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The Effects of ESL on Refugees' Perception and Use of Native Language

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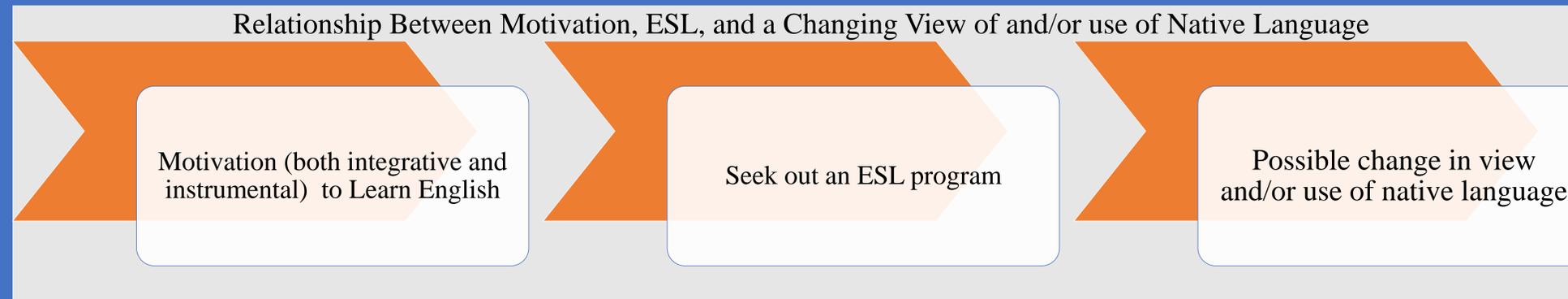
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“It’s My Language”: The Connection Between ESL and the View Of Native Language Among Adult Refugees

Researcher: Macey Kakuk, Faculty Advisor: Dr. Merideth Pitts

Research Question: How do motivations to learn English affect the way adult refugees use and view their native language?



Previous Research

Motivation: Many students in the United States are motivated to seek out ESL education because they believe the language will help them reach a better life (Duran, 2016, Shiffman, 2019; Snell, 2018; Warriner, 2007).

ESL Classroom: Research discusses the importance of the ESL classroom structure as well as the role ESL teachers play in students’ self-identification (Ardasheva & Tretter, 2013; Canagarajah, 2016; Cao, 2014; Duran, 2019; Fruja, 2017; Wiley & Lukes, 1996).

Native Language Maintenance: Native language maintenance is very important to refugees and immigrants, even though they may live in an English dominated culture (Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019; Smith-Hefner, 1990; Valdés, 2005)

Gaps in Previous Research: Current research discussed various components of the research question, however, only one article discussed all three elements together (Duran, 2016).

Methods

- All participants are students at a community ESOL program in Ohio.
- Surveys were administered to 19 participants.
- Five interviews were conducted with individual students.
- One group interview was conducted with the level 3 class at the community ESOL school.

Findings

Motivation

- A majority of participants, both in the interviews and surveys, indicated that their motivation for learning English came from the desire to get a better job or help their children with schoolwork.
- Participants indicated that English is a necessity for living in the United States

View of English/ESL Classes

- Throughout both surveys and interviews, participants indicated that they saw English as a language of power that could benefit them in any country.
- ESL class was seen as something that would improve life as well as make them stronger as people.

View/Use of Native Language

- Nineteen of the total participants indicated, although they could use English in multiple settings, they used their native language in their own homes with their close family and friends.
- Participants indicated that their native language was still important to them because they use it to communicate with family and associate it with their native culture.

Discussion and Conclusion

It was evident from the data that was gathered that the students at the community ESOL school have a desire to learn English and have a great respect for the language. However, this did not seem to change the way they view their native language. ESL education may change the way the student use their native language, as they are now able to use English at work, while running errands, and at school. They are excited about these opportunities, but native language is still important to these participants. When asked if ESL education had changed the way they viewed their language, a student said, “No, it’s my language.” This shows that, in the case of adult refugees, native language is equally, if not more, important than English. and that a person’s heart language will always be important, no matter in what circumstance they may find themselves.