he says that he’s pleased with his job because of “good benefits and not too

much labor.”

Birhanu took courses at MELP over a span of 2 years. The courses he took dealt with grammar, writing, and oral skills. He shrugs off the oral skills course as “not too difficult,” but expresses that he struggled with the writing and grammar courses.

On his pre-interview questionnaire, Birhanu indicates that the cost of tuition reflects why he is not taking MELP classes anymore. In person, however, he expresses little concern about the cost increase. “75% is okay, too,” he says. What holds Birhanu back from taking classes appears to be a lack of confidence in his English proficiency. “My ability is not [up] to quality,” he confesses. He assures me that he enjoyed working with his classmates in MELP, but his strategy has become to study English on his own, everyday. His approach involves studying his grammar textbooks and reading everyday materials like the newspaper. “I have my dictionary. Takes time, but it is good. Everyday. Still, I need time.”

Not only is Birhanu studying English on his own so that he can return to the classroom with confidence, the more immediate goal of acquiring his electrician’s license commands his focus. Birhanu has recently failed his licensure test for the third time. He’s been taking the test through a non-profit program that aims to increase the employment opportunities of low-income neighborhoods. An advisor there told him that he appeared to be translating the English passages too literally. He tells me that he needs to work on understanding “the meaning of grammar” in context. Ultimately, Birhanu would like to study Electrical Engineering. “I like Math,” he says. “My problem is English.”

Birhanu shows some interest in working with a private tutor. Money is not the issue, but he doesn’t expound on why he’s not exactly looking for a tutor at the moment. In the past, Birhanu signed up for a language-learning partner through a free University program called

Tandem Plus. It partners up individuals based on their schedules and the language they desire to learn, and then the individuals take turns tutoring one another in their respective language of fluency. Tandem Plus never found a match for Birhanu, who is a native speaker of Amharic.

A naturalized U.S. citizen, Birhanu shows affection for America. “More money here, more peaceful here; no one bothers no one here.” He exudes a positive outlook for the future. “Just need more practice,” he assures me.

Birhanu says he knows a lot of people here, but he doesn’t have much time to go out. He lives alone and all of his family resides in Ethiopia, yet he has applied for visas for his mother and father. He frowns on America’s nursing-home-solution for elderly family members, and plans to take care of his parents in their old age.

Elena and Vison.

Elena and Vison are in the same age range as Nuneya and Birhanu. They, too, work at the University, but, unlike Nuneya and Birhanu, both of them hold post-doctorate positions. They each earned their doctorate degree outside of the U.S. Elena accomplished all of her formal educational achievements in her birth country, Mexico. Vison obtained his bachelor’s degree in his home country of China, but studied in Japan for his doctorate.

Elena and Vison have both been in the U.S. for about a year and a half. Although each of them learned English starting in primary school and have a good amount of experience in reading and writing in English at a post-secondary level, they both feel that their oral skills are not on par.

Elena says, “By the time I came here, I thought I know English, but accent is very difficult.” So, she joined an advanced oral skills class through the Minneapolis Public Library. “I think that it was pretty, pretty good,” she conveys with enthusiasm. She was surprised by the

high proficiency level of the other learners in the class, many of whom had lived in the Twin Cities for years. She also appreciated the fact that the library class was not based out of a textbook. After about 3 months of attending the library class, a scheduling conflict prevented Elena from returning.

Elena then signed up for an oral skills class through MELP. When I ask her if she found the class helpful, she says, “I think that...a little bit.” She goes on to explain that she would have preferred more practice with conversational English and pronunciation. She tells me that she finds it difficult to keep up in a conversation in which two or more Americans are involved because of their accents and fast topic changes. As Elena explains, having solid conversational English skills is vital because of the social aspects of her academic/research profession.

Vison took both a business culture and oral skills class through MELP. He says that both classes helped him become aware of areas that need work. Pronunciation in general presents a challenge to Vison. “I need to practice and practice, but I’m so busy I don’t have time to.” Also, although Vison says he acquired some cultural information through the classes, he states:

(It’s) still difficult for me to communicate with Americans because I need to know more American culture, and more what Americans are thinking. Sometimes I want to make a joke, but that person might think it’s impolite.

In his oral skills class, the younger Chinese students spoke English “very fluently.” Vison felt that his English should have been more advanced than theirs. He believes the younger students’ relative fluency is due to the fact that English language education in China has “changed very much” since he was in school there.

For social reasons largely related to his profession, Vison wants to improve his oral English skills. “If I can speak English more fluently it will help me to make more friends and get

more information.” He also acknowledges the likely possibility that his profession may require him to teach at the college-level (in English).

Both Elena and Vison acknowledge that the tuition rate change plays a large part in their decision not to return to MELP. The other major factor for each of them is a lack of time. “You have to learn English, but you cannot quit your job,” says Elena.

Elena believes that her post-doctorate position at the University will help her get a better job in Mexico. She is set on returning to all of her friends and family there after one more year in the U.S. Vison, however, has not decided if he will leave the U.S. He lives with his wife, who moved with him to U.S. for a post-doctorate position at the University in the same field as him. Together they have a 3-year-old child who is learning both Chinese and English.

Discussion

I have attempted to present the words of the instructors and learners to closely reflect the data that was recorded, but the data reflects its close relationship to the conceptual framework and the research questions, which are continually refined in accordance with the received data in qualitative research (Richards, 2009). Rather than coding for items or *searching* the data set, one way of approaching case studies, is *seeing* the data holistically. The line where data description stops and analysis begins is often a fine one (Wolcott, 1994, p. 16). However, this section highlights and synthesizes parts of the data with the literature review into an interpretation that directly responds to the research questions.

1) *From the viewpoint of the instructors, how suitable is MELP as a learning site for Regents Scholars?*

Instructors Richard and Emily point out that, despite their differences, both Regents Scholars and international students are learners of academic English, many of whom also seek a

college a degree through the medium of the English language. MELP exposed the Regents Scholars to an examination of the language tools necessary to meet the expectations of post-secondary education, increasing their understanding of the knowledge of power.

While MELP aided the Regents Scholars in sharpening their academic language skills to some degree, the MELP instructors provide a viewpoint that generally positions the needs of the Regents Scholars outside of the norm. They indicate that the Regents Scholars demonstrate more of a struggle with writing, reading, computer, studying, and test-taking skills, as well as foundational grammar and mechanics knowledge. Several instructors mention that Regents Scholars tend to fall behind and, therefore, require extra attention.

Some instructors allude to previous education factors to qualify these needs. Richard says, “Regents Scholars often lack the foundational grammar and mechanics knowledge that international students acquire before they enter our program,” while Olivia muses, “I wonder how many tests many of these students had ever even taken in their lives.” Emily indicates that many of the Regents Scholars “seem less prepared for the academic nature of the class.” She goes on to suggest that the likelihood that their educational backgrounds have been “sporadic or interrupted—or otherwise having less than normal progress—often due to the conditions of the country from which they came to the U.S.”

Although, generally, Regents Scholars may be lacking in several key skill areas, MELP instructors state that the Regents Scholars often appear to have strong oral skills. Many of them likely honed these skills during their acculturation period in the U.S. Emily does point out that Regents Scholars still needed work in developing their *academic* oral skills (as opposed to social), which, as stated in the introduction take somewhere from 4-10 years to develop (with the appropriate input). Still, having these social oral skills allowed the Regents Scholars to feel

comfortable asking questions and negotiating for meaning when they did not understand new concepts. Richard and Olivia state that the talking/questioning of the Regents Scholars caused an impatient to insensitive reaction from some of the international students. This observation brings to mind Emily's insight that many international students have "budgeted" a certain amount of time for English classes and that they agitate to be finished with them. It could be that, to these international students, the dead weight of English class is exacerbated by any apparent redundancies, wherever they come from. It could be, too, that these students' reactions are discriminatory in nature, based on perceived differences in identity markers such as age, race, country of origin, and class status.

Given that Regents Scholars may have had to battle tough scholastic challenges as well as immature responses from certain classmates, it is fortunate that the MELP instructors view the Regents Scholars armed with attributes to combat adversity. They note their maturity, patience, resourcefulness, and resilience--qualities enhanced by their age and experiences navigating a new life in the U.S. They view Regents Scholars as serious learners, eager to engage in all the opportunities around them, made available by increased English proficiency.

While the Regents Scholars' wisdom, strength, and desire positively contribute to their language learning, MELP instructors have questioned whether or not that the program is the ideal learning site for their needs. James notes that over the years the idea of creating separate classes for international students and Regents Scholars has come up more than once.⁶ James is personally against this notion, and he states that past Regent Scholars were, too. Olivia, for one, is under the impression that a more suitable learning site for Regents Scholars is in need. She remarks, "...our courses were not designed to help [Regents Scholars] in the ways they needed help." Richard adds, "It would be nice if MELP could design classes specifically for immigrant

and refugee learners,” but he doubts that Regents Scholars alone would be numerous enough to fill the classes, and believes that cost would keep potential learners from the community from enrolling.

Emily notices that financial pressures cause many Regents Scholars “to miss class assignments, participate less often, and/or eventually drop out.” I, myself, was an instructor during a summer session at MELP, and witnessed one Regents Scholar drop out of class due to a change in his work schedule; another Regents Scholar clearly began to struggle when her work schedule was suddenly switched to a late-night shift.

In the literature review, it was explained that international students often pay full tuition for the opportunity to study at U.S. universities. As opposed to paying full tuition, as full-time employees at the University of Minnesota, Regents Scholars in MELP previously received 100% tuition coverage. The coverage now sits at 75%. Immediately following the tuition rate change the percentage of Regents Scholars in MELP dropped from 20% down to 2%. When I asked the MELP instructors what effect they believed the tuition rate change would have on Regents Scholars, they acknowledged a noticeable decrease in their numbers and most of them thought it likely that this trend would continue.

2) How has the strength of the Regents Scholars’ investment in learning English been informed by their past learning experiences and identities?

Nuneya and Birhanu belong to the nearly 50% of Minnesota immigrants whose highest educational achievement is a high school diploma. For Regents Scholars like Nuneya and Birhanu, who took non-credit bearing classes through MELP, being in a college degree program is an imagined community, a social group by which they desire their English proficiency to be legitimized.

The fact that language operates in a social context, complete with power relations, is part of what drives the notion of investment in language learning. A strong aspiration to belong to a social group of the target language, as well as positive interactions with target language speakers can strengthen one's investment in learning the language. Additionally, investment underscores that a learner's identity is multi-faceted and changes with experiences over time. A specific language-learning context may be in concert or conflict with part of one's identity, and, hence, the propensity to invest oneself in learning is affected.

All four of the Regents Scholars that I spoke with graduated from high school in their home country. As mentioned by the MELP instructors, although Regents Scholars displayed eagerness to develop their academic English, for many, their past learning experiences positioned their needs in a way that made it difficult to acquire the material presented in MELP. Although English was the dominant mode of instruction in high school for Nuneya and Birhanu, neither of them expressed confidence in the type of instruction that they received. Perhaps, as suggested by Brock-Utne (2001), they attended schools in their African nations that were fractured by competition for high-quality English instruction. Without a thorough investigation of their respective schoolings, one can only conjecture. However, what is known is that unlike most of their classmates, Nuneya and Birhanu did not enter MELP fresh out of high school. They waded through several years of acculturation in the U.S. before entering this formal learning site. Although their oral and listening skills may have blossomed during this period, the gap likely disrupted their focus in other, more formal areas. For instance, both Nuneya and Birhanu are quick to point out that academic writing in English has been a real challenge. Nuneya also indicates that computers are an area she wants to know more about. Whatever her experiences

with technology and the classroom were back home, classroom technology certainly has grown more sophisticated over recent years.

As a concise assessment of his overall English skills Birhanu recognizes that “my ability is not [up] to quality,” and so he has decided to get his English up to par by studying on his own. Although he conveys this as a personal shortcoming, it is likely that his previous education did not prepare him for these challenges.

Elena and Vison obtained doctorate degrees in their previous education, and are apparent exceptions to the Regents Scholars that the instructors largely refer to. Neither of them conveyed sentiments that they were academically underprepared for MELP. As Boshier and Rowekamp (1992) and Fennelly and Palasz (2003) indicated, there may be more variation between individuals within a category like “immigrant” or “Regents Scholar” than across categories.

Although Elena and Vison have met their formal educational goals, they do see an advantage in investing time to improve their English oral and listening skills for the purposes of feeling confident in their professional community. Both of them could probably benefit from the MELP course on pronunciation skills. However, neither of them felt they had enough conversation practice in the MELP oral skills class. They may need a class dedicated to conversation (like the one Elena joined through the public library), as well as the advantage of time and authentic practice outside of a classroom setting.

However, Vison does point out an apparent advantage of the prior schooling received by his younger Chinese peers in MELP. He equates their admirable English fluency with a more recent emphasis on oral skills offered by (certain) Chinese schools. His statement underscores the need for TESOL professionals to understand the changes to the atmosphere of English instruction in primary and secondary schools world-wide, even in the past 10 years or so, the

approximate age gap between many Regents Scholars and international students. As important as it is for instructors to be aware of the here-and-now of methodology, technology, resources, approach, etc., an effort to understand the schools of thought that have informed classrooms in the variety of EFL contexts and points in time strengthens an instructors' ability to meaningfully connect with the past learning experiences that adult learners carry with them.

In addition to previous education, Regents Scholars' investment in learning English is impacted by their identities. For one, all four Regents Scholars said that their roles as full-time employees certainly demand much of their time. Nuneya and Birhanu fall into the concentration of Minnesota immigrants at the low-skilled end of the job spectrum. The need to be financially self-sufficient is paramount for making it in the U.S., as they do not appear to have the financial backing that many international students enjoy. As they work in relatively low-paying positions and many international students do not need to work at all, socioeconomic differences are at play. Nuneya says that she was not able to participate in the communal component of the summer session because of her work schedule. Likewise, Elena and Vison mention that despite their desire to improve their English, the demands of their work take precedence. Although Birhanu does not discuss scheduling conflicts between school and work, he is experiencing difficulty in advancing his job position without first improving his English skills. He has failed the electrician's license test three times, and tells me he needs more practice "studying passages." Paradoxically, for many Regents Scholars, enrollment in MELP classes only became realistic through the benefits of full-time employment at the University, although their identity as full-time employees has also put practical constraints on their commitment to formal learning. Their investment in this learning-context is, in part, controlled by the power dynamic of

employer and employee. Traditionally, they must first attend to the work requests of their employer and, secondly, the English classes made accessible through this employer.

The Regents Scholars also have familial identities that affect their investment in learning English. Nuneya moved to the Twin Cities with the encouragement of her cousin, who has helped to guide Nuneya's learning investment. She introduced her to English classes at the Hubbs Center and, as a student at St. Paul College, she serves as a model in Nuneya's imagined community of college learners. Nuneya's younger brother has recently moved in with her. Perhaps this will spark her to continue pursuing her imagined community of college learners, to be a mentor to her brother, much the way her cousin has been to her. She also anticipates how her life will change once her husband arrives in the U.S. In Skilton-Sylvester's (2002) study on Cambodian women's investment in an English language program, many of the women found it overwhelming to juggle their multiple identities of wife and mother, employee, and student; in Fennelly and Palasz's (2003) study, women were less likely to be proficient in English than men. How will Nuneya's role as wife and her plan to have children shape her future commitments?

Similarly, Birhanu will assume the future identity of caretaker for his parents. How does his knowledge of this forthcoming responsibility affect his choices now and in the future? Will he be able to commit to improving his academic English to a level commensurate with an Electrical Engineering program while taking care of his parents?

It is unknown if Vison will remain in America, surrounded by speakers of the language he desires to speak more proficiently himself. He has not only his, but, his wife's career to consider as he plans the next step after his post-doctorate position. Vison's need for improving his spoken English may hinge on what job offers are available for him and his wife in the same location. If Vison's job requires him to teach in English in the U.S., he may need to seek out

formal oral skills instruction. Together they must also make decisions with their child in mind, who will soon be entering school.

Elena has committed herself to return to Mexico, where all of her family resides. Whatever improvements to her spoken English Elena could achieve by a longer stay in the U.S. (for the purposes of her career), her connection to home has a stronger appeal.

Unlike Vison, Elena, and the international students in MELP, Nuneya and Birhanu left their families back home under the pretense that they would be residing in the U.S. for the long-term. Saying good-bye to their familiar position aside family members and friends, they upheld a vision of joining the community of learning and working Americans. Among the peak age group (25-44 years old) of Minnesota immigrants, they had to exercise their English language skills to integrate into society. Nuneya passed her driver's license test. Birhanu passed the American citizenship test and continues to try to pass his electrician's license test. Both passed the tests of daily life by earning a living and interacting with those around them, whether they tapped into the community of other Amharic speakers or asked for repetition and clarification with English speakers, as Nuneya learned to do. Nuneya and Birhanu's 4 and 10 respective years as immigrants in the U.S. have impacted their investment in learning English in complex ways. Exactly how such experiences have affected their attitudes, insights, and identification is a deeply personal matter, the exploration of which can aid further learning.

Whatever the shape or strength of one's investment in learning English (as a theoretical concept), classes at a post-secondary institution require a healthy amount of the monetary definition of investment. The Regents Scholars that I talked to stated that the tuition cost was prohibitive, with the exception of Birhanu, who said that his lack of confidence in his English skills was keeping him from returning to MELP, not the cost. Additionally, the MELP instructors

believe that the tuition rate change limits the Regents Scholars ability to participate in MELP, to take the opportunity to improve their academic English and further their formal education.

Birhanu and Nuneya's positions as custodian and cleaner are among those Minnesota jobs projected to grow greatly in the next 6 years, suggesting that new immigrants will continue to join them as co-workers. Without the opportunity to advance their education, will those Regents Scholars at the low-skilled end of the job spectrum have a chance to move upwards? Will they have access to the discourses of power and discussions of social and cultural value?

Summary of discussion

The consensus of the MELP instructors appears to be that the Regents Scholars often enter MELP with a less-than-sufficient base of language skills from which to build, accounted for by the difference in previous education between the majority of Regents Scholars and international students. Two instructors mention that as they spend class time addressing these students' needs, some of the younger international students display intolerance. While the instructors agree that Regents Scholars are mature and dedicated learners, both in the past and present there has been uncertainty over whether or not separate ESL classes for Regents Scholars are desirable. Regardless of this debate, the instructors do not see how most Regents Scholars' participation in any University classroom is possible given the financial commitment necessitated by tuition reimbursement adjustment.

Previous education has affected the learners' investment in learning English, insofar as the degree to which it prepared them for academic advancement in MELP. Nuneya and Birhanu offer hesitation in regards to their ability in some English skill areas, coming into MELP four and ten years since they graduated high school. Elena and Vison indicate some insecurity in their oral skills, but generally have had sufficient preparation for MELP because English factored into

their attainment of bachelor and doctorate degrees. The other factors that have played an important role in the strength of the learners' investment include employment, familial roles, time spent living in the U.S., and the cost of tuition.

While the data do not allow learners' investment to be measured quantitatively, it does lend itself to a meaningful interpretation of how their experiences, needs, facets of their identities, and institutional constraints have and will continue to shape their language learning.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is that it was conducted retrospectively. Had the investigation occurred before the tuition change, while the Regents Scholars were still taking classes, it would have been easier to recruit more participants and garner fresher perspectives. The number of Regents Scholars that participated in this study is too small to capture a comprehensive description of the experiences and identities as language learners. Also, without personally knowing the Regents Scholars ahead of time and being limited by data collection time, I did not have the advantage of fostering a relationship that would have allowed me to more confidently report on their backgrounds, identities, and experiences. Fostering a genuine relationship over time strengthens the findings, as has been personally communicated by Bigelow, Hanson, and Tarone in regards to their recent language acquisition study of low-literate learners in the Twin Cities (personal communication, November 7, 2009). As a graduate student/novice instructor, this study reflects an exercise to articulate an immediate learning/teaching context through problem posing, and, as such, it is ultimately shaped by a subjective voice.

Implications and Recommendations

International students, as well as Vison and Elena, came to the U.S. with a spot at the University secured for them. These students likely came to the University via the education route of globalist ideology (Cambridge & Thompson, 2004) -- via Western textbook publishing companies, the high-stakes testing industry, and the price tag of University tuition. Regents Scholars who immigrated to the U.S. as adults from African nations arrived at the University through a different route, and represent a variety of experiences and values. It is hoped that a powerful public institution like the University shares the vision of an internationalist approach to education (Cambridge & Thompson) of diplomacy and peace among nations. If so, they should also embrace the rich cultural pluralism of the immigrants in the immediate community, not only ambassadors of material wealth. The push for transformation will likely have to come from the bottom up—from the community of concerned immigrants and those educators, advocates, and activists who live and work with them.

It is true that the University has afforded many immigrants a lift to their well-being through employment. Birhanu worked his way up from *Subway* to working as a custodian at the University, and he is thankful to be an employee of this reputable institution of public learning. Is this where Birhanu and other immigrants' access to the University terminates? Can the University extend an invitation to immigrants as employees AND learners? Although affordable tuition certainly plays a large role in this question, there remains the issue as to whether or not the University offers these immigrants an English learning program that fits their needs.

The MELP instructors highlighted a gap between the learning needs of the international students and the Regents Scholars that suggests they are not as academically prepared for MELP courses. While some instructors believe this gap is evidence to support the creation of separate

classes for Regents Scholars, some argue against this idea. The ideal option, in my opinion, would be to offer both courses together and separate.

Having the Regents Scholars and the international students together broadens the learning experience for everyone involved. Regents Scholars witness and interact with “typical” pre-enrolled or enrolled college students. They learn first-hand the legitimizing language, the specifics of academic English expectations, and how international students, who have likely had a more fitting preparation for MELP, respond to these expectations.

As the differences in their background, age, and experiences allow for a range of viewpoints, there is rich potential for meaning beyond acquiring the keys to academic English. While engaging in communicative practice of the language, learners can develop the means for bridging distances. They can temper misunderstandings and hone the art of finding common ground through communication. Certain individuals may go through life in narrow social/class circles, but it is unlikely (and should be undesirable) that one never venture to communicate with those who exist outside of what is comfortable and familiar.

International students in MELP may not have considered that some of their classmates would be immigrants (Regents Scholars) when they imagined the cultural interface of studying in the U.S. Incorporating the classroom topic of immigration and multiculturalism as important facets of U.S. culture promotes values beyond the occupational value of English. It allows for critical reflection on why people around the world, from all walks of life, study English. Having Regents Scholars and international students in the same MELP classroom can promote the internationalist approach to learning with an understanding across multiple differences of identity, not only a difference of nationhood.

However, meaningful reflection and peaceful understandings do not come automatically. To create awareness in issues of social justice, inclusion and mutual respect takes an adept instructor. Instructors can only do so much to teach academic English effectively *and* encourage students to think one iota past the utilitarian value of English class. Instructors Richard and Olivia speak about the enormous energy it took to balance the needs of the Regents Scholars and international students. Although it is probably not the case that all Regents Scholars were markedly unprepared for the academic rigors of MELP, many could have benefited from specialized instruction.

I'm not speaking about all the extra class time and office hours that instructors devoted to Regents Scholars, but rather a separate class just for Regents Scholars. Because of the relatively small number of Regents Scholars, I imagine this class as a multi-level, all-skills class. In addition to a heavy emphasis on writing, it would incorporate study skills, time management, and computer and library skills. In a class of all Regents Scholars, it may be easier for instructors to tap into their experiences and identities as workers, responsible family members, and adult immigrants and utilize their oral skills and connections with the community in learning. In order to maximize the number of potential students, course planners could inquire how to schedule the course around work schedules. As a non-credit bearing course, the cost would be 100% covered by the University for its employees. The purpose of some such version of a Regents Scholar-specific English course would be to attempt to address the unique needs of these learners and give these students a chance to stay apace in traditional MELP courses. However, it may be that the solution lies in a program outside of MELP.⁷

The central matter remains that a Regents Scholarship program makes no sense to these workers if the University does not offer a learning site supportive of their identities as English

language learners. Reinstating 100% tuition coverage, especially for non-credit bearing courses, is a must. To accomplish change, these aspiring learners need advocacy: from educators, staff, workers' and students' groups, and all individuals concerned with true inclusion in public education. This paper is a small step in acknowledging how a university can improve the opportunities for their low-skilled workers who are speakers of English as another language.

Conclusion

Aside from the tuition change that affected the participation of the Regents Scholars in MELP, this paper has mentioned a handful of other changes to ESL opportunities at the University of Minnesota in recent years. After September 11th, 2001, the preceding version of MELP had to close its doors for a couple years. In 2003 the privately funded "English College Readiness" program had just a moment to shine. In 2006 the 70-year-old General College was shut down. The General College was the site where Boshier and Rowekamp conducted their study in 1992 on language proficiency and academic success of refugee/immigrant learners. Boshier and Rowekamp's influential study is unique because of its minority population of participants and its focus on academic English in a university setting. My research did not turn up any studies that were quite the same. Their study, as well as this one, reinforce the fragility of many TESOL contexts and the need to capture their insightful characteristics before they disappear. Scholarship of this kind helps to advance transformative steps in ESL education.

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Notes

1 Please note that I generally employ “Regents Scholar” to refer to those who work in entry-level positions and are seeking to be college learners.

2 EFL refers to the study of the English language in countries where it is not the native language or “mother tongue.” However, the actual distinction between an EFL context and ESL context is generally regarded as more nuanced (Kachru, 2001).

3 According to the study cited by Immigration Policy Center (2009):

The terms “Spanish,” “Hispanic,” and “Latino” are used interchangeably. Some respondents identify with all three terms, while others may identify with only one of these three specific terms. Hispanics or Latinos who identify with the terms “Spanish,” “Hispanic,” or “Latino” are those who classify themselves in one of the specific Hispanic or Latino categories listed on the questionnaire – “Mexican,” “Puerto Rican,” or “Cuban” – as well as those who indicate that they are “other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.” People who do not identify with one of the specific origins listed on the questionnaire but indicate that they are “other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” are those whose origins are from Spain, the Spanish-speaking countries of Central or South America, the Dominican Republic, or people identifying themselves generally as Spanish, Spanish-American, Hispanic, Hispano, Latino, and so on. All write-in responses to the “other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” category were coded (http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/data_documentation/SubjectDefinitions/2007_ACSSubjectDefinitions.pdf).

4 According to the subject definitions of the study cited by Immigration Policy Center (2009):

Asian – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. It includes “Asian Indian,” “Chinese,” “Filipino,” “Korean,” “Japanese,” “Vietnamese,” and “Other Asian” (http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/data_documentation/SubjectDefinitions/2007_ACSSubjectDefinitions.pdf).

5 In 2006 the University closed the General College, which provided access to post-secondary learning for under-prepared students, including immigrants, students of color, and those economically disadvantaged. The College, which had operated for over 70 years, was “downsized” into the Department of Post Secondary Learning and Teaching (PSTL), and along with it, the enrollment percentage of students of color (Collins, 2008).

Along with the downsizing of the General College, the price of tuition at the University of Minnesota’s has more than doubled from 2000-2010 (Ross, 2010). Groups like Faculty for the Renewal of Public Education (<http://umnfaculty.blogspot.com/>) fight a trend toward corporatization, from athletic wear sweatshops to agribusiness research dollars. They question the University’s commitment and invitation to the public, in all its diversity.

6 Maupin (2005) notes that instructors raised the question of separate classes for Regents Scholars in the MEC (the program that was restructured into MELP).

7 The Department of Post Secondary Teaching and Learning (PSTL), which absorbed the former General College, may also be a site where the Regents Scholars can enhance their academic English skills—provided ESL classes were made available to them. While PSTL involves a diverse population of learners, it is dedicated to specifically serving first-generation immigrants in the metro community. Although an immigrant fresh out of a Twin Cities high school may have different needs from an immigrant who graduated from high school in her home country over 10 years ago, their shared identities as community members and immigrants provide a strong basis for creating an encouraging and unified learning environment. Additionally, as PSTL claims to value the demonstration and assessment of knowledge in a variety of ways that don’t necessarily hinge on traditional academic preparedness

(<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/pstl/About/Default.html>), Regents Scholars may discover new, legitimizing strengths in themselves. Regents Scholars could be allowed to work up to the content, credit-bearing courses offered through PSTL.

Another University program called “Access to Success” (ATS) (<http://www.ats.class.umn.edu/>) is a one-year development program in a handful of University colleges that supports students from diverse backgrounds with lower high school scores and rank than the typical admitted undergraduate student. ATS selects a limited number of freshman to participate, and bases its acceptance criteria mainly on the potential shown in their high school records and experiences. A certain number of ATS students for whom English is not their first language benefit from the 2-semester “College English Transitions” (CET) program. This program offers credit-bearing courses with instructors that have been trained in teaching ESL.

Ideally, scholars should be exploring the vitality of PSTL, ATS, and CET and how these acronyms compare to the opportunities offered by the former General College. Maupin’s (2005) study of ESL programming offered by the University of Minnesota found that instructors and staff believed there was not enough coordination and organization between the various ESL programs on campus which made it difficult to effectively serve learners. The mention of these ESL programs serves to caution against the University’s power to downsize particular avenues of learning at any time, as in the case of the tuition reimbursement with Regents Scholars, as well as to offer optimism of enhancing the opportunities available with the help of those communities of learning.

Appendix A – Instructor Consent Form

Consent Form

Immigrant Perspectives on Learning English at a University

You are invited to be in a research study of employees at the University of Minnesota who have taken courses through the Minnesota English Language Program (MELP). You were selected as a possible participant because the director of MELP and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) gave me permission to contact you. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Angela Gerend, graduate student in the English as a Second Language program at the University of Minnesota.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is:

To learn about the experiences of employees of the University who have also been students in the MELP to gain insight into how educational opportunities for similar populations can be improved.

Procedures:

I am asking you to fill out a survey, via email, with 5 open-ended questions on your perceptions of these learners' experiences in the classroom.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The risks of participating are: There are no risks.

The benefits of participating are: There are no direct benefits to you.

Compensation:

You will get a \$10 gift card to Espresso Royale or whatever you deem reasonable.

Confidentiality:

The records of the study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept securely and only I will have access to the records.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Being in this study is your choice. Your decision whether or not to be in this study will not affect your current or future relationship with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time with out affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher doing this study is: Angela Gerend. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at:

2809 Grand Ave S #1, Minneapolis, MN, 55408
(612)-423-9243
gere0013@umn.edu

or my project advisor

Dr. Anne Lazaraton
Office 331C Nolte Center
315 Pillsbury Dr.
Minneapolis, MN 55455
612-626-9372
lazaratn@umn.edu

If you have any questions or concerns about this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B – Learner Consent Forms

Paper Survey Consent Form

Immigrant Perspectives on Learning English at a University

You are invited to be in a research study of immigrants and employees at the University of Minnesota who have taken courses through the Minnesota English Language Program (MELP). You were selected as a possible participant because the director of MELP informed me that you have attended classes. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Angela Gerend, graduate student in the English as a Second Language program at the University of Minnesota.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is:

To learn about why you took classes with MELP and what kind of experiences you had so that the educational opportunities for immigrants like you can be made better.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

- 1) Fill-out a 3-page survey that asks questions about your personal background, the reasons that you took courses with MELP, your experiences in MELP.
- 2) Next, if you are interested, I will tell you more about the oral interview. **There is another consent form for the oral interview.**

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The risks of participating are: You may be reminded of painful memories of your home country.

The benefits of participating are: There are no direct benefits to you.

Payment:

You will get a \$15 gift certificate for the University of Minnesota Bookstore if you fill out the paper survey. However, if you participate in **both** the paper survey and oral interview you will get a \$30 gift certificate for the University of Minnesota Bookstore.

Confidentiality:

The records of the study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept securely and only I will have access to the records.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Being in this study is your choice. Your decision whether or not to be in this study will not affect your current or future relationship with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time with out affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher doing this study is: Angela Gerend. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her:

2809 Grand Ave S #1, Minneapolis, MN, 55408
(612)-423-9243
gere0013@umn.edu

or my project advisor:

Dr. Anne Lazaraton
Office 331C Nolte Center
315 Pillsbury Dr.
Minneapolis, MN 55455
612-626-9372
lazaratn@umn.edu

If you have any questions or concerns about this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the **paper survey** of this study. I understand that consent for an oral interview will be obtained at a later time.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____

Date:

Oral Interview Consent Form
Immigrant Perspectives on Learning English at a University

You are invited to be in a research study of immigrants and employees at the University of Minnesota who have taken courses through the Minnesota English Language Program (MELP). You were selected as a possible participant because the director of MELP informed me that you have attended classes. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Angela Gerend, graduate student in the English as a Second Language program at the University of Minnesota.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is:

To learn about why you took classes with MELP and what kind of experiences you had so that educational opportunities for immigrants like you can be made better.

Procedures:

You have already filled out a paper survey about your personal background, the reasons that you took courses with MELP, and your experiences in MELP. Next, I will tell you more about the oral interview. I would like to meet with you for an interview to discuss more about what you said on the survey. The interview would take about 45- minutes to an hour. We would meet at a time and location that is easy for you. I will tape record your voice so that I can later write down our conversation. This is all I would ask you to do. However, there's a small chance that I may contact you if I have an additional question.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The risks of participating are: You may be reminded of painful memories of your home country.

The benefits of participating are: There are no direct benefits to you.

Payment:

You will get a \$15 gift certificate for the University of Minnesota for your participation in the paper survey. However, if you participate in **both** the paper survey and oral interview you will get a \$30 gift certificate for the University of Minnesota Bookstore.

Confidentiality:

The records of the study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept securely and only I will have access to the records.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Being in this study is your choice. Your decision whether or not to be in this study will not affect your current or future relationship with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time with out affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher doing this study is: Angela Gerend. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her:

2809 Grand Ave S #1, Minneapolis, MN, 55408
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Dr. Anne Lazaraton
Office 331C Nolte Center
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Minneapolis, MN 55455
612-626-9372
lazaratn@umn.edu

If you have any questions or concerns about this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the **oral interview** of this study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____

Date:

Appendix C – MELP Instructor Survey

1. About how many courses have you taught at MELP with one or more Regents Scholar students in the class?
2. What similarities and differences do you see between the learning needs of international students versus Regents Scholars?
3. How does having both international students and Regents Scholars affect the atmosphere of the classroom?
4. How do you think MELP contributes to the realization of Regent Scholars' personal learning goals?
5. How do you think the tuition rate change will/has affect(ed) this population's potential for learning English?

Appendix D – Paper survey for learners

1. **Age:** ___ Less than 24 ___ 25-29 ___ 30-39 ___ 40-49 ___ 50 or older

2. **Gender:** ___ Male ___ Female

3. **Country of Birth:** _____

4. **Country where you lived last** (before moving to U.S.): _____

5. **How many years have you lived in the U.S.?** _____

6. **Native Language:** _____

7. **Language Spoken at Home:** _____

8. **Check the statement that is true:**

___ Yes, I have a high school diploma or equivalent degree.

___ No, I do not have a high school diploma or equivalent degree.

If you chose “yes,” where did you get your high school diploma?

___ Outside of the U.S.

___ Inside of the U.S.

8. **Check the statement that is true:**

___ Yes, I have attended some college /university courses outside of the U.S.

___ No, I have not attended college/university courses outside of the U.S.

9. **Check the statement that is true:**

___ Yes, I have a college/university degree.

___ No, I do not have a college/university degree.

10. **Did you study English before coming to the U.S.?**

___ Yes ___ No

11. **How long have you taken classes at University of Minnesota’s Minnesota English Language Program (MELP)?**

12. Why did you to take these English classes? You can check as many as you want to.

- To improve my English writing skills for my current job
- To get ready for more education (like a college degree program)
- To get a better job
- To learn more about American culture
- To meet new friends
- To help me talk with my children

Other reasons: _____

13. Are you taking English classes this semester at the University of Minnesota’s Minnesota English Language Program (MELP)?

- Yes No

If you chose “no,” what are the reasons you are not taking classes? Check as many as you want to.

- Cost is too expensive
- I don’t have enough time
- I’m just not interested
- I wanted to take English classes at a different place
- I don’t think the classes will help me in the future

Other reasons _____

14. In your classes at MELP how comfortable are you or were you working with the following groups of people:

Classmates who also work at the University

- very comfortable somewhat comfortable
 somewhat uncomfortable very uncomfortable

Classmates who do not work at the University

very comfortable somewhat comfortable
 somewhat uncomfortable very uncomfortable

The class instructors and staff at the MELP office

very comfortable somewhat comfortable
 somewhat uncomfortable very uncomfortable

15. How do you feel about the kind of activities and assignments you did in class?

I really liked them. I liked them.
 I didn't like them. I really didn't like them.

16. What made it difficult for you to learn? Check as many as you want to.

I didn't have enough time in my schedule.
 I didn't feel comfortable in the classroom.
 The assignments were hard to understand.
 I wasn't interested in the activities.
Other: _____

17. Who encouraged (supported, helped) you *the most* to keep learning English?

Family
 Friends
 Classmates
 Myself
 Teachers
Other: _____

