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International Student Spouses and the English Language: Co-Creating a Low-Stakes Language Learning Community

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the internationalization of U.S. higher education, millions of international students have come to study at U.S. institutions. Some students, particularly those pursuing advanced degree, bring their spouses. As part of a larger study, we set out to examine the experiences of international student spouses at a Midwestern university. This article examines the experiences from the perspective of grappling with the English language, a theme cross-cutting through spouses' experiences. Experiences with English, the focus of this article, are both a discrete element of spouses' lived experiences and a useful way to understand challenges and opportunities not directly related to language. Utilizing qualitative case study techniques, we found that English language is experienced through anxieties as well as ambitions by the participants in our study. Moreover, the site of our analysis, a non-profit faith-based organization, fostered a low stakes language learning community where international individuals interact with each other within a casual setting in a pursuit to better their language abilities, mitigating language anxiety.

Keywords: international mobility, international student spouses, internationalization of higher education, language learning

Internationalization continues to be a hot topic for higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States (Knight, 2015). For many HEIs, internationalization means recruiting foreign students to their campuses (Brandenburg & De Wit, 2015). Over the last decade, the number of international students at U.S. HEIs nearly doubled

from over 500,000 in 2005–2006 to over 1.1 million in 2017–2018 (Institute of International Education, 2018). A related population that many scholars have overlooked are the spouses of these international students, many of whom travel alongside their partners to the United States. According to one measure, in the 2017–2018 academic year, 95,246 international students or 8.7% of all international students studying in the United States were married (Baer, Bhandari, Andrejko, & Mason, 2018).

While there is some research on international spouses, there has been scant focus by institutions and governmental agencies on collecting data and understanding this group, or on providing supportive services for them (Doyle, Loveridge, & Faamanatu-Eteuati, 2016). Indeed, international spouses are sometimes referred to as an invisible or forgotten population (Lei, Woodend, Nutter, Ryan, & Cairns, 2015; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2011). International spouses, however, view U.S. HEIs as having a responsibility for providing programming to assist with their adjustment and living (Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2011). Existing research demonstrates that where programming does exist, international spouses report better adjustment, feeling more involved and connected to their communities, and overall contentment with their decision to accompany their student-spouses (Campbell & Prins, 2016).

This article is part of a larger project aimed at understanding the experiences of international student spouses at a Midwestern research university. In this larger study, we sought to explore how spouses of international students navigate the process of finding their place in a new country and make meaning of their changing identities in a new cultural context. During our research, English language emerged as a significant theme. In response, we have dedicated this article to the exploration of the question: *How do participants in our study experience language in the context of their new lives in the United States?*

To answer this question we utilized a case study methodology (Yin, 2009) to examine the experiences of 10 international spouses who attend classes at “Campus Commons,” (pseudonym) a non-profit, faith-based organization located near the university that offers English as a second language (ESL) classes to international students and their families. A case study design was deemed appropriate because we wanted to understand the experience of individuals as constrained within the confines of a unique context and setting as this setting and context shapes these experiences (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) We collected data through individual interviews, a focus group, and site observations. Analyzing our data, we adopted a cross-cutting theme of “language” to interrogate our research question and paint a picture of international student spouses through their own words and experience. Participants shared that opportunities and challenges related to the English language were an important element of their experiences. Moreover, in our data analysis, we found that spouses experienced the ups and downs associated with adjusting to life as a spouse in the United States in ways similar to how they experienced language. Our study builds upon the extant literature on this population with unique insights into how they experience the process of navigating their lives in a new cultural context through English language learning. We also introduce the concept of a low-stakes language learning community to offer explanations for how participants in our study experience

language learning in the context of moving to a new country and interacting with others at Campus Commons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on spouses of international students spans various disciplines and fields, but remains an understudied topic (Chen, 2009). Most studies on spouses of international students focus on their acculturative adjustment. Acculturative adjustment is usually operationalized as the psychological (mental and physical well-being) and sociocultural (managing daily life) changes people make in coping with the stress associated with moving to and living in a foreign culture (Berry, 1997). Like international students, international spouses also experience the psychological and sociocultural stress associated with adjusting to a new culture (Myers-Walls, Frias, Kwon, Ko, & Lu, 2011) but experience loneliness and social isolation, a loss of self-esteem and identity, and a change in marital dynamic that is unique to their dependent status (De Verthelyi, 1995; Martens & Grant, 2008; Myers-Walls et al., 2011). International spouses are dependent on their student-spouses for their legal visa status in the US and are sometimes language dependent on their spouses as well (Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

Support and Social Adjustment

Spouses also possess few natural avenues for finding social support since they do not belong to ready-made groups (such as academic programs) to socialize with others, and are often prohibited or excluded from finding employment and are therefore financially dependent on their student-spouses (De Verthelyi, 1995). Finally, a lack of opportunities for socialization can exacerbate isolation and erect barriers for healthy adjustment (Mwale, Alhawsawi, Sayed & Rind, 2018). Thus, the international spouse experience is described as a hardship or sacrifice (Chen, 2009; De Verthelyi, 1995) made for the benefit of the student-spouse's academic and career aspirations. The visa status of international spouses is a major contributor to the struggles they experience. International spouses on the F2 visa are prohibited from working or studying full-time towards an academic qualification (Bordoloi, 2015).

The experiences of international spouses are varied and nuanced based on numerous personal and external factors. Yellig (2011) noted that relocating to the United States as an international spouse brought both positive and negative experiences and that spouses changed how they viewed themselves as a result. Some of the spouses for example described themselves as becoming more independent, self-reliant, resilient, and valuing more their role as spouse and/or parent. Similarly Zhang, Smith, Swisher, Fu, and Fogarty (2011) found that perception of their situation impacted feelings of adjustment. Wives of international Chinese students who viewed their situation as temporary and perceived a better future were more tolerant and reported better adjustment than spouses who viewed themselves as trapped (Zhang et al., 2011).

Second Language Learning

The ability to live and survive in an English-language environment for non-English-speaking spouses of international students has been shown to be significant in terms of adjustment and satisfaction. In research on international spouses in Canada, Lei et al. (2015) described being able to communicate in English as a significant barrier to accessing services, finding that spouses who had been in Canada on average for more than a year still expressed loneliness and a lack of social connectivity but also a desire to learn more about the local culture, the English language, and for more opportunities to connect with their communities.

Scant research has specially looked at English language learning among spouses of international students and its effects for them. Campbell and Prins (2016) is a notable exception. In this study, their participants expressed isolation and loneliness but also described “agency in making the decision to come to the USA and in taking initiative to find and take advantage of myriad opportunities in the university and community” (p. 444). The authors also found that participants did not view their relocation as a burden or sacrifice and speculated that this may be because these international spouses who take ESL classes compared to spouses who do not “may have been more motivated, had more supportive partners, or been more likely to take initiative in crafting a new life” (p. 444). Campbell and Prins’ (2016) research sheds lights on how international spouses take advantages of opportunities that are available to them to find new ways of being in their new context.

METHODS

Research Design and Site

Our research was qualitative in nature and utilized a case study methodology (Yin, 2009) within the constructivist tradition (Sipe & Constable, 1996). Such a design advocates the use of a variety of data collection techniques, such as observation, document analysis, and interviews intended to generate an understanding of the case (Yin, 2009). For our study, the *case* was international student spouses taking part in a spouse support group and other activities at Campus Commons (pseudonym). In this case study, we were guided by the following research question: *How do international student spouses experience language in the context of their new lives in the United States?*

Sampling Procedures and Participants

Following IRB approval, we recruited participants by sending emails directly to the director of the “Campus Commons” who forwarded our invitation to their membership email listserv. Interested participants were then contacted in person via a site visit. Once international spouse participants indicated that they would like to participate, they were asked whether they would like to participate in the focus group, the individual interview, or both. Individual interviews for international spouses were scheduled for a convenient time and location for the participant and the researcher.

Our study included 10 participants, one male and nine female, each spouses of international students. Pseudonyms are used in the telling of their stories. In Table 1, we present demographic information for participants which includes the participant's pseudonym, age, highest level of education, visa type, country of origin, the length of U.S. residency, and whether the participant completed an individual interview, focus group, or both.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Ed.	Visa type	Country of Origin	How long in the US	Individual Interview	Focus Group
Aditi	31	BA	J2	India	6 mo	N	Y
Anita	45	CC	Green card	South Korea	15 yr	Y	Y
Azra	27	BA	J2	Turkey	2 mo	N	Y
Emilia	26	MA	B1/B2	Italy	5 mo	Y	Y
Ina	35	BA	F2	Indonesia	2.5 yr	Y	Y
Marco	33	HS	J2	Italy	1 yr	N	Y
Mei Lin	39	BA	J2	Taiwan	8 mo	N	Y
Mochi	40	MA	F2	Indonesia	9 mo	Y	Y
Rahima	22	BA	J2	India	2 mo	N	Y
Ria	31	BA	F2	Indonesia	3 yr	N	Y

Note. Ed. = Highest level of education; BA = bachelor's degree; CC = community college; MA = master's degree; HS = high school.

Data Collection

We utilized three types of data collection in this study. First, field observations included a total of four visits ranging from 1–3 hr in duration (Merriam, 1998). Second, we conducted individual interviews with four participants, ranging in duration from 30–90 min. For this, we utilized a semistructured interview protocol, designed to allow participants to respond to questions with their own experience (Yin, 2009). Third, we conducted a focus group with nine total participants over 90 min (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Our initial formal observation took place at the beginning of the study during an English class at Campus Commons. For the first half of the observation we were passive observers. During the second half of the observation we became participant observers (Merriam, 1998) as the class broke up into groups for discussion. Author One conducted five more observations over 3 months. We also

conducted four in-depth, informal, semistructured interviews. Interviews were conducted after our initial observation but prior to the focus group. Finally, the focus group was informal and semi-structured, following a protocol that we designed as a team.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis process began with writing notes about our first observation and discussing our impressions as a group. Following each interview and focus group, which were audiorecorded on several devices—we transcribed the recordings, making sure to create a word-for-word transcript. We wanted to capture exactly what the participants said, not eliminating repetitive words or stumbles. As our participants are second language learners, we felt that correcting grammar mistakes or eliminating stammers could inadvertently alter the meaning contained in an answer. Once transcribed, we read the all transcripts and noted common themes that we found salient (Merriam, 1998). During this initial read-through, we also reflected on how these same themes or ideas were present during our observation, referencing the notes we took.

Through our coding schema, we found the three themes of “Hopes and Desires,” “Worries and Anxieties,” and “Determination and Motivation” to be the most resonant within the broad category of language. Through notes and group discussion, we examined the ways in which our case of Campus Commons impacted the process embedded within each of these themes.

Ethical Consideration and Trustworthiness

When approaching our study, it was important that we could demonstrate that our research was credible (Creswell & Miller, 2000). One of the major tools we utilized was member checking (Carlson, 2010). From the beginning of this project, we envisioned this research as an opportunity to share the stories of this understudied population. Therefore, it was important to us that we were sharing these stories in a way that is just and representative of the stories our participants wish to be told. After initial data analysis, we returned to Campus Commons to share our emergent findings with our research participants, to thank them for their participation, and to get feedback on the themes we were analyzing. Through member checking, we were able to not only confirm the accuracy of transcribed interviews but also to ensure that our interpretations and understandings were consistent with the individuals actually going through this experience (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

FINDINGS

Through our data analysis, we constructed three major themes present in the process of international student spouses navigating their lives in a new cultural context. These themes were *hopes and desires*, *anxieties and worries*, and finally *determinations and motivations*. These three themes will serve to organize the Findings section. Through the data analysis, we also recognized that aspects of English language learning cut

across each of these three themes. We found that language is not only an example of these categories, but also a mitigating factor in other expressions of hopes, anxieties, and determinations. Therefore, we chose to focus on participants' discussion about language for two reasons. First, this was a topic that was brought up in each of our interviews and in the focus group. This was clearly a topic that they wanted to share about as an important element of their experience. Second, language as an analytical code cut across all of the emerging themes in the data. Using language as a lens, we are thus able to understand how each participant can experience a broad range of challenges and opportunities during their experiences as an international student spouse in the United States. Our findings proceed with a description of the theme interwoven with a variety of quotes that demonstrate that although the theme is present for each participant, it manifests in unique ways in each person's experience.

Language Hopes and Desires

All the participants in our study expressed their hopes and desires in terms of wanting to learn or improve their English language abilities. These sentiments were expressed when recalling their expectations for coming to the United States, in assessing their current situations, and in thinking about their goals for the future. Participants also talked about their hopes and desires related to English language learning both when speaking about intentions for their own learning and intentions for their family members.

When discussing hopes or desires for coming to the United States, language learning was identified by multiple spouses as an important consideration. Emilia (female, 26, Italy), for example, when anticipating coming to the US, thought of her new life as a "good opportunity" to "improve [her] English." For different participants, depending on their language level upon arriving in the United States, interacting with English could mean anything from "learning" for those with lower proficiency to "improving" for those like Emilia who were already conversational, and even to "adopting an American accent" for Aditi (female, 31, India) who is highly proficient.

When assessing their current English learning situation, many participants also expressed a genuine desire to learn or improve their language ability. For some, wanting to learn English was a matter of "survival." Ria (female, 31, Indonesia) explained that her desire to learn English was to help her interaction with others: "I want to learn English, so it's make me survive here to speak with people, especially for native speaker, so that's why I come here, I learn here."

In addition to wanting to learn out of necessity, others demonstrated an intrinsic desire to learn. Azra (female, 27, Turkey) exclaimed, "And also, I love speak, but I can English a little. I speak English a little, I love speak. I hope my English more than now." This quote—accompanied with a flurry of hand gestures and a big smile—demonstrated Azra's genuine desire to communicate. Despite true challenges in expressing herself through words, her hope and passion shone through.

Hopes and desires related to English language learning were not limited to past expectations or current assessments but also shaped goals for the future. Several participants had begun planning for employment in the United States and saw English

as an intermediate goal. Anita, for example, planned to take the TOEFL exam in order to demonstrate her English proficiency to future employers. Despite already passing the registered nurse licensing exam, Anita desired a bachelor's degree. Anita (female, 45, South Korea) expressed her plan for continuing her studies in the United States, but desired to learn English as a means to that end:

Researcher One: Okay, so you are hoping to start that (a nursing degree) maybe soon? Maybe in the next couple years?

Anita: uh... maybe TOEFL, I need the TOEFL first, right?

Researcher One: Ah, TOEFL first.

Anita: Yes, I cannot, maybe, I have to ah, study English, right yeah. And then if I go to the, um maybe, I don't know we have to meet advisor, but I don't know, but anyway, I need a speak and read, I need, I need English. Okay.

From these examples, it is evident to see that hopes and desires for learning or improving English are rooted in a variety of motivations for individual participants. These intentions also spanned beyond individual participants and included hopes for family members. Mei Lin (female, 39, Taiwan), a spouse and mother, talked about English learning as it related to her children:

But as I have two children, so I was hoping that they can, you know, grab English and you know, speak with native speakers so they can have better pronunciation. One of them is actually picking up pretty quickly, which I'm pretty happy with. The other one, I think she is just trying to use her fingers to point around; she's not really learning, but I mean, they both have fun at school and they have friends so I'm really happy about that.

Within the theme of hopes and desires related to English language acquisition, individuals in our study expressed a variety of positive emotions and plans regarding their language learning. These positive emotions, however, did not exist in isolation.

Language Worries and Anxieties

In addition to hopes and desires expressed in relation to learning English, all of our participants expressed some level of anxiety regarding their perceived English language ability. Although these anxieties and worries may not be explicitly expressed in our interview transcripts, these feelings were palpable through our observations and in informal interaction with international spouses. For example, when recruiting participants for interviews and the focus group, all three researchers were met with apprehension by those we approached. Although enthusiastic about being in our study, participants nearly universally expressed that they did not want their English proficiency to inhibit or hurt our study. It was almost as though they felt that interviewing them would be a burden on us.

Within our conversations, worry regarding the English language was manifested as participants articulated their expectations for their life in the United States before

moving here. Emilia, for example, expressed that “before coming” she was “terrified of the English language” all due to “a bad experience at school with [her] teacher.” More commonly, however, individuals expressed anxiety and worry when it came to expressing themselves in English. As Mochi (female, 40, Indonesia) said, “I think I can’t speak English, and actually I think I don’t want to have mistake about. Because my pronunciation, oh so hard!” She continued,

The first time and do you know, I am shy, because everybody, Oh oh oh oh, and I'm quiet because what I say? If I want talk about that, I'm very worried, I'm very so so worried if I have mistake about my my English.

The fear of making a mistake or failing to be understood was a consistent worry for all of our participants, regardless of their proficiency. Ria explained how the fear of making a mistake rendered her unable to communicate with others: “So at the time, the first time I cannot speak English, I mean like I’m not confident to speak in front of other people.”

These worries and anxieties persisted beyond the language learning environment at Campus Commons to influence their professional plans and interaction with their families. These dynamics were particularly potent for Anita, the green card holder who has been in the United States for 15 years. Despite years in the country, Anita struggled to break beyond her Korean language environment. Korean is spoken in the home and in the church where she is an active member.

Oh, usually, my husband, he speak Korean, my kids they talk Korean, they bilingual... Yes, when they talk with their friend, they talk English, but when they talk to me, usually they speak Korean. Because, my husband he love English, he is okay, he he’s okay, but, um, yeah he is teaching me, he is okay, but um ahhh, my problem...

In this exchange, the tone in Anita’s voice moved from pride and admiration talking about her children’s bilingualism to despair and desperation when determining that her perceived low proficiency was “her problem.” It is particularly noteworthy that Anita labels her husband and children as bilingual, but does not assume the same label herself, even as we had this hour-long conversation in her second language. This speaks to how family and language intersect in her own self-perception. Continuing to tell a story of how her language proficiency affected her relationship with her family, Anita explained:

...because my daughter she loves friends, and everyone is American, but sometimes, I like my daughter to, she wants to play date, but sometimes I, Um, don't like to text (laughs). Yes writing, yeah, I ask to my husband to write ah, haha, my husband told me “you live in America 15 years!” he always said to me (shy laugh).

From these short quotes, it is easy to get an idea of Anita’s internal struggle of processing her language anxiety in the context of her family relationships. These anxieties also inhibited her professional pursuits and plans. She explained how her low level of confidence caused her to quit a job as a nurse:

Anita: Right, when I work with the patient, he, he is American. Sometimes it is hard to, it is hard to say, it is hard to speak. When I read some, ah, when I read some kind of, how can I say? Sheet, some papers?

Researcher One: His medical papers?

Anita: Yeah, sometimes, I couldn't understand

Researcher One: Oh?

Anita: Yeah. (shy laugh) it is a problem (laugh)... yeah, I quit, haha

Anxieties and worries related to the English language or learning the language were both a spoken and unspoken dynamic throughout our interviews, focus group, and observations. It is clear to see that although participants hoped and desired to learn and improve their English, these positive thoughts and emotions existed simultaneously with negative feelings and apprehension.

Language Determination and Motivation

Finally, language hopes and dreams as well as anxiety and worry were mitigated by a sense of determination and motivation to learn English. While the previous theme depicted language as a barrier to personal, social, or professional development, many participants in our study also recognized language learning as the tool with which to break through that same barrier. Despite speaking to their own perceived deficit in or an initial ambivalence toward their language proficiency, participants also exhibited a sincere motivation to persevere. Mochi said this directly, "But oh! Uh the first time I'm coming here and I think, 'Oh this good' and I, I think I can take motivation, I have motivation. I want to learn English." When asked if they felt they had improved in their English learning, several participants answered in ways that demonstrated their determination:

Researcher One: Do you feel that your English has improved since coming here?

Anita: Yes, I think so.

Researcher One: How do you feel? Do you feel more confident now?

Anita: Yes, when I, well yesterday I felt this, because my daughter goes to Corner Elementary school, in the second grade, I went science fair with my kids and when, sometimes my kids' well parents, well it's hard to say, hard say, it is hard to speak. Everybody, I think everybody very kind, but I'm very nervous. "How can I say? How can I listen?" I always think. And but, yesterday I went to science fair and um, I am getting, I'm getting natural, natural, yeah. Even though I, um, mistake. It's okay, I try and try and try again.

When asking Mochi about whether she felt that she had improved, we received a similar answer:

Researcher Two: Have you found that your English has improved since you've been here?

Mochi: Yes.

Researcher Two: Since you just got here?

Mochi: Yes, improved. And hopefully, if I return to my country, I want translate my book, I want, hopefully.

Like Anita and Mochi, Emilia expressed a sense of determination in her assessment of her own English learning:

And, so this changed, um, in a better way, because now I like English. I can, I mean, I can speak. And I watch movies in English without subtitles and I'm like ok. And I watch because I want to watch, and not because I have to.4 And yeah, I like this change.

Despite their anxieties, all of our participants acknowledged that they thought their English had improved and exhibited a determination to continue to improve it. Marco (male, 33, Italy) summed it up nicely: "I am very glad about that experience because when I came here I didn't know how to speak English, now I can survive." This determination was reinforced by the environment and community at Campus Commons, discussed in the next section. Regardless of their motivations or anxieties around English language learning, participants all sought out Campus Commons as the place to try and realize their goals to some degree or another.

Mochi found that Campus Commons was a place that enhanced her motivation and determination to learn English. She noted that the peer environment was also something that gave her confidence and eased her initial anxieties:

And I want share you about Campus Commons for myself, Campus Commons is ah one place good because Campus Commons ah, give everybody motivation, I mean endorsement. I very very not confident, I'm very very afraid if I want speak because my pronunciation I believe, no, not true, it's wrong. And I followed the class and the teacher, the teacher is very very very nice, friendly, funny and I think it's okay. And I look at it, my friend, the same me, don't know English too, oh the same and Campus Commons if ah, somebody want know who I am, I mean who my English come here and we know, we stay at level basic level, intermediate level, and so on.

Here, Mochi shares how teachers and peers within Campus Commons encourage and support her learning and provide her with motivation. Receiving encouragement from teachers and finding camaraderie with her classmates created the conditions for motivation.

Like Mochi, Ina (female, 35, Indonesia) recognized Campus Commons as a place where she found determination to pursue her goals, but also saw the boundaries of that motivation:

I like Campus Commons, but at this moment, because ah, sometimes like all the classes is good ...but I felt like some of the classes are too basic... I skip some classes who I think it's too basic for me because I want more challenging classes... Maybe I feel this ah, like the first year, I was so happy because I get Campus Commons, the second year, too. But at the beginning of the this third year, I felt like I want to do something else, like maybe I can say I am getting bored...

The central point here for Ina is that her identity is changing based on her language abilities. When her language ability was low, Campus Commons was a central part of her experience and who she was. Now that her language ability is higher and also perhaps because her life circumstances have changed, she has more time to devote to developing another aspect of herself. She is bored with her current routines. Her language ability seems to allow her to imagine more and want more. Notably though, she still thinks that improving her English in a formal classroom setting is important for her.

DISCUSSION

Language was never an explicit part of our protocol, but became an important element of many of the discussions with and among our participants. In the following section, we discuss major concepts that arose through analyzing our findings and reflecting on our experience. Here, we introduce a concept, a *low-stakes language learning community* (LSLLC) to offer explanations for how participants in our study experience language learning in the context of moving to a new country and interacting at Campus Commons. We ground our discussion in relevant literature and suggest areas and directions for future research.

A Low-Stakes Language Learning Community at Campus Commons

Despite the negative emotions and anxiety related to learning English, the participants in our study expressed hopes and desires to improve their English and a determination to do so. Through our observations, we found the environment at Campus Commons to be particularly conducive to alleviating anxiety and creating an atmosphere where individuals could confidently and comfortably learn and grow (Horwitz, 2001). As a group, spouses of international students under the organization of the Campus Commons created an organic LSLLC. At Campus Commons, spouses gather informally in the welcoming space to chat, do crafts, and cook together, sharing recipes and dishes from their home countries. These friendships, developed in everyday interactions and practices, bolstered learning and development. Research on international students supports the notion that friendships with other internationals and co-nationals is beneficial to learning and development (Montgomery, 2010; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Such friendships are also a source of empathy and validation of shared experiences of transitioning to a new learning environment and culture (Hirai, Frazier, & Syed, 2015; Montgomery, 2010). Similarly for these international spouses who are students of English, Campus Commons provided a space to develop the kinds of relationships that are supportive for learning a new

language. A strong sense of multiculturalism has developed in this space. Emily expressed her thoughts on the multicultural environment at Campus Commons:

So yeah, it was boring before coming here (referring to Campus Commons). And then here I met a lot of new people, I made friends from all around the world. It's beautiful. And we don't meet only here, so we go out and we have dinner together and I made very good friends.

She continued to describe the community of learners as being "like a family" and providing a place where she can "just come here, eat, have lunch, and meet people." In this way, the LSLLC at Campus Commons also filled a social void that many of our participants identified. Ina explained what this meant in her situation.

But moms who stay in the house for 24 hours 7, it's hard to not meeting a people, not to interact with people and not to socialize but that's why I think Campus Commons is one of the best thing that ever happen to me here because especially in the first year when we just here, if I didn't find Campus Commons I think, I will be very depressed living in here.

This group takes on characteristics of learning community in that they meet regularly to pursue a common goal of learning or improving their English (Tukibayeva and Gonyea, 2014). We introduce the idea of low stakes because English language learning is not explicit in many of the activities of the group. Instead, English is used as it is the common language among the members of the group. Ina discussed the variety of activities available at Campus Commons:

...and there's Campus Commons where you can meet a lot of people from different countries and do a lot of activities, and also improve your English skill and that's I think the good thing.

In this statement, Ina lists English learning as almost an afterthought of what she gains from participating in activities in the Campus Commons, first citing the multiculturalism and then the variety of interaction among individuals. Without a deliberate focus on language learning, participants in this community can also obtain many of the benefits of language immersion without some of the drawbacks. To this point, Weger (2013) observed that "even when international learners [in an intensive English program] are embedded in an English-dominant community, it cannot be assumed that assignments requiring learners to interact orally with a native-speaking community will be well received" (p. 98). At Campus Commons, there are rarely native English speakers present in group meetings, so the unequal power dynamic of having a native speaker or teacher who possesses the correct answer is removed from the equation. At the same time, because individuals come from a variety of linguistic backgrounds, in order to communicate, they must use their common language and cannot default to their native languages, which is often the case when learners from the same language interact in a second language (MacIntyre & Baker, 2001). As Emilia remarked about the environment, "...in Campus Commons all our, almost all the people are international students. So all are here to learn English, to improve English and no one is judging you and...so it is easy."

Recognizing and appreciating cultures other than one's own also seems to be a product of engaging in this LSLLC. The findings are consistent with Anderson (2008) who found that an intercultural group of women designed to increase interactions between international and local women enabled participants "opportunities for interaction across many lines of difference/dissimilarity" (p. 6), and to develop knowledge of and openness to people and cultures that they would not have encountered without the group. At the same time, a diverse or international environment is also a precondition for the LSLLC. Learners from different linguistic backgrounds come together in an LSLLC, communicating amongst themselves in their common language (English). The result of this communication and interaction is not only improved language skills, but also enhanced confidence for interaction and a tendency to have positive impressions about people from other cultures and countries.

The concept of an LSLLC seems to have promising implications for the study of second language acquisition. Our concept of an LSLLC is similar in some ways to the oasis idea found in Johnson's (1999) doctoral work. In Johnson's research, a university-affiliated ESL program provided a space for many spouses of international students who were marginalized because of their English language status to bond over their shared living experiences and their English language learning goals. A key difference between Johnson's research and ours, however, is that while in Johnson's study learners desired more formality in the form of testing and evaluation of learning, learners in our study at Campus Commons praised the informal, community-based nature of study that allowed them to gain more proficiency in English in a relaxed, low pressure environment. Our observations of the LSLLC are consistent with Merrill Swain's (2000) output hypothesis, or more specifically, second language acquisition through collaborative dialogue. Collaborative dialogue is "knowledge-building dialogue" that encourages learners' "performance to outstrip competence" and where language use is mediated by language learning (p. 97). Collaborative dialogue is the alignment of both cognitive and social activity. While our study sheds some light on the importance of informality and comfort in an LSLLC, further research is necessary to explore how such a community could be effectively organized and facilitated.

Limitations

While our study has begun to elucidate the experiences of international student spouses in acclimating to the context of a large Midwestern university, particularly in regards to the English language, there are several limitations that should be noted. First, this is a single case study and does not include all of the international spouses within the university. However, despite the small sample size, important themes were found about the implications of language learning and the communities in which this learning takes place. These findings, though preliminary, call for more research to be done within a larger, more diverse population in order to broaden conclusions and generate more nuanced findings. A second limitation is that this was a cross-sectional data collection, which provides but a glimpse of the lives of participants. While we were deliberate and reflective in our data collection and analysis, to gain a more

nuanced understanding of international student spouses' experiences over time, future studies should take place over time and include focal respondents to assess how these experiences change over time and how they differ between participants. Finally, the applicability of results could be improved by including multiple sites in order to understand how components of location impact experience. This is of particular relevance to the fact that participants chose to focus on language in reflecting on their experiences. This might have been due to the fact that participants were recruited and interviewed within a language learning space. Had we met in a different space, they may have focused on different elements of their experience.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our research raises implications for policy, practice, and future research. First, in regards to future programming at the Campus Commons, directors and instructors might recognize the significance of the LSLLC that has formed there. Future programming could be more deliberate in building upon the benefits of the LSLLC. For example, instructors could design opportunities for learners to engage inside and outside the classroom in collaborative projects. These projects could encourage communication and provide learners with an opportunity to more deeply engage in the LSLLC.

In terms of the HEIs from which our participants received their supporting visa documents allowing them to come to the United States, we feel that more deliberate steps should be taken to better prepare and inform students and their spouses about life and potential challenges to expect upon coming to the campus community. Nearly all of our participants noted that their expectations were not met with reality. As the grantor of supporting visa documents, the institution is responsible for investing in the positive well-being of the spouses of international students and not just that of the students. When it comes to language learning, while the university has taken positive steps to provide low-cost English language program for adult learners through its Linguistics department and a free English tutoring program offered by the university-affiliated international-student-support-focused organization, more needs to be done in terms of coordinating programs and disseminating information to individuals who could benefit from such programming at the university. Furthermore, our concept of the LSLLC could also be adapted and promoted for spouses by the institution. Several of our participants commented that while there was some programming available on campus, these lacked the community feeling that the Campus Commons possesses. If the idea of LSLLC were a component of the campus-based English tutoring programming, spouses might enjoy additional support when it comes to improving their language and finding a sense of community.

For the field of higher education more broadly, our study has implications for recent discussions of internationalization of higher education. As institutions continue to internationalize, a growing number of students from outside the United States are recruited to U.S. campuses (IIE, 2016). Many, particularly those studying advanced degrees, bring their spouses and dependents with them (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2015). As such, HEIs hold not only the responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of everyone coming to the institution, but also possess a significant opportunity for tapping into

the meaningful contribution these individuals can make in the university community. As universities herald the benefits of internationalization as bringing diverse perspectives and insights to their campuses and classrooms (Knight, 2015), they should also recognize the ideas, skills, and perspectives brought by spouses of students. In other words, the concept of internationalization at home, or the idea that students need not travel internationally to reap the benefits of international exchange (Soria & Troisi, 2013), should be adapted to include individuals beyond students themselves, especially at a time when international spouses on dependent visas are growing in number.

Stemming from this study, future research might more directly investigate the concepts developed in the discussion section. For example, subsequent conceptual work could continue to explore the optimization of an LSLLC, while empirical work could explore how such communities are formed and how they develop both for international spouses and other populations. Although we have intended to learn more, international student spouses continue to be an underserved and understudied population. Future research might consider this population in other institutional or country contexts and within the broader conversation of student mobility and migration. Researchers are also encouraged to investigate stories of “agency and resilience” (Cui, Arthur, & Domene, 2017, p.177) instead of narrowly focusing on deficit-based stories that currently dominate the research on international spouse adjustment (Cui et al., 2017). Potential areas of inquiry could include investigation of the professional and friendship networks of international spouses, pathways to furthering higher education for international spouses, and more broadly the learning aspirations, goals, and activities of international spouses. Quantitative studies, for example, might consider whether bringing a spouse (or having children while abroad) enhances or diminishes probability of remaining in the host country after degree completion.

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