

Immigrant women, English learning, and social interactions:

– a qualitative study in Vancouver, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Immigration and language learning are topics of interest to many people around the world; it is a daily concern for immigrants and for people who are welcoming immigrants to their country. Canada has experienced a lot of immigration for many years, and is therefore a suitable location for research on language learning and language use. Canucks English Centre (CEC) is an education centre where mostly women attend to improve their English skills, as well as take other courses that are relevant to their situation as low income parents. Through qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 13 women that have at some point taken classes at CEC, information about female English learners' subjective experiences were examined. The aim of this research project was to learn more about English learners' language use, and how social interaction in English was experienced by the individual. This study also set out to learn more about individual action and choices made by the women in an effort to learn more English. This research project describes the reality for women that are learning English and living their lives at the same time. The interviews revealed many challenges faced by women in their situation, for example lack of time, money and support to attend classes. On the other hand, the research describes active choices made by the women to improve their English skills, such as volunteering or choosing neighbourhoods where people speak English. A factor that has a big impact on the women's motivation to learn English was the desire to help their children with their school and to communicate with their children's teachers. A major finding was that almost all women were unsatisfied with their ability to use English. This finding is something that needs more attention, as every woman should feel confident and competent enough to communicate in the official language of the country in which they live.

ABBREVIATIONS

ESOL English for Speakers of Other Languages

CEC Canadian English Centre

SLA Second Language Acquisition

CHAT Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

MS Marinette Sedin, the researcher

1 INTRODUCTION

Everyone who has tried to learn a new language as an adult knows that it is a challenging task, taking years of studying and practicing to be able to communicate in the new language. The ability to learn varies among people (Marton & Säljö, 2005). Some people have many years of previous education and can easily transfer their existing skills to the process of learning the language, while others have less educational experience and struggle to find an efficient study approach (Marton, 2006). Exposure to the language differs and depend on factors such as: family, location and job situation (Harper et. al., 1996). Certainly, frequent exposure will speed up learning for most people. In some cases though, the individual can live in a country and never fully learn the official language (Norton, 2010). Language is more than words and sentences; it holds emotional value (Colic-Peisker, 2002). Not knowing the language in the new country can cause an immigrant a lot of emotional stress; it is frustrating when communication fails. On the other hand, knowing the language can create opportunities for employment, friendships, schooling, and so on (Colic-Peisker, 2002). Language helps shape who you are as an individual; thus, learning a language is more than just learning vocabulary and grammar, it is about re-shaping your thoughts about the world and about yourself (e.g. Colic-Peisker, 2002; Norton, 2010; Taylor-Leech & Yates, 2012). Identity and language are closely interrelated.

Language learning and the social interactions that take place during the learning process are fascinating to me and I am curious to explore the topic further. In my research, I intend to interview immigrant women in Vancouver, Canada, to explore their subjective experiences of increasing their English proficiency and how their social interactions changed in the process.

1.1 Background

Canucks English Centre¹, CEC, is a non-profit organization located in one of the poorest areas of Vancouver, Canada. The primary goal of the organization is to offer family literacy programming in conjunction with other service providers in the area to support families in their learning. The organization supports learners by also removing some of the barriers to learning; lunch is provided, children are looked after, and bus tickets are given out for free. CEC offers a number of programs to anyone that is in need, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is one of the programs offered. Most participants are immigrants, many are mothers, and some come from problematic backgrounds, such as war-torn countries or abusive relationships.

I am curious to learn more about the ESOL program participants' use of English outside of the classroom, how they learn, and how they feel during social interactions with English speaking people. Having migrated myself, I appreciate the emotional aspect of language, and how closely language and identity are connected. I want to ensure that the participants in my study are given the opportunity to describe their experiences subjectively, because to help English improve their situations, one must first learn more about their experience. During my time as a facilitator in the ESOL course, I have often wondered how to help learners improve their English in such a way as to help them function better in the community. This research reflects an interest of mine, because the ability to communicate with people outside of the classroom has always been the goal I had in mind when planning my lessons and I agree with Young-Scholten (2013) that socially relevant research is needed in this area.

¹ Canucks English Centre is a fictive name to protect the privacy of the participants.

1.2 Research aim and questions

The aim of this research is to understand female English learners' identity formation and learning while they participate in social interactions in English. More specifically, this research is set up to explore the use of English in social activities that female English learners take part in in their everyday lives.

The questions used to guide this research are as followed:

1. Who do the learners interact with in English and what are the purposes and topics of their social interactions?
2. How do the learners perceive themselves and other social actors when they use English in social situations?
3. What are the choices the learners make to actively participate in the community and actively learn English?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

As more and more people migrate and live short term or long term in a new country and as communication across national borders increase, research on second (or third, or fourth) language learning is both relevant and abundant. Immigration is an important topic as well, because of the large number of people that are affected either by immigrating or welcoming immigrants to their country.

I have focussed my literature review on five areas that are relevant to my research: language and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research to understand some of the mechanics of language learning; immigration and language learning to outline some benefits and difficulties in learning a new language as an immigrant; language and identity to emphasize the close relationship between language and a person's emotions; social interactions to show the importance of social interactions in integration; gender in previous research in immigrant studies to describe research in immigrant studies from a female perspective.

2.1 Language research and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research²

Glaserfeld (1989) writes that "language users must individually construct the meaning of words, phrases, sentences, and texts" (p.126); he further explains that information that is needed for the construction of language comes from interactions with other language users, it is an active

² I interpret the terms acquisition and learning interchangeably in the context of Second Language Learning/Acquisition research.

process. To be considered proficient in a language, one needs a large enough vocabulary and previous construction of meaning associated with the words to avoid discrepancies during interactions with others (Glaserfeld, 1989). The language learners' experience will determine the meaning of words and categories (Glaserfeld, 1989) and the meaning of categories (such as "masculinity") are constructions that take place through participation and interaction between people (Bryman, 2012).

Cognitive theories dominated SLA research for many years (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). For the first 20 years in SLA research, the process of learning a second language was considered an entirely internalized, cognitive process. The research at that time, from about 1970-1990, contained descriptions and explanations of input, transfer, output, etc. (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). In 2006, the cognitive perspectives were still the most common perspectives among SLA researchers, although researchers more often included social and contextual factors in their work (Zuengler & Miller, 2006).

Sociocultural theories in SLA research are becoming more common (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Firth and Wagner (quoted in Zuengler & Miller, 2006) argued that too much attention has been given to the individual in language learning, they argue that researchers put too much focus on mental processing and too little focus on contextual and social factors. They also suggest that language learning and language use cannot be separated because "learning (or acquisition) occurs through use" (Zuengler & Miller, 2006, p. 45). Still, other SLA researchers (e.g. Gass, 1998, quoted in Zuengler & Miller, 2006) disagree with Firth and Wagner's position and maintain that language learning is an individual mental process. The argument in this research is

that language use *is* language learning and therefore concludes that language learning is social and dependent on participation in social interactions.

2.2 Immigration and language learning

Language learning carries social importance. Learning a new language is not an easy task, but proficiency in the language of the host country can improve the everyday life of an immigrant (Yates, 2011). A study on Croatian immigrants to Australia describes English proficiency as being important both to practical integration, such as finding a job, and emotional integration, which is a sense of belonging and feeling at home in a new country (Colic-Peisker, 2002).

Learning the language of the country in which you live has social benefits, but opportunities for social involvement is also essential for language learning (Yates, 2011). Unfortunately, opportunities to use the language are often hard to find. Learning a new language is often described as a Catch-22 situation, an inescapable situation with contradictory rules, where the learner needs to interact with English speakers to learn, but does not initially know enough English to interact in English comfortably. Cumin and Gill (quoted in Norton, 2013) discussed opportunities for learning in a project where they aimed to improve language education for a group of Punjabi-speakers in Vancouver. They found that the women, although they had lived in Canada for an average of six years, rarely had a chance to interact with English speaking people. Further, Norton (2010) argues that many immigrants never get the opportunity to use English enough to learn to communicate; this lack of a functioning level of proficiency can lead to social exclusion and a failure to integrate.

Social language learning strategies are an important factor to consider when learning or teaching a language. Taylor-Leech and Yates (2012) writes that the use of language learning strategies, such as memory strategies or retrieval strategies, is shown to improve language learning. The authors emphasize that social strategies are the most beneficial strategies for language learning. A few examples of social strategies include actively looking for opportunities to practice speaking the language and being involved in the community. The use of language learning strategies increases as language proficiency increases. A big challenge, according to the authors, is that most language learners are not aware of these strategies, and are therefore not intentionally using them. Barriers for using social strategies are outlined in the article by Taylor-Leech and Yates (2012), some of these reasons are: a strong native language network, low confidence and limited opportunities to practice the new language. It is evident that to learn a language, one must participate in social interactions. The more social interactions that take place, the better the learning will become.

Language learning in the work environment depends on social interactions. Most of the information on the benefits of language proficiency and second language learning concerns the labour market (Liu, 2015). One example is a study by Harper, Norton Pierce and Burnaby (1996); they conducted a study in a garment factory regarding challenges immigrant women face in some Canadian workplaces. The study showed that interaction between English speakers and speakers of other languages were minimal even though programs of English education were in place. Billett and Choy (2012) emphasize the social and participatory factors in workplace learning; they argue that “the mediating factors of situation, society and culture are central to

understanding, learning and advancing the knowledge and skills needed for work” (p. 270). They argue further that participation in work is not sufficient to maintain a suitable level of knowledge for employment; guidance and other educational activities are needed for optimal learning.

Tynjälä (2008) describes network learning where the argument is that social interactions with others will be more beneficial than working alone. A network is “a forum for the exchange, transformation and creation of knowledge” (p.137). Again, the importance of social interaction is emphasized. It is very likely that this is true in situations outside of work as well, especially since authentic situations are described as helpful in learning (Billett & Choy, 2012; Tynjälä, 2008), and nothing is more authentic than real life.

2.3 Language and identity

Colic-Peisker (2002) argues that “[p]eople’s identity is a combination of their own idea of who they are and ideas others have about them” (p. 159). Identity formation is an ongoing process where people identify with a particular group at a particular time, and an individual is also labelled with a certain identity by others (Killian & Johnson, 2006). An individual is situated in the larger social world, and the individual’s identity is therefore constantly constructed and reconstructed in the context of the social life of the individual (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Identity negotiation is inseparable from the social act of language learning (Norton, 2010; Taylor-Leech & Yates, 2012). Immigration and language learning are major changes in a person’s life. The immigrant’s social environment and ability to communicate with other people are drastically changed, and this means that the immigrant’s identity must change to adapt to the new situation.

Identity and language are inseparable. Norton (2013) describes the lives of five women that are learning English and reconstructing their identities as they learn how to communicate in Canada. While English proficiency seemed to have a positive impact on identity in most cases, learning English also caused some conflict with the desire to identify with people from the native country and language. Norton (2013) writes about Katarina, who came to Canada with a six-year-old daughter. Katarina cried every day when they first arrived because of the realization that her daughter would grow up speaking English instead of Polish. The story of Katarina is one example of the emotional value of language and the connection between a person's identity and language.

An identity label can be ascribed to a person by other people. In a study by Liu (2015), it becomes clear that identification is important, but difficult. Liu describes that one can often find a discrepancy between "self-claimed" identity and "ascribed" identity. In one case, the interviewee stated that he or she was "treated as Chinese in Australia but Australian in China" (p. 15). Ng (1990) studied immigrant women in the workplace and noted that the identity "immigrant women" is assigned to women; the label is stereotypically used to describe a certain ethnicity, often non-English speaking and occupying a certain low skilled job position. Professional migrants in an article by Colic-Peisker (2002) argue that their "social status is adversely affected" (p. 159), because of the fact that they are seen as "aliens" (p. 159). Thus, a foreign accent or a different communication style can lead to lower status in society, misunderstandings, and a feeling of "otherness" (Colic-Peisker, 2002).

Identity has an impact on social interactions. As an English learner increases English proficiency, social interactions will be affected by changes in the identity of the individual. “While some identity positions may limit and constrain opportunities for learners to listen, speak, read, or write, other identity positions may offer enhanced sets of possibilities for social interactions and human agency” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 414). Liu (2015) writes about Chinese migrants to Australia who had to familiarize themselves with a new culture and they had to learn English to “be accepted as [members] of the mainstream society” (p. 2).

2.4 Social interaction

Social interactions are important in the integration into society. Low levels of literacy are related to negative consequences such as poor health and social exclusion (Young-Scholten, 2013). A research project by de Greef, Segers and Verte (2012) shows the benefit of socially relevant research; the research they conducted concerns training programs that focus on other gains than skills for the job market, a focus relatively rare in research in adult education. The study describes social interactions as a process of gaining connections in the community with social inclusion as a result; they recommend adult education programs to support this process of gaining connections in vulnerable adults. The authors argue that increased social inclusion will help adults with skills needed for life, such as raising children and taking care of personal finances.

Canadian immigrant service organizations (ISOs) offer services to facilitate settlement in Canada, but they also provide an opportunity for learning and identity formation. While the

reason ISOs exist is to provide assistance in the settlement process with courses such as employment preparation and language, an important “side effect” of the ISOs locations is that they create space for interaction. Gibb, Hamdon and Jamal (2008) describe how women used time between classes to discuss and compare their experiences, and to collectively make sense of their situation. The women in the study place value on this unstructured space, and see it as important support of their immigration experience and identity negotiation. Above examples show that interaction with others help people to make sense of their experiences and changing identities.

Several research studies have explored changes that occur among immigrant women when they meet and interact with Canadians. Chen (et. al, 2014) describes the parenting clash that can occur when Chinese mothers move to Canada and are exposed to Canadian parenting. In Australia as well, Chinese women changed parts of their lives, such as education and parenting methods, when they immigrated to Australia (Liu, 2015). Changes in women’s lives will most likely affect their social interactions and vice versa. Exactly how English skills, social interactions and changes in women’s lives are related remains to be explored.

2.5 Gender and previous research in immigrant studies

Most research on immigrants’ struggle to learn English and the consequences of that struggle concerns the workplace, and the majority of research is focussed on men. Until the 1970s, for example, “women were largely absent in immigrant studies” (Shan, 2015, p. 47). Walters and Manicom (1996) are the authors of the introduction to a book about gender in popular education,

and they highlighted the need for feminist education to start from “where women are” (p. 9).

Where women are can mean a number of things: geographic location, workplace, or the place of feelings and emotions to name a few. To ensure that feminist education can start from where women are, researchers must understand women’s circumstances and this research project is set up to increase the understanding of women’s experiences.

Although subjective experiences of women have been reported in previous research, the reports are few. Norton’s (2013) in-depth description of five women’s experiences as immigrants in Canada is a good example of a report of the experience of immigrant women in their own words. In Norton’s (2013) study, the subjects were either young without children, married with children, or married without children. They were all able to find work and therefore had an income and often found opportunities to practice English. They were all good learners, in a few cases with many years of previous education.

2.6 Implications for this study

In my research, I want to focus on language use, based on the argument used in socio-cultural theories of learning that language learning is a factor and a consequence of language use (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). The descriptions of social interactions in the everyday life of women will put this argument into context.

As argued by Norton and Toohey (2011) among others, identity is an important factor in language learning. By asking questions specifically about the women’s perceptions, I hope to

understand more about the effects of positive and negative emotions and the consequences these emotions and perceptions have on language learning.

Social interaction is important for language learning and integration on both a practical level and an emotional level (Colic-Peisker, 2002, among others). This research hopes to increase an understanding of what types of social interactions take place in the everyday life of female immigrants, how social interactions are experienced, and the learning that takes place during these social interactions.

I would like to examine opportunities to use English among situations and people that are not employed or only working part-time. I am interested in subjective experiences of social interaction and how descriptions of social interactions change as English proficiency increases. In line with Shan's (2015) argument that gender is a social relation aspect that does not work in isolation, I look at gender as one of many pieces in the total experience of women's lives. Thus, this research does not specifically pinpoint gender as being more influential than other factors in social interactions among immigrant women. A deeper analysis of gender, and the relation to social interactions and language, need to be explored in future research.

The majority of research on language learning has involved educated, middle-class learners and this leads to an inability to fully understand the challenges faced by socially excluded learners without previous education (Young-Scholten, 2013). By including a wider variety of learners in research, we can paint a clearer picture of how contextual factors like socio-economic status and gender affect language learning. Therefore, I am interested in extending the existing research to involve women that are vulnerable in additional ways, other than being immigrants. I want to include immigrant women that are single mothers and/or are poor and/or have limited previous

education and/or come from difficult circumstances such as domestic abuse and war. Some women in my study might have undiagnosed learning difficulties.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this research, I investigate how English learners use English and how they learn in the context of social interactions in learning communities. I start from the basic premise that knowledge is subjective and constantly constructed during the process of living life. I therefore find it suitable to use a social-cultural learning theory as a theoretical framework, because it allows me to emphasize the social aspect of learning. Social theories of learning argue that knowledge is much more than an individual possession; instead, knowledge and learning are the results of a collective process that occurs in communities of people where resources are shared (Mercer & Howe, 2012).

3.1 Cultural-Historical Activity Theory: Background

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is mainly built upon the work of Vygotsky, Leont'ev, and Engeström. Engeström himself describes the development of CHAT in terms of three theoretical generations (Engeström & Glavenau, 2012).

The first generation is represented by the work by Lev Vygotsky, who introduced mediation and cultural artifacts as important parts in interaction and learning. An individual's action was not seen as an isolated act, but as heavily affected by mediating factors (Bakhurst, 2009, p.199).

“The individual could no longer be understood without his or her cultural means; and the society could no longer be understood without the agency of individuals who use and produce artifacts” (Engeström, 2015, p. xiv). Vygotsky saw language as an important tool because language allows for interaction and is the bearer of culture (Martin & Peim, 2009). A concept that was created by

Vygotsky, and still bears importance in today's learning theories, is the "zone of proximal development", which is described as the difference between learning that a person can achieve individually and the learning that can be achieved with the assistance of a more competent person (Engeström, 2015).

The second generation of CHAT, initiated by the work by Alexei Leont'ev, differentiated between individual action and collective activity and focussed on the interrelations and division of labour among individuals and their community (Engeström, 2015). The concepts activity, action, and operation were incorporated into CHAT. Activity is when individuals act on an object to reach some goal, actions are intermediate steps toward the object to reach some goal, and operations are actions carried out under specified constraints (Postholm, 2015).

Researchers working with the third generation of CHAT saw the need to incorporate multiple perspectives into the theory and focus on interacting activity systems."This expansion is accompanied with increased attention to the dynamics of the subject, with new important openings into the analysis of agency, experiencing, and emotion" (Engeström & Glavenau, 2012, p. 515).

The third generation of CHAT is interesting for this research project, because this latest generation incorporates many of the factors that are important in a holistic perspective on learning. Some of these factors are that individuals benefit from appropriate mediation, individuals do not live in isolation but are affected by components from many parts of their lives, and the third generation of CHAT promotes research that incorporates many aspects of individuals' lives, such as emotional and subjective experiences.

3.2 What is Cultural-Historical Activity Theory?

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory is a theoretical framework that can be explained with the help of five principles (Engeström, 2001, p. 136).

The first principle describes the prime unit of analysis as “a collective, artifact-mediated and object-oriented activity system, seen in its network relations to other activity systems” (p. 136).

Individual actions are to be viewed as parts of the larger activity system. An activity system has six components: subject, object, instruments, rules, community, and division of labour.

The second principle builds on the view of collective involvement in activity systems and emphasizes multi-voicedness. The second principle thus states that “an activity system is always a community of multiple points of view, traditions, and interests” (p. 136). Both the individual parts of the activity system and the activity system as a whole have histories that are carried on in the development. The recognition of multiple histories brings the discussion to the third principle that describes activity systems as dynamic and created over time, and one must take into account the history of the activity system in analysis. To explain what mechanism causes change and development in activity systems, principle four describes contradictions within and between activity systems. Contradictions can cause “disturbances and conflicts, but also innovative attempts to change the activity” (p. 137). Change over time and from a larger perspective is presented using the fifth principle of CHAT. The premise of the fifth principle is that an activity system can develop expansive transformations through aggravation of contradictions over time. Object and motive can therefore be reconceptualized in an activity system (p. 137).

This research is based on the five principles of CHAT, and in simple words views individuals as part of a larger network of activity systems in which each component brings its own history and

voice. Activity systems change over time, as a result of contradictions within activity systems and networks of activity systems.

3.3 Expansive learning

Developed within the framework of CHAT is a theory of learning called expansive learning (Engeström, 2001); principle five above describes the expansive learning as taking place through contradictions between elements in the activity system. The expansive learning theory also recognizes that individuals are learning new information and cultural practices as they are developed (Engeström, 2001). Situated learning theory, developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasizes the importance of social interactions in learning and describes learning as changing participation in communities of practice. Participation in social interactions are considered important in expansive learning as well; however, further explanation is deemed necessary as participation is not the only piece of the puzzle (Engeström, 2001, p. 142). Other components of the activity system, such as the history of the activity system or the relationship with other activity systems, is deemed to have an impact on learning.

3.4 This research

The Cultural-Historical Activity Theory is appropriate for this research project for several reasons. First, CHAT is a social theory that recognizes active participation in social interactions as being essential to learning. The theory also recognizes that outside opinions or actions have an impact on the individual and vice versa; the focus is on the collective nature of activity. CHAT

recognizes activity systems' multi-voicedness, which means that each component of activity systems will contribute histories that impact the activity system. The *collective perspective* is useful to answer and discuss the first research question in this essay: "Who do the learners interact with and what are the topics and purposes of their social interactions?". Second, CHAT allows incorporation of emotions and subjective experiences in the discussion on participation and learning. This holistic perspective includes many components in the examination of individuals' learning, both historical and current issues. The *holistic view* of a person is exactly the perspective missing in previous research and it is a view that can help answer research question two of this essay: "How do the learners perceive themselves and other social actors when they use English in social situations?" Third, CHAT emphasizes that people's lives are in constant motion and that the components of a person's life affect other components in the network of activity systems. Change and development therefore takes place while the learners are actively participating in activity systems, or in other words, while learners are living their lives. The view of *active participation* will guide the discussion of research question three: "What are the choices the learners make to actively participate in the community and actively learn English?"

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Design

A qualitative research method was chosen for this project. Rather than collecting a large amount of data from a large sample of research participants, this research project was structured in a way to allow for a smaller sample of women to be investigated. Qualitative research can provide the researcher with an in-depth description of a phenomena (Bryman, 2012); this method is therefore suitable for this research project that aims to describe the research participants' subjective experience of language learning and language use. This study is constructed in such a way as to let the women describe their experiences in their own words.

In order to elicit personal experiences and opinions, semi-structured interviews were selected as the data collection method (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A semi-structured format ensured that all topics relevant for the research questions were discussed in the interviews; additionally, the flexibility of a semi-structured format allowed exploration of additional information that came up in the interviews. Another advantage of using interviews as a data collection method concerns scheduling and time considerations. I was able to meet research participants at a time convenient for both them and me, without causing a major interruption of anyone's daily life.

An interview guide was used (see appendix 1), and included questions to address the research questions. The interview was divided into four sections focusing on different aspects of the women's English use. The first section collected background information about the interviewees, such as when they moved to Canada and what language they speak at home. The following

sections contained questions about social interaction, English language learning, and identity respectively. I made a special effort to ensure that the language in the interview questions were at an appropriate level, taking into consideration that the research participants are all learning English.

4.2 Context and participants

CEC served as the context of the research. At this organization, I have developed my interest in language learning and teaching, and I found it appropriate and convenient to carry out my research in this context.

Generic purposive sampling was used in this research project to make sure that participants who are relevant to the research questions were selected. The criteria for the selection of research participants were that they had an experience of immigration and English learning in Canada, and a level of English that excluded the need for translators during the interview. All participants were chosen because of their connection with [CEC], which meant that I had met all participants previously, and some of them were former learners in my English class. Because the aim of the project was to make in-dept analysis of a few cases, and considering the time frame of this project, 13 participants were invited to participate in my research. Everyone I asked accepted the invitation to participate. To ensure some variation in the sample, the selected participants differed in age, length of stay in Canada, and country of origin. Below is a table with background information on the participants, including fictitious name, country of origin, number of years in Canada, number of children, and first language.

TABLE 1 Background information about participants

Fictitious name	Country of origin	Number of years in Canada	Number of children	First language
Carol	China	10	2	Mandarin
Denise	Malaysia	15	2	Cantonese
Gloria	Mexico	14	2	Spanish
Jasmine	China	16	4	Cantonese
Julie	Afghanistan	11	4	Dari (Persian)
Kate	Albania	12	3	Albanian
Mariam	Iraq	3	5	Arabic
Mary	Taiwan	10	2	Mandarin
Michelle	El Salvador	30	4	Spanish
Rhianna	China	3	1	Cantonese
Sarah	Phillipines	13	2	Ilonggo(Tagalog)
Skyler	El Salvador	30	4	Spanish
Sylvanna	Vietnam	24	5	Cantonese

4.3 Interviews

4.3.1 Procedure

All interviews took place at [CEC] during the weekend of April 30th and May 1st in 2016, in a empty and private classroom. The participants were scheduled to arrive at different times during the day, with a generous amount of time between interviews to accommodate late-comers and casual discussion. Each interview was around 20 minutes long, with the shortest being 12 minutes and 26 seconds and the longest being 25 minutes and 26 seconds. Each interview started at the top of the hour, which resulted in a break of around 30 minutes between interviews. Childcare was available for those who wanted to bring their children. Some participants had lunch at [CEC] as well.

The interviews were recorded on two devices, an iPhone and an iPad, to make sure the audio was backed up in case of a recording malfunction.

4.3.2 Evaluation

Although it was very convenient to interview all participants on one weekend, I felt very tired on Sunday afternoon. I also was not able to transcribe the interviews as I went along, but had to transcribe all of the interviews afterwards. This may have caused some stress in me as a researcher and as a person, but it most likely did not affect the interviews or the transcriptions.

4.4 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis allows the researcher to continuously evaluate the data that is obtained during the research process (Bryman, 2012). I used thematic analysis to organize and interpret the data (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). As I transcribed all 13 interviews, I looked for similarities

and differences in the answers to be able to identify categories. As I read and re-read the transcripts, I could discern relationships between categories and themes that I focused on to answer the research questions. During the last stage of analysis, I set exclusion criteria and decided what information was relevant for my research project (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). The aim of the study was to give a fuller picture of the experiences of women; therefore, I had to make sure the subjective opinions and descriptions of experiences were brought to attention. To describe the women's experiences, I thus searched for quotes that explained the thematic findings and answered the research questions.

4.4.1 Ethical considerations

I am a student at Linköping Universitet in Sweden; thus, I decided to follow the Principles of the Research Ethics for the Social Sciences (Swedish Research Council, Appendix 2) even though data collection took place in Canada. A comparison of the chosen Swedish research ethics to Canadian research ethics showed that both countries follow very similar guidelines for how to conduct research; this fact gave me an argument that further supported my decision. To follow research guidelines set up by the Swedish Research Council, I began the interview session by informing the participants of my research and reading the consent form with the participants before we signed it. My main concern was that research participants would understand that the information they shared with me was going to be kept confidential, and any quotations in my written analysis would be under fictitious names (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The research participants understood this information.

The interview guide I used during the interviews is included as appendix 1.

4.4.2 The role of the researcher

As a English language facilitator at [CEC], I had met all the selected research participants before my research project started; it is therefore important to consider how our relationships might affect the results of this research. Although I found no direct evidence of this, participants may have felt an obligation to participate in the research project because of our mutual affiliation to [CEC]. Participants may also have given me and [CEC] positive evaluations because of a desire to please. To minimize possible bias, I informed the participants of their right to withdraw at any time, and this would not affect their relationship with me or with [CEC], I also made sure the interview was as comfortable and casual as possible, by being friendly and non-judgmental.

According to my observation, the research participants showed support in my studies as I have done for them, and perhaps this is why every person I asked was willing to participate. The fact that we were all familiar with each other made the interviews relaxing and fun. I care very much for these people and I loved hearing their stories and experiences of immigration to Canada and English learning. To my knowledge, the participants answered the questions truthfully and expressed their opinions subjectively.

I believe that my experience with [CEC] helped give a nuanced and well-informed description of the context, and my previous knowledge assisted in the construction of interview questions and in the analysis of the material. At the same time, I found it important to explore issues from different perspectives and I made an effort to carefully examine the material with an objective mind.

5 FINDINGS

This research was conducted because of a desire to learn more about English learners in a low-income neighbourhood in Vancouver, Canada. The theoretical foundation of the research maintains that individuals live and should be understood as parts of a social community; this research therefore attempts to understand individual learning in the context of the surrounding environment. Below is a table of findings and themes from the thematic analysis (table 2).

TABLE 2 Themes from data analysis

Research questions	Themes
Who do learners interact with and what are the purposes and topics of their social interactions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -government -doctor/dentist/teacher -new situations -friend/family/neighbours
How do the learners perceive themselves and other social actors when they use English in social situations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -positive perception of other people -communication with their children -native language vs. English -to feel Canadian -learners are not satisfied with their English ability
What are the choices the learners make to actively participate in the community and actively learn English?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -active choices -active learning -openings and barriers

5.1 Who do they interact with?

5.1.1 Government officials

Moving to a new country and applying for citizenship requires a lot of interaction with government officials; the process itself can be challenging and stressful, and for the subjects of this research study, the added difficulty of using a language that they are not completely fluent in were mentioned as being one of the most stressful situations where English was used in their lives.

Rhianna, for example, felt anxious when she had appointment with the government when she was new in Canada. “They think I know English a bit so they keep asking me and that’s why make me so nervous”.

Given the importance of understanding what government officials say, interpretation by another person is sometimes needed. However, the communication sometimes remain challenging.

Michelle feels that she “needs someone who speaks my language too” when she “goe[s] to the bank or if [she] goes[s] to immigration or something” and Rhianna mentions as well that sometimes the “interpreter is not interpreting well”, and this makes government meetings and doctor’s appointments complicated.

Speaking on the phone is more difficult than meeting face to face. Carol talks about the difficulty of speaking with government officials, especially on the phone: “I think some important thing, to talk to government people, and on the phone I can’t see people speaking, I don’t know the people that word, for me it’s a new word, I don’t understand”.

5.1.2 Doctors, dentists, teachers, and knowledgeable people

Other situations that were considered by the learners as being more difficult or stressful were interactions with knowledgeable people, such as the doctor, dentist or teacher.

Sylvanna explains how she did not attend meetings at her children's school before: "before, I don't go to PAC meeting, because I don't understand, when people speak English", she also describes how she "went to parent meeting, no, teacher conference, I need to translation, but now I don't need it, I understand".

Interacting with people that are knowledgeable is difficult for an English learner that has limited vocabulary. "Sometimes I feel embarrassed, if I talk to someone who is more knowledgeable, so it's like, because it's like your ego, but I think it's ok" says Sarah. Related to Sarah's quote is the statement Kate made about interacting with people who use "high words", meaning more difficult words, and how she can only answer in "simple words", and this makes her a bit anxious: "Sometimes I can't answer I just say like, how to be in conversation, how to show I care, what they're saying, I say ok, ok, something just short".

5.1.3 New situations

During the interviews, many of the participants expressed that they often feel nervous or unhappy when they participate in social interactions in unfamiliar, or new situations. The anxiety described by the women shows how difficult it is to use a foreign language in social interactions; interactions that are necessary for every day life. Using English in unfamiliar and important

situations causes a lot of stress.

Gloria talks about when she feels nervous or unhappy speaking English: “when it’s a new place, new people, probably job, very soon I will have to work, and just to think that I have to do an interview and what about if I’m going to speak properly, what about, and it’s going to be very hard”.

When asked who she feels nervous when interacting with, Mariam mentioned the difference between interacting with new people and people who she knows already. “Some people I’m meeting for the first time, [but] some people, my friend or my neighbour, I see him many, many times, I don’t feel nervous”.

Skyler explained that she was scared to interact with other people when she was a new learner, but as she got more comfortable with English, her anxiety went away. “At first, I was [nervous or unhappy], that is why I didn’t work, because I was kind of afraid because I would go to work and they would ask me a question I didn’t know how to answer”, “what if I say this and it’s not right?, they will laugh at me or whatever”, “you have to practice all the time, and not to be afraid, you know”.

5.1.4 Friends, neighbours and familiar people

Interaction with friends, neighbours in casual situations were considered the least stressful type of interaction in English. Many of the interviewed women expressed that repeated exposure to a certain situation or person brought more comfort and confidence. Jasmine talks about the comfort of speaking with people she met many times, for example her children’s teachers:

J: “My kids teachers, they all good, they all nice, they can let me practice, because I been there, I think over ten years in the same school”.

MS: “So you know them?”

J: “and they know me, and I’m comfortable”

Many language learners choose to take English classes, but going to class can also be stressful, especially in the beginning. Julie describes how she felt nervous in the beginning of going to classes at [CEC]: “first time I came to that class I’m shy to talk to you, with the other teachers, with [Joanne], after that, I learn more, and I’m more relaxed”... “I’m not shy, because [CEC] like my family, I don’t know, now, I’m relaxed”.

Denise describe the comfort she feels among familiar people: “sometimes I feel relaxed, even I don’t worry if I use a different word, describe something, even if I say something wrong, I don’t worry because we’re close.” It seems like the women needed some time to get to know people before they felt comfortable interacting with them.

5.2 Topics, reasons and importance of English

When it comes to the question of which topics that occur in social interactions in English among the participants in the study, a common answer was “appointments”. Since medical appointments are common and important in women’s life, the topic carries a lot of weight in the participation in society.

Rhianna and Carol, for example, described their experience. Rhianna came to Canada when she was pregnant, and therefore went to a lot of medical appointments. After she had the baby, she joined a baby group and made new English-speaking friends that she still spends time with.

Carol also spent a lot of time in the hospital right after she came to Canada because she had cancer. She said: “I learn English, lots of words, in the hospital”.

Another issue that came up in the discussion on topics that occur in social interactions in English was the fact that “interesting topics” help with comfort levels. Mary explains: “when we have the topic that people are really interested in, like, when I hang out with my friend and we have the same topic and the people makes me comfortable to speak with her or him, that is more relaxed”.

5.2.1 Importance of English in their everyday lives

To further understand what the learners used English for in their lives, the interview contained questions concerning how important they thought learning English was for them. Most women explained that they thought learning and speaking English was of high importance in their lives. The most common answer was that English is important for “everything”, for example, Denise said:

D: “Actually is important, because I live in this country”

M: “And what do you want to use English for?”

D: “For my life, for my job, everything here”

Other answers emphasized the importance of knowing English to “belong” and to be able to work. Kate argues: “For me it’s very important. If I don’t know English, I don’t think so I belong here. I can’t work. I can’t do anything”.

Michelle emphasized the importance of being able to communicate: “ If you do not know English you cannot communicate with other people”.

In essence, English is perceived to be important to build independence. This is further exemplified by Gloria that feels that it's important to be able to go to appointments by herself: "you know, before, I have to go to the hospital, always someone has to come with me, my ex-partner, even though he didn't have good English I have to believe what he's thinking, when he translating me, right. But now, I'm free and comfortable to go by myself and ask the doctor or the teacher, anybody person, just by myself".

5.2.2 Children's schools and teachers

An interesting commonality between the women was that communication with their children's teachers and other school personnel were the reasons why they wanted to learn more English, and many expressed their children's lives and well-being as being the main reason why they needed to use English in an everyday context.

Skyler said she had to learn English "because I would like to communicate with the teachers, you know, to go see how my kids were doing at school".

Kate describes the first time she sent her children to school in Canada:

K: "...and teachers are talking to me, I don't know what they're saying, no translator, no nothing, just come here and go there, so..."

M: So you didn't understand what the teachers were saying?"

K: "I didn't understand what was going on, saying, you know, nothing..."

She then goes on to explain that someone told her about the [CEC] English program that she later enrolled in. Kate "had a very good experience" and she argues that the reason is because she

has spent a lot of time with “education people”. She feels that people in the education field uses a varied vocabulary and that they are willing to “correct [her] English”.

Carol finds English useful because her children are learning English as well, and “sometimes I go to [my son’s] school, talk about [my son’s] behaviour during the school.”

5.3 Perceptions of themselves and others.

An important line of questioning in this research project concerned the women’s perceptions of themselves and others in different situations. The aim of this research was to find out how the women felt about interacting with other people, and how they describe their subjective experiences.

5.3.1 Positive perceptions

I asked how the women feel when they speak English, what they think about the people they interact with and what they think people are thinking about them. Overall, the women has had positive experiences. They perceived other people as being helpful and patient with their efforts to communicate. Denise, for example, is thinking that people probably want to know more about her: “maybe they would love to more, how do you say, they would love to know more about me, maybe they try to chat with me, to communicate with me”.

The women allow themselves to make mistakes, because they see themselves as English learners and they think that other people see them as such as well. Sarah, for example, feels comforted by

the fact that she's "in a multicultural country, we are still learning". Not all people are patient with English learners though. Mary points out that some people have no patience for people that don't speak English perfectly, but she later says: "...but that people that I speak English with, best to best, most of them are pretty nice and friendly, they try to understand what I said, some people will just give me a word that I can't say so they will just teach me how to say the word". She continues: "they will understand that I'm still learning English, so..."

5.3.2 Communication with their children is important

The women have lived in Canada for varied amounts of time, and their children were either born in Canada or born somewhere else. English use within their families are therefore different, but most of the women mentioned the importance of the communication with their children and the help they receive at home when it comes to English language.

Some of the women speak other languages with their children, Michelle said: "with my children I try not to speak English, because I know they say, they always correct me, and I feel uncomfortable when they are doing that, so I say: I speak Spanish, and they understand". Sarah experienced some difficulty as well when she was speaking English with her children, because "even for my children, sometimes, "mommy, what do you say?", and I have to think about that. So instead of teaching my children, it teaches them in a wrong way, so that's when he's asking me: "Why do you do to school?", I say I want to learn, I need to improve my English, improve myself"

Often, the children were part of the motivation to learn English. In Sylvanna's case, her children "always speak English at home" and that is one of the reasons she wants to learn English.

The support from family members is described as fun and helpful. Denise talks about how her bad memory stops her from learning new words and how she jokes with her children: “I just sometimes tell my kids: “please forgive me, because your mom doesn’t have good memory [laughter]”. Denise continues: “I want to learn. I love to learn. And then I want to memorize, try my best, but I can’t do. I have no choice, you have no choice because I’m your mom [laughter].” “I think my main teachers are my children”, says Michelle. Her children and husband will correct her mistakes: “every time they say: “Mami, this is not the right way to say it, you have to...” And my husband say: “Oh, the grammar is not good, you have to...”. So they always correct me and they tell me: “You have to go back to school”, ok, I try”.

5.3.3 Differences when speaking native language versus when speaking English

Learning a new language as an adult is challenging, not only because it involves memorization of vocabulary and learning grammatical structures, but also because the use of a new language in social situations can cause changes in the way the learners view themselves and how they behave in social interactions. Differences in identity, behaviour and emotions can be examined by looking at how the women feel when they speak English versus when they speak their native language.

Among the advantages of speaking their native language, the women listed higher confidence, happiness, freedom, relaxing feeling, and worry free communication.

Gloria, for example, feels more “confidence” when using Spanish, because she “knows more words” and “also we have that, how do you say it, colloquial talk”. She says that “your maternal language, it’s different, it’s happier”.

English use was often referred to as problematic, limiting and “basic”. For example, Mariam says: “I speak Arabic like I don’t worry, I don’t make mistake, but when I speak English I think about before about what I say I think, don’t go directly to the conversation, but when Arabic, when I speak Arabic I go directly”

Sometimes, speaking English in social settings can cause a person to act differently, Mary says: “if I speak English, it’s like I go to school and all the classmates they speak professional English and the teacher, so I speak English to them I’m kind of shy and kind of like if I can keep quiet”.

Speaking English in social interactions is not always a positive experience, as described in the citations above, but Kate had a good point: “I just speak Albanian very good, and I never lose it until I die, and English I’m learning every day and I know it’s going to stay here forever...”

5.3.4 To feel Canadian

This research examines whether the women feel Canadian and what being Canadian mean to them. Half the women said that they feel Canadian; they had various reasons for giving that answer, such as family ties and significant amount of time spent in Canada. Some reasons for not feeling Canadian included lack of English ability and low participation in society.

For Kate, feeling Canadian is a matter of time spent in Canada. She says she’s both Canadian and Albanian because “half of my life here and half there”. Michelle, who has lived in Canada for about 30 years, agrees:

MS: “Do you feel Canadian?”

M: “I feel like this is my home. I haven’t go back to my country, because it’s still a lot of problems there”

MS: “Feels like you belong here?”

M: Yes, and here I got married and I have my four children”

For Kate and Michelle therefore, being Canadian means living and belonging in Canada and having a family here.

Often, the women made a connection between language and feeling Canadian. Mary, for example, says that she does not feel Canadian: “I don’t feel that I’m Canadian because I don’t speak fluent, fluency”. Rhianna, as well, talks about not feeling Canadian, and how it’s connected to language: “Language is a big part, so my language is not there yet, so I always think that I’m not really that Canadian yet, I have no English level yet...”. Participation in the community is important to Gloria who does not feel 100% Canadian; she says: “I don’t working. I want to be part of whole society. I will feel different when I’m starting to work and be productive for the country, but I feel kind of getting there”.

5.3.5 Learners are not satisfied with their English ability

Even though the participants in this study are able to answer questions about everything from family situation to emotions and identity, which require a relatively high understanding of the English language, they are not satisfied with their ability to communicate in English. 10 out of 13 interviewees gave at least one negative self-evaluation when it came to their English ability. Some of the negative self-evaluations were simply: “I’m not very good” (Julie, 11 years in Canada) and “English sometimes hard for me...not very fluent in English” (Sylvanna, 24 years

in Canada). Some self-evaluations were more descriptive, such as “Because it looks like I have a mouth, how come I cannot say what I want to say?” (Denise, 15 years in Canada).

The need and desire to learn more was expressed as well, Sarah, for example: “I’m not confident”, “I still need to learn”, “I need to improve my English.” Or simply, as Mariam puts it: “I need more”.

5.4 Learning through participation

The findings show what the learners are doing personally to increase their learning and how they actively participate in their community. I met all the learners at [CEC], so we already know that the women are taking classes, such as English conversation, math, or Early Childhood Education assistant. During the interviews, I learned that the women are active members of the community, they experienced different routes when learning English, and they describe various factors that either help or hinder their learning.

5.4.1 Active participation and learning

By asking the women about their efforts to learn English, findings show that they are not passive bystanders in the process. On the contrary, many of the women described how they made active choices aimed to increase their opportunities to learn English. Even though it would be easier to only spend time with people that speak their native language, the women chose a more challenging environment in many cases. Some of the choices included where to live, which church to attend, and volunteering.

Rhianna made some choices to increase her exposure to English; she joined a baby group where members spoke English, and she also told me about her choice of neighbourhood: "...so I chose the area where I live, I don't choose the area close to Chinese people, the same language as me".

Denise talks about choosing a church where people speak English: "I'm thinking when my son was young, I have no chance to close to someone speak English, that's, because I'm a Christian so I'm thinking I'm looking for the church so that I choose the English church for both of us to go in there, and we learn together".

Julie talks about her choice to be active in the community: "I volunteer in the community centre, with English people, because I volunteer for senior community centre, serve the food, just about I want to talk with them".

5.4.2 Learning English in different ways

Looking at the participants in this research study, one can point out many differences in their lives. They came from different countries, have spend different amount of time in Canada, speak different native languages, and so on. In consideration of these differences, it is easy to realize that their English learning will be different too. The women explained how they learnt English, and they described everything from simple methods like watching TV to more challenging routes like memorizing books.

Carol's story is different from other stories, because she got cancer shortly after she arrived in Canada. Her story shows how health challenges and other significant life events can necessitate learning. Carol wanted to learn more about her disease and treatments:

“Why I learn in the hospital, because I came to here, 1 year, 1 ½ year, I got sick. I got cancer, so the doctor told me maybe your life short because of the spread. I want to know, what happened. The government gave translator, but I want to know more, more, more, so I go to the library, go in the hospital I asked the doctor, write down the word, I take the dictionary. The doctor gave me a book about my cancer. I translated almost half. It’s difficult. I learned a lot.” Carol later explained how she’s actively trying to learn more English: “Every day use it. Try to go to the grocery store or talk to friends, if the friends have time. Talk to children’s teacher, sometimes I go to [my son’s] school, talk about [his] behaviour during the school”

For some of the women, being a single parent has forced them to learn English to be able to take care of the family. Mariam, for example, explains: “Because I’m single mom, the life push me to do everything myself.”

An accessible tool for most people is the TV. Skyler, for example, explains: “for me it helps watching TV, sometimes with the subtitles, you can learn. I also used to watch TV with my sons when they were watching the Sesame Street show, and yeah, talk with friends, trying to catch a little word here and there”. Julie also uses TV as a learning tool before she was able to attend English classes: “Just from TV. I watched TV, English TV. I learned some from TV”

5.5 Openings and barriers

Related to the different methods of learning English described above are other factors that influence learning. Some factors will make it easier to learn English, and some factors will make

it harder. English learners can sometimes influence their own learning by actively seeking opportunities to speak to people and to learn, but sometimes there are factors that they have no power over, such as lack of ability to remember, lack of time, lack of money, lack of exposure, and lack of support.

The first thing Mary, Jasmine, Michelle, and Rhianna mentioned when asked about how to best learn English was “speak”. Rhianna described it nicely: “In my opinion, I think the best way to learn English is by speaking a lot. Just know, don’t be shy and just talk to people around you”.

Having young children sometimes makes it impossible to attend English classes. Skyler said that going to [CEC] where child programming was offered helped her participate in English classes.

Kate explained that, in her opinion, the only good way to learn English is to go to class: “just going to school, going to class. All the things just going to class. I find it very hard myself.

”Some factors act as barriers during English learning. Some of the women complained about the difficulty to remember words, and because words are such an important part of language, this is a major barrier. This memory issue could be age related, as Carol states: “When teenager, I learn very fast. Now is more than 50 years old, so I remember one word is very difficult”.

Lack of money is a barrier to learning in many cases, Skyler explains how money was important when she first arrived in Canada: “Having three small kids, you know, and was hard and only my husband working, it was tough, thank god for this place [CEC], they offer free English classes for new immigrants”.

Another barrier to learning English is the lack of time. Taking care of children and working outside the home take up a lot of the women's time, and time is needed to learn a new language.

Sylvanna and I discussed this issue:

S: I just learn a half year, 6 months, just came in Canada. After than I go to work, I don't have time to..."

MS: "And at work you spoke Cantonese?"

S: "Yeah."

MS: "So there was really no time to..."

S: "I work, all is Cantonese. Restaurant in Cantonese. Chinatown. That's why most people speak Cantonese"

In Mary's case, having a husband that spoke for the family became a barrier for her to learn English: "I actually when I just got here, I don't use any English, because my husband always beside me, so I don't have that much chance to speak English." She continues: "Most of the time, we go out together and he speaks to people, so I don't have to speak, but I just listen and understand a little bit". The scenario above is one example of the lack of exposure to English that act as a barrier to learning.

In some cases, lack of support made learning English difficult. Gloria's situation was challenging: "In the beginning, I couldn't really go to school. It was hard with my partner to go out and look for schools. I didn't have a lot of support."

6 DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to understand English learners' identity formation and learning while they participate in social interactions in English. English use in various social activities were examined, and women's subjective experiences were discussed. In this section, the interviewees' specific contexts and their English learning are discussed using the theoretical framework of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. In the literature review section of this essay, issues that are relevant to this project were presented. Information given in the interviews allows for further discussion of those issues; similarities and differences with previous research is presented.

6.1 Discussion of findings

CHAT emphasizes the collective nature of human learning and it is a holistic view that understands that individuals are active participants in the process of their learning. This study provides additional support for those concepts.

6.1.1 Collective perspective

Based on the research by Engeström (e.g. 2001 & 2015), this research emphasizes the importance of social and participatory factors in learning. Not only do the women need to be exposed to the language to be able to learn, they also have to feel supported and motivated. Participation in English classes, church, or parent-teacher conferences increases opportunities to

learn, and those situations force the women to use the language and motivates them to learn more.

According to the participants in this study, who are all English learners, social interaction plays a major part in their learning and the emotions and motivation involved in learning. Language is inherently a social phenomenon, and language ability in turn impacts social interactions.

Previous research has shown that social interaction with English speakers is minimal at many workplaces (Harper, et al. 1996); thus, to understand immigrant women's experience better, this research was mainly interested in social interactions outside of the workplace. This study examined who the women interacted with and what the topics and reasons for social interactions were, and the findings show that social interactions are inseparable from their everyday lives.

Going to the doctor or speaking with government officials are important events in an English learner's life, and according to the women in this study, these occasions also cause some anxiety and a need to learn more English. One of the most stressful situations where the women had to use English was communication with government people, and as immigrants to Canada, the contact with government is important and frequent in the beginning.

A situation that the women gave a lot of importance was the communication with their children's teachers, and this was also mentioned as being more relaxing and less stressful as they learnt more English. Having children in school is a strong motivating factor to learn more English. The social benefits of learning English include independence and improved interaction with government people and education people, according to the interviewed women.

Social interactions are important for inclusion into society (Young-Scholten, 2013), and the findings of this study describe many of the benefits of social interaction. In this research project, many of the learners in the ESOL class did not know each other before they started taking

classes together. In the classroom, they physically come into contact and are all working toward a common goal- to learn English. Outside of the classroom, the contact is more imaginative, because they know that they are alike in some ways in that they are all immigrants. Physical contact or imaginative contact brought the women together and it seemed to increase their opportunities for English learning and social interaction. As mentioned by many of the women, they were happy to take English classes and grateful for the support they received at [CEC]. So, from the perspective of the women I interviewed, their English improved and they felt better after studying at [CEC]. This satisfaction partly comes from the possibility of social interactions with other immigrants, such as the positive effect of ISOs in Canada (Gibb, Hamdon & Jamal, 2008), but also from the benefits of an increased ability to communicate in English (Yates, 2011). The way participants describe social interaction in this study shows the impossibility to separate the collective from the individual. The English language exists in their social interactions.

6.1.2 Holistic view

CHAT maintains that an activity system is dynamic, which means that as the participants live their lives, the activity system(s) they belong to are created and are changing in the process (Engeström, 2001). This holistic view of learning is exemplified in this study, especially during the discussion of the connection between identity and language.

Research projects in the past have focussed on the connection between language and identity (for example Norton, 2010, and Taylor-Leech & Yates, 2012), and to understand more about the role of language in identity work I was curious to find out whether the women felt Canadian and if

that feeling had anything to do with language. Feeling Canadian takes into account the history of a person, the person's opinion about what it means to be Canadian, and the emotional aspect of living in Canada. The identity work involved in immigration also depends on other people; interactions and thoughts about others will impact the way a person views herself (Colic-Peisker, 2002). Some of the women mentioned a strong connection between identity and language, and said that they did not feel Canadian because they did not speak English well enough. The fact that some women also mentioned that they felt more competent and relaxed when they spoke their native language also shows that there is an important connection between language and identity.

CHAT emphasizes the many factors that influence a person and an activity system, and one must therefore consider multiple parts that together form the whole (Engeström, 2001). While talking about English learning and use, consideration of certain factors that act as barriers shows the importance of viewing experience from a holistic viewpoint. Lack of exposure to English was found to be a barrier of learning the language, but other barriers were discovered as well during the interviews: lack of ability to remember words, lack of money, lack of time, and lack of support were mentioned. Learning English is not as simple as studying words or reading texts, instead, learning has to be seen as a part of life that sometimes is hard to fit in among everything else.

Because they are immigrants in an English speaking country, English use is an important part of how the participants of this study care for themselves and their families. Even though learning English is not a choice they made, their situation is forcing them to learn the language. Language use and language learning is in this case hard to separate. Choices made are reactions to the situation they are living in; women are actively participating in the activity systems they belong

to. This interrelation between the individual and the context is a major part of CHAT; Roth and Lee (2007) argue that “the specific function of individual components cannot be understood decoupled from the function of other parts and the function of the whole”.

The reasoning behind the choice of research method, theoretical foundation, and interview questions comes from an overarching desire to look at the women’s situations from a holistic perspective, where many factors of their lives are discussed and seen as affecting their English learning. The fact that the women’s gender is female is therefore seen as one factor in the total experience. Exactly how gender affects their lives is not discerned specifically, but their lives have certainly turned out the way they have because they are women. Had they been men, the situation would look different. Had they not moved to Canada, their situation had been different. No factor is given priority in the examination of their current situation.

6.1.3 Active participation

In line with Glaserfeld’s (1989) argument that language learning is an active process, this research found that immigrant women are active participants in their language learning by for example making conscious choices to increase their learning.

In the literature review section of this text, strategy use is discussed, and the use of social strategies were considered beneficial (Taylor-Leech & Yates, 2012). I wanted to examine whether the women I interviewed used any specific strategies to learn English, I was especially interested in what social strategies they use. The active choices some of the women made to learn more English, such as moving to an English speaking neighbourhood, choosing an English speaking church or choosing to take English classes can be described as strategies to learn. The

women who made those choices were determined to learn, and believed that their English improved because of it.

Second Language Acquisition theories often discuss the construction of language and the connection between language use and language learning (for example Zuengler & Miller, 2006). In the case of the learners in this research project, one can follow their path to constructing their language through their use of the language. The women I interviewed often made a connection between participation in society and English learning, both because of the perceived importance of English for themselves and their families and the way they learn the language by using it in their everyday lives.

6.1.4 Activity systems

Given that a holistic view of the women's lives was the desired perspective of this research project, the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) created a good theoretical foundation. CHAT maintains that a person (or company, etc.) is one part of an activity system, and the activity system is not constant, it changes. Furthermore, an activity system is in turn part of a network of activity systems, and this network is not constant either (Engeström, 2001; Roth & Lee, 2007). In simple terms, if one part changes in an activity system or a network of activity systems, the other parts will change as well.

Looking from a one-person perspective, a participant in this research, the activity system could have the following six components: the learner (subject), English communication or increased social interaction (object), TV or radio or English classes (tools), teachers and family and other English speakers (community), language rules, historical/cultural rules, education rules (rules),

follow lesson plan and the object is the reward (division of labour). According to the interviewed women themselves, different parts of the activity system have changed over time, and this has brought change in other parts as well. These changes are contradictions in CHAT terms (Engeström, 2001), and it is when contradictions happen that learning occur. Moving to Canada, for example, changes the community (among other things) and this sole fact forces a change in the language in communication. Many active and passive adjustments are necessary as a result, such as: find a way to support the family, find new friends, study English, start communication with new people, identity negotiation, new rules and norms in environment where one lives, etc.

In CHAT, an activity system does not stand alone, but is a part of a network of activity systems (Engeström, 2001). If we look at a learner as being one activity system, we could look at the curriculum designer as being another activity system. These two activity systems would be components of a network of activity systems. The components of the activity system would look different for the curriculum designer: curriculum designer (subject), create a program that will successfully achieve English proficiency in learners (object), research and knowledge about learners and colleagues (tools), learners and colleagues and funders (community), government rules and language rules (rules), salary, create a plan, material to study, facilitate (division of labour). These parts affects the lesson plan that is created, and the lesson plan affects the learners in the program.

7 CONCLUSION

7.1 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to learn more about English learners' subjective experiences when it comes to learning English and interacting with English speakers in the community. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 women, all immigrants to Canada, with different home countries and native languages. The women were recruited to the study from Canucks English Centre (CEC), which is an education centre where families are encouraged to learn together to improve the life of all members of the family. The interview questions were put together specifically to encourage the women's voices to be heard, with the goal of giving an in-depth and personal account of the experience of learning English and at the same time dealing with the responsibilities that comes with being a parent.

An increased understanding of the women's situations were reached in this project. Learning English is of great importance to these women, mainly because of a need to communicate with their children's teachers and other school personnel. Further reasons to improve their English skills were mentioned, such as a desire to reach independence, create opportunities to get a job, or feeling Canadian. Barriers to learning were also discussed; lack of time, money, and support were commonly mentioned as being problematic. The study aimed to understand what the women actively did to improve their English skills and found that some choices seemed to give more satisfaction than others, for example choosing a church or neighbourhood where people speak English, taking English classes, or volunteering. With the theoretical framework of

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), individual actions were discussed and related to other parts of the women's lives. An important finding of this study and somewhat surprisingly, almost all of the women that participated in this study were unsatisfied with their ability to use English in their lives; they wanted to learn more. According to CHAT, a desire to learn is not enough to ensure that learning occurs; all parts of the individual's life work together to coordinate the environment that is possible. Active choices can be made to create change, but other parts, such as a lack of time or money, can act as barriers.

Looking at an individual from a holistic perspective paints a clear picture of the efforts and actions taken to reach the individual's English ability. Since this research project is focussed on giving in-depth accounts of a small amount of people, one can argue that the information gained is not important outside of this group of people. I would like to argue that this is exactly the point; generalizations cannot be made when it comes to in-depth accounts of individual situations. To understand an individual's road to learning a new language, what has made it easy to learn and what has made it hard, the only way is to ask this specific individual those questions.

The information gained in this research project can be used to increase understanding of the process of integrating and learning. As additional perspectives are explored, new constructions of knowledge can be created as a result.

7.2 Suggestions for further research

As described in previous chapters, an issue that was brought to attention was the fact that many of the women expressed that they were unsatisfied with their English ability. They felt that they could not participate fully in the community and some of the women did not feel Canadian because they did not speak English fluently. Further research is necessary to explore options for these women. Why is it that they are unsatisfied with their English skills? Will they ever be satisfied? How can we make sure they are confident and feel competent when using English? The application of CHAT, expansive learning theory, can be used to evaluate and improve the situation at CEC and possible other language schools and education centres in Canada by looking at all the parts of the activity system(s) and making appropriate changes.

7.3 Quality aspects of the study

Efforts to ensure high levels of quality during the course of this qualitative research were guided by the concepts of trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Lengthy contact with participants and context and frequent discussions with peers and professionals in the development of research aim, research questions and interview questions were undertaken to achieve credibility. To aid in transferability, thick descriptions of context and background information about the participants were carefully developed and included in the text. The concept of authenticity was central to this study, and the hope was to reach a high level of fairness. Efforts taken to fulfill the requirement of fairness were: ensuring that participants were given access to any information they desired; the participants gave informed consent to participate in the interviews; to create a power balance, the format of the the interview sessions were designed in such a way that both parties had access to important information, and the research contained

every effort to include all relevant issues. The first goal is to allow the readers and participants of this research study to reach new constructions and new, enriched understandings of the issues and topics included. Additional information from different perspectives will increase and balance individuals' previous knowledge. The ultimate goal is to facilitate action and empower people to improve theirs' or others situations.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview guide for semi-structured interview

Background information

You have immigrated to Canada, can you tell me a bit about that? Where are you from? When did you move to Canada? How old were you when you moved to Canada? Why did you move to Canada?

Social interactions/communities of practice

I am interested in learning more about how you use English in your life, and I have a few questions about that. So first, I would like you to think about when you speak English. Who do you speak English with? What do you talk about when you speak English? Where do you speak English?

People often spend time in groups of people, for example in church or in school, what groups of people do you spend time with? How often do you meet? How do you learn English in those groups?

Now I want to talk about your opinion about other people, and what you think other people's opinions are about you. If you think about the times when you speak English with different people, what do you think about the people you have conversations with? For example, you might think some people are intelligent and that some people are not intelligent. Or you might

think some people are friendly and other people are not friendly. What do you think they are thinking about you? (Think about different times when you speak English.)

English language learning

As you know, I'm interested in how individuals learn English, so I would like to discuss this with you. If you think about when you arrived here in Canada, how much English did you speak?

It seems like you have improved your English a lot, how did you learn English? What in your life helps you learn English? What in your life makes it hard to learn English? In your opinion, what are some good ways to learn English?

Sometimes it's easy to speak English and sometimes it's hard. Can you think of a few times when you feel relaxed or happy when you speak English? Can you think of times when you feel nervous or unhappy when you speak English?

How important is learning English to you? What do you want to use English for?

Identity

I think that language is full of emotions, sometimes speaking English makes people feel good but sometimes people feel sad when they can't say what they want in English. How do you feel when you speak English?

You have now lived in Canada for years, do you feel canadian? Why or why not? What is a canadian? What cultural groups do you belong to?

If you think about the times when you speak English and the times when you speak in your native language, is there a difference? How is it different?

APPENDIX 2

Principles of research ethics for the social sciences (Swedish Research Council)**Requirement to inform**

The researcher is required to inform those affected by the research of the purpose of the research task at hand.

Rule 1

The researcher is to inform research participants and informants of their function in the project and of the conditions that regulate their participation. They are to be informed of the fact that participation is voluntary and of their right to withdraw from participation. Information is to cover all aspects of the research task at hand that could reasonably be expected to influence participants' willingness to take part.

Consent requirement

Participants in research have the right to make individual decisions concerning their participation.

Rule 2

The researcher is required to collect statements of consent from informants and research participants. In certain cases consent should also be received from parents/legal guardians (for instance, in cases when the subjects of research are under the age of 15 and the investigation involves ethically sensitive aspects).

Rule 3

Research participants shall have the right to individually decide whether or not to take part in research, the duration of their participation and the conditions for their participation. They shall have the right to withdraw their consent to participate with no negative consequences.

Rule 4

Research participants may not be subjected to undue influence or pressure in the process of deciding whether or not to participate in research. There should be no conditions of dependency between the researcher and prospective participants or informants.

Confidentiality requirement

Information regarding all participating persons in a research project shall be subject to the greatest possible level of confidentiality and the information is to be stored in a way that makes it inaccessible to unauthorized persons.

Rule 5

All staff employed in research projects that include the use of ethically sensitive information on specific, identifiable persons should sign a confidentiality agreement banning the dissemination of such information.

Rule 6

All information concerning identifiable persons is to be recorded, stored and reported in such a way that specific individuals cannot be identified by anyone not part of the research. This applies

particularly to information that can be perceived as ethically sensitive. This also means that the information should be inaccessible in practice to unauthorized persons.

Usage requirement

Collected information on specific individuals may only be used for research purposes.

Rule 7

Information on individuals, collected for research purposes, may not be used or lent out for commercial or other non-scientific uses.

Rule 8

Personal information collected for research purposes may not be used for decisions or measures directly affecting the individual (such as care, compulsory treatment, etc) unless explicit consent from the affected person has been given.