

## RESEARCH

### Telling the Life Stories of Adult Immigrants Learning English as a Second Language in the Midwest: A Chronotopic Approach Informed by Bakhtin's *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel*

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#### ABSTRACT

Adult immigrants are invaluable assets to our society as they bring along their cultural capital across borders. However, little is known about how their rich life histories reflect and refract their plights as ESL learners. This study is an investigation of three adult immigrants' English learning in an immigration center in the Midwest. The researcher spent six months at the immigration center for prolonged observation. She collected artifacts, videotaped the ESL classes, and conducted interviews with the participants in 2009. Bakhtin's chronotopic approach was employed as a means for representing and mapping the participants' life histories. The findings contribute to the research base by furthering our understanding of the discursive relationships between life histories and ESL learning among these adult immigrants.

#### INTRODUCTION

This article aims to tell the life histories of three adult immigrants and how their rich experiences reflect and refract their journeys as English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners. The researcher developed a chronotopic approach based on Bakhtin's *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel* to represent the chronotopic moves (i.e., critical turning points) in the participants' lives. The findings of the study

contribute to the research community of adult literacies in two ways, (i) the study reveals how these learners' experiences affect their learning of ESL, and (ii) the chronotopic approach offers a new investigative means for qualitative researchers in the field.

As Crandall (1993) underscores in her article, "Adult education is a stepchild of K-12 education and an afterthought in U.S. educational policy," (p. 497) adult ESL education has long been viewed as a "dumping-ground" for people who failed in the educational system. Formal ESL instruction among school-aged students has always been the focus of research. However, the learning of English as a second language among adult immigrants is an important area of research because this group of people, whose voice is seldom heard by the mainstream society, deserves an outlet to tell us what they can offer to the teaching and learning processes.

#### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study was informed by Bakhtin's *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel*. In the literary theorist's masterpiece, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin uses the analogy of novel genres to narrate the subtle relationships between the author, the text, and the reader (Bakhtin, 1981). This approach

was borrowed and applied to broaden the horizon of investigating the life histories of adult ESL immigrants.

With reference to Bakhtin (1981), chronotope is the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in the literature” (p. 84). Time and chronotope in the novel are referring to the changes that occur in the major characters’ lives in various novel genres. Bakhtin (1981) depicts the various genres as unique in its way of telling the lives of the heroes. For instance, the hero in the adventure novel will go through adventures but will appear “as if absolutely nothing had happened” afterwards (p. 89). On the other hand, the hero in the adventure of everyday life will go through metamorphosis, i.e., evolving into a more complex individual after a series of events.

By bringing in the various chronotopes of his novels, Bakhtin (1981) unfolds the complex relationships between the characters’ past, present, and future in the plots. As such, the chronotopes reveal the critical turning points of the characters. I believe that Bakhtin’s (1981) chronotopes can be applied to analyze adult immigrants’ life histories as ESL learners. I derived new analytical tools called the “chronotopic moves” and “chronotopic map” based on the chronotope theoretical construct discussed in Bakhtin’s *Dialogic Imagination*.

Chronotopic moves are the flashbacks that occur when a participant refers to a certain period of time in his/her life while answering a question in the interview. Most of the times, the chronotopic moves are identified when the participant refers to a critical turning point of his/her life, e.g., moving from his/her home country to the U.S., or attending the very first ESL class. Such turning points are significant temporal referential points for analyzing their interview transcripts. The chronotopic maps are the representation of such moves with the use of timelines.

For each participant’s interview transcript, I first identified the chronotopic moves and described them in the form of a table. Timelines were used to represent all the chronotopic moves that happened during the interview. The collection of timelines is called a chronotopic map.

Bakhtin’s chronotopic approach unravels the participants’ transnational experiences and ESL learning journeys. Most importantly, it highlights the *changes* in the participants’ lives, which can be easily overlooked in educational research. Therefore, I regard the chronotopic approach as an invaluable means to analyze interview data. Also, as the approach is based on the participants’ point of view, it allows the researchers to gain an *emic* perspective while analyzing the interview data.

## Literature Review

In the area of second language teaching and learning, studies about formal classroom instruction with school-aged children have always been foregrounded in the literature (e.g., Allwright, 1980; Alvarado, 1992; Brock, 1986; Lee, 2008; Love & Suherdi, 1996; Pennington, 1999; Schwartz, 1980). However, less focus has been given to adult immigrants who are struggling with the English language in the U.S. (Bowen, 1999; Bourret, 2009; Cooke, 2006; D’Annunzio, 1990; Frye, 1999). Mathews-Aydinli (2008) corroborates this claim and expresses the concern that “not only do adult ELLs studying nonacademic English remain an understudied population in the academic scholarship on second-language acquisition (SLA) and education, the research studies that do exist often lack a theoretical base and thus remain disconnected from each other” (p. 199). Indeed, there is no consensus among the research community regarding the “how” question for investigating adult immigrants’ learning trajectories.

Among the extant studies, D’Annunzio (1990)

used pretest posttest design to determine the effectiveness of Language Experience Approach in educating 15 Cambodians who did not speak English at all. Cooke (2006) investigated four adult migrants learning English in the UK using a case study methodology. Frye (1999) studied immigrant women's ESL classes and concluded that they lacked crucial support such as child-care and transportation, placing them at a disadvantaged position when compared to the males.

As far as Bakhtin's chronotopic approach is concerned, much of the research was conducted in literary studies. Among them, most were conducted for genre analysis and narrative studies (Crossley, 2007; Cuevas, 2006; Dickson, 2001; Lawson, 2011; Pishghadam & Sabouri, 2011). These studies referred to Bakhtin's notion of chronotopes for analyzing the time and space arrangement in literary texts. For instance, Crossley (2007) counted the number of temporal and spatial moves in cover letters and analyzed the genre specific particularities in cover letters. Lawson (2011) utilized Bakhtin's chronotope to analyze the space-time arrangement in narrative plots.

In the field of education, many studies were conducted with reference to Bakhtin's dialogism instead of chronotope, but few used the chronotopic approach (Brown & Renshaw, 2006; Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 1998; Mutnick, 2006). Brown & Renshaw (2006) investigated a conversation between a male teacher and 26 students by looking at how the past and present were articulated and constructed among the participants. The researchers concluded that the chronotopic approach allowed them to further explore the meaning constructed by the participants with intertextuality and hybrid chronotopes. Hajdukowski-Ahmed (1998) referred to Bakhtin's dialogism and how it empowered female participants to voice out the hegemony that they experienced. Mutnick (2006)

analyzed the time and space arrangement in novels using chronotopic approach. All of these studies utilized narration as the means of analysis. Though Mutnick (2006) suggested mapping out the temporal-spatial arrangements in the novels, the analysis in the article was conducted with textual analysis.

The overarching concerns arisen from these studies are:

- i) The number of research studies conducted with adult ESL immigrants with limited language proficiencies is much less than those conducted with school children receiving formal instruction, and
- ii) There is a lack of studies with well defined logic-of-inquiry that maps out the chronotopic moves. All studies were conducted either with quantitative methods, i.e., counting the temporal-spatial moves, or textual analysis.

Crossley (2007) suggested that, "while much of Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the dialogic nature of discourse has been adopted by both the composition and the English as a Second Language (ESL) community, very little, if any, of his work on the chronotope has been used as an approach to analyze either the composing process of writers or the finished writing product." (p. 4) Therefore, there is a need for a better framing and representational tool as far as adult immigrants' learning trajectories are concerned. This study aims at addressing this research gap in the literature.

## Research Questions

1. What are the major reasons for adult immigrants to move to the U.S.?
2. Why are they studying English as a second language?
3. What are the difficulties of adult immigrants in learning English as a

second language (ESL) in the U.S.?

4. What are the cultural differences which they experienced?
5. How do their life histories inform us about their English learning?

### METHODOLOGY

This article draws data corpus from a qualitative case study with three adult immigrants at an immigration center in the Midwest. The immigration center offers free ESL classes for adult immigrants who are over 18 years old. In 2009, I volunteered as an ESL teaching aide and started to collect data after having the approval from the center director and IRB. When I was working closely with the adult immigrants, I noticed that they longed for their voices to be heard. I chose Bakhtin for the theoretical framing because he addresses the dialogical needs of these immigrants. As such, the logic-of-inquiry warrants a qualitative approach, so I observed and videotaped the ESL classes, audio recorded the oral interviews, and collected reading and writing artifacts from the participants.

The interview data for this study, which was relevant to the participants' lived experiences and their plights in learning English as a second language, was selected for further analysis. Among the 26 adult immigrants, many were undocumented and did not want to be interviewed. Also, many women from the Middle East said that they were not allowed to be video or audio recorded in their cultures. As such, three learners' interview data was included for in-depth analysis. The interviews were conducted in Summer 2009 on a one-on-one basis. They were transcribed and analyzed as follows.

#### Lin

Lin was a 78 year-old man who emigrated from China to Canada in 1999. He later moved from

Canada to the U.S. and was naturalized in 2007. He was married with two daughters: one lived in the U.S. and one lived in Canada. Lin received his college education in mainland China in the 1950s and was previously employed as a college instructor teaching Mathematics and Computer Science in China. When Lin was attending college, he was required to study Russian instead of English as a second language and, therefore, did not have much training in listening, speaking, reading, and writing English. He only received some basic instructions of English vocabulary in elementary school.

Among the three participants, Lin possessed high intrinsic motivation to study English. He genuinely loved the English language. According to Lin, "English is beautiful. English grammar is science. It's a systematic language... I consider English as culture... American culture. I love it" (Lin, personal communication, June 2009).

Regarding the difficulties of English learning, Lin complained about his fading memory. He was interested in studying the language but could not retain the new words presented through formal instruction and incidental learning. He often became frustrated with the situation, but he used a pocket-size notebook for jotting down new words presented to him. Lin was a conscientious student in and out of the classroom. Within the classroom, he always raised his hand and volunteered to answer questions. Outside the classroom, he tried his best to learn and use English in daily life with his notebook. Lin was aware of the cultural differences that he experienced in the U.S., and he stated that Americans were more open-minded than the Chinese counterparts—especially in the classroom setting.

#### Ginny

Ginny was a 25 year-old woman who moved from Italy to the U.S. in early 2009 because of her

partner's relocation for a job. She had extended family members living in the country and said that she particularly liked the lifestyle. Ginny received her college education in Italy and had a B.A. in women studies. She had several years of work experience in an architectural firm before coming to the U.S.

Ginny was particularly interested in working on her pronunciation because sometimes the native speakers could not understand her. In Italy, she received English education beginning in elementary school, but it was grammar focused. She complained about having too many grammar drills but insufficient training in speaking. In her home country, English was viewed as formulaic and autonomous. The only goal was to remember the grammatical rules and pass the examinations, so the biggest cultural difference that Ginny experienced centered on the teaching approach in the English classes. However, the immigration center's English language classes focused more on conversational skills and the completion of group-oriented tasks.

The ESL instructor in the immigration center encouraged Ginny to ask questions freely and allowed her to speak without raising her hand. Ginny enjoyed the ESL classes at the immigration center because the classroom atmosphere made her feel relaxed, and she was free to talk and laugh with the teacher and her classmates.

### Jack

Jack was a 65 year-old man with sons, daughters, and grandsons in the U.S. He emigrated from Cambodia many years ago, where he received his college education. In the states, he pastored a Cambodian church in the Midwest.

Jack was intrinsically motivated to learn English; he said he wanted to improve his listening and writing skills. For listening, he did not understand the slang used by young people, and he could not

make sense of higher-level words, which were less frequently used in daily life. He also wanted to improve his writing skills, especially about the tenses and the homonyms. He mentioned that most of his English learning struggles focused on tenses and aspects. "In my language, we use different from here. We have the word that has the past tense. In English, they have regular verb and irregular verb, but in Cambodian it's not like that" (Jack, personal communication, June 2009).).

Jack said that he would follow the rules of the country he was moving to as far as cultural practices were concerned. Before moving to the U.S., he previously lived in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. "Anywhere I go I decide to follow them. I decide to follow. I see what they do. How they do. I keep my own. I just follow them" (Jack, personal communication, June 2009). Jack explained that Cambodian culture was to make peace and to follow the rules. "For example, in America sometimes we shake hands, sometimes we hug. I like to hug because in the church we usually we say like hug by loving people. We have mercy on people. We have compassion to people. And we love them like brother and sister. Love them like a family. We like to hug" (Jack, personal communication, June 2009). Jack said that he had no interest in hugging, but he actively engaged in hugging because it was a cultural obligation due to his position as a pastor at his church.

### Findings: Mapping of the Chronotopic Moves

The representations of the chronotopic moves and maps are as follows. For heuristics purposes, the rows in Table 1 were arranged with reference to the research questions of the study.

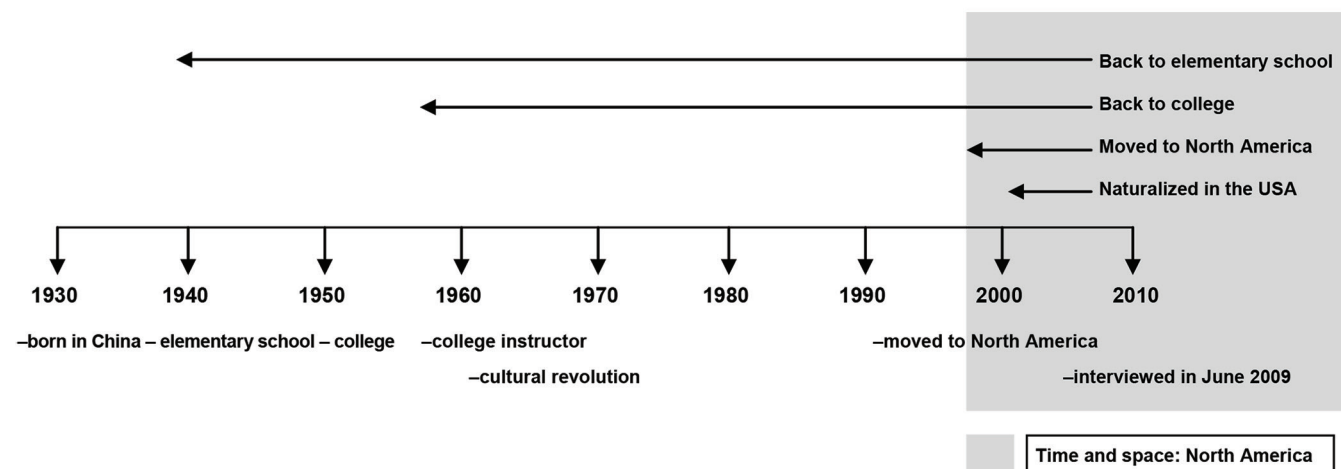


**Table 1—Chronotopic Moves Initiated by Lin**

Lin		Chronotopic Moves <sup>1</sup>	Analysis of the Chronotopic Moves
Age	78 (as of June 2009)		
Gender	Male		
Reasons for moving to the U.S.	“I arrived in Canada as immigrant in 1999. The last year of the last century. Because I have two daughters. One is in Canada and another one is in U.S. So I think it’s better. I am naturalized in USA two years ago.	Flashbacks: (i) 2009 to 1999 when he moved from China to Canada (ii) 2009 to 2007 when he was naturalized in the U.S.	There were two critical moves in Lin’s life, i.e., from China to Canada and then from Canada to the U.S. His immigration to North America occurred when he was 68 years old. He had accomplished many things in his life before the moves. His life experience before the immigration could have significant impact on his language learning in his later life.
Reasons for studying English	“I love English. Yes, in my opinion, English is beautiful. English grammar is science. It’s a systematic language. Yes. And I consider English... I consider English as culture. American culture. I love it. Just because I had a long time since learning English in China. So I have to learn English. I love English.”	Flashbacks: 2009 to the 1930s when he started to study English in China	Lin referred back to his earlier life in China, when he was an elementary school kid studying English: he was always intrinsically motivated to learn the language. English was like his old time friend whom he lost contact with. He valued his relationship with English and he appreciated the beauty of the language.
Difficulties in English learning	“To me, I think only difficult is my memory has decreased. Slower and slower. I have no other difficulty to learn English. Only my memory has decreased. I must say to you. Because I forgot words completely. I talk in English not well. Because I forgot completely afterwards. I speak English... I am sorry. But I... But I... But I am good to talk to you in English. I learnt English when I was young. When I was primary school child. After I entered the college, I think you know that. In China we can only learn Foreign language, Russian. So I have a long break to learn English. But I used English very often.”	Flashbacks: (i) 2009 to the 1930s as an elementary school kid in China (ii) 2009 to the 1950s as a college student in China	There were two chronotopic moves here. Lin referred back to his childhood as well as his college life. These were important years of English study in Lin’s life.
Cultural differences experienced	“This makes great impact to me. Americans deal with things very differently. They are very open-mind. Chinese are not open-mind so much like the US people. Very different. Inter-exchange. Exchange is inter. Americans emphasize exchange. Chinese is more like the teacher talks the students listen. Not only exchange, but inter-exchange. The teacher and students in China do not interact. Sometimes the teacher kneeled down on the floor in the ESL classroom. In the ESL classroom, the teacher kneeled down to us to write and teach us. It’s beyond imagination in China that a teacher kneels down to a student. This is very different.”	Flashback: 2009 (American ESL classes) to the 1950s (English classes in China)	There was a chronotopic move here where Lin first referred back to his English education received in China and then made a comparison between his American classes.

<sup>1</sup>The chronotopic move represents the participant’s flashback to a certain time and space with critical turning point(s) in his/her life.

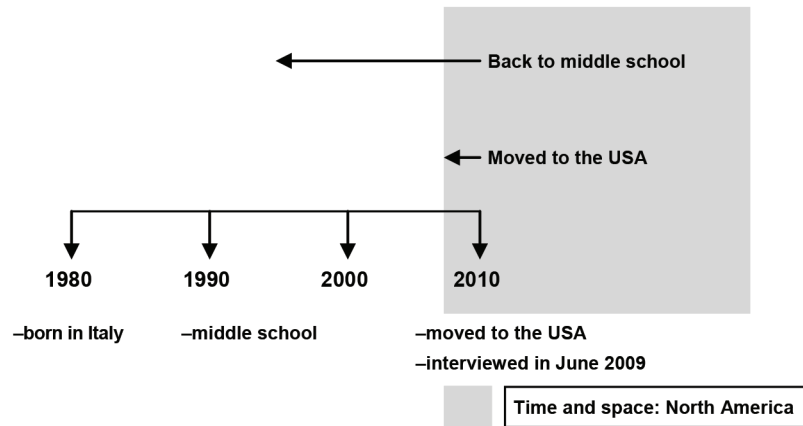
## Chronotopic Map A



**Table 2—Chronotopic Moves Initiated by Ginny**

Ginny		Chronotopic Moves	Analysis of the Chronotopic Moves
Age	25 (as of June 2009)		
Gender	Female		
Reasons for moving to the U.S.	"My boyfriend needs to come to work in the USA, so I followed him. My grandma and my grandpa from my father's side. They decided to move to France. I don't know why. There wasn't anything there. They tried. My grandfather was intelligent. We were lucky. We were happy. We were like... So they came like... Some parts of my family went to Australia too. Some parts went to America. They came here."	Flashback: June 2009 to March 2009 Moved from Italy to the U.S.	Ginny followed her life partner to the U.S. She moved in her mid 20's when she was a young woman.
Reasons for studying English	"Just because I want to learn English better. Possible I try to learn, if I have better pronunciation, it's fine."	—	—
Difficulties in English learning	"Italian teachers are based on grammar. We do a lot of grammar, we don't talk a lot. They really talk good English. They can speak in past tense. They really talk. I don't know why. We have a lot of grammar. Because you can talk, ok. For me, learning things is an opportunity. But I honestly think that this kind of lessons here are interesting, are funny. Because you talk about things and you can also laugh. It's like work. In Italy the feeling, it's more like something severe. Something hard. You have to study."	Flashback: 2009 to 1995 where she started learning English at the age of 11 in Italy	Ginny referred back to fourteen years ago when she was in middle school in Italy. She did not like the English classes because of the grammar-based teaching. She then compared the teaching in Italy since middle school to the English classes which she received in the immigration center. The contrast between the two separate chronotopes allows her to find out the differences and appreciate the free English education she received in the U.S.
Cultural differences experienced			

## Chronotopic Map B

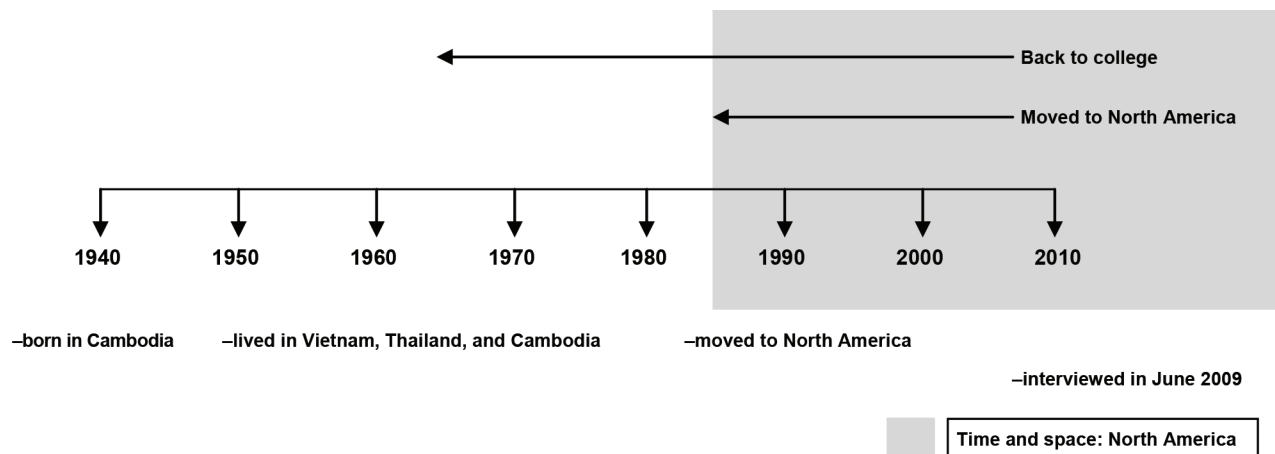


**Table 3—Chronotopic Moves Initiated by Jack**

Jack		Chronotopic Moves	Analysis of the Chronotopic Moves
Age	65 (as of June 2009)		
Gender	Jack		
Reasons for moving to the U.S.	"I immigrated to the USA 25 years ago."	Flashback: 2009 to 1984	Jack was 40 years old when he moved to the U.S. Similar to Lin, Jack had accomplished many things in life before moving to the U.S.
Reasons for studying English	"I want to improve my English."	—	—
Difficulties in English learning	"Listening and writing. Because people speak slang and I'm the one not comes to school. When they speak the high word, top word, I don't understand. Um the way I write. I am not very good. I am not listening very good. But the way I speak to people, I speak the vernacular word, because I don't know. Unless I come to school and I try to listen to somebody. If I try to listen careful, sometime I have to write it down. But I have to... I write the word by my own language. And I some word I cannot say. When I ask the teacher, the teacher say the word, the same spelling, but different meaning and different reading. Like we say read but read in past tense. I come to school I have to listen careful and I write in my own language to make sure. About 1965 I studied English for two months. It was not good at that time. Just learnt how to read ABC."	Flashback: 2009 to 1965 Jack studied the alphabet in Cambodia for two months only	The chronotopic move from 2009 to 1965 represents a critical turning point in Jack's life. Forty-four years ago he started off learning the English alphabet in Cambodia, but he received no formal instruction after this. Later on, he started attending the free lessons provided by the immigration center.
Cultural differences experienced	"I lived in Vietnam, Cambodian, Thailand, USA. I have been here for 25 years. Anywhere I go I decide to follow them. I decide to follow. I see what they do. How they do. I keep my own. I just follow them. Because Cambodian if we go we have to follow the rule of culture. We make peace. If we don't follow we don't have peace. It doesn't matter what country. It doesn't matter what culture. I follow every country. In my country, I hold hands. Go to Thailand do the same way. Vietnamese do the same way. But in America sometimes we shake hands, sometimes we hug. I like to hug because in the church we usually we say like hug by loving people. We have mercy on people. We have compassion to people. And we love them like brother and sister. Love them like a family. We like to hug."		



## Chronotopic Map C



## DISCUSSION

### 1. What are the major reasons for adult immigrants to move to the U.S.?

Lin moved from China to North America (Canada and then the U.S.) in 1999 to be united with his two daughters. Ginny moved from Italy to the U.S. in March 2009 to accompany her boyfriend who had a job offer. Jack moved from Cambodia to the U.S. in 1984 but did not specify his reason.

When comparing the three chronotopic maps, it is evident that moving to the U.S. was a critical turning point for the three participants. Both Lin and Jack made the transition after their 40th birthdays; both of them had finished their perspective college educations and raised their families in their home countries. As such, their prior life experiences could have significant impact on their language learning in their later lives. On the contrary, Ginny moved to the U.S. in her mid-twenties, so her life history might not have comparable impact on her English learning.

### 2. Why are they studying English as a second language?

Among the three participants, Lin showed intrinsic motivation (c.f. intrinsic motivation, Deci & Ryan,

1985) in learning. He said, “I love English. Yes, in my opinion, English is beautiful. English grammar is science. It’s a systematic language. Yes. And I consider English... I consider English as culture. American culture. I love it.” From here we can see how he appreciated the language itself and did not present the instrumental reasons that many other ESL learners promote. By taking a closer look at the chronotopic moves, Lin’s past life experience as a Mathematics and Computer Science instructor explained his tendency to appreciate the systematicity of the English language from a scientific perspective, whereas both Ginny and Jack wanted to improve their English for instrumental reasons (c.f. instrumental motivation, Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991).

Besides helping the educators identify the motivations of the participants, the chronotopic maps also help researchers further analyze the findings. Both Ginny and Jack did not engage in chronotopic move when asked about the reason for studying ESL; only Lin initiated a chronotopic move in response to this question. He referred back to his elementary school days when he first studied the language. He mentioned that, “Just because I had a long time since learning English in China. So I have to learn English. I love English.” For Lin, the

English language was like an old time friend whom he used to hang out with in the 1930s. His desire to study English was because of his appreciation of the language, as if it were a friend to him. The chronotopic link to his old days when he was studying English in elementary school explains that Lin had deeper personal connection to the reason for studying ESL.

### **3. What are the difficulties of adult immigrants in learning English as a second language (ESL) in the U.S.?**

Lin said that his fading memory was the biggest plight because he could not retain the words he encountered. Ginny mentioned that pronunciation was the biggest challenge for her because of her lack of oral practice in Italy. Jack thought that listening and writing were the most difficult for him.

All three participants initiated chronotopic moves when answering this question. Lin initiated two chronotopic moves in his response: he referred back to his elementary education in 1930s in China, which was when he first started studying English. He also referenced his college education in 1950s in China, when he studied Russian as a second language instead of English. Because of the lack of opportunity to study English in college, Lin underscored the long period of time since he officially studied the language in elementary school.

From his two chronotopic moves, it is evidenced that Lin's personal life history had great impact on his English learning after moving to the U.S. Since the Communist Party's establishment in 1920s, the People's Republic of China was strongly influenced by the Soviet Union socio-culturally and socio-economically. From 1920s till the end of 1950s, the colleges in China required students to study Russian as a second language. Therefore Lin did not have a choice to study English when he entered college in 1950s. This period of life

seems to have left Lin underprepared for his later life in North America in 1999. Because of the lack of formal instructions in ESL, Lin had a hard time remembering the word and grammar rules presented to him in the immigration center. On a superficial level of analysis, his fading memory is the major difficulty in his English learning; however, on a deeper level of analysis, Lin initiated an intertextual move (Kristeva, 1980). The two texts that Lin selected to compare are (i) when he was studying English as an elementary school child in China in 1930s, and (ii) when he was a college student studying Russian in 1950s. By initiating an intertextual link, Lin compared his learning experience in two different stages of his life, which not only helped explained his learning difficulties, but also indicated that he was more engaged in the interview and was more strategic in his response to the interview questions.

Ginny also initiated a chronotopic move in her response. She mentioned that she was taught English in Italy since she was eleven years old. In her interview response, she contextualized it by describing the kind of English lessons that she received in Italy. As the instructions were mostly grammar-based with many mechanical drills, Ginny did not have much opportunity to practice speaking and pronunciation. She complained that her previous English education left her underprepared for the needs of oral proficiency after moving to the U.S. Because of the chronotopic move, Ginny's learning experience in Italy was juxtaposed with her current learning difficulty, which helped explain her plight in English language usage.

Jack only received formal English instruction for two months in 1965 when he was in Cambodia, and he initiated one chronotopic move in his response to the question. As Jack received the least formal instruction among the three, he had many challenges in English learning. He mentioned that

listening and writing were the most problematic areas. Regarding listening, he could not understand the slang that young people used, and he also had difficulty with “high/top words” (i.e., less frequently used words in formal register). Regarding writing, he struggled to distinguish the homonyms and lacked the training in grammar, especially about the regular and irregular verbs, tenses, and aspects. His chronotopic move helps explain his difficulty in English usage. He also explained that Cambodian did not have inflectional changes to the verbs, making it difficult for him to remember the changes in verb forms.

#### **4. What are the cultural differences which they experienced?**

According to Lin, his teacher in China was more authoritative in the classroom. Kneeling down to teach a student was out of the question and beyond imagination. He concluded that the Americans were more open-minded in terms of social relationships. He took a chronotopic move back to 1950s in China as he thought about the cultural differences that he experienced.

As such, Lin compared the English education that he had in China in 1950s with the classes that he attended at the immigration center in the Midwest. By doing so, Lin initiated another intertextual link (Kristeva, 1980) in his response. The intertextual link compared two texts, (i) his English education in China in 1950s, and (ii) his ESL classes in the immigration center in the U.S. in 2009. The intertextual link helped explain how the participant was unconsciously drawing upon two pieces of lived experiences when constructing his response in the interview.

Similarly, Ginny initiated an intertextual link between her English classes in Italy, which were mechanical and grammar-based, and the English classes offered by the immigration center, which were lively and conversation-based. Jack referred

back to 1984 when he first moved from Southeast Asia to the U.S. He compared his way of life in different countries and concluded that he would always conform to the local rules and values when moving to a new country. In America, he was a pastor in a Christian church and, therefore, he had to adopt the greeting manners such as shaking hands, hugging, and displaying mercy to people, which demonstrates that how an adult immigrant learns the cultural rules is closely related to the career and everyday need of the individual.

#### **5. How do their life histories inform us about their English learning?**

Lin used to be a Mathematics instructor in China, and he studied ESL because of his appreciation of the systematicity of the language. His career history as a college instructor gave him a better angle to analyze the linguistics and cultural practices in Chinese and American classrooms in a systematic way. Because of the dominating power of Russia in China in the 1950s, he did not have the opportunity to study English in college. Because of old age, his fading memory was the biggest obstacle for him to learn English. His life history explains his motivation, learning difficulties, and cultural adaptations as the chronotopic moves unfold themselves in the interview.

Ginny had been studying English as a foreign language in Italy since she was 11 years old. Her learning history details the focus on grammar and mechanical drills in Italy and the drawback of such teaching. Her chronotopic moves inform us about the importance of addressing the cross-country differences in English teaching and the need to address individual learner's personal needs.

Jack was a pastor in a Christian church in the Midwest. His lack of formal English instruction (only two months of English lessons when he was 21 years old) explained his difficulty in understanding the grammar rules, especially those

related to the change of verb forms. Jack was very adaptive as he had moved from country to country in his earlier life. Similar to Lin, Jack also initiated intertextual links when he was constructing his response to the interview questions. His comparison of his experiences in different countries, especially that in the Cambodian church in the Midwest, informs us about why adult immigrants' learning needs, styles, and practices could be so closely linked to their career and everyday lives.

### Limitations of the Study

One of the biggest limitations of this study is about the small number of respondents. Ideally, more respondents' life histories could have been drawn from the study, yielding more varieties of life histories that the adult immigrants have. By doing so, the breadth of the study would be increased, making the results more transferable. However, it takes a long time to establish a trusting relationship with these participants. Lin, Jack, and Ginny's willingness to recount their personal stories reflected the prolonged engagement and investment that I put into the ESL class of the immigration center. The depth of the interview data might be affected if more respondents were involved in the study because I may not be able to spend similar amount of time to establish rapport with all of them. Alternatively, if a team of researchers can be involved, then more life histories will be collected, and overall the credibility of the study will be increased.

### Recommendations for Future Research

In the following paragraphs, I discuss the implications for research and teaching of adult immigrants based on the findings of the study:

- i. The chronotopic moves and intertextual links initiated by the participants help educators and researchers better understand their

learning goals and needs, and thus should be foregrounded in the teaching and research practices,

- ii. Educators can invite learners to tell their life histories and encourage them to map out their life histories so as to help the learners take ownership of their learning,
- iii. Textbook authors may create more oral activities which allow the learners to connect their transnational and ESL learning experiences with learning,
- iv. Researchers can employ the chronotopic moves and maps to represent the adult immigrants' learning trajectories and the correlation of such trajectories with various research questions identified by the researchers, and
- v. Policy makers may incorporate the adult learner's oral history into the curriculum and portfolio assessment. Many of the ESL and TESOL programs in the U.S. overlook the rich lived experiences of the adult learners. Not only do these experiences help adult learners in the learning process, but they are invaluable resources to the ESL/TESOL learning communities.

For future research, researchers may use the chronotopic moves and maps to investigate adult learners' learning trajectories. Also, more studies should be done regarding the disjunction between the learners' life histories, learning materials, curriculum, and standardized tests.

### CONCLUSION

Lin, Ginny, and Jack had different experiences as ESL learners in their home countries due to various historical, political, sociological, and personal reasons. The chronotopic moves that they

constructed in the interview are representations of the dynamic relationships of their past, present, and future in their English learning trajectories. Giving them a chance to tell their life histories empowered them to connect their past and present with intertextual links. The findings of this study suggest that more emphasis should be placed on

connecting adult immigrants' individual lived experiences with their learning, so as to empower them to take agency to appropriate their personal learning trajectories and gain ownership in their ESL learning processes.

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