

# Understanding Success and Failure in Adult ESL

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# Understanding Success and Failure in Adult ESL

Superación vs Dropout of Adult  
English Learners in the US

**Taewoong Kim**

DOI <https://doi.org/10.21832/KIM2408>

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Names: Kim, Taewoong, - author.

Title: Understanding Success and Failure in Adult ESL: Superación vs Dropout of Adult English Learners in the US / Taewoong Kim.

Description: Bristol; Jackson: Multilingual Matters, [2022] | Series: New Perspectives on Language and Education: 106 | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "This book explores the reasons why adult ESL learners drop out of their language classes and suggests explicit strategies for keeping students engaged. The most effective strategies may be personal rather than technical or curricular"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021057233 (print) | LCCN 2021057234 (ebook) | ISBN 9781800412392 (Paperback) | ISBN 9781800412408 (Hardback) | ISBN 9781800412415 (Adobe PDF) | ISBN 9781800412422 (ePub)

Subjects: LCSH: English language—Study and teaching—United States. | English language—Study and teaching—Spanish speakers.

Classification: LCC PE1068.U5 K46 2022 (print) | LCC PE1068.U5 (ebook) | DDC 428.0071/5—dc23/eng/20220202

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021057233>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021057234>

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-1-80041-240-8 (hbk)

ISBN-13: 978-1-80041-239-2 (pbk)

### **Multilingual Matters**

UK: St Nicholas House, 31-34 High Street, Bristol, BS1 2AW, UK.

USA: Ingram, Jackson, TN, USA.

Website: [www.multilingual-matters.com](http://www.multilingual-matters.com)

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Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India.

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# Acknowledgements

I want to thank many people who have supported the birth of this book. I sincerely thank my wife Hyojung Park, and my sons Leo Yoon Kim and Philip Geon Kim for their support despite the unusual COVID-19 pandemic situation. Also, I thank Lawrence Baines for inspiring me to keep going forward, and Lauren Albin, Georgeanne Yehling, Myoyoung Kim, Ji Hong, Kyungsook Yeum and Daniel Rueckert for their tremendous help and insightful feedback on the early drafts of this book. I thank Anna Roderick and the Multilingual Matters team for their considerate support. Last but not least, I want to thank the six participants of this book and their families for letting their voices heard. Without their dedication, this book would not have been possible.

Taewoong Kim



# Preface

In recent years, the California wildfires have killed over a hundred people, and more than a quarter of a million Californians have been evacuated from their houses. However, in the midst of this conflagration, Latino migrant workers have continued to pick berries and grapes all day and night despite the fire, smoke and danger, because evacuation announcements are often delivered only in English (Barry-Jester, 2019; Sesin, 2017).

In the US, almost one in five workers, about 28 million people, are immigrants (US Department of Labor, 2021). Of these 28 million, only 3% have ever enrolled in English classes (US Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2019). Despite adult English learners' (ELs) natural inclination to learn English, they often drop out of their classes without saying a word. Lacking the resources to research what made their students' drop out, teachers often attribute their absence to mysterious forces at home or work. About learning English, Juan (pseudonym), one of my adult students told me, 'I want to learn English, but I learn nothing. The teachers care about the money, not us. They just talk, talk, talk. No learning'.

Through a qualitative study, this book explores what makes adult Spanish-speaking ELs stay or drop out of English class. The findings reveal that adult ELs' decision to stay or drop out is complex, multifaceted and dynamic. *Superación*, a Spanish word meaning self-improvement and self-actualization, was central to adult ELs' decision to invest in learning English. ELs' multifaceted sociocultural backgrounds, needs and factors for investing in learning English were found to be dynamic and fluid, consisting of both cognitive and affective aspects. When students felt that a teacher genuinely cared, when they could see visible evidence that they were learning the language, when teachers were engaging and responsive, they experienced *superación*. Without *superación*, students dropped out.

This book tells the untold stories of and gives voice to adult ELs in a community English literacy class through three questions: Who are they? What makes them invest in learning English? and What makes them quit? The journey to hear their voices began one night when my car was broken into at the class parking lot. Details of that night are provided in the Introduction.

# Introduction: A Broken Car

It was 8pm and the sky was pitch black. The church classroom where I taught English as a second language (ESL) to adults in Oklahoma City was empty as the students had all gone home. Mine was the lone car in the parking lot and my engine refused to start.

Suddenly, I remembered a colleague's comments, 'John (I go by 'John' as my English nickname), please be careful where you teach. That area has one of the highest crime rates in the state'. But I was stuck and alone in an empty parking lot. In the darkness, using my iPhone's flashlight, I looked at the class roster. There was a student named Domingo (pseudonym) who always participated and seemed like a nice guy.

'Hola', Domingo answered.

'Hello Domingo, this is John Kim, your teacher', I said.

Domingo showed up at the parking lot 10 minutes later.

He opened the hood and looked at the engine.

'Any wrong sound?' Domingo asked.

'Phu-shu, phu-she, phu-shu sounds when I stop my car', I replied.

'Hmm, it might be the gas pump, I'll call a friend'.

Domingo had a short conversation in Spanish over the phone with his friend. Domingo's friend, a car mechanic, said he would tow my car from the parking lot to his repair shop and I could pick it up tomorrow.

I asked, 'Would it be better to call my insurance company and have them tow my car? My insurance company can pay for the towing fee'.

Domingo said, 'Towing is free, he never charges for towing. He once towed my car for a long, long way for free. Besides, we are friends'.

I thought about being in the 'most dangerous area' and I did not really know Domingo all that well. I mean, he was a diligent student, but did I know him well enough to hand over the keys of my car?

On the other hand, he had dropped everything to come rescue his ESL teacher in the middle of the night.

'Okay, Domingo, thank you very much. So we can meet tomorrow at your friend's repair shop to pick up my car?'

'Yes'.

'Great, how much is the cost to repair?'

‘Let’s say 110 dollars’.

‘Check or cash?’

‘Cash’, Domingo laughed.

So, we made a deal and Domingo gave me a ride back home, a ‘side trip’ for him of about 40 miles. In the car, we talked about that night’s class material, which was about house layout with several vocabulary words such as patio, yard, bedroom, bathroom, living room and den.

To practice what we learned, I asked, ‘How many bedrooms do you have? Do you have a patio in your house?’

‘No, teacher, two bedroom, and no patio, no yard. I live in a trailer’.

The following morning, a friend drove me to the repair shop in downtown. The closer I got, the more uneasy I felt. The repair shop was very close to big homeless shelters in a shabby part of downtown. The shops around the repair shop had broken windows and no signs. The car ‘repair shop’ also had no signs, no windows and was actually an abandoned gas station. My car was among five or six others scattered around the lot.

When my friend and I got out of the car, Domingo just popped up out of nowhere.

‘Hi teacher’.

We shook hands, and together looked at my car. My car’s hood was covered with dusty fingerprints, hundreds of fingerprints everywhere.

‘Spark plugs’, Domingo said.

Domingo jumped in the car, and it started right away.

I gave him \$110 in cash and thanked him profusely for rescuing me and fixing my car.

So, this is what I learned about Domingo. He lives in a trailer and his friend the mechanic works out of an abandoned gas station and accepts cash only. Over the course of only two days, I learned more about my adult ESL students than I had learned about them through the previous two semesters.

I have taught English to adult ESL learners for five years. In this particular center, I teach from August to December and January to May and typically have about 20 students, all of whom speak Spanish as their first language (L1).

In fall 2016, a health problem compelled me to take two months off. When I came back the following spring, only four students were left, and Domingo was one of them. I began this book because I wanted to understand why those 16 adult ESL learners stopped coming to class. I also wanted to know why those four students stayed.

# 1 Voices Unheard from the Margins

Thousands of adults come to English as a second language (ESL) classes with great hopes of mastering English. Many of them come in the evening after a long day of work, despite having families at home and untold chores to do (e.g. babysitting duties for friends and preparing cultural events such as the quinceañera [a Mexican cultural celebration of a girl's 15th birthday]). When an ESL student decides to leave, some administrators might think that the students 'were just too busy' or that 'they were not proficient enough to follow instructions' or even that 'they are not smart enough, they don't have a high school diploma'. However, adult learners, especially immigrants, are, by nature, problem-solvers (Vinoogradov & Liden, 2009). Often, they work at several different jobs while living in a foreign country. They learn to adapt to the environment by learning how to support their family, raise their children and get along in their communities. They build up their own networks and establish intimate relationships to solve problems.

In the US, 17.4% of the labor force is foreign born. Most of these individuals have a mother tongue other than English (US Census Bureau, 2020). A fundamental challenge for immigrants living in the US is overcoming the barriers of limited English proficiency (Comings, 2007; Greenberg *et al.*, 2001; Kim *et al.*, 2011). For immigrants, learning English is paramount; a problem that must be solved to ensure survival. When an adult ESL student knocks on the door of a classroom, they are usually motivated and determined to succeed. Norton-Peirce (1995) called the learning of adult ESL students a way of *investing* in the future (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton-Peirce, 1995; Peirce, 2000). Most would do whatever it takes, regarding time, adjusting work schedules and negotiating family responsibilities so that they can learn English. According to Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, taking ESL classes, *investing* for learning and staying in or dropping out are all human actions related to the sociocultural and historically situated meaning/identity construction processes.

On the first day of my teaching ESL at the Center for English Literacy (pseudonym) in fall 2016, only one student showed up. By Thanksgiving,

enrollment had increased to 20 students. Most of the students were from Latin America, with Spanish as their mother tongue. The students worked as restaurant servers, factory workers, construction laborers and hotel housekeeping staff.

This book explores why adult ESL students drop out and why they stay. In order to explore reasons based on participants' real stories, I delved into the students' lives, not only inside the classroom, but also outside the classroom, because students, by nature, bring their learning interests from home to school and vice versa (Auerbach, 1993; Barth, 1972; Dewey, 1903; Krapp, 1999). Learning is an organic and dynamic activity, formed socioculturally in complex ways, predicated upon the adult students' motivation, which is both complex and multifaceted (Canagarajah, 2006; Norton-Peirce, 1995).

Adult ESL students who come to ESL classes expend significant time, energy and money. In 2016, the US Department of Labor reported that 51.9% of Latinx immigrants' jobs were hard labor, working mostly in the construction, housekeeping and manufacturing fields (US Department of Labor, 2017). Hard labor jobs are at the margins of our society and thus are the immigrant workers' lives. One of the core reasons that adult ESL learners learn English is that they view English as enabling them to move from the margins where they live to the central circle of society (Norton-Peirce, 1995; Wang, 2006). For example, immigrant adult ESL learners want to improve their English to work in better conditions such as working in an office, instead of working in the fields day and night (Kim, 2018). When the connection between what a student wants to learn and what is offered in terms of instruction is not apparent, the students' learning motivation may decrease (Comings, 2007; Han, 2009; Hidi *et al.*, 1992; Krapp, 1999). While retention is a hot topic for undergraduates in college and high school students (Jimerson *et al.*, 2002), it is also a critical factor when working with adult immigrant ESL students.

### **Adult English Learner Dropouts**

What makes adult English learners (ELs) drop out despite the increasing numbers of ELs? The adult EL enrollment rate for adult English literacy classes has decreased over the last decade from 1.1 million (2005–2006) to 0.7 million (2015–2016) (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2010, 2019). Research has investigated adult EL characteristics (Buttaro, 2002, 2004; Ellis, 2004; Gault, 2003; Gordon, 2004; McVay, 2004; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002), and some researchers have focused on adult learner's persistence (Comings, 2007; Kerka, 2005; New England Literacy Resource Center, 2009). However, the adult EL dropout phenomenon has gained relatively less scholarly attention nationwide

compared to other populations such as high school or college students. The lack of English proficiency or fewer opportunities to improve their English proficiency among the adult immigrant EL population leads to unstable, fatalistic and hopeless attitudes toward English learning (Freire, 1996; Macedo, 2000). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the reasons for dropping out to more effectively and meaningfully support adult immigrant learners of English.

## 2 Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter, I first review social justice through English language teaching (ELT) as the overarching framework of this study. Then, I review the spectrum of second language acquisition (SLA) studies and where this study's dominant theoretical framework, investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015), is located on the continuum. Following a detailed review of investment constructs, the dropout factors of push, pull and fall out (Doll *et al.*, 2013) are reviewed, as it is the second framework adapted in investigating what made the adult learners quit their investment. Lastly, I review the consideration of adult English learners' (ELs) situatedness (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the holistic and ecological nature of SLA (Douglas Fir Group, 2016) to advocate for the necessity of a paradigm shift in second language (L2) teaching.

### **Social Justice through English Language Teaching**

In the field of ELT, the topic of social justice emerged with the consideration of critical pedagogy and social transformation through education (Akbari, 2008; Hall, 2016; Hastings & Jacob, 2016). Social justice is defined as socially made conceptualizations, norms and practices toward what is right and what is wrong over time. The specific definition and intricacies of social justice are ever-evolving, dynamic and fluid, as reflected in the characteristics of its counterpart, social injustice, which has no end as it is culturally defined and perceived (Hall, 2016; McLaren, 2016).

### **Social justice: The conceptualization**

The notion of social 'injustice' is a good starting point to consider what social justice refers to. Historically, it would be thought-provoking to note that missionary teachers in the 19th-century US actively saw themselves as 'helping' Native American students and taught them under the notion of 'social justice' at that time, in which they believed that 'Indians would ultimately confront a fateful choice: civilization or extinction' (Adams, 1995: 6). The concept of social justice for the missionary



teachers during this time period was to ‘civilize the Indians’ from their ‘savage lifestyle’ by educating them through boarding school systems; in other words, by isolating and excluding the Native American students from what they viewed as ‘uncivilized’ life. In fact, this justification helped hide the brutal colonization of Native Americans behind the term ‘civilizing’. A French writer of the era, Jules Ferry, even argued that ‘the superior nations must civilize the inferior races’ (Ennis, 1945: 326). Educators in the 21st century might argue that the 19th-century missionary teachers’ beliefs and actions were too radical because they denigrated or subtracted the heritage of native peoples and violated their human rights to achieve their goals. However, the consensus in the 19th century was that civilizing supposedly ‘savage people’ was a form of social justice. The belief of equating ‘civilization’ and ‘social justice’ was destructive for the people who suffered from such ‘justice’. In retrospect, perhaps it was most harmful for the identities of students (Norton-Peirce, 1995; Peirce, 2000). ‘Taking out’ an individual from his/her cultural heritage space is based on the rationale of an inferior–superior cultural dichotomy such as racism or neocolonialism, which is unjust (Patel, 2015). Being removed from one’s heritage through subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 2005) can dehumanize and harm one’s identity. For this reason, considerations about ‘humanity and identity’ typically are at the center of discussions of social justice (Canagarajah, 2006; Hall, 2016; Nieto, 1994; Peirce, 2000).

### Influences from biases to mind

Scholars have found that aspects of ‘humanity and identity’ can be influenced, either positively or negatively, by social justice issues:

- social/racial/gender/economic differences (Hall, 2016: 4);
- unequal power dynamics between social groups – oppressors vs. the oppressed (Freire, 1996, 1998);
- underlying and imposing mindsets through holistic socially made classes and structures (Bernstein, 1971; Macedo, 1994; Macedo & Bartolomé, 2014).

Exclusion from social resources, which include not only materialistic resources such as money, cars, houses or food, but also literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills, harms the people who are implicitly and explicitly oppressed (Freire, 1996; Peirce, 2000). Particularly for adult ELs, learning English is a fundamental resource.

Another example of social injustice would be the racism-based notions, norms and terminology in our society. Such terminologies implicitly convey racism in our daily lives toward certain groups of people, although the concept of ‘race’ is a social construct. For example, ‘border-rats’ was used to refer to Mexican-Americans living on the

border (Macedo, 2000), sending a negative message and image of the ‘race’ to the public.

The hierarchical mentality provided through *terms, social norms* and *unearned privileges* schematizes a binary conceptualization about *what is right or standard* and *what is not standard, thus wrong*. In English as a second language (ESL) classrooms, the use of ‘standard English’ implies that it is the only ‘legitimate’ English to teach. Usually ‘standard English’ refers to White English speakers’ English use, their pronunciation, ways of composing phrases and idioms (Chantrain, 2016). It seems clear that the well-known ‘English-only policy’ adopted by ESL institutions since the 1980s is based on the binary mindset of English as *right* and whole variant forms of English are *wrong*. Yet, research has found that encouraging ESL students to use their first language (L1) can bring positive effects to L2 learning (Auerbach, 1993; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). However, ESL teachers often seem to forbid their students from using their L1 for the sake of improving their L2 (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003).

In the 21st-century ESL classroom, antagonism toward L1 use and variant forms of English still lingers. The term ‘nativism’ in ESL refers to biased racism in teaching. Nieto (1994) advocates for an awareness of nativism in language teaching. It is not uncommon to find that EL students are sometimes regarded as ‘less intelligent’ based on their lower English proficiency (Norton, 2012; Webster & Lu, 2012). This oversimplified categorization of immigrated students can be detrimental in many ways, including damaging to a student’s self-concept (Norton, 2012).

Oppression on a mental level might make or force the oppressed to ‘think’ in the following ways that reflect internalized biases such as gender bias, racial bias, social bias and so forth: ‘I can’t do this, I am inferior to the rich/intelligent people in power (social bias). I, as a non-White person, am born with this unintelligent brain (racial bias). I can’t master science because I am a girl (gender bias). I can’t go to college, I’d better to go to a factory, as I am from a poor family and nobody in my family went to college (economic bias)’. This type of *fatalism* (Freire, 1996) or *internalized oppression* (Fanon, 2008) is at the core of self-doubt. The fatalistic mindset is imposed, forced and indoctrinated implicitly and explicitly as illustrated in the examples above, and it is reinforced through multifaceted ways in our society. In education, these fatalistic viewpoints can be reinforced through interactions between a teacher and students and between students and their peers. Research found that students even indirectly internalize an ‘oppressed mindset’ from the power dynamics illustrated among school administrations and field teachers (Anyon, 1980; Bernstein, 1971).

Oppression in the form of gaps or unequal access to materialistic/tangible/superficial resources and the effects of this on one’s mind is dynamically alive, subtly but closely intertwined with social injustice

because it harms the students. An L2 teacher would do well to have an awareness of these notions of social justice, injustice and oppression, because ‘language’ is at the center of both tangible and mental resources in human rights and identity (Canagarajah, 2006).

The concept of social justice, by nature, is dynamically interrelated with the notions and considerations of race, privilege, socioeconomic status (gaps), equity, diversity, culture and identity (Coney, 2016). In teaching practices, and especially for language teaching, social justice can incorporate concepts of empowering toward, co-ownership of and questioning conceptions of socially made paradigms, biases and unequal power structures. This book uses a social justice lens as an overarching theoretical framework for exploring the lives of ELs and their perceptions of English language learning. Other frameworks such as investment (Norton-Peirce, 1995) and push, pull, fall out (Doll *et al.*, 2013) are adapted to explore the phenomenon with more dynamic viewpoints, which will be introduced in the next section.

### **Research Trend: Continuum and Gaps in SLA Studies**

Richard-Amato (1988), an L2 teaching methodology scholar, views L2 learning as complex. He argues that L2 learning is cognitively made and affectively influenced, which is consistent with Krashen’s (1982) notion of the importance of learners’ affective filters. In brief, Krashen’s (1982) affective filter argument focuses on the multifaceted affective domains of learning, such as anxiety, confidence, belief and feelings. People process language input cognitively and affectively. For decades, SLA researchers have tried to gain a theoretical understanding of how people really learn an L2.

From the 1960s to the 1970s, behaviorism-based English teaching methods, such as grammar translation and audio-lingual methods, were popular (Brooks, 1975; Lado, 1964; Saville-Troike, 1973). By their nature, these behaviorism-based L2 teaching methods focused on memorization and mimicking. In the 1980s, researchers put an additional focus on language input and learners’ affective aspects such as anxiety. Krashen’s (1982) monitor model and  $i + 1$  hypothesis are well-known examples. Later, scholars highlighted Chomskian perspectives, such as the innatist view, which led L2 researchers and teachers to view students from more organic viewpoints (Chomsky, 1980; Hauser *et al.*, 2002).

DeKeyser (1998) and Schmidt (2001) argued that learners must pay attention to the target language features to master an L2. The term ‘information processing’ was introduced, emphasizing how to help students ‘process’ language input with in-class exercises or tasks, e.g. jigsaw activity (Anderson, 1995; DeKeyser, 1998; VanPatten, 2004). These information processing scholars argued that language learning is ‘skill learning’; the process starts with declarative knowledge and through

practice, it becomes procedural knowledge. For example, many scholars have studied how to teach vocabulary more efficiently through information processing (Brown & Perry, 1991; Cho & Krashen, 1994; Huckin & Coady, 1999; Jianzhong, 2003). Scholars have also studied ESL writing in terms of how to teach L2 writing more effectively (Hamp-Lyons, 1991; Harklau *et al.*, 1999; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Zhang, 1995). This view sees L2 learning as cognitive development.

It was critiqued by scholars who saw language learning as more of an organic human meaning-making process (following a Vygotskian sociocultural perspective), through interpersonal interactions and intrapersonal reflections (Celce-Murcia, 2008; Donato, 1994; Dunn & Lantolf, 1998; Long, 1983, 1996; Swain, 1995, 2005, 2009).

Empirical studies of the ESL profession have investigated a plethora of approaches to language learning including behavioristic, cognitive and sociocultural approaches. Although Krashen (1982) and Richard-Amato (1988) argued the importance of affective aspects in L2 learning, studies focusing on affective domains were less researched compared to other domains in the 1980s literature.

Since the 1990s, scholars such as Peirce (1995) and Cummins (1994) have pointed out the importance of affective and organic factors in L2 learning, such as identity, power relations and sociopolitical aspects inside and outside the classroom. Adult populations, marginalized by their social status (such as immigrants or refugees), may have affective aspects more susceptible to social and economic factors outside the classroom. Some L2 motivation researchers have reframed their research focus on the dynamic interrelatedness between motivation and learner identity (Dörnyei, 2005; Giddens, 1991; Lamb, 2004; Pavlenko, 2002).

Dörnyei (2005) argued that the 'ideal' self and the 'ought-to' self can be strong motivational factors for L2 learning because mastering L2 proficiency can promote a student's ideal self. Giddens (1991) and Lamb (2004) focused more on the external environment, in which the globalization phenomenon naturally motivates students to master English as a world language. Adopting a post-structural perspective, Pavlenko (2002) challenges the traditional notion of L2 learning motivation to broaden its concepts to wider contexts by arguing that the 21st century has witnessed that more than half of the total population on Earth are already members of *multiple* ethnic, social and cultural communities. Hence, the researchers call for a paradigmatic shift in L2 motivation research. Norton-Peirce's (1995) concept of investment addressed another facet of this reconceptualization of L2 motivation and identity, because investing in L2 learning means investing in oneself. One critical assumption that Norton-Peirce (1995) offered was that the investing and self (or identity) concepts are socially constructed. A more detailed review about the theory of investment will follow.

## Investment: Ideology, Identity and Capital

Expanding Norton's notions of ELs' investment (McKinney & Norton, 2008; Norton, 1997, 2012; Norton & McKinney, 2011; Norton-Peirce, 1995), Darwin and Norton (2015) developed a theoretical framework about L2 learner's investment that consists of three specific constructs: ideology, identity and capital. Inspired by Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) approaches and Blommaert's (2010) sociolinguistic approach, Darwin and Norton developed a post-structural framework to examine what comprises an individual learner's investment in systemic ways. Within such a framework, the concepts of ideology, identity and capital work together in an intertwined way, sometimes supporting and contradicting each other, in influencing one's decisions to invest in micro and macro levels of English learning.

First, *ideology* in this framework refers to a 'normative set of ideas' (Darvin & Norton, 2015: 43). The meaning of this concept in this framework is that individuals are consistently negotiating and positioning their spaces in society, communication sites and learning institutes based on the hegemony or power structure dictated by the given ideology. For example, a student might feel that their English pronunciation is not good enough to talk to people who speak English as their L1. The hegemony and ideology in this example are that they privilege native English speakers' ways of using English language as the only 'right' way or as a more 'superior' way of speaking than the students' variant forms of pronunciation. Darwin and Norton (2015) view ideology or hegemony embedded in an L2 learning context as influencing the students' decisions on investment. As ideology is a dominant way of thinking to determine inclusion and exclusion, this hegemony comprises one component of students' investment dynamics.

Second, *identity* in this framework is 'multiple, a site of struggle, and continually changing over time and space' (Darvin & Norton, 2015: 45). Influenced by ideologies based on their own ideology (based on their backgrounds) and the new ideology encountered in an English-speaking country, L2 learners' identity is by nature multiple and has the potential to shift moment by moment. At each moment, individuals either accord or refuse their power to speak. For example, a student who learns ESL might feel that their English speaking is not legitimate enough to join a learning *site* because their English accent is not legitimate enough to participate with other fluent English speakers. In this case, the student refuses their right to speak, thus learn, based on the hegemony mindset that they deserve to be excluded. On the other hand, when the person perceives that a situation is where they can speak up for their right to speak, the student accords the power to themselves and begins speaking and learning. For example, a student can ask a conversation interlocutor to slow down their speech so they can understand and communicate

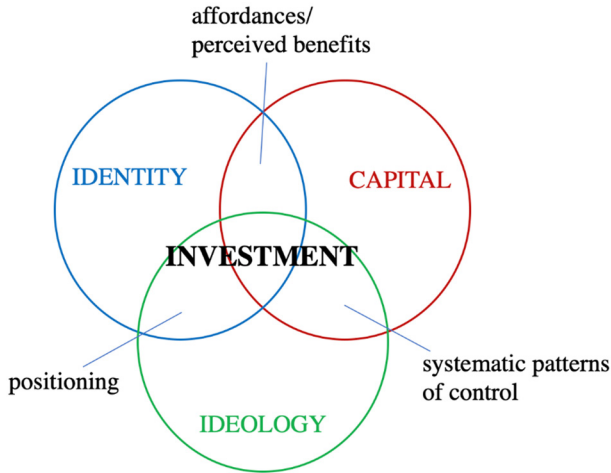
better. In this case, according to Darvin and Norton (2015), this student seems to centralize their identity within the site of learning (i.e. the conversation situation) by positioning their identity inside the conceptual site. Learners' imagined identity also plays a role in one's investment such as imagining becoming a successful English-speaking business owner, which can be rephrased as the perceived benefits of their investment.

Third, *capital* in this framework has three sub-constructs: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Darvin and Norton adapted Bourdieu's (1987) notions of these three constructs, with each standing for different characteristics of capital, all of which mean *power*:

- *Economic capital* refers to wealth, property, and income,
- *Cultural capital* refers to knowledge, educational credentials, and appreciations,
- *Social capital* refers to connections to network of power. (Darvin & Norton, 2015: 44)

What is more important about this capital notion is that the value of each is determined by ideology and one's negotiation based on the context (time and place) in which an individual encounters the capitals. The types and values of capitals are taken 'once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate' (Bourdieu, 1987: 4). Therefore, capital is fluid and dynamic, subject to the ideologies of specific groups, which is called symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1987). Symbolic capital includes two key ideas for language teachers. First, learners enter the learning space equipped with their capital such as material resources, linguistic knowledge and social networks. Second, when learners occupy new learning spaces, they not only acquire new resources but also utilize their own capital as affordances and transform them to resources that are valuable in the context. Therefore, ESL teachers should treat the learners' linguistic and cultural capitals more as affordances than constraints.

Darvin and Norton (2015) viewed these three components toward one's investment as related to each other; they support, complement and sometimes contradict each other based on the situatedness of individual students. Figure 2.1 demonstrates Darvin and Norton's model of investment. The shared space between two concepts shows the relationship between them. For example, affordances/perceived benefits between identity and capital mean that capital can provide affordances to one's identity building efforts (e.g. enabling internet access to online learners). Perceived benefits are based on the learners' imagined identity, which in turn help the learner to seek adequate forms of capital. Between identity and ideology, positioning refers to an individual's position negotiations between inclusion and exclusion. In an L2 learning situation, this might mean inclusion and exclusion toward L2 practice opportunities with a native speaker of the target language. The systemic patterns of control



**Figure 2.1** Model of investment (author created diagram based on the work of Darwin and Norton [2015: 42])

between ideology and capital refer to a socially constructed environment that either supports or constrains one's access to capital. For example, economically disadvantaged students seem to encounter systematic patterns of control that prevent them from accessing internet connections, whereas affluent students can access internet resources (Darvin & Norton, 2015). 'Language as investment' provides a framework for exploring and analyzing what makes adult ELs invest or not invest in their English learning.

### Push, Pull, Falling Out

Nationwide studies have been conducted concerning high school student dropout factors (Balfanz & Fox, 2011; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005; Cairns *et al.*, 1989; Doll *et al.*, 2013; Eckland, 1972; Englund *et al.*, 2008; Ensminger *et al.*, 1996; Griffin & Alexander, 1978; Powers & Wojtkiewicz, 2003; Rotermund, 2007). Among those, Doll *et al.*'s (2013) comparative analysis over seven nationwide quantitative studies provides a framework for the causes of high school students' dropping out, such as push, pull and falling out factors.

First, 'push' refers to any pressure from inside the school that leads students to drop out, such as negative test results, attendance issues and discipline policies (Jordan *et al.*, 1994). 'Pull' refers to distracting components inside a student that constrain the student from completing school, such as 'financial worries, out-of-school employment, family needs, and even family changes' (Doll *et al.*, 2013: 2). Lastly, Watt and Roessingh (1994) argued about the third factor of 'falling out' that refers to a situation where a student dislikes school and gains no academic interest due



to the circumstances around that student. The key distinctions among push, pull and falling out lie in agency; with push, the school is the agent, whereas for pull a student is the agent. However, falling out's agent is neither the school nor a student; the agent is 'circumstances that exist that neither the school nor the student can remediate, and as a result, the connection students have with school gradually diminishes' (Doll *et al.*, 2013: 2).

Falling out is not an active decision, rather an involuntarily forced choice of leaving school. Watt and Roessingh (1994, 2001) found that falling out decisions are forced by many situational reasons such as educational budget cuts, the necessity of financially supporting family by part-time jobs, fatigue and lack of sleep due to work, and fear of being punished for unfinished homework derived from their socially structured tiring life. Among push, pull and falling out factors, Doll *et al.* (2013) found that pulling was the most dominant cause, followed by push and falling out. This book adopted this framework to explore dropout factors for the adult ELs who enrolled in an evening English literacy class.

### **Situatedness of Immigrant Adult Learners of English Literacy**

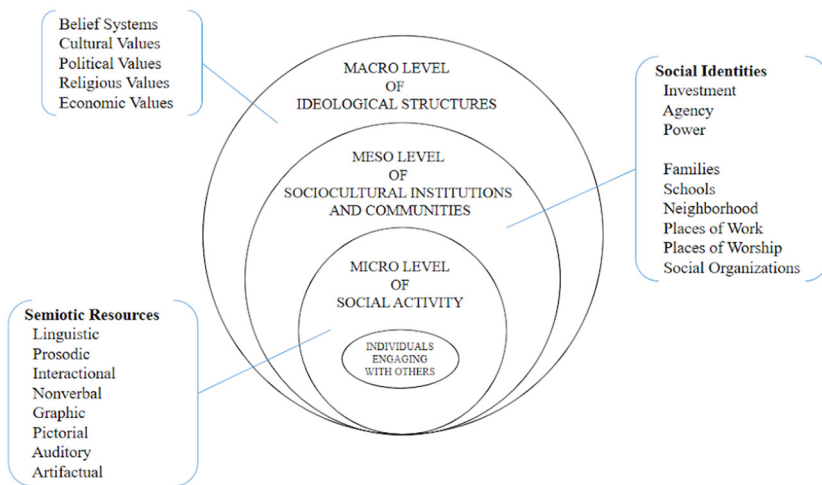
Because one's identity and investment are influenced by one's situatedness (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and considering that the fundamental inquiry of this book is *What makes adult ELs either persist or drop out?*, I would emphasize the importance of the situatedness of adult ELs to explore the target phenomenon more plausibly. The themes found through previous research of adult learners' learning motivation seem to converge into four themes: job, family, self-actualization and being a community member in a new society (Vafai, 2016; Valentine, 1990; Wang, 2006). However, the population for each study has shown different priority patterns. Valentine (1990) shows that personal development is the number one desire for ELs, whereas Wang (2006) and Vafai (2016) show that job needs were preeminent. The need of many ELs for academic purposes is to pass a standardized test, such as the test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), in order to pursue higher education in English-speaking countries (Hsieh, 2017). On the contrary, immigrant adult ELs for community purposes have different needs based on the four aforementioned themes for their functional and transitional desires (Auerbach, 1993). Understanding the different 'situatedness' between ELs for academic and community purposes is important because that situatedness foregrounds different goals and characteristics of adult ELs (Gee, 2012, 2014; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Menard-Warwick (2005) expanded the adult ELs' situation by considering the larger sociopolitical issues surrounding students, closely related to governmental policies toward immigrants in the US. For example, the 2016 US presidential candidate Donald



Trump's pledge to expel undocumented immigrants (Wang, 2016) would have directly affected the immigrated adult students. Thus, the situatedness of students must be explored with multiple lenses to shed light on adult ELs' investment factors for learning English.

## Holistic and Ecological Nature of SLA

For decades, SLA scholars have studied how to teach content knowledge more effectively such as how to teach phonics, speech skills, writing skills and so on (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Swain, 2005). However, affective aspects in L2 learning are as important as how to teach content knowledge, which seems to call scholars and teachers' attention to a more ecological and comprehensive approach to SLA, ranging from sociopolitical concerns, psychological aspects, cultural considerations, learner identity, investment and the social responsibility of English teaching. SLA scholars have devised an ecological approach to SLA by integrating the diverse and dynamic nature of L2 learning called the transdisciplinary framework (Costa & Norton, 2017; Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Composed of renowned SLA scholars such as Merrill Swain, Bonny Norton and Diane Larsen-Freeman, the Douglas Fir Group has developed the multifaceted nature of language learning and teaching in 2016 depicted in Figure 2.2. In this framework, the nature of L2 learning is multifaceted, multilayered and consistently evolving over time, ranging from the macro level of ideological structures (belief systems, cultural values), the meso level of sociocultural institutions and communities (social identities, families, place of work) and the micro



**Figure 2.2** The multifaceted nature of language learning and teaching (author created diagram based on the work of the Douglas Fir Group [2016: 25])

level of social activities (individual engaging with semiotic resources). The aforementioned investment framework is located in the meso-level layer of social identities. It is imperative that ESL teachers and stakeholders grapple with the nature of the multilayeredness of L2 learning.

This book has used three theoretical frameworks: investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015), push/pull/fall out (Doll *et al.*, 2013) and a holistic approach to language learning (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). Among these, the main framework is investment, that is related to learner's identity; thus, it also relates to social justice to some extent. Push/pull/fall out is related to social justice, because the dropout factor constructs are socially constructed. Finally, the holistic approach to language learning is related to the situatedness of learners and investment, because it shows the interwoven and multifaceted nature of one's language learning.

# 3 Adult English Literacy Learners in America and Research Context

## **Adult English Literacy Learners: Who Are They?**

In 2019, 17.4% of the US workforce (28.4 million) were immigrants (US Department of Labor, 2020). The number of foreign-born workers increased from 23 million in 2006 to 28.4 million in 2019. Of the 28.4 million foreign-born workers in the US, almost half were Latinx and 30% were Asian. One of the most difficult barriers for the immigrated workforce is language (Valentine, 1990). According to the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (2020), adult English learners (ELs) enrolled in adult English literacy classes numbered 1.1 million in 2019–2020, which means that over 20 million ELs were not enrolled. Tucker (2006) reported that adult EL classes in the US have long waiting lists of up to three years. Among the students enrolled nationwide, Latinx learners accounted for 44%. In Oklahoma, Latinx ELs accounted for 35% of adult language learners (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2019). Many jobs available to ELs may entail risk of physical accident, and their lack of English proficiency may keep them revolving around the margins of the job market (Hopkins, 2002; Navarez, 2015). Studies have shown that adult foreign-born workers' employability is related to English proficiency (Hyman, 2002; Mathews-Aydinli, 2008). In 2021, adult education grants totaled \$688 million, only 0.7% of the US education budget (\$95,545 million) (US Department of Education, 2021).

## **Term Matters: ESL, EFL, ELL and EL**

Several different terms refer to learners of English as an additional language other than their first language (L1) based on learning contexts. One relatively simple clarification between English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) is whether a learner lives in the target language-speaking country or in a country that does not speak the target language (Nayar, 1997). The former is called 'second language' and the latter is called 'foreign language'. For example, if a student from Mexico learns English and lives in the US simultaneously,

the setting is called ESL. In the teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) field, ESL is widely used to refer to academic ELs who learn English to pursue their higher education in an English-speaking country (Nayar, 1997). On the contrary, when a Mexican student living in Mexico learns English at a school in Mexico, this situation is called EFL.

Another term, English language learning (ELL), seems to be categorized under the concept of ESL, with the individual living in a country where a second language is used. In the US, ELL refers to K-12 students whose L1 is a language other than English, and who have less proficiency in English. However, one issue with using the term ELL is that the term has a somewhat negative connotation that any student labeled as ELL is ‘positioned in a category outside the category of mainstream language learners in the classroom’ (English, 2009, cited in Lee & Lu, 2012). A student categorized as ELL may give the impression that the student is at the margins of society (Hastings & Jacob, 2016). Language is power and can be used as a means of keeping people at the margins of society (Freire, 1996).

This critique seems to lead to a discussion of the necessity for an alternative term for ELL. The new term, English learners, was introduced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed by the US Department of Education in December 2015 (Alicandri, 2016). Since the ESSA, many US states have begun to use the term (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017). However, several government agencies and public schools still use the term ELL (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2015).

For adult immigrated populations who learn English in the US for non-academic purposes, EL seems appropriate and has ‘less baggage’ than other terms. This study uses ‘English learner’ to refer to Spanish-speaking adult learners who learn English at a literacy center through evening classes.

### **Adult English Literacy Class Characteristics**

The adult ELs’ learning environment seems hard to characterize with precision. Unlike in K-12 schools, adult EL courses have a wider age range, from 16 to 90+, and students with a variety of educational backgrounds ranging from no education to PhDs (Comings, 2007; Mathews-Aydinli, 2008). The classroom venues for adult ELs tend to be diverse – a public library meeting room, a cafeteria or a classroom in a local church (Han, 2009; Menard-Warwick, 2005; Peirce *et al.*, 1993; Schalge & Soga, 2008). The adult students’ desire to invest is generally high, regardless of their backgrounds or language proficiency because adult ELs must go to class in their ‘free’ time (Bernat, 2004; Derwing, 2003; Hyman, 2002; Valentine, 1990). Despite their high willingness in English learning

investment, poor learning outcomes are recurring problems (Bernat, 2004; Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, 2019). The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) reported that in recent years, Latinx adults' English prose levels (written or spoken language) have fallen dramatically (from 234 to 216, which is almost Below Basic) (National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2005). The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (2019) reports that adult English literacy learners' skill gain rate was 46% in 2013–2016, but it decreased to about 36% in 2019. Another consideration for the adult EL context is the teachers' unique characteristics. Most adult EL teachers are either volunteers or part-timers; job security is relatively low and appropriately trained teachers are rare (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008).

### **Center for English Literacy (CEL) in This Study**

The CEL is a non-profit English teaching institute located in an urban city in the Southwestern US. The CEL's primary funding sources are from various grants, donations and fundraising events. The CEL was founded in the 1980s to address adult illiteracy by helping adults improve their basic literacy and math skills. The head office is located in the city's downtown, and teachers work day and night at satellite locations to teach adult ELs. In 2017, when I taught at the CEL, 13 teachers worked as part-time teachers and 17 satellite classrooms were operating across the city. Classes usually had an enrollment of 5–10 students, mostly refugees and immigrants. Student numbers fluctuated for many reasons, including family issues and time conflicts. I taught English to refugee and immigrant groups from Mexico, Myanmar, Vietnam, Panama and Chile at the CEL for four years. The teaching venues included a break room in a metal valve manufacturing factory, a library meeting room in an elementary school and a room in a local church.

### **Participant Characteristics and Methods**

The participants in this study were six adult Latinx ELs, who enrolled in and studied at a non-profit community literacy institute in a city in the Southwestern US. Most of the students had day jobs in fields such as construction, housekeeping and manufacturing. Their ages ranged from 20 to 50. They had resided in the US from less than 5 years to more than 20 years. All the participants were from Mexico and their L1 was Spanish. I taught English to these students in the fall of 2016. The two-hour class met twice a week (Mondays and Wednesdays). The class used the Basic English Skill Test (BEST) Literacy developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics as a pre- and post-test to evaluate students' progress. However, the BEST Literacy that my class used has only reading and writing components to assess – no speaking or listening. Although the test developer launched Best Plus 2.0 that includes oral

assessment in 2016 (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2021), the CEL used the previous BEST only in 2017.

To explore untold adult ELs' stories: (1) I interviewed the six participants about what makes them invest in English classes and what makes them drop out; (2) I observed and took photographs of their lives at home, at work and in classes; and (3) I kept field notes and memos for my reflection and interpretation of the phenomenon. I used semi-structured interviews and each participant's interview was conducted for one to one and a half hours. The interview questions consisted of open-ended questions to listen to the participants' voices. Example questions include: In your life, what makes you feel that you want to (or don't want to) learn English more? (probing question); and Okay, you said \_\_\_\_\_ made you think that you want to (or don't want to) learn English more. What specific aspects made you feel that way? Can you give me any examples?

I collected the data and interacted with the participants for 19 months, from May 2016 to November 2017. Note that in the interview data some students said that they wanted to learn English and work with me (teacher John) again, and I have represented their true words but I don't want it to be mistaken for self-praise. Also, throughout this book, the participants' original narratives with grammar or vocabulary mistakes are used in order to maintain authenticity.

### **Adult EL Stories through My Eyes: Subjectivity Statement**

As is the nature of a qualitative study (Creswell, 2012), it is essential for me to clarify my subjectivity. Because I was a researcher outside of the study population group, the data collected were interpreted through my eyes. As a qualitative researcher, I clarify my subjectivity for bracketing my unforeseen bias when collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data and phenomenon. I uphold the constructivism that values the multiple realities based on individuals (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I agree that the data interpretation is constructed by the interactions between the participants and myself as a researcher, and I acknowledge that my interpretation is a plausible facet of the multiple realities (Shank, 2002). Therefore, I am open to other interpretations respecting the constructivism.

I was born and raised in South Korea. My maternal grandparents lived in the northern region of the Korean Peninsula before the Korean War broke out in 1950. To avoid the warzone, they moved to South Korea, where my mother was born. When I was young, I thought of my mother's family as poor, but they 'became' poor because of the war. Before the war, they had a house, money and land. The government said that the war would end in a few months, but many people living in the north, including my mother's siblings, moved to the south to avoid the conflict. Once they had moved to South Korea, it was not possible to return to the north and it has remained impossible for the past 70 years.

On the contrary, originating in the south, my father's family was influential and possessed land and money. To make a long story short, it seems that the Korean War made my mother's family poor and my father's family rich.

I have always liked language, whether Korean, Chinese or English. I served in the Korean Air Force as a weather forecaster for nine years, and then worked at a semiconductor company for four years. These jobs were okay, but not creative; thus, I asked myself what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. The answer was to become a language educator, so I came to the US to earn my master's and doctorate degrees in second language teaching. After receiving my master's in teaching English to speakers of other languages (MA TESOL), I taught at academic ESL centers, where many international students go to study English prior to entering US colleges. At the same time, I worked at a non-profit literacy center that sent ESL teachers to high-need areas. For one year, I taught refugees from Myanmar, Mexico and Panama in a factory's cafeteria. I also taught adult Latinx students at a local elementary school and church. At a hotel, I taught a group of housekeeping staff who had moved to the US from Latin America.

Over the course of about six years, these language teaching experiences were creative and rewarding as an educator. However, when it was time to ponder my doctorate dissertation research topic, I decided to work with immigrants, not college prep students. I asked myself why I wanted to work with them, and it seems that, because I had family members marginalized by the post-Korean War sociocultural structure in East Asia, I was interested in working with adult ELs who are members of marginalized populations in the US. The ELs whom I worked with were called 'illegals' and 'border rats' (Macedo, 2000), and were 'subject to deportation'. With the Trump administration's radical immigration policy during January 2017–January 2021 (Wang, 2016), I began to feel my students' sense of security was shaken, just as my mother's family status in South Korea in the 1950s was shaken.

As an ESL teacher, I went by an English nickname 'John'. Because I am a non-native speaker of English, I was somewhat worried about my class, which made me prepare hard and approach my teaching in a deliberate way. As mentioned in the introduction, I had two substitute teachers take over when I was absent for two months due to health reasons; I didn't worry at all because my substitutes were native speakers of English. However, when I returned, my students said that they learned nothing from the subs. If I were my students, I would be more likely to welcome native speaker teachers than non-native speaker teachers. However, that was not the case. After listening to their narratives, I realized that such student stories often go unheard, especially by ESL stakeholders. This qualitative study describes the untold, socioculturally situated and ongoing journey of immigrants to learn English in America.

## **The Purpose of This Book**

This book focuses on students' identity-level meaning making as a subjective and active participant in second language learning. First, this book explores adult ESL students' needs for learning English. Second, it investigates diverse possible factors that might impact adult students' desire for learning English. Third, it explores the untold stories of English learning journeys and decision-making rationales. In other words, it reveals what learning English means to ELs, and what made them persist or drop out of English class. The questions that this book pursues answer to are

- Who are adult ELs at the CEL?
- Why do adult ELs at the CEL invest in learning English?
- What makes adult ELs at the CEL decide to stay or drop out?

The untold stories and voices of adult immigrant ELs in the US will be heard in Chapter 4.



# 4 The Six Persistent Learners

## Irma's Story

*I need English to protect my kids. My two daughters, 9 and 11 year old, translated in an emergency room 18 years ago when my ex-husband died due to cancer...it was so hard, so sad. I couldn't speak any English, couldn't protect my kids. I wanted to tell the doctors, 'talk to me, don't touch my kids', but I couldn't. I always want to learn English, but I dropped my English class, because the teacher didn't care for us, never prepared for the class. We did the same thing for three days. It was waste of time.*

Irma (pseudonym) is from Mexico. She is 51 years old and has lived in the US for 27 years. She was born in Mexico and came to the US with her husband to work. Irma's two daughters, Samantha and Eli (pseudonyms), were born in Texas. Irma has done many different physical jobs, including hand-picking grapes and berries, making medical equipment and bags in a factory, nursing elderly people and making cardboard. Irma is proud of herself for working full-time in the US, and prefers factory work to other jobs, saying, 'I like factory working more than other jobs like housekeeping and restaurant. I worked at a factory for 16 years. It is easy and comfortable for me'. She had difficult times at work due to her lack of English proficiency. 'No English, heavy work', Irma said. When she started her first factory job at the medical equipment factory, her boss asked her to carry a heavy box. To Irma, the box was way too heavy to carry. She wanted to say that she couldn't do it, but she didn't know how to say it, so she just mumbled. Her boss pushed her to do it anyway. Irma ended up carrying the box, hurting her back. Avoiding work exploitation is one reason for Irma to learn English.

Recently, Irma is very proud of her English at work, because she is a translator between her boss and her colleagues. Irma's boss looks for Irma to communicate work orders with other Mexican workers. 'I am so happy when my boss called me, I translate, and we both understand', Irma said. Her two colleagues, Marcella and Ibbby (pseudonyms), asked