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Adapting to College Life: An Ethnographic Study of the Linguistic Challenges Faced by Immigrant, Black, Male Students at Bridgewater State University

CARTER REMY

Abstract

This linguistic qualitative ethnographic study sought to understand whether immigrant, ESL men who have completed their first year of college at BSU perceive themselves as linguistically prepared for college life. Linguistic preparedness is critical for successful participation in the classroom and completion of required work. The research seeks to identify and analyze the programs BSU has established to assist this population in their adaptation to college life and in acquiring linguistic proficiency. The study employs a multi-tiered methodology, beginning with semi-structured interviews with diversity administrators as well as ESL and Global Language faculty. These interviews were followed by rapport-building, participant and naturalistic observations, and semi-structured interviews with four immigrant male students who had completed their first year of college. Selected by purposive sampling, the resulting case study of Bridgewater State University with respect to linguistic readiness for ESL immigrant students will offer emic (insider) perceptions of students’ own linguistic preparedness. Results offer insights into this population and generate recommendations that cater to struggling ESL students.

Section I

Foundation

The moon is shining, the stars glimmering. In the midst of a soccer game on the beautiful island of Haiti, following the funeral of a senior citizen in the community, momentarily I am mesmerized by the beauty of the night. Turning back to the game, I look across the field to see who is open, so I can make my next cross as our team is down one. Unable to do so, I swiftly and beautifully dribble my way through two guys of the opposing team followed by a diagonal pass to find my teammate. My teammate, with one hand in the air, yells, “blode mwen ouvri, bann pass lan,” telling me to pass the ball while jokingly cussing at me, saying that he is open as I am in the middle of performing my move to lose my defenders. Our attack is cut short as one of the defenders anticipates the move and sweeps the outgoing pass. Again, my teammate shouts and jokingly cusses at me in Haitian Creole for not passing the ball much sooner and quicker. I retort, yelling as loudly as I can “ou pa tap fe anyen avek boul la,” telling him that he won’t do anything with the incoming pass.

Growing up in Haiti as a kid, I never imagined being able to speak more than Haitian Creole let alone seeking to be linguistically competent in more than one language. However, my life course has offered me this opportunity: immigrating to the US at age 12, I faced the challenge of becoming competent in English, so I could be successful in school and life. Thinking back on that soccer game all those years ago, I realize that part of the fun of the game was the banter with my peers in a comfortable setting. This is what linguistic anthropologists refer to as a “speech community,” individuals who share specific rules for speaking and interpreting speech in a community (Salzmann, et al, 2015, 266). Studying anthropology has allowed me to think about my past and my current challenges through the lens of the many speech communities I navigate in daily life, and it is because of my personal experience that I realized others face a similar struggle. This research highlights these struggles that are significant because...
the immigrant population deserves to be a focus of all universities’ student success efforts. At Bridgewater State University (BSU), while student success is highlighted as one of the university’s strategic goals, the specific definition of student success is not readily available to students on the BSU website; my research indicates that it is student-oriented, defined as learning and applying knowledge and skills through a vast array of curricular activities, degree completion, and post-degree educational goals (BSU Strategic Plan, 2017).

**Research problem and hypothesis**

Bridgewater State University prides itself in catering to its students in helping them to become successful. According to BSU’s Strategic Plan, the university’s “primary purpose is to advance student success” (BSU Strategic Plan, 2017). To what extent is this goal achieved with respect to the population at hand, specifically Black male immigrant students? BSU has sought to help young men tackle obstacles that hinder their capacity to excel, and, in many ways, there has been success, most notably through BSU’s Male Student Success interventions with respect to retention and graduation rates (interviews with administrators; July/August 2018). However, there is always room for improvement, and my informal interactions with immigrant male ESL students suggest that the university has not focused enough on the challenges that this population faces linguistically. This has led me to look into the linguistic readiness of ESL Black male immigrants at BSU and how the resources that the university offers impact their studies. A study related to my proposed research was conducted by Mauro S. Dos Reis, during the spring of 2016. A former student from BSU, Reis researched the high school performance of Cape Verdean immigrant students who had migrated from Cape Verde to New Bedford. Reis’s research adopted a linguistic perspective as she worked to figure out ways to better serve Cape Verdean immigrant students in their acquisition of ESL (Reis 2016).

This research offers what we in Anthropology refer to as an emic perspective, or a cultural insider’s point of view, of male immigrant students’ own linguistic readiness. I have analyzed the data I obtained from my observations of my study group—their emic perspectives—drawing from James Cummins’ proposal of his lower and higher threshold levels that are needed in order to achieve linguistic competence, which I explain in more detail below. In brief, these levels build on one another and are interdependent with each other, indicating that there are degrees of readiness rather than only two levels. Cummins outlines an introductory level and a fully competent level. This idea of stages challenged my initial thinking when I began the research. Initially, I shared Cummins’ view. However, now after my research, I have determined that my data indicates that there are many stages of linguistic readiness and that they vary with each student’s prior knowledge of English, as well as other factors such as individual attitude, the nature of the student’s speech communities, and mentorship experiences. There is much more than simply stating that, yes or no, immigrant students are, or aren’t linguistically ready for college. Having said this, the current article does not detail Cummins’ hypothesis or present challenges, but instead focuses on responses to interviews from all the study participants regarding existing services at BSU and the challenges of acquiring language proficiency for student success. Cummins was useful in helping me to think about stages of language proficiency.

**Section II**

**Literature review**

**Linguistic foundation**

English is a language that is taking the world by storm—it is currently known as the world’s “lingua franca”—the common tongue, since so many countries have adopted the language in many areas such as academia, business, and even everyday life. When immigrants speak English, myself included, we are often looked down upon: we face prejudice, are teased, and mocked for our accents, leading to shame and embarrassment. A research study conducted by Maureen Snow Andrade in 2009 found that
non-native English speakers, including international students, are heavily challenged by academic language demands. One challenge is with their peers in the classroom. For example, their difficulties with English proficiency may prevent domestic students from working with them on projects for classes, due to “their weak writing or presentation skills” (Andrade 2009, 18). Non-native English speakers face two kinds of language proficiency struggles here in the United States. The first is what is referred to as “basic interpersonal communication skills” (BICS) where a student can be well versed colloquially. This means that language skills are developed enough for interpersonal communication with peers outside a formal classroom environment. The second is what is referred to as “cognitive academic language proficiency” (CALP) which is the ability to keep up with the demands of academia (http://esl.fis.edu/teachers/support/cummin.htm; accessed 2/21/18). Immigrant students often struggle with keeping up with the demands of their CALP skills but more easily master their BICS skills.

**Anthropological foundation**

Linguistic Anthropology, the scientific study of language and its relationship to thought, semantics (meaning), and behavior, offers the theoretical framework that guides my study. According to the early twentieth-century linguist Edward Sapir, who laid the foundation for the anthropological subfield of linguistic anthropology, “language is a guide to ‘social reality’... human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity ... but are very much at the mercy of the particular language that has become the medium of expression for their society” (Sapir, cited in Salzmann, et al 2015, 312). This understanding of the semantic role of language—the fact that the world around us is given meaning in large part through language, rooted in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, offers the linguistic anthropological theory that shapes my work. As indicated above, James Cummins is another linguist who has heavily shaped my work. One of his hypotheses proposed that there is a potential for levels of “linguistic competence” that need to be acquired in order to avoid cognitive loss and have access to cognitive growth (Cummins 1979, 229). He called this The Threshold Hypothesis, and in it, he highlighted two levels of learning. The lower level is not too rigorous and doesn’t require significant mastery of cognitive language skills. However, the higher level needs to be attained in order to grow cognitively and perform well academically. The lower level varies according to a child’s stages of development and academic requirements, but, essentially, the lower threshold of bilingual competence, as Cummins refers to it, proposes that a bilingual child’s competency in a language may be weak to the point where it impacts their interactions in an educational setting. The higher-level builds upon the lower level and as immersion increases within programs in a second language, there should be cognitive benefits. Through the lens of these levels within the threshold hypothesis I was able to analyze the interviews and observation data. Previous studies have reported that bilingualism has had negative effects on scholastic progress. However, Cummins’ research indicates that negative impacts can be largely resolved by addressing language proficiency through students’ access to support and resources. Bilingualism itself isn’t an obstacle to academic success; in fact, studies demonstrate that people who speak more than one language have increased capabilities in a number of areas such as thinking skills, cognitive functioning, and more (Cummins 1976).

**Section III**

**Methodology**

**Methods for assuring protection of human subjects (IRB)**

This project was very sensitive for each of the case study participants. The project was not approved right away from the IRB board as various precautionary measures had to be taken. The first application that was submitted was denied because the
Board was seeking further clarification about the nature of the project with respect to the safety of the immigrant population. The second application submitted was again denied for its lack of emphasis on how the identity of the participants, especially the student participants, would be protected. The Board was worried about their identity being revealed and used throughout the research project even with pseudonyms. Most importantly, the Board was concerned about the student participants’ immigration status being revealed through the process of the research, which required involvement in participants’ speech communities, so consent forms had to be redrafted with greater specificity for their protection.

This research required participant observation, rapport building, community engagement, and other forms of anthropological naturalistic observation. These processes are explained in detail below in the approach to data collection section. However, given the severity of the current immigration crisis, I, as the researcher, was not allowed to travel to the homes of the student participants. This would hinder collecting data from the many possible speech communities that typically occur in the homes of the student participants. The IRB worries were understandable; however, the project start date was very time sensitive. The board did not give their approval until everything was thoroughly explained and carefully examined, and it was just in time to begin conducting field work which was about a week before I needed to do so.

**Sample and approach to data collection**

To provide insight into the domestic ESL Black male immigrant student population via the perspectives of students, faculty, and administrators, this study, based on a critical paradigm, draws on a multi-tiered methodology beginning with a literature data search, structured and open-ended interviews with diversity administrators, ESL and Global Language faculty, followed by rapport-building (continuous genuine and naturalistic dialogic interaction), participant and naturalistic observations, and structured and open-ended and formal interviews with four male immigrant students who had completed their first year of college at BSU. Selected by purposive sampling, consent forms were created for each individual group with appropriate wording. I began by pursuing a literature search of research conducted on ESL students about their struggles in the academic realm. I then met with each student individually, interviewed, participated in their daily activities and observed them in their respective speech communities, details which I explain below. After four weeks of this participant-observation followed by interviews, I moved to stage two of my research, interviewing administrators and faculty from the Global Languages and English Departments. Following the interviews, I transcribed them by listening to and typing up each interview. My decision to focus on specific speech communities is informed by Sapir’s linguistic anthropology insight, namely that the social context of speech shapes language use in terms of vocabulary and body language. For example, I wanted to understand how well students adapted, linguistically, to distinct speech communities.

One I transcribed the interviews, I then analyzed the data using Cummins’ ideas to determine if their level of language represented the lower or upper tiers of linguistic readiness. This is how I determined that these two levels are inadequate to describe the range of levels I noted in my observations.

My sample comprised of students, administrators, and faculty. I had a sample of four male Black Male ESL students from different countries including Haiti, Jamaica, Cape Verde, and Ghana whom I interviewed and engaged in naturalistic observation and participant observation in their respective speech communities that they often navigate through—with the exception, as noted above, of their homes. My naturalistic participation and participant observation involved me spending a period of two months interacting with the student participants in different settings. For example, with one student, I attended a Church service in English at his Haitian Church and then asked him about his understanding of the sermon. With another student, I joined a game of soccer, paying attention to the verbal exchanges before, during, and after the game, also noting body language.
As they linguistically navigate these communities, individuals engage in what linguistic anthropologists refer to as “code switching” (Salzmann et al, 2015, 313). Each community contains its own codes—patterns of speech represented by grammatical constructions, lexicon (vocabulary), kinesics (body language), as well as other variables including intonation, communication levels (loudness), and the proximity of one speaker to another (proxemics). I also interviewed three administrators from different department and offices, including the Office of Institutional Diversity and English Language Learning office. Interviewing the administrators allowed me to see how they view the programs created for student success compared to how the students view those programs, and whether they are useful to the immigrant students’ academic growth from the students’ point of view.

Section IV

Data Analysis and findings

Student perspectives

The population at Bridgewater State University is very diverse. In a recent survey conducted by the university, the ethnic make-up of said population includes Asians, American Indian Hispanics, and more (CIRP Freshman survey 2017). In addition, it is important to note that the university does not collect data on a student’s immigration status, such as which countries domestic immigrant students are from. Nor does the university specify percentages of ESL students. Moreover, even for ethnically diverse students who are counted, said population is rarely a focus of conversations about diversity with respect to linguistic challenges. The student participants were eager to be part of a project that would allow them to use their voices and speak for themselves. The student participants echoed many like-minded sentiments. They all agreed that as undergraduate students, immigrant, domestic, international students are expected to have a certain proficiency, in fact, a level of mastery of the English language to succeed academically. They all mentioned how they had to seek language acquisition via unorthodox forms such as watching anime: “Yeah, a lot of big words I learned from anime, I learned a lot from Dragon Ball and movies,” stated one participant (interview July 1, 2018).

An additional sentiment echoed was on some of the many resources that the university has to offer and students’ own perceptions of how they use those resources and whether they are helpful. One resource that all my participants referred to was the Academic Achievement Center (AAC). Students go to the AAC to receive help with their academic coursework. Within that Center, there are multiple resources available, such as the Writing Studio (WS), second language services, and more. The WS is a resource on campus that most faculty and administrators think is helpful to the student body, but that the student participants asserted was not helpful to them. This was the one resource that was mentioned in all the student participants’ and professors’ interviews, as well as one of the three administrator’s interviews. The WS provides additional assistance, mainly writing assistance, to students to help them with their classroom assignments. However, the student participants saw the WS in a different light. One participant stated, “For me, I feel like it (the AAC) didn’t help” said one of the participants (Interview with student participant, July 1, 2018). I quickly asked a follow up question: “Going to the AAC, do you see that happening with other immigrant students on campus where they’ve done the same thing that you have, stopped going to the AAC?” He replied, “Yeah, definitely, most of my friends, from the same high school, sometimes we joke about our writing. You could ask why you don’t go to the Writing Center and they would say, ‘Nah, I stopped going because every time I never get the help that I needed.’ It’s not only me” (Interview with student participant, July 1, 2018). This sentiment highlights that this issue is present amongst other students. Later, the student elaborated that “three or four people have said the same thing.” This was a sentiment expressed across the board with all the student participants that I conducted observations with and interviewed. For example, I
asked one of the student participants if he felt like the WS molded his writing to help him achieve the level of writing he was seeking and his response was as follows: “So for the first semester, I went there, talked to them… they helped me with my writing and they told me it was fine, but then I brought it to the teacher and I got a low grade on it. That kind of stopped me from going back there, because I feel like they weren’t much help” (Interview with student participant, July 2, 2018) Another student expressed that he was getting help with writing his papers when the tutor would make the corrections, but not with becoming a better writer. This indicates that the students perceive that they are not getting the help they need and that not all immigrant male students can be helped the same way. Also, it seems that the tutors themselves are not sure how to guide the students with these ESL challenges.

The combination of these factors led students not to return and to give up easily for many reasons: some indicated that they were shy in seeking help; others cited the lack of a cultural connection to their mentors; others thought the aid they received was inappropriate to their needs. The context here, a foundation of the anthropological approach, is critical: ESL students have frequently been ostracized, shamed and discriminated against for their accents; they have even experienced the assumption that they are not intelligent because of their accents. “They were told a story of themselves as struggling, less competent learners, while they were doing a task twice as difficult as the rest of their peers” (Lowenstein 2017). This history shaped their perceptions of their experiences, and as an ESL student myself, resonated with my own experience. With that said, the student participants also agreed that there needs to be a resource focused on immigrant students, and, if not a new one, an improvement on the existing services based on awareness of the experiences of this student population. Their reasoning, according to one participant, is that “students of color, immigrants should be able to feel more comfortable. There should be more focus on the students, helping them prepare instead of just putting them in class” (Interview with student participant, July 2, 2018). When asked what that resource would look like, their answers were as follows: “At least an office for immigrant students. Have people that can help you in writing, help you understand the language”. Another student, commenting on his own lack of comfort at the WS said, “Just make it more inviting.” When asked what he meant by that in a follow up interview, he explained “Sometimes you don’t really get the help needed, or enough time because there’s other people waiting.

Faculty perspectives

The faculty members were also big proponents and supporters of this project being done. All of the faculty saw the need that immigrant students face. One of the faculty members even empathized with the linguistic struggles of immigrants, something that the student participants noted that not all faculty members recognize: “Yeah exactly. If English isn’t your first language, you’ll have issues with grammar and syntax. So, we talk about different cultural ideologies that influence their writings. So, we try to be aware of cultural differences,” said one faculty member. “Often professors will go nuts and be upset about every grammatical error and penalize the student. It’s like penalizing someone for having an accent” added the same faculty member (Interview with faculty participant: July 31, 2018). Thaat faculty member understood the cultural differences of immigrant students and how that affects their work. Most professors expect their students, no matter their background, to be linguistically ready academically. “there’s a belief that good grammar equals good thinking” (Interview with faculty participant, June 25, 2018). Another shared idea among the faculty was how they strongly they believe that a student’s mastery of English will definitely affect his studies. I asked one of the faculty participants “Do you feel like the student’s mastery of English has an impact on their writing?” to which the response was: “definitely” (Interview with faculty, July 31, 2018).
Administrator perspectives

Bridgewater prides itself on being student-oriented first and foremost. That is a viewpoint that all the administrators in the study shared. In regard to being student-centered, they all also echoed how they are data-driven and those data, whether qualitative or quantitative, always involve the student population (from small-scale to larger-scale analyses): “I think the approach that BSU has, ‘one student at a time’, makes sense. It’s an institution that is data driven, using analyses to best help our students,” said one administrator (Interview with administrator, July 16, 2018). “We look at the data from institutional research and student-driven” said another administrator (Interview with administrator, July 19, 2018). The administrators’ perspectives were that language has not been part of the many programs and research conducted at the university itself, even linguistic issues in terms of the language that the university utilizes. This fact hinders an upcoming freshman student’s ability to fully comprehend the rules, regulations, and operation modules of the university, whether they are an immigrant or not.

One question that I asked of all the administrator participants was, “has language been part of the programs (At BSU)?” In response, one administrator stated, “It hasn’t. Your project is making me realize we need to do that more.” Another administrator even pointed out that, “I’ve encountered language issues. For examples policies that are written by a lawyer. For a lawyer, it’s easy to understand, but if I’m reading it and I have no notion how the law operates, I’ll be lost.” Another administrator added, “That’s a really good question. I’m not sure that it [language proficiency] has been. Clearly, it has been to some extent.” Given the many students that Bridgewater caters to, this project has allowed administrators to look more closely at a population with immense linguistic struggles, who was perhaps flying under the radar. They understand that the immigrant population, in this case, male immigrants, is an underserved population when it comes to linguistic readiness.

Analysis and Additional Findings

From its analysis, this project highlighted quite a few insights. As I studied the semantics of each of these participants, it was evident that they knew how to code switch orally. For example, after the Church service, where the student participated in hymns and spoken prayers, he reverted to the peer-to-peer conversational style of Haitian Creole that he and I use in our casual conversations. Another example was when another student participant switched from speaking to me in English to speaking in Cape Verdean creole to his co-workers after I interviewed him. This indicates that these students know how to culturally code switch. In a nutshell, this means that they demonstrated the ability to adopt behaviors that are normative in a given speech community in their respective form of language, such as being able to greet people in Haitian Creole and, then, being able to quickly switch to greet others in English using proper gestures and tonality. Given that many of them are polyglots (speakers of more than two languages), they followed the rules fairly well in their respective languages. I was able to determine this because the responses they received were not surprised or concerned, but matter-of-fact and sometimes led to ongoing conversation. Three out of the four participants use the lingua franca, as well as code-mixing as a mode of communication cross-culturally. For example, in one communicative event, where two of the study’s participants and I, alongside our friends, were playing a game of pick-up soccer, more than one language was used simultaneously. We switched back and forth between English and Creole. Many of the participants’ sentences sounded like this: “Map pran three thirty train lan,” which in English translates to “I’m going to catch the 3:30 train.” During the same event, one of the participants spoke Haitian Creole to me and English to a friend of mine in the same sentence. Thus, one finding is that oral code switching was successfully achieved in peer group conversations. A second finding is that code mixing was also normative in those same speech events.

Moreover, I have also concluded, based on the emic views
of the students, that this population faces issues that are flying under the radar, so to speak. While Black males are a population who are focused on for success, Black male immigrants who are struggling with language skills, as a subset of this wider population, is not targeted for academic success. During one of my interviews with a faculty member, it was brought up that there's a course available, English 101e, for students whose first language is not English and need additional help with their writing beyond English 101. That course is a start, but there are much bigger issues that cannot be solved simply in a matter of a semester. Following that course, my research indicates that there's no way to truly track these students’ improvements in linguistic proficiency. There are multiple resources available for other populations on campus, but when it comes to resources for black male immigrants, resources are very limited.

Section V

Limitations and Future Studies

Limitations

This project is among many that look into how second language learners navigate through the many challenges they face when acquiring a second language, mainly English. However, this project is one the few that looks into the readiness of immigrant college students when it comes to English. As the end of the project neared, I started seeing its many limitations. To name a few, the first limitation of this project was that the student participant sample was small and purposefully sampled. Another limitation of the project is that it was only being looked at from a male perspective. A third limitation was that the environment to conduct field research and collect data was already controlled and predetermined by IRB constraints.

Future Studies

There are always two or more angles to an issue. As mentioned above, while this specific project was looking at the issue from the perspective of male students, the next step is to look at it from female students’ perspectives. My goal is to understand if gender plays a role in Black immigrant students’ process of becoming linguistically ready. The issue of linguistic readiness may not necessarily change for women students, but it might look different from their perspective. It is also possible that there may be Black immigrant students who identify as gender diverse, and, if there are, issues of gender diversity may render even more complex the intersectional identities of race, ethnicity, immigration status, and language proficiency. There are already issues of stigma and discrimination related to language, race, and immigrant status. How gender weaves into this is critical to explore. Thus, I will continue this project through an Honors Thesis, pursuing an ethnographic study that seeks to understand whether Black immigrant, ESL women and gender diverse individuals who have completed their first year of college at BSU, perceive themselves as linguistically prepared for college life. This would allow me to understand the role of gender in linguistic readiness in the black immigrant population.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The concluding results of this study demonstrate that domestic, immigrant, ESL Black men who have completed their first year of college at BSU feel that they are not being provided with enough resources to help them to acquire enough linguistic competence to be fully prepared for the college realm. As noted above, limitations have included a small number of immigrant student participants due to time limitations of the study combined with the in-depth nature of ethnographic research. Nonetheless, I shall conclude with some recommendations that I believe reflect the insights gained from the combination of student, faculty, and administrator contributions.
I. One of the many recommendations that can be made stemmed from one of the administrator interviews. That recommendation is to host campus tours, or family orientation programs in a student’s native tongue for both the students and their parents. This would allow the parents to be able to get involved in the student’s academic life.

II. A second recommendation that I can make is for the writing studio to revisit their training of their staff members to include empathy training. As I interviewed a faculty member from the WS, they seemed to understand what being an immigrant student is about. They indicated specific awareness and empathy for immigrant students who suffer from self-esteem challenges regarding language use; however, to what extent does the entire staff appreciate the complexity of immigrant student issues, from emotions of inadequacy to skills needed? The importance of the anthropological perspective is evident here in the distinction between language acquisition and language proficiency. Proficiency includes features of language learning that stem from Sapir’s holistic approach to language as part of culture. Students are not only learning grammar, lexicon, morphology, and semantics but also cultural patterns of language use such as kinesics (body language) and proxemics (spatial distances between communicators) and the subtleties of tonality, volume, and other behaviors that accompany language. ESL/ELL learners would benefit from language trainers who themselves are trained in the holistic nature of language.

III. BSU collects data in many ways to help their students. The CIRP freshmen survey and the placement test are two main ways to identify immigrant students and their needs. However, the process still needs adjustment. The CIRP survey includes questions that ask a student about their level of English and their level of speaking and writing skills. However, the answer choices may not be as clear or well defined where some students may choose a category that doesn’t necessarily describe their skills or mastery. A few questions are needed that point more directly to whether students speak and write English as well as first language learners.

IV. A fourth recommendation emerged from one of the faculty members that I interviewed who explained that the students felt as if their work was being red-penned, both in the classroom and at the WS. This means that professors or tutors would go over their work with them, cross out what was wrong, and tell them how and what they should write, rather than helping them understand why what they originally wrote was wrong in the first place. Therefore, the nature of tutoring must teach students using “focus correction.” Focus correction establishes rapport, an understanding of who that student is, and builds a relationship with the student. Determining the level of linguistic readiness is part of the focus of the rapport building. In this way, tutors would be able to understand why students are making the mistakes they are and how each student can be helped to see their mistakes and the best way to fix them. A few professors, including my advisor and a professor that I interviewed, use focus correction rather than red-penning. By the end of next semester in my honors thesis work, I will be able to provide the administration with a chart that includes levels of language proficiency development that can be used as a guide for tutors and professors who have immigrant students in their classes who are ELLs.

V. It is crucial that faculty and tutors understand the emotional profile of many ELL/ESL students. Students in the study group report that because of their language proficiency challenges, there is often the unacknowledged assumption that the students are not
as intelligent, and they are often spoken to in louder tones than to other students. This is a subtle form of discrimination that alienates ELL/ESL students and reinforces feelings of inadequacy. A handbook or tips for faculty and tutors that identifies the profile and how to assist students by boosting confidence is also recommended.

VI. The university’s definition of Student Success should be easily accessed on the website, so that all students, including the population of this study, are able to evaluate their own views of their own success vis-à-vis the university’s definition. Students need to be able to determine the relationship between the two and to identify the support systems they need to attain success as the university defines it.

VII. One final recommendation is to conduct further research into the immigrant population at the university and, ultimately, to see if a program can be developed for undergraduates modeled after the graduate writing fellows program, which pairs a struggling student with a strong peer and a faculty member to strengthen their writing. This can be a resource tailored to focus on immigrant students like the student participants have mentioned throughout their interviews, in terms of a new resource or to better an already existing one. This program for graduate students is fairly new but has seen a lot of success. Something of that nature can definitely be of use to undergraduate immigrant students.

As immigrant students are increasingly growing in numbers, especially in higher education, the topic of their linguistic readiness, as well as associated issues that they face as immigrants, is starting to be an essential conversation. The naturalistic observations and participant-observation conducted with the student participants have demonstrated that immigrant students, especially Black male immigrant students, still struggle linguistically. Part of the goal of this research was to analyze the programs that the university offers and to see whether or not they provided adequate help to assist this population—Black, domestic, immigrant, former first year, male students—in their adaptation to college life and in acquiring linguistic proficiency. The field work conducted with my student participants, combined with the interviews with the faculty and administrators, has echoed the sentiments that the programs that the university offers do not fully cater to their linguistic needs.

Bridgewater State University prides itself on diversity as well as the success of its students. However, one of the many student populations that attends Bridgewater is facing significant linguistic struggles. It is my hope that this research will inspire the university to take a deeper look by addressing the above recommendations, and see how they can best help this population. Becoming linguistically ready is an ongoing battle, especially with detailed writing such as verb tense agreement and noun-verb agreement, which are issues for many immigrant ESL students. In my own experience, as a member of this population, there have been individual professors who have been willing to help me, but no systematic program where I can partake with experts in ESL writing who can train me. This was the kind of work I’ve had to do as a former first year student at BSU. I’ve come from afar as I faced many challenges with my writing skills and becoming linguistically ready; however, I still have a long way to go. This is also the case for others who are part of this population—Black, domestic, immigrant, former first year, male students at BSU—as they are still struggling to become linguistically prepared to tackle academic writing and feel comfortable in the speech community of the classroom. Academic success is not divorced from the emotional struggles created by the stigma of discrimination that ESL students experience. BSU, as an institution that prides itself on diversity, has an opportunity to further its strategic goals through this attention.
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Vanderbilt Kennedy Center “CULTURAL & LINGUISTIC
Appendix A: Glossary

Bilingual: People who can speak two languages

Code-mixing: The embedding of various linguistic units such as words or phrases and clauses

Code-switching: The mixing of words, phrases and sentences from two different grammatical systems

Communicate Competence: The knowledge of what is and what is not appropriate to say in any specific cultural context

Communicative Strategy: The shift in language to fit the nature of a speech community

Cognate: A word related to another by descent from the same ancestral language

Creole: A pidgin that has become the first language of a speech community

Creolization: Process of expansion of a pidgin to other language functions

Decreolization: Speakers of creoles who uses the standard language over the creole

Dialect: Form of a language or speech used by members of a regional, ethnic, or social group

Diglossia: The use of two distinct varieties of a language for two different sets of functions.

Ethnography of Communication: The nature of communicative behavior in the context of culture

Ethnopoetics: Study of the poetic aspects of discourse

Ethnoscience: Lexical classification of the social and physical environment of speakers of a language by means of its vocabulary rather than the relationships of grammatical categories.

Frame (or Performance): Face-to-face interaction that participants do when speaking that determines the frame of reference in which the exchange is to be interpreted and understood

Idiolect: An individual's speech variety

Kinesics: The study of body language

Language Shift: Adaptation of a new language into a native tongue

Lexicons: A person's vocabulary

Lingua Franca: A language agreed upon as a medium of communication by people who speak different first languages

Linguistic Competence: The knowledge of the grammatical rules of one's mother tongue, acquired before adulthood

Loanwords: Borrowed lexicons

Multilingual: The ability to speak more than one language

Morphology: Study of words and their structure (Linguistics)

Neurolinguistics: Branch of linguistics concerned with the role the brain plays in language and speech processing.

Norms of Interpretation: The judgment of what constitutes proper interaction

Paralanguage: Characteristics of vocal communication considered marginal or optional and therefore excludable from linguistic analysis of speech for purposes of an ethnographic analysis

Passive/Receptive Bilingualism: The ability to understand a second
language but not being able to speak it.

Polyglot: People who can speak several languages fluently

Pidginization: Process of grammatical and lexical reduction of a language

Proxemics: The study of cultural patterning of the spatial separation individuals maintain in face-to-face encounters.

Rules of Interaction: Communicative activity of the members of a speech community who know what is and what is not appropriate

Semantics: The study of meaning

Sequential Bilingualism: Becoming bilingual by first learning one language and then following up with another

Simultaneous Bilingualism: Learning two languages at the same time

Sound Symbolism: The presumed association of sound and meaning

Speech Act: Minimal unit of speech for purposes of an ethnographic analysis

Speech Area: An area in which speakers of different languages share speaking rules

Speech Community: Those who share specific rules for speaking and interpreting speech

Speech Event: Basic unit of verbal interaction

Speech Situation: The context within which speaking occurs

Voice Characteristics: Speech through which one talks

Voice Qualifiers: Tone of voice, pacing of speech, and variation in intensity or volume

About the Author:

Carter Remy is a graduating senior majoring in Cultural Anthropology. His research, mentored by Dr. Diana Fox (Anthropology), was funded by an Adrian Tinsley Program summer grant and formed the basis of his honors thesis. Carter is a big proponent for youth, especially youth immigrants. He is moving forward in furthering his studies in linguistic anthropology. His interests lie in understanding speech communities, the ethnography of communication, linguistic readiness in black communities in the United States, as well as linguistic readiness amongst other communities (LatinX, White, Caribbean).