

# International Spouses' Goals and Investment in Language Learning Programs

Jade Sandbulte<sup>a\*</sup>

*University of Minnesota Duluth, United States*

\*Corresponding Author: Email: [jadesand@d.umn.edu](mailto:jadesand@d.umn.edu)  
Address: University of Minnesota Duluth, Minnesota, United States

---

## Abstract

*International spouses, individuals who accompany a partner studying in a foreign country, are an important source of support for international students and scholars, yet many academic institutions overlook this population. Research indicates that many international spouses benefit from joining language programs; however, there has been no research on how to design such programs to support international spouses. By drawing on the theoretical constructs of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015) and capital (Bourdieu, 1986), this study investigates the goals of international spouses, the relationship between these goals and English proficiency, and how international spouses perceived the language resources available to them. Semi-structured interviews with 15 (8 female, 7 male) international spouses in the U.S. revealed that the participants viewed English as relevant to their professional, social, and cultural goals, and that various factors influenced which ESL programs they joined. This study concludes with recommendations for designing programs to support international spouses.*

Keywords: capital, English as a Second Language, international spouses, investment, language learning

---

## Introduction

The high numbers of international students and scholars studying in the United States have been a major benefit to American universities in terms of funds, recognition, incoming knowledge and skills, and providing a more intercultural experience for domestic students (Soria & Troisi, 2014; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012; Vaughan, 2007). International students have been the focus of many research studies that help illuminate the difficulties they encounter while abroad (Johnson, 2019; Morita, 2009; Oyeniyi et al., 2021; Tubin & Lapidot, 2008; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). One finding from this body of research is that international students often benefit from the presence of family when they are studying overseas (Girmay et al., 2019; Lin, 2018; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). In particular, many married international students travel abroad with their spouses, who promote the students' wellbeing by maintaining their household, providing childcare, and offering emotional and social support. Despite their importance to international students' success, the international spouses living in university communities are often "invisible" (De Verthelyi, 1995) to academic institutions due to their lack of an official status at the university where their spouse is enrolled.

International spouses have been traveling abroad with their partners for decades, yet only a few studies have examined this population. These prior studies have primarily focused on illuminating the difficulties that international spouses face. The most commonly-cited difficulty for international spouses is the social isolation they experience while abroad (Campbell & Prins, 2016; Chen, 2009; De Verthelyi, 1995; Lin, 2018; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012). Another common issue is difficulty with the local language (Campbell & Prins, 2016; De Verthelyi, 1995; Grimm, Kanhai, & Landgraf, 2019; Lei et al., 2015; Lin, 2018; Martens & Grant, 2008; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012). Only a few studies (Campbell & Prins, 2016; Grimm, Kanhai, & Landgraf, 2019; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012) have examined the steps international spouses take to overcome these challenges, typically through membership in informal ESL programs.

Campbell and Prins (2016) and Grimm, Kanhai, and Landgraf (2019) extended the research on international spouses by examining the community-based ESL programs in which international spouses practice language. Both studies demonstrate that joining an ESL program was beneficial in terms of improving international spouses' confidence in English and reducing feelings of isolation. However, there is still little information on how such resources can be improved to better support international spouses. In particular, although the goal of improving their proficiency in the local language has been mentioned in many of the studies on international spouses, there has been little investigation on international spouses' other goals, particularly for their future, and how learning the local language is related to these goals. By focusing solely on international spouses' desire to learn English (as opposed to discussing the unique life experiences and skillsets that international spouses can build upon by improving their English proficiency), prior studies cast upon international spouses the same deficit view that recent scholarship on international students has worked to mitigate; namely, that they are a population defined by a lack of a skill and therefore need to be fixed (Marshall, 2009; Tavares, 2021). Another shortcoming of the previous studies on international spouses is the lack of diversity, particularly in terms of gender. Of the studies cited in this study, the only ones that reported including male participants were Lei et al. (2015) (3 out of 9 participants), Grimm, Kanhai & Landgraf (1 out of 10 participants), and Campbell and Prins (2016) (2 out of 13 participants).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill this research gap by presenting data from interviews with a diverse group of international spouses in the U.S. to present a broader picture of how institutions can better support this population, especially by helping them to improve their language skills, and as a result improve the quality of life for international students and scholars. In particular, I will examine the various goals of international spouses, show the intersections between these goals and English proficiency, and analyze the factors that influence international spouses' investment in ESL programs. I will also examine several ESL programs that international spouses accessed and the perceived benefits and limitations of those various resources. Based on the experiences of the international spouses, I will conclude with recommendations for institutions that want to better serve the spouses of international students and scholars.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to connect international spouses' goals with their experiences utilizing various ESL resources, this study draws upon the notion of *investment* in language learning. As opposed to the static construct of motivation, investment recognizes that a language learner's choice to engage with others in a target language is influenced by the context of the interaction (Darvin & Norton, 2021; Norton Peirce, 1995). According to Darvin and Norton (2015), an individual's investment in a language resource results from the interplay between identity, ideology, and capital. In this model, identities refer to the various ways in which one positions themselves or is positioned within an interaction, and ideologies refer to systems that, often invisibly, influence human behavior and perceptions. Identities and ideologies interact to designate certain speakers and their contributions as legitimate while excluding other speakers. The third construct, capital, is based on the work of Bourdieu (1986), who argued that there is not only economic capital (such as money) but also cultural capital (such as knowledge or familiarity with cultural artifacts) and social capital (such as network connections). Language learners are more likely to engage in interactions if the cultural capital that they bring are recognized as legitimate (Darvin & Norton, 2015) and if they view the interaction as leading them to gaining additional capital, particularly social capital (Cai, Fang, Sun, & Jiang, 2022; Moharami, Keary, & Kostogriz, 2022).

In order to design effective language resources for international spouses, ESL instructors and program administrators within the university need to be aware of what international spouses want out of such resources; in other words, what forms of capital the resource can provide to the international spouses in order to increase the international spouses' investment. This current study aimed to provide such awareness by interviewing a diverse group of international

spouses to learn more about their goals for their time abroad and the future and how they perceived the resources available to them, particularly resources connected to language learning.

## **Methodology**

This is a qualitative research study which collected data through in-person interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to answer the following three research questions:

1. What goals do international spouses have for themselves, both now and in the future?
2. How do international spouses' goals influence their investment in language learning programs?
3. What qualities of these language learning programs influence international spouses' investment in the programs?

The data for this study are taken from a larger ethnographic research project on international spouses, which involved in-person interviews, year-long case studies, and observations of ESL programs (Sandbulte, 2020). In order to answer the above questions, I will be presenting data from the interviews. Interviews are a common method of data collection for research on investment as it allows the participants to describe their lived experiences, position themselves within their own narratives, and select the details that are most significant for them (Darvin & Norton, 2021). This is in contrast to quantitative approaches, such as questionnaires, that limit participants' responses and seek to establish statistically significant patterns. Furthermore, interviewing multiple participants from diverse backgrounds allows the research to include unique perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked while also finding commonalities among different individuals. It should be noted that the aim of research on investment is not to determine a causal relationship between identity labels such as gender and the participants' experiences as language learners but rather to draw from the experiences of a more inclusive participant base (Darvin & Norton, 2021).

## **Research Site**

This study was conducted in a small city in the mid-Atlantic United States. During the academic year, the student population of the local university exceeds that of the city; thus, most people and businesses in the city have some connection to the university.

## **Participants**

The participants for this study are all international spouses who traveled to the city to stay with a spouse who was either an international student or international visiting scholar at the university. At the time of the interviews, none of the participants were enrolled as students at the university, although several had participated in its intensive English program. Participants were recruited through a variety of means: the university's research database, flyers in university buildings and housing, visits to ESL programs in the university and community, emails to religious organizations, and personal invitations. I had previously met some of the participants or their spouses, but I was unacquainted with most participants. It should be noted that, since most participants reached out to me based on my recruitment strategies rather than being directly asked to participate, the participants felt comfortable enough to have a conversation in English with a stranger. This may skew the results, as some international spouses lack the proficiency or the confidence to speak with a stranger in English.

Sixteen individuals agreed to participate in this study. One of the individuals was married to an American, and her interview was not included in the dataset because her experience differed significantly from the other participants (who were all married to someone of the same nationality as themselves). Therefore, this study has a total of 15 participants (eight female, seven male) from 11 countries. At the time of the interviews, the participants had spent two months to five years in the U.S. All participants had some proficiency in English, ranging from high beginner to proficient. The details for all participants are shown in Table 1 below. The participants are organized by country to highlight the diversity within the sample.

**Table 1. Participants' Demographic and Background Information**

Home Country	Pseudonym	Gender	Previous Job	Time spent in U.S. when interviewed
China	Aiguo	Male	NA	5 years
China	Dong	Male	Mechanical Engineer	2 years
China	Biyu	Female	Geneticist	1 year
Taiwan	Yafang	Female	Office Assistant	2 months
South Korea	Woojin	Male	Insurance agent	9 months
Japan	Jun	Female	Biochemical Engineer	7 months
Japan	Fumiko	Female	Office Assistant	2 months
Saudi Arabia	Hamid	Male	Shop owner; Islamic teacher	1 year
Israel	Etta	Female	Pharmacist	2 years
Germany	Klaus	Male	Software developer	2 years
Chile	Claudia	Female	Midwife	2 years
Brazil	Paulo	Male	Philosophy teacher	2 months
Colombia	Ivan	Male	Finance professor	1 year
Colombia	Lucia	Female	Researcher; high school teacher	2 months
Mexico	Maria	Female	Kindergarten teacher	6 months

**Data Collection**

I conducted the interviews in-person with one or two participants at a time. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions based on the participants' experiences in the U.S., their goals, and the people they interacted with regularly (see Appendix). The interviews lasted 30-60 minutes. Most interviews were conducted in English, with one interview including a mixture of Portuguese and English. After obtaining verbal consent from the participants, I audio-recorded the interviews and took notes. This project was determined to be exempt from a formal IRB review by the institution's Office for Research Protections.

Following the interviews, I transcribed the audio recordings. Since the goal of the study is to analyze the participants' experiences rather than their speech, the transcriptions do not include filler sounds, false starts, pauses, etc. unless necessary for understanding the content. The recordings were stored on a secure hard drive and pseudonyms were used in the transcripts. The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Polio & Friedman, 2017) with the program QDA Miner Lite. The constant comparative method mitigates researcher bias by allowing codes to emerge from the participants' responses rather than applying a priori codes to the data. I conducted an initial coding that highlighted the most salient information and actions of each participant. Then, I identified recurring codes and organized them into categories that were used for a second, focused coding on the data. The categories for the focused coding were: goals, challenges, and resources. Codes that fell within these categories were present in all of the transcripts.

**Researcher Positionality**

Due to the personal nature of interviews, researchers' own identities and biases shape the interactions. My experience with international spouses prior to this project came primarily from my involvement in various ESL programs, which meant that I encountered international spouses actively seeking aid with language assistance. To mitigate this bias, I asked open-ended questions that avoided language-related challenges, but I prepared follow-up questions if the participants mentioned these topics (which all of them did). In addition, since my identities as a native-born, English-speaking American could cause discomfort or intimidation among my study participants, I invited them to bring a friend or family member to the interview, but only two of the participants chose to do so.

**Results**

Below, I report what the dataset revealed about participants' goals and their perceptions of the ESL resources in which they participated.

## Goals

Although the participants represented a wide range of backgrounds, cultures, and experiences, the interviews revealed recurring patterns in their lives as international spouses, particularly in the goals that they hoped to achieve while abroad. The goals of the participants generally fell into three categories: professional, cultural, and social.

### *Professional Goals*

All but one of the 15 participants had been working at a job prior to moving to the U.S., and 12 of the participants described professional goals that they had for their time abroad. For example, Biyu, who had been working in a genetics laboratory in China before she moved to be with her husband, describes her goals in the quotation below:

Biyu: At the beginning we want to find another postdoc position, but it failed so maybe with another be a student. There's something more I- my PhD major is genetics. It's biology. It's quite hard to find a job, only several choice: be a postdoc, go out the academy. I would like to be go out the academy but it's quite hard to find a position, to be a faculty. So we think nowadays maybe this computer science or statistics, they are two major easy to find a job. So I choose statistics.

Biyu explains that she had wanted to find a temporary postdoc position for herself at the same university as her husband, but they were unable to do so. However, rather than simply wait for her husband's postdoc to be completed, Biyu chose to increase her cultural capital by gaining experience that would be beneficial for her career: obtain a degree in Statistics.

A characteristic of capital is that its value can change depending on the context (Darvin & Norton, 2015). For several participants, the cultural capital associated with their careers was not recognized abroad. For example, Claudia had been a midwife in Chile, and she had received authorization to work in the U.S. Unfortunately, her midwife credentials were not recognized in the local setting. According to Claudia, "If I want to do something related with midwifery here, I have to go through a nursery program. And I prefer to do a master program because it's better for my career." As a sojourner, Claudia did not see value in investing time and money for a nursing degree that she would not need when she returned home. Therefore, Claudia enrolled in a master's program, which would provide more returns for her investment when she returned to Chile.

For many of the participants, English proficiency was seen as a potential barrier that could prevent them from achieving their professional goals. For example, Dong from China stated, "At the beginning I want to apply to degree and maybe PhD, but I found my English is- I think difficult to progress." Woojin from South Korea and Ivan from Colombia also stated that they wanted to enroll in graduate studies in their disciplines but needed to improve their TOEFL scores before they could be admitted.

Apart from needing English in order to achieve specific professional goals while abroad, several participants viewed learning English itself as important for improving their career prospects. For example, Etta described why she views English as important for her career as a pharmacist in Israel.

Ett: English is everywhere. At work in Israel and you work with medical companies almost in a regular basis. I didn't have to do it back then when we were in Israel, but now if and when we are going back I'll have to find another job and then maybe I'll have to use English more.

Etta explains that she did not need English in the past, but she saw it as being more necessary in the future. Since she, like many international spouses, left her position when she went abroad, she wants a competitive advantage when she returns to the job market in her home country, and learning English can provide her with that advantage. These findings show that improving one's proficiency in English carries professional value for many international spouses after they return home.

### *Social Goals*

A second goal, which was mentioned by 12 of the 15 participants, was to create social connections while in the U.S., or, to put it another way, to increase their social capital. Social capital was viewed as important for international spouses because of the many benefits that it provided, as described by Ivan below:

Int: Why is it important for you to be meeting new people here?

Iva: I think that for two main reasons. The first one is that being here I need to improve my English, yes. So I need to interact with people who speaks English in order to try myself and to yes to challenge myself to speak and hear people- real people because I can listen a lot of videos from YouTube from TED but it's

different to interact with someone. So the first one is for my speaking abilities. And the second one is because I had the idea that being with people, interact with people helps you in a lot of ways. Being enclosed in my house is not- is something that I don't something that could be like nice or something that I love to do the whole- for two years. [. . .] But we have really interesting people we have met here and I think that's maybe a third reason that is that being here is also an opportunity to be like connected with with more places in the world to know more about other things in the world, so I never had spoken with someone from from the Middle East for example. But now I spoke regularly with people from Saudi Arabia. Also people from Africa. [. . .] Yes, I think that those three reasons. And also because people helps you as well. If you can be alone and try to do all by yourself but if there is someone that already knows how to do something they can help you.

Ivan identified four reasons why it was important for him to meet other people while abroad: to improve his English, to avoid social isolation, to meet people from other cultures, and to receive assistance with daily tasks. When international spouses travel abroad, they lose access to much of their social capital, or to the networks that previously provided them with information and support. Therefore, finding new connections to make their transition abroad smoother are important.

As with professional goals, one of the challenges that participants faced in accomplishing their social goals was a perceived lack in their English proficiency. For example, Woojin from South Korea described his first few months in the U.S. by saying:

Woo: Actually I felt kind of lonely whenever I was in the room with white people. I felt like for whatever reasons, for maybe language reasons or something, I couldn't feel I'm- I couldn't be included with them. Woojin went on to describe a social event he attended with his wife, during which Americans were more likely to engage his wife in conversation because of her higher English proficiency. Similarly, Jun from China also found it difficult to engage with people because of her English:

Jun: In the first month I feel very terrible and scary because I couldn't speak English, yeah worse than now so. I feel very scary to talk with others, and when I go to the [grocery stores] and some staff talk to me but always I run away because I thought I couldn't talk anymore.

Whereas Woojin felt that Americans did not want to speak with him because of his low English proficiency, Jun describes the reverse: she avoided interacting with Americans because she was self-conscious about her poor English. Many of the participants fell into either or both situations in which their level of English was a barrier to achieving social connections. Therefore, improving their English would give them access to more social capital.

### ***Cultural Goals***

A third goal, mentioned by eight of the participants, was to gain cross-cultural experiences. Although similar to the goal of creating social connections, this goal was distinct as the participants were seeking knowledge and experiences about other cultures; thus, cultural capital rather than social capital. For example, Etta from Israel explained, "If I'm here, I want to experience something different, something new, and different perspectives and different language. There are many opportunities here it seems, so why not?" As seen in an earlier quote, Ivan also listed learning about other cultures as one of the reasons why he wanted to meet more people while in the U.S.

This goal was not limited to their time in the U.S. but also included future cross-cultural opportunities as well. Many participants expressed the hope that learning English while in the U.S. would open up opportunities to travel in the future, such as Hamid:

Int: Why do you want to improve your English?

Ham: I have some plan in future. Read different books, English books, make friend in the world because the English more popular in world, more talking- people talking English more in China, Japan, yes. And I will go and visit some country and use this English, yes.

Hamid wanted to meet with people in different countries around the world, and he believed that English would offer him the opportunity to speak with people from other countries even if they came from countries where English was not the dominant language.

From these quotes, we see that learning English is not an end to itself but rather a means for participants to achieve their professional, social, and cultural goals. Of these goals, the social goals are more temporary, as the sojourners' social connections are likely to weaken once they return to their home country. The professional and cultural goals, on the other

hand, will continue to be relevant for their futures. Therefore, programs that aim to support international spouses should consider how they can help the spouses reach their long-term goals.

## **Resources**

Since most of the participants were invested in improving their English while living abroad, many of them had accessed ESL resources in the community. None of these resources had been specifically designed for international spouses, and the participants' satisfaction with these resources differed from each other and (for those who joined more than one) between the resources themselves. In order to demonstrate how resources can better support international spouses, the following section showcases the factors that influenced participants' investment in the various resources.

In the interviews, four ESL programs were frequently mentioned. Nine participants joined religious-affiliated conversation groups which focused either on religious topics or daily vocabulary. These groups were led by individuals associated with a church or university ministry group. Another resource, which four participants joined, was the university's intensive English program (IEP), which was taught by paid professionals either possessing or pursuing graduate degrees related to ESL education. Enrolling in the IEP did not guarantee acceptance into the university, but passing through all four proficiency levels of the program met the university's language requirement. A third resource, which seven participants joined, was a community-based literacy program called Community Literacy. The instructors at Community Literacy were all volunteers and included community members, international scholars, and master's students. Finally, eight participants attended events hosted by a non-profit organization associated with the university called World Hub. World Hub offered conversation groups, conversation partners, and classes on miscellaneous topics (such as cooking or arts and crafts), all led by volunteers

## ***Cost and Professionalism***

Two significant differences between these ESL programs are immediately apparent: the cost and the training of the instructors. The IEP courses cost approximately the same as regular college courses; Community Literacy had a modest cost to cover books and supplies; World Hub's activities were usually free unless there was travel involved; and the religious groups were all free. Five of the participants listed cost as a factor in their decision to utilize an ESL resource, including Etta, as shown below:

Ett: I decided to check to see if [Community Literacy] is something that would work for me, because when I searched at the beginning, all I could find was courses from the university, and it was very expensive. So I just decided to not go and then when I saw that it's something that I can afford, I decided to go for it.

The courses from the university are likely the IEP classes, which several participants stated were too expensive for them. Since many international spouses are relying solely on their partner's income, they must be careful with how they use their available financial resources, and for many this means not paying a high tuition for English classes.

On the other hand, more expensive programs such as the IEP were recognized as being taught by qualified instructors. Five of the participants discussed how the quality of instruction impacted the value of an ESL resource, such as Jun:

Jun: In IEP, this is my just opinion but teacher prepare the class. So in the Community Literacy, we can talk, only talking- there is no lesson. But in IEP, teacher prepare before the class so contents is very a lot and they useful for me.

When comparing Community Literacy and the IEP, Jun views the teacher preparedness as one of the benefits of the IEP. By being more prepared, the instructor is able to give a more organized lesson with more content. This does not mean that all of the instructors in Community Literacy were ill-prepared to teach; Lucia from Colombia described one of her instructors as well-prepared and good at managing the class. However, this instructor was later replaced with a different volunteer, whom Lucia felt had not prepared for the class and could not keep the other students focused on the material, which caused Lucia to feel that the class was a waste of her time.

Interestingly, although cost and instructor training were mentioned in a few interviews, most of the participants highlighted different aspects of the ESL resources. In particular, 8 of the participants valued resources that gave them more opportunities to speak and 13 discussed the importance of creating social connections.

### ***Speaking Opportunities***

Participants recognized the importance of frequent practice in the target language in order to improve their proficiency. The quote below shows why Woojin, as an international spouse, found World Hub to be a useful resource:

Woo: Because that was maybe my only way to make that environment to use English. I'm, you know, I'm not a student here. Yeah, I'm just F-2 visa holder so I couldn't make any environment to use English. [. . .] It is so hard find the kind of environment but World Hub give a way to us. Give several ways to us to use English, so it was very helpful.

As an international spouse, it was difficult for Woojin to find opportunities to use English. He uses the term "environment" to describe what he wants: a context in which English is continuously spoken by him and others. Even though many of the activities in World Hub were not focused on English teaching, they provided Woojin with the environment he was searching for. Similarly, Aiguo from China described the primary benefit of attending the IEP by saying, "We have to speak English all the time." Based on the interview, Aiguo seemed to value the opportunities to practice English more than the specific language instruction that he received.

Although it would be easy to assume that all ESL resources provide participants with plenty of opportunities to practice using English, this was not always the case. For example, Jun described how her opportunities to speak differed between the IEP and Community Literacy:

Jun: In IEP I cannot talk a lot because I am shy and yeah teenager are very powerful and I have no brave to talk in the class. [...] There are different advantage and disadvantage. In Community Literacy the number of the students is very small so we can talk more easily. But in IEP there are many student in that class.

Jun points out two factors that limited her opportunities to speak in the IEP when compared with Community Literacy. First, she found it difficult to compete with the "teenager" students for speaking turns because they were more confident in their speech than she was. Second, the number of students in the IEP also limited her opportunities to speak, whereas the small class sizes of Community Literacy gave everyone more speaking turns.

Another obstacle that prevented participants from speaking was the proficiency level of the other participants. For example, Jun found it difficult to speak when she attended a World Hub activity:

Jun: Yeah at the first time I came here, I came here in end of the March so in March and in April I went there [World Hub] because IEP begin May so before that I went there. But the program is many people can speak English very fluently so yeah I cannot continue. So yeah the good things in IEP is there is a class that people separate level so but in World Hub there is only one class so I feel that language gap between people.

The IEP has four different levels based on proficiency, so Jun could be placed with individuals who had a similar proficiency level as herself. In the World Hub group that she joined, the proficiency level was much higher, so she felt that she could not participate. Several other participants also described how difficult it was to attend an ESL program when the other speakers had a higher proficiency or that a program seemed unhelpful if the other speakers had a much lower proficiency.

### ***Social Opportunities***

Other than providing opportunities to speak in English, ESL resources provided international spouses with much-needed opportunities to socialize. For example, Jun gave this recommendation for other international spouses:

Jun: I heard from the many Japanese women they at the first time they stayed at home for long time and they feel very sick, so I advise others to go to outside and talk to people, but for us to find the place to talk other is very difficult so yeah. So they can go IEP or Community Literacy or other community like me. Yeah it is very good way for their English skill and their feeling or mind.

Jun, as we have seen, tried three of the most common ESL resources (the IEP, Community Literacy, and World Hub). In this quote, Jun does not distinguish between the different resources but views all of them as useful for dealing with loneliness. Jun points out that these resources can help international spouses with their English, but this seems like a secondary concern. Similarly, Etta favored World Hub because she had made many friends and joined in fun activities through that organization, although she admitted, "But if you want to learn more how to speak correctly and speak English, then I guess Community Literacy is better." These examples demonstrate that ESL resources provide international spouses with highly desired social opportunities. Considering that creating social connections is one of stated goals of many of the international spouses, it is understandable how this characteristic of an ESL resource could be considered more important than the quality of the language instruction.

### ***Relevance to Goals***

A final consideration when assessing the usefulness of an ESL resource is whether or not it helps the individuals achieve their goals. When asked about why they chose a specific ESL resource, six of the participants mentioned the importance of learning English language that was relevant for their lives and goals. The quotation below shows how important Claudia's goals were to her choice to attend Community Literacy:

Cla: Because I had the goal to learn English in order to give the TOEFL exam, so I decide to go. Like to put myself and try to do something high level. So I decide for Community Literacy at the first time because they offer a TOEFL class, and they offer like four classes with tutoring and with all like stuff. You have to pay obviously, but at least they have like a whole activity related with the thing that I wanted to do.

As mentioned earlier, Claudia's goal was to enroll in a master's program while in the U.S. to build upon her midwife credentials. In order to do so, she needed a high score on the TOEFL, which is why she enrolled in Community Literacy. Although Community Literacy costs money, Claudia deemed it to be worth the cost if it helped her meet her goal.

As a contrasting example, Jun discussed how a mismatch of goals impacted her experience using an ESL resource:

Jun: If I don't go to the IEP I will stay home and don't talk anyone. So it is good, but IEP's goal or aim is to enroll university so the lecture is focus on the academic contents so sometimes some of them are not need for me because I finish my master's degree in Japan and I used to employee, so yeah. To be honest I don't need academic English, but I want to speak English every day so I decide to go to the IEP. So if they have more casual talk class or daily conversation it will be helpful too.

As Jun points out, the goal of the IEP is to prepare students for academic contexts. As a professional who already has a master's degree, Jun did not see much use in academic English and preferred to learn English that would be helpful in daily interactions. However, since the IEP provided her with daily interactions in English (and, as described earlier, had professional teachers), Jun chose to continue using this resource.

In summary, the participants in this study had access to several ESL resources, even though these resources were not specifically designed for them. The value that they saw in using these resources were impacted by several factors: cost, teacher preparedness, speaking opportunities, social opportunities, and relevance to their goals. Of these, the social opportunities were the most discussed benefits of joining a specific ESL resource.

### **Discussion**

The data from this study confirms previous research on international spouses that demonstrated the importance of ESL programs for this population, particularly in terms of providing social interactions (Campbell & Prins, 2016; Grimm, Kanhai, Landgraf, 2019; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012). This study connected these findings to scholarship in second language acquisition, specifically investment, in order to create a broader picture of the international spouse experience and to work against a deficit view of this population. As predicted by Darvin and Norton (2015), international spouses' choice to participate in language learning programs are strongly influenced by the perceived gains in capital. Participants showed that they joined ESL programs to provide them with future professional opportunities (economic capital), to connect with other people while abroad (social capital), and to gain experiences in both the local country and other countries in the future (cultural capital). Their investment in each individual program was influenced by the cost, teacher preparedness, opportunities for speaking, social opportunities, and relevance of the practiced language to their goals.

One interesting finding from this study is that the perceived relevance to the international spouses' goals seemed less important among the interviewed participants compared to many of the other characteristics. One possible reason for this is that, due to the isolation that international spouses often experience (Campbell & Prins, 2016; Chen, 2009; De Verthelyi, 1995; Lin, 2018; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012), forming strong social connections becomes a higher priority than obtaining the desired English repertoire. This in turn influences the international spouses' investment in the different programs, with programs in which they formed strong social connections becoming more important to them. Another possibility is that international spouses are operating out of a structuralist orientation toward language (Canagarajah, 2018). From this perspective, English is viewed as a single, bound system that individuals gradually gain proficiency in, and therefore learning any English vocabulary is contributing to becoming fluent. In contrast, more recent scholarship in areas such as second language acquisition, English for Specific Purposes, and translanguaging would argue that a language is a collection of semiotic resources that speakers use to accomplish specific purposes (Basturkmen, 2014; Canagarajah, 2018;

The Douglas Fir Group, 2016). In other words, practicing how to discuss certain topics such as holidays or food will not meaningfully contribute to individuals' ability to converse in professional or academic settings. International spouses, as well as other English learners, can improve their strategies for developing proficiency in English if ESL program administrators and instructors communicate this important distinction in language perspectives.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

A strength of this study is the diversity in the participant pool in terms of gender, national origin, and the duration of their stay abroad. Since research on investment seeks to gain diverse perspectives rather than identify causal relationships (Darvin & Norton, 2021), comparisons based on the participants' characteristics, such as gender or national origin, were not conducted, and such comparisons would be complicated due to the small number of participants and the many different identities that differentiated them. Future studies could examine if some of these different identities influence participants' experiences and their perceptions of language learning programs. In addition, the recruitment strategies likely attracted international spouses who were interested in conversing with a stranger in English and possessed the confidence to do so, which could skew the participant pool. Utilizing other data collection techniques, such as surveys, might result in less rich data but could reach a larger pool of international spouses compared to the 15 participants of this study. Finally, it is also my hope that future studies will expand on this study by piloting programs specifically designed for international spouses and assessing the programs' benefits.

On that note, I join with previous scholars who have examined this population in arguing that universities and surrounding communities should find more ways to support international spouses. This support will create a better environment for international students and scholars, particularly for women since they often face limitations within academia when simultaneously raising a family (Niu, Xu, Zhu, & Hunter-Johnson, 2022). In addition, international spouses bring with them resources and areas of expertise that need not lay dormant while they are abroad. Therefore, I close this study with recommendations for graduate student departments, international program administrators, ESL instructors, and other individuals in academic institutions on how to support international spouses.

#### **Recommendation #1: Create Welcoming Environments**

Although the site of this study had several resources that international spouses could access, participants expressed concerns about which places they were allowed to access. Many events in the university and community were advertised specifically to students even when other individuals were welcome to attend. Therefore, labeling programs and events as open to international spouses would alleviate this hesitation. For example, departments could create more family activities for international students and visiting scholars. Not only does this show international spouses that they are welcome in these spaces, but it allows them to socialize with others who are in a similar situation, and it allows them to bring their children along.

#### **Recommendation #2: Provide International Spouses Opportunities to Use English**

As mentioned in previous research (Grimm, Kanhai, & Landgraf, 2019), international spouses need spaces where they feel comfortable interacting in English. Part of creating a comfortable space for speaking, according to Darvin and Norton (2021), is to recognize the language learners as legitimate speakers. The data from these interviews as well as observations of the various ESL resources showed that some spaces deny language learners the position of legitimate speakers by asking them to simply read from a worksheet or answer basic questions rather than providing them the opportunity to produce spontaneous, non-scripted language. ESL programs should therefore examine their practices to ensure that they are providing opportunities for participants to express their own thoughts and ideas so that they can build confidence in using the language.

#### **Recommendation #3: Expand Services**

The data from this study showed that a wider range of targeted ESL resources would benefit international spouses. In particular, resources that are intended for different levels of English proficiency and that focus on English expressions relevant for specific contexts (such as academia, workplaces, or service encounters) would allow international spouses to choose and invest in the resource that is most relevant to them. Although this may be difficult depending on available

resources for ESL programs, some participants, such as Claudia, stated that they were more willing to pay to join programs if it had “a whole activity related with the thing that I wanted to do.”

#### **Recommendation #4: Provide Financial Assistance**

As pointed out earlier, international spouses are often reliant on their partner’s income, which may limit their options. Therefore, financial assistance for international spouses can provide them more opportunities to engage in local activities. For example, some university ESL programs offer reduced prices for the family members of international students, which can serve as a draw for more international students to attend the university.

#### **Recommendation #5: Acknowledge the Capital that International Spouses Possess**

Although much of this study has focused on the capital that international spouses are trying to gain, universities and surrounding communities can benefit from acknowledging the capital that the international spouses already possess. Many international spouses are highly educated and have professional experience. International spouses in this study indicated that they were interested in doing something that mattered while they were abroad and were open to volunteer opportunities. Therefore, universities should consider how they can tap into this motivated population. One suggestion would be to invite international spouses to departmental lectures, brown bags, and student clubs. In these spaces, international spouses could share their expertise while practicing their English – specifically, English that is relevant to their professions. Initiatives such as this have the potential to improve the experiences of international spouses while also benefiting the students enrolled in universities.

#### **References**

- Basturkmen, H. (2014). LSP teacher education: Review of literature and suggestions for the research agenda. *Ibérica*, 28, 17–34. <http://www.revistaiberica.org/index.php/iberica/article/view/237>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. F. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–58). Greenwood Press
- Cai, Y., Fang, F., Sun, H., & Jiang, L. (2022). Unpacking identity construction and negotiation: A case study of Chinese undergraduate students’ social and academic experiences while studying abroad. *System*, 110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2022.102896>
- OCampbell, K., & Prins, E. (2016). Taking initiative and constructing identity: International graduate student spouses’ adjustment and social integration in a rural university town. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 35(4), 430–447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2016.1197332>
- Canagarajah, S. (2018). Translingual practice as spatial repertoires: Expanding the paradigm beyond structuralist orientations. *Applied Linguistics*, 39(1), 31–54. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amx041>
- Chen, L. K. (2009). Negotiating identity between career and family roles: A study of international graduate students’ wives in the US. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 28(2), 211–226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370902757075>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2015). Identity and a model of investment in applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 36–56. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000191>
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2021). Investment and motivation in language learning: What’s the difference? *Language Teaching*, 56(1), 29–40. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444821000057>
- De Verthelyi, R. F. (1995). International students’ spouses: Invisible sojourners in the culture shock literature. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 19(3), 387–411. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(95\)00028-A](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(95)00028-A)
- The Douglas Fir Group. (2016). A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. *Modern Language Journal*, 100, 19–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12301>
- Girmay, M., Singh, G. K., Jones, S., & Wallace, J. (2019). Understanding the mental and physical health needs and acculturation process of international graduate students in the United States. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* 11, 10–17. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v11iFall.1071>
- Grimm, A. T., Kanhai, D., & Landgraf, J. M. (2019). International student spouses and the English language: Co-creating a low-stakes language learning community. *Journal of International Students*, 9(4), 1172–1190. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i4.583>

- Johnson, B. A. (2019). Integrating service learning into a first-year experience course. *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*, 6, 38–41. <https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jcihe/article/view/911>
- Lei, D., Woodend, J. D., Nutter, S. K., Ryan, A. R., & Cairns, S. L. (2015). The forgotten half: Understanding the unique needs of international student partners. *Journal of International Students*, 5(4), 447–458. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i4.407>
- Lin, H. F. (2018). The “invisible” group: Acculturation of international women partners on United States campuses. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 55(3), 334–346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2018.1474753>
- Marshall, S. (2009) Re-becoming ESL: Multilingual university students and a deficit identity. *Language and Education*, 24(1), 41–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500780903194044>
- Martens, V. P., & Grant, P. R. (2008). A needs assessment of international students’ wives. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(1), 56–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306293547>
- Moharami, M., Keary, A., & Kostogriz, A. (2022). Adult Iranian English language learners’ identity work: An exploration of language practices and learner identities. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 73(3), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07417136221129625>
- Morita, N. (2009). Language, culture, gender, and academic socialization. *Language and Education*, 23(5), 443–460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500780902752081>
- Niu, Y., Xu, X., Zhu, Y., & Hunter-Johnson, Y. (2022). Exploring self-perceived employability and its determinants among international students in the United States. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 14(1), 6–22. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v14i1.3027>
- Norton Peirce, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 9–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587803>
- Oyenyi, O., Smith, R. L., Watson, J. C., & Nelson, K. (2021). A comparison of first-year international students’ adjustment to college at the undergraduate and graduate level. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 13(2), 112–131. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v13i2.2584>
- Polio, C., & Friedman, D. A. (2017). *Understanding, evaluation, and conducting second language writing research*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sandbulte, J. W. (2020). *Invisible Sojourners: Second Language Socialization among International Spouses* (Publication No. 28778335) [Doctoral dissertation, the Pennsylvania State University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Shaffer, M. A., & Harrison, D. A. (2001). Forgotten partners of international assignments: Development and test of a model of spouse adjustment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(2), 238–254. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.86.2.238>
- Soria, Krista M., & Troisi, J. (2014). Internationalization at home alternatives to study abroad: Implications for students’ development of global, international, and intercultural competencies. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(3), 261–280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313496572>
- Tavares, V. (2021). Theoretical perspectives on international student identity. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 13(2), 83–97. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v13i2.2949>
- Teshome, Y., & Osei-Kofi, N. (2012). Critical issues in international education narratives of spouses of international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(1), 62–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315311403486>
- Tubin, D., & Lapidot, O. (2008). Construction of “glocal” (global-local) identity among Israeli graduate students in the USA. *Higher Education*, 55(2), 203–217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-006-9049-x>
- Vaughan, J. (2007) International students and visiting scholars: Trends, barriers, and implications for American universities and U.S. foreign policy. *Statement presented to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight and the House Committee on Education and Labor Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness*, Washington, DC. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/005604138>
- Zappa-Hollman, S., & Duff, P. A. (2015). Academic English socialization through individual networks of practice. *TESOL Quarterly*, 49(2), 333–368. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.188>

---

**JADE SANDBULTE**, PhD., is an Assistant Professor in the Academic Writing and Learning Center in the University of Minnesota Duluth in the United States, where he co-coordinates the Tutoring Center and is an ESL specialist for the Writers’ Workshop. He earned his doctorate in Applied Linguistics from the Pennsylvania State University. His research interests include TESOL, sociolinguistics, and social network analysis, and his focus is on non-traditional educational spaces, particularly volunteer ESL programs and workshops. Email: [jadesand@d.umn.edu](mailto:jadesand@d.umn.edu)

## Appendix

### Interview Questions

1. How long have you been in the U.S.?
2. What made you decide to move to the U.S.? What are your goals while you are living in the U.S.?
3. How was your first month in the U.S.?
  - a. Why do you say that? Can you provide an example?
  - b. What have you done to overcome some of these challenges?
4. What resources (such as people, organizations, or places) have been helpful for you?
  - a. How did you connect with that resource?
  - b. How has that resource been helpful?
  - c. Why did you choose to use that resource?
5. During an average week, what kinds of people do you interact with?
  - a. How did you connect with those people?
  - b. How have these interactions helped you?
  - c. Why have you chosen to keep meeting with those people?
6. How does your life here compare with your life in your home country? What is similar or different about your activities and interactions?
7. What support would you like to receive from the university or community?
8. What suggestions do you have for other international spouses?