

**Unveiling Underrepresented Voices: The Experiences of Adult English Language Learners with  
Online Learning**

by

**Asia Mohamed Al-Jalal**

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**Doctoral Committee:**

**Professor Danielle L. DeFauw, Chair  
Professor Christopher Burke  
Lecturer II Iman Ismail  
Assistant Professor Kyongson Park**

Asia Mohamed Al-Jalal

[mohamedy@umich.edu](mailto:mohamedy@umich.edu)

ORCID iD: 0009-0005-3080-3562

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## **Dedication**

*In the Name of God, Most Beneficent, Most Merciful*

To my beloved son, Tawfik, who grew up while I was pursuing my doctoral degree. Your love, smile, and support kept me going through the toughest parts of this journey. Despite the sacrifices we had to make along the way, I am grateful for your presence in my life and for being my source of inspiration. This dissertation is also dedicated to my parents, brothers, and sisters who have always been my pillars of strength, supporting me through every step of my educational path and believing in my potential to break barriers and become the first female in the family to pursue a higher education degree.

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative research phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of 13 adult English Language Learners (ELLs) involved in online learning in a community-focused college between 2020 and 2022. The study, through surveys and semi-structured interviews, empowered participants by giving voice to their experiences and views regarding online learning. Analysis of participants' data revealed four themes: the significance of exploring learner experiences, engagement in learning environments, fostering self-directed learning, and addressing online learning challenges for adult ELLs. These themes were comprehensively discussed using three theoretical frameworks: Andragogy, Constructivism, and Second Language Acquisition. The findings from this study emphasized the important implications of stakeholders addressing the needs of adult ELLs and providing them with a supportive learning environment that fosters their growth in English proficiency.

*Keywords: Online learning, adult ELLs, andragogy, constructivism, second language acquisition*

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Since 2017, I have worked as an adjunct faculty member for an adult English Language Learners (ELLs) program in a formal, higher education learning environment. In this program, social needs are as important as language needs in terms of helping my adult students adapt to the new life circumstances in the United States. As an instructor in the ELLs program, I have a passion for teaching adults who come from different backgrounds, learning styles, and cultures. They come with rich resources and backgrounds that can be shared with others in collaborative and meaningful interactions.

My students may immigrate to the US with the hope of building a better future for their children and themselves. They look for jobs and develop new life skills. In order to navigate their daily lives, they strive to master the English language through receptive and productive skills. Most importantly, my adult students are “not empty vessels waiting to be filled but rather active organisms seeking meaning” (Driscoll, 2000, p. 376). They attempt to make sense of their surroundings by listening, speaking, and sharing their own experiences through language.

To meet the needs of my adult students, I balance many teaching responsibilities required in any teaching profession. Patience, empathy, and effective communication are keys to teaching and motivating adults in the ELL program. I had moments of confusion and doubts about how my instruction was delivered and if the subject content was presented clearly and efficiently. In my academic experience, I learned about different pedagogical practices to help me build a foundation of instructional practices in my classroom, such as public pedagogy, andragogy, and critical pedagogy. Other practices required technology and the use of online learning to deliver

instruction to all students. Identifying learning theories and effective practices for students particularly for ELLs presented a significant challenge during my early teaching years.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, in my role as a teacher, I had to keep up with the technological advances so I could provide my adult students with resources and activities that would allow them to interact meaningfully with my instruction. Using technology as a supplementary tool in teaching, I was able to keep track of students' English levels and assess their English mastery. Technology helped make the lessons more engaging and interesting, especially if students faced challenges learning English as their second language and adapting to a new culture.

At a time of uncertainty, I was among those teachers who were lost and needed instructional guidance when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world in Spring 2020. Due to the rapid shift to remote learning caused by the pandemic, many of my adult students' progress stalled, and they struggled to complete their work. Furthermore, I was overwhelmed and stressed by the difficulties of embracing different learning approaches and models to meet the needs of my students virtually. Therefore, I conducted a pilot study to understand how my adult ELLs experienced online instruction during the pandemic.

### **Pilot Study**

During the summer of 2020, I conducted a case study focusing on adult ELLs switching to online learning during COVID-19. That pilot case study aimed to find themes in participants' interview responses that might further describe their experiences switching from traditional education to online learning. The pilot study explored the transition from face-to-face to online learning and how it affected adult ELLs' learning experiences. Three broad topics

guided the study: life experiences during the COVID-19 quarantine, learning experiences during the switch to online learning, and recommendations to other stakeholders engaged in online learning.

The pilot study's findings were determined by seven interviews conducted after four months of the unexpected switch to online learning. The results showed four major themes that identified participants' experiences switching from face-to-face classes to online learning, three of which emerged from negative experiences: lack of communication, emotional isolation, and technical difficulties. In contrast, becoming independent learners was a positive experience that many participants reported during the interviews.

All seven interviewed students shared their concerns about improving their speaking and listening skills, especially with online learning. They expressed the lack of face-to-face communication and the use of body language and facial expression, which eventually affected their understanding of the content while learning English. According to Vygotsky (1978), communication and social interaction are the core of language development required between the learner and the teacher. Previous studies indicated that interaction between students can also help facilitate a learning environment in which students are more willing to try speaking in a second language if they are interacting with other students (Granados, 2020). Opportunities for real oral communication enhanced the internalization of knowledge (Harlan, 2000), regardless if the interactions were student to student or student to teacher.

Based on the pilot study's findings, the participants also expressed their negative experiences switching to online learning, especially when it came to technology struggles. They also expressed how they were affected emotionally. Thompson and Lynch (2003) found that students developed a loss of confidence if they did not have acceptable access to the technology

needed for the online learning experience or lacked experience with technology; therefore, a negative attitude toward online instruction ensued.

Thompson and Lynch's (2003) finding is closely connected to Krashen's (1982) monitor model that explains the relationship between acquisition and learning (Schütz, 2019). In this model, Krashen (1982) introduced a comprehensive framework that explains second language acquisition through various interrelated components (Schwartz, 1986). Within this model, the input hypothesis explains how the learners acquire a second language while the Affective Filter Hypothesis emphasized the significance role of negative emotions, low motivation, and low self-esteem in hindering the learning process. On the other hand, when learners experience confidence and motivation, they will take more language input and consequently achieve better learning outcomes (Chen, 2022). This affective filter hypothesis promotes ELLs' abilities to absorb comprehensible input by creating a positive learning environment. In order to tackle any challenge and motivate understanding, ELLs need a positive environment conducive to learning and adequate support, which includes technology tools, a significant asset in helping ELLs achieve success in learning English (Diallo, 2014).

The results of the pilot case study provided a short, but incomprehensive, evaluation of the experience of adult ELLs while switching to online learning. The data did not represent the participants' overall experiences especially because physical observation was not part of the data collection. The pilot study provided the first step in learning about adult ELLs' situations and determining their needs. Overall, as an educator, I needed to understand my adult students better. Thus, it was necessary to extend the study to explore the problem of how to address the authentic experiences of my students and identify ways to help them engage in online learning actively and effectively, during and after the pandemic.



## **Problem Statement**

In this study, I focused on the experiences—including the challenges and opportunities—of adult ELLs with online learning and the types of support, if any, they received throughout the process of studying English. Adult ELLs face challenges in learning proper English because they have to go through the everyday struggle of survival—especially in the new country—and provide food and shelter to their families. In educational research about teaching ELLs, much of the work to date has focused on young ELLs' immersion into inclusive classrooms (e.g., Yoon, 2008; White et al., 2023), but not adult ELLs. Young ELLs who attend schools from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade (K-12) are exposed to the language and learn English in daily classroom settings, but not adult ELLs. It is imperative to understand adult ELLs' experiences within their various contexts. Unlike K-12 students, adult ELLs already have extensive experiences that serve as rich resources or "living textbooks" for development and learning within their work, educational, and home contexts (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 12). Understanding their stories is even more pertinent in light of the rapid advancement of technology as well as the unprecedented effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on society. Adult ELLs are likely to face increasing challenges during the upcoming years that will impact their learning of English.

## **Background of the Problem Statement**

Using technology in adult ELL classes is very important for their language progress and development. Studies over the years have shown that integrating technology into general ELL classrooms improve the quality of learning and teaching experiences. English programs have been incorporating technology into their curriculum to promote engagement and creativity

among students, especially with the rise of social media and mobile applications. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world in 2020, it changed the way technology is viewed and how learning instruction is delivered. This highlighted the significance of online learning and how students use technology not only as a learning tool but also to navigate their daily tasks and stay connected with the world. Therefore, it is important to adapt teaching methods and address the challenges that adults ELLs may face in both traditional and online learning environments.

### **Adult ELLs and Technology**

In adult ELL classes, integrating technology and teaching students how to use it is no less important than the teaching of English. Over the past two decades, higher educational institutions have adapted the use of technology as part of their ongoing development and fast progress in education (Mahyoob, 2020). Studies were conducted to present the benefits of integrating technology into ELL classrooms and how it could be used to enhance learning and teaching. Many English programs have integrated technology into their practices to improve their curriculum because technology has become an integral part of people's lives and accessible to many individuals (Pustika, 2020). The use of technology helped students be creative, engaged, and motivated to participate in online activities. Because communication is a significant factor in the pedagogical practices of teaching English, students use what they are familiar with regarding social media, computer skills, and their phone apps. They create blogs, reply to posts, and communicate via emails or video chats. Even job interviews are more likely to include a question of technology to identify a qualified individual capable of carrying on their tasks. Adult ELLs must learn to utilize technology, which has become more apparent since the outbreak of the pandemic.

## **Adult ELLs and the Pandemic: Past, Present, and Future**

When the Coronavirus (COVID-19) spread worldwide and schools shifted to online learning in the spring of 2020, some students seemed to be impacted more than others by the change. Because the global shutdown of educational institutions limited people's social interaction and movement, the shift to online learning was enforced. Although the technology was present and online learning had "been activated in some global institutes," not all schools and colleges used this educational mode, and many teachers and students were unaware of all that is involved in online learning (Mahyoob, 2020, p. 352).

For adult ELLs who might struggle to learn the language within in-person learning contexts, the challenge of learning remotely added to their struggle by making educational achievement more complicated. During the pandemic, it was a critical time to experience social distancing and the effects of learning English as a second language behind screens. The lack of face-to-face communication, body language, and facial expression affected online learners' understanding of the content and ability to learn English (Ying et al., 2021). Although online learning provided students with the advantage of studying from anywhere and the flexibility to study their courses without commuting to schools, it also increased the amount of distraction, social isolation, and limitations of group work (Lin & Gao, 2020).

Meeting the needs of adult ELLs during and post-COVID was and is very critical, especially because their courses are heavily based on a structured curriculum, face-to-face communication, and language proficiency. According to the English Language Proficiency standards for adult Education, "ELLs need access to challenging, level-appropriate curriculum and materials" (American Institute for Research, 2016, p. 9). They also need to be exposed to

content-rich nonfiction and to develop social language skills in order to be college and career ready (American Institute for Research, 2016).

The challenges faced by the pandemic do not eliminate the idea of online learning in the future but rather call for improvement and development of online instruction. Teachers, facilitators, and educators need the resources to identify their adult students' struggles, including emotional isolation and cognitive barriers, even if that will require more time and planning. When a teacher prepares adult students to use technology in a positive context, adult learners become willing to accept technology as part of their learning and become more self-directed. In order to bring out potential opportunities for adult ELLs, it is imperative to conduct further research and study the phenomenon of adult ELLs' learning in online contexts.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Online learning has been the subject of qualitative and quantitative research over the years (Gonzalez & St. Louis, 2018). In spite of recent efforts to fund major research studies focusing on adult ELL instruction, there is little research that focuses on the challenges of adult ELLs in learning English in a new country (Schaetzel & Young, 2010). Moreover, few studies include a narrow focus on the situation of learning English remotely. For example, Greene and Larsen (2018) noted that although adult online learning is one of the fastest growing segments of the educational field, the literature to date “has been mostly small-scale and piecemeal” (p. 1376). Similarly, Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) indicated that research on online language learning conducted during a pandemic is very uncommon, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in secondary schools. In addition, Dung (2020) looked at this issue only from the perspective of the advantages and disadvantages associated with technology and online learning. Still, with the COVID-19 pandemic and the understudied population of adult

ELLs, it is necessary to fill in the research gap by focusing on adult ELLs' experiences with online learning.

As part of the study, it is important to acknowledge the significance of the stories shared by the participants. These narratives are a valuable source of understanding the experiences of adult ELLs, especially if these narratives have not been told before. One of the objectives of this study is to provide adult ELLs with a platform to ensure their voices are heard, their struggles expressed, and their needs met. The participants offer underrepresented stories that need highlighting and bringing to the forefront in the literature. By exploring the experiences of adult ELLs, another goal is to gain new insights into effectively engaging the growing number of this particular population. Through their stories, there is an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced in online classrooms. Learning from their experiences instead of assuming their experiences provides opportunities to improve the effectiveness of educational strategies and approaches focusing on adult ELLs in online settings. Their narratives can provide examples revealing both challenges and gains present in online learning, guiding educators on how to best support them.

Overall, the purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning in community-focused colleges; thus, I pose the following research question: What have been the experiences of adult ELLs who attend community-focused colleges with online learning? Because many colleges offer special programs that target adults interested in pursuing academic or vocational degrees while learning English, understanding the adult ELL participants' experiences who attend a local community-focused college as part of their degree majors will fill a hole in the literature.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Design**

The aim of the study was to gather information on the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning. The study used a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach which helped to uncover patterns and gain insights into the lived experiences of 13 participants. This approach highlights the underrepresented stories in literature and provide valuable narratives that draw attention to the challenges and opportunities faced by adult ELLs in online learning. These stories do not only offer insights into the experiences of adult ELLs but also provide valuable knowledge on how to effectively engage this population in online environments. Specifically, the study focused on the common situation faced by adult ELLs who attended community-focused colleges transitioning from in-person classes to online learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic. By conducting surveys and interviews, the study aimed to provide insights into the perspectives of adult ELLs navigating online learning.

### **Data Collection**

In this study, data were collected through a combination of a semi-structured interview and an online-based surveys. After the survey results were gathered, the interviews were carried out during the winter semester of 2023. The semi-structured interviews included 12 questions that were drafted to provide insight into the participants' experiences with online learning. The interviews were conducted in-person or via Zoom, depending on the participant's preference, with a focus on ensuring the participant felt comfortable and understood the purpose of the study. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes; each involved active listening, a reminder of voluntary consent, and follow-up contact if necessary.

## **Data Analysis**

After collecting survey responses and conducting interviews, the qualitative data were organized, processed, and coded (Saldaña, 2014). The data went through several coding cycles including spoken words, determining dominant codes, and regrouping categories. Through this process, themes were extracted. Once themes were identified, they were examined to see how they connected to the theoretical framework which included andragogy, constructivism, and second language acquisition. Based on the analysis of the emerging themes and how they connected to theories addressed the research question about the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning.

## **Definition of Terms**

### **Adult Education Programs**

In Adult Education Programs, students study English mainly to cope with the practical needs of life. They usually complete their classes in public schools, non-profit organizations, and community colleges. They have different kinds of classes that focus on English such as citizenship, GED classes, and ELL classes. Through such programs, a curriculum is not consistent, and it is used to meet each institution's outcomes while others look at the needs of their students and then design goals, methodology, and evaluation criteria for the class curriculum.

### **Adult English Language Learner**

According to McAllister and Priebe (1991), there is no specific arrangement of criteria in which to define who is considered an adult ELL. Mathews-Aydinli (2008) define these people as being between the ages of 16 and 90-plus years old, having no formal education to being Ph.D.

holders, with varying needs from basic literacy to level English classes to prepare them for academic English.

### **English Language Learner (ELL)**

A student from a minority background who speaks a language other than English and has limited proficiency in English (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

### **English as a Second Language (ESL)**

A specialized educational program designed to teach English language skills to students who are English language learners. This program covers listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, and cultural understanding. ESL instruction is mainly conducted in English, with minimal use of native language (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

### **Online Learning**

According to Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland (2005), online learning is an open and distributed learning atmosphere that uses the pedagogical tools enabled by the Internet to deliver instruction and facilitate learning. Online learning includes instructional strategies; learning models; pedagogical practices; and tools for classroom instruction such as Google Classroom, graphic videos, Zoom, WhatsApp, emails, and Microsoft Teams. Online learning is a type of distance learning, and it is referred to as e-learning, virtual learning, and web-based instruction (Manoharan et al., 2022).



## **Virtual Learning Environment**

A virtual learning environment is a context with teaching and learning resources used to improve a student's learning experience. E-learning or virtual learning refer to "instruction in a learning environment where teacher and students are separated by time or space, or both" (Dung, 2020, p. 45). Virtual environments with teaching and learning resources improve students' learning experiences. Most virtual learning environments divide the curriculum into sections that students complete and then the teacher assesses and grades the students' work. These environments provide email, discussion boards, and submission portals for both students and faculty (TechTarget, 2016).

## **Limitations**

While the primary goal of this study is to gain valuable insights into the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning, it cannot fully represent all English learners who attend colleges due to study limitations. The study focuses on the years 2020 to 2022, a period marked by significant educational changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A limited number of participants was evident, with only 13 participants, and the duration of data collection was conducted during two college semesters. It is possible that some individuals may argue that the findings of this study cannot be applied to a larger population due to the small sample size of 13 participants (Creswell, 2013); however, since this is a phenomenological study, the ability to dig deeply into fewer stories actually strengthens the quality of this research study. This approach leads to a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of the participants' experiences and the contexts they were navigating. Also, conducting the research solely in English may have impacted participants' abilities to express themselves due to language barriers. Another potential

limitation included the exclusive focus on students' experiences, overlooking valuable insights from teachers that could influence interpretations of the findings. In addition, the study did not consider participants' academic proficiency or success in English courses, which may also have affected the analysis of data results.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the experiences of 13 adult ELLs involved in online learning in a community-focused college between 2020 and 2022. Through their interview responses, participants highlighted their challenges and opportunities with online learning. The next chapter highlights previous and current literature that focuses on the central problem in relation to what other scholars have researched and written. Chapter Three identifies the research methodology and descriptions of the participants. Chapter Four provides a detailed analysis of the data collected for this study. Finally, Chapter Five presents interpretations of the findings and includes implications, a more thorough discussion of the limitations of the research, and recommendations for future research. In consideration of the post-COVID-19 pandemic and understudied adult ELL populations, there is a need for more studies like this to fill in the research gap and identify factors that impact the online learning experiences of adult ELLs.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In this chapter, a thorough review of relevant literature explores research on adult English Language Learners (ELLs) and their experiences with online learning to help understand this research study's question: What have been the experiences of adult ELLs who attend community-focused colleges with online learning? The literature review is organized into four sections: adult learners, online learning, education disruption, and online teaching. This review also highlights the unprecedented global crisis of COVID-19 and how it disrupted the learning process during the two years, 2020 and 2021, especially adult ELLs. This chapter begins with a review of the theoretical framework constructs— Andragogy, Constructivism, and Second Language Acquisition (SLA)—to understand the experiences of adults with online learning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theories in education provide a structure and framework to assist students in their learning process (Arghode et al., 2017). The theories also help researchers identify gaps in knowledge and allow instructors to adapt their teaching methods to accommodate their learners. Diep et al. (2019.) explored a number of different theories of adult learning that could be applied to various contexts while meeting adult learners' needs, including andragogy, and constructivism.

#### **Andragogy**

Although andragogy has been around for over 180 years, few people in education are familiar with the term (Greene & Larsen, 2018). Malcolm Knowles (1980), who is considered

the father of andragogy or Adult Learning Theory (ALT), defined andragogy as a set of principles applicable to most adult learning situations. He viewed adult learners as independent and self-directed, emphasizing that the instructor's role was to facilitate knowledge acquisition (Reischmann, 2004). The theory of andragogy, which provides a view of how adults learn and develop their skills, aims to offer an approach specifically to adult learning and it remains an essential theoretical framework for adult educational practitioners and higher education students (Abeni, 2020).

Andragogy covers the study of the learning process in adults while pedagogy refers to the methods used in teaching young children. In contrast to pedagogy, andragogy considers how adult learners acquire knowledge by collaborating with their instructors, sharing their experiences, providing contextual investigations, engaging in meaningful conversations, and thinking critically (Abeni, 2020). The fundamental difference between andragogy and pedagogy is the premise that adult learners are expected to participate in the classroom by incorporating their own experiences into the learning process. In pedagogical assumptions, young students are more likely dependent on their teachers to acquire knowledge and are less likely to take responsibility for their learning (Knowles et al., 2005). However, the andragogical approach helps to create an interactive, supportive, and dynamic classroom environment for adult learners (Lawson, 2009).

### ***Principles and Indicators of Andragogy***

Andragogy distinguishes how adult learners acquire knowledge compared to young learners, and it revolves around six principles: need to learn, self-concept, adult learning experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn (Knowles et al., 2005).

First, Knowles et al. (2005) argued that adult learners are different than young learners regarding the andragogy principle: need to learn. Adults need to know the purpose of their learning in order to be able to learn. Second, self-concept impacts adults' learning. The major difference between young children and adults is that young children do not have the ability to direct their learning. Children are usually more dependent on teachers for guidance and instruction. During a child's development, skills are acquired that enable them to become more independent, and this is the process by which adults become competent. Adults assume more responsibility for their own lives and become more aware of their own decisions.

Third, adults depend on their learning experiences. Children do not have the same level of experience as adults. Instead, they gain knowledge from the experiences of others. Adults, on the other hand, tend to gain new insights through the context of their own experiences. Fourth, adults tend to orient to problem-based learning. This is the process of adults applying what they have learned to their everyday lives. They are life-centered in their orientation to learning. Fifth, adults demonstrate a readiness to learn. New roles require adults to learn and apply their knowledge, such as being new parents, moving to a new country, or life-related developmental tasks. Adults are more willing to learn to cope with real-life situations by learning.

Finally, adults are motivated to learn. Motivation is a social science concept that was defined by Merriam and Bierema (2014) as the "drive and energy we put into accomplishing something we want to do" (p. 147). There are many key ideas and theories that revolve around motivation. Still, scholars agree that the main two types that drive people to be motivated include intrinsic, extrinsic, or both. Motivation is crucial to improve teaching and enrich learning, especially with adult ELLs. They are more motivated and driven toward their learning than younger students (Gross, 1996). Houle's (1961) referred to adults' motivation to continue

learning as a goal-oriented and learning-oriented approach. Usually, these adults are motivated extrinsically to develop new knowledge and learn English to improve the quality of their lives in a new society. When they continue to learn even after mastering the language and receiving a degree, intrinsic motivation becomes the driving force for learning.

In addition to the previous six principles, there are four main indicators that Knowles (1984) proposed for effective andragogy in any adult educational setting. First, both planning and evaluating the instruction are important to adults which can determine their engagement level. Second, adult learners' experiences can serve as a basis for all learning activities. Consequently, teachers can develop individualized study plans in order to ensure their students' educational needs are met. As another indicator, problem-based learning is the main focus of adult education. Adults are able to apply their learning to their careers when learning is problem-centered (Abeni, 2020). Lastly, most adults prefer to learn about topics directly relevant to their professional or personal lives. According to Knowles (1984), adult learners are more likely to learn if the content is relevant to their goals and directly applies to their lives. Typically, adult learners are more mature and self-directed, taking responsibility for their own learning decisions. Moreover, adults are willing to learn when learning is relevant to their experiences and life situations, which is one of the main characteristics of constructivism (Huang, 2002).

## **Constructivism**

Constructivism is a theory that encourages teachers to look at what all students, regardless of age, already know and then build on this knowledge and allow them to put it into practice. It is a theory based on enhancing students' abilities to connect their life experiences and knowledge while constructing their own (Marlow & Page, 2005). Many researchers who are interested in social constructivism view learning as an active process in which learners need to

learn how to discover concepts and facts for themselves. According to Shunk (2000), teachers need to emphasize reciprocal teaching, peer collaboration, problem-solving, and other pedagogical and andragogical strategies that involve learning with others. Although Tobin and Tippins (1993) examined constructivism from a science perspective, they emphasized the need for teachers to think creatively about ways to make science more engaging and meaningful for students. In their views, constructivism can serve as a model for reform-oriented science education. In all subjects, learners are seen as an important part of the learning process and are encouraged to have their version of the truth affected by their background, culture, or knowledge of the world around them (Amineh & Asl, 2015).

Wertsch (1997), who focused his research on Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development construct, asserts that students develop their thinking skills through their interaction with other students, teachers, and the environment. Wertsch (1997) argued it is very important to consider the background, language, and culture of the learners to build on the knowledge and information they create during their learning process. Similar research conducted by Yang (2002) confirmed that new knowledge of one subject could be built upon while reinforcing prior knowledge from a different subject. Regardless of where they come from or what language they speak at home, students of all ages contribute to their world of knowledge through their teamwork and interaction with each other in class. Although constructivism applies to all ages (Tynjälä, 1997), one group that had little research conducted on their behalf is adult ELLs who might need different tools or, in this case, a constructivist approach tailored to help them to be successful in learning.

### ***Constructive Methods of Teaching ELLs***

Many teachers have found it challenging to teach adult ELLs because they come to class having different academic abilities, English language abilities, and academic backgrounds. ELL students, regardless if they are adults or children, are less likely to participate and speak up in classrooms that include native English speakers (Mvududu & Thiel–Burgess, 2012). Due to these reasons, researchers suggest implementing constructivist practices in the classroom to accommodate the needs of this group (Diep et al., 2019). Zehr (2006) found that ELL students could increase their English abilities and become more comfortable working with other students when teachers built on what they already knew. Students with low English language ability understood the vocabulary and contributed to the class discussion. Also, the research suggested that a collaborative environment helped students felt welcomed by their classmates even if they spoke another language.

A study conducted by Uresti et al. (2002) showed an increase in K-12 ELL students' scores on standardized tests. However, in their study the focus was more on autonomy and self-direction. There was a positive effect on students' success when applying independent investigations. The students' overall proficiency was increased when independent study was incorporated into their classrooms. Apparently, involving ELL students in the learning process, either by collaboration or self-direction, can be successful if constructivism is applied (Mortagy & Boghikian–Whitby, 2010). As long as students demonstrate confidence and maintain their cultural and background identities, which are considered part of the constructivist theory, there will be an increase in K-12 ELL students' abilities to acquire language proficiency skills. (Mvududu & Thiel-Burgess, 2012).



Minimal research explored adult ELLs using the constructivist approach; however, a study by Huang (2010) examined teaching English as a Second Language (ESOL) curricular courses to adult scholars from China. Huang discussed the rationale for implementing constructivism in teaching an undergraduate course focused on teaching ESOL. The findings determined the instruction effective due to two important aspects. First, creating a constructivist classroom learning environment motivated the students to learn from a second language curriculum. Second, the students could view problems from different perspectives because they embraced the idea that knowledge is socially constructed. This study was based on problem-solving that required future teachers to use open-ended questions to support critical thinking. The students used constructivist strategies in the course curriculum they developed while working cooperatively with each other.

### ***Blending Technology with Constructivism***

The use of technology with constructivism in ELL classrooms is effective for all ages. Kaya (2004) encouraged teachers to integrate technology into their constructivist classes to improve students' communication. He referred to Marlowe and Page's (2005) summary of constructivist pedagogy, which includes constructing knowledge, thinking, and analyzing, understanding and applying, and being active. Kaya (2004) made an interesting connection between constructivism and Bloom's taxonomy; they both encourage learners to think critically and strategically. The study concluded that ELLs could use technology as a constructivist approach to access and interpret information, review, and modify their work, communicate with others, evaluate their work, gain confidence and independence, and improve their speaking efficiency. The use of technology enhanced learning through constructivism as students were

active rather than passive; they collaborated, interacted, reflected upon, and commented on their classmates' performances.

### ***Constructivism and Online Learning***

Students who are adult ELLs bring a different set of experiences as well as needs to the classroom. Huang (2002) stated that many institutions in higher education have adopted constructivist instructional strategies that require online students to engage in collaborative learning activities through online discussion boards. These types of activities are typically collaborative and represent authentic assessment. Students may participate in student-centered activities which simulate situations they are likely to encounter in the workplace or their daily lives.

Huang (2002) also emphasized that when designing effective social constructivist online instruction for adult learners, key strategies to align with andragogy include interactive, collaborative, supportive, authentic, and student-centered learning. Adults taking online courses can introduce new dynamics for which online instructors need to remain flexible. Constructivism supports students' learning. As new viewpoints are presented by peers during weekly online discussions, learners' confidence increases, and they support each other if they need assistance with technology. Additionally, Ruey (2010) affirmed that constructivist-based online instruction can assist adult learners to develop a sense of becoming more self-directed in their learning and broaden their responsibilities as students, especially important for adult learners acquiring a second language.

### **Second-Language Acquisition**

Language is considered a form of expression of thoughts and a communication device. Dewey (1897) described language as an analytical instrument, primarily a social tool. Language

acquisition of the mother tongue, or L1, begins at an early age when an individual is exposed to the first language as an infant. During the process of acquiring a language, one learns how to apply various tools such as morphology, phonetics, and syntax. Alternatively, second language acquisition is the process of taking on a new language after the native language has already been established. A person can acquire L2 by using the linguistic skills acquired during L1 acquisition (Thieves, 2011).

According to Ozfidan and Burlbaw (2019), learning a new language requires significant communication and interaction between the learner and the teacher. Students learn from body language, the teacher's voice, and interactions with other students, which are key factors in developing their language skills. Age is another important factor when it comes to second language acquisition, and questions have been raised for decades regarding how adults and young learners differ in learning a second language.

### ***Second Language Acquisition in Young vs. Adult Learners***

Certainly, adult ELLs learn a second language differently than children, and the language outcomes may not be the same. Nevertheless, Kerschen and Martinez (2020) concluded that adults are just as capable of learning a second language as children. In educational research into teaching ELLs, much of the work has been focused on young ELLs and how they might be immersed in inclusive classrooms. In contrast to K–12 students, adult learners already have valuable experiences which can serve as significant resources to facilitate their language growth and development.

One popular belief is that children tend to acquire a second language better than adults. Although there is no conclusive or definitive answer to the question as to what age is the best for the acquisition of a second language, Krashan et al. (1979) came up with three generalizations

that present the relationship between age, rate, and attainment in second language acquisition. He generalized that adults tend to proceed through early stages of syntactic and morphemic development faster than children. Children who have natural exposure to a second language tend to achieve higher second language proficiency than adults (Krashen et al., 1979). Ozfidan and Burlbaw (2019) demonstrated that children acquire a language faster than adults, specifically when it comes to pronunciation. On the other hand, adults are better at learning how to read and write than children. The study also noted that adults are better at cognitive processing, whereas children are better at sensorimotor learning. According to Kerschen and Martinez (2020), adults are more likely to learn grammar faster than children, and they tend to do better in recalling more vocabulary words than children. When it comes to comprehension and meaning, adults rely on their own experiences in their native language and children take more time and attention to acquire this skill.

Furthermore, children tend to learn and understand language in a more naturalistic way. According to Krashen's (1982) theory of Natural Order to Acquisition, children acquire language rules through repetition and designed instruction to communicate ideally with others. They learn phonics and pronunciation of words at an early age to prepare them for reading and to make their speech understandable to others. In their Bilingual Syntax Measure, Duly and Burt (1973) indicated that children can acquire a second language without a formal linguistic environment and on their own. On the other hand, adults may not acquire the level of performance achieved by children who are learning English as a second language (ESL). Adults usually need the isolation of linguistic structures to learn English and receive explicit feedback from their teachers (Bailey et al., 1974). For example, when children are exposed to L2 at home and school through songs, books, and repetition, they are more likely to learn a new language. Conversely,

adults learn better when they work in groups, and they depend on understanding rather than focusing on pronunciation. Another important distinction is that young students from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade are exposed to the language and learn English in classroom settings. Adult ELLs face challenges in learning proper English because they have to endure the everyday struggle of survival—especially in the new country—and provide food and shelter to their families; thus, they do not have the luxury of learning the language, with ease, within the classroom context. Overall, more research is needed regarding the learning experiences of adult ELLs (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

### **Adult English Language Learners (ELLs)**

ELLs are considered one of the fastest-growing student populations in the United States (U.S.) (Hanover Research, 2017). Additionally, the number of U.S. students who are considered ELLs has grown from about 1.25 million in 1979 to 4.1 million in 2000 (American Federation of Teachers, 2002) to 5.1 million in 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The ELL population has grown and dispersed, yet it is considered an understudied population in academic education (Mathews–Aydinli, 2008). According to recent data, approximately 45 million adult immigrants live in the U.S., and more than 60 percent of them are ELLs (Batalova & Fix, 2019). Another recent report by the National Reporting System (NRS) indicated that in 2013–2014 more than 40% of Adult Education (AE) students in the federally funded system are ELLs. Meanwhile, more than 30% of all adult learners have low literacy levels, and the majority of these students (61%) are considered ELLs (American Institutes for Research, 2016). Adults form a significant portion of the ELL population and approximately 45% of those completing adult education programs enroll in English programs (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2006).

Adult ELL programs aim to “equip students with the necessary skills to use the language outside the classroom and consequently, improve their chances of survival” (Kadi–Hanifi, 2009, p. 85). Although the number is gradually increasing, it is evident that adult ELL program designs, instructional practices, instructor experiences, curricula used, and funding resources are inconsistent in adult English programs throughout the U.S. (Hanover Research, 2017). In adult programs, curriculum, assessments, and instruction are designed using standards-based education which involves building on prior knowledge to teach new concepts. However, “no national adult ELL content standards exist in the United States” (Schaezel, 2007, p. 68). Although a recent English Language Proficiency Standards for Adult Education was created in 2016 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), there are still many questions regarding the challenges that many teachers face due to the diverse backgrounds, educational levels, and cultural differences of adult ELL students who enroll in English programs.

Many adult ELLs are internally motivated to learn English. Several studies have been conducted to determine why adult ELLs study English, and the common factor is coping with practical life situations (Cozma, 2015). They are more cooperative, motivated, and serious about their learning. According to Cozma (2015), adults learn English to find employment, improve their self–image, communicate at work, and participate in social situations. Learning English for them is a way to reconstruct a new self in the new culture and “to feel [like] competent, articulate, independent adults” (Mathews–Aydinli, 2008, p. 203).

The struggle to rebuild self–image in a new environment and culture is yet another problem facing adult ELLs. Many of them are immigrant students who come from developing countries, and others come from refugee camps of war-torn countries. Others work fulltime so they can provide for their families in the U.S. and abroad while adjusting to the new culture and

language. Due to their multiple responsibilities, they may come to English classes with cultural confusion and uncertainty about what to expect in an academic setting. Ogbu (1982) points out that “some groups do well in school because their cultures are congruent with school culture” (p. 290). He indicated that significant differences in students' school experience lie in discontinuities between their cultural backgrounds and the culture of the schools. Understanding cultural differences and teaching a lesson relevant to a student's culture and identity can significantly impact their academic success, language proficiency, and motivation. González et al. (2005), suggest that adults can draw on a variety of social, linguistic, and cultural experiences as they learn English. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge, value, and utilize students' social and cultural backgrounds during instruction in order to maximize their English learning.

Ramussen (2015) referred to Knowles' (1973) Andragogy characteristics to detail the methodology for teaching adults and how to implement four main principles into instruction: motivate, inform, monitor, and engage. Eventually, adult ELLs need to be encouraged to try new things and take risks in learning English as their second language. When teachers support ambition and growth, their students feel motivated to tackle any challenges. Cozma (2015) concluded that creating a positive climate that makes students emotionally safe is important to their learning. This is not only limited to the teacher–student relationship but also includes the ELLs and their interactions with native speakers in the educational field and their community. Adult ELLs bring to the classroom their cultural knowledge, as well as the value of their first language skills, all of which can be integrated into instruction to enhance learning.

### **Online Learning**

Online learning has been growing in the last few decades. It is defined as the learning experiences that occur in both synchronous and asynchronous environments and utilize a variety

of technological devices such as mobile phones or laptop computers with Internet access (Cohn & Seltzer, 2020). By using virtual environments, students learn and interact with instructors from anywhere in the world (Singh & Thurman, 2019).

Due to their extra responsibilities—balancing their jobs, attaining a good education, and juggling family responsibilities—adult learners often find it more convenient and flexible to take online courses that align with their schedules (Bishop, 2002). Online learning is more convenient for adult learners, even those who are native English speakers, than attending face-to-face classes. This can apply to adults who are in post-secondary, workplace schools, or in community centers who are “older, need a flexible schedule, who are moving into a different occupation because of layoffs and are using technology to learn for the first time” (Folinsbee, 2008, p. 4). Another data set presented by Assapari (2021) showed that online learning provides adult learners with flexible times, up-to-date information, and rich resources. Also, online learning helps students engage in discussion forums and to be more independent learners. Online learning is shown to be more effective when it comes to general adult online learning and higher education (Folinsbee, 2008).

Due to the increase in online courses, according to Diallo (2014), more research needs to be conducted regarding students’ learning experiences. He collected data that show students’ performance is the same both virtually and on campus when looking at content transfer. Looking at online learning from adults’ satisfaction perspective, Folinsbee (2008) reported that studies indicated “that there are few differences in satisfaction and quality of learning based on test scores, course grades, and students’ rating,” and the most widely studied predictors of satisfaction with online learning are “the ability to use computers and the quality of the social interaction” (p. 8).



Thieves (2011) examined the benefits of technology with adults who are learning English and concluded that “computer and internet can serve not only as a tool to learn English but more importantly as a survival tool through which English can also be learned” (p. 130). This is a basic survival need for many newcomers who must apply for jobs online and perform daily tasks. The study concluded that adult ELLs need to become computer literate, and their curriculum should include computer-based instruction whenever possible; however, one problem facing this curriculum development is the shortage of computer literacy programs due to a lack of funding and resources.

### **Challenges and Benefits of Online Learning for Adult ELLs**

Adults in the English programs are more likely to face challenges and obstacles than other adults in online learning. In Robles and Belsha’s (2020) study, it was concluded that ELLs can be negatively impacted by subjects introduced to them virtually. Their progress toward mastering the English language is slowed, especially with the rapid shift to remote learning forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Merriam and Bierema (2014) stated that learning English requires a significant amount of communication and interactions between the learner and the teacher. Students are used to body language, the teacher’s voice, and interaction with other students, which are very important in developing their English language skills. With online learning, the lack of face-to-face communication, body language, and facial expressions can affect adult ELLs’ understanding of the content and learning English. According to Ali (2020), learners in higher education institutes faced challenges during COVID-19 such as low engagement, a lack of social values, inadequate supervision, poor academic performance, and high retention rates with online learning. Another study by Hijazi and AlNatour (2021) found

that learners were not effectively engaged by online learning because of the limited communication they had with their teachers.

Several challenges need to be recognized and highlighted by ELL instructors and English programs to support adult ELLs. In her literature review, Kara et al. (2019) found that adult ELLs face three major internal challenges—learning, technical, and management challenges—and two external challenges including domestic and job-related challenges. Mahyoob (2020) studied the challenges of online learning for adult ELLs specifically during COVID-19 and reported the main difficulties of ELLs with online learning include but are not limited to “communications, assessment, online education experience, technology use tools, time management, anxiety and coronavirus disease stress” (p. 354). This is likely to increase the dropout rate of adult ELLs as Deschacat and Goeman (2015) indicated in their pre-COVID research that external and internal challenges play a major role in increasing the rate of dropouts among adult ELLs.

Other research conducted before COVID-19 perceived benefits related to technology and learning online. For example, a study by Bahrani and Tam (2012) concluded that technology tools help ELLs become more proficient English speakers because of the efficiency and the rich learning environment technology represents when compared to traditional teaching methods. Other research indicated that “technology-based learning environments tend to motivate learners. Particularly, research supports that technology can help ELLs build self-confidence, reduce anxiety, and acquire the language faster than learners in a stressful and less motivating environment” (Diallo, 2014, p. 16).

Sunal and Sundberg (2003) conducted another major research study comparing online and traditional learning at colleges across the U.S. and Canada. They examined ten different

studies of online learning compared to face-to-face classes. They discovered it was challenging to conclude which method is better but acknowledged that online learning was an applicable way to conduct a class. They also noted that the major factor for success for any course was the course setup and pedagogical decisions being made rather than the online or traditional format.

Although the studies detailed in this section were conducted during the pre-COVID period, several challenges are common in other studies amid COVID-19 such as insufficient computing skills, difficulty in communication, low self-confidence, and inability to understand course materials (Zalat et al., 2021). It is evident from current research that online learning will remain after the pandemic (Shanker et al., 2023), and the number of online English courses will increase significantly due to their convenience and accessibility for adult learners. Nevertheless, with the provision and analysis of these advantages and challenges, as well as receiving regular student feedback, teachers and administrators need to redouble their efforts and find alternative strategies to support their students, especially for those adult ELLs who have experience educational disruptions.

### **Educational Disruption**

When a crisis occurs, such as wars and pandemics, the disruption of education tends to leave all students, K-12 and adults, with barriers to continue learning. Jobs are lost and health problems increase, making it imperative that education leaders look back into history and examine examples of pandemics in the past—such as the Spanish flu in 1919—and consider how the educational system handled and reacted to such situations. Some students have been displaced from countries hit by violence and wars in the past years but as Orville (2020) stated in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic's effects, "Not since World War II have so many countries around the world seen schools and educational institutions go into lockdown at around the same

time and for the same reason” (p. 11). The COVID-19 Pandemic certainly impacted all students’ learning.

### **COVID–19 Pandemic**

The pandemic has affected the educational systems around the world (UNESCO, 2020). In March 2020, over 1,100 colleges and universities across the U.S. closed their doors, and 14 million college students had to transition from face-to-face to online classes (Hess, 2020). Although the intention was to limit the spread of the coronavirus, the switch to online instruction caused a major ripple through schools, colleges, and universities. Adarkwah and Agyemang (2021) referred to the pandemic in academia as “Pandemia” to showcase how learning has changed in terms of funding, instruction, and research due to the pandemic. He described the pandemic as a major factor in causing significant changes in academia and other educational systems.

The International Association of Universities (IAU) conducted a global survey on the impact of COVID–19 on higher education for 2020 and 2021. The researchers of the IAU concluded that the pandemic had a major effect on students’ participation in the learning process and negatively influenced the quality of activities and equity of educational opportunities. For example, ELLs were one of the groups described as the “most behind” in comparison to their classmates (Villegas, 2021).

With the spread of COVID–19 across the world and with schools implementing closures which impacted 91% of the world’s student population, including ELLs (UNESCO, 2020), schools and colleges had to switch to online learning, leaving millions of ELLs in a precarious position. The lockdown especially posed challenges and interfered with the education of students who needed accommodations for language. During this pandemic, it was anticipated that ELLs

would lose even more ground and become less able to master essential language skills (Robles & Belsha, 2020).

### ***Switch to Online Teaching for ELLS***

The switch to online learning due to COVID–19 completely changed how learning and teaching were and are experienced nationwide (Baxter, 2020). Students in the English programs were dramatically impacted by the change than others; data presented by Goldberg (2021) indicated that districts across the country reported an increase in failing marks for ELLs. Furthermore, “English learners [were] hardest hit by COVID–19’s disruptions to in–person learning” (Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education, 2021, p. 20). In response, teachers and instructors across the country worked harder than ever to address the needs and challenges of these students while facing their own struggles with online learning. Teachers tried new teaching strategies to fill the academic and emotional gaps due to the global pandemic. For example, teachers provided interactive learning opportunities— such as online conversational circles, sharing their outdoor activities and posting videos on social learning platforms—to support their students’ engagement and motivation. In spite of the uncertainty surrounding how long the pandemic would last, teachers were required to develop online lessons and prepare remote teaching plans to meet the educational and emotional needs of their students (Malik & Dahiya, 2021).

Alturise (2020) concluded that online learning during the pandemic needed a significant amount of work to improve the learning outcomes related to the technical issues and experiences of teachers and students. In order to make online learning more reliable, he suggested providing technical support that can improve the quality of online instruction. This would enable students to have access to adequate resources and assistance and teachers would have the flexibility to

adapt their teaching methods to virtual environments. Shivangi (2020) has provided guidelines for dealing with the challenges of online learning during a pandemic. He emphasized the importance of online learning in ensuring the continuity of education, the strengths of accessing resources, and the benefits of more flexible learning schedules. One drawback he highlighted is the lack of meaningful social interactions. Shivangi also stressed the importance of standardized quality of resources presented with online learning. He indicated that “there is a lack of standards for quality, quality control, for development of e-resources, and e-content delivery” (Shivangi, 2020, p. 12). With the COVID-19 pandemic, he called for a collaborative effort from policymakers and stakeholders to establish more standardized measures, to ensure consistency and effectiveness of online learning.

### ***Challenges and Support During and After the Pandemic***

Teachers across the board adopted practices they never had to use prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their online teaching riddled with difficulties, they had to deal with their students' academic and social challenges. In his research, Wolfinger (2016) focused on teachers' roles in supporting their students' educational needs and found that learners' characteristics, along with social and academic support, were important to promote students' success in fully online virtual schools.

Most of the research and studies that were conducted before the pandemic generally supported the pedagogy of online education as an interactive and actively engaging platform full of sources and practical activities. More than a decade ago, Larreamendy-Joems and Leinhardt (2006) stated that the concept of online courses had changed from being an optional choice to being vital and necessary. Initially, teachers and instructors were optimistic about teaching online; however, when it became mandatory that everything be taught online, stakeholders

realized the challenges and amount of work required for success. According to Assapari (2021), “Lecturer challenges are also clearly visible with the availability of internet facilities by providing teaching materials that are delivered to students” (p. 29). Furthermore, because of time constraints and the overabundance of online resources, teachers had to teach themselves new dynamic strategies to keep their students engaged and motivated. According to Priyadarshani (2021), the biggest challenge was the overwhelming number of resources and the technical problems associated with the network during instruction.

Other challenges posed by the pandemic can still be addressed through research related to online learning conducted prior to COVID. For example, Thoms (2001) stated that motivation starts with teachers who understand their students' characteristics and follow the strategies that motivate adult learners. She dedicated her research to teachers of adult learners to encourage them to support their ELL students and follow pedagogical methods to boost their students' learning and motivation. One way is to make the materials relevant, explain the reasons behind each task, and let students work in groups for a more collaborative environment. Flexibility is also encouraged as a key factor in creating a motivating environment.

Wlodkowski (1993) came up with four pillars of motivating teachers: expertise, empathy, enthusiasm, and clarity. It is possible to enhance these pillars through practice and effort, regardless of whether lessons are delivered in person or online. Motivating teachers offer knowledge while understanding their students' needs, demonstrate clarity, and display enthusiasm while teaching. In addition, they consider the students' demographics to carry out these pillars. As a result, students apply the new knowledge to their situations even if they are studying online and will be more motivated to learn within an engaging environment.

Another aspect of online teaching mentioned by Basford (2021) is the issue of students' backgrounds, overall equality, and challenges raised in 2020 and how teachers needed to help students make sense of what was happening around the world. Several events that year left students feeling more troubled, worried, and concerned such as the assault on the capital and protests against racism and police brutality. In response, teachers were encouraged to use new teaching strategies and "hold on to some of the dynamic and empathetic teaching practices" (Basford, 2021, p. 5). Moreover, it was recommended to be compassionate and flexible in order to support students during the COVID-19 pandemic, to help them feel more connected (Basford, 2021). All of these recommendations compounded the increased workload, inferior learning outcomes, cheating, and loss of connection with students associated with learning (Watkins, 2021). All the previous challenges do not necessarily diminish the potential of online teaching but instead call for improvement and growth. For example, Gusso et al. (2021) argued it is possible to carry out courses in an online format with good quality, but quality supports are needed.

### **Summary**

The review of literature discusses other studies that have explored the experiences of ELLs with online learning. The main objective of the review is to provide insight into the experiences of adults engaging in online learning. The chapter is divided into four sections - adult learners, online learning, education disruption, and online teaching. Furthermore, it focuses on three theoretical learning frameworks and highlights the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the learning process for ELLs during the years 2020 and 2021.

While the results of previous and current research may not directly relate to adult ELLs and their teachers, there is a need to increase teacher contributions to education programs and to



allow teachers to implement different andragogical approaches that work with their students. In the end, adult ELLs must be encouraged to try new things and be willing to take risks associated with learning English. Students are motivated to overcome any challenge when their teachers support their ambition and growth (Thoms, 2001). Also, when a teacher prepares adult learners to use technology in a positive context, they become accustomed to technology as part of their learning process and become more self-directed.

The literature review reveals a gap and a lack of attention on this particular group, and the following study aims to fill in that gap. Meeting ELLs' needs is critical, mainly because their courses are heavily based on a structured curriculum, face-to-face communication, and language proficiency. The current situation requires more attention to conduct further study and research about ELLs and try to bring out potential opportunities for them. Immigrants are already experiencing difficulties in feeling isolated and sometimes rejected by the rest of their communities. In an era of COVID-19 pandemic that has brought more isolation and disruption to the world and impacted the educational system worldwide, ELLs have been acutely affected by the situation and they require additional supports (Goldberg, 2021).

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this research study is to describe the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning in community-focused colleges between 2020 and 2022. Using surveys, course materials, and semi-structured interviews, the shared experiences of adult ELLs with online learning were collected, interpreted, and organized through a qualitative case study research design utilizing a phenomenological approach. This chapter outlines the description of site, the population selection, timeframe of study and the process of collecting data. The chapter concludes with a data organization procedure and coding of data along with a statement related to research biases.

#### **Qualitative Researcher Paradigm**

Creswell (2009) defined qualitative research as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Qualitative research provides insight into a topic from the perspective of those affected by the issue or problem. Through this research design, the aim is “to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 16).

It is important for educators who work in the field of English language and adult education to consider the experiences and opinions of adult ELLs with online learning. Thus, a qualitative research design was determined to be the most appropriate method of collecting data regarding the experiences of adults with limited English proficiency to explore the following research question: What have been the experiences of adult ELLs who attend community-

focused colleges with online learning? Creswell (2013) described research questions as “open-ended, evolving, and nondirectional” (p. 138). Their aim is to address the purpose of the study in specific terms that may start with words such as *what* or *how* rather than *why*.

Since the shift from face-to-face to online learning was relatively recent due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was not enough data available to answer this study’s research question. When the variables and theory are unknown, qualitative research is considered to be an effective exploratory design (Creswell, 2009). Thus, this qualitative case study was designed to explore the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning by collecting participants’ feelings, emotions, and stories through surveys, course materials, and semi-structured interviews. Themes in participants’ responses fill a void in the literature by recognizing the external and internal challenges of adult ELLs with online learning (Deschact & Goeman, 2015; Mahyoob, 2020), all of which were discovered through a phenomenological approach.

### **Structured Process of Phenomenology**

Considering the nature of the research project, a phenomenological approach was selected as the most appropriate methodology for this study. Van Maanen (1990) described phenomenology as the “study of the lifeworld, the world as we immediately experience it... Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). A phenomenological approach allows the researcher to identify viewpoints and responses that can be used to describe shared experiences between participants. Furthermore, phenomenology can be useful in exploring an issue or phenomenon experienced by different individuals in order to gain a deeper understanding of their collective experiences (Creswell, 2013). By using phenomenology, a researcher is able to uncover patterns as well as to gain insight into the lived experiences of those involved in the study.

Using a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, this research focused on collecting information related to the shared experiences of adult ELLs with online learning. The phenomenon under investigation highlighted the shared condition experienced by adult ELL students who switched from face-to face classes to online learning due to the COVID -19 pandemic. Based on their personal experiences, surveys, interviews and course materials will offer insight into their perspectives and interpretations as adult ELLs experiencing online learning.

### **Site Description**

This qualitative research study was conducted at a public community-focused college where I am employed as an adjunct faculty member. The college has its own English program for students who want to achieve proficiency in English before transferring to academic courses. The college's English program is a member of the American Association of Intensive English Programs and accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. The English department was established in 2001 to provide English language support to students who have been admitted to college. The program serves a diverse population of international and local students, those seeking academic degrees and others who want to improve their English skills. Since 2017, I have taught English to students with diverse backgrounds and levels of English proficiency at the college.

### **Selection of Participants**

Creswell (2013) indicated that “participants need to be carefully chosen to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question so that the researcher in the end can forge a common understanding” (p. 83). In this study, I invited adult ELLs who completed English

level courses in Summer 2022 and/or Fall 2022 as part of their English program. The selected participants were chosen through the use of a convenient sampling because they share similar attributes and characteristics, and they experienced the phenomenon of online learning in the last two years.

The participants were in the same English level courses based on their placement exams. They are considered first generation immigrants, and they range in age from 18–50. Students who are first generation immigrants live in a country where they were not born. Generally, these students begin their education at a community college and then transfer to a four-year university (Mumper, 2003).

After receiving the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) approval (see Appendix B) and once final grades were posted for the Fall 2022 semester, I sent an online-based-survey to my former Summer 2022 and current Fall 2022 students, around 20 adult ELLs, which included an electronic copy of the consent form (see Appendix A). The form included the participants' rights and responsibilities, in addition to protection of the data. This survey served as an invitation to participate in the interview process, as well as to provide basic demographic information about each student. Of the 20 surveys I emailed, I was hoping at least 12 to 15 students would respond and agree to participate in the study in order to meet the middle range Polkinghorne (1989) recommended; researchers should conduct interviews with five to twenty-five individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. Thirteen participants filled out the informed consent form and agreed to participate in the research study.

### **Data Collection**

Following the results of the survey, I used the interview questions aligned with semi-structured interview guidelines. I dedicated the Winter 2023 semester to interview students and

collected their course materials. I analyzed all of the following data which extended to Summer 2023: Online-based surveys, course materials, and semi-structured interviews.

### **Online-based Surveys**

Using surveys is a useful method to measure and collect participants' opinions, attitudes, values, and experiences (Gable & Wolf, 1993). An online-based survey was used in this study in order to gain a brief understanding of participants' demographics and their opinions about online learning (see Appendix C). Participants were asked to provide information about their age, gender, major, current occupation, years of residency in the US, and classes taken over the past two years. Questions were open-ended and multiple choice. The survey was designed in Google forms and distributed to students via email. All students were given instruction and information about the online-based survey prior to their participation.

### **Course Materials**

Creswell (2009) argues that not all participants during interviews are equally "articulate and perceptive" (p. 180). There is a tendency for English learners to offer generic responses during oral interviews and conversations as a result of language limitations. After requesting their permission to use their course writings as artifacts, the study will include participants' journal responses completed as course requirements. Creswell (2009) recommends going beyond typical interviews and including other data collection types such as documents to "create reader interest in a proposal and to capture useful information that observations and interviews may miss" (p. 181). Thus, participants' course-required journal entry will be helpful because participants respond to prompts in order to explain their experiences with online learning and English language development.

## Semi-structured Interviews

There are two purposes of interviews in a phenomenological study. In accordance with Van Maanen (1990), interviews provide an opportunity for the researcher to collect narrative material relating to personal experiences and “serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (p. 66). In this case study, the twelve semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix D) focused on the topic of adult ELLs and their experiences with online learning. Moustakas (1994) believes that the first two questions of ‘*What has been the experience of participants*’ and ‘*What situations affected the experience of participants*’ helps researchers gain a better understanding of the participants’ common experiences and enable a textual and structural description of the phenomenon.

Participants had the option of conducting their interviews in person or online, depending on their preference. Due to social distancing and some of the participants working from home, Zoom conferences were an option for conducting the interviews. Participants had the choice to conduct interviews in-person at their school or at any local library. Two students decided to be interviewed in person, while eleven students were interviewed via Zoom.

The interview began with introducing and explaining the purpose of the study. Following the interview protocol per Appendix D, participants were reminded of their voluntary consent and their rights to continue or withdraw at any time without any penalty. I reminded participants that I planned to record the interview. If for any reason participants objected to having their voices recorded, I told them that I would take notes on a Word document as they spoke to record their responses. For participants who agreed to be recorded in-person, recordings were collected via a voice recording application. For participants who meet via Zoom, I used the feature of recording meetings on Zoom that include transcription to speed up the data collection process.

During the interview, active listening techniques were used to reassure participants that their ideas and responses were valued.

A total of twelve semi structured open-ended interview questions were asked. Each interview took around 20 to 30 minutes. After every question, follow-up probes were asked to specify participants' answers. After completing the interviews, I sent a thank you message to all participants who participated in the interview process.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

As survey responses were collected and sorted and interviews were conducted, all electronic data were securely stored in a password-protected laptop. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity throughout this research project. Pseudonyms were also used for all course materials collected from the course's learning management system. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the survey responses, transcribed interviews, and course materials, the data were analyzed for significant statements and the generation of meaning units (Creswell, 2009), typical of a phenomenological approach.

During this research, information provided by participants were collected and responses were gathered in order to develop an analysis from the experiences of adult ELLs. As suggested by Creswell (2009), the following steps were used to organize, collect, and analyze the data in this research project: Organizing the data for analysis, reading through all the data, and working on detailed analysis with a coding process to identify categories and emerging themes that answered the research question.

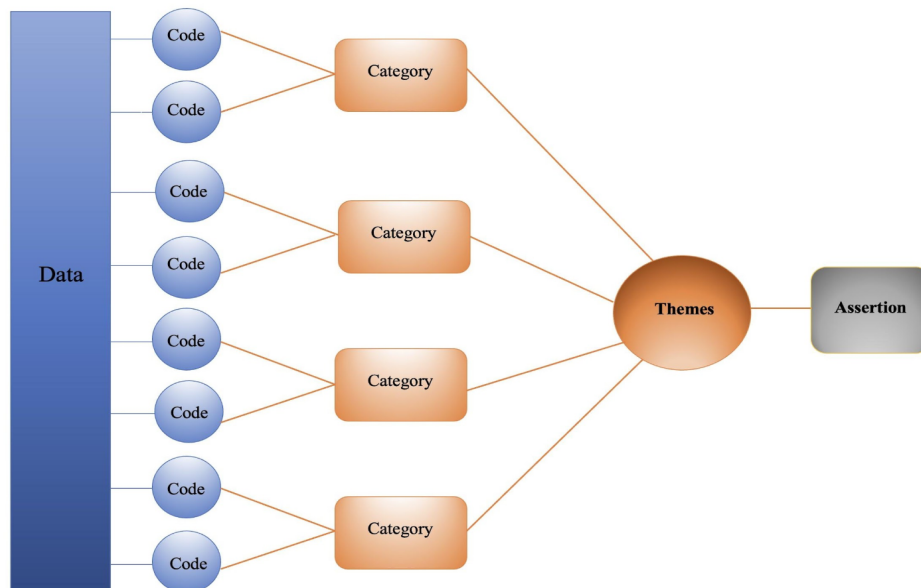


## Coding

After the data were collected and organized, the next step was to classify and interpret the data using codes and categories. Coding, by definition, is the “process of organizing the material into chunks or segment of text before bringing meaning to information” (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). The main purpose is to reduce and simplify the data in order to analyze them and form a conclusion. Creswell (2013) described coding as the “heart of qualitative data analysis” (p. 184). Upon the completion of the interviews, all transcriptions were read carefully while topics and key words that emerged from participants’ responses were noted as codes. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

Codes and Categories to Theory Framework



Based on Saldaña’s (2013) methods of coding qualitative data, there were three cycles to process the coding of data. The first cycle included In-Vivo coding which is a form of data analysis that places emphasis on the actual spoken words of the participants (Manning, 2017). During this cycle, the exact words and repeated phrases in the data were assigned into categories.

In the second cycle, axial coding was applied to determine the dominant codes and to regroup categories. Axial coding is a second cycle coding method that allows the researcher to compare and reorganize the codes into categories (Saldaña, 2013, p. 218). In the third cycle of coding, all data were triangulated to ensure the validity of the findings as categories were grouped into themes.

### **Researcher bias**

Due to my experience as an adult ELL adjunct faculty, I continued to reflect on my own biases as I interpreted the data. As COVID-19 spread around the world in 2020, teachers faced a variety of struggles and challenges in moving their instruction online. Although my research question was influenced by my own experiences as a teacher, I set aside reflections and judgments as much as possible in order to gain a fresh perspective on the experiences of the participants. In qualitative research, the process of suspending judgments about assumed truths until they are confirmed by the data is known as *epoche*, also known as bracketing (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) expressed his views on the concept of *epoche*, stating the following:

I see it as a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also as an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness and to look and see them again, as if for the first time. (p. 85)

In order to better understand my biases and ensure that they did not interfere with my research, I kept a scribbled journal for self-evaluation. My experience as a teacher with online learning was documented in order to minimize any potential biases that may have arise during the data analysis process. Also, as an ELL instructor who shares the same language and culture as many of the students, this reduced communication and language barriers; Furthermore, being

an ELL instructor allowed me to have direct contact with the students. However, I had to make sure that no research took place until final grades were posted. In this way, students likely did not feel compelled to participate or answer questions in a particular way that could jeopardize their grades.

### **Summary**

Chapter Three outlined the research methodology used in this study. The use of a qualitative research design employing a phenomenological approach was efficient for identifying the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning. Using a convenient sampling method for participant selection within a community-focused college, data collection and analysis of surveys, course materials, and interviews provided answers to the research question: What have been the experiences of adult ELLs who attend community-focused colleges with online learning? A detailed analysis of the data collected for this study will be presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings**

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning in community-focused colleges. The findings in this chapter addressed the research question: What are the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning? Using qualitative analysis to analyze the interview transcripts for in-vivo codes and themes that emerged, this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section describes the profiles and backgrounds of participants. The second section presents four general themes that emerged from collecting and analyzing the data. The participants discussed their experiences with online, in-person and hybrid learning; their engagement and learning environment; the challenges they faced with online learning; and their self-directed learning.

While online learning can be a powerful tool, it can also marginalize many individuals, including adult ELLs who are trying to navigate through life while struggling to bring their issues and concerns to the forefront due to language barriers. The 13 participants in this qualitative case study expressed not feeling that they had a voice to share their concerns nor that they had an audience willing to listen to them regarding their learning experiences. The findings in this chapter allow these individuals to express their personal anecdotes through spoken words so others can listen to their stories and understand their experiences.

### **Participants**

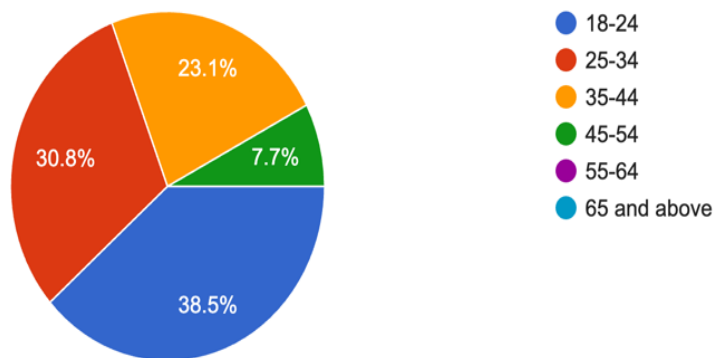
The study was conducted in the Winter semester of 2023, where 13 students who completed English-level courses in Summer 2022 and/or Fall 2022 as part of their English

program, were interviewed. They were asked to share their personal experiences through 15 semi-structured interview questions. In the interviews, the participants shared their experiences of online learning between the years of 2020 and 2022. Initially, the college offered in-person classes in Winter 2020 but eventually shifted to online-only classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, when quarantine restrictions were lifted, the classes became a mix of both in-person and online, also known as hybrid classes. Figure 2 details participants' age-range. The diagram and tables below provide a summary of the participants' backgrounds and profiles. To protect their privacy and identity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

**Figure 2**

*Age Range*

Age Range  
13 responses



Among the participants, around 38% of them were young adults aged 18–24. The next largest group was students aged 25–34, making up 30% of the sample. The remaining 30% were students who were 45 and older. The age distribution provides valuable insights into the diverse experiences of participants and their perceptions of online learning. All 13 participants were enrolled in intermediate level English classes at the time of the interview. Based on their weekly

and monthly assessments, it was determined two participants were at the beginner level and one participant was at an advanced level.

As detailed in Table 1, out of thirteen participants, nine were female and four were male. The male participants tended to give direct and concise answers to the interview questions while the female students expressed more of their feelings and experiences related to online learning. It is important to note that participants might have had difficulty understanding or expressing themselves effectively in English. The data collection was carried out in English to maintain consistency, even though English is not the first language of participants. Regardless of gender differences or participant numbers in each gender group, using a second language during the interview may have limited participants' ability to express themselves effectively. Also, the study did not focus on a particular cultural or ethnic group, but all 13 participants spoke the same second language. Likely, they communicated in English because the questions were asked in English, implying that they had to respond in the same language.

**Table 1**

*Participants Demographics & Course-Modality Experiences during the years 2020 -2022*

Name	Gender	Age Group	Years in the U.S.	Highest Degree	English Proficiency	Current Occupation	Major	In person only	Online Only	Hybrid
Ayat	Female	25-34	12	High School	Intermediate	Housewife	NA	3	3	2
Duha	Female	18-24	6	High School	Intermediate	Student	NA	3	3	3
Gamal	Male	35-44	3	Associate's Degree	Intermediate	Amazon Employee	Education	3	0	3
Hala	Female	35-44	22	High School	Intermediate	Student	Business	4	6	0
Halima	Female	45-54	3	Master's Degree	Advanced	Substitute Teacher	Biology	5	0	4
Mason	Male	18-24	6	High School	Intermediate	Amazon Employee	Computer Engineer	3	3	3
Mohamed	Male	18-24	2	High School	Intermediate	Process Guide	Business Administration	3	0	3
Nour	Female	35-44	20	High School	Intermediate	Unemployed	English	3	6	0
Roz	Female	25-34	3	Bachelor's Degree	Intermediate	Student	Laboratory	3	2	2
Saja	Female	18-24	2	High School	Intermediate	Unemployed	Biology	6	1	6
Salem	Male	18-24	2	High School	Intermediate	Unemployed	Science	3	0	9
Sara	Female	25-34	4	High School	Intermediate	Housewife	Pharmacist	4	1	4
Susan	Female	25-34	7	High School	Beginner	Hair Stylist	Ultrasound	3	5	0

## **Participant profiles**

The participants' profiles, along with their assigned pseudonyms, are listed below in alphabetical order.

**Ayat** lived in the US for the last 12 years. At 32 years old, she is a mother of three children and holds a high school diploma. Her educational background is basic. She was taking three in-person classes before the college closed in Winter 2020 due to the Pandemic. Ayat then enrolled in three online classes that focused on reading, writing, and communication. As quarantine restrictions eased, she also enrolled in two hybrid English classes. However, her experience with online classes left her feeling dissatisfied, ultimately leading her to discontinue her studies at the college.

**Duha** is a young student, 21 years old, who has lived in the US for six years. She completed high school with a high GPA (3.99) in 2020. In addition to being proficient in technology, she is also quick to learn new concepts. While she remains undecided about her future major, she plans to transfer to a four-year university. She enrolled in three online classes during the pandemic. As a result of her shy personality, she expressed satisfaction with her experience of online learning.

**Gamal** is a middle-aged father, 40 years old, who immigrated to the US three years ago. He has a Bachelor's degree in teaching Arabic as a foreign language from overseas and has previously worked as an Arabic teacher in Malaysia. Currently, he works for Amazon. While managing his job and studies over the last two years, Gamal has taken three in-person and three hybrid classes. Upon arrival in the US, he focused primarily on improving his life and providing for his family; thus, he had little time to pursue further education.

**Hala** is a single, 41 year-old mother who decided to enroll in college English classes after being in the US for 22 years. Cultural restrictions prevented her from pursuing higher education

after high school, but she has now embarked upon a path of resilience and success to continue learning. Hala chose to pursue a degree in business, and she adapted to the pandemic circumstances by taking six online classes. Initially, she had limited exposure to technology, but her proficiency increased as she engaged in online learning. She expressed her satisfaction with online classes, particularly her writing courses, while also acknowledging the lack of communication with fellow students.

**Halima** is a dedicated ELL student who holds a Master's Degree in Biology from her home country. She moved to the US three years ago, and she's currently working as a substitute teacher. She is 53 years old. Halima is committed to improving her English language while earning another degree in accounting. Despite her mixed feelings about online learning, she firmly believes that in-person instruction plays an important role in effective communication. Her main challenge comes from her limited social interaction with her classmates and teachers. During the past two years, she has taken five in-person courses and four hybrid courses.

**Mason** is a passionate, 19-year-old student who has recently graduated from high school. Although he is currently employed by Amazon, he is interested in pursuing a degree in computer engineering. In the last two years, Mason had experience with different class modalities for his ELL courses, having taken three classes one of each in-person, online only, and hybrid formats. He considers himself proficient in technology which helped him during his online classes. Mason preferred the one-to-one communication with the teacher in-person, but also found the hybrid classes to be better suited to his work schedule.

**Mohamed** is another 19-year-old student who arrived in the US two years ago. He is currently pursuing a major in business administration. During the pandemic, he continued to take language classes while concentrating on improving his English. He has developed proficiency in



technology due to his passion for design. Mohamed had the opportunity to experience both in-person and hybrid classes in the last two years. He recognizes the importance of online learning opportunities and believes it is crucial to incorporate more online courses into his future learning journey.

**Nour**, 38 years old, a mother of three children, made the decision to pursue a college degree and improve her English skills after being in the US for almost two decades. Although she has a degree from her home country in accounting, she decided to pursue a bachelor's degree, and began her college journey in the states by taking English language classes. She is currently unemployed and a housewife. She looks forward to pursuing a career in English. During the last two years, Nour mainly engaged in online courses with few in-person sessions and ultimately chose to discontinue her studies due to lack of significant learning progress.

**Roz** is a hardworking student who recently became a mother. She came to the US three years ago and holds a bachelor's degree from science. Roz is eager to continue her studies and looks forward to working in a laboratory in the future. In the last two years, she has taken three in-person classes, two online classes, and two hybrid classes. Her main concern regarding online courses is the interaction with teachers and the lack of communication with fellow students.

**Saja** is a 20-year-old ELL college student who graduated from high school two years ago. She has resided in the US for the same duration and is currently unemployed with plans to pursue a degree in Biology. During her college journey, Saja has primarily taken in-person classes, including hybrid, with one online class. Though she experienced technical difficulties during online classes, she acknowledges that the experience taught her self-discipline.

**Salem** is a recent high school graduate and a 19-year-old college student. He has resided in the US for two years and is currently unemployed. Salem's academic focus is science, and he

hopes to pursue a career in medicine. His background in technology helped him when he enrolled in hybrid classes. Despite having difficulties communicating with instructors and learning content, Salem has preferred hybrid learning formats, especially when working in groups with other students.

**Sara** is also a mother and a housewife who aspires to become a pharmacist in the future. She has been in the US for four years, and she is 28 years old. She is currently enrolled in computer technology and English language courses. Throughout her academic journey, she has undertaken a combination of in-person and online classes with a total of four in-person classes, one online class, and four hybrid classes. Based on her two years of experience, Saja recommends online courses for reading and writing while favoring in-person or hybrid for communication courses.

**Susan**, a mother of four children, immigrated to the US seven years ago. She is 33 years old. She currently works as a hairstylist from home and has a vision to enter the field of ultrasound. While Susan did not take any hybrid classes, she has completed several online courses along with a few in-person classes. One of the key advantages she found in online learning is the flexibility for time and place, which is beneficial for her as a parent. Susan also faced challenges with online learning, including the struggle to understand the course materials and teachers not responding to questions in a timely manner.

## **Findings**

Multiple steps were involved in collecting data and analyzing findings that address the research question related to the experiences of the adult ELLs with online learning. Table 2 provides examples of coding. As part of the process, preliminary and secondary coding tables were formulated; thus, Table 3 provides a general overview of the findings, while Table 4 details

the analysis using the principles of andragogy, constructivism, and second language acquisition to identify common themes.

The first step for data analysis was to organize and prepare the data by transcribing all 13 interviews. The next major step was to read through the data without coding to gain a full understanding of the meanings of responses. This is particularly important when analyzing responses from ELL participants who may have difficulty expressing themselves verbally due to their limited language skills.

To gain a detailed analysis, a first cycle coding of the 13 transcribed interviews was performed using descriptive and in-vivo coding methods. Descriptive coding summarizes the main topic of a passage using a word or phrase while the in-vivo method captures participants’ actual wordings (Saldaña, 2013) as exemplified in Table 2. The preliminary descriptive and in-vivo codes along with their frequency are detailed in the first column in Table 3. The purpose of this preliminary coding was to gain a better understanding of the challenges and experiences of participants with online learning.

**Table 2**

Examples of Code Charting

Raw Data	Person (pseudonyms)	Jottings	Final Code
“I noticed my least favorite part we don't have more communication. I felt my English going worse than in person classes.”	Hala	Online vs. in-person No communication (Descriptive) “worse” (In Vivo)	Lack of Communication Negative experience with online learning
“I feel I am more independent... I practice something and listen to myself recording or whatever, sometimes I figure out my mistake.”	Halima	“More independent” (In Vivo)	Independence in online learning

Note. This process was used for all interviews. The information provides examples of how a portion of raw data was coded.

Both methods were used simultaneously to analyze the data, which resulted in the second cycle of finding categories and then formulating initial themes, as detailed in columns two and three, respectively, in Table 3. Each theme summarized the answers of the experiences of the participants with online, hybrid, and/or in-person learning.

**Table 3**

*Preliminary Coding of Adult ELLs Interviews*

First Cycle: Codes (no. of coded passages)	Second Cycle: Categories	Themes (No. of coded passages and category definition with the first three to four prominent subcategories)
Online learning (34) Online learning experience (75) Online classes (15) Negative Experience (2)	Online learning experiences Views of online learning	<b>Online Learning (126)</b> The participants addressed the concept of online learning (34) including their experiences (75), and their views on online classes (15)
Preference for in-person (7) Experience with in-person learning (7) Importance of in-person interaction (4) In-person learning (5)	In-person learning experiences Views on in-person learning	<b>In-person Learning (23)</b> The participants discussed their experiences (7) and preferences with in-person learning (7) including the importance of in-person interaction (4).
Experience with hybrid (5) Hybrid classes (17) Hybrid learning experience (21) Transition from online to in-person (2)	Hybrid learning experiences Views on hybrid learning Preference for learning format	<b>Hybrid Learning (45)</b> The participants described their experiences with hybrid learning (26) classes (17) and their transition from online to in-person classes (2)

Flexibility of online learning (4) Accessibility of online classes (3) Support during online learning (2)	Flexibility (4) Accessibility (3) Support (2)	<b>Learning Gains (9)</b> The participants noted positive experiences of online learning related to flexibility (4), accessibility (3) to meet family and work obligations, and support received during online learning (2)
Negative experience with online learning (2) Challenges with technology (2) Difficulties of online communication and interaction (3) Difficulties in online learning (4) Difficulty of transitioning from in-person to online learning (2) Effects of COVID-19 (4) Disruptions (2) Lack of preparedness and professionalism (2) Difficulty maintaining attention in online classes (2) Difficulty in establishing friendships and support networks in online classes (2) Absence of group interaction and peer engagement (4) Student discomfort with cameras (3) Lack of student-student interaction (3) Learning discontinuity due to online transition (2) Procrastination (1) Lack of self-motivation (1) Need for in-person for pronunciations (2) Difficulty maintaining attention (2) Lack of clarity in online learning (3) Inability to quickly access help (2) Frustration (2)	Negative experiences Challenges with technology Difficulty of online communication and interaction Difficulty in online learning Difficulty of transitioning	<b>Learning Challenges (50)</b> The participants addressed the challenges they faced with online learning including difficulties related to technology (2), communication and interaction (3), and transitioning (2) from in-person to online learning (2).

Note. The frequency numbers represent how many times each code emerged during the analysis of data from 13 interviews.

The analysis used in the next process followed a retrospective approach which means the work was conducted in a backward manner. Table 3 played an important role in presenting a comprehensive view of the recurrent codes found in the interviews. After deriving general themes from the data, three theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 2—Andragogy, Constructivism, and Second Language Acquisition—were used to connect those general themes

in Table 3. As a result, Table 4 was created to highlight how the theoretical frameworks corresponded to the empirical findings of themes.

To thoroughly analyze the themes and gain a comprehensive understanding of the recurring themes, Table 4 was drafted to connect the data to the theoretical framework. First, using the andragogy principles—self-concept, experience, readiness, orientation, and motivation—a view of how adults learn and develop their learning skills was determined as I compared the themes in Table 3 using these principles. The two principles, learner experience and self-directed learning, were found to be relevant to andragogy. Second, the theme of engagement in a learning environment was found to be more relevant to the theory of constructivism. This theory suggests that learners can enrich their learning by connecting it to their life experiences and constructing knowledge through active engagement in their learning environment. Third, learner challenges can be addressed within the framework of second language acquisition theory. In this theory, understanding the challenges faced by learners can help in overcoming obstacles which may include adapting to new instructional methods and making effective use of technology to improve the process of acquiring a language in online settings. Understanding the previous theories and how they connect to the themes, can assist educators in supporting adult ELLs throughout their journey in learning the English language.

**Table 4**

*Secondary Coding of Adult ELLs Interviews*

First Cycle: Codes (no. of coded passages)	Second Cycle: Categories	Themes (No. of coded passages)	Theme-Theory Correspondence
Online learning experience (75) Online learning (34) Hybrid classes (17) Hybrid learning experience (6) Experience with in-person learning (7) Preference for in-person (7)	Online learning experience (75) Online learning (34) Education and learning background (4) Interruption in learning (2)	Learner Experience (115)	Andragogy

Assignments and academic workload (5)			
In-person learning (5)	Hybrid experience (15)	Learning Environment (56)	Constructivism
Absence of group interaction and peer engagement (4)	Online classes (15)		
Difficulties in online learning (4)	Online vs. In person (11)		
Distractions at home (4)	Hybrid classes (10)		
Effects of COVID-19 (4)	Hybrid learning (5)		
Flexibility of online learning (4)			
Importance of in-person interaction (4)	Preference for in-person (5)	Self-Directed Learning (11)	Andragogy
Accessibility of online classes (3)	Learning Independence (3)		
Difficulties of online communication and interaction (3)	Independence in Online Learning (2)		
Lack of clarity in online learning (3)	Self-Discovery through online learning (1)		
Lack of student-student interaction (3)			
Student discomfort with cameras (3)			
Teacher's impact on learning (3)			
Challenges with Technology (2)			
Difficulty in establishing friendships and support networks in online classes (2)	Interaction in online learning (5)	Learner Engagement (19)	Constructivism
Difficulty maintaining attention in online classes (2)	Interaction with other students (5)		
Difficulty of transitioning from in-person to online learning (2)	Interaction with teachers (4)		
Disruptions in online classes -internet, multiple people talking- (2)	Teacher-student interaction (3)		
Frustration in online classes (2)	Student-student interaction (2)		
Inability to quickly access help in online classes (2)			
Independence (2)	Challenges with technology	Learning Challenges (50)	Second Language Acquisition
Learning about oneself during online learning (2)	Difficulty in online learning		
Learning discontinuity due to online transition (2)	Difficulty of online communication and interaction		
Need for in-person for pronunciations (2)	Difficulty of transition from in person to online learning		
Negative experience with online learning (2)	Negative experience		
Procrastination (2)			
Support during online learning (2)			
Transition from online to in-person (2)			
Laziness (1)			
Lack of self-motivation (1)			
Self-Discovery through online learning (1)			
Time management (1)			

Note: Table 2 illustrates the correlation between the identified themes and their corresponding theoretical frameworks.

## **Learner Experience**

**Online learning.** Due to the nature of the interview and the research questions, all participants had views on online learning. They discussed their general experience, including the classes and how it affected their learning of English as college students. Every participant described online learning as a new platform that impacted their English language acquisition and their roles as parents, new college students, employees, and immigrants. Mohamed made a general statement that “online classes for people who study language is really hard.” However, Duha expressed that her online English learning experience was relatively easy due to her strong background knowledge from a specific class: "Because my experience from the class was kind of strong, it was kind of easy.” Throughout the interviews, different perspectives emerged regarding learner experiences with online learning but the transition to online learning proved to be quite challenging for participants in this study, given their prior experience with in-person classroom instruction.

**In-person Learning.** Although there were no specific questions about in-person learning during the interview, some participants would compare their experiences between online and in-person modalities. Seven of the participants showed a preference for in-person and described the importance of in-person interaction in their learning. For instance, Gamal shared his preference for in-person classes but noted the challenge of balancing work and school: “I prefer in person classes,” he stated, “but I'm working, and I need some time for studying.” Roz also expressed her preference of attending classes in person by stating:

I feel like I prefer to be in class instead of doing it online because when you are in class, you can understand well. You can learn the idea when the teacher gives it to you



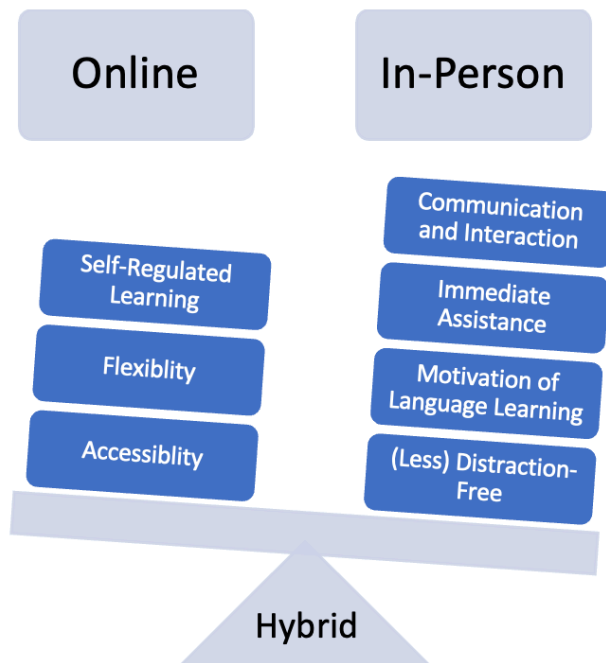
directly, and it is more clear. It's not like with online classes. (Roz, Interview, January 24, 2023)

In her journal entry, Duha listed reasons for not recommending online learning and one reason was “it could be easier for students to be in a class rather than online to give them the opportunities to communicate with others and learn more.” Other students, which will be explained in Chapter 5, provided further details on their experiences with attending classes in-person.

**Hybrid Learning.** During the discussion of learning formats, most participants preferred the hybrid format, which blends in-person and online learning. Merging the benefits of online and in-person learning can help overcome the limitations of online learning. This approach helps students who seek flexibility in and accessibility to their education. The majority of students indicated that hybrid courses would balance out these experiences, eliminating most of the negatives and increasing the positives that they would get outside of online learning. Salem was one of the students who shared his thoughts on hybrid learning by stating, “Online classes have some advantages and, in-person have some advantages, and with hybrid, I will get the best of both advantages.” Through in-person classes, negative experiences of online learning can be transformed into positive ones, making hybrid learning a preferred choice among students. A hybrid model can potentially create a balance and improve connections. As shown in Figure 3, the tilt holds significant strength as it depicts how hybrid is strengthened through the weight of in-person interactions.

**Figure 3**

*The Hybrid Learning Model for a Balanced Learning Experience of Adult ELLs*



### **Engagement and Learning Environment**

Under the andragogy principle of learning environment, students touched upon the topics related to the different class formats and their preferences between online, hybrid, and in-person classes. They discussed the different experiences they encountered during online-only courses and in-person courses and highlighted how hybrid was a balanced approach.

A father who has a full-time job, Gamal, stated, “I prefer in-person classes.” Then, he mentioned hybrid classes as another preference because of the nature of his work. Another student, Halima, stated, “Because I am busy, there is not much difference between in-person and hybrid classes.” A much younger student, Mason, indicated that the online format was hard for him because he did not fully understand what the teacher was asking them to do for assignments. He noted, “I think for the hybrid, it was much better.”

Mohamed had some positive comments about having classes in a hybrid format: “I love hybrid and all my current classes are hybrid because it balances between online classes and going to campus.” He also noted, “Online classes for people who study language is really hard.” Another student who also struggled with online classes, Nour, quit after several online classes: “We can learn English online, but you know what I mean, not like in real life.” Preferring hybrid, Saja stated, “I would not stop taking online classes because most of these subjects are beneficial. And actually, for the next summer, I'm planning to take three classes online. Oh, I mean, 100% will be hybrid.” Salem another young student had a strong opinion about his preference for a class format:

I actually prefer hybrid. Yeah, I prefer to take 50% online and 50% in-person because I can benefit from both sides. Online classes have some advantages and, in-person have some advantages, and with hybrid, I will get the best of both advantages. (Salem, Interview, February 2, 2023)

One reason Salem does not like online classes is because he gets distracted with social media applications and ends up using his phone instead of focusing on the lesson: “I actually, if the class is online, I get to spend most, most my time on my phone.” Sara and Susan have strong opinion about their preference of learning format. With online classes, Sara indicated, “I prefer in-person classes. I'd be more active and engaged in person, I feel being directly present with my classmates and my teacher is important to me.” Susan on the other hand stated, “My experience with online was so bad for me because maybe there was no meeting with teachers every time or no participation with one another.” These statements highlight the different learning environments and settings that adult ELLs have encountered over the past two years, including

hybrid learning, online-only classes, and in-person classes, which created various learning challenges.

### **Learning Challenges**

During the interviews, participants shared their challenges with online learning. Due to the pandemic and its aftermath, participants did not have a choice but to participate in online learning. Throughout the interview process, the participants addressed several challenges they faced with online learning, including difficulties related to technology, communication, and interaction, and transitioning from in-person to online learning. Also, participants expressed that they missed the social aspect of learning and mainly had difficulty communicating their questions and concerns to teachers. Another common challenge was encountering various technological issues that prevented them from comprehending content or accessing material and resources.

A participant, Duha, expressed frustration with online learning, stating, “There's a lot of reasons that I don't like online classes.” As a result, Duha stopped taking online courses and decided to wait for in-person classes to resume because, regarding online instruction, she stated, “If I have a question, I can't find the teacher to ask unless I have to make an appointment and even if I text or something it's not gonna be as fast as I want.” Duha preferred in-person classes and waited for them to resume due to the lack of immediate access to teachers’ assistance.

Gamal, another middle-aged male participant, stated, “There's a lack of speaking practice in online English courses.” He discussed how online learning can lead to laziness in practicing and learning the necessary English skills. Similarly, Hala noted that while online learning offers flexibility, some students and professors lack communication or interaction:

Even though I have just limited time to speak to the professor or to the class, for example, I have five minutes. But when I got to the college and talked to my peers, I used English as my second language. Staying home and taking online classes. I don't use it that much.

(Hala, Interview, January 23, 2023)

Hala also found it hard to form friendships or have learning discussions with her classmates due to the lack of in-person interactions. She suggested having at least one in-person class to improve speaking skills.

Another significant challenge that participants experienced was disruptions during classes, such as classmates speaking out of turn and family members distractions, causing frustration for both students and teachers. When it comes to Roz's experience with online learning, getting lost from distractions during instruction was her main challenge:

I feel like I prefer to be in class instead of doing it online because when you are in class, you can understand well. You can learn the idea when the teacher gives it to you directly, and it is more clear. It's not like with online classes. There are more voices and just so many questions. (Roz, Interview, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023)

Mason, who is a young, full-time employed participant, expressed difficulty with the online homework load. "Initially, the assignments appeared simple. However, they soon became overwhelming, and I struggled to keep up." While some students noted that communication existed, "it isn't the same as a physical classroom," Mohamed stated.

Several students shared their challenges with online classes. Nour mentioned that she received high grades and completed two semesters but still felt like she lacked information. She believed teachers should teach from class rather than from home to make students take the classes more seriously. Additionally, she highlighted the lack of preparedness and

professionalism in online classes and the difficulty of maintaining attention. Saja stated that the first few weeks of online classes overwhelmed her. Similarly, Salem struggled to engage and focus on the teacher, often distracted by non-academic phone use.

Sara, a parent of young kids, found it difficult to adjust to online classes, even with hybrid learning. Even Susan, who was proficient with technology, struggled with the lack of interaction with the teacher, which caused confusion during lessons: "There was no meeting with the teacher. The teacher teaches a lesson. I don't understand the homework and what the main subject of the lesson was." In his journal entry, Mohamed described the challenges faced by adult ELLs who are taking online classes. He wrote:

They cannot have immediate answers for their questions. Sometimes, the students need help for their homework and need answers immediately. The students in class communicate and interact with each other, and they can talk with their teachers; this helps them to learn more. (Mohamed, Journal Entry, August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022)

The idea of online learning highlighted several challenges for students. Although online classes offered the benefit of flexibility and saved them the trouble of commuting, they faced problems with technology, missed the social aspect of learning, and sometimes felt a lack of commitment. Communication also proved to be challenging. Some students were dissatisfied with their learning experience, while others felt their English-speaking skills declined. As a result of these challenges, it is important to take a comprehensive approach to online learning, which emphasizes not only the delivery of content but also the development of interpersonal skills, encouraging students to be engaged in their own learning and providing technical support to them.

## **Self-Directed learning**

During the interview, several students reflected on their preference for independent or self-directed learning to help them manage their learning around personal and professional commitments. Gamal stated that he prefers in-person classes, but due to working, it was difficult for him to manage between school and work: “In hybrid classes, I can study at home, and I go to college once a week, and I have time for work and for my family.” Although the interview question was focused on his experience with online learning, he gave his insight into the different learning formats and their effectiveness. Duha also affirmed that she is an independent student and she “likes to learn” on her own. Being an older student, Halima recognized the loaded homework given online and how it feels good to work and take her time to do them in the comfort of her home: “I feel I am more independent.” Halima also recognizes the importance of practicing and fixing her own mistakes: “I practice something and listen to myself recording or whatever, sometimes I figure out my mistake.”

The participants’ responses showed how they engaged in self-directed learning by adapting and applying knowledge on their own in the context of their online learning experience. For example, Saja mentioned that it was hard for her, at first, but she read books and watched videos on YouTube: “I just had to depend on myself.” She also added: “I realized that I am a responsible person” because she could search for resources on her own. Other students indicated that during online learning, there were times they had to take initiative in their own learning by seeking out resources and adjusting to the new circumstances, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hala said, “I learned a lot of things during COVID-19, especially with technology, like how to search for topics, how to use the online library, and how to write good essays.” Some students even discovered new hobbies such as Mohamed who stated, “I get a lot of skills from

online courses because one of my hobbies is technology design.” Learning online allowed those students to develop skills beyond the course curriculum and adapt to the experience of online learning.

### **Summary**

The chapter focuses on the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning. All participants shared their views, with the majority expressing challenges and some mentioning learning gains. The chapter also connects the interview findings to the theories of andragogy, constructivism, and second language acquisition. Participants talked about their learning environment; their experiences with hybrid, online-only, and in-person classes; and their learning gains and challenges with online learning. The main findings and how they are connected to the theoretical framework will be discussed in Chapter 5 within the context of the literature review along with recommendations and implications for stakeholders.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions**

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning in community-focused colleges. The study focused on identifying any challenges and opportunities faced by adult ELLs while taking online classes and how these experiences shape their overall perceptions of learning English. Through interviews conducted for this phenomenological study, data were collected from 13 participants who answered semi-structured interview questions that discussed their individual, diverse experiences. The participants agreed to share their voices and perspectives on how online learning has impacted their English learning journey from the years 2020 to 2022.

Stemming from the data, four thematic findings were grouped as follows: (a) exploring learner experiences, (b) engaging in learning environments, (c) empowering self-directed learning, and (d) addressing online learning challenges for adult ELLs. In this chapter, the themes are thoroughly discussed and analyzed using three theoretical frameworks: andragogy, constructivism, and second language acquisition. The chapter includes limitations of the research and recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with implications related to embracing non-verbal communication, prioritizing empathy, and hybrid flexibility.

### **Andragogy in Action: Exploring Learner Experiences**

Experience is one of the foundational concepts of the andragogy theory (Ferreira & Maclean, 2017). Adults are known to bring many real-world experiences, both personal and professional, to the learning environment. When adult students have positive or negative

experiences, such experiences can impact their approach to learning especially in unexpected situations. Although the main purpose of this study was to learn about the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning, it was apparent that participants' experiences were influenced beyond the education context. As Knowles (1980) explained, adults tend to acquire new learning through the context of their own experiences. Knowles also reinforced the idea that experience becomes a resource for acquiring knowledge. Adults are known to bring a wealth of life knowledge and experiences which can help their learning. Teachers have the opportunity to utilize their students' experiences by constructing, demonstrating, and relating ideas to develop engaging activities for adults (Greene & Larsen, 2018).

During the interviews, participants mentioned their prior experience with online classes, which led to their own preferences. For example, Duha referred to her class as follows: "Because my experience from the class was kind of strong, it was kind of easy." This aligns with the concept of experiences, as adults tend to bring their own life experiences to their learning journey (El-Amin, 2020). Duha's previous classroom experiences influenced her online learning success. On the other hand, Gamal expressed, "I feel like I was lost," indicating the challenges he faced, especially in relation to his experiences with online classes. His past experiences in other English classes influenced his preference for hybrid classes. He found hybrid classes preferable as they helped him in balancing the demands of his school and work responsibilities.

Adult ELLs often draw on their previous experiences to assist them in their learning process, regardless of whether they're learning English or not. They might even rely on experiences from several years prior, such as those from primary or secondary school. As an example, Roz explained that her experiences in high school and college influenced her perception of technology which was a big part of her online learning. During her primary and

secondary schooling, she had to take computer classes to learn technology fundamentals in order to use programs for documentation, communication, and creativity. During her online English classes as an adult, she applied those previously learned computer skills.

Sometimes, through their experiences, participants realize that they missed their past experiences, especially when it came to learning. One student, Sara, expressed her struggles with online learning, stating that it “has been a challenging experience.” She missed the physical presence of her teacher and classmates, which highlighted how the principle of andragogy is relevant in her online learning journey. The principle of experience emphasized the importance of stepping back and observing students’ needs to provide them with a supportive learning environment. For example, Mason arrived at a conclusion that online learning was hard and compared it to his previous experience of in-person particularly when “it was easier to ask questions.” The lack of physical presence made it hard for Mason to get immediate answers and feedback to his questions.

For teachers, it is important to understand students’ past experiences to assist them in achieving success. This is what distinguishes andragogy from pedagogy in which adult learners and their teachers have multi-directional relationships where the experiences of both are equally valued (Robles, 1998). Even though no two participants’ experiences were the same, it was important to ensure that they received the necessary support, and their needs were recognized and honored. Hala mentioned that her “English was going worse” during online learning because she felt that the lack of communication was affecting her progress. On the other hand, Sara who was an outspoken student in the past, felt hesitant to ask questions or communicate effectively with the instructor during her adult online class, which negatively impacted her learning. Despite their differing experiences, both agreed that communication played an important role in online

learning. When teachers consider the individual experiences of learners while designing instruction, they can effectively reduce learner frustration and decrease dropout rates aligning with the principles of andragogy (Ferreira & Maclean, 2017), all of which helps students engage in the learning environment.

### **Engaging in Learning Environments**

The data highlighted the significance of active participation and engagement for participants in any learning environment. From a constructivist perspective, participants needed more purposeful tasks and activities that allowed them to become active in group discussions and practical problem-solving. For some participants, learning online was difficult because it failed to provide students with an environment that engaged and motivated them to be active participants. For instance, Mohamed struggled to present questions since online learning limited his opportunities to interact with teachers compared to in-person learning: “I have to search for my questions, though. This is the hardest part.” Mohamed found searching for answers to his questions made the process of learning more challenging. Learning becomes difficult when there is a disconnect between assigned tasks and students' existing knowledge, especially when there is no communication and engagement during the process. (Burmakow, 2016)

Also, when meaningful learning experiences connect to existing knowledge, it becomes easier for students to be engaged whether they are learning online or in person. During her online class, Hala mentioned that she learned how to search for topics and how to use the online library. She felt satisfied about this experience as she used to do these activities in-person but had to switch to online due to the pandemic. Halima, an older student in her fifties, explained how she practiced conversational skills by recording herself and sharing it with others on Flip: “When I practice something and listen to myself recording or whatever, sometimes I figure out my

mistake.” This applies to constructing knowledge which may involve reviewing, modifying, and evaluating work; gaining confidence and independence; and improving performance (Kaya, 2004).

In constructivism, teachers are encouraged to find ways to engage students and build on their knowledge, allowing them to put their learning into practice. Whether the learning environment is in-person or online, teachers must ensure they have a basic understanding of students' prior knowledge. This knowledge can then be redirected or refined to further develop deeper concepts that can be learned by the student. It is important for teachers to also create a positive and supportive learning atmosphere that motivates adult ELLs to engage with their classmates. Teachers can provide online group projects, conversational language activities, and access to interactive learning resources which are all key elements to social constructivism. Wertsch (1997), who focused his research on Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, asserts that students develop their thinking skills through their interaction with other students, teachers, and the environment. In his viewpoint, it is very important to consider the background, the language, and the culture of these adult ELLs in order to build on the knowledge and the information that they create during this learning process; doing so, also empowers self-directed learning.

### **Empowering Self-Directed Learning**

The data indicated that participants acknowledged the importance of being able to learn independently and to become self-directed students. Due to the mandatory transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, students were given the opportunity or required to take charge of their learning process. Due to the pandemic, students were isolated and had to work independently, which resulted in the development of their self-concept and self-direction. In

other words, these students had to take responsibility for their own learning without relying on direct instruction from their teachers as they used to have during traditional in-person classes.

In the field of andragogy, the principle of self is a fundamental concept that encourages adults to take responsibility for their lives and become more mindful of their decisions. Knowles (1984) illustrated that adults are self-motivated because they tend to take responsibility for their role in the learning process: "The precise attributes of andragogy are that learners demonstrate self-directedness, and as learners, they are multifaceted resources for learning" (p. 60). Despite facing various challenges, the participants in this study recognized the importance of being able to learn independently and becoming self-directed learners.

To illustrate how participant data revealed the theme of empowering self-directed learning, Gamal shared his preference for in-person classes but noted the challenge of balancing work and school. Hybrid classes provided him with a valuable solution which allowed him to study at home, fostering independence and permitting him time to attend college. Duha also identified herself as an independent learner after taking online classes by expressing her preference for learning on her own: "I like to learn by myself." Mohamed developed a self-directed interest in integrating technology as part of his future career following his experience with hybrid classes; he expressed being "comfortable to use any device of technology."

The answers given by the participants also revealed their approach to self-directed learning, which involved adapting and using their knowledge based on their online learning experiences. For example, Saja found online classes to be challenging at first but overcame them through dedication to read books and watch videos. She also realized that it was her own responsibility to search for resources. Other students also mentioned that they had to take the initiative in their own learning during online classes, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hala learned a lot about technology during this time, including how to search for topics, use the online library, and write good essays. Other students, like Mohamed, even discovered new hobbies and gained many skills in technology design from online courses.

During the interviews, the participants also shared how they adapted to technology, shifted to online learning, and became more self-directed learners by managing their life schedules and time. For example, Halima recognized how online classes, despite the challenges, made her navigate her time to do homework in the comfort of her home: “I just take a lot of time to do homework but it’s good. I feel I am independent.” A seminal study conducted on 68 randomly selected English learners also supported this finding and concluded that the use of computers as an instructional medium helps students work at their own pace while acquiring metacognitive skills (Carrasquillo & Nunez, 1988).

Students who enroll in online courses tend to navigate their time management skills and the ability to use technology. It is evident that ELLs can also adapt and apply content knowledge using technology especially because they recognize the importance and role of technology for future opportunities. As Gasevic (2020) argued, in this digital age, technology will continue to play a crucial role in equipping students with the skills and knowledge to prepare them for their future careers and lives.

### **Addressing Online Learning Challenges for Adult ELLs**

Learning challenges faced by adult ELLs in online learning was an important theme. The interviews conducted with the participants revealed several struggles arising from the change in learning modalities including the use of technology, lack of communication, minimal interaction, and difficulty faced while transitioning from in-person to online learning. In addition, the participants expressed their challenges in adapting to the new way of learning, particularly in the

context of acquiring a second language. The findings of this study align with the conclusion drawn by Mahyoob (2020) who conducted a study during the COVID-19 pandemic which revealed that students “could not effectively interact with teachers during virtual classes of English language skills” (p. 360). The lack of communication with teachers led students to have low motivation, lack of confidence, and limited experience in online learning.

This study’s research participants also missed the social aspect of learning and found it challenging to communicate their questions and concerns to teachers. For example, Salem described his experience and interaction with his teacher by stating, "I actually don't interact with her so much because I know it's not easy to communicate with the teacher or others when the class is online." Saja also expressed her thoughts on the lack of communication; she stated, “Learning English, you need to meet with people. You need to communicate with others.” Similarly, another recent study on international students, highlighted the negative impact of online learning because it “happens in one direction, making it difficult for students to consult with material that is felt to need a deeper explanation or understanding” (Assapari, 2021, p. 14).

The transition to online learning proved to be quite challenging for the adult ELLs in this study, given their prior experience with hard copy materials and in-person classroom instruction. For example, one participant described how she struggled with technology during the COVID-19 pandemic:

I'm so bad in technology because I didn't use it before. So, I'm still learning how to use technology. In the beginning of classes, and pandemic, I have to use computers, and this is the first time I use a computer. (Sara, Interview, March 8, 2023)

This quote highlights the importance of a smooth transition to online learning platforms and the need for adequate support to overcome technical challenges. Conducted during the COVID-19



pandemic, Mahyboob (2020) revealed that technological challenges may hinder adult ELLs from accessing content, materials, and resources, resulting in difficulties in understanding and comprehending lessons.

The sudden change to online learning during the pandemic also had a significant impact on various aspects of the participants' personal and professional lives, especially after moving to the U.S. Students who range in ages 35-44 found it challenging to learn online while navigating all the changes in their lives. For instance, Nour mentioned that during Zoom classes, her kids were around, and she had to manage household tasks, making it difficult to focus on the class: "When I take my classes on Zoom, my kids are around me, all the things in the home I need to make like this or cook or do other things, but that's not having interest in the class."

As in second language acquisition theory, factors such as age and individual learning styles can influence these challenges. It is important to address and understand these challenges as they are crucial to effective language acquisition and teaching. Ja'ashan (2020) conducted a study on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in learning English online at the university level. He found that students encountered several challenges related to academic, administrative, and technical aspects of online learning. One significant disadvantage of online learning is that "skills [such] as speaking are harder to practice online" (Ja'ashan, 2020, p. 135).

Learning English requires a great amount of communication and interaction between the learner and the teacher. All participants shared their concerns about improving their speaking and listening skills in online learning. For example, Gamal mentioned the challenges he had with online communication which included difficulties in forming connections with classmates and the teacher. He highlighted issues with English online classes being less engaging which made him feel lost and worried about minimal interactions. Hala, on the other hand, expressed her

frustration with online communication tools like Zoom, especially when facing technical issues and internet disruptions:

In the beginning, I was like, excited to take Zoom classes. But sometimes I get frustrated when the connection goes away. And we have to wait 30 minutes. And waiting for the professor to come back to open the Zoom again. (Hala, Interview, January 23, 2023)

Within a relative context, Hijazi and AlNatour (2021) found that online learning was not effective in engaging learners, as it only involved listening to and watching lectures, making learners passive with no two-way communication.

Participants expressed the lack of face-to-face communication and the use of body language and facial expressions, all of which eventually effected their understanding of the content and learning English. Mason stated, "Online was a little hard because I couldn't know like, what teacher want." Similarly, Nour described how some students turned off their cameras during online classes, resulting in the absence of body language. She expressed her frustration for this situation, stating, "I don't like it because it makes me feel like I'm not in a class."

According to Vygotsky (1978), communication and social interaction form the foundation of language development. Also, engaging in oral communication enhances the internalization of knowledge. However, both elements are hard to replicate online due to the absence of physical presence and the limited non-verbal cues that are important for effective communication and social interaction (Harlan, 2000).

Based on the second language acquisition theory, learning a new language requires significant communication and interaction between the learner and the teacher. Students learn from body language, the teacher's voice, and interactions. Participants lacked these aspects in online contexts which effected their learning. Booth (2020) addressed similar challenges faced

by students learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic, including low engagement, poor academic performance, and limited social interaction, which led to a high dropout rate. Her conclusion proposed a solution to incorporate technology to address the challenges of remote learning and connect with students, considering the human factors that impact student growth and achievement.

Ozfidan and Burlbaw (2019) also discussed the factors that affect second language acquisition. In their study, they listed internal and external factors that can affect the learning of a second language. Some of the internal factors include age, personality, experience, cognition, and motivation. The external factors include curriculum, classroom instruction and materials, culture, and access to communication with native speakers. In this study, the 13 participants not only shared their experiences but also expressed the challenges they faced while learning a second language. Some of the external factors that affected their learning was the involuntary shift to online curriculum. To illustrate, Nour stated, “When I finished the semester with online, I feel like okay, I finished two semesters, but I feel like I don't have information.” This shift to the online context did not only affect the content learning but also the sense of connection between learners and their educational environment.

Additionally, the distractions and disruptions during online classes made it difficult for participants to concentrate. On the other hand, in-person classes allowed participants to share their customs and food and be present while speaking about their culture. With online learning, they lacked that sense of sharing friendship and networking. This aligns with Alzamil's (2021) conclusion that online learning cannot fully replace face-to-face classes and is often considered boring by students. His study shows that learners miss the social environment of a physical classroom, face a lack of physical activity, and experience limited access to practical lessons in

online learning. Even during their synchronous Zoom meetings, students would turn off their cameras, which made participants feel disconnected from each other as Nour previously mentioned: "I don't like it because it makes me feel like I'm not in a class." Students also expressed some internal factors related to motivation in which they experienced laziness and procrastination during their online learning unlike when they were in-person. For example, Duha stated, "Sometimes I log in late because I know it's not as important as, you know, going to the class, even though she started the class." All of these factors can directly influence adult ELLs' competence and performance in acquiring English as a second language.

### **Implications**

Adults, in general, are known to be aware of the reasons for what they need to learn and why (Knowles, 1996). Although there is an increased number of adult learners, the number of studies related to them is less in comparison to K–12 students (Kara et al., 2019). Unlike K–12 learners, adults have many responsibilities and needs that may affect their educational experiences and participation in learning. They tend to be very busy with life, work, and family, especially for immigrants who try to assimilate into society by learning a new language.

The results of this research suggest that it is important to address the needs of adult ELLs and take their experiences into account. Especially during uncertain times, it is crucial to provide constant feedback and listen to students' concerns. However, it is important to note that the data do not provide a complete picture because of the limited number of participants and timing of the study. Nevertheless, the study revealed three important implications for stakeholders, including teachers and administrators, to consider: embracing non-verbal communication, prioritizing empathy, and hybrid providing flexibility.

## **Embracing Non-Verbal Communication**

This study highlighted how students value non-verbal communication and interaction, which are crucial for developing their English language skills. Similar to previous studies, students perceived online learning as having less social interaction, lacking social presence, and synchronous communication (Bali & Liu, 2018). As more online programs are being introduced and developed, there is a growing need to accept change and adopt new methods that facilitate adult ELLs' learning.

Teachers need to consider both verbal and non-verbal communication learning techniques and “recognize the importance of a customized approach to learning” (Cercone, 2008, p. 151). Since adults bring a wealth of experiences, memories, and feelings to the learning environment, teachers should take on a facilitator role rather than lecturers by planning instruction that enables adults to leverage their non-verbal communication skills. Consequently, teachers in online learning should utilize more visuals and videos. Additionally, teachers need to develop synchronous learning models that allow students to interact with each other and communicate effectively; such a focus will likely help students and teachers prioritize empathy.

## **Prioritizing Empathy**

Findings from this study reveal how participants carry a range of feelings related to online classes including frustration, confusion, and isolation. It is essential to pay attention to the quality of online teaching methods and evaluate whether they work well with ELLs. Teachers, facilitators, and stakeholders should be empathetic toward students' everyday struggles, including emotional isolation and language barriers, even if it requires more time and planning.

English programs should also prioritize improving the quality of all learning formats and look into hybrid learning as an option to motivate, encourage, and guide adult learners,

especially those who are ELLs. Students seem to prefer the flexibility of online along with attending the courses. Also, exploring differences in experiences in different learning formats based on age group and gender may offer a broader perspective on the challenges faced by adult ELLs during online learning.

### **Providing Hybrid Flexibility**

To support and empower adult learners in their English language journey, it is beneficial to expand the availability of hybrid courses. This approach allows for a blend of online and in-person instruction, supporting the diverse needs and preferences of students. By offering this level of flexibility, there is a potential for increased enrollment and participation in English classes, ultimately leading to greater success for adult ELLs. Not only do ELLs benefit from the flexibility of classes, but they also interact with their classmates and teachers, using social conventions and nonverbal communication in language learning, which is part of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. The core principle of this approach is to learn the language by using it, rather than just learning about the language (Sauvignon, 1987). Hybrid learning offers students that flexibility to attend classes in person or online, while acquiring communication skills needed to learn a new language such as turn-taking, appropriate content, nonverbal cues, and tone.

Moreover, exploring the differences in experiences based on age and gender provides a broader perspective on the challenges faced by ELLs during online learning within a hybrid context. Hybrid courses not only offers flexibility but also allows teachers in English programs to gain a better understanding of the unique needs and obstacles of their students, allowing educators to evaluate their teaching approach and improve the learning experience for their students. Within the (CLT) approach (Sauvignon, 1987), the objective of language teaching is to

develop communicative competence rather than only grammatical competence in students (Richards, 2006); such competence can be achieved through hybrid courses that encourage participating in class activities that are based on a cooperative rather than individualistic approach to learning. By examining the findings in this study, many students mentioned hybrid learning in the data, even though there was no direct question about it during the interview. This suggests that hybrid courses provide an important learning format that needs to be explored further. For instance, stakeholders need to consider whether classes should be offered exclusively online or if they should include more hybrid components to be more effective. One possible angle to consider is comparing hybrid programs with online-only programs on a global scale.

One concern that may rise with hybrid flexibility is how to ensure accessibility and quality. Hybrid learning is a way of learning that provides a blend of in-person and online elements. While it offers students the flexibility they need, there are concerns about equal access and quality (Gorman et al., 2021). It is important to ensure that online learning is of high-quality and accessible to all students. Before hybrid learning, online education often struggled to meet the diverse needs of students (Bettinger et al., 2017). However, with hybrid learning, there is a better chance of meeting ELLs' language needs. The challenge that remains is finding ways to maintain quality while ensuring access to students. Findings from this study have shown that that online learning may not fully meet the needs of participants even though half of their preferred hybrid learning is conducted online. Therefore, it is important to find solutions that address this dilemma and deliver high-quality online learning that is accessible to everyone. This might require further research, but achieving balance between access and quality in hybrid learning is essential to enhance online learning for all students, regardless of their circumstances. Overall, there appears to be a significant potential for future research in this area.

## **Limitations**

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning at one community-focused college. Although the findings were rich because of the participants' voices, the findings cannot accurately represent the experiences of all ELLs attending community-focused colleges. The study focused on the experiences of participants who took classes during 2020–2022, a period of significant changes to the educational system due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the population of people taking online classes was narrower and therefore more focused on individual situations. Although this study focused on a two-year period only, which might be considered a limitation, it managed to capture the experiences of a diverse group of people engaged in online classwork.

Another factor that may be perceived as a limitation is that some individuals may argue whether the sample size of 13 students is enough for generalizing the findings (Creswell, 2013). Since this study is phenomenological in nature, the importance of being able to dig in deeply into fewer stories enhances the quality of the research instead of making it a limitation. Phenomenology allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the participants and the contexts they encountered during online learning.

To ensure consistency, all participants were asked the same questions in English during the interview. Prior to the interview, the participants were not given any instruction about choosing their language preference during the interview; thus, all participants spoke in English, likely assuming that they would be interviewed by their teacher in the same language they were supposed to speak in class. It is important to note that English is the second language for all the



participants, and this may limit their ability to express themselves fully during the data collection process. This limitation may prevent participants from communicating their true feelings and experiences with online learning.

Also, this study focused solely on the students' experiences and did not include the teachers' experiences or their perspectives of how they view online learning for adult ELLs , which could be a major factor in understanding the findings. Lastly, the study relied on the participants' descriptions of their experiences and did not focus on their academic level or achievement in their English courses. There was no evaluation or analysis conducted to determine whether there were potential connections between academic performance and the reported experiences.

### **Future Research**

Per the findings, this study explored the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning and emphasized the importance of this learning format for future instruction. With globalization and immigration prominent, the number of adult ELLs in community colleges and higher education institutions is expected to rise (Cozma, 2015). These individuals seek to improve their lives by learning English as one of their initial steps toward settling in the U.S. and securing job opportunities.

To gain a comprehensive understanding, it is important to expand beyond a single college and English program. This will help in identifying the similarities and differences in the experiences of other English learners both domestically and internationally. Another approach for deeper research involves conducting interviews or surveys to explore the various resources available to current or former English learners across different settings including community colleges, universities, and online platforms. Additionally, it would also be meaningful to

compare and examine the experiences of English learners abroad and how they adapt to online learning prior to, during, and after, the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research serves an important purpose because not only does it give voice to this particular population, but few studies have focused on the specific situation of adults learning English through online platforms. In a similar context, it is important to further explore the effectiveness of learning English and the various teaching methods used in online instruction to support English learners. This may include assessing the impact of language barriers on student performance and their overall experience in different contexts. Additionally, it is important to explore the cultural aspects of language learning and how students connect with their communities. Allowing students to express themselves in their native language during future studies can reveal their authentic feelings and experiences. Therefore, it is important to provide the choice for participants to select their preferred language and interview format, whether in person or online. Even dedicated researchers who only speak one language can utilize advanced technology for translation purposes if needed; albeit, the interview process will be easier when the interviewer and interviewee speak the same language. Ongoing research can help bridge that research gap on the experiences of adult ELLs with online learning.

Future research should also include the perspective of teachers and their insights regarding teaching ELLs in online courses. This shift in perspective can provide an in-depth understanding of the findings and may explain the challenges that students face from the teachers' point of view. During the interviews, participants discussed the role of teachers with their online learning. However, gaining insights from the teachers and hearing their side of the story, so to speak, can provide deeper understanding of the research findings. Another area for future research involves the evaluation of teaching methods and strategies in adult English online

courses. This includes both synchronous and asynchronous approaches and how they differ from hybrid and in-person classes. Within such research, students' and teachers' perspectives need to be layered.

Furthermore, it is important to examine the English curriculum used in online learning to identify critical factors in the experiences of adults ELLs. One area that can be explored further is the increased use of Open Education Resources (OER) and how effective, if at all, this integration can be among English programs. Such research may include gathering data on the effectiveness of OER curricula as well as identifying potential benefits and challenges through student feedback and outcomes.

Another recommendation is to study the accessibility of resources among adult ELLs and how this can influence their learning experiences. When learners are provided with access to the necessary resources, they feel supported in their learning journey. However, it is important to consider how much access ELLs actually have to learning materials, such as textbooks, technological tools, and visual aids which can significantly impact their ability to acquire language skills.

This study could be replicated to include multiple community colleges and compare their findings with traditional education programs that offer English classes for community members. Such research would provide a broader perspective and enable the analysis of similarities and differences between online and traditional learning. Studies like this will also help to determine if online learning can be offered outside of academic institutions.

Another recommendation is to find recent studies conducted post-pandemic and compare them with pre-pandemic studies to understand the evolving needs of adult ELLs regardless of the learning format. One aspect of the analysis could be the difficulty faced by many participants in

expressing their experiences, emotions, and support regarding online learning due to language barriers. In future research, it would be appropriate to provide participants with the option to communicate freely in their native language, and then translate their thoughts into English.

### **Concluding Thoughts: A Personal Reflection**

As a first-generation ELL who came to the U.S. almost 20 years ago, I was able to relate to some of the students who had to face similar challenges I've experienced across the last two decades. Online classes were not available at that time, but I recall the feeling of being self-directed yet isolated. To thrive in this country, I knew I had to surpass the expectations of a typical high school student and put in more effort than my peers. Like many participants in this study, I came from a diverse background and had similar challenges of adapting to life in the U.S. Personally, my arrival was a challenge as an eighth grader. I did not speak the language and had no friends, which made life even more difficult. In my early years of high school, I was frequently pulled out for assessments that I cannot even recall. I felt frustrated and struggled to express myself. I can understand how important it is for these students to have a voice and a platform to share their experiences and feelings.

The students who participated in this study were willing to speak up about their experience with online learning for several reasons. First, I was their teacher prior to their interviews, so they had voluntarily decided to take part in the study. Second, they felt that their voices needed to be heard because they didn't have a platform to express themselves. Although they were learning English and had not yet fully mastered conversational skills, they wanted to express their viewpoints and hoped for change. In general, when students learn that their opinions are valued, they tend to become more confident in their communication.

Through my research, I aimed to deliver the voices and messages of the minorities and English learners, highlighting the importance of academic research in addressing their needs. I hope that this study will help pave the way for fellow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by adult ELLs and work toward finding effective long-lasting solutions related to effective instruction for this growing population. My focus was on capturing the unique experiences of these individuals and the ideas they shared about online learning. Despite my role as their former teacher, I was pleased that my students spoke up and trusted me with their personal experiences.

For the last five years of my role as a college teacher, I often assumed that my instruction was learned and understood by all students, but listening to each individual student has made me realize that every student has a story, a struggle, and a perspective. They bring with them their own set of challenges and experiences, and it is important to understand their individual needs and address them to create an inclusive and effective learning environment.

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**Appendix A:**

**Informed Consent for Participation in a Research Study**

**The Experiences of Adult English Language Learners with Online Learning**

You are invited to participate in a research study about the experiences of adult English language learners with online learning conducted by Asia Mohamed Al-Jalal, a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education at University of Michigan - Dearborn. If you agree to be part of this research, you will be asked to participate in one-on one interviews with a series of questions regarding your experiences with online learning. Your permission to use your journal writings as artifacts will also be included in this consent. The goal of this research study is to gain insight into the lived experiences of adult English language learners with online learners. The interview is anticipated to take no more than one hour and will be audio recorded. You will have the option to be interviewed in person or online, depending on your preference. Participation in this study is voluntary. If you change your mind and do not wish to continue with the study, you may withdraw at any time. Your identity as a participant will remain anonymous during and after the study. All responses will be coded for anonymity and data will be stored on a password-protected laptop throughout the duration of the research. There will be no compensation for participation. If you agree to participate in this study, please sign your name below. If you have any questions regarding your rights or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns, you may contact the principal investigator, Asia Mohamed Al-Jalal at [mohamedy@umich.edu](mailto:mohamedy@umich.edu)

.....  
I, \_\_\_\_\_ verify that this study has been explained to me and that I agree to participate in the study. I also agree to being audiotaped. I understand that if I have any hesitation, I reserve the right to discontinue my participation in the research at any time and may request that all information that has been provided be destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B:

### IRB Exemption



Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB-HSBS) • 2800 Plymouth Rd., Building 520, Room 1170, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2800 • phone (734) 936-0933 • fax (734) 998-9171 • irbhsbs@umich.edu

**To:** Asia Mohamed

**From:**

Riann Palmieri-Smith  
Thad Polk

**Cc:**

Danielle DeFauw  
Asia Mohamed

**Subject:** Notice of Exemption for [HUM00228043]

**SUBMISSION INFORMATION:**

Title: The Experiences of Adult English Language Learners with Online Learning  
Full Study Title (if applicable): The Experiences of Adult English Language Learners with Online Learning  
Study eResearch ID: [HUM00228043](#)  
Date of this Notification from IRB: 12/16/2022  
Date of IRB Exempt Determination: 12/16/2022  
UM Federalwide Assurance: FWA00004969 (For the current FWA expiration date, please visit the [UM HRPP Webpage](#))  
OHRP IRB Registration Number(s): IRB00000245

**IRB EXEMPTION STATUS:**

The IRB HSBS has reviewed the study referenced above and determined that, as currently described, it is exempt from ongoing IRB review, per the following federal exemption category:

**EXEMPTION 2(i) and/or 2(ii) at 45 CFR 46.104(d):**

**Research that only includes interactions** involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) **if at least one of the following criteria is met:**

(i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that **the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained**, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

(ii) Any disclosure of the **human subjects' responses** outside the research **would not reasonably place the subjects at risk** of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation

Note that the study is considered exempt as long as any changes to the use of human subjects (including their data) remain within the scope of the exemption category above. Any proposed changes that may exceed the scope of this category, or the approval conditions of any other non-IRB reviewing committees, must be submitted as an amendment through eResearch.

Although an exemption determination eliminates the need for ongoing IRB review and approval, you still have an obligation to understand and abide by generally accepted principles of responsible and ethical conduct of research. Examples of these principles can be found in the Belmont Report as well as in guidance from professional societies and scientific organizations.

**SUBMITTING AMENDMENTS VIA eRESEARCH:**

You can access the online forms for amendments in the eResearch workspace for this exempt study, referenced above.

**ACCESSING EXEMPT STUDIES IN eRESEARCH:**

Click the "Exempt and Not Regulated" tab in your eResearch home workspace to access this exempt study.



**Riann Palmieri-Smith**  
Co-chair, IRB HSBS



**Thad Polk**  
Co-chair, IRB HSBS



**Appendix C:**

**Online Survey-based Survey**

<https://forms.gle/aV5vXZnbodJkfN5a7>

**Name:**

**Phone:**

**Email:**

**Age Range:**

\_\_\_ 18-24

\_\_\_ 25-34

\_\_\_ 35-44

\_\_\_ 45-54

\_\_\_ 55-64

\_\_\_ 65 and above

**Gender:**

**Years in the United States:**

**Highest Degree:**

**Major:**

**Current Occupation:**

**English Language Proficiency level** \_\_\_\_\_ **Benninger** \_\_\_\_\_ **Intermediate** \_\_\_\_\_ **Advanced**

**Over the past two years:**

\_\_\_\_\_ English language classes taken (In-Person), how many? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ English language classes taken (Online), how many? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ English language classes taken (Hybrid), how many? \_\_\_\_\_

**Advantages of online learning**

\_\_\_\_\_ Saving commute time

\_\_\_\_\_ Time and place flexibility

\_\_\_\_\_ Language skills improvements

\_\_\_\_\_ Extra time for Self-Study

\_\_\_\_\_ Opportunity to be creative

\_\_\_\_\_ Self-Disciplined

\_\_\_\_\_ Access to online resources

\_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ No Advantages

**Challenges with Online learning**

\_\_\_\_\_ Internet / Technical Problems

\_\_\_\_\_ Online assessments

\_\_\_\_\_ lack of interaction with teachers

\_\_\_\_\_ Concentration loss

\_\_\_\_\_ Emotional Isolation

\_\_\_\_\_ lack of social interaction

\_\_\_\_\_ low motivation

\_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ No Challenges

**Satisfaction with Online learning**

\_\_\_\_\_ Very Satisfied

\_\_\_\_\_ Satisfied

\_\_\_\_\_ Neutral

\_\_\_\_\_ Dissatisfied

\_\_\_\_\_ Very dissatisfied

## **Appendix D:**

### **Student Interview Questions**

**Intro Script:** I would like to thank you for taking part in this study regarding your experiences with online learning. During the interview, I will record our conversation and you will be given a pseudonym to protect your privacy. Feel free to ask questions, pause at any time, or skip any question. As a reminder, participating in this interview is completely voluntary. You may choose not to continue with the interview or withdraw at any time without any penalty.

1. What has been your experience with online learning?
2. What situations have influenced or affected your experience with online learning?
3. How would you define a successful online learning experience?
4. What would you say has been your favorite part of online learning?
5. What would you say has been your least favorite part of online learning?
6. What are your thoughts about the impact of online learning on your English skills?
7. What challenges and difficulties, if any, have you faced in switching from in-person to online learning?
8. What challenges and difficulties, if any, have you faced in switching from online learning to in-person classes?
9. What is the greatest learning challenge you have experienced during online learning?
10. What were the greatest learning gains you experienced during online learning?
11. What kind of support did you receive, if any, during online learning?
12. Would you recommend online learning to adult English language learners? Why or why not?