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## **Peaks and Valleys: The Lived Experiences of International Students Within an English Immersion Program Using the Integrated Skills Approach**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative phenomenological study examined how 11 international students experienced learning English within an intensive English immersion program, which used an integrated skills approach for language learning. Participants included seven males and four females from Africa, Asia, Central America, Middle East, and South America. Drawing on sociocultural and sociolinguistic theories, data analysis suggested that the participants experienced a range of competing emotions and relied on instructors for support and guidance throughout the learning process. In addition, participant testimonies demonstrated that successful language learning occurred when instructors met their social needs (e.g., provided a sense of belonging) and respected their cultural mores (e.g., supported a family-orientation in class). Implications from this study offer insights for university-based immersion programs in the United States.

**Keywords:** English immersion programs, English learners, intensive English program, second language acquisition

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In 2018, the US's international student population topped one million for the fourth consecutive year, accounting for 5.5% of the total college enrollment (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). Many of these students come to the United States to learn English, which affords them economic opportunities in their home countries (IIE, 2016); however, these English learners (ELs) often

encounter barriers (Martirosyan et al., 2015). For example, many ELs lack cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) needed for university-level coursework (Andrade, 2009). Furthermore, because of deficient language skills, ELs often delay participating in discussions and feel overwhelmed or alienated while in class (Andrade, 2009; Wolf & Phung, 2019).

Alongside linguistic barriers, social and cultural factors can hinder ELs' adjustments (Elturki et al., 2019; Luo, et al., 2019). Content, instructional strategies, and assessment methods (e.g., written-based assessments, performances) may be unfamiliar or disconnected from ELs' prior learning experiences (Wolf & Phung, 2019). For example, cooperative learning might seem foreign to some ELs and cause them to feel intimidated, minimizing their participation (Elturki et al., 2019; Glass et al., 2015). Without assistance, ELs may withdraw from universities prematurely (Martirosyan et al., 2015).

Intensive English programs (IEPs) emerged to help with the retention and transition of ELs at the university level (Thompson, 2013). Traditionally, IEPs implemented applied linguistics through discrete, segregated language skills curricula. However, this structure carried limitations when implemented universally (Andreou et al., 2008). ELs struggled to distinguish how to use language across cultural and social settings while also within specific academic disciplines (Gee, 2012; Tajzad & Ostovar-Namaghi, 2014). As a result, isolated language instruction hindered authentic communication for some ELs and failed to adapt to all their needs (Krashen, 1982; Oxford, 2001).

IEPs which utilize integrated skills approach (ISA) provide avenues for addressing these challenges. Richards and Schmidt (2002) define ISA as "the teaching of the language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, in conjunction with each other" (p. 262). This draws on the concept that learning language involves all of these skills simultaneously when someone is constructing meaning for communication. ISA focuses on the learner's motivations and the authenticity behind the communication (Blake & Majors, 1995).

Because language learning also encompasses cultural factors, we need to research how IEPs integrate multicontextual interactions to increase EL's linguistic, social, and cultural capital (Elturki et al., 2019; Martirosyan et al., 2015). An ISA, with its focus on authentic communication, might bridge language learning across these contexts. However, to trace this connection, researchers need to understand ELs' cross-cultural experiences and seek out their voices (IIE, 2016).

This study examined how one IEP, which focused on ISA, facilitated linguistic skills and language use in a variety of contexts with ELs and native English speakers (NESS). This study adds much-needed student perspective to the research on IEPs (Elturki et al., 2019; Thompson, 2013) and ISA (Rahman & Akhter, 2017).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Academic Challenges and Stressors**

Research demonstrated that ELs with limited English proficiency experienced increased levels of academic stress, negative well-being, and feelings of social isolation. For example, in their case study of eight Chinese international graduate students in nursing, Wolf and Phung (2019) found that ELs experienced difficulties with academic writing and reported mixed challenges with speaking in classroom interactions. Likewise, Luo and colleagues (2019) conducted a survey study of 216 mostly undergraduate international students, primarily from East Asian countries, ranging from 17 to 38 years of age. They concluded that self-conceived English proficiency combined with the level of social support they experienced from native English-speaking peers was linked to positive well-being and eased their psychological transition. They noted, “The adjustment process [for ELs] is slower for students with poor English competency” (p. 965).

Limited competency in English also made classroom interactions difficult, especially when ELs felt socially uncomfortable (Luo et al., 2019). As a result, according to a case study of six first-year undergraduate international students at an Australian University by Freeman and Li (2019), ELs often experienced social isolation, even revealing being treated like a “ghost,” invisible in the classroom. Similarly, Garcia and colleagues’ (2019) study of international learners in community colleges found that socioacademic and social integration were essential for a sense of belonging. Challenges with English competency also impacted EL’s ability to make friendships with peers. Elturki et al. (2019) revealed ELs lacked interactions with English-speaking peers outside of the classroom. Likewise, Williams and Johnson’s (2011) study of 80 American students also found limited friendships among Americans and internationals. Part of the issue may be how ELs perceive American students. In a qualitative study of 17 international students at a mid-sized public university in the United States, Rivas and colleagues (2019) reported that participants perceived American students as unapproachable or disinterested in befriending international students and cross-cultural interactions. Problems in building out-of-classroom social relationships can increase EL’s sense of social isolation.

### **The Need for Integrated Language Learning**

ISA to language learning is a discourse-based approach to teaching that integrates different language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) for authentic communication (Hinkel, 2010). ISA classroom activities might involve mock dialogues or written communications, and homework assignments could include cross-cultural oral or digital communications with NESs. Oxford (2001) argued that ISA aligns with a view that language is like a tapestry, where all the skills are interwoven together. Hence, language learning must be holistic.

While scholars advocate for ISA to enhance language learning, few studies focus on its use for international learners. In their grounded theory study of 30

English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, Tajzad and Ostovar-Namaghi's (2014) noted that participants responded well to ISA learning, which seemed to increase their motivation and self-confidence while also reducing stress. In addition, Zúñiga (2016) conducted classroom observations of ISA activities, analyzed student work, and interviewed six EFL students in a qualitative case study. The findings revealed that participants grew to appreciate ISA techniques. For example, one participant shared, "the integration [of various language skills] is fundamental to learn the language as it is used in the real life" (p. 21). Much more research is needed to understand the significance of ISA for international ELs.

Despite the limited research on ISA, the research does document the importance of student-faculty interaction and support for language learning. For example, Garcia et al. (2019) found ELs tended to have stronger bonds with faculty when compared with their NES peers. Later in their program, Freeman and Li (2019)'s participants built resiliency with some faculty empathy. Thus, Lin et al. (2019) and Freeman and Li (2019) stressed the need for joint university support (i.e., explaining expectations and building positive learning environments) as avenues toward success and self-confidence. The current study seeks to expand upon the research in ISAs while also exploring the relationship between participants and their instructors.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE**

This study draws on a blend of core ideas stemming from sociocultural and sociolinguistic theories. In particular, I incorporated three central themes. First, social interactions (e.g., speaking) support learning and language development (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978). According to Bakhtin, "language lives only in the dialogic interaction of those that make use of it" (White & Peters, 2011, p. 183). Based on this idea, active dialogue creates understanding, but language also fluctuates across cultures, societies, and discourses (Gee, 2012; White & Peters, 2011). Interactions within diverse contexts can shape the meaning of words; therefore, communicators must negotiate a mutual understanding based on their contexts (Gee, 2012). In this study, I explored the roles of social interactions in language learning.

Second, language learning requires scaffolding from a mentor to guide learners through a zone of proximal development (ZPD), which represents the area where students' skills are maturing (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Gallimore and Tharp (1992) identified three stages of ZPD: (1) dependence on support from a more-skilled mentor; (2) self-directed action with minimal guidance; and (3) habitual, unsupported, internalized performance. Applied to language learning, I considered how the ELs perceived their instructors' scaffolded language instruction through these stages.

Finally, I borrowed Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) ideas regarding mediation. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) proposed learning depends upon mediation, or the utilization of sign systems such as language (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Learners enhance their cognitive and language development as they interact socially

through mediation (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Mediations can be (1) symbolic, such as sign systems; (2) tools, such as a writing instrument or technology; or (3) a person (Kozulin, 1990). This study considered interactions and utilization of language as a tool for communicative, collective social processes. Given this conceptual framing, this study attended to the following research question: *what is the lived experience of international ELs who studied in an English immersion program via the ISA?*

## **METHODS**

An interpretive phenomenology centers on the lived experiences of participants with respect to the phenomenon under study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Researchers first reflect on their experiences with the phenomenon and then collect individuals' information through in-depth interviews, which are analyzed for units of meaning that give context to the participants' experience (van Manen, 1997). As a result, this study investigated participants' lived experiences by asking, "What is your experience with participating in an English immersion IEP that utilizes an ISA?" Findings offer intimate insights about how learning occurs within immersion programs and IEPs.

### **Site and Participants**

The study took place at a state university in the United States, referred to as Gushing River University (GRU), which houses an IEP that currently uses immersion principles via ISA with authentic, interactive social and cultural experiences. The program emphasizes discussion and excursions for authentic language use. Additionally, ELs interact with native English-speaking peers.

GRU founded the IEP 30 years ago on traditional IEP principles. However, in 2006, the IEP director, faculty, and university administrators revamped the program. Since then, ISA and immersion principles guide the revised structure. New GRU international students take placement examinations. If students' scores are too low for university-leveled courses, IEP faculty administer separate IEP assessments for placement within beginning, intermediate, or advanced ISA courses. Students only enroll in one IEP language course per semester based on English proficiencies. Students jointly enrolled in the intermediate course and IEP electives, such as cultural studies and study skills. Many advanced-level participants enrolled in up to three selected university-leveled courses and alluded to these experiences.

Participants, identified by self-selected pseudonyms, included 11 students (7 males, 4 females; see Table 1) through purposive and then snowball sampling (Morse, 1991). Recruitment occurred via social media and email. When a student agreed to participate, they were asked to identify other potential participants as well. Participants differed in terms of English proficiency and birthplace (Africa, Asia, Central America, Middle East, and South America).

**Table 1: Participant Information**

Pseudonym	Gender	Native country	Language(s) spoken	English proficiency at initial enrollment
Alexandre	M	Brazil	Portuguese*	Beginner
Diego	M	Chile	Spanish	
Efosa	M	Benin	Spanish* French* 2 dialects of his country	Advanced Advanced
Hamadi	M	Egypt	Arabic* French	Advanced
Jia Li	F	China	Some German Bugahar* Chinese	Advanced
João	M	Brazil	Portuguese* Spanish	Beginner
Kambale	M	Democratic Republic of Congo	Lingala* French Swahili Kikongo	Intermediate
Kawm	F	Thailand	Thai*	Intermediate
Maria	F	Guatemala	Spanish*	Intermediate
Toshiyuki	M	Japan	Japanese* Chinese	Intermediate
Vanessa	F	Brazil	Portuguese* Some Spanish	Beginner

\*Native language.

### **Phenomenological In-Depth Interviews**

Phenomenology relies on in-depth, oral, open-ended interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Seidman's (2006) three-interview sequence formed the basis for this study. This sequence ensures participants' consistency over time and allows opportunities for deeper elaboration. The first interview focused on participants' life histories. The second interview asked for detailed reconstructions of key instances and events. Finally, the third interview allowed the researcher to ask participants to reflect on experiences.

Participants were interviewed three times over a span of three week. Interviews occurred in English and were digitally recorded for transcription and analysis. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min in length (compromising roughly on average 4.5 hr of data per participant). Seidman's three-interview sequence affords ample data for in-depth qualitative analysis.

The researcher gained Institutional Review Board approval to conduct this study, and all participants signed informed consent forms.

### **Data Analysis and Validity**

Phenomenological data analysis first traces how participants make meaning of their lived experiences (van Manen, 1997) and then seeks to find cohesion across these meanings so as to uncover deeper facets of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Here, I address data analysis and validation strategies.

#### ***Data Analysis Procedures***

After transcription, I read through each transcript to get a holistic understanding (van Manen, 1997). Then, I reread and highlighted significant statements which contributed to participants' core understandings of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1997). These statements were later clustered into categories and a composite summary was generated (Moustakas, 1994). Themes stemmed from commonalities revealed in the composite summary. Throughout the process, I took detailed notes and analytical memos within a research journal.

#### ***Validation Strategies***

In phenomenological research, trustworthiness of research is established through validation techniques that might include sustained engagement (Seidman, 2006), bracketing (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), bridling (Vagle, 2014), and checking for consistency and truthfulness (van Manen, 2014).

This study used validation strategies proposed by van Manen (2014). First, the research question of this study met criteria appropriate for phenomenological study (e.g., it was centered on ELs' lived experience). Second, interviews were transcribed and served as the basis for analysis. Attention was given to participants' perspectives and not to the researcher's bias. Use of a research journal aided in identifying researcher's biases (a process called bridling) (Vagle, 2014). Third, I maintained consistent phenomenological procedures, gravitating toward interpretive phenomenology and widely accepted experts in this methodology.

### **Limitations**

Participants' IEP completion, technological glitches, and some language barriers limited this study. Sparse IEP alumni records, especially among students who transferred from GRU, restricted locating participants for a representative sampling. In addition, classroom observations were impossible because of participants' IEP completion.

## FINDINGS

Three findings emerged from this study: Learning English had Peaks and Valleys, IEP Instructors were Guides, and Learning English was Social and Cultural.

### **Learning English Had Peaks and Valleys**

Studying English contained “high points and low points” (Vanessa). At times, the peak and valley experiences intertwined as conveyed by Alexandre.

I had two sides at the same time. One good and one bad... I was kinda of afraid to hanging out around the campus, because I couldn't understand the people there...At the Same time were the good things. The good things, in my opinion, were the best things. Keeping me in the class .... Keeping me climbing that mountain. [I was] happy to learn English in a fun way, but I was afraid too. (Alexandre)

Alexandre's comments illustrated mixed emotions about learning language. While these feelings are natural, he implied mediated-IEP classrooms within his ZPD helped him negotiate his identity, emotions and learn English. He had more agency in the safety of the class.

Other participants explained mixed emotions of excitement coupled with anxiety and loneliness. For example, João recalled being “extremely excited for living the dream that is a reality, but I have to say I was afraid and missed my family too.” Toshiyuki's emotions (“internal things”) surprised him during second language acquisition (SLA). Likewise, Efosa's prior English exposure made him confident, but he still feared uncertainties and peer rejection. Vanessa was “thrilled to learn the beautiful language, but nervous” of failure and disappointment. Being introverts, Kawm and Maria felt insecure yet excited about SLA.

Many participants confessed being nervous and worried at first but became comfortable with improved second language (L2) knowledge and use. Kambale felt “amazed, proud and honored to be learning with an American teaching me,” but it was “very difficult and Americans speak so fast.” Hamadi and João recollected embarrassment while speaking, but were confident with reading and writing tasks. Whereas Jia Li enjoyed speaking, she was nervous about writing. Toshiyuki was comfortable speaking in IEP classes but nervous in other settings. Most ELs negotiated learning at least one English domain more than others based on personalities and preferences. Furthermore, these sentiments indicate social and cultural groups impacted their language development and reactions.

Participants recalled uncertainties surfacing again in university courses. João sensed “regular” university professors disliked him being in their classes, and he “tried to be invisible and not make any problems.” Yet, he felt like a “normal student” when his English improved. Likewise, Diego perceived himself “clueless and out of place...and would try to shrink out of sight,” especially when professors “made connections to historical event[s] that happened here in the States. I had no clue....I couldn't answer anything about U.S. history. So, I hoped



the professor wouldn't see me in the class." Maria perceived she "graduated from elementary to high school" by going into "regular" courses, because classes became "serious." Unfortunately, she felt unwanted in university courses.

All participants mentioned accents connected with SLA. Some participants equated accents as "valleys" in SLA while others saw them as "peaks." Efosa explained his professors' accents impacted his learning and comprehension. Other participants elaborated on accents' influence across communication realms. In general, males' accents led to shame and a sense of judgment. They perceived NESs labeled them based on their accents. Hamadi admitted he preferred "English literacy tasks" to avoid any accent-related communication struggles. Alexandre struggled with his Brazilian accent in the United States but even worse when he moved to Australia. Despite his accent being a proud part of his identity, it hindered communication, especially when he "pronounced some words using an American accent and others with a Brazilian one." As a result, "Aussies call me a lazy English speaker" (Alexandre).

Conversely, females' accents conjured occasional compassion. Maria received empathy from most NESs after hearing her accent, because they perceived she needed help. Vanessa agreed people seemed to be patient with her, since her accent "signaled being a foreigner." Jia Li and Kawm mentioned Americans initiated conversations to hear their Asian accents. Generally, female participants saw their accents as assets.

This theme illustrated sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and emotional aspects of SLA. High points included excitement, confidence, and pride after learning some English. Low points stemmed from insecurities and uncertainties. Participants felt afraid, nervous, lonely, insecure, and embarrassed, especially in the beginning. These feelings are natural responses from ELs who take language learning seriously and encounter barriers. Even though participants still experienced challenges, their agency grew because IEP instructors provided scaffolded and support. However, negative emotions resurfaced for many IEP students in university courses without professors' support.

### **IEP Instructors Were Guides**

While ELs faced challenges learning English, their IEP instructors guided them through these hurdles. For example, Vanessa stated,

It was so very hard...So many problems... I believe God put the right people in our lives to help us push through. One was my IEP teacher. I would have given up without my teacher...She showed us how to do things. Things to help me learn English and live successfully in the United States.

Alexandre also attributed his success to his instructors' guidance and purposeful scaffolding on assignments with "24/7 support." Some compared instructors to parental figures. Kambale said his instructor had "the heart of a mom...who was not likely...to forget her kids." Likewise, João described his IEP experience with a metaphor equating his instructor to a mother: "It's like kids with a mom, right?"

The mom is gonna teach her kid to fish, but she cannot fish for him. He's gotta fish by himself." Even after completing the IEP program, João reported he still reached out to his instructor for support. These ideas suggest IEP instructors provided continued support within a collective, social, and family-like environment.

ELs recalled IEP instructors combined navigating educational expectations, systems, and policies with SLA. For Hamadi, his "lack of understanding of American standards" affected his school performance. Kambale and Efosa said IEP instructors helped with initial adjustments and transitions to university courses. João mentioned a plagiarism issue in the advanced IEP class. Uninformed of U.S. plagiarism standards, he submitted a paper without proper citations. The IEP instructor addressed GRU's strict plagiarism policy so he would avoid this issue. Being embarrassed yet thankful, he respected the IEP instructor's professional, kind response. Participants' limited understanding of U.S. educational expectations suggests assistance is vital within cross-cultural environments. IEP instructors helped students navigate embedded "American standards" to build agency and cultural capital.

Participants praised IEP instructors' keen awareness of students' needs and interests for "check[ing] students' pulse for understanding" (Kambale). João expressed, "The teacher cared.... She loved her job and was willing to go above and beyond to help. Otherwise, I probably would have quit in the beginning." Diego recalled IEP instructors challenged students "just the right amount" for learning without overwhelming them. Maria explained how IEP instructors "led us on a journey around the world through the activities and use of technology. They [IEP instructors] knew how to plan for us to have fun with learning." Jia Li agreed IEP instructors knew how to make learning applicable, which differed from prior language study in her native country. Kawm described IEP instructors as "friends who know how to relate to us for learning and life." Socioculturally and sociolinguistically, it appears participants relied on IEP instructors to help them navigate their environments and challenges.

This theme illustrated IEP instructors' guidance in the learning process. IEP instructors appeared to evaluate ELs' ZPD and structured supportive, nurturing environments for interactions. In addition, ELs saw IEP instructors as resources. As IEP instructors cultivated activities, they integrated culturally situated contexts for navigation of societal and institutional expectations. Instructors' scaffolded instruction helped ELs build knowledge funds to mediate academic settings and interact in sociocultural environments.

### **Learning English Was Social and Cultural**

The next theme's two parts were separate yet intertwined. For example, across participants, language learning was both social and cultural. Communications cultivated learning and meaning. However, cultural capital influenced interactions. Social and culture components impacted each other and were mutually dependent but addressed separately.

***Social***

Most participants expressed IEP classes felt like a “family” (Maria) or social gatherings. Participants described classes as “not scary” (Diego), lively, and interactive. ELs attended classes with the same instructor and classmates at each course level. Jia Li elaborated,

I feel so excited. I was so happy. You just learn like normal in life. It was like sitting down with friends and having a tea party and stuff like that. We were learning, but it was natural learning. It was fun and not just memorizing a bunch of grammar rules.

To Jia Li’s pleasant surprise, IEP instructors participated in discussions and shared personal information too. She recalled initial shock with the relaxed atmosphere, but she soon loved IEP environments. Jia Li’s experience implies IEP instructors scaffolded “natural” English learning and mediated appropriate input (Krashen, 1982). Kawm agreed, “I was very shy to use English at first. I made mistakes, but my teacher and classmates didn’t judge me. I was comfortable. So, I talked and laughed with them.” Kambale expressed, “Everyone was in it together.” Inside natural IEP atmospheres, ELs called each other “brother and sister and the teacher was the mom” (Maria). Most participants still consider their classmates and instructors as friends and keep in touch. Clearly, authentic, instructor-facilitated interactions enhanced SLA.

Conversations within IEP classrooms also prepared participants for agency to communicate with NESs. Kambale expressed, “before [studying at the IEP] French was inside me and it was just gonna come out. After [studying at the IEP], I gotta say French is still inside me, but English comes out so I can speak to all kinds of people.” After a brief time, Efosa became “brave enough” for speaking with Americans. Those encounters challenged him to thrive. Toshiyuki recalled unsuccessfully asking for directions when he first arrived in the United States. He thought he used the correct words but failed to get a response. His botched attempt made him ashamed, but IEP assignments forced communication. The IEP assignments “trained [his] English” and gave him assurance to try authentic communication. Now he speaks confidently with NESs.

IEPs created safe spaces for developing L2 confidence. For example, Kawm’s initial verbal attempts led to shame. She expounded on why she initially avoided speaking with Americans, “I thought people would think I was too different. I’m not of their culture. Why should they bother with me? You know? So, I hid from Americans at first because of shame.” She felt accepted by her American IEP instructors, and their encouragement gave her confidence for communications with other Americans. Efosa and Kambale elaborated on how “America ways of teaching” (Kambale), such as peer teaching, differed from schools in Africa. They said IEP activities helped them gain confidence in other courses. Beyond gaining social agency, Diego “got the nerve to get a job” afterward. Despite the reasons, interacting with NESs invoked pride.

Participants’ comfort levels depended on situations and social and cultural knowledge. Diego explained he hesitated to talk with some people, because he

lacked cultural capital. While helpful, the IEP was unable to instill cultural mores of communication. As a result, sometimes he nodded if he misunderstood and hoped he “didn’t nod at something stupid or embarrassing and just look[ed] like a bobble head doll.” Kawm, Efosa, and Toshiyuki preferred speaking to friendly people with “easy-to-understand accents” (Kawm). Likewise, the university athletes, Alexandre, João, and Vanessa, were more confident socializing with teammates. Participants felt uncomfortable participating in GRU’s social events but usually attended IEP activities for practicing English, mingling and having fun. From a social stance, students constructed and internalized English in supportive environments, and, in turn, applied collective practices to other settings.

### **Cultural**

Even though participants’ cultural perspectives differed, their lived experience encompassed culture. Everyone except for Efosa considered SLA as learning a new culture. However, Efosa saw language as a separate entity from culture but still believed “you gotta learn the flavor” of the area. Hamadi and Kawm said vocabulary interpretations were culturally based. Kawm argued that having increased cultural knowledge fosters relationships. She said, “Friends equal new culture. New culture equals more language.”

Limited cultural capital affected SLA, because “it was hard to accept the English culture at first” (Jia Li). U.S. culture was a “shock” (Vanessa), “like being on a different planet” (João), and created barriers to learning. Kambale expounded on how the “American culture” impacted his learning, because the “American culture was very rude.” Due to this perceived rudeness, he refused initial NESs communications. Likewise, Diego resisted embracing the English culture, reflecting that “I am Chilean. I look like one. I talk like one. I should stay [with] my culture and just have problems with English culture and language learning.” Eventually, Diego accepted the need to interact with American culture. Participants’ lived experiences suggest interdependence among humans, interactions, and culture. For fruitful English interactions, participants continued negotiating cultural identities. They also thought their “home culture” (Maria) affected English learning. Toshiyuki believed contrasting cultures impacted SLA. He enlightened,

My culture is narrow. We don’t express opinions and such as that. The American classroom and culture expect open minds. I learned to appreciate that over time, but I was like ‘what is this?’ in the beginning. The assignments helped us to learn about the United States culture. You are what you study, right? So now I am an English speaker because of this culture. (Toshiyuki)

In terms of sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives, Toshiyuki reflections showed culture as dynamic and inseparable from his being and outlooks. Language, interconnected with culture and supported in IEP assignments, helped him mediate, understand, and internalize the U.S. culture.

Vanessa, Alexandre, and João described Brazilian culture as very relaxed and “loose.” Thus, they struggled with tardiness and time management. They recalled being scorned and penalized for what university professors perceived as “laziness. We aren’t lazy though. We are Brazilian athletes. Not lazy” (Vanessa). Instead, Jia Li believed the “American way is very loose” and initially struggled socializing with Americans. She perceived the American culture was disrespectful and superficial. “You have to be careful with American culture when you select your words, so they don’t think you are rude even though they speak badly to their elders and professors.” Hamadi depicted Egyptian culture as warm, supportive, and caring with “no strings attached.” However, he perceived “the reverse with American culture, because the American culture only helps for something in return, usually money.” Hamadi reasoned, “It’s not all bad though, because it’s the American culture to work hard. It’s just an adjustment with cultures.”

Alexandre shared how SLA in the United States differed from Australia due to cultural differences. He noticed variances in mannerisms, phrases, words, and instructional strategies. During our first interview, Alexandre shared about his wife’s pregnancy. Before our second interview, I chatted with Alexandre’s wife about her pregnancy. She moved from Brazil to Australia after their marriage. Later, during the interview Alexandre elaborated on culture,

I have two Alexandres. One with English because of U.S. culture. One with English because of Australian culture. Like when you talked to my wife, sometimes she didn’t talk with you. Not because she doesn’t know English, but because she doesn’t know United States culture. Like you asking her about things with the baby that we just don’t ask in Australia. She doesn’t know the United States culture and didn’t know how to talk with your U.S. culture and English.

These statements suggest how culture, interwoven with people’s lives, affects language learning. Participation in social and cultural groups impacted language development and interactions. Alexandre implied cultural awareness impacted his wife’s agency more than English proficiency.

Jia Li, Toshiyuki, Alexandre, and João mentioned their cultures aided SLA. Their friendly, open-minded cultures enhanced L2 utilization. Consequently, Alexandre described the Brazilian culture as active, social, and talkative, and thus, he struggled with concentrating on writing. João alleged Brazil’s internalized multitasking, hard-working culture improved his SLA. Clearly, these statements imply social and cultural aspects, including language, affecting everydayness, identities, and language usage.

The third theme illustrated SLA was social and cultural. Socially, participants viewed IEP classrooms as welcoming, dynamic, collaborative, “family” environments. Interactions facilitated language internalization. Participants’ cultural perspectives differed, but most saw culture linked with SLA. Heightened cultural awareness enhanced EL-NES interactions.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This phenomenology addressed the question: “What is the lived experience of international ELs who studied in an English Immersion Program via the ISA?” Using sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives, I contemplated ELs’ experiences and found common themes (van Manen, 1997, 2014). Even though ELs have individual needs, motivations, backgrounds, and viewpoints (Weger, 2013), themes from this study offer insights that may inform SLA and instructional best practices for immersion programs, IEPs, and university coursework for international ELs.

### **Learning English as Achievement Pathways**

Comparable to Hayakawa’s (1978) and Gee’s (2012) theories, participants perceived they needed to use English correctly for enhanced opportunities. Participants’ desire for advancement offered them a meaning behind language learning. This echoed Goodman’s (1996) sentiments, “without meaning, there is nothing to language” (p. 105). Participants attributed language learning to concepts of internal satisfaction, broadened horizons, personal growth, and agency. As a result, SLA affected participants on a personal level.

### **Learning English Was Emotional and Identity-Driven**

Since participants considered English as a route toward fulfillment, relationships, and life-changing experiences, second language learning and knowledge appeared interwoven with identities (Valdés et al., 2005) and emotions. Language and culture connectedness seemed centric to identity negotiation (Norton, 2000). SLA impacted participants’ dignity and feelings, triggering emotional peaks or valleys. As explained by Hayakawa (1978), ELs generally identified emotions on a two-tiered orientation or by counterparts such as feeling happy or sad. “High points” (Vanessa) helped them persist in “climbing that [SLA] mountain” (Alexandre) while “low points” (Vanessa) caused insecurities, anxiety, and loneliness. In alignment with Valdés et al. (2005), participants’ identity and emotional navigations helped them function. ELs seemed to have evolving personal, social, and cultural identities. They eventually used internal buffers to develop empowerment, which fostered resiliency and agency.

### **Learning English as a Way to Overcome Barriers**

Even though participants expressed general optimism and perceived L2 empowered them, they faced barriers. ELs usually felt internal and external pressures to prosper, but successes varied based on academic acculturation and language proficiency (Martirosyan et al., 2015). Along with past reports (e.g., Halic et al., 2009; Martirosyan et al., 2015), ELs endured challenges as students unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the dominant language. Like Luo et al.’s (2019) and Garcia et al.’s (2019) participants, ELs in this study encountered obstacles which influenced emotions and identities. ELs’ transitions and challenges often

produced identity discontinuity. For example, João's felt unwanted in "regular" university courses. However, unlike these prior past studies, participants mentioned positive experiences, dispositions, and emotions empowered them. Throughout their journeys, participants built agency amidst struggles. They grew from experiences and identified none as restrictive. They developed resiliency, agency, and constructive mindsets.

### **Learning English as Cultural**

Most participants linked second language learning to culture. As proposed by Gee (2012), participants contended language application goes beyond linguistic skills to also encompass cultural standards. Participants mentioned cultural aspects occurred naturally and influenced SLA. For example, most participants appreciated IEP cultural parties. Thus, IEPs and universities should plan campus-wide cultural events. These events mutually benefit everyone by "change[ing] their mind or appreciate people and cultures to find the truth about the culture and the people" (Hamadi).

### **Instructors Crucial for SLA**

According to Collier (1987), outside factors, such as stress and social stigma associated with accents, can make language learning difficult. Increasing CALP in structured settings like IEPs could assist ELs through these issues. As a result, participants saw IEP instructors as guides for navigating complications and overcoming hurdles. João and Vanessa said they would have given up without IEP instructors. Furthermore, participants in this study still considered their IEP instructors as friends with the "heart of a mom" (Kambale). IEP instructors doubled as supporters and counselors.

Participants explained IEP instructors challenged them within their comfort zones including "24/7 support" (Alexandre). IEP instructors' teaching mirrored Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) ZPD and Krashen's (1982) "i + 1" theories, which also advocates teachers being both challenging and supportive. IEP instructors' affirmative attitudes and scaffolded instructional practices improved learning. Instructors used these beliefs to guide actions and decision-making and as filters for multicultural education, sensitivity, and educational philosophies. Considering students' diverse abilities, native languages, and cultures, instructors must guide ELs toward academic success and SLA.

### **Learning English Within a Family Dynamic**

IEP instructors created environments for social and cultural SLA. Jia Li experienced initial shock and uncertainty stemming from stark contrasts between IEP environments and classrooms in her native country. Yet, she and other participants later appreciated casual, social, "tea party" IEP atmospheres. Many participants connected SLA with family dynamics. IEP instructors established supportive, rather stress-free environments (Krashen, 1982) for authentic

interactions. They seemed to echo Goodman (1996), “Language is a living, dynamic organism” (p. 36) and Bakhtin’s notion (White & Peters, 2011) that people make meaning from not only their utterance but other’s utterances as well. Interactions created understandings (White & Peters, 2011). Participants concurred with Dewey’s (1997) and Vygotsky’s (1978) theories that language is interactive and social. IEP socializations usually gave ELs courage for NESs conversations, but they lacked agency and felt uncomfortable attending university-wide social events.

Participants’ lived experience revealed more about faculty’s dispositions, such as patience, empathy, and dedication, than actual instruction. They also valued IEP instructors’ mindfulness of students’ cultures, interests, and needs. Overall, participants esteemed faculty and staff who “understood that students are human beings like them” (Hamadi). However, participants rarely encountered compassionate, culturally responsive professors across the university. Therefore, universities should offer more professional development for faculty and staff about meeting the needs of ELs and offer university-wide culturally responsive coaching.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I recommend modifications to IEP and university-wide instruction and classroom atmospheres. First, instructors and professors should craft comfortable, scaffolded, interactive environments with relevant, natural language use. Intermingling innovative teaching strategies with applicable assignments could help ELs learn English naturally and empower them in multiple discourses. Second, faculty should structure applicable assignments fostering English usage throughout the day. As Hamadi noted, “Without these assignments, English is just for class. Outside of school forget about it.” I suggest IEPs as well as university classes assign at least one outside assignment weekly to “force” (Maria) L2 application. Impressionable assignments involved shopping, cooking, going out to eat, opening bank accounts, and observing court trials. These activities allowed culturally embedded ISA practice. Faculty could modify assignments based on course competencies. Finally, I recommend giving students choice among applicable assignments. The goal is to enable continued multidiscoursed L2. Overall, findings from this study support the need for an ISA in immersion programs and IEPs designed to support international university students. Additional research should continue to explore the efficacy of ISA and its associated instructional practices.

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