

Investment and Benefits of Adult Female English Language Learners

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Abstract

This study investigates the lived experiences of two adult female English language learners in the United States, focusing specifically on the benefits, both intrinsic and extrinsic, of their investment in language learning. The conclusion very clearly demonstrates the positive connection between investment and gains. This study speaks to educators and adult students alike. Educators must be aware of and take an interest in the needs and motives of individual learners. This knowledge and awareness better help educators to prepare students for life with a new language.

Keywords: english, investment, identity, benefits, capital, education, women, empowerment

1. Introduction

Adult English language learners (ELLs) in nonacademic settings in the United States are a diverse group (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; Skilton-Sylvester, 1998). In general, this population is seen to “range in age from 16 to 90-plus, in educational background from no formal schooling to PhD holders, and in native language literacy levels from advanced to pre-literate” (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008, p. 199). This population also has a distinct set of needs that differ from young learners, adult ELLs in academic environments, and Adult Basic Education (ABE) students; these needs many times relate to family and work situations (Hubenthal, 2004; Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998).

In the past twenty years, educational research into learning motivation has taken a turn, looking past surface motivation to investigating language investment and how a learner’s identity and learning experience interface, and the effect that each has on the other. Since the birth of Norton Peirce’s (1995) notion of investment, studies have examined, in a variety of locations and contexts, the sociocultural nature of language learning, investment and identity. With this have come more frequent explorations into adult ELLs, nonacademic language environments, and female learners in particular; though fewer still incorporate all three factors into one study (Norton Peirce, 1995; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Several studies touch on benefits--self-confidence, job advancement, etc.--gained by adult ELLs, but none blatantly ask the question “Is it worth it?”

Do adult female ELLs believe that their investment in language learning is worth it? Do the benefits outweigh the cost of time, money and effort? This study investigates the experiences and perspectives of two adult female ELLs in a nonacademic learning environment in the United States and explicitly explores the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of learning English from the two women, who have accomplished a high level of competence as demonstrated by continued admittance into an advanced ESL class. As advanced students, these learners have acquired enough language to determine definite benefits obtained and supply a response to “Is it worth it?”

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theory of Investment

The concept of investment in language learning was introduced in 1995 by Bonny Norton Peirce (now Norton) as a more comprehensive lens through which to investigate and analyze why and how a language learner commits to the difficult task of acquiring a new language. She argues that previous Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theorists had not “developed a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 12). This argument led her to propose the notion of investment, which declares that language learning and acquisition is a socially complex experience where the learner must consciously and unconsciously negotiate society’s power relations. These negotiations lead a learner to find a time and place in which to assert her right to speak; in other words, “the notion of investment...attempts to capture the relationship of the language learner to the changing social world” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 17).

Norton Peirce (1995) grew her theory of investment from the thoughts and writings of other scholars such as Weedon (1987), Gardner and Lambert (1972), Bourdieu (1977), and Ogbu (1978). Much was drawn from poststructuralist Weedon’s (1987) work, which “is distinguished from that of other postmodern theorists in the rigorous and comprehensive way in which her work links individual experience and social power in a theory of subjectivity” (p. 32). Neither does Weedon (1987) ignore the pivotal role that language plays in the interactions between an individual and society. For her theory of investment, Norton Peirce (1995) adopts three primary attributes of Weedon’s (1987) writings on subjectivity; they are: “the multiple nature of the subject; subjectivity as a site of struggle; and subjectivity as changing over time” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 15).

Gardner and Lambert’s (1972; see also Gardner, 1985) work on SLA motivation is also influential in the growth of Norton Peirce’s (1995) concept of investment. She nods to their notions of integrative and instrumental motivation, but states that the notions do not allow for the complexities of interactions between identity, power and language learning. Norton Peirce (1995) believes that French philosopher Bourdieu’s (1977) economic metaphors- primarily *cultural capital*- more accurately capture those relationships. She states that “if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 17). Finally, Norton Peirce (1995) turns to Ogbu (1978) when she expounds on cultural capital in investment, saying that the gains from language learning are expected to be comparable to the energy utilized during the learning process. Investing and learning must be worth the time, effort and money spent.

2.2 Identity

Essentially intertwined with Norton Peirce’s (1995) notion of investment is the concept of a language learner’s identity, mentioned briefly above. The theory of investment cannot be accurately understood without comprehending the idea of “social identity as multiple, a site of struggle, and changing over time” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 14).

More and more research on language and identity is coming to the understanding that identity is “dynamic, contradictory, and constantly changing across time and place” (Norton, 2008, p. 47). An individual’s multiple identities are not set in stone, but shift as life and needs alter and circumstances change. Norton (2008) describes language learning as a place where that occurs, where identities are thrashed out when new experiences are introduced or situations are altered. “Investment in the target language is also an investment in the learner’s own identity” (Norton, 2008, p. 48).

2.3 Agency

Agency is another component that helps one to understand the language learner (or any learner). In short it is “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power” (Agency). Norton Peirce (1995) briefly mentions agency in her concept of investment, stating only that the subject has human agency. Thus the subject positions that a person takes up within a particular discourse are open to argument: Although someone may be positioned in a particular way within a given discourse, said person might resist the subject position or even set up a counterdiscourse which positions himself or herself in a powerful rather than marginalized subject position. (p. 15-16)

2.4 Cultural Capital

Mentioned above is Bourdieu's (1977) cultural capital, an essential component of Norton Peirce's (1995) theory of investment and an extrinsic benefit of language learning. Bourdieu (1977) writes of cultural capital when discussing social class and the role that language has in defining each class in the minds of speakers. He states, "...a language is worth what those who speak it are worth, i.e. the power and authority in the economic and cultural power relations of the holders..." (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 652). Since its beginnings in a conversation on social class, cultural capital has developed as a concept and been subtly defined in different ways in multiple contexts (Alfred, 2009a; DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Kim & Kim, 2009; Roberts, 2004), one of which is language learning.

With reference to learning a language, Norton Peirce (1995) speaks of language learners increasing cultural capital through the acquisition of material and symbolic goods as their level of language increases, allowing them access to more places and people in a society. Symbolic resources refer to assets such as friendship, education and language while material resources speak of money, capital goods and property.

2.5 Social Capital

Social capital is a concept related to cultural capital, also defined in subtly different ways by various scholars. One of Alfred's (2009b) primary research focuses is social capital, with which she has personal experience after growing up on the island of St. Lucia where friends and neighbors would come together to build a house or plant a field. She states, "...this concept of collaboration, networking, and sharing of resources within an element of trust for the improvement and well being of individuals and groups is referred to as social capital" (Alfred, 2010, p. 214). Social capital theory, relays Alfred (2010), has been much developed by Bourdieu (1977, 1986), Coleman (1988, 1998), and Putnam (2000). Bourdieu (1977, 1986) references social capital with regards to social inequality and how social capital can give one positional power. Coleman (1988, 1998) utilizes social capital in studying the communities of public and private grade schools, concluding that social capital could greatly assist economically marginalized communities. Putnam (2000) additionally researches within the field of political science, claiming that "social capital serves both a bonding and bridging function" (Alfred, 2010, p. 217).

In terms of adult education, Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) "suggest that social capital results from learning interactions taking place in a social, political, and cultural context" (Alfred, 2009b, p. 9). Balatti and Falk (2001) even write specifically of growing social capital in the adult learning classroom through group work. What begins as an in-class project has the potential to expand beyond the classroom, developing and strengthening students' social networks. In their own research, Balatti and Falk (2001) conclude that using building blocks such as relationships, norms and trust aids in the growth of social capital. Therefore,

...even though there are inherent risks with social capital networks, with deliberate intent the classroom and the adult learning program can foster social capital development whereby learners capitalize on the resources to improve their living conditions and those of partner members. (Alfred, 2009b, p. 11)

2.6 Empowerment

King (2000) writes that "one of the predominant goals of adult education is to empower adults" (p. 77). Empowerment is an intrinsic benefit of language learning, though it is less often written of than the external benefits such as acquiring employment; still, there are several scholars who broach empowerment in their writings (Alfred, 2003; Alfred, 2009a; Bergin & LaFave, 1998; King, 2000; McMahon, 1997; Zacharakis, et al., 2011). Generally, the definition of 'empower' is "to promote the self-actualization or influence of" (Empower). A language student, then, can be empowered through the learning of a new language; her confidence and self-esteem are improved as she grows as an individual, or self-actualizes. King (2000) writes of the adult learners in her study achieving "...greater self-esteem and empowerment as they learned to cope with learning the new language and culture. This greater self-confidence affected what they did, how they related to others, and how they thought about themselves" (p. 77). Alfred (2009b) also makes a connection between two ideas: social capital and empowerment. She writes specifically of a feminist view of social capital and female empowerment, stating that amongst women, social capital can vary "from small initiatives within communities to address life's daily challenges and threats to women's empowerment or social and political movements that address women's rights, both in local and global contexts" (Alfred, 2009b, p. 8). That is, under the umbrella of social capital, social networks and groups can form to protect the rights of women and even empower them to progress in and through movements.

3. Methodology

Because Norton Peirce's (1995) notion of investment takes a holistic view of language learning, taking into account the student's current circumstances, personal history, etc., a clearer picture of the learner is provided. The theory of investment does not take a single snap shot, but rather delves into understanding the language learner, and the gives and takes of the language learning process. Accordingly, data collection is an involved, and long term operation, and consequently, a qualitative approach was employed in this study due to the subjective, interpretive nature of the research topic, personal connection with the participants, and in-person methods of data collection (Gall, et al., 2007). In particular, this study employed a form of the Case Study, in following with Gall et al.'s (2007) features of a case study: "(a) the in-depth study of (b) one or more instances of a phenomenon (c) in its real-life context that (d) reflects the perspectives of the participants involved in the phenomenon" (p. 447).

3.1 Participants

Two participants were selected from a nonacademic, advanced ESL class by means of convenient and purposeful sampling. Three criteria guided participant selection-- being an adult, female and a regular attendee of the ESL class. The two individuals are female and both originally from Mexico. Without intention, the women happened to share the same first language: Spanish. Both participants range in age from their mid-thirties to mid-forties, and are both wife and mother in a nuclear family.

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected using three methods: individual interview, group interview, a written questionnaire and observation. Dr. Bonny Norton developed the questionnaire during her PhD studies and graciously allowed its use in this study; it was professionally translated into Spanish for this study. The informal group interview was held with both participants and the casual individual interview was conducted with each woman and this researcher. A list of guiding questions was compiled from scholars in the discipline (Buttaro, 2004; Igoudin, 2008; Kim, 2011; Norton Peirce, 1995; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002) and this researcher. Finally, participants were observed in a class setting using an observation instrument developed from Igoudin (2008). The observation instrument recorded specific visible markers of investment (or lack thereof): attendance, active listening, notes/writing, reading, solicited and voluntary verbal participation, group effort, and distraction.

3.3 Data Analysis

After collection, the data was examined in light of the following research questions, which examine the connection between investment in language learning and benefits reaped:

1. What motivates adult female ELLs in a nonacademic learning environment to invest in language learning?
2. Do adult female ELLs in a nonacademic, advanced ESL class feel they have accomplished the goals they set out to achieve?
3. To adult female ELLs in a nonacademic learning environment, are the costs of investing in learning worth the benefits gained? Why or why not?

Additionally, Gall et al. (2007) establish narratives as "the use of a communication format to organize interpretive representations and explanations of personal and social experience" (p. 519). Therefore, following analysis, data is presented in a narrative structure similar to Norton Peirce's (1995) and Skilton-Sylvester's (2002) published pieces.

Due to its qualitative nature, it is essential to understand the context in which this study took place. Gall et al. (2007) list many characteristics of qualitative research; one states that it is the "study of human actions in natural settings" (p. 32). This researcher, then, provides a frame of reference for this study. The ESL class from which participants were selected is a small city of approximately 13,000 in the United States where oil is the primary business. This industry draws many (predominantly Central American) immigrants to the area and creates a need for English classes.

This need is filled by a non-profit group from another nearby city; their English classes are open to all, though students must be registered at the beginning of each semester. The students pay only for their textbook and workbook. In the past, these English classes have consisted of all women, however one man joined the class during the research period, subtly altering the feel of and discussions in the class. It was not a blatant change, but there was somewhat less conversation about the women's husbands and fewer unconscious references to gender and roles.

4. Stories and Analysis

The following accounts of this study's participants present a type of *before* and *after* picture of their experiences investing in English learning. Why the women invested functions as the *before*, that is, what they desired to do and learn toward the beginning of their investment experience. The intrinsic and extrinsic benefits reaped from investing in English serve as the *after* photo. Have the women gained what they sought to gain? And has the journey been worth the end result?

4.1 Gloria: "I Feel Good, I Feel Stronger."

Gloria is a woman in her mid-forties who married an American national of Mexican heritage eighteen months prior to this study. Originally from Mexico, she spent time in Canada and other parts of the United States before arriving in the state of Texas(United States) where she would meet her future husband. At seventeen, Gloria started working at a bank and attending university in Mexico, where she studied business administration. She was unable to complete her degree in the university because her father broke his back and she had to leave school to work longer hours and care for her siblings. Gloria's identity as a daughter kept her from further education at that point in time.

After working at a bank for nearly fourteen years, Gloria took a vacation to Canada with her sister and friend where they ended up staying for six months of sightseeing, working and taking English classes. While the women did not originally intend to stay so long, they did and so began working to support themselves while there. Gloria recalled her inability to buy something as small as a soda because she couldn't speak the language in Canada. Due to instances like that and in preparation to work, Gloria took about two months of English classes. Her identities as a sister, friend and adventurer led her to Canada where she first invested in learning English. The women needed some level of English to work in order to have the finances to stay for a longer period of time, and so one sees that Gloria's identity as a worker greatly influenced her investment in English. The Cambridge dictionary defines "investment" in short as "the act of putting money or effort into something to make a profit or achieve a result" (Investment). Gloria chose to give time and effort to language learning to gain the benefits; in her case, the benefit was the ability to stay in Canada due to the money earned at work.

Some time after being in Canada, Gloria found herself in a large city in Texas working at a truck store owned by her cousin. In contrast to her identity as a worker in Canada, her worker identity at this store did not push her to invest in learning English. Most of her interactions were in Spanish and she stated that in her two years there she learned "5% English;" there simply was no need for her to learn in order to live or work there. However, Gloria did meet her husband at the truck store, as he is a truck driver. Almost four years after first encountering him, they were married and she moved to a small Texas city with him. The family Gloria married into is an English speaking family where she was pushed to invest in English learning again. She has since reaped numerous benefits.

In talking with Gloria, this researcher has seen her demonstrate her power as an English learner and speaker, that is, her agency. As defined above, agency is "the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power" (Agency). While Gloria may or may not know the term agency, she appears to comprehend her own power and knows how to use it in social situations to her advantage, according to her self-recounted experiences. Like Blair's (2009) fifth grade music class that wanted to understand and be understood as musically knowledgeable, Gloria wants to understand and be understood as a legitimate English speaker. Her experiences show her asserting herself, for example with the cable television company.

As a truck driver, her husband can be gone for two or more days at a time, and a few months ago when he was away, the cable television stopped working at Gloria's house. She did not wait for the native English-speaking members of her family to remedy the situation, but rather took charge and called the cable company herself.

This is how she described it:

...I don't know how long ago, I went to the cable. I call the cable because my cable don't work. I'm speak English...so, oh my god, and I understand, I can explain and I'm not sure, I went to the office...the same I explain. Total perfect, everything perfect. So say, 'Oh, Gloria, you can do it. In the phone, face to face.'
(Gloria, personal communication, April 4, 2013)

Gloria's rising confidence and application of her power, her agency, in the world is certainly a benefit gained from her investment in English learning. It is as King (2000) reports of the adult ELLs in her study: "...they gained greater self-esteem and empowerment as they learned to cope with learning the new language and culture. This greater self-confidence affected what they did, how they related to others, and how they thought about themselves" (p. 77).

The reader will recall Norton Peirce's (1995) understanding of cultural capital as it relates to her research and theory of investment: as a person invests in language learning, she may grow her cultural capital, that is, her material and symbolic resources. Symbolic resources refer to assets such as friendship, education and language while material resources speak of money, capital goods and property. As she has continued to invest in English, Gloria has absolutely increased her cultural capital as witnessed by her own experiences. I will broaden Norton Peirce's (1995) symbolic resource of 'friendship' to 'relationships.' Similarly, Alfred (2009b) writes, "Social capital theory assumes that a person's family, friends, and associates constitute an important asset that can be capitalized in times of need, leveraged for capital gain, or enjoyed purely for the human interaction it affords" (p. 5). The concepts of cultural capital and social capital are exceedingly similar and interconnected and here, they intersect at the understood value and benefit of relationships with family and friends. Gloria even stated, "Because I'm speaking English, I feel good. I can be good with my husband, with his family, with his friends" (Gloria, personal communication, April 4, 2013).

Gloria has obtained tremendous benefits in terms of personal relationships due to her investment in language. First, her relationship with her husband has improved since they married; she has been able to communicate better as her English has improved. She spoke about the beginning of their marriage, when they would attend parties, and she could not leave her husband's side because she couldn't communicate with anyone else. She felt bad for her husband and herself. Remembering those occasions, she said, "Now I feel [like a] person...now I feel the party or I feel person...Gloria is Gloria...before is 'Daniel's wife,' but she don't speak English. So bad. Now, 'I'm Gloria. Nice to meet you' " (Gloria, personal communication, March 7, 2013). Her husband also feels better now that she is able to communicate more with his adult children, who only speak English, and during social situations.

Second, her improving English has allowed Gloria to generate closer relationships with her husband's grown children. This is how she described it:

Now I feel better because my situation in life is crazy because I don't have the kids, but my husbands' kids talk to me like 'mom.' So they don't speak any Spanish so the boy, his mom left...when the girl is two years old and the boy four so they don't have a mom. So they talk to me and 'Gloria, I need some' or 'She cry...' I can say nothing. Now, I can try help and 'No...look, don't say that' or now I can talk...very important conversation because that is important for my husband, too, and for my life...his kids talk to me and I try to help, he feel better...and the grandbabies, too... (Gloria, personal communication, March 7, 2013)

Her investment in English has been exceedingly beneficial for not only Gloria, but also the whole family. The adult son lives with Gloria and her husband, Daniel, and as seen above, he and the daughter interact with Gloria as a mother figure. The two adult children come to her when they need advice or help, and they entrust their collective three children to Gloria's care on a near daily basis.

Gloria has also gained significant intrinsic benefits. When she first moved in with her husband and met his family and friends, she couldn't hold a conversation in English. She felt awful, and in her own words: "I'm zero" (Gloria, personal communication, April 4, 2013). She told of going to the tax office in the past and simply leaving when she couldn't talk with the employee there. More than once, she spoke of her embarrassment that she couldn't speak English in public or social situations. Interestingly, it was not the native English speakers that she was embarrassed in front of, but rather other native Spanish speakers who were fully fluent in English.

Now, having invested much time and effort into acquiring English, Gloria is no longer embarrassed or scared to speak: "...before just thinking, I'm scared. Now, any problem, I don't scare anymore" (Gloria, personal communication, April 4, 2013).

In our interview, Gloria stated that she invests in English for herself: "Number one is me" (Gloria, personal communication, March 7, 2013). And indeed, her acquisition of English has been intrinsically beneficial, as it has empowered her, and increased her confidence and self-esteem.

This is clearly evident in her lack of embarrassment now to engage in an English conversation. Even in interviews, she threw herself into the discussion without hesitating or searching for words. And now, she is even able to translate for others: “I feel good. I go somewhere and some people don’t speak English, ask me if I can help in English” (Gloria, personal communication, April 4, 2013).

Investing in English has empowered Gloria by allowing her to access more people and places in society, *and* to feel strong and confident as a person. She said it like this: “Because all my life’s changed. I feel good, I feel stronger. All around is better...in my person” (Gloria, personal communication, March 7, 2013).

When asked if it’s worth it, if the effort of learning is worth what she has gained, Gloria immediately replied, “Of course. Yes. Oh, 100%” (Gloria, personal communication, April 4, 2013).

4.2 Teresa: “Is for me...and Now I Feel Happy.”

Teresa is from a small town in Mexico where grade school only went to the ninth grade. After completing ninth grade, she moved in with a family in a larger city in Mexico in order to attend more school and to work. However, Teresa missed her family very much and returned home after just three months. At the age of 17, she tried again, moving in with her sister in another large city; this did not last either and she went home where she began dating someone. Her then recently acquired boyfriend traveled to the United States (US) where he found work and stayed for approximately a year, calling Teresa and writing her letters. When she was 19, he returned to their hometown in Mexico and the two were married. They soon left and traveled back to the US where her new husband had a job.

Now, Teresa is in her mid-thirties and has been living in the United States for 15 years with her husband and their three sons, who are in grade school. She has chosen to invest in learning English and has since reaped significant benefits both intrinsically and extrinsically. Though, she is seemingly naturally demure, somewhat hesitant, and soft spoken, there is evidence in her self-recounted experiences that point to her increasing sense of agency. She can be seen using her personal power to take charge of situations from food sale preparation to her own health as a result of her investment in English. Whether or not she realizes exactly that she is exercising what scholars call human agency, she *is* doing it.

One example of this increasing sense of self-agency is in fundraising for her church’s new building fund. Teresa described it like this: “I have group de six person with me, but me is leader. So I need call everybody when it’s time to sell food and the organization, the food, the menu and I need go the for buy, buy in Sams, the grocery, everything...” (Teresa, personal communication, April 9, 2013). She has taken up a position of leadership in which she can be successful due in part to her investment in English. This is certainly a display of personal agency and a benefit of investment.

Another relational benefit of investment is Teresa’s ability to connect more with English speaking members of her church. As mentioned, she leads a group of women who make breakfast to sell in order to raise money for the church. Part of that is, of course, setting up the dining room and in the past she had trouble getting what she needed out of a closet at the church. She said, “Before, I can’t explain I need open the door because I need towels, I need plates, everything, spoon, and but now I can explain and understand” (Teresa, personal communication, April 9, 2013).

Norton Peirce (1995), as mentioned, states that when students invest in language learning, they understand that they will increase their material and symbolic resources, which include education, language, friendship, real estate, money and capital goods. These resources expand the learner’s cultural capital as increased language proficiency allows her access to more places and people in society. Though Norton Peirce (1995) uses the term ‘friendship,’ I broaden that to ‘relationships.’ And Teresa has indeed benefitted by increasing her range and quality of relationships as she has invested in language learning. For example, she can communicate more efficiently with her children’s teachers and doctors. In particular, Teresa’s oldest son has behavioral abnormalities and she is able to speak with his doctor to get advice and tips on how to deal with certain situations.

Teresa’s relationships with her family have also benefitted as she has become the primary adult English speaker in her household. Her husband speaks only a little English for his work, so she carries the weight of the English communications outside the home. She described his reaction to her English education: “He say you studying English for you can help in the house because he, he say he has a problem when he need leer or write. He say for me is better” (Teresa, personal communication, April 9, 2013; ‘leer’ means ‘to read’). She buys the groceries,

pays the bills, speaks with teachers and doctors, and even helps her husband fill out forms for his job such as insurance renewal papers. Teresa also assists the children with their homework in English where she can. Her investment in English has enhanced her relationships in the home and outside the home as her access to people and places has expanded, and smoothed a way for her family's success in the US.

Part of Teresa's cultural capital that has increased is clearly her language skills. This will aid her greatly in her future work endeavors. While she is currently not working so she can be home with her children, she has the desire and intention of returning to work when they are older. In the past, Teresa worked with a catering business that cooked for oil companies (a major industry in the area) and special events such as weddings. The owners were English speakers and Teresa was able to establish a solid rapport with them as they also invested time and resources into her, taking the time to teach her English on the job. She began investing in English even then, and her continued investment greatly benefits her future opportunities. As she stated,

...with the time understand what important is come to English and my goal is, I learn my textbooks. I hope...I understand more English, I can speak English better for one day go back work with them. And maybe when they more older, they need more help and I love my boss. I hope can help. (Teresa, personal communication, April 9, 2013)

Several scholars write of social interaction as a cause for investment and also a benefit gained (Alfred, 2009b; Horsman, 1990; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998). Social capital, according to Alfred (2009b), *can* be just about enjoying interaction with other humans without necessarily seeking to gain anything specific from the other person in the relationship. That simple social interaction was a major push behind Teresa's decision to invest in her ESL class. Before, she was very depressed and stressed and not sleeping and her church pastor advised her to attend the English class, amongst other things. To Alfred (2009b), this simple human interaction is categorized as social capital and Teresa has absolutely benefitted from it. Her health is better and her depression is less in part as a result of her investment in her English class.

A primary intrinsic benefit that Teresa has gained is a sense of empowerment, confidence and increased self-esteem. In fact, she stated, "...I need speak English for have success in me self" (Teresa, personal communication, April 9, 2013). That desire to better herself and her life was a force pushing her to invest and has since resulted in repeated benefits. When she was employed by the catering business and had occasions when she successfully used English, she expressed how happy she was. When asked how she felt about her level of English now, she replied thus,

I feel happy because...I guess before when I come for English class, I come only because other person tell me is good study English. Me say ok, but for inside me, no, no important. Now inside me, is very very important. Cause my...what is in English...is mi motivo...my motivation. I come here because it's inside me, that is good. Not for other person tell me is good. Is for me...and now I feel happy. (Teresa, personal communication, March 7, 2013)

When asked if it's worth it, if the effort of learning is worth what she has achieved, Teresa replied, "It's nothing in comparison what we gain with we speak English" (Teresa, personal communication, April 9, 2013). That is, the work and time and effort are little effort compared to what she has gained. In this case, the end most certainly justifies the means. She ended with this advice for other learners: "Yes, keep coming...and perseverar, yes" (Teresa, personal communication, April 9, 2013; 'perseverar' means 'persevere').

5. Conclusion

This study focused on the link between investment in the English language and the benefits gained. In short, did Gloria and Teresa gain what they sought to gain when they invested in the English language? And has the journey been worth the end result? While both women show and state a desire to continue their English education with the intention of becoming more proficient in the language, they also show and clearly state examples of success in their endeavors thus far.

Both participants stated repeatedly their satisfaction regarding the internal results of investing and learning: they feel better and more confident. Their self-recounted experiences demonstrate increased confidence and a sense of empowerment as each is able to accomplish more in society and communicate better with the resident populace in English. The women also reported repeated external benefits from being able to purchase a pizza in a restaurant to being able to speak more easily with family members.

A good way to an authentic answer is a straight question, and that is exactly what this study did. While many other scholars and researchers have recorded the benefits and advantages gained that *they* saw in their participants' lives, this study asked outright, "Vale la pena?" Is it worth it? Are the long hours and large amount of effort worth the language one gains? Unhesitatingly, the women replied yes. While not an unexpected answer, the confirmation from these participants is absolute. The gains are worth the pains.

The implications of this study speak to both educators and adult students alike. Instructors of adult female ELLs must be aware of and take an interest in the needs and motives behind each learner's investment. What the learner is seeking to accomplish is unique to her. This awareness can better help educators to prepare students for life with a new language.

This study also speaks to adult students, particularly adult females ELLs in nonacademic settings. The participants of this study recounted their experiences not only for this researcher, but also for others like themselves. Their experiences provide stories of success and encouragement for other language learners, while honestly acknowledging the difficulties along the way.

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