Adult immigrant learners' perspectives of language learning experiences

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The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore adult immigrant learners' perspectives and motivations for participating in an ESL program through the lens of McClusky's Theory of Margin. Nine adult immigrant ESL students were interviewed about their learning experiences. Creswell's (1994) systematic process informed the data analysis of the study. The findings of the study include adult immigrant learners' perspectives of the ESL program, the challenges (loads) they face in their daily lives in terms of learning and speaking English, the support system (power) that help them navigate through those difficulties, and their suggestions to improve the learning experiences at the ESL program. Implications of this research for policy, adult educators, curriculum, and program developers are explored.

Keywords: *immigrant ESL learner, adult learners, learner perspective, refugee learners, Theory of Margin*

There has been a growing increase in migration flows in the last decades (OECD, 2020). Migration Report (OECD, 2020) highlights that

globally 271 million people have been living outside of their birthplace. The United States has been one of the main destination countries with around 2 million immigrants arriving in 2019. When the aging population and declining birth rate are considered, the increasing immigrant-origin adult population including their U.S.-born children are anticipated to provide an invaluable asset to the economy as a source of talent and almost all labor force growth in the next twenty years (Batalova & Fix, 2015). Immigrants' cultural capital (Lee, 2013) and various abilities benefit U.S. society's social and economic growth (Larrotta, 2019). According to the policy report the U.S. Census Bureau pooled for 2012-2016, more than half of the 44.3 million foreign-born people residing in the U.S., aged 16 and over have limited English proficiency and do not have a high school degree or any degree comparable. However, the reports indicate that fewer than 1.5 million of them used adult education services. Language learning is an essential part of immigrants' integration into various domains of life (Adamuti-Trache, 2013; Chao, 2020). Adult education programs could benefit many immigrants and refugees in that sense, but the existing system can only meet less than four percent of the current need (McHugh & Doxsee, 2018). Community-based initiatives such as libraries specifically churches have been trying to bridge the gap in language programs as part of their social service for immigrant communities (Durham & Kim, 2019). However, there is still a critical need to support immigrants in literacy, degree completion, or adaptation to the host culture.

Persistence and participation of adult learners with access to language support have been also recurring issues in adult English as a Second Language programs (ESL) (Frye, 1999; Kouritzin, 2000), Adult Basic Education (ABE), or programs for post-secondary education or the workforce (McHugh & Doxsee, 2018; Ouellette-Schramm, 2019). Beder (1991) in his review of adult literacy programs suggests that adult learners can overcome challenges to participation if motivated. Adult education programs need to adapt their teaching methods to better suit the motivations and personal circumstances of adult students. A recent theoretical framework "L2 Motivation Self System" developed by Dörnyei (2005, 2009) assumes that when learners see a difference between their present state and future ideal self (what they want to achieve), or ought to self (what others expect them to achieve), they may be motivated to close perceived gaps and achieve desired outcomes. The

theory of the L2 Motivation Self System conceptualizes motivation as a form of personal growth and development and suggests focusing on the learners' perception of themselves to understand their motivation (Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013).

When thinking about what drives adult immigrants to participate in language programs, it is important to remember that they are also trying to learn about and adapt to a new culture, set of norms, and obligations, all while attending classes. McClusky's Theory of Margin (1963) emphasizes adults' need to find an equilibrium between such demands (load) and their coping methods (power) (Biney, 2022). This theory applies to the context of adult immigrant learners as they need to navigate between the load and power aspects of their lives to be successful in learning.

The literature indicates that the investigation of adult immigrant learners' perceptions and experiences in language programs is an important area that deserves more attention (Burns & Roberts, 2010; Chao & Kuntz, 2013; Kisiara, 2021). Research on learner experiences would give voice to underrepresented communities, educate us about their unique needs and motivations for studying English, and help adult educators in improving methods and resources that are informed by learner perspectives (Kisiara, 2022; Merriam, 1998). The current study explored adult immigrant learners' perspectives and experiences in an ESL program in the U.S. Resting on its purpose, the following questions guided the study: 1) What are the adult immigrant learners' experiences of the ESL program? 2) What factors influence immigrant learners' motivation to study and participate in the ESL Program?

Literature review

Immigrants need language skills to secure work and sustain their families, manage everyday tasks like navigating the healthcare system (Kisiara, 2021; Larrotta & Adversario, 2022) or participate in political, social, educational, and environmental realms of life (Burns & Roberts, 2010; Dudley, 2007). Language proficiency is also closely related to sociocultural adjustment and successful integration of immigrants (Dudley, 2007; Kisiara, 2021; Masgoret & Ward, 2006) as improving language skills results in more performance in daily tasks and an increase in intercultural relationships (Masgoret & Ward, 2006).

English as a second language (ESL) programs are among the instructional services available to adults who lack literacy, numeracy, or English language skills. These programs serve a diverse population of immigrants including refugees, asylees, displaced workers, or incarcerated people (Schaetzel & Young, 2010). Immigrants from all around the world with different languages and cultural backgrounds come to the U.S. with varying levels of English proficiency (Zong & Batalova, 2015). Adult ESL classes are essential for providing a social setting where participants may connect socially and culturally, share experiences, and learn from one another (Larrotta & Adversario, 2022). Institutions and organizations providing social services, church-based programs, community centres, and libraries are among the adult education service providers for immigrants (Larrotta, 2017). Church-based ESL programs refer to mostly Christian programs (Durham & Kim, 2019) where learners do not have to share the same faith or preach but take classes in a church. These programs reach out to those who may be hesitant to participate in more formal or state-sponsored programs (Durham & Kim, 2019).

Theories of motivation and adult learning suggest that people are naturally driven to learn. Thus, motivation issues are the result of dispositional, situational, and structural barriers. Adults will naturally want to learn if these obstacles are eliminated (Ahl, 2006). Obstacles such as unpredictable job schedules and family commitments (McHugh & Doxsee, 2018), inaccessible living environments, and residential mobility (Schafft et al., 2008) impact adult learners' perseverance in education programs. Those considerations also include gender and culture-specific needs or structural barriers such as low-income and transportation issues (Cummin,1992; Frye, 1999; Schafft et al., 2008).

The cultural environment is also regarded as an important factor in defining and fostering adult learning (Merriam et al., 2007). Adult immigrant learners are highly diverse in terms of their age, country, and language of origin. They try to preserve ties to their original culture while building relationships in a new country. Culturally responsive teaching help educators mediate this challenge by valuing learners' cultures and drawing on their cultural knowledge and life experiences (Rhodes, 2017). The Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching developed by Ginsberg and Wlodkowski (1999) suggests that culturally responsive teaching increases the motivation of under-

represented learners. The pillars of this framework include establishing inclusion in the classroom by creating a respectful environment, developing a positive attitude toward learning by drawing on learners' experiences and knowledge, enhancing meaning by encouraging reflection, and engendering competence by showing the learners their proficiency. This framework is helpful for adult educators to reflect on their teaching and enhance the motivation of learners. As language learning is a highly social activity, it also requires that learners embrace the cultural components of the target language (Dörnyei, 2001). Therefore, it is essential to introduce relevant aspects of L2 culture to learners, increase cross-cultural awareness by showing the similarities in both cultures and establish a safe space to discuss and eradicate prejudgments. According to Dörnyei (2009), one's opinions towards speakers of L2 are related to their idealized view of self. Based on this view, the learner's ideal L2 self motivates them. The learner's perceived social and moral obligations to learn (ought-to L2 self) creates pressure and an urge to succeed. Lastly, one's experience in the actual learning environment considering the factors like the instructor, content, or the setting (L2 learning experience) offers advancement and success. These three components mutually reinforce the learner's motivation.

McClusky's Theory of Margin

While theories of motivation inform us about what makes people engage in learning, they do not provide other variables that impact on the participation of adult learners in educational activities (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). One theory that accounts for the complexity of adult life and motivation is McClusky's Theory of Margin (1963). According to the Theory of Margin, transitions or daily life issues can become both opportunities and hindrances affecting the engagement of adults in adult learning activities (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Adults need to balance life demands or challenges (load) and the resources (power) they need to address them. Thus, the relationship between load and power is defined as a margin and illustrated in a formula where the load (L) is the numerator, and power (P) is the denominator ($M = L/P$). According to McClusky (1963), the load can be both internally and externally derived. While external loads include community, work, and family responsibilities, internal loads comprise personal plans, goals,

and desires. Power, on the other hand, includes external and internal resources. Family and social support, and economic well-being are types of external power, while personal attributes, resiliency, and life skills are considered internal resources.

McClusky (1963) specifically focuses on the effects of rising expectations and demands on adult learning. By reducing the load or increasing the power a margin can be increased. Margin offers individuals agency, allows learners to explore possibilities, and reinvests psychological capital in growth and development. McClusky focuses on the effects of life demands on learners' learning process over time (Grenier & Burke, 2008). In this study, adult immigrant learners' perspectives and motivations were explored through McClusky's (1963) theory's components of load and power as they relate to the reality and complexity of adult immigrant learners' experiences.

Research design

Method

This study employed a phenomenological research design (Creswell, 2007) to understand the way adult immigrant learners make sense of their learning experiences at a church-based ESL program. These experiences were collected through in-depth interviews with the participants. When explaining a phenomenon, phenomenologists concentrate on describing what the subjects have in common (Creswell, 2007) that, in this study, can be valuable for adult educators, and program developers. Phenomenology's main goal is to limit the experiences of each participant with the phenomenon to a "description of the universal essence" (p.76). Using an inductive approach, the researcher becomes the main instrument for data collection. As the researcher I was aware of my prejudices, and biases and put in effort to set them aside from the interview process by employing the epoche (bracketing) concept (Moustakas,1994) to gain a fresh understanding of the reality of the participants' experiences.

Participants

Participants were selected on a volunteer basis, using a purposeful sampling method through the snowball sampling technique (Patton,

2002) from an advanced-level ESL course at a church-based program in a Southwest city in Texas. While purposeful sampling provided information-rich cases guiding the study, snowball sampling allowed me to locate the key participants who then referred me to others with related experiences (Merriam, 2009). The participants included nine adult immigrant learners (3 males, and 6 females) whose ages ranged from 19 to 60 years of age. Most of the learners were married with children. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were used in all documents. The nationality of participants included Cuba, Ecuador, Iraq, Nepal, and Sudan. The educational and professional backgrounds of participants in their home country varied (e.g., mechanical engineer, dentist, chemical engineer, health care professional, college graduate, primary school teacher, housewife, and student).

Data collection and analysis

Before data collection, Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission was obtained to conduct the research. The data for the study was gathered through semi-structured, open-ended in-depth qualitative interviews. The participants were interviewed on their learning process, motivation, and feelings about participating in the program. The interview protocol consisted of 10 open-ended guiding questions, lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in English. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews continued until saturation was reached. To ensure triangulation in research, other sources such as field notes and research journals were used as additional data sources. Member checking and peer review were employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Creswell, 2007).

In the data analysis process, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed word for word, the transcriptions were read multiple times, and the researcher's impressions were written in the margins. As the participant's responses were analyzed, Creswell's Systematic Analysis (1994) with the following 8 steps were used: the researcher 1) read the transcripts and got a sense of the whole, 2) focused on each conversation and its meaning separately, 3) wrote the topics to the margin, and clustered similar ones by identifying the major topics, unique ones, and sub-topics, 4) coded each topic and wrote them to the segments of the text, 5) created categories from the related topics, 6) used abbreviations

for the topics in each category and alphabetized the codes, 7) grouped the data according to the categories and 8) started analysis preliminarily until no more re-coding was necessary.

Findings

Following the data analysis and interpretation, two key themes corresponding to the research questions and the theoretical framework became salient: Load and Power. Three sub-themes were identified under the first major theme loads: Adjusting to life in the U.S. and meeting survival needs, language proficiency, and cultural differences. Three sub-themes emerged under the second major theme of power: Hope for the future, learning environment and community, and family.

Loads

The sources of load for the participants of this study varied. The overarching loads they experienced were external loads such as sustaining their families and themselves while adjusting to life in the U.S., language proficiency, and cultural differences.

Adjusting to life in the U.S. and meeting the survival needs

Participants had two distinct reasons to learn English. One of the reasons was to adjust to life in the U.S. to meet their needs which put some pressure on them. Aman, a housewife from Iraq mentioned her engagement in the community when she said,

> *Because I need to learn English. Because I want to speak with you, like you, your English (giggles). But now, I cannot understand something, and I am speaking with many people… [sighs] and I go to a store or supermarket, I cannot speak.*

The participants agree that they must learn and master English to communicate effectively, become a member of the community, be accepted, and meet their basic needs in their daily life. Another reason they reported was that the tests required to provide credential equivalency to the high school diploma or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to start college or to complete their studies, they had to leave off in their home. Finding a job to provide for

their families or becoming eligible to do their profession by getting a license in the U.S. are also some of the main reasons they mentioned. Afzal who was a student in his home country Afghanistan emphasized the importance of English and why he is taking ESL classes:

> *Because first, it is an international language, we are living here it is very important for us. When we go for jobs, and study, when we face some people, we have to speak English because all the people in America speak English. I want to work and study too. Both because we are a big family, and we have to work.*

As for Ali, who has recently come from Mosul, learning English is the first thing to accomplish to go to college. My conversation with Ali talked a lot about motivation. When he started to tell me his story, Ali introduced himself and the exceedingly difficult life circumstances he had left behind and the terrific battle he went through right before he came to the U.S. "Food for your family, for my family it was very hard to get. It is hard you get water, not have water, not have anything. This light! First time I see light. I see but we don't have it". But then he started to talk about being in the U.S. and how hard he tries to learn English.

> *I want to learn English until I get [sighs and tries to find the right words], after that, I think I will go to college. But I need time. One year, two years. Until my language is better.*

For Nina, a Nepalese woman married with one child, learning English is more work in a job that would provide her enough to pay her daughter's daycare expenses.

> *I would like to work. Yeah, my husband; goes to work, and I like to help him. I think so. I like to go to work but my problem, I have a daughter if I go to work, I have to pay for her. So, I study English for her, for our family, to get childcare for my daughter.*

As the findings indicate, the external sources of load include the participants' responsibilities to meet their survival needs and the requirements to adjust to their new lives in the U.S. themselves and their families.

Language proficiency

Learning the language itself was not easy for the participants. According to Aman, learning new words is the most challenging part of her experience in learning English. "Many words I can't understand because it is ... so many things ...(laughs) ..." Second, to Aman, Safiya said learning English was something new for her. She added, "I find it difficult. One word has many meanings. That is difficult." Sana, a senior student with a high level of English proficiency pointed to the need for a more communicative approach in their classes. She suggested that students should be taught towards meeting their survival needs using an interactive approach to teaching.

> *We here sometimes know something, but some of the students has not ability or background how to for vocabulary at discussion. They do not know how to... They... so we need lesson like speaking, reading, writing not only the teacher explain what she wants what she has, today which subject she explains.*

Similarly, Nina referred how she felt about learning and using English outside the classroom when she mentioned her husband's support and encouragement. She said,

> *Last time I was here I feel shy and my husband said: "you have to speak". I do not shy, If I knew her or if I do not know, how much I know. I try. My country and here is different language, we learn English also some meanings, if you do not know meaning it is difficult, I think so.*

Briana explained the biggest challenge for her as the following: "People speak very fast. I do not understand. "What do you say?" all the time I ask I cannot understand". Similarly, Ali was worried about not understanding people when they speak fast. He said,

> *With English. I am shy! because I do not know. If I am speaking, sometimes they do not understand me, and if they are speaking, I do not understand them. If you speak slowly and clear but sometimes if I go shopping, they are speaking very fast.*

Some of them think the teaching methodology needs to be improved for them to reach their desired level of proficiency. For example, Sana said,

> *So, we need this class, the rules how they speak, how to improve their speaking, accent. Sometimes If I say a word like 'Whistleblower" I said "Wistlerblower" and you didn't understand me, or I pronounce it wrong. We need like this classes [refers to our conversation]. I want to talk to our principal when I see them because we here sometimes know something but some of the students has not ability or background how to for vocabulary at discussion. I want to tell them that we need a class for talking, speaking without paper, pencil, pen. Speak like this!*

For Mina, a college graduate from Iraq, learning the language was not easy. She mentioned feeling ashamed when she could not understand people around her, or she could not respond to native speakers. Mina told me it was important to speak English for her to be accepted in the community. She used the word "ashamed" to explain her feelings when she could not respond to people talking to her. "Not just to improve my English, when I go everywhere, my English is important. I will not be ashamed. When asked me, and I didn't know, I ashamed".

All the participants agreed that they had difficulty learning English and reaching the proficiency level they aimed to achieve their goals. They reported that it was not easy to remember all the vocabulary and to remember the grammar rules when they want to use them outside of the classroom. They also pointed out that their oral communication practice in class was insufficient for them to become confident and fluent in English.

Cultural differences

Cultural differences were mentioned by some participants as a challenge and source of stress in their learning and integration process as well. Even though they participated in the cultural orientation in their first months of arrival through the resettlement program, they complained that the orientation they received was not comprehensive enough. For example, Afzal mentioned:

> *Outside, for me, the hardest thing is the culture. I was born in Afghanistan. Their culture is very different than USA. Because of this, I face someone I do not know from what I start. How do I*

> *tell them how are you? What is the good sentences to tell them?*

Afzal emphasized that those thoughts created some stress when he wanted to initiate a talk or speak in English to communicate his needs outside of the class. Nina, the sole parent of her 10 year old son going to school in the U.S., helps her son with his homework. She mentioned not knowing much about the culture as one of the challenges that they had to overcome in their adaptation process.

Mina emphasized the importance of knowing about the culture in a host community as an immigrant in these words: "I know many things about America culture. I know many. When I go to the hospital to the community, to the market, to the bank, I know how I can deal with. It is very important".

For Briana being in a different culture is a challenge as well. Briana used to be a healthcare professional, and she wants to do her job in the U.S. once her degree is accredited. She emphasizes how crucial is to learn the culture of the host community while learning English and for her future when she starts working in the U.S. as follows,

> *I should learn the culture first; it is difficult to learn when we do not know the cultural meanings for what we say. Here, culture is different, people expect different things, and we mean differently when we try to speak. I need to learn more about culture in English class to become good health practitioner.*

Participants view a lack of knowledge about the host community culture as a challenge that impacts their motivation to learn and participate and engage in the community. Some participants also expressed feelings of stress about not knowing the culture, and not knowing how to behave on some occasions.

Power

The second major theme was about the sources of power in the lives of participants and included the following subthemes: Hope for the future, Learning environment and community, and Family.

Hope for the future

Each participant comes from a different cultural, educational, and professional background and brings with them a range of heartfelt stories. However, their inspiration to learn English bears hopes not only for themselves but also for the future of their families. Briana who has been in the program for two months hopes to get a license to do her profession. She says, "I would like to work and become a healthcare professional". Safiya is planning to continue higher education in the U.S. She hopes to get into college and have a good life in the U.S. That's why she wants to speak English fluently. She described her hope for her future in those words. "I hope to get a job I love and have a family in the future. When I learn English, the door will be open for me. I can be a nurse or work in a hospital".

Afzal hopes to be able to find a job, study, and live in the U.S. for the rest of his life. He mentioned his dream to settle when he said, "I have a big family here. We will live in America, work, here. We will be safe, healthy, and good life with my family". Similarly, Aman said, "Because I want to speak with you. Like you, your English!". Nina also mentioned,

> *I want to learn English to have a better life with my child. I want to help him with his homework, and he becomes successful. Now he asks me things, I do not know. I cannot help him with school, anything he asks. I want to help him more.*

The narratives of the participants indicate that their vision of the 'ideal L2 self' (Dörnyei, 2009) is a powerful motivation for their learning. Dörnyei (2009) describes 'the ideal L2 self' in language learning as the condition one would most want to achieve. Ideal L2 self would become a powerful motivator when learners have a desired, realistic future self-image that does not contradict the expectations of their social environment and when they keep their vision of future-self alive.

Learning environment and community

The learning environment was another source of power that reoccurred in the stories of participants. Six of the nine participants talked about the encouragement and positive feelings they felt thanks to the support of their community and the learning environment. They also mentioned how the support they received from their teachers and their

program officers affected their decision to persist in the ESL program. Participants all reported that the service providers (teachers and the program directors) were always giving them the courage to learn and that they were placing a lot of emphasis on providing the conditions for their active participation in the activities and the classes. Mr Macit, a former mechanical engineer from Iraq who was participating in the ESL program for one year said, "We are very happy with this organization because this is very helpful for us. They are very friendly. They accept here, anything we want for us. They make things easier". Ms Mina shared her perspective of their instructor when she said,

> *I really like Mary teacher. We have been in this class one year. It is very good for us. I know many things about America culture. I know many. When I go to the hospital to the community, to the market, to the bank, I know how I can deal with. It is very important.*

Ali also pointed out the importance of the community in his learning process and motivation to participate and learn. He said,

> *Here, I feel okay. I feel I learn things and I can become better. Teachers help us. They care and ask us our questions and help us with everything. I feel more okay at myself in the classroom. They really help. Students help each other. We speak, and chat after class.*

Aman mentioned how she was encouraged to learn more and believe in herself.

Another participant said, 'Mary teacher and everybody here wants us to be sufficient for ourselves and become powerful. Their support and encourage help us learn every day, new things here".

Evident from the participants' thoughts and feelings was that the care and support they received in the program made them feel powerful. The program officers and the teachers encourage them to participate and learn English eventually to become self-sufficient individuals who can accomplish their goals. Some women participants also mentioned that the church provided them with childcare options when they attend the classes. So, during recess, they would check on their children downstairs.

Family

When the participants introduced themselves, they immediately started to talk about their families. Most of them came to the U.S. with their families. Family support is a source of motivation to learn English and overcome the stress related to migration and resettlement. For example, Aman expresses her yearning and hopes for her family.

> *I am here with my husband and youngest son. Before one year and ten months. But I left my two sons in Iraq. Two of them are married and one of them is single. I want to bring all of them here. I miss them very much. Here we are together with my one son and husband and I feel happy and secure.*

Likewise, Macid indicated, "My family is here with me. We are together and I am here to help them for a good future. I need to learn English so I can help them. We are together, and it is important for us". Nina described her feelings, "I am grateful for my husband, and we are together. He gives me the courage and I feel happy because he can work, he takes care of us."

The data from the stories of the participants suggest that living with family is a big asset for their psychological well-being as well as socio-economic circumstances. As the breadwinners of their families, they feel the pleasure of being together and feel powerful and courageous in their new lives in a foreign country.

Discussion

MacKeracher (2004) describes motivation as the urge to discover or understand the uncertain, or the desire to meet the needs and to grow (p.132). It is an "all-purpose" term that refers to a person's tendency to generate organized and controlled behaviour in response to internal and external life factors (MacKeracher, 2004). According to the Theory of Margin (McClusky, 1963), those personal (internal) and social (external) factors and demands on a person are described as the load. On the other hand, the resources and the support system that help a person cope with the load are defined as power.

In this study, the use of McClusky's Theory of Margin (1963) helped me organize, understand, and explain the experiences of participants.

Even though it is not right to assume adults who are overburdened with responsibilities cannot learn (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 96), the stories indicate that immigrant learners juggle several responsibilities and demands of their time and energy, which in turn interacts with and challenges their learning and motivation to participate. One limitation of this study is the age diversity of participants ranging from 19 to 60.

Regarding the relationship between language acquisition and age, the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) is a widely accepted theory on first language acquisition. CPH suggests that children have a unique ability for language development facilitated by a mechanism that would last until about puberty. The similar developmental path all children follow and the full competency they reach in their L1 is accepted as evidence of a critical period (Andrew, 2012). The variety of second language competency outcomes and not enough neurobiological evidence have caused the questioning of the role CPH plays in the second language context (Andrew, 2012). Studies showing accomplishments of late learners reaching native-like proficiency (Bongaerts, 1999; Boxtel et al., 2005) refute the age-related constraints on second language acquisition. A widely held opinion among SLA researchers is that some biological age factors combined with environmental factors cause the variability of proficiency in SLA. A dynamic interaction between learner characteristics such as age and cognitive, social, and environmental factors should be considered in the second language learning process (Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013).

Despite the age variety, commonalities are identified in terms of the focus of this study, which is to investigate the learner perspectives, motivation, and participation. Participants have desires to achieve personal goals and expectations namely their ideal L2 selves. Examples of internal loads included the stress that resulted in not knowing how to navigate in a foreign culture as well as not being proficient in the language. They described the external demands such as meeting survival needs (paying the bills, running errands), having to interact with the community, finding a job, and helping with their kids' schoolwork. Supporting the existing research (Albarracin et al., 2019; Weger, 2013) practical and instrumental reasons such as meeting the language requirements for college and job placement, requirements of daily life, and engaging with the community were the primary reasons listed by the participants for attending the ESL program.

The physical, socio-economic, and mental aspects of their lives, on the other hand, represented power. It included the resources, possessions, personal abilities, and support system that enable them to cope with the barriers. Participants' major support systems were their family and language instructors. They all emphasized the importance of family and linked their aspirations to the ties and hopes they have with and for their families. The data show that teacher assistance is critical to adult immigrant learners' involvement and success. Most of the participants also mentioned that support services provided by the program enabled them to participate in the classes. Childcare at the ESL centre was the most significant benefit of the program for them. On the other hand, the findings of the study also reveal that while some aspects of their experiences could be considered part of their support system as power, they could also be identified as loads. For example, while living with the family is considered major support giving courage and happiness in their lives, the concerns, and the pressure they feel to provide for living and the future of their families could be considered sources of stress at the same time. Since most of the participants are responsible for their families, it is also one of the main reasons why they learn English. They should be fluent in English to be able to get a job and simply make a living for their family in the U.S.

An important consideration should be the role of teachers and program officers in improving the existing programs for immigrant learners. Because of the tight funding, most programs depend on a small unpaid or underpaid staff. Research indicates that volunteer teachers have a strong desire to assist immigrants but lack knowledge of adult second language learners, effective instructional methods concerning adult backgrounds, relevant cultural knowledge (Durham & Kim, 2019), and trauma-informed teaching practices (Kostouros et al., 2022). Teachers of adult immigrant learners need professional development in teaching language skills, training on using culturally responsive teaching strategies (Chen & Yang, 2017), and implementing principles of adult learning, (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) as well as enhancing motivation, language skills, and participation of their students (Durham & Kim, 2019).

Conclusion and recommendations for future studies

The study explored the experiences of adult learners through McClusky's

Theory of Margin. Adult immigrant learners have both external and internal loads they try to balance with the support of their families, learning environment, and their hope to achieve the ideal self (Dörnyei, 2009). The findings highlight the need for long-term, sustainable services to decrease the load adult immigrants experience so that they have a margin available to participate in learning activities. Besides the government and other institutions that are responsible for providing a safe and supportive environment for immigrants' orientation to a new society, educators play an important role in facilitating their learning process (Kloubert & Hogan, 2021). The findings suggest adult educators and program developers re-examine the learning needs of this specific group of adult learners and become more inclusive of the learners' perspective, background, and motivation in their planning and programming process. Immigrant learners need a language program that incorporates cultural orientation at all stages of their integration process, as shown by the findings. Future studies should also consider exploring the teacher experiences and knowledge regarding culturally responsive and trauma-informed teaching practices (Kostouros et al., 2022) for this specific group of learners. Experiences of comparable age groups should be also examined to better understand language acquisition, persistence, and participation of immigrant learners as they mature.

Adult educators can create engaging and pertinent lessons, help learners keep their vision of the ideal self alive, and set realistic, elaborate plans supported by some strategies to achieve their goals (Dörnyei, 2009). Programs may improve learners' well-being by offering tools and implementing mindfulness practices like meditation or mindfulness-based therapies into their curriculum. Adult educators should continue raising awareness of unique lived experiences and needs of immigrants. Finally, adult English language classes can help learners develop an awareness of the social conditions and oppressive structures in society. They can provide a safe space where new ideas and social relations can be produced (Heinemann & Monzo, 2021). In that vein, the study informs curriculum development, teacher training programs, and other service providers for immigrants, as well as policies promoting immigrant integration in the U.S. about the experiences of adult immigrant ESL learners.

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