How Do Adult English Language Learners Use their First Language as a Cognitive Tool to Understand Text in the Target Language? A Case Study

Rita DiFiore

Abstract

This four-subject qualitative case study investigated the reasons English language learners use their primary language while they construct meaning from written text. I used four research tools: formal survey, interview, observation, and research journal. The participants were adult English language learners, whose primary language was Hungarian. They shared their insights about their reading practices in their second language.

Results of the study showed that adult language learners preferred to use their primary language as a tool to read in English for several reasons. Knowledge of various content areas in their first language helped them connect new information to the existing one. Understanding the structure of their first language gave them the framework to contrast and analyze their second language. Code switching and mixing enabled them to clarify cultural details when their second language was not sufficiently developed to do so. Translating was used as a reading strategy, and its target varied according to the level of proficiency of the participants. Overall, the students' beliefs and their motivations about language learning clearly reflected the need for the incorporation of the linguistic resources their mother tongue offered.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33036/EJAS.2024.45

CHAPTER I
Introduction

Topic

The topic of this research is second language acquisition of adult language learners, with a particular focus on reading comprehension. In the United States, immigrants enrolled in literacy courses had been the fastest growing segment of adult education programs until four years ago. Since 2005, there has been a slow decrease in numbers (2007 National Center for Education Statistics). Teaching them adequate English language skills is crucial to increase their employability and their integration into society. While educators tend to agree on the importance of community-based adult education courses, there is no consensus regarding the instructional theories and models (Gallegos, 1994).

English teachers often advocate contrasting educational theories regarding the use of the students' first language (L1) during language learning. The English-only classroom seems to be the norm for adult learners, yet bilingual education is widely accepted and practiced on the elementary and high school levels. The use of L1 is also deemed useful in language classes where English is taught as a foreign language.

Problem Statement

Unfortunately, the achievement of immigrant adult students is rather inconsistent. Adult learners must face several external obstacles in learning a second language, including time constraint, and lack of primary language support (Johnson, 2003). The diversity of adult learners in non-academic literacy programs presents several internal problems. The student community is not homogenous in their level of education. Some students hold college degrees from their countries of origin, while others are pre-literate in their own language. There is a variety of students' learning styles represented in each classroom. Educational goals of certain students may not coincide with program goals. The length of time students had spent in the target culture also varies, and so does their level of immersion.

The multi-level proficiency of the learners often results in the frequent use of their L1. This occurs particularly in community-based programs, where the majority of the learners share the same first language. Students revert to their first language for a variety of reasons, and this is often viewed as unwillingness to practice L2, or the second language. Unfortunately, there is no cohesive literature to address the

issues, which stem from the unique characteristics of such student populations. (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008).

In this study, I investigated the reasons for the use of L1 during reading comprehension, and explored whether the use of the primary language could work as an effective problem solving learning strategy. The intent of the research was to provide intervention in literacy classrooms. Based on the results of the study, my objective is to incorporate useful reading strategies, which utilize L1 into the explicit instruction of comprehension strategies. On the long term, the study can become part of a larger body of literature, which addresses the needs of adult immigrant learners in non-academic settings.

Purpose of Research

For beginning students, the emphasis of the teaching-learning process is on reading and listening comprehension. Krashen (2008), states that acquiring the new language in the natural order requires comprehensible input. However, in a diverse and multi-level classroom "comprehensible" is not uniform. When students who have a low level of proficiency request full-text translation of written material from their peers, the use of L1 is indeed an obstacle to language acquisition. On the other hand, the primary language may be used for problem solving purposes. I feel that it is important to separate convenience translation from using the primary language as a resource for effective reading comprehension.

The exploration of the participants' opinions and experiences regarding reading in English informs literacy-based instruction. I wish to identify preferred strategies for reading comprehension in the participants' second language, and use them to accommodate learners' needs. Improving the explicit instruction and teaching transparency of reading strategies is another purpose of the study. In addition, the research helps demonstrate the possible negative effects of the use of L1 on second language acquisition.

The purpose of this case study is to describe reading strategies, which include the use of the adult English language learners' (ELLs) first language. Reading strategy is defined as a cognitive tool an individual uses to construct meaning from written text.

Research Question

The research question addresses the usefulness of L1 during second language acquisition, particularly during reading comprehension in L2:

How Do Adult English Language Learners Use their First Language as a Cognitive Tool to Understand Text in the Target Language?

The study uses four research tools: a formal survey, an interview, an observation and the researcher's journal. The researcher investigates how frequently the participants use reading strategies, which include their first language, and for what reason these strategies are the preferred methods of constructing meaning.

The study explores the relation between the learners' previous education, and the use of L1. I also wish to understand how the learners' level of proficiency in the English language influences the frequency of using the primary language for problem solving. Exploration of whether translation is a problem solving tool and a valid reading strategy which aids reading comprehension in a second language or a hindrance of second language acquisition is the final goal of this qualitative research.

Definition of Terms

Language is defined as a mental tool that people use to organize and control processes concerning memory, attention, problem solving, planning, evaluation, and voluntary learning (Williams, pg. 1).

Translating is defined by Oxford (1990) as "converting the target language expression into the native language (at various levels, from words and phrases all the way up to whole texts); or converting the native language into the target language" (p.46).

Learning strategies are operations or steps used by a learner to facilitate the acquisition, storage, or retrieval of information (Rigney 1978, Dansereau in press).

Reading comprehension is defined as using background knowledge and cues from three language systems to construct meaning from written text (Freeman & Freeman, 2004).

CHAPTER II
Literature Review

This section includes review of literature from three areas: Adult Immigrant Students Enrolled in ESL Education, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theories, and Learning or Reading Strategies.

The primary area of literature I reviewed pertains to immigrant adult learners enrolled in non-academic literacy programs. The authors focused on the conditions of community-based continuing education programs. They described the socioeconomic conditions of the students, and summarized the goals and motivations of the learners. Part of the reviewed literature investigated learners' beliefs about instructional methods and learning styles, and highlighted the importance of student empowerment through participation in curriculum and instructional design.

The most comprehensive study I reviewed was a survey of current trends in research on adult English language learners (ELLs). It was published in 2008, in Adult Education Quarterly, a journal of research and theory. The author, Mathews-Aydinli, PhD, reviewed and summarized the findings of 41 studies, which had been written between 2000 and 2006. These studies focused exclusively on the adult immigrant population of ESL learners in non-academic environments. Thus the learners' circumstances, needs, and goals were fundamentally different from other ELLs', who were enrolled in EFL university courses, or workplace literacy programs. The author organized the review of research in three categories. The common thread through the description of learning communities and educational approaches was the diversity of the learners. She stressed the significance of caring communities, and encouraged programs, which provide the necessary support for these learners. Teacher-related studies comprised the second largest group of articles. They either investigated the role of the teacher or described action research. These articles mainly discussed instructional practices in a particular setting with the focus on balance between traditional and progressive methods. Second-Language Acquisition Studies (SLA) described research where ELLs were the participants of the study. The number of these studies was noticeably smaller than others. The use of interactive multimedia and the use of recast and translation for corrective feedback were the focus of the quasi-experimental research. The author contended that these studies were barely projectable for the implementation of better classroom practices, since they were not concerned with the particular variables, which characterize the adult second language learners in non-academic settings.

The following studies addressed specific issues related to immigrant adult education. In her case study of four Latina women, Johnson (2003) described the non-academic learning environment of Latina students in California. Her research focused on the effectiveness of a project-based bilingual curriculum. She contended that the literacy development of adult language learners must be accelerated by applying appropriate curriculum and learning experiences, since the older students are under significant time constraint. As opposed to children and teens, the adult learners must obtain survival skills in a short period of time in order to be able to provide housing and income for themselves and/ or their families. Their learning is focused on those skills therefore the input of adult English language learners (ELLs) significantly promotes learner success. She also advocated the use of varied instructional strategies in order to accommodate the needs of the secondary language learners with diverse academic experiences and learning styles.

Her research concluded that second language acquisition was most successful when students were able to make real world connections due to language use, which mirrored their community and cultural background. A study conducted in a similar setting described several components of adult immigrant education, which contributed to student success or failure.

Buttaro (2002, 2004) focused on the factors, which supported or hindered learner promotion. The studies described the educational experiences of Hispanic English as Second Language (ESL) students in the United States. The author noted that the key element of learner success in the case of Latinas, who were enrolled in community-based literacy education, was the support of their extended family and community. Their challenges matched the broader adult student population from various cultural backgrounds, and ranged from securing reliable quality-child care, and issues regarding transportation, to academic and work counseling, and medical problems.

Gault's (2004) study analyzed the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of adult ELLs. He contended that the students' beliefs about "good teaching" should be given more prominence in educational design. Goals of language programs and teachers' practices often do not match the students' expectations. Students frequently prefer traditional grammar-based form of instruction as opposed to the teacher's communicative approach. Another problem, which frequently emerges in ESL settings is the issue of error correction. Due to the mismatch in assumptions, the learning environment is limited and less effective.

The second area of focus for the literature I reviewed was the contrasting theories in second language teaching: the English-only classroom versus bilingual education. The three identified reasons for the opposing views were underlying political principles, findings and implications of studies in foreign and second

language acquisition, and teacher and student beliefs and attitudes regarding L1 use in ESL settings.

Polio (1994) advocated the monolingual English classroom for a variety of reasons. She stated that the primary reason for the extensive use of L1 in ESL classrooms had been the inadequate training of teachers in making L2 comprehensible. Instructors of adult ESL programs are often paraprofessionals, volunteer tutors, or peer students. With proper training of ESL professionals, this shortcoming of ESL instruction can be eliminated. She also referred to a political framework, where the use of L1 perpetuated the existing power relationships. She believed that the advocacy of the bilingual classroom is the product of a politically motivated agenda, whereas the English only approach is based on research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Stephen Krashen's (1997) findings regarding comprehensible input influenced a large segment of ESL professionals, and created an unfriendly climate for the bilingual classroom. The Comprehension Hypothesis found evidence from the areas of literacy development, which supports that second-language learning and foreign-language learning operate in much the same way. In his Report (2008) he also stated that

> "the present is marked by the emergence of the Comprehension Hypothesis, the view that we acquire language when we understand messages, and is also characterized by the beginning stages of its applications: comprehensible-input based teaching methods, sheltered subject matter teaching, and the use of extensive reading for intermediate language students. My hope is that the future will see a clearer understanding of the Comprehension Hypothesis, and the profession taking more advantage of it."

As an advocate of the opposing theory, Auerbach (1993) suggested that ESL professionals who believe in the exclusive use of the target language in the ESL classroom should reexamine their views. She contended that the students' primary linguistic resources must be viewed as an asset in an ESL classroom, and must be utilized at all levels of proficiency in English. She has found that the use of L1 "reduces anxiety and enhances the effective environment for learning, takes into account socio-cultural factors, facilitates incorporation of learners' life experiences, and allows for learner-centered curriculum development" (p. 20). Although her suggestions and findings specifically pertained to the English as Second Language programs, which exist in the United States and other English speaking countries, this view is widely supported by linguists and educators involved in foreign language teaching (EFL).

Hungarian linguist and educator, Medgyes (2004) stated that successful language learning occurs when the language teacher is not only proficient in both the primary and the foreign languages, but due to his dual linguistic background, he is able to anticipate the problems the target language presents. Thus the students' first language is an essential element of predicting, consciousness raising and problem solving. He contended that the key to effective language instruction is the ability to contrast and analyze the primary and the target languages. His language teaching approach was particularly successful in the case of instruction of languages, which were not related to one another. His findings were based on the results of comparative and applied linguistic studies, rather than student-centered action research.

Posen (2006), on the other hand investigated the human element of language instruction, the EFL learners' beliefs about strategic use of translation in English learning. His research sought the answer to questions regarding students' background variables in relation to their beliefs about using translation as a learning tool. His research listed the various historical methods of language education. The Grammar-Translation Method, which was mostly used for the instruction of the Latin language, was denounced when the Direct and the Audio-Lingual Methods emerged. The most current trend in education embraces the Communicative Language Teaching Approach, where the target language is used during functional real life-like activities in the classroom.

As the preferred methods of language instruction have evolved, the students' willingness to incorporate their primary language into classroom discussion has not seemed to diminish. Learners use translation to understand text, to remember vocabulary, and to formulate output in a foreign language. Adult students with a well-developed proficiency in their primary language, use their first language resources through translation as a learning strategy. Posen (2006) noted that researchers had devoted relatively little attention to the learners' beliefs and opinions in consideration of the use of translation in language learning.

Swaffar and Bacon (1993) raised the issue of social context as a factor, which often renders a bilingual discussion necessary. The ESL or EFL reader, especially in the beginning phase of education, frequently encounters information, which is culturally unfamiliar, therefore the most effective method of comprehension is instructional conversation. Since the limited proficiency language learner is unable to process and discuss cultural information in the target language, code switching or code mixing may be the most effective tool of successful comprehension. Johnson (2003) supported this view in her description of Latina students in a community-based bilingual program. She emphasized that adult learners already possess a certain level of proficiency in their primary language, and it is linked to

a pool of cultural knowledge, which is transferable to the target language if the appropriate tools are used. She further stressed the significance of the maintenance of the students' primary language. Her research suggested that "educational and language programs that provide instruction and support in the primary language, while building competence and fluency in the second language, are valued" (p. 35).

Upon the review of the contrasting teaching theories, I focused on learning strategies and particularly reading comprehension strategies of adult second language learners. "Research and theory in second language learning strongly suggest that good language learners use a variety of strategies to assist them in gaining command over new language skills" (O'Malley et al, 1985, p. 557). The authors described learning strategies as they are related to second language acquisition, as well as through their implications to cognitive psychology. Previous research had shown that the use of strategies in second language learning had been limited to the application of cognitive strategies to vocabulary learning and retention tasks.

According to second language acquisition theory, tasks vary from cognitively demanding to relatively simple ones, characterized by rich contextual clues. The cognitively demanding, or language learning view acknowledges the need for learning strategies, which include inferencing, monitoring, formal and functional practicing. The language acquisition view promotes the mastery of conversational fluency through spontaneous contexts and unconscious adaptation of rules. In Krashen's (1982) opinion, learning a language does not result in acquisition. One of the research questions O'Malley (1985) investigated was whether cognitive learning strategies can be useful in a natural teaching environment. The applied strategies varied according to the skill developing activity. The researchers found that most strategies were utilized during vocabulary learning. Since vocabulary building is an essential component of reading and listening comprehension, the application of learning strategies in developing comprehension skills does not impede on the natural language acquisition approach.

Narrowing the focus from general learning strategies to reading comprehension strategies in a second language, I reviewed several studies that concentrated on the adult students' reading strategies in their primary and their target languages. The following studies investigated the relevance of the students' level of proficiency in the target language, the transferability of the reading skills from L1 to L2, the correlation between the students' level of literacy in L1 and their ability to recode written text in L2. The reviewed studies explored the effectiveness of explicit training in reading strategies as they pertain to specific text elements. Various methods of research procedures included think-aloud protocols of individual students, and collaborative work of a group of learners. While the studies focused on the

significance of the instruction of reading strategies in L2, they also revealed that the use of L1 was an acceptable tool for monitoring comprehension or clarifying culturally unfamiliar content.

A comparative study of processing strategies by Pritchard and O'Hara (2008) provided insight into the tools students utilized as they read in their native and their target languages. The authors interviewed 100 bilingual students who were proficient readers in both languages. As the participants read a passage, they stopped and reflected on their thoughts. The responses were categorized into four strategies, which pertained to the four components of text. Monitoring Comprehension (A) represented word recognition. Establishing Intrasentential Ties (B) referred to the students' ability to make meaning of the particular sentence. Establishing Intersentential Ties (C) related to the topic sentence and the other sentences in the paragraph. Finally, Establishing Intercontextual Ties (D) constructed meaning of the entire text. The results of the study showed that when students read in their native language, they relied on intercontextual ties, whereas during reading in the target language, they used strategies for the more basic categories of the text. They were also more likely to use translation as a comprehension strategy for narrative texts, while they used visual support and other tools for expository texts. The instructional implications of this study emerge from the frequent use of strategies in category A, which related to word recognition in the target language. The study demonstrated that ELLs are not necessarily able to transfer reading strategies from one language onto the other. Therefore the authors suggested that the design of instructional activities should incorporate the use of L1 for additional student support.

Another study by Prince (1996) analyzed the role of context versus translation as a function of proficiency in second language vocabulary learning. The findings resonate with the research of Pritchard and O'Hara (2008) regarding the students' reliance on translation for vocabulary comprehension. Prince (1996) stated that "The size of vocabulary needed to achieve general communication skills in English has been estimated at 5,000 words." (p. 478). The research results he reviewed showed that paired associate learning of words seemed to be the preferred method of the majority ELLs, yet most teachers discouraged this effective translation learning. The ESL professionals contended that linking words exclusively to their equivalent in the students' L1, and ignoring the contextual change in their meaning would undermine and limit second language acquisition.

The students listed a number of reasons for their preferred method of pair-translation. They stated that the frequent incorrect guesses they had made about the meaning of the new vocabulary they encountered in the text rendered their comprehension faulty. The learners also reported that translation learning resulted

in better recall of the vocabulary. Studying the words in pairs was a result of conscious and intentional learning. On the other hand, an unknown word, which appeared in an L2 text impeded on comprehension, and the students generally ignored its specific meaning in an effort to construct meaning from the entire text. The time the learners spent analyzing the semantic cues was significantly more than applying the translation approach. Therefore, when the students were faced with choosing a high-effort strategy as opposed to a familiar one, they chose the latter, since they were unwilling to relinquish strategies they adopted in the early stages of second language learning. Lower level of proficiency in L2 was also a key component in the learners' choice of approach.

Context-based vocabulary acquisition is preferred by professionals for a variety of reasons. The research has shown that a continued resistance to use the semantic cuing system resulted in the inability to transfer meaning into different contexts. Participants from the weaker group performed better on word recall. Yet their overall comprehension was significantly behind the participants from the higher proficiency group. These weaker learners were not beginner students. It was their overdependence on translation that stopped them from applying and developing other strategies. ESL instructors' appropriate guidance can aid students to gradually apply metacognitive approaches to construction of meaning. Since context-based inferential strategies and translation pairs both have their advantages, the author recommended a mixture of approaches for instructional application in the early stages of language acquisition. The research of Cohen and Aphek (1980) supported the findings of Prince (1996) regarding the voluntary applications of various approaches at different levels of proficiency. Cohen and Aphek (1980) concluded that context provides the necessary cues once the ELLs advanced to a level of proficiency where they do not feel "overstimulated" by the unfamiliar text in their target language. Hulstijn (1992) added another perspective where he suggested that there should be a clear distinction between reading comprehension and reading in order to increase students' vocabulary.

Second language reading strategy instruction and its effects on comprehension and word inference ability was also the topic of Kern's (1989) study. Kern (1989) agrees with Prince (1996) that the lack of L2 word recognition is an obstacle of comprehension, and he further explains that "the demands of L2 words can impede comprehension by reducing the availability of attentional resources" (p. 135). ELLs who have a low level of proficiency in L2, are unable to use chunking strategies as they do automatically in their L1. Therefore sometimes even students, who are proficient readers in their own language, are unable to transfer their reading skills into their second language. One of the reasons Kern (1989) believed in the importance of strategy training for students was because ELLs were more

"linguistically bound" to the text in L2 than in L1. As a result of their increased focus on the structure of the text, their comprehension suffered. The reading strategies the researcher suggested include making inferences regarding the meaning of unknown vocabulary, and word-combining or synthesizing meaning in text segments. These were the reading strategies adult proficient readers automatically applied during reading in L2. Bringing these tools of comprehension to the surface will develop their reading skills in L2. The instructional implications of this study included the suggestion that read-aloud practices in class should be reserved for pronunciation practice only, and the teachers should not put expectations of comprehension on the students without the appropriate application of a specific reading strategy. Another conclusion was the recommendation of procedures, which teach morphological aspects and word derivation in order to improve word recognition. Finally, the use of read-aloud techniques can point to the students' particular difficulties and needs. Kern (1989) also warned that instruction in reading strategies is not necessarily universally effective for all adult ELLs. Learner characteristics may vary, and the abovementioned instructional approaches may not correspond with certain learning styles of adult learners.

Davis and Bistodeau (1993) also used think-aloud protocols to investigate how L1 and L2 reading differ. The findings of the study provided two answers to the original research question. The researchers found strong evidence that the vocabulary of the target language has a great impact on the psychological processing of the adult learner. The foreign context, and the lack of the necessary background information decreases the readers' performance in L2. In addition, the qualitative analyses of the study revealed that the culturally ingrained literacy practices of adult learners also influenced their strategy use and overall reading behaviors. The recommendation of the authors was that ESL practitioners should not adopt and develop one set of comprehension strategies over the other. A complete understanding of reading in a foreign or second language requires cognitive as well as social perspectives.

Similarly to the research of Kern (1989) and Davis and Bistodeau (1993), the research of Seng and Hashim (2006) used think-aloud protocols as they investigated reading comprehension strategies of adult ELLs. All the previously cited researchers who used the think-aloud protocols to compare the reading process in L1 and L2 dismissed the transferability of strategies from the primary onto the target language, and agreed that a variety of reading strategies must be incorporated into L2 instruction in order to meet all students' cultural and individual learning styles. However, none of them specifically addressed the issue of L1 use during L2 reading activities. Seng and Hasim's (2006) study supported a bilingual approach to reading comprehension versus the English-only, or otherwise known as contextual

approach. As they investigated the use of L1 in reading comprehension among tertiary ESL learners, the researchers examined the extent and frequency of those reading strategies, which utilized the students' first language. They contended that reading is a problem solving activity. When the students did not possess the necessary proficiency in the target language, they returned to their primary language. The research targeted a collaborating group of students, as opposed to the individual learner. It investigated the cognitive process of reading in a foreign language, which was expressed during the discourse among the students.

This study provided insight into the thinking process of students while they recoded written text. When students' competency in a target language was not sufficient for problem solving, the primary language was a valuable tool. This study advocated the multilingual classroom, and encouraged activities, which utilize the students' linguistic backgrounds.

The researchers asserted that second language learners willingly and effectively utilized the linguistic information their first language provided. Translation was not deemed as an obstacle, but rather a beneficial cognitive strategy of second language learning. From the transcribed problem solving discussion of the four participants, the authors obtained a unique insight into collaborative reading. The recorded verbal interactions between the subjects revealed the use of several comprehension strategies. During the observation of the individual reader's interaction with the text, the researchers did not receive the same amount of information about the thought process. Reflections on the reading process did not provide as much information as the observation of group work did. Therefore the group setting was key to obtaining accurate information. The authors also intended to measure the extent of the use of L1. The frequency of translating, code-mixing and code-switching was indicative of the students' level of proficiency. The authors indicated the use of eighteen reading comprehension strategies. Fifteen strategies included the use of the students' first language. The study showed that the students used their primary language in 32.20 %. This supported the hypothesis that reading in a foreign language did not take place only in the target language. The code-switching and code-mixing strategies the students used to clarify the meaning of the text indicated that L1 was used constructively during reading comprehension in L2. The data showed that L1 was an essential element of constructing meaning in L2.

The case study is not highly projectable due to the limited number of participants, but the theoretical framework provided insight into second language acquisition and constructing meaning from written text. The study showed that the extent of L1 use varied according to the subjects' level of proficiency, academic background, individual goal of education, the method and setting of instruction,

as well as the focus skill of the activity. Since the students considered reading in a foreign language a problem solving activity, they used their well-developed primary language as a resource.

Another study of collaborative dialogues between adult ESL learners investigated the effects of proficiency differences and patterns of pair interacting on second language learning. Watanabe and Swain (2007) found that the "proficiency differences do not necessarily affect the nature of peer assistance and L2 learning" (p. 121). The researchers recorded and analyzed as the partners talked about their language output. The data showed that there was a value for the more proficient students to be paired with and interacting with the less proficient students. Overall the research proved that students of various proficiency levels were able to interact with each other. This finding supported the researchers' original hypothesis that collaborative peer to peer dialogue acted as a mediator of L2 learning.

Students use reading strategies while they are engaged in reading. Miscue analysis is an instructional strategy that raises the reader's awareness of the reading process. The reader is recorded, and the observed mistakes are later analyzed. These miscues reveal the readers' interactions with the text. Retrospective miscue analysis with proficient adult ESL readers was the topic of research of Wurr, Theurer and Kim (2009). Their review of literature indicated that similar studies on this particular student population had not been published to date. They investigated how miscue analysis made L2 learners more aware of the reading process. They concluded that proficient L2 readers gained confidence in their reading ability through the conscious analysis of the four cuing systems: syntactic, semantic, graphophonic and pragmatic. They further concluded that the students' metacognitive skills in L1 aided their ability to process information in L2. The students, who were interviewed by the researchers reported that their perception of reading became less skill-oriented, and more focused on meaning as they continued discussing and analyzing their miscues. The students of low level proficiency were not able to converse about their miscues in the target language, but they still applied the strategy of miscue analysis to improve their awareness of the reading process. The study of Wurr, Theurer and Kim (2009) supported the theory that the adult language learners' primary language can in fact become a useful resource in problem solving, with appropriate guidance and proper instructional scaffolding.

The literature I reviewed ranged from 1978 to the present. The cited authors conducted their research with adult language learners in academic and non-academic settings, in bilingual or monolingual classrooms. The studies investigated the characteristics of adult language learners, particularly in regards to their reading comprehension, and overall concluded that the students' learning is maximized in a friendly, non-threatening classroom, where a trained professional willingly

incorporated their first language resources, life experiences, and educational goals into the curriculum design.

The studies suggested the integration of problem solving learning strategies. The authors contended that increasing the students' awareness will benefit the universal learning and reading process. Seeking the students' input through think-aloud protocols, interviews and surveys will contribute to their successful involvement in their education.

CHAPTER III
Methodology

Procedures

Strategies of inquiry

This qualitative research describes the students' beliefs about using their first language during constructing meaning from written text in their target language. The study encourages participants to reflect on their best practices of language learning through the use of a survey, an observation and an interview, since learners' preconceived beliefs affect the way they learn a foreign language (Posen, 2006). The study describes the views of adult ELLs on their own language learning. The assumption is that at various levels the participants prefer to use their primary language to understand written text. The three forms of inquiry explore the participants' educational background, learning goals, beliefs about successful instruction, and particular learning strategies they use automatically and willingly. The fourth form of inquiry records the researcher's reflections and insights on the process of data gathering.

Role of the researcher

I am a non-native speaker of English with native-like fluency. My first language is Hungarian. I studied EFL for sixteen years in Hungary. I received my BA in teaching English and Russian as foreign languages in 1987. During my professional experience as an EFL student and teacher, the use of L1 had been encouraged as a tool for monitoring comprehension and organizing linguistic information.

In the US, I have taught ESL for immigrants in a non-academic setting for six years. I worked with high school students in a bilingual program for one year. I also have sixteen years experience as a professional interpreter/translator serving language minorities in superior courts, and diplomatic visitors of the US Department of State. As a translator, I have worked for an international research corporation. This experience enhanced my knowledge of survey design and translation.

Creswell (2002) stated that research is most appropriate when the educator's goal is the improvement of instructional practices through specific emphasis on individual empowerment of students. I believe that adult ELLs who participate in the curriculum design and the selection of language objectives will receive individual empowerment (Johnson, 2003). As a teacher, I seek to refine and

improve my teaching practices. Observations of beginner level students revealed that they engage in conversations in their first language for various reasons. The preference of adult students to use their mother tongue while they construct meaning from written text is worthy of investigation.

Non-academic settings

Non-academic language learning facilities are generally non-profit, community-based agencies. The student population is a mixture of immigrants from various countries. Their educational backgrounds may vary from illiterate to college degree from the country of origin. Their ages range from teen to senior years. They have diverse learning goals including US citizenship, drivers' education, computer skills in order to improve employability, English language acquisition, or improving family literacy. Some students aspire to higher education, while others participate in classes in order to increase their level of social involvement in the community.

The students' attendance often suffers due to lack of transportation or family support, financial difficulties, or medical problems. They often experience difficulties obtaining or retaining employment due to limited language proficiency or poor work skills. Their lack of a support system, and their relatively recent relocation to the USA renders them financially insecure. They often choose to participate in community-based language education, because they do not have the necessary funds to be able to afford ESL courses provided by community colleges.

ESL education in non-academic settings is generally funded by the state or various charities. The donors may require the program to focus on certain elements of content including civics education, workforce training, or family literacy. ESL instructors teach integrated skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Learning is frequently project-based. Students' placement and advancement are usually determined by standardized competency based assessments. The classrooms are generally large; it is not impossible to have twenty or even thirty students at a beginner level. The students' first language may be various, but if the facility is located within the boundaries of a particular immigrant community, or is sponsored by an ethnic organization, a large percent of the students may come from the same linguistic background. Teachers are generally low-paid, and many are of immigrant background as well. In my six years of teaching in non-academic settings, I have encountered few instructors who were native speakers of English and held the appropriate teaching degree. Volunteers often participate in language education as tutors or serve as interpreters.

The facilities themselves may be well-equipped centers, or humble local churches, which offer their basements for the purpose of education. The same inequities exist

in instructional materials and teaching supplies. Textbooks are scarce, and teachers often need to use copies or generate their own reading materials for the classes. The students' level of proficiency in the target language as well as their education in their primary language is diverse. Many older adults suffer from fossilization of the second language. Their reading skills are also all over the scale. Pre-literate students may be in the same class with other adults who have studied and are able to apply several reading strategies. Many students focus on reading fluency, and struggle with comprehension. Instructors prefer authentic reading materials in order to incorporate the competency goals of the program. Students learn to interpret charts and graphs, and there is a lesser emphasis on narrative text.

Selection of participants

Since working with my actual students at the place of my employment created ethical problems, I have opted to work with adult language learners whom I met earlier in my career in a different community-based language education program. I have known these students as a former administrator. I also communicate with them in a social context. Therefore, they were glad to participate in my research. Their characteristics are similar to those of my current students, thus their answers are transferable to other adult second language learners in non-academic settings. I selected four adult ELLs, two males and two females between the ages of 30 and 45 whose level of education, employment status in the US, and general life standards are similar to the adult learners in my ESL class. The four selected participants, Szabó Ádám, Farkas Emma, Kovács Anna, and Kollár József – all pseudonyms – are all native speakers of Hungarian. I opted for this sample, for I strongly believe that my research benefits from the fact that I am a native speaker of the participants' primary language. Having a common language between researcher and participants eliminated the need for a professional translator, and excluded the possibility of miscommunication.

Data collection

Data for this case study was collected through observation, informal interviews, which included narrative stories, and a conventional survey. The triangulation ensures the strength of the qualitative research. The observation, the survey, and the interview provided information regarding the strategies the subjects used for reading comprehension, as well as their personal beliefs about the role of translation during reading in L2. A research journal complemented the three

data collection tools. This journal contains the researcher's reflections on how the reviewed literature, the design of the research tools, data collection procedures, the data interpretation and the possible results of the study connect and provide answers to the research question.

Data recording

The primary data gathering tool was a conventional survey. This survey was given to the participants in English, but upon request, Hungarian sight translation was provided by the researcher. I administered the survey, and the students recorded their own answers. The survey consisted of three sections. The first section identified the participants' educational background. The second section sought answers to the participants' reading practices, and the third section referred to the participants' vocabulary. The survey consisted of seventeen multiple choice questions. At the bottom of the last survey page extra space was provided in case participants wished to record additional information. The survey was marked as Appendix A.

The second data gathering tool was an informal interview. I audio-taped and transcribed the participants' answers. At the end of the interview, I provided the opportunity for participants to add informal, anecdotal information pertaining to the questions. Upon transcription, the participants read and verified the transcript in order to ensure accuracy of the information. The seven questions of the interview were marked as Appendix B.

The third data gathering tool was an observation of the participants during reading in their target language. I provided a short text in English, which was appropriate for the participants' reading level. The authentic text was an article from a local newspaper. It included cultural references and idioms. Minimal visual support was provided with the text. Thus, participants had to mainly rely on text elements for comprehension; they were required to use graphophonic, semantic and syntactic cues to construct meaning. I supplied the participants with an up-to-date English-Hungarian dictionary. They were also encouraged to ask me questions in either language, for this increases their level of comfort during the observed activity (Pritchard & O'Hara, 2008). My field notes included the problem solving discussion, which took place during the activity, as well as the participants' comments upon completion of the reading. The participants were asked to read silently in order to shift their focus from reading fluency and pronunciation solely to comprehension. The text participants read was marked as Appendix C.

The final tool for data gathering was the journal of the researcher. In this journal I reflected on the links between the research question, the raw data, the analysis and interpretations of these data, and the conclusions.

Validity

I worked with languages in many capacities. I studied two foreign languages as a child, and two additional languages as an adult.

The participants were familiar with my background, and they were aware of the fact that I myself used to be an ELL. They were comfortable sharing their thoughts with me, since I do not have strong convictions about an English-only classroom policy, and I did not conduct my research in a teacher or administrator capacity. Sharing a mother tongue with the participants added to the trust between researcher and participant, and increased accuracy of communication.

Immigrant student populations in non-academic settings share many similarities regarding their goals and challenges (A Human Capital Concern, 2004). These similarities increase the transferability of the research. The overlapping methods of data collection enhance the dependability of the study.

CHAPTER IV
Data Interpretation

This research investigated the strategies adult language learners of varied levels of proficiency used during reading in English. The data were gathered from four participants through a survey, an interview, and an observation. Throughout the study, I kept a research journal to record my experiences and feelings. The data was collected between October 7, 2009 and October 26, 2009.

The data collection began with a survey, which evaluated the proficiency level and educational experiences of the participants. The survey also explored reading strategies of the individual subjects, and highlighted their methods of acquiring new vocabulary. The individually conducted interviews focused on the participants' preferences in reading strategies including those that use the primary language, and those that do not. A ten-minute observation of the participants' reading comprehension also took place individually. During the observation, I gave the subjects an opportunity to ask clarifying questions in any language in which they felt comfortable. Their questions and comments were recorded, transcribed, and translated, and the think-aloud provided me with valuable information regarding the participants' actual reading practices.

Learners' Beliefs and Empowerment

The primary theme, which emerged from the data is the significance of student input regarding the beliefs of the learners. It empowers learners, and contributes to their success. The opinions of my research participants supported the theory of Auerbach (1993), who contended that the students' primary linguistic resources must be viewed as assets in ESL education. Posen (2006), who investigated the human element of language instruction, and the EFL learners' beliefs about strategic use of translation in English learning, noted that researchers had devoted relatively little attention to these key factors. My findings resonated with his research, which showed that adult language learners used translation to understand text, to remember vocabulary, and to formulate output in a foreign language. Adult students with a well-developed proficiency in their primary language, used their first language resources through translation as a learning strategy. In another research about learners' beliefs regarding "good teaching", Gault (2004) indicated that students frequently preferred traditional grammar-based instruction, as opposed to the communicative approach. The participants in my research expressed similar

opinions to Gault's subjects. An entry from my Research Journal also demonstrated the preference of my beginner level students to use their first language.

"I have a class full of adult English learners. They are mostly Spanish speakers. They often engage in code switching and mixing. The administration does not look kindly on it. They wish to enforce the "English only" policy, but in my beginner classroom they cannot. If the students were not allowed to speak in their mother tongue, they could not communicate at all. Their vocabulary is not large enough, and their fluency is not great. How can we require that they use English at all times, when they are here to learn English? They want to talk about their opinion, their insight and their experiences, but they are limited in proficiency. They are not children acquiring a first language. They are adults with real wisdom and real valuable insight. And we do not give them a chance to express what they know." (Research Journal, 4/19/09)

The following vignette demonstrates the opinions of adult language learners on contemporary ESL education in a community-based setting. The conversation is a recollection of a past event.

Learners' Beliefs

Two men and two women are chattering in the library of the Hungarian Cultural Center. They are all immigrants from Hungary. They study English as a second language, some on their own, some in a community-based program, and they are eager to help me with my research project.

"Maybe you can help reform English teaching in this country," says Adam to me in a mocking tone of voice.

"Or you can offer better English classes in the center. The ones we have been taking are not very successful." chimes in Jozsef, offering what seems like a more realistic solution to him.

I am anxious to find out what works and what does not work for them in their current educational programs. They describe different aspects of teaching. They all seem to be upset with the classes that refuse to teach grammar, or focus on the content they are interested in.

"These teachers just want us to repeat sentences from books. All they use is dialogues from what they call everyday life. They are not interested in what and how we want to learn. They also don't care about what we already know. Our interests or our expertise do not matter. They have a curriculum, and they force it down our throat, "complains Anna, who has studied in several community-based ESL programs.

"And how about this English-only classroom? How am I supposed to speak "English only", when I am here to learn it? I am fresh off the boat.... If I were able to speak English, I would not be in class..."Jozsef adds.

"Well, I am not even likely to learn anything if they explain fast, and use expressions I do not understand. Even if they allow me to use the dictionary, I cannot always get things right. I need someone to explain to me in Hungarian sometimes...."says Emma slowly and hesitantly. She is a beautiful tall blonde, whose stunning looks and soft spoken extreme shyness would render her a mystery in any class.

"Oh, yes. The idioms drive me crazy. They are related to sports or otherwise embedded in their culture. I understand nothing about them," laughs Adam who has been in the US for many years, but who still considers himself "culturally Hungarian, and proud of it".

"Uhum. And some of the words that have a million meanings! I finally remember one, and two dozen new ones pop up," says Anna with a frustrated sigh.

"Sure. Top that with the grammar nobody explains any more, and it is a mess. It would be so much easier if someone could just relate it to what we already know in Hungarian!"Jozsef concludes the conversation.

Language education is not different from teaching any other subject. It should be carefully scaffolded, and built on already existing knowledge. The above vignette illustrated the learners' preference for the use of their resources in the primary language, which include content knowledge and cultural as well as linguistic background information.

In addition to their preference for a bilingual classroom, where their primary language resources are used as linguistic assets, the participants expressed their beliefs that second language learning must rely on the first language in order to clarify linguistic information. This resonated with the results of Peter Medgyes (2004) who contended that the students' first language is an essential element of problem solving. In his opinion the key to effective language instruction is the ability to contrast and analyze the primary and the target languages.

Contrast and Analyze the Primary and Secondary Languages

The most basic strategy in reading comprehension is to look for the words which are already familiar. In the survey Szabo Adam said: "I look for cognates" (Survey, 10/07/2009)

Kovacs Anna, Kollar Jozsef and Farkas Emma all said: "When I do not understand something, I try to translate the information into my first language." (Survey, 10/09/2009) Anna elaborated on this idea during her interview. She added: "Some words cannot be translated verbatim. I misunderstand sentences because of idioms. I need someone to translate the whole sentence." (Interview, 10/16/2009)

In my research journal I also recorded instances when Hungarian speakers in a non-educational setting expressed their need for clarification in their primary language. As the example below illustrates, a false cognate and an idiom rendered the learners' comprehension unsuccessful.

"I have been off from work for two weeks. I spend most of my days interpreting in court or on the telephone. I made an interesting observation. Sometimes I interpret for people who are new immigrants from Hungary. They have studied English, and they understand some spoken as well as written English. However, they do not understand idioms, or cultural references. One of my clients was puzzled by the expression "power school". Another did not know what "an individual" meant. The first one was able to translate and understand the words, but when she put them together, it did not make sense. The second one was confused by the false cognate. Individual in Hungarian refers to "uniqueness". (Research Journal, 8/10/09)

The observation of Kollar Jozsef revealed that the use of the primary language is needed not only to translate individual words or expressions, but to clarify a grammatical concept:

J: And a determined 10-year-old-boy.... What is determined?

R: To determine is "meghatároz". When you add the "-ED"....

J: It is past tense.....

R: Yes, that too. But here it is the past participle. It means he is "határozott".

J: I would have never guessed. We have the same structure in Hungarian, though. (Observation, 10/09/2009)

Another example of the same type of clarification occurred in connection with a different part of the text:

J: Safer means what part of the road?

R: You are right it is an adjective. It means "biztonságosabb".

J: Isn't "biztonságos" just safe?

R: Yes, but this is the comparative form: like more safe.

J: So -ER is the same as "-BB" in Hungarian? (Observation, 10/09/2009)

Thus I observed that the subjects' primary language played an important role when they blended new information with existing knowledge in order to accommodate individual goals. It helped identify the correct meaning of words, and the translation supported the learners' understanding of grammatical structures. Another area where the participants expressed their preference for the use of their first language was during discussions about culturally unfamiliar content.

Culturally Unfamiliar Content

Swaffar and Bacon (1993) pointed out the significance of the social context factor, where the information in the target language was simply unfamiliar, therefore a bilingual discussion was necessary to clarify content. During the observation of Jozsef's reading I observed the following two examples of code switching and code mixing for the purpose of content clarification:

J: Mayor Tim McDonough is a name?

R: Mayor means "polgarmester". The rest is his name.

J: I put the title in front of the name. Like President Obama." (Observation, 10/09/2009)

"J: This Hope Township.... This means "reménység"?

R: No. Hope is just the name of the town. (Observation, 10/09/2009)

During the observation of Anna, the following question for clarification arose:

A: And Locust Lake Road is the name of the street?

R: Yes. Exactly.

A: That's why it is in capital letters, Duh. (Observation, 10/09/2009)

As the above examples demonstrated, my research participants identified word recognition, contrast and analyses of grammatical structure, and explanation of cultural references in the text, where the use of their primary language was required for successful comprehension in the target language. The previous examples demonstrated how English language learners used their first language to improve comprehension in their target language. The importance of student input regarding the content of learning was the next theme, which has emerged from the data.

Motivation

My four adult participants regarded background knowledge and personal interest as key factors of effective learning. Johnson's (2003) study also found that a project-based curriculum for adult language learners, which mirrored their community and cultural background increased student productivity and contributed to the learners' advancement. Her Latina participants needed to acquire survival skills in order to begin a new life in new setting. Their background, their goals and interests were appropriately matched in the language program, and it promoted their learning. Szabo Adam described the motivation factor, and how it improved his listening comprehension:

"It is important to listen to the thing you are interested in. If your hobby is cooking, listen to that. If you like politics, like I do, listen to that. Otherwise you

will lose your motivation to listen to the radio. I cannot listen to sports. It irritates me. I am not interested, and I cannot listen to that. I will tune onto something else. Do not listen to it as background noise. Concentrate on the content. Make sure you listen to the thing you are interested in. Otherwise it is not worth it. Do not listen to it only because you want to learn English. Listen only if you would listen to the same program in your own language. Learning the language will be simply the by-product of listening to the very thing you enjoy knowing." (Interview, 10/10/2009)

He also commented on his reading comprehension. The key to successful reading in his opinion was personal interest. He already had knowledge about the topic in his language, and he needed to find more details in English. He had to tie the information in the two languages together, in order to complete a project:

"I was working on my annual project of publishing a calendar in Hungarian. I needed information about how to make excel sheets work with my stuff. I read instructions about Excel. I did not read for pleasure. I read to get ahead. I read because it helped me learn something I wanted to know. I needed the information for my work. I did not read for entertainment or fun, but to use the information." (Interview, 10/10/2009)

Kovacs Anna talked about the importance of existing vocabulary, and how it aids reading comprehension. Her comment highlighted the importance of vocabulary learning in translation pairs:

"I enjoyed reading a home decorating magazine. It was interesting to read, because I understood a lot of words, and I like the topic. I wanted to find out information. I like decorating. I am interested in learning more. I wanted to learn about the concept. I knew that I would use these words elsewhere. It was also nice to recognize the words I met in other places. I recognized them here. My previous knowledge helped me. I came full circle. If I were not tired, I would have found all words in the dictionary. It would be so much easier if I could ask someone for the unknown words. The dictionary is ok, but I would remember better if a person explained." (Interview, 10/16/2009)

The participants expressed their beliefs about "good teaching" and they highlighted the significance of their motivation regarding content in order to progress in second language learning. They considered those two factors as the foundations of effective language learning at any level of proficiency.

In the following they described how the use of strategies served them in reading comprehension. The following vignette is intended to illustrate the various techniques adult language learners of diverse levels of proficiency use to understand written material. The conversation took place when I administered the formal survey.

Four adults are leaning over a survey. They are answering questions about their English proficiency, and their learning experiences.

"Adam, you've been here forever. You speak English. Translate it," says Emma, who has lived in the US for over five years, but who is used to family members interpreting for her on all occasions.

"I can translate the whole thing for you for fifty bucks an hour, or you can just ask me to tell you the words you do not understand for free. I am here to help," – says Adam with a coy smile. "But if I can't sound it out, you are stuck, baby. I can't spell in English... My momma never taught me no spelling rules...."

They all laugh.

"Can I use a dictionary?" interrupts Jozsef, who is the most practical of all of them, and prefers to work individually, although he has recently arrived from Hungary.

"Sure, honey," says Anna, and pushes her dictionary closer to Jozsef. "Be my guest. It is hard to find the proper meaning in there. It is not a new dictionary, and it is small too. For me it is easier to answer these questions without dictionary, because the possible answers are here, and I can find the most important words I need. "

"So what does this word mean? I have never seen it before?"- asks Adam showing his paper to Anna.

" I can only guess...." – she answers while Emma and Jozsef also get up to investigate the unfamiliar word .

"Read it again" –suggests Emma hesitantly.

"Wait, it is not even an important one" – says Adam quickly. "Just skip it, and let's move on."

Jozsef, the participant in the study with the lowest level of proficiency who only read for a few hours a month in English, claimed:" I concentrate on the individual words. I use a dictionary to find the words I do not recognize or I look for somebody to translate the words. I try to sound them out. I look for words that I recognize.", but also "I read slowly and get stuck when I do not understand a word." (Survey, 10/26/2009) All these statements resonated with the findings of Kern (1989) who contended that word recognition was the obstacle of beginner level ELLs.

In addition, Jozsef stated in the survey: "I cannot guess the meaning of the words."During his observation the following question revealed that he was in fact unable to infer meaning from the text:"what does bump mean? Is that a road sign? Similar error in inferences were recorded by Prince (1996). Jozsef also expressed his confusion regarding sentences during the interview:

"I misunderstand the sentences because I do not understand the structure. Who is this about? Is it active or passive? I understand the individual words, but I do

not understand the meaning of the sentences. How do the words connect? What meaning do they convey? For example: "I am Legend." What does this mean? Is this my legend, or am I the legend? Is this about my story, or the story I read? I understand this only if I use my language." (Interview, 10/17/2009)

ELLs of Jozsef's proficiency have a high reliance on translation from their first language, due to the lack of vocabulary, which is needed for basic communication skills in English.

Anna, whose level of proficiency was slightly higher than Jozsef's, and liked reading fiction and magazines for a few hours a week, was able to concentrate on the words and on the individual sentences as well, although she admitted to be "stuck" on individual words. However, she was able to infer the meaning of words from the context when no interpreter or dictionary was available. (Survey, 10/09/2009) She summarized her way of reading in the following: "It does not make sense to take the words out of the context. They always mean something else. But I can figure them out if I read the whole sentence again, and if you tell me exactly what they mean in a given sentence."(Observation, 10/09/2009) During her interview, she talked about re-reading, using key words, and finding the main idea as reading strategies:

"I re-read everything many times. I may have not paid enough attention. I always found that the key words helped me. If I did not know the meaning of the key words, the teacher clarified. Even now I have times when I do not understand what I read in Hungarian. I still look for the main idea. Even if I lose the details, I will look for the most important information." (Interview, 10/16/2009)

Anna's ability to separate important parts of the sentence from the unimportant ones became obvious during her observation: "Careen. I know this one!..... hm. Maybe not.... But it does not seem important. The cars came fast." (Observation, 10/09/2009) Her focus on the intrasentential connections tricked her with the use of a past participle, though. She was unable to understand the unfamiliar structure, and needed clarifying translation to avoid misunderstanding of the sentence:

A: What is determined?
R: What is "determinal" in Hungarian?
A: Aha. "meghatároz". Is it the same in the past?
R: Past participle.
A: What is that?
R: The adjective form.
A: Aha. So he was determined. (Observation, 10/09/2009)

Similarly to Anna, Emma claimed to read a few hours a week in English, but her range of materials was more extensive than Anna's. They included subtitles, letters, and information on the Internet. She classified her reading as "slow, but sure". Emma's reading concentrated only on the individual sentences. She used re-reading, inference and visualization of information as strategies. (Survey, 10/09/2009) During her interview, she commented that the most frequent mistake she made was when she read and interpreted the words individually, and did not put them together into a sentence.

"I understand the words, but when I put them together, I may not understand the meaning they convey. That is because I usually grab the primary meaning of the word. I do not concentrate on the expressions. Therefore, I lose the meaning. I need my husband to translate the sentences. And sometimes I think I got them, but they do not fit into the text. Then I need to make sure I know what they mean in Hungarian." (Interview, 10/26/2009)

The examples of Anna and Emma resonated with the findings of Pritchard and O'Hara (2008) whose study demonstrated that ELLs are not necessarily able to transfer reading strategies from their primary language to the target language. As their proficiency grew, they were able to move from the simplest word translation-based strategies to the more complex ones in order to establish intrasentential ties. During this process, the participants in my study stated that they still had relied on translation, as a method of verifying their inferences.

The following three entries from my research journal also supported the relation between improved proficiency and ability to apply monolingual strategies:

"I was teaching reading strategies – explicitly, during the past few weeks. Re-reading, predictions, visualization, key word finding, summary, main idea and clarifying questions. My students understood the concept, yet they still relied on translation quite a lot. I want to find out whether they consider translating a reading strategy. I believe that if translation is still their preferred tool for reading comprehension, I should investigate why, instead of shutting their efforts down. The only student I seem to run into trouble with is Mechita, a 74 year old woman from El Salvador. She speaks English at a fossilized level, barely enough for survival. She has no schooling. She uses her pocket translator constantly. And she interprets all instructions for everyone. Often, she makes mistakes." (Research Journal, 4/23/09)

"I divided my class in two groups: those who wanted to translate for reading comprehension, and those who wanted me to introduce the text through appropriate reading strategies. We will be doing this activity for a few weeks, maybe the whole summer session." (Research Journal, 5/1/09)

"All my students who were initially in the group that translated for better comprehension, decided to join the other group of explicit reading strategy instruction, over a period of roughly two months. What happened during this time? Why did they one-by-one gradually change their minds? I asked what the reason was. They said they have learned enough English now that they understand better, and they do not necessarily need Spanish. They are interested in trying to speak English only. The same students who were crying and fighting in the beginning of the summer session, the ladies who were ready to leave the program for "discrimination", were now volunteering to learn and adopt the appropriate reading strategies."(Research Journal, 8/15/09)

The study of O'Malley et al (1985) also supports that successful language learners incorporate more than one strategy as they progress. The use of a range of reading strategies was illustrated well in the case of Adam, who read a few hours a day, and classified himself as: "I understand most of what I read in English". He placed his focus on the text as a whole. He looked for cognates and the most important words to "open the text". He still needed to use the dictionary when he did not recognize the key words. He was able to establish, which words were significant and which ones did not aid him in the comprehension of the sentence:

A: What is TUG?

R: TUG is RÁNCIGALNI...

A: Ah, so the kid was pulling on his pocket. (Observation 10/11/2009)

In order to establish intersentential cues in the text Adam used re-reading: "Luke was called... Let me re-read I don't get it. What happened to the kid?" (Observation, 10/11/2009) and visualization: "I visualize the information I read." (Survey, 10/07/2009).

The above examples of the participants' preferred reading strategies illustrated how they apply more and more complex strategies as their level of proficiency progressed. This resonated with the results of Cohen and Aphek (1980) who concluded that context provided the necessary cues once learners advanced to a level of proficiency where they did not feel "overstimulated" by the quantity of unfamiliar text. Kern (1989) agreed with these findings and contended that the lack of L2 word recognition was the primary obstacle of comprehension. Since these studies considered vocabulary development the key to improving reading comprehension, the next theme of my research became the participants' methods of vocabulary acquisition.

Vocabulary Acquisition

Jozsef, the participant with the lowest level of proficiency in the study, stated that his vocabulary was "very limited" (Survey, 10/26/2009). He always translated words into Hungarian, and learned the words in translation pairs. (Survey, 10/26/2009). This helped him retain vocabulary, but impeded on his use of inference as a higher level reading strategy. The following example from my observation field notes illustrates how Jozsef recognized the word "past", but he was unable to infer its meaning in the given context, which lead to a misinterpretation of the text.

J: Aha. The cars were flying past the houses....The cars passed the houses.... How? Is this figurative? The houses do not move...."

R: Pass has more than one meaning. They did not pass a moving object. It is not "lehagyták". They passed the houses by. "elsuhantak mellettük". They flew past them as the houses stood there. (Observation, 10/09/2009)

Jozsef's example supported the results of Prince (1996) suggesting that paired associate learning of words facilitated excellent recall, but occasionally rendered comprehension faulty.

Anna and Emma, the two intermediate level learners stated: "I translate the words into my language and learn them as a pair, but I can also remember the context where I found it." And "I look words up in the dictionary, I find them in text, and I hear them in social contexts." (Survey, 10/09/2009). Anna demonstrated the example of problem solving and applying a new meaning to familiar vocabulary during her observation:

A: Picked up. What is it. I use it all the time. I pick up Milly from school. But I have no clue what it means here....

R: What is it in Hungarian?

A: "felvenni" or "felkapni".

R: Exactly. What can you also pick up. Not only a person....

A: An object from somewhere....

R: Or?

A: Information?

R: Yes. That's it.

A: So he picked up the information at the dinner table. (Observation, 10/09/2009)

This was a perfect example, of how a student of intermediate level proficiency was able to connect paired associate learning and the application of contextual cues in order to construct meaning. At this level, the support of the first language and the English context were combined to facilitate correct comprehension. At the advanced level of language proficiency, Adam marked social context and text as the

primary sources of new vocabulary, and expressed little need for translation and the use of a bilingual dictionary. (Survey, 10/07/2009) He claimed to be able to identify key words, and he used his primary language only when the monolingual methods or re-reading and inferencing failed: "I can also use the context. I can guess the meaning of the words. I can find the important words that unlock the text. If they are not familiar, I can look them up in the dictionary. If they are not important from the point of view of comprehension, I ignore them." (Interview, 10/11/2009).

The above examples demonstrated the learners' use of diverse reading strategies, and their need for the resources of the primary language at various stages of L2 proficiency. The mother tongue served as a vehicle for conscious miscue analyses of the syntactic, semantic, graphophonic and pragmatic cuing systems, which according to Wurr, Theurer and Kim (2009) made L2 learners more aware of the reading process.

The final theme of my study reaches back to the most significant component of language learning: learners' beliefs about the successful teaching-learning process. As my participants described their reading strategies and vocabulary learning practices, they all commented on the significance of the integration of language skills. Although this element does not relate to the use of the learners' primary language, it was still noteworthy for future instructional purposes.

Integrated Skills Instruction

" I like reading lyrics. I have heard the songs before. But I never understood the words. I knew the music. I did not connect the two. After I read the lyrics, I understand the meaning. I do not necessarily like the meaning. But I can connect the music with the words and the meaning now." (Interview, 10/17/2009)

Jozsef's comment about connecting listening and reading illustrated the need for integrated skills instruction. Anna cited a different example to support the same belief: "I like subtitled movies and other TV shows." (Interview, 10/16/2009). Adam stressed the significance of connecting reading, writing and listening:

"Read the paper and copy the words. It does not matter that you don't understand. Just copy the words. And try to write down a few paragraphs each day. This way you will learn what the words sound like from the radio, and what they look like and how to write them. The copying should be a daily paper with actual news. First you will not understand anything. And slowly you will be able to connect the news with your everyday life." (Interview, 10/10/2009).

He commented that lack of the knowledge of the graphophonic cuing system was the main cause of his failure to construct meaning from text.

R: If you were asked to answer some important questions in a test in English, would you like to read it yourself, or would you rather someone reads it to you?

A: If someone reads it to me, I may forget the first part by the time I hear the second part of the question. If I read it myself, I can read the question again and again. I think that is better. But if I cannot read the letters, because I do not know how they sound, I may not know the meaning. So I guess I need both. (Interview, 10/10/2009)

Conclusion

Based upon the result of my study, the use of the first language was preferred by adult language learners at any stage of language proficiency. The learners used the resources their mother tongue provided in several ways. Their beliefs about "good teaching" constituted appropriate scaffolding, which incorporated using prior knowledge of language content and structure as a foundation for language learning, as opposed to the language acquisition theory, which advocates the monolingual approach. The participants expressed the significance of contrasting their first and second languages in order to accommodate word recognition and explain grammatical structure. The importance of code switching and code mixing also arose as the participants wished to clarify culturally unfamiliar content. While the participants were able to apply diverse reading strategies which evolved with the gradual improvement of their second language proficiency, they claimed to rely on their primary language for clarification on the inter- and intrasentential levels of comprehension.

CHAPTER V
Discussion and Implications

Overview

This qualitative study investigated why adult English language learners use their first language as they construct meaning from written text in English. The purpose of the study was to gain better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the students, to explore their beliefs about the teaching-learning process, and to observe the results of reading strategies they apply willingly.

I conducted a review of related literature to provide a framework for the research. I examined multiple studies, which pertained to the characteristics of the adult ELL community and their second language learning practices with a particular focus on the reading strategies students use at various levels of proficiency.

The four-subject case study used qualitative research components. I collected data through a formal survey, an informal interview, and an observation. In addition, I recorded my personal observations and opinions in a research journal.

The participants of my study were anxious to share their experiences and feelings about ESL education with me. Their descriptions were comprehensive, and the insights they shared with me were honest. Through careful triangulation of the data, I established that the use of the ELLs' first language is essential at all levels of language proficiency.

The Data Collection Tools

The survey provided me with information regarding the participants' level of proficiency in English. It specified the length of time the individual learners spent studying the English language, as well as the educational settings. It also classified the subjects according to their educational background and learning goals. The interview investigated the various techniques the learners used while they read in English, and the observation demonstrated the successful and unsuccessful applications of the mentioned comprehension strategies. The final data analysis revealed that adult language learners relied on the resources their primary language provided in several ways, depending on their beliefs about "good teaching", their motivation, and their proficiency level.

Implications of the Study

Based on my research findings, I intend to accommodate my adult ELLs' need for a multi-lingual classroom, where the use of their primary language is not only tolerated, but it is encouraged.

The primary goal for my low beginner students is vocabulary expansion. Learning words in a written context via translation eliminates the students' discomfort, which they experience as they become overwhelmed with the unfamiliar language. Learning words in a translation pair facilitates better recall, and reduces the possibilities of misunderstanding. The focus on vocabulary learning through reading aids the integration of skills, which is a key element of successful language learning. Students at this level also wish to use their first language in order to clarify cultural content.

Adult ELLs of intermediate proficiency benefit from the use of their first language on the intersentential level. They often wish to contrast and analyze the two languages in order to improve the comprehension of individual sentences. In addition to comparing syntactical features, they need to confirm the meaning of idioms, or lexical units with multiple meanings.

Advanced learners do not necessarily need to use their primary language for translation purposes. Their English has developed enough to enable them to identify key words and to infer the meanings of these words. They are able to recognize grammatical structures, ask clarifying questions in the target language, and will attempt to facilitate better comprehension through re-reading or visualization. At this level, students are able to transfer reading strategies from their first language into their second language, thus they concentrate on the intersentential cues. Nevertheless, ELLs at the advanced level still take advantage of their mother tongue. They use it to activate their large pool of background knowledge and to integrate new information into the existing content. This is a highly effective motivational factor at all levels of proficiency.

Recommendations

Explicit teaching of level-appropriate reading strategies and the integration of language skills at all levels of proficiency is highly recommended. Continued work is necessary to explore how the extended use of the primary language for solely word recognition purposes may hinder second language learning.

Researcher Reflections

During the research process, the participants' insights confirmed my beliefs that language at the beginner level cannot be acquired by adult language learners. It must be learned. Attempts to "enforce" language acquisition at this level may reduce the learner's self-esteem, deprive them of their motivation, and lead to the fossilization of the new language at a conveniently functional level.

Applying the language acquisition model becomes beneficial at a higher level of proficiency. But without the appropriate linguistic scaffolding and integration of skills, this approach would not yield the results which adult language learners strive to achieve.

My role as a researcher was new and interesting. From the technical point of view, I gathered a very positive experience. I have designed and translated formal employee surveys and interviews for over a decade. In my earlier years of teaching, I made numerous observations of student teachers and colleagues. But I have never designed a research methodology. Fitting those pieces together as a puzzle in order to receive the most information from the participants was a difficult, yet very rewarding activity. It showed me that I can learn a new trick. It also demonstrated how years of loosely-related experience can be tied together.

The ethical aspects of this study also shaped my beliefs about educational research. Even though my research did not qualify as "Action Research", for I did not conduct it in my own classroom, the purpose, as well as the implications make this study part of my every day teaching routine and my professional development plan. As I wondered about the various power issues, which may have risen, had I conducted action research, I am grateful to my director whose guidance helped me avoid such conflicts.

Most importantly, my beliefs about the learning process had been drastically altered by conducting this research. When I studied English as a foreign language, the motivational factor was tourism and curiosity: "What's beyond the Iron Curtain?" Proficiency in the English language was alluring, and Hungarian was simply a functional, gray tool, I took for granted. This is similar to the way English speakers learn other languages. As I talked to my students and research participants, I understood how the role of the Mother Tongue changes as one becomes an immigrant. The new language becomes a goal to survive and function. But immigration in most cases strengthens the ties with the first language. Living in a foreign language speaking environment highlights the beauty, the uniqueness and the warm familiarity of the mother tongue. Therefore, the use of the first language is not simply functional, as it was in my case of EFL learning, but also motivational. Knowledge of the first language provides the foundation of the

learners' healthy self-esteem. As a researcher, I learned that my participants may not possess the education I was fortunate to receive in three countries, yet they know and taught me about adequate teaching of a second language.

Summary

We do not teach language. We teach people. For every adult, their mother tongue is of sacred significance. They value and utilize it as a refined and respected resource. Thus, language educators must learn to accommodate their students' convictions, academic foundation, learning goals and level of comfort as they guide them towards communicative competence in a foreign language.

REFERENCES

A Human Capital Concern: The Literacy Proficiency of U.S. Immigrants.Retrieved May 31, 2009 from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1b/a8/82.pdf

Auerbach, E.R. (1993). "Reexamining English only in the ESL classroom." *TESOL Quarterly,* 27(1). https://doi.org/10.2307/3586949

Buttaro, L. (2002). "Understanding adult ESL learners; Multiple dimensions of learning and adjustments among Hispanic women." *Adult Basic Education,* 11(1), 40-61.

Buttaro, L. (2004). "Second language acquisition, culture shock, and language stress of adult female Latina students in New York." *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education,* 3(1), 21-49. https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192703255525

Cohen, A.C. & Aphek, E. (1980). "Retention of second-language vocabulary over time: Investigating the role of mnemonic associations", *System,* 8, 221-235. https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(80)90004-4

Condition of Education. Retrieved on June 3, 2009 from http://www.secc.cc.ia.us/userup/inst_research/Condition_of_Ed_2007.pdf

Creswell, J. W. (2002). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.

Davis, J.N., Bistodeau, L. (1993). "How do L1 and L2 Reading differ? Evidence form Think Aloud Protocols." *The Modern Language Journal* 77(4). 459-472. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1993.tb01993.x

Gallegos, B. (1994). "English: Our Official Language? The Reference Shelf." 66(2). (98-136). New York. The H.W. Wilson Company.

Gault, T.R. (2004). *Adult Hispanic immigrants' assumptions regarding good teaching in ESL.* Dissertation Abstracts International, 65(5), 1704A.

Hulstijn, J.H. (1992). "Retention of inferred and given meanings: Experiments in incidental vocabulary learning." In P. Arnaud &H. Bejoint (Eds.), *Vocabulary and Applied Linguistics.* (113-125). London: Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-12396-4_11

Johnson, C. (2003). A Perspective of the Effectiveness of Project Based Bilingual Curriculum in Personal Empowerment of the Adult English Language Learner. Retrieved May 15, 2009, from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1b/90/b5.pdf

Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practices in second language acquisition.* Elmsford, New York: Pergamon.

Krashen, S. (1997). *Comprehension Hypothesis. Recent Evidence.* English Teachers' Journal (Israel), 5(1), 17-29.

Krashen S. (2008). "Language Education: Past, Present and Future" (EJ821379). *RELC Journal: A Journal of Language Teaching and Research,* 39(2) 178-187. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688208092183

Mathews-Aydinli, J. (February 22, 2008). "Overlooked and Understudied? A Survey of Current Trends in Research on Adult English Language Learners." *Adult Education Quarterly,* 2008; 58; 198. Retrieved on April 15, 2009 from http://sagepub.com. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713608314089

Medgyes, P. (2004). *A Nyelvtanár: A nyelvtanitás módszertana.* Budapest. Corvina

O'Malley,J.M.; Chamot, A.U.; Stewner-Manzanares, G.; Russo, R.P.; Kupper, L. (1985) "Learning Strategy Applications with Students of English as a Second Language." *TESOL Quarterly,* 19(3) 557-584. https://doi.org/10.2307/3586278

Oxford, R.L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know.* (New York: Newbury House)

Polio, C. (1994). Comments on Elsa Roberts Auerbach's "Reexamining English only in the ESL classroom." A reader reacts. *TESOL Quarterly,* 28(1), 153-157. https://doi.org/10.2307/3587203

Prince, P. (1996). "Second Language Vocabulary Learning: The Role of Context versus Translations as a Function of Proficiency." *The Modern Language Journal,* 80: 478-493. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1996.tb05468.x

Rigney, Joseph W. 1978. "Learning strategies: a theoretical perspective." In *Learning strategies,* Harold F. O'Neil (Ed.), 165-205. New York: Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-526650-5.50012-5

Seng, G. H., Hashim F. (April 2006). Use of L1 in L2 reading comprehension among tertiary ESL learners. Reading in a Foreign Language, 18,(1), 29-54. Retrieved April 10, 2009 from http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl.

Swaffar, J., Bacon, S. (1993). "Reading and Listening Comprehension: Perspectives on Research and Implications for Practice." In *Research in Language Learning*, Alice Omaggio Hadley, 125-155. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

Watanabe,Y., Swain M. (2007). "Effects of proficiency differences and patterns of pair interaction on second language learning: collaborative dialogue between adult ESL learners." *Language Teaching Research,* 2007; 11;121 Retrieved April 11, 2009 from http://www.sagepublications.com https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168806074599

Williams, R. Socio-cultural Perspectives on Second Language Learning. Retrieved May 1, 2009 from http://academics.smcvt.edu/rwilliams2/sla/sociocult M&m. htm