

## Exploring Identity and Agency through the Investment of Mexican Speakers of English as a Foreign Language

*Explorando la identidad y la agencia a través de la inversión de los hablantes mexicanos de inglés como lengua extranjera*

**ABSTRACT:** This article explores identity and agency through the concept of investment as it pertains to Mexican speakers of English as a second language. In this study, I revisit Bonny Norton's concept of investment, and I claim that the concept of investment provides unique insights into local Mexican foreign-language learning practices. In this article, I argue that participants in my study are successful in their English language learning and language use when they take control of their own learning and use it for their own purposes. I conducted this research in a qualitative study employing semi-structured interviews using narrative analysis. This article will explain the concepts of investment and agency, articulate the overall methodology, and analyze the results of the five participants providing key conclusions to this study. By studying when and why Mexican speakers of English as a foreign language invest in English, this research can help educators understand these learners better. According to the study's results, when English language learners take control of their own learning and language, using it for their own purposes, they are successful on their own terms.

**KEY WORDS:** investment, identity, agency, second language.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo explora la identidad y la agencia a través del concepto de inversión en lo que respecta a los mexicanos que hablan inglés como segunda lengua. En este estudio, reviso el concepto de inversión de Bonny Norton, y afirmo que el concepto de inversión proporciona una visión única de las prácticas de aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras de los mexicanos locales. En este artículo, sostengo que los participantes en mi estudio tienen éxito en su aprendizaje y uso del idioma inglés cuando toman el control de su propio aprendizaje y lo utilizan para sus propios fines. Realicé esta investigación en un estudio cualitativo que empleó entrevistas semiestructuradas utilizando un análisis narrativo. Este artículo explicará los conceptos de inversión y agencia, articulará la metodología general y analizará los resultados de los cinco participantes proporcionando conclusiones clave para este estudio. Al estudiar cuándo y por qué los hablantes mexicanos de

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inglés como lengua extranjera invierten en inglés, esta investigación puede ayudar a los educadores a entender mejor a estos estudiantes. De acuerdo con los resultados del estudio, cuando los estudiantes de inglés toman el control de su propio aprendizaje e idioma, utilizándolo para sus propios propósitos, tienen éxito en sus propios términos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** inversión, identidad, agencia, segundo idioma.

## Introduction

In this article I explore identity and agency through the concept of investment as it pertains to Mexican speakers of English as a second language. While teaching English as a foreign language in private universities and large corporations in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, I became interested in learning why these professionals decide to enroll into English courses, what leads them to seriously invest in learning the language, and how this has an effect on their identity and agency. In this qualitative study I learned that when Mexican speakers of English as a second language are forced to study and use English, they are often averse to investing in the language until they find a concrete personal need to communicate in English. By revisiting Bonny Norton's concept of investment, I claim that the concept of investment can provide unique insights into local Mexican foreign-language learning practices. I argue that participants in this study are successful in their English language learning and language use when they take control of their own learning and use it for their own purposes.

Investment is a concept first introduced by Norton (1995) and remodeled by Darwin and Norton (2015) as a way of studying how and why second language speakers decide to learn and use their second lan-

guage. Norton's concept of investment demonstrates that there is more to consider as to why speakers of English as a second language become motivated and invested in learning and communicating in English. There are few studies on the investment of speakers of English as a second language in an EFL environment (Darvin & Norton, 2015). By studying Mexican speakers of English as a second language—specifically when and why they invest in English—this research has pedagogical implications in the classroom and helps educators understand these types of learners better. Using semi-structured interviews with five participants, I seek to understand their individual experiences while giving them a voice. Through their experiences I hope to shed light on the motivations, identities, agency, and investment of others.

## Literature Review

### *Overview*

The focus of the literature review is to relate how the concepts of investment, identity, and agency become significant in language learning. These concepts are relevant because they enable a way of studying how and why second language speakers decide to learn and use their second language. Norton (1995) “argues for a conception of investment rather than

motivation to capture the complex relationship of language learners to the target language” (p. 9). Theories on motivation, which will be explored in the next section, fail to take into account the social context in which second language speakers operate. Motivational theory cannot fully explain the complex interactions that take place in a second language speaker’s world. More recently, Darwin and Norton (2015) have developed the concept of investment to capture this complexity which can shed light as to when and why second language speakers decide to invest in the English language while working and residing in Mexico. I look at motivation from this point of view rather than from the more traditional intrinsic-versus-extrinsic perspective. In this literature review, I will review the concepts of investment, identity, and agency in relation to second language speakers.

#### *Why motivational theory doesn’t work*

Motivational theory does not fully capture the picture of what is happening in a second language speaker’s world. Past research has usually pinned second language learners into two polar opposite categories such as motivated/unmotivated, introverted/extroverted, inhibited/uninhibited, and good learner/bad learner (Norton, 2014) to explain why a second language speaker may be successful or unsuccessful in learning and then speaking a second language. These descriptors can often exist in the same second language speaker for various internal or external reasons, and hence be contradictory. They do not fully encompass the external factors of their social context, which has a significant impact on whether second language speakers choose

to continue learning and using their second language and decide to invest in it. Due to this complexity, motivational theories from theorists such as Gardner (1985) do not fit.

Gardner’s (1985) socio-educational model of language learning is based on the belief that social and cultural settings can impact motivation to learn a language. He specifies two types of motivation: instrumental and integrative motivation. “An instrumental orientation refers to a situation whereby the learner is motivated to learn the language for extrinsic reasons, such as for financial gain or job promotion. An integrative orientation refers to the situation whereby the learner is motivated to learn the language because they identify with the target culture” (Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015, p. 404). In short, instrumental motivation stems from a desire for practicable purposes, and integrative motivation stems from the desire to be part of the target community. Norton goes further to say that integrative motivation comes from the “desire to learn a language to *integrate successfully* with the target language community” (Norton, 2013, p. 50; original italics). Integrative motivation drives second language speakers to successfully be accepted into the target community.

However, the idea of investment that Norton advocates for is not the same as instrumental motivation. The concept of instrumental motivation assumes “a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner who desires access to material resources that are the privilege of target language speakers” (Norton, 2013, p. 50). To say that a language learner is a “unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner” is putting them in a closed box and assumes that external fac-

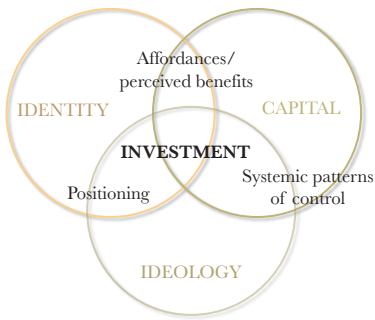
tors have no influence on their decisions to either invest or not invest in a second language. Alternatively, the concept of investment dictates that when second language learners speak, they are doing two things: 1) interacting with target language users; and 2) “constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (Norton, 2013, p. 51). Norton’s conclusion from this is that in investing in a target language, a second language speaker is also investing in their own identity, which is changing over time and space (Norton, 2013). Because a language speaker’s identity evolves, the idea of instrumental motivation cannot fully explain changes within the language speaker. Hence, the concept of investment describes a more complex phenomenon happening in second language speakers than what can be explained by instrumental or integrative motivation. For this reason, I will focus on the model of investment.

### *Investment*

Investment is seen as the sociological complement to the “psychology construct of motivation” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 37). Since Norton’s (1995) initial introduction of investment, Darvin and Norton (2015) have developed the concept more fully to encapsulate three specific notions: ideology, capital, and identity. Their model shows “how power circulates in society, at both micro and macro levels, constructing modes of inclusion and exclusion through and beyond language” (Norton & De Costa, 2018, p. 92). Darvin and Norton (2015) have argued that “if learners invest in a language, they do so with the

understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources” (p. 37). This is exhibited through their model where ideology, capital, and identity all intersect and interact with each other so that investment is created. Kramsch (as cited in Norton, 2013) states that “Bonny [Norton] found in these three concepts an expression of her desire to reclaim the right of language learners to take ownership of English, to liberate themselves from imposed identities, and to build communities of practice constituted along lines other than the institutional communities imposed by society” (p. 195). Norton (2013) argues “that a learner may be a highly motivated language learner, but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community” (p. 2). Their communities or classrooms, for example, may be racist, sexist, elitist, or homophobic, thereby deterring language learners from investing. In addition, the language practices of a classroom may not be consistent with learner expectations of good teaching and thus affect their ability to learn. A learner can be highly motivated to learn a language, but not necessarily invested in a given set of language practices (Norton, 2013). To describe this phenomenon, McKinney and Norton (2008) focused on the ideas of various poststructuralist theorists who see “the individual (i.e., the subject) as diverse, contradictory, dynamic, and changing over historical time and social space” (p. 194). The model of investment demonstrates how learners position themselves within the constructs of capital, identity, and ideology (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Fuente: Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 6.

The basis of investment's three notions of capital, identity, and ideology stems from Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural. Each of these is reviewed below.

*Capital.* As described in Block (2016), Bourdieu's economic capital refers to income, possessions, and property; social capital refers to friends and work associates; and cultural capital refers to education level and cultural consumption. In general, each person strives to increase their forms of capital, and second language learners do so by learning the target language of their community. Bourdieu (1986) states that "the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world" (p. 246). This social world for language learners is dependent on the target language community and/or their places of work. "If learners 'invest' in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic re-

sources (language, education, friendship) and material resources (capital goods, real estate, money), which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power" (Norton, 2013, p. 6). These symbolic and material resources tie directly into Bourdieu's forms of capital and provide us with reasons as to why learners pursue a second language.

If a person decides to learn a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will increase their capital. "Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) use the term 'cultural capital' to reference the knowledge and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms" (Norton, 2013, p. 50). Some types of capital are valued more than others; however, some second language learners believe that by investing in a second language it will give them access to a greater array of resources, which translates into increasing the value of their cultural capital, one of the main goals of second language learners (Norton, 2013). The results/byproducts of these processes and access to capital(s) become more and more concrete when a second language learner's knowledge of the target language grows; their access to symbolic and material resources converts to more sales or job opportunities and promotions at work. This cultural capital directly links to the notion of identity in investment, wherein the loss or gain of capital changes how second language learners see themselves over time and space.

*Identity.* Identity is defined by Norton (2013) as how a person understands their relationship to the world and how that relationship

is arranged throughout time and space, affecting the way in which the individual understands their future possibilities. In this time and space, “language is seen as central to the circulation of discourses” where systems of power and knowledge oversee social institutions and practices (De Costa & Norton, 2016, p. 589). This signifies that within this space, identities must be negotiated. Identity can be “multiple, changing, and a site of struggle, frequently negotiated in context of inequitable relations of power” (Norton, 2014, p. 61). Identities are multiple and ever-changing within both language as well as the community in which a person operates.

Kramsch (as cited in Norton, 2013) states that “Bourdieu considered an individual’s habitus as unconsciously structured by the fields in which he/she finds himself (e.g. family, school, workplace); in turn, by acting according to their habitus, individuals structure the fields in which they operate. It is through this interaction of habitus and field that people gain a practical sense of who they are and who they can become” (p. 196). Habitus refers to the “physical embodiment of cultural capital, to the deeply ingrained habits, skills and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences” (Zapata-Barrero, 2019). Second language speakers must make an investment in the fields in which they are operating in order to be successful. Within these fields, learners decide who they think they can and would like to become.

Following poststructuralist theorists such as Bourdieu, Weedon (1997) argues that language creates who we are and defines social and institutional practices. Weedon writes, “Language is a place where

actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is *constructed*” (p. 21; original italics). Weedon uses the term *subjectivity* because a person’s identity is defined by their own personal feelings and opinions. It is in this space that a person forms and decides who they would like to be. Building off Weedon, Norton (2013) states that “one is often subject *of* a set of relationships (i.e. in a position of power) or subject *to* a set of relationships (i.e. in a position of reduced power)” (Norton, 2013, p. 4; original italics). These relationships of power are in constant flux and form based on where each person stands within their target community. The idea of power and its effect on identity leads to the notion of ideology.

*Ideology.* Darwin and Norton (2017) adopt a broad concept of ideology in order to account for learners’ ability “to move fluidly across spaces where ideologies collude and compete” (p. 6). They refer to these ideologies as “dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion,” all of which collectively determines power structures (p. 6). Similarly to Foucault (1980), Norton (2013) argues that

power does not operate only at the macro level of powerful institutions such as the legal system, the education system and the social welfare system, but also at the micro level of everyday social encounters between people

with differential access to symbolic and material resources – encounters that are inevitably produced within language. (p. 47)

This power implicates the relationships that are created between a person and their institutions and communities, where symbolic and material resources are gained and lost.

A person can be denied or granted access to powerful social networks that give second language learners the opportunity to speak (Norton, 2013). Thus, their environment influences whether or not the learner would like to invest in the language. It is highly advantageous for a language learner to be within the community of the target language which they are learning. This gives the language learner more access to opportunities to practice their listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills (Norton, 2014). Outside of their places of work, sometimes second-language users do not have much engagement with the target language, unless they take it upon themselves to access English language materials, such as reading news articles online or listening to podcasts. This is one of the reasons that “identity theorists are therefore concerned about the ways in which power is distributed in both formal and informal sites of language learning, [...] and how it affects learners’ opportunities to negotiate relationships with target language speakers” (Norton, 2014, p. 61).

Multiple discourses exist in investment. Bourdieu’s (1977) and Bakhtin’s (1981) concepts of discourse and discursive practices influenced Norton’s concept of ideol-

ogy. Bourdieu (1977) paid special importance to power in discourse and believed that participants never shared equal rights when speaking. He believed that there were legitimate and illegitimate speakers who were identified by their “rights to speech” and their “power to impose reception” (p. 648). In formal or informal situations, second language speakers may feel that they do not have the right to speak nor the power to impose reception due to their second language abilities. The right to speak depends on their personal or work position in addition to their linguistic/communicative competences. For example, a second language speaker may feel that they do not have the right to speak when a native language speaker speaks or if their boss is speaking since they are a subordinate. Their position dictates who will pay attention to the speaker.

#### *Agency*

Another important aspect of second language learning that needs to be reviewed is learners and speakers’ agency. Though it is not part of the investment model of ideology, capital, and identity it is an overarching theme across it. Agency is the interplay between the individual and the social (Kalaja et al., 2016). It is a relationship that is built amongst an individual and others. Dufva and Aro (2014) state that “people’s capacity to act purposefully and reflectively as they engage in relationships with other human beings in turn prompts human beings to re-invent their own positions or re-imagine how they can act” (p. 4). These positions and the reimagining of oneself directly relate to an individual’s identity

and the concept of investment. Bourdieu (1977) explored how second language speakers or writers negotiate social positions and power through the use of discourses. The active use of discourses and addressing power relations through language become an aspect of learner agency (Dufva & Aro, 2014). Because investment “offers a way to understand learners’ variable desires to engage in social interaction and community practices,” it points to the social relationship that is constructed between learners and the target language “and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (Norton, 2013, p. 6). The agency of a language learner “develops in a dialogic interplay that involves power relationships and asymmetry, such as those between students and teachers, or native and non-native speakers” (Dufva & Aro, 2014, p. 40). Because of these relationships, learners’ agency can increase their desire to continue learning a language or can make them want to stop.

In summary, there are various reasons as to why individuals invest in a second language; the more encompassing the theorizations of an individual’s identity, capital, and ideology, the more researchers can understand about learners and their successful learning practices and strategies. This study explains this phenomenon, resting on the model of investment as its focal point; identity and agency are spread throughout this model. Each person does not simply copy another person’s words and ideas but integrates their own meaning and intention. These meanings and intentions carry the most importance for second-language users in order to communicate and be understood.

## Methodology

### *Overall methodology*

My research on investment specifically looking at identity and agency of English second language speakers was conducted in a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and narrative and thematic analysis. All participants use English transactionally at their workplaces, some on an everyday basis and others less frequently. All places of work are located in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico.

### *Participants*

I began my study with six participants, but I had an attrition of one, leaving a total of five participants dedicated to the study throughout its entirety. These participants are not a representative sample of all second language speakers, as I am attempting to understand individual experiences to see if they can provide insights into the motivations, identities, agency, and investment of others. Each participant signed a consent form, and their names have been changed to protect their privacy. Below are details of the five participants.

### **Ricardo, 38, tech industry and entrepreneur**

Ricardo is an engineer who was born and raised in Oaxaca, Oaxaca, Mexico. In addition to taking mandatory English language courses that were part of his school curriculum, his mother enrolled him in English courses at a private language school. He recalls his mother taking him and his sister to the main city square and forcing them to practice their English by randomly going up to tourists and speak-



ing with them. He believes that this had a significant impact on his English language learning and use. From a young age, he was forced to overcome any embarrassment or shyness he may have had and just speak, which has carried into his adulthood. He moved to Guadalajara in his twenties to attend university and study engineering. He has now been working in the tech industry in Guadalajara for over ten years at various companies as a project manager. He also owns a business with his wife. He uses English daily at work. At work, he often looks for any training opportunities; however, English language courses are not one of these opportunities, as he feels that his English level is good enough and his priorities should be in management and computing.

### **David, 29, tech industry**

David was born in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico but moved to Guadalajara when he was a teenager. He attended a university in Guadalajara and studied industrial engineering. English courses were a mandatory part of the curriculum, but he says that he did not take these courses seriously, since he was focused on his engineering coursework. This is a common pattern among all participants in their undergraduate education. David currently works in the logistics department of a tech company and loves his job. He consistently tries to do what is best for his career. While looking into his company benefits, he learned that they would pay for a certification course if it would benefit his job and company. He searched for courses on his own and landed on a logistics certification course at a top university in Guadalajara, which was successfully funded through his com-

pany benefit. David completed the course and is always looking for other certifications he can obtain through his job benefit, demonstrating that he is not satisfied with the status quo. David took this certification course because he thought it would benefit his career. For this reason, he also enrolled in an in-house business English course that was offered by his company. He feels that improving his English will enhance his abilities at his current job as well as future job prospects. For this reason, he sees the investment of studying English as worthwhile.

### **Marco, 25, auto industry and entrepreneur**

Marco lives with his family in Guadalajara. He grew up with a mother who placed great importance on learning English. When he was young, he discovered that he was extremely good at BMX bike racing, an extreme sport. Because of this talent, he lived and trained in Canada for three months when he was 12 years old, and when he was 17 years old, he lived and trained in the United States for six months. Throughout his time in both locations he was enrolled in all English-language schools, as well. Marco believes that, although short, these experiences had a significant impact on his English language learning and comprehension. The other big influence on his English language learning he attributes to his mother. She consistently pushed him in his English language courses in school and enrolled him in private English language schools in the city. His younger two brothers were even sent to an elementary and junior high private military academy in the United States for the specific reason

of learning and practicing English in an English-speaking country. While at university, Marco studied international business. He graduated with his degree a few years ago but realized he wanted to invest in English while working at his family business in the auto industry. He also is the founder of a proprietary car accessory brand that he sells in Mexico. Both companies have suppliers around the world, mostly located in Asia. A couple of years ago, he enrolled in a business English course at his alma mater that he paid for himself. His long-term goal is to receive his Master's in Business Administration.

### **Flor, 38, entrepreneur**

Flor was born and raised in Guadalajara, Jalisco. Unlike the other participants, English language courses were not mandatory in her university studies, though she did have mandatory English language curriculum instituted in her primary and high school education. While at university, she studied systems engineering. She worked as a test engineer at various tech companies in Guadalajara for over 10 years. One of the tech companies she worked for offered in-house English language courses. Though extremely busy with her projects at work, Flor never missed a class and was very dedicated to her language course. At this time, she did not use English at her job, but she did feel an urgency to learn English to be promoted within the company. After her time in tech, she founded her own business with her husband. Their business brings the work of Mexican artisans from all over the country to Guadalajara. This is her true passion. Many foreigners visit her store, and this is where she finds her En-

glish language skills most useful and needed at this time.

### **Adriana, 28, education field**

Adriana lives with her husband and young daughter in Guadalajara, Jalisco, where she was born and raised. During her entire academic life, English language courses were always part of the mandatory curriculum. From a young age she was interested in education and teaching, and as an adult she found her way into the educational technology industry. While at university, she studied pedagogy and graduated with an honorable mention and then worked in her university's department upon graduation as a coordinator. She used her English language skills sporadically as she coordinated trips and agreements with other universities abroad. She was later promoted to another department in the university, which allowed her to enroll in a business English class during her normal work hours. As our interviews began for this study in 2019, she was starting a new position at the same university in which she used her English language skills for research purposes.

### **Araceli, 24, tech industry (dropped)**

Araceli initially agreed to be part of this study, but we were unfortunately never able to establish an appointment time, so I have an attrition of one.

### *Instruments and procedure*

I created a list of 32 interview questions divided into four pre-determined themes (see Appendix 1) and used a semi-structured interview format. I did not fully follow my formal list of questions during interviews in order for the conversation to flow more

naturally (Weiss, 1994). The themes and questions were reviewed by two academic professionals who have research experience and post-graduate qualifications in the field.

All interviews were conducted between March 2019 and October 2019. Each participant was given the option to have the interview in the language of their choice, Spanish or English. Each participant was interviewed three times, and each interview lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. In order to be respectful of their time, I offered to meet them at their places of work; this had the added advantage of providing a setting both comfortable and familiar to the participants. I also collected general biographical information during our conversations so as not to distract from the details of their stories and experiences.

After my series of interviews, I collated the results into pre-determined themes of each participant and conducted a thematic and narrative analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that thematic analysis can be a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants while highlighting their similarities and differences. These theme are: beliefs about English and its importance; experiences learning English; experiences using English; and self-perception of English-language skills. The results and analysis were reviewed by two academic professionals who have research experience and post-graduate qualifications in foreign language teaching and learning. I was not seeking their endorsement but rather whether my results and analysis made sense and are sustainable, which they confirmed.

## Results and Analysis

I will divide my analysis into four pre-determined themes: beliefs of English and its importance; experiences learning English; experiences using English; and self-perception of English-language skills.

### *Beliefs of English and its importance*

Participants believe that knowing English increases the number of opportunities you receive. They want to increase their capital in some form. As cited in Block (2016), Bourdieu's economic capital refers to income, possessions, and property; social capital refers to friends and work associates; and cultural capital refers to education level and cultural consumption. Second language learners, like my participants, believe English is important to give them access to "a wider range of symbolic and material resources" (Norton, 2013, p. 50). Ricardo believes that English is important if you want to work in a global company and opens more doors and opportunities outside of Mexico. All but one participant was most concerned with increasing their economic capital.

All participants agreed that English is important to being promoted in your career if your goal is to work in a global company. However, if you work in a national company and have no desire to move outside of it, knowing English does not necessarily get you a better job. Though it is something that he did not observe himself, Ricardo obtained a new and better position during this study and it was not due to his English skills. He is the only one of the participants who works at a global company. It could be a myth that knowing English well will

get you a better job and more opportunities, but this needs to be further explored with research. It is this potential myth that keeps participants invested in English as their second language, since they believe it will increase their economic, cultural and social capital.

#### *Experiences learning English*

Norton (2013) argues “that a learner may be a highly motivated language learner, but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community” (p. 2). Ricardo and the other participants did not like learning English when it was mandatory for them to learn in their elementary, junior high and high schools.

Participants said that many of their English teachers did not seem to care about the course themselves. They felt that their teachers never taught anything new even though they passed each level of English at school. This is part of the reason why Ricardo is thankful that his mom enrolled him in a private English language school and placed such importance on the language, but he did not feel the same support in his public school education. Other participants said that they believe they might have invested more in their English coursework had their teachers and administration emphasized it. This is in agreement with what Norton (2013) argues “that a learner may be a highly motivated language learner, but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom or community” (p. 2). The language practices of a classroom may not be consistent with learner expectations of good teaching and affect their ability to

learn. A learner can be highly motivated to learn a language, but not necessarily invested in a given set of language practices (Norton, 2013). All participants felt they had the motivation to learn, but the support was not there in their general education curriculum. When people are forced to study a language, it does not seem like something they are open to do.

When English acquired a personal significance (e.g., for work, travel, etc.), that is when participants felt invested in their learning. This investment happened after graduating from university, when they were working and found a concrete need for the language. When they find something they are passionate about, they are motivated to learn and use English. As a matter of fact, participants like Ricardo enrolled in English classes on their own after obtaining their undergraduate degrees because they felt an urgency to know English better. They took agency over their own learning. This is in agreement with Norton (2013) as she states, “If learners ‘invest’ in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic resources (language, education, friendship) and material resources (capital goods, real estate, money), which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power” (p. 6).

#### *Experiences using English*

Four of the five participants used to be nervous and stressed when speaking English but have stopped caring since it’s the only way to communicate between themselves and the other (e.g., Indian or Japanese second language speakers of English). As Norton (2014) states about one of her re-

search participants: “while some identity positions may limit and constrain opportunities for learners to listen, speak, read, or write (particularly under conditions of marginalization), other identity positions (such as ‘mother’) may offer enhanced sets of possibilities for social interaction and human agency, i.e. the possibility to take action in social settings” (p. 61). Identities such as “owner” or “manager” give agency to participants to take action in their places of work. In Adriana’s case, the issue of power operates at the micro level between her, the subordinate, and her boss. Her job title is underneath that of her manager and so she does not feel that she has agency. In Ricardo’s situation, he is managing people and projects at their place of work, which gives him agency to act and speak in English without the worry of making mistakes. He feels both parties are equally invested in the transaction, and so there are equal levels of power at play. He believes that when both parties want something out of the transaction, they equally share the goal to complete it. This is one of the reasons that most participants do not care about making mistakes in English. They believe that by having a successful transaction, they accomplish their goals of being understood in their second language and successfully complete their work tasks.

While none of them like making mistakes when speaking English, all of them accept that they will. Participants feel that they use English in business or social interactions, but none of them see English as part of their identity. They feel that speaking English does not define them because their native language is still present in every other aspect of their lives. Even when

Ricardo attended work conferences in the U.S., he stated that all the Spanish-speakers would go to an area during breaks to be able to communicate in their native language, so even in certain work situations, Ricardo was able to speak in Spanish, which he did not feel odd about. If any of the participants had the option of being able to only communicate in Spanish, they would take it. Participants get tired of using their second language. However, they feel economic, cultural and social pressure to learn, speak and use English, specifically, in certain professional situations.

All participants would like to sound like native English speakers, but they accept that they most likely will never achieve this goal. For instance, Flor is okay with making mistakes in English while speaking to foreigners in her store because she feels the need to communicate. She says, “Aunque cometa errores, tengo que comunicarme. Aunque cometa errores, tengo que decir algo, ¿no?” She expects special consideration when speaking English, since other second or foreign language speakers may not speak very well either. When speaking to Japanese tourists in her store, she said that they communicated by using short, simple sentences in English. She feels a mutual understanding and tolerance of their English-speaking abilities and left the interaction content because she felt she made a connection in her non-native language. As long as participants are successful in their transactions in English, they feel accomplished.

#### *Self-perception of English-language skills*

Participants see themselves as legitimate speakers. As cited by Norton (2013), Bour-

dieu (1977) argued that four conditions need to be met if an utterance is an example of legitimate discourse: first, it must be said by an appropriate speaker; second, it must be said in a legitimate situation; third, it must be said to legitimate receivers; and fourth, it must be “formulated in legitimate phonological and syntactic forms” (p. 106). Participants agree that the first, second, and third conditions are met when they speak English, but all feel that they do not meet the fourth criteria due to the errors they feel they must make while speaking. For example, Marco stated that he lacks the appropriate vocabulary and does not use properly structured sentences, but since he can communicate his business objectives with any American, he feels he has the right to be heard and responded to. Regardless of this lack of vocabulary and syntax, all participants consider themselves to be legitimate speakers who deserve to be heard and responded to.

David, Flor and Adriana saw themselves at an intermediate level and Ricardo and Marco saw themselves as advanced in English. I consider these to be partly inaccurate based on the interviews conducted. David, Flor, and Adriana could be at a more advanced level. I let all participants know that they could speak in Spanish or in English during our interviews. Both women chose Spanish because they would be able to speak faster and be able to communicate their ideas using the words they wanted. However, Flor started to feel more comfortable towards the end of the study and said she wanted to practice her English. All three men wanted to and liked the challenge of conducting the interviews in English, even though all three used a few

Spanish words occasionally. Even though David uses the same amount of English at work as the women, he said that he wants and needs to practice English. I cannot say if this is an issue of gender at this time because further research is needed.

### Conclusion

In this research, I attempted to understand the individual experiences of five participants to see if they can shed light on the motivations, identities, agency, and investment of other learners. Obviously, future research needs to take place to confirm whether other insights can be achieved, since my focus was on a small group of individuals and not large groups of people. By studying when and why Mexican speakers of English as a foreign invest in English, this research can help educators understand these types of learners better. Each of these participants became successful in their English language learning and use when they took control of their own learning and used it for their own purposes.

There is a process of self-realization that helps second-language learners develop and identify their motivation to invest in English. Their interactions at work or in their personal life confront them with the need to know English. Something secondary provides an opportunity for them to have the time and funding to enroll in English courses while working. When learners took control of their own learning this produced positive affective factors. Participants felt successful using English when they were understood and/or when they completed a transaction. It is because of the success felt in each of these participants' transactions that they felt that En-

English did not define who they were, but was a tool used to help them gain success in their work and personal lives. Feelings of being unsuccessful only happened to some participants while traveling abroad.

My participants did not like English at the beginning of their learning, but when they took control of their English and used it for their own purpose, they felt they were successful in their language learning and use. When a concrete need for the language was found, the participants in this study were and are successful on their terms and other educators should see them as such. This research is strong in looking at them as individuals as well as giving them a voice. Second-language learners can sometimes be seen in a negative light because they can be seen as unmotivated in their English-language courses, but this research shows them positively as each of them have taken control of their own learning when they discover their specific need and use for it.

There are a few things that could be improved upon in this research project. For instance, a greater number of participants to interview would have been optimal. Also, adding another component such as asking each of the participants to complete a daily journal would have been ideal to collect additional data. Unfortunately, participants' busy work and personal lives did not allow them to do this.

For future research, it could be interesting to do a case study of a learner for a longer period of time. Other alternative methodologies could include a critical discourse analysis looking at power and English. Another option would be to have an objective measure of English levels rather

than self-perceived levels of English as participants did in this study. I did not follow this method because it was important for me that these participants were successful on their own terms, not according to an exam. In this research, I've looked at advanced learners and how they got to that point in a synchronic study. It could be interesting to look at beginning (and/or intermediate) students who are already on this path. Perhaps a diachronic study of learners' failures could be executed, to determine if failures are due to lack of language or lack of agency. Each of these options could help make a stronger contribution to pedagogy through learners' experiences.

## Appendix

### *List of interview questions*

#### *Beliefs about English and its importance*

- Is English important? Why or why not?
- Why did you learn English?

#### *Experiences learning English*

- Describe how you learned English. Where? When? With whom?
- How did you feel about learning English in school?
- Do you enjoy learning English?
- When do/did you most enjoy learning English? (e.g., in classes, watching Netflix, interacting with clients, etc.) Why?
- When didn't you enjoy it? Why?
- After you graduated from university, did you enroll in English courses? If yes, why did you enroll?

### *Experiences using English*

- Do you use English at work? For what purposes? With whom? How often?
- When you use English at work, how do you feel about it?
- When you use English in your personal life, how do you feel about it?
- When you speak English, do you feel comfortable? Is it stressful? Why?
- Do you feel like you make mistakes when using English?
- If yes, how do you feel about making mistakes?
- Do you expect special consideration because English is your second language when speaking to native speakers? How about non-native speakers? When do you expect special consideration?
- If someone doesn't understand you, what strategies or tricks do you use to get them to understand you?
- When you don't understand someone, what strategies or tricks do you to understand?
- Do you get tired of using your second-language? When? Why?
- Do you feel discrimination when speaking English? If yes, how so? If no, why don't you think you feel discrimination?
- When you're by yourself and don't understand something that someone said, what do you do?
- When you're in a group and don't understand something someone said, what do you do?
- Can you understand everything in a conversation in English? While listening to music? Watching movies? What do you do if you don't understand? If you just let it go/pass, do you think you're improving your language learning? Why do you let it go/pass?
- When you are out with coworkers or friends, what language do you speak? Why?
- Do you think you can sound like a native speaker?
- Do you worry about sounding like a native speaker?
- Do you worry about making a grammar mistake when speaking English?
- Do you worry about making a social mistake/faux pas when speaking in English?
- Do you believe that the other person you're speaking to is just as knowledgeable in English as you? What makes you say that? How does this differ when speaking to a native English speaker versus a non-native speaker?

### *Self-perception of English-language skills*

- Using English involves different skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking. What's easiest for you? What's more difficult?
- How good would you say your English is? What makes you say that?
- What level of English do you perceive yourself to be?
- What level of English do you have? Have you taken any standardized tests? Which one or ones? When? Why? What were the results?
- Do you consider yourself a good language learner?



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