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# “Writing is hard, but I think I like it”: Identity (Re)Construction of Female Refugee and Immigrant Adult Language Learners in the US.

Svenja Trommler

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*“Writing is hard, but I think I like it”: Identity (Re)Construction of Female Refugee and Immigrant Adult Language Learners in the US.*

By

Svenja Trommler

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in English  
with an emphasis in  
Teaching English as a Second Language

Minnesota State University,  
Mankato Mankato, Minnesota

April 2019

Date: 04/10/2019

*“Writing is hard, but I think I like it”*: Identity (Re)Construction of Female Refugee and Immigrant Adult Language Learners in the US.

Svenja Trommler

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student’s committee.

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Dr. Sarah Henderson Lee, Chairperson

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Dr. Paolo Infante, Committee Member

### **Abstract**

This paper examines how identity is reconstructed in second language literacy of adult female refugees and immigrants, and how their prior literacy and language experience influences their current literacy usage which develops slowly due to a lack of suitable education for them in the United States, causing difficulties during their integration process. Responding to the low representation of immigrant women in research, three major research methods to collect the qualitative data were used: (1) prompted journal entries as narrative inquiries, (2) observations and field notes, and (3) semi-structured interviews to understand the participants' previous and current literacy development and identity construction. Through a detailed analysis, the results demonstrated a connection between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) literacy development and how the upbringing, as well as religious literacy, influenced the participants' language learner identity and the identity as an immigrant. The findings shed light on the limited education services provided for adult women immigrating to the US and inform existing language programs by highlighting the unique lived experiences and related literacy needs of this population to voice their thoughts and stories that reconstruct their identities, as well as providing support for using the language in day to day encounters.

*Keywords:* adult female immigrants and refugees, literacy development, (religious) identity, language learner

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## **Dedication**

For Mom, Dad and Christian Meier

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## Acknowledgements

Three years ago, after my state exams in Germany, I received the opportunity to study and teach abroad. This had always been my dream, but sometimes things in life happen different than planned. Fulfilling my dream and conducting a study in an area that means so much to me was only possible through a network of supporting and enriching people. First, I would like to thank Dr. Sarah Henderson Lee and Dr. Paolo Infante for guiding me in this process of writing; providing me with valuable insights in their area of expertise as well as giving my ideas a voice through our conversations. I would not have been able to write this thesis without Dr. Henderson Lee's support and encouragement.

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Special thanks deserve my parents who always had faith in me and encouraged me to do what I enjoy and love. Without their love and support, I would not have made it to the United States and had the chance to study here. The two of you were there when I was struggling or worried that I would not make it, you came when I needed you the most, and were always just a phone call away. My sister Lea, Ami, and my best friends Stefan Graessle and Kristiane Kirr who helped me wherever they could.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

### **Background Information**

Many countries, such as the United States of America, are countries of migration. Due to a constant movement, about 86.4 million people in the United States (27 per cent of the US population) have a migration background and a tenth are refugees (Zong, Batalova & Hallock, 2018). This leads to changes in culture and language in countries of migration. Many of the receiving countries, even though migration has been occurring for centuries, seem unprepared for the amount of people migrating.

Especially teachers and educational institutions struggle with the arriving population; they are not only confronted with a gap in teaching materials, and a lack of language in their daily teaching, but also with students who may be traumatized or have interrupted schooling. Some adolescents and adults may have never acquired literacy skills in their first language, such as Somalian refugees who did not have a written language until the 1970s (Farid & McMahan, 2004).

Coming to a new country also includes becoming a member of the society and the political system; being able to decode and encode signs and symbols are essential in the process of arriving, such as understanding street signs and labels in a grocery store or filing numerous documents for immigrants to be legally living in that country. In addition, these documents are needed to proceed further actions, like attending a school, finding a job or even renting an apartment. Having these documents is part of their daily life issues, like buying groceries, which cannot occur if the person does not have money

or a bank account. All these actions in Discourse (Gee, 2015) require reading and sometimes even writing. Discourse according to Gee relates to the social practices, such as language and interaction, which are influenced by the environment and people in these different settings. This means that each setting carries its own communicative rules and norms, like the conversational differences between two colleagues and two students. Yet, how can someone who does not receive formal education in the target language be able to file these documents or receive a bank account? How can individuals be supported when they have difficulties expressing their desire? Does the judgement already begin when these individuals approach a bank or customer service desk?

When a woman wearing a headscarf enters the bank to open a bank account, the spiral of associations and stereotypes begins. The agent might start speaking in a very slow or even childish English, which is far from authentic communication. This form of interaction is not a one-time phenomenon but can happen repeatedly. The problem with labels and stereotypes is that these do not represent an individual, yet they stand for a whole population and the person is viewed as a token of their culture which can lead to further misunderstandings. As humans we tend to categorize other humans, situations and things to make it easier for us to remember and to understand the different connections. The question of identity construction through personal experience and as a result of the interactions with others arises and challenges the individual integration process. In many occasions, women emigrate without their spouses because these might have passed away, been occupied in the ongoing war or left their families due to other reasons. These women arrive in the receiving country, trying to make a living and supporting their

family while fulfilling the role of a care-taker (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Therefore, identity (re-) construction mainly falls into the hands of women who need to rethink their identity and their role in the “new” society which upholds tasks and daily routines, such as working in a company or having a driver’s license, which differs from their experience in their home country. Expressing these changes and needs are often too difficult and overseen in current research because women do not receive a voice, or they are not represented as much (Ennsner-Kananen & Pettitt, 2017). Previous studies, such as Dahya and Jenson (2015) or Moghaddam, Taylor, Pelletier and Shepanek (1994), have discussed the influence of labels and misconceptions resulting from these identity markers. Moghaddam, et al. (1994), addressed how similarities between the cultures can lower the “social distance” (p. 113) and positively evaluate the membership of a minority group as part of a “hierarchy of acceptance” (p. 113). Dahya and Jenson (2015) focused their research on Muslim girls and their misrepresentations in school-based digital media. According to their findings and theoretical framework, “Muslim girls have described incidents of teachers who assume they cannot speak English and place them in remedial English classes without appropriate testing” (p. 110). Yet, most women are not even placed into an educational context to receive the needed language learning and literacy input and therefore, the consequences of (mis-) representations are worse.

There is a need for additional courses that focus on the needs of refugees and immigrants without prior schooling. Some of these learners may have experienced interrupted schooling or never attend a school, and do not only lack linguistic skills in the target language. Their need for reading and writing is based on daily interactions and

communication, which is not dealt with in an academic context. However, not providing the suitable education for immigrating female adults can lead to problems because further support may not be offered or on the contrary too much support is given when learning the new language. The issue of sparsely implemented courses for female adults that address reading and writing concepts is underrepresented in current research, even though recent second language (L2) writing scholarship has shed light on multilingual writers generally, including international students (e.g. Frodesen, 2009; Harklau & Siegal, 2009; Hirano, 2014). These students are often placed in a composition class due to standardized testing (e.g., TOEFL) and these courses are offered to them in their first-year of college prior to or during the matriculation process. Such courses are beneficial for students who have already acquired language and literacy skills but not for beginning students who come from cultures with more oral traditions, or those who have had no access to higher education.

Alternately, there are people amongst the adult refugee learners and current migration population who have a doctoral degree in their home country or attended several years of school but have a lack of English skills. Based on the fact of being referred to as a “refugee”, they end up in a preparation course of a university with other undergraduate students, or they even get placed into a course that focuses on learning the Roman alphabet. Others are deprived of having the chance to attend an ordinary school and certainly not a post-secondary institution, hindering them in fulfilling their dreams or achieving a higher living standard. A third group of adult refugee language learners may be articulate but have never learned how to read and write since their first language (L1)

is mainly oral. In addition, in some Muslim countries, children learn their L1 through oral communication and read in their second language (L2), like Qur'anic Arabic. However, this differs from the spoken Arabic, that is for example spoken in Saudi Arabia. These adults therefore, have difficulties building their target language on a sustainable language foundation. Learning the language of the receiving country, like English, would then be their third language and combine new vocabulary with a different symbolic system (e.g., the Roman alphabet).

The above described learning contexts for adult refugee and immigrant learners lead to an unsatisfying situation because both groups, refugees with and without literacy skills in their L1, would be confronted with frustration due to different language and content-specific competences. In some situations, these learners do not have the chance to move forward in their learning process. Some of these courses do not continue, courses are not flexible for working mothers, or they constantly include new arrivals. Adolescents and adults who have already acquired a degree might be familiar with an educational culture as well as learning strategies and do not need to learn the basics of literacy. Giving these minorities a voice and presenting their feelings and challenges during their identity construction could open the door for new approaches that are made for their specific needs and purposes. Adaptable approaches and ideas are needed that teachers could use and implement to bridge the gap of labels as misrepresentations, providing courses for minorities, such as women, and the resulting lack of courses to gain literacy skills.

## Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

Scholars, like Ennser-Kananen and Pettitt (2017), have expressed the need to conduct research that “investigates and improves the experience of migrant women as they become language learners in receiving countries” (p. 585). There are many studies focusing on male refugees which, therefore, receive the most attention in the integration debate. In addition, more migrating women become a part of the labor market which requires a certain amount of language competence that exceeds the domestic usage. According to Ennser-Kananen and Pettitt, many European countries have changed their language policies as a reaction to the ongoing migration process and resulting requirements often hinder immigrants to access language (learning), even if most of them would want to learn the dominant language as soon as possible because they see a chance to change through the language. The authors conclude:

Many migrants become language learners – whether voluntarily, reluctantly or enthusiastically – and thus often find themselves facing an unanticipated set of challenges, especially in view of the fact that social capital and civil rights are tied to (not always easily accessible) linguistic resources. (p. 586)

Narrowing down the study and focusing on female refugees means taking a closer look at their heritage’s Discourse. Many women are often unheard in their home countries and do not share the same rights as women in the United States. This is also related to their role in society and family, e.g. contrasting the role of a house wife and



mother (Pavlish, 2007) in comparison to an emancipated woman who aims for a career and does not have children or does not marry until she is in her mid-thirties.

The designed study investigates the first and second language literacy experiences of female immigrants and refugees which are expressed and manifested in their narrative inquiries and influenced through their identity (re-)construction. Therefore, the guiding questions are:

- 1) What are the previous and current literacy experiences of adult female refugees and immigrants in an adult education program in the US?
- 2) How might female refugees' and immigrants' identity construction, influenced by labels as misrepresentations, be expressed in their L2 literacy experiences during their English language education?

This study is important to understand how people, arriving in a new country, feel and how educators can help them adapt to the new life. Forwarding their education would simplify their integration process and facilitate the start in their new life, as well as providing an understanding for the unique literacy experiences that have an impact on their current literacy usage. In many countries, these “newcomers” are considered as “the Others” and are excluded as a group; rarely looked upon as individuals. As Hopkins (2009) states:

Using narrative in research about refugee issues [...] brings life to the subject, and brings the subject to life. It becomes, if well used, a powerful political weapon in

the name of human rights. It politicises the personal, and personalises the political (p. 136).

In the current situation many women, especially those coming from other countries, are silenced or do not have the necessary tool to express their thoughts and feelings. Not knowing the language of the receiving country can hinder expressing one's personality. Sharing ideas and emotions are essential yet challenging because these words are often unfamiliar to the language learners and they may lack self-confidence in the new Discourse. Providing a medium, such as writing, gives the narrator the chance to choose the needed words wisely and bring the message across without the fear of being judged directly.

As Hopkins (2009) states, telling stories and using narratives is a powerful tool which can influence individuals and groups, as well as influence politics. Knowing about the feelings and needs of “newcomers” or currently considered as “Recently Arrived English Learners (RAEL)” will help improve the educational system to meet the needs of this population. This study aims to inform educators and others asking them to view these RAELs as individuals with very specific needs and appreciate the importance of literacy. Further, the study sheds light on the current course structures and offers which do not meet the adult female immigrant and refugee's needs and commitments.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study are based on the setting in which it is conducted and the participants. Firstly, the low number of participants which is a result of the research

location in a smaller town in the Midwest of the United States and the special focus on female immigrant and refugee language learners. For the conducted research, four women with a migration background and who recently arrived in the United States consented to take part in the research. They are all part of a language learning program which focuses on improving their literacy skills. Their current language skills and educational background are heterogeneous which influences their ability to read and write in their L2. Originating from different countries, their L1 differs and influences their previous literacy input. A greater number of participants might have balanced these demographic nuances and could have resulted in a wider variety of experiences and language learner identities. Narrowing down the participants to female adults limited the results to these subjects. However, these two aspects are risks in every qualitative research and are justified with the aspect that this is a case study which is not supposed to lead to generalizations.

The second limitation stems from the research method itself. Asking participants to write in English confronted them with a challenge because some have not yet developed the literacy skills, they may need to express all their thoughts. By giving the participants writing prompts, an introduction through the teacher, and scaffolding, they were guided through the idea finding process. This approach could have also influenced the individual opinion, as well as it supported the participants who may have had difficulties with the language. Providing the teacher with an overview and teaching guidelines ensured a structure and supported the idea finding sequence. Furthermore, the narrative inquiries were extended through an interview and observations, so that the

researcher could grasp more details about the individual experiences and ensure a method triangulation. The observations were made to understand the teacher's approach to the topics and how she interacted with the participants.

The third limitation comes from the research setting and the researcher's positionality in the research process. As an outsider, the researcher came into the classroom and language learning environment, in which she asked challenging and personal questions that might not be answered as freely to an unknown person. To ensure a secure and intimate environment in which the women felt like they could express their thoughts, the researcher came to the research site ahead of time and introduced herself and answered possible questions. In addition, pseudonyms were chosen for the participants to assure anonymity, and, this may have resulted in creating distance between the writing and the individual. Another aspect that falls under this limitation is the time given to the participants. The research was conducted over a period of five weeks with four weeks of writing and one week for the interviews. This short period of time could have hindered the participants to deepen their understanding of their own identity and limited the amount of time given in class for them to write, since they only met once a week with the teacher. To give the participants more time to write, they were able to continue writing beyond the classroom time, yet this was optional.

### **Positionality Statement**

*As an international student at a university in the United States, I have encountered several situations of misunderstanding or false assumptions based on*

*my origin. Growing up with two languages, I do not seem to be an outsider at first, yet, looking closer – I am different.*

The interest in the topic of the research project arose through three different strands which crossed each other's paths in the course of a graduate program. The first strand began as a child and growing language learner of German and English simultaneously, who always struggled with writing, even though the surrounding was rich, providing reading and listening input. Speaking in either language was never a problem but reading and writing revealed the difficulties a foreign literate language learner needed to face. Even being placed into out-of-school programs to support the literacy development did not result in the promising outcome. I did not enjoy reading and writing until I was able to decide on topics which were interesting for me, and I was able to adapt stylistic variations.

The second strand developed out of the first degrees as a teacher, specializing in educational science, migration, multilingualism, and teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). I wanted to know more about minority groups who often do not receive the voice or whom a chance to speak is not granted. This mainly referred to immigrants and refugees who might have the will to say something and express their thoughts but are not yet equipped with the required language. Through personal experience, I know how frustrating specifically communicative situations may become. Therefore, the conducted research was the opportunity to give those a voice who often stand in the shadows of others; namely women – immigrant women.

The third strand of interest came from the experience of living abroad and the problems one faces at that time, through labels as misrepresentations and false assumptions. Coming from a country with a long history, this leads to the identity people from other countries project on you, even if these personalities have nothing to do with one personally, nor with current political and social situations; history and society forms and determines identity. These given identities challenge the ones created over time and influence the future thinking and behavior.

Based on these three strands, I wanted to focus my study on immigrant and refugee women who use writing as a form to express their identity in the “new world” and to share their personal experience with literacy and language development. Since, I am not a refugee or seeking permanent immigration in the United States, I take on an etic point of view. In addition, I come into the research setting as an outsider because I do not teach the English classes that the participants are taking. Yet, I share certain traits with the women, such as English as a foreign language and the same sex.

My personal experience and literacy upbringing influenced the research process when preparing the writing prompts and in the choice of potential participants. I decided to focus most of the prompts on the participants’ literacy upbringing and development, as well as the experience with identity in different Discourses. Furthermore, I personally introduced myself to the participants and the teacher which created a personal and somewhat subjective position in the research project. Nevertheless, this approach may be beneficial for the writing, because the participants can build a personal relationship with

myself which might give them the opportunity to open themselves up in their written responses.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

This introductory chapter presented the gap in current female refugee and immigration research, especially the one that focuses on literacy development and identity construction. In addition, I described my attitude towards the research topic and the research site by describing my role as a researcher and how I approached the subject. Moreover, the chapter named the two research questions and offered the possible limitations of the study with a reasonable justification. At the end, I gave an overview of the organization of the thesis and provided insight into each chapter.

### **Chapter Organization of the Thesis**

The thesis contains five chapters. After introducing the content in the First Chapter, the Second Chapter focuses on the previous studies regarding literacy development of foreign language learners. Starting with a literature review on migration, this section of the chapter aims at defining migration, corresponding terms, such as female refugee and immigrants, and giving reasons for people to migrate to a new country. Since the chapter lays the foundation for the research, the term identity is defined and set in relation to society and culture. Furthermore, the chapter discusses findings of literacy development by defining foreign language learning and laying a special focus on refugee and immigrant literacy development. Based on the background of the participants, the chapter also presents previous and current findings of religious

literacy as a subcategory of literacy and analyze the possible factors which may influence ongoing literacy development.

The Third Chapter describes the methodology that was used throughout the study and the justification for this approach through theories. In detail, the chapter focuses on the used materials, describe the research setting and participants, as well as the data collection process. A theoretical framework is given to characterize the narrative inquiries, interviews, and observations that were used in the process and how this data was analyzed.

Findings and points for discussion are showcased in Chapter Four. The chapter refers to the introductory research questions and answers these queries, based on the findings of the data collection. In addition, the chapter discusses two major themes that were voiced in the writings and interviews: how previous literacy experiences, such as those expressed in L1 storytelling, influence L2 language learning and literacy; and how identity is reconstructed, including influential factors such as heritage and power relations. Chapter Five then concludes the thesis with providing suggestions for pedagogical implications and future studies.



## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This study addresses the issues and challenges adult female refugee and immigrants come across in the current language learning contexts of the United States by reviewing different theoretical aspects of current teaching and learning societies. In most countries the population is heterogeneous, which leads to more and more people learning the domestic language in a later age or as a second language. The chapter therefore focuses on defining current migration processes in a globalized world, including its effects. Migration is one of these globalized effects and with an increasing number of immigrants, especially refugees, the questions of education and identity are heightened more than before. Recent immigrants are confronted with the process of integration, assimilation and acculturation which is additionally discussed in this chapter. These definitions and perspectives are needed to understand the importance of change in education to offer those affected the maximum support. The chapter covers the concepts of migration, including the resulting identity process, since these are important to understand why people shift their living context and environment by taking risks and which factors influence the integration process. Special attention is hereby given to female refugee and immigrants because their previous roles as care-takers and mothers expands in the receiving society and often takes place outside the home. As part of the foreign language learning process, literacy development plays a vital role in the daily interactions of everyone and is therefore, discussed in this chapter. To understand the challenges of learning a foreign language, investment and access are the focus of this

section. The study focused on female adult refugee and immigrants whose literacy development varies from other multilingual readers and writers because formal schooling contexts are often not available. In many countries of origin, religion and the corresponding religious literacy are the main sources for reading and based on this background, the chapter defines and discusses religious literacy.

### **Migration**

The word migration is often used when people move from one place to another. According to the United Nations (2017), we speak of migration when people change their life's center or add a new center to their life, for longer than a year. It has always been a human trait to change the surrounding and choose a new place to live. In the Middle Ages for example, women migrated to join their husbands on his family's farm. Nowadays, many different reasons result in migration, such as better employment or fleeing adverse conditions

Migration involves a process of mobilization and movement, such as moving in a geographical and social room, often related with crossing a border (Treibel, 2008). Mobilization is a product of *globalization* and *transnationalism*. Even though, both terms are frequently used interchangeably, they refer to different aspects of mobilization. The term globalization can differ depending on the field of research. Anthropologists for example see globalization in relationship to culture and how cultures change and develop over time. Scholars in this field observe how social practices and cultural formations are detached from their territories and traditions, which emerge into topics such as immigration, transnationalism, cultural hybrids, and cultural conflicts (Suarez-Orozco,

2001). Political scientists on the other hand take a closer look at the political challenges which arise through changing borders and technology, such as human and civil rights, which are not limited to single nations and countries but involve the whole world (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). According to Ariely (2012) as well as Held, McGrew and Perraton (1999), globalization is “the increasing cross-border flows of goods, services, money, people, information, and culture” (Held, McGrew & Perraton, 1999, p. 16) which “is an important factor in shaping national identity and intergroup relations” (Ariely, 2012, p. 540).

For the purpose of this paper, the term globalization is used to define the process of formation on the macro-level, such as global inter-connectivity and world economics, and on the micro-level, including activities which are carried out across borders and contexts. Including globalization as “the product of new information and communication technologies that instantaneously connect people, organizations, and systems across vast distances” (Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 348). Moreover, globalization is “the generation of unprecedented new patterns of large-scale immigration” (Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 349) which deterritorializes not only the economical and informational sector, but large numbers of people as well. In conclusion, globalization and transnationalism are two related terms, but they have different meanings. Those affected through immigration do not only need to communicate orally with the receiving population but contribute to daily life by writing messages and understanding written texts. Literacy also connects the present with past and future. In a globalized world, people use technology and the written word to communicate across borders. Refugees and immigrants contact their family and

friends which they have left behind through text messages and emails, as well as file papers which contribute to their future.

In the past decades, most immigrants in the United States were highly educated and highly skilled workers that were looking for their chance to be part of the rapidly growing technology and knowledge-intensive sectors, such as Asians in Silicon Valley (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Nevertheless, there has always been a number of immigrants with poor education or unskilled workers whose knowledge is less than a ninth-grade education (Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 351). Many immigrants are children and teenagers who accompany their parents and follow their parent's motivation to migrate. Studies have examined different motivations leading to migration, such as the opportunity for a better life and optimism (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001 as cited in Suarez-Orozco, 2001). United States' educational system has changed and improved to support the students of this age group. In the past decades, many schools did not have the financial and human resources to guarantee additional language courses and support for immigrant children, resulting in crisis; children growing up in poor surroundings with limited access to educational opportunities, due to various factors, such as their parents' financial situation.

Nevertheless, with the growing technology and after the war in northern Africa, more and more people flee from their homes, cross borders, search for a better place to live and a chance of work. These trends challenge the receptive countries politically, socially, and on an educational level.

**Transnational Identity.** Different perspectives that rely on various concepts make the definition of identity challenging. However, every human being has an identity that forms their character and determines their way of behaving. Identity is often considered as something that makes us who we are. It develops over time and originates in our home culture, up-bringing, and surrounding. By viewing identity from a philosophical perspective, people give subjects names to categorize and understand them. With these descriptions a constant comparison between the subject's behavior and its characteristics is possible. When analyzing different social behaviors, learning habits, and aspects of integration, identity plays a very important role. Identity is not only limited to the individual personality but seen as a connection between individual and national identity; social identity serves as the intersection between individual and intergroup relations. This close connection influences people's motives of migration and their process of integration. Arriving in a country that welcomes immigrants, leads to positive outcomes in a supportive educational system and decreases exclusion and discrimination tendencies. In the purpose of this study, identity is seen as the individually constructed persona which is formed by past and previous experiences, as well as future intensions. Scholars in the field of TESOL and Applied Linguistics believe that everyone has multiple identities and that these identities change over time and make them incomparable (e.g. Butler, 2006; Gee, 2015; Norton, 2000). One example would be a young mother who works in a part-time job and plays the piano. This woman is seen as a caring mother who brings her child to school and takes him to baseball practice. In addition, she is an employee working several hours at a hospital taking care of other

people as a nurse, and in her spare time she is a musician. Can this be considered as one identity that makes her unique? Or rather as many different identities?

Identity always stands in relation to the surrounding and the socially and historically constructed relations of power. According to poststructuralist theories, such as Bourdieu (1984, 2001) and Weedon (1997), the whole world is defined by a structure through language. Language does not just replicate reality, but shapes reality in doing so. Constructing reality through language is always tied to the individual using language in context and their relationship to the world (Bourdieu, 1984). This relationship though forms the subjectivity (Butler, 2006), a sense of ourselves. Subjectivity is the ongoing process of formation through discourse. Weedon (1997) defines *subjectivity* as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32). Norton (2000) extends the terminology by stating that the poststructuralist theorists see the individual (subject) as “diverse, contradictory, dynamic and changing over historical time and social space” and she further describes subjectivity which is “conceived of as multiple rather than unitary, decentered rather than centered” (p.125), strengthening the argument that individual *identities* and subjectivity cannot be compared.

According to Butler’s (2006) perception, identity is performative which means that cultural and historical factors determine who someone is, like the priest who is disposing of someone in marriage. Without his occupation as a priest, his words “I now declare you husband and wife” have no meaning. Therefore, the words “priest” and “marriage” do not only form the act of marriage, but also the validity of this reality.

Nevertheless, this connection of a priest who is involved in a marriage is not obvious for people from other cultural backgrounds, and therefore, language and context are needed to construct the meaning of this act. In the conducted study, the literacy the women use is based on their daily experiences as a woman, as a nun, a mother, or an employee.

Therefore, one of the journal entries focused on the question of how language is shared in their daily life.

*Otherness - Individual in the social world (power).* Positioning oneself in the different cultural and social contexts is the most difficult and complex process, especially if others assume that the observable markers should place someone in a different cultural context or heritage. Ng (1981) describes the feeling of belonging to one culture or the other by stating that:

Ethnicity arises when a group of people possesses observable differences from the groups that surround it. These differences are recognized by themselves and others, and mark them off from other groups. The differences are seen to be results of different cultures (p. 98).

As Norton (2013) argues on the foundation of poststructuralist theories, identity is “the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (2013, p. 4). Based on this assumption, the individual characteristics are socially constructed, and everyone has the feeling that they are being positioned as someone. This struggle of relations begins at birth and lasts a life time. As soon as the pregnant woman

knows the gender of her child, the world around her determines what the child will be like and which role it will receive in society. First, it will become the son/daughter *of* that mother and father, the grandson/-daughter *of* those four grandparents, and later maybe the brother/sister *of*. Secondly, his identity as a son, brother, or grandson will be changed when placed into a different context, like being a student at school or a friend for his classmates. The individual is a human agency who is influenced by perceptions of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. A similar form of positioning occurs with refugees who arrive in a new country. Their identity is built upon their heritage, like originating from an African country like Somalia, and their journey to the receiving country. Furthermore, their experiences in their home country, like profession, family status, and education has formed their identity. In addition, the receiving country has its perceptions and views about that person which is again formed by their own beliefs and norms.

Viewing identity from a sociocultural perspective means that identity formation takes place in Discourse (Gee, 2015). This term, with a capital letter, was coined by Gee and refers to the different social practices in which one has their role to play. In his opinion, Discourse is “all the ideas in our heads [that] come from evidence about the world we have gathered through our physical senses. What we think and how we act is due to our upbringing and environment” (Gee, 2015, p. 8). Authors like Blackledge (2005) and Hatoss (2012) extend this assumption that ideologies and power go hand in hand and that identity is “co-constructed with everyday dialogic discourse” (Hatoss, 2012, p. 48). The unborn child, from the earlier example, is part of a Discourse related to



the family, the local community, the state, the country, and even the world; each new form of relationship sets its own Discourse, including symbolic systems like language and signs that need to be encoded by “literate people”. The term literate and literacy is discussed in detail in the chapter “L2 Literacy development based on L1 experiences”. As Freire (1985 as cited in Stromquist, 2014) describes, literacy provides individuals with tools of socialization to ask questions and negotiate meanings enriching their power in society. People have the will to get involved with others and to be integrated in social interactions. Yet this integration process is often denied due to misunderstanding, assumptions, and cultural differences. In such cases, *culture* is understood as the inhibited beliefs and norms that in turn influence identity.

The identity of every human is always in relation to power and otherness; especially in the context of immigrants and refugees. Power per se is “socially constructed relations among individuals, institutions and communities through which symbolic and material resources in a society are produced, distributed and validated” (Norton, 2000, p. 7). Power plays a tremendous role in human society that can be taken away from or granted to individuals or a group. Power places humans in relationship to others, such as an employee with an employer or a mother with her son. This relationship defines how individuals interact with others and how they are respected. *Otherness* is, therefore, understood as the form of being different and resulting as in an exclusion from a group.

In conclusion, the individual cannot exist without the social aspect and vice versa. It can be understood as the “I” in “we” and “they” which means that the individual (“I”)

is part of one group (“we”) and might have the desire or need to become part of “they”. Based on these findings, the term identity is referred to the plural form *Identities* which includes the self-concept: the perception one has about themselves, and the concept which is formed by discourse in daily life. This can include direct forms, like giving someone a name based on descriptions or indirectly through stereotypes.

***Social and cultural capital.*** As stated above, identity is closely linked to the symbolic system of each culture and society. Scholars like Bourdieu (1984, 2001) and Vygotsky (1978) based their theoretical findings and assumptions on these systems.

Bourdieu states that there are different forms of *capital* which influence everyone’s daily life. Besides the economic capital, there is the cultural and social capital. For this study, the focus is on the latter two. Any form of object is seen as the *objective cultural capital*, according to Bourdieu (2001, p. 25), such as machines, books, and written artifacts. Through the process of education, the objects become *incorporated cultural capital*. However, these actions must be learned and internalized (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, internalization takes place when the tools that are used to understand the world are reformulated to create new tools. Culture is a tool which makes us human and forms our self. In the process of internalization, humans are regulated by others (e.g. a child through its parents) before they are in a co-regulation relationship that eventually leads to self-regulation and being independent. Internalization of cultural resources that transform into a person’s psychological tools support the development of one’s *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 114). Through *institutionalized cultural capital*, cultural capital is recognized and receives its meaning by way of state-accredited

credentials, such as the degree one earns with college graduation. Likewise, the power attributed to institutions within a society, such as schools and universities, is extended to the microlevel through the privilege and prestige held by its representatives and forms of disciplinary knowledge vetted by said representatives. Teachers provide the necessary knowledge about cultural artifacts, and students can have access to this knowledge by entering state institutions. *Social capital* on the other hand, is the potential and the available resources individuals have (Bourdieu, 1984, 2001). These resources depend on the different networks of institutional relationships, such as the possibility to go to a school and receive education. For refugees this is often inaccessible and not an option until later years or in some instances, it is never granted. Especially, women are impacted, due to their role in society and therefore, their situation is discussed in more detail in the chapter dedicated to women. Social capital determines the group one belongs to and the role that an individual has in that specific group or discourse. Yet, these affiliations can change over time and be influenced by objective cultural capital, such as money or even language.

As a conclusion, in order to take an advantage of the potential resources one must be aware of their existence and how to implement these in the specific setting. The primary source is using language to encode the social and cultural conventions; however, these need to be taught and people need to have access to them to use them. Providing suitable education for refugee and female adults, especially women, will foster their self-confidence to overcome issues of “otherness” and lead to more understanding across borders which would benefit social and cultural interactions. The participants in the

conducted study were open-minded and talkative which supported their integration process and made it possible for them to learn an additional language. Beyond, the four women had access to an English program which was not related to any school-based setting, but which aimed at the needs of these women, such as being able to decode and encode letters in words and sentences, since some did not have formal education as a child.

**Female immigrants and refugees.** “An immigrant woman’s ethnicity becomes consequential when she interacts with the rest of, e.g. the bus driver, the cashier at the supermarket, or the social worker. The attribution then... draws on the fact that she looks different; that she cannot function adequately or conduct herself properly on such occasions. Her ethnicity is posited as a reason for her incompetence. This is the point at which ethnicity arises for the immigrant” (Ng, 1981, p.103). Even though many western societies are emancipated, women still receive a different role in our society and especially in the immigrant society. As a modern woman growing up in the Western world, it is difficult to argue why one might not prefer having children or why one decides to promote her career before thinking about settling down. It is still seen critical if one decides to live abroad and to study in a foreign country. How intense must this feeling be for an immigrant/refugee woman who struggles with a completely different form of identity construction and encounters other values which contradict with their heritage?

Ng (1981) noted that women receive a different role in an immigrant society and their experience of immigration will always be gendered. She bases this assumption on

her research with a group of immigrant women who are part of a project about family violence. She states that “[e]thnicity arises when a group of people possesses observable differences from the groups that surround it. These differences are recognized by themselves and others, and mark them off from other groups” (p. 98). Furthermore, Ng believes that the part of labelling and being identified as someone is “in part a historical process which has its origin in the bureaucratic practices of the state... there are clear stipulations on who an immigrant is, and at what point an immigrant becomes a citizen” (p. 100). Regardless of her study being based in the Canadian context, this perspective is still valid and can be found in several parts of the world in which immigrants apply for citizenship. Nevertheless, Ng pointed out that some people are treated as immigrants and others may not be, but “the way in which the attribution is made in the everyday world draws on a ‘common-sense understanding’ of how that difference is constructed” (p. 101) which means that the context and setting might change the way one is labeled. Besides, these forms of labeling, such as “immigrant”, “refugee”, or “ethnicity” result from the contact between the incoming population with the domestic citizens. In the process of labeling, power relations are set. As a refugee there are certain advantages one might receive, such as support for housing or food, but other benefits might be refused, such as working in the proficiency that one had in the home country. Observable differences, as Ng (1981) stated, are the first step towards labels and often resulting separation which is connected to the fact that was earlier mentioned; namely individual characteristics, the way someone is seen, is socially constructed and used. This determines the relationship

each individual has with the world (Norton, 2013): as a refugee or immigrant, as a woman, as a mother, and more.

Women often accompany their husbands to the new country, in which they may not have the chance to work and therefore, experience a denied access to the public world. Their identity is “classified” and produced in specific sets of a social, historical, and economic relationship of power (Norton, 2000). As stated above, Butler (2006) focused on the performative identity, constructed and shaped by the outer world, for example the role a woman receives when giving birth. She is not only seen as a woman anymore, but as the mother *of* someone’s child and therefore, responsible for the family. It is a contradiction to see that the woman who nurtures the child and is responsible for its first form of education, may have not received any form of formal education herself.

Especially Somali women struggle with the change in the receiving country (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Their cultural beliefs and traditional values are closely connected to their religion. The mother will be the nurturer and advice giver for her whole life yet cannot fulfill this task in the new country because of language and cultural differences. Often these mothers do not know how they can contribute to the new society and feel overwhelmed by the educational system. In Somalia, parents do not need to take care of their children’s education; it was completely autonomous, which is part of their collective identity. According to their understanding of one’s role, families are built through marriage and women are responsible for the household and younger children, whereas men who dominate the sphere outside of the house are responsible for the religious education and guidance of the children. In many cases, Somali families must move away

from city centers in the receiving country. Due to the rising prices for housing they are confronted with new challenges and less support through friends and relatives, as well as more language challenges.

Somali women are often confronted with additional pressure and depression without knowing because there is no description and word for this in Somali. During the war between the clans in their home country, many women actively protected their men and were raped and killed to take revenge. Consequently, many women fled as soon as it was possible. When they reach the country of refuge, their role was reversed, and many Somalis had to live next to someone from a different clan who may have killed a family member or friend. Many men died during the war and others suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome, so women must earn a living for their families (Farid & McMahan, 2004) and reconstruct their own roles as a woman, mother, and immigrant. This study contrasts two Somalian women with two female immigrants sharing different L1 literacy experiences and upbringing based on the culture and historical situation. The context in which the study took place is in the United States and many Somalians fled during the past two decades. Many Somalians did not have the chance to attend a school, especially women were not privileged, but they have to manage their life in the US as individuals; filing the paper work and having the wish to find a suitable employment, like nursing. To fulfill these goals, Somalians need to be able to read and write, yet many do not even know the Roman alphabet or how to read and write in their L1.

## **Foreign Language Learning**

As Norton (2000) points out “[l]anguage is not just a neutral form of communication, but a practice that is socially constructed in the hegemonic events, activities and processes that constitute daily life – the practices that are considered normal by the dominant society” (p. 130). Language learning for adult immigrants provides a greater challenge for their identity construction than it does for younger learners. In most cases, their access to the social world is narrowed and mainly focuses on daily encounters, such as interactions in a shop or in their children’s school. Regardless, their expectations and their resulting investment to belong to the imagined community, it differs in the sense that they desire to be a part of this “new world”, so that their integration process is positive, they can find a job or expand their education. Coming to a new country often gives a sense of change and improvement, as stated in the motives for immigration. Some immigrants and refugees might struggle with the new situation of (formal) language learning, since they have never attended a school or learned a language explicitly. Their primary language learning will nevertheless come from a natural setting if they manage to overcome barriers and interact with native speakers. Moreover, their previous language learning experience continues to shape their identity by hindering development and interaction based on the cultural distance with the dominant society.

**Identity in language learning - motivation and investment.** With the will to become part of a new community, individuals have the intrinsic motivation to invest in their learning. Norton (2013) describes these groups as “imagined communities” (p. 8);



communities one feels connected to through imagination. As an illustration, an immigrant woman, coming to the United States, has the will to be part of her new home, the new neighborhood, and maybe even of the employment site. This woman will, therefore, invest to overcome the unequal power relations, such as the ones existing between native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs), that make her the “other” and exclude her from society. During this process, it is the struggle for independence and the desire to resist a patriarchal structure that determines her integration success, for example in a home with a traditional understanding of roles in which the power of language is only given access to some of the people (Norton, 2000, p. 60). It is a constant organizing process of who you are and which relationship you have with others. Ellis (1997) defines investment as “the learners’ commitment to learning an L2, which is viewed as related to the social identities they construct for themselves as learners” (as cited in Norton, 2000, p. 11).

*Motivation* can therefore be the commitment the learner has to the target language (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), there is “instrumental orientation” (p.14), referring to the advantageous purposes of the individual to express what they desire. In addition, there is the will to be part of the community which is called the “integrative motive” (p. 12). *Investment* on the other hand is constructed, socially and historically, regarding the relationship between the learner and the target community and the desire to learn and use the language of that community (Atkinson, 2011). The learner tries to develop their cultural capital in order to build a greater network and be part of the “new world”. In fact, motivation and investment are

often contradictory terms: even if the learner is motivated to learn the language, they might be hindered due to the power relations that exist in the imagined community and how these learners are being perceived.

Notwithstanding, the question remains how does the new identity which is connected through the target language interact with the identity of the first language, such as resistance in the language learning classroom. Canagarajah (2004) discusses this aspect under the term “subversive identities”. His analysis focused on how language learners keep the membership of their vernacular (a language which is naturally spoken by a particular group in most informal settings) communities and cultures while they are engaging in an L2. Results proved that some learners did not openly practice language and literacy, as an expression of resistance towards the unwanted identities that were forced on the learners. These *pedagogical safe houses* (Canagarajah, 2004) were the site of constructing their new identities. Based on the second language acquisition *acculturation model* (Schuhmann, 1978 as cited in Norton, 2000, p. 114) and Norton’s (2000) study, the immigrating population does not feel inferior to the target group when arriving, however, they are labeled as “immigrants” in everyday life which influences their interaction with the target community. As a result, the women in her study maximized their contact with the target community by giving up their heritage’s lifestyle and values whilst adopting these from the current community. Findings further demonstrated that a positive relationship between the target language group and second language group enriches the assimilation process.

Learners from different language levels and learning backgrounds, often do not seek the same approach to understand a new learning content. As part of the Vygotskian perspective of learning, scaffolding is the key approach. In many cases, learners encounter situations which are unfamiliar to them, yet others, such as teachers or peers, may have internalized and understood these concepts already. To hinder frustration and bridge the gap between the learner's current knowledge and the aimed competences, which is called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 84), others can support this learning process. The ZPD can be understood as the form of mediation which the student needs to understand. Several different approaches and forms are possible and used in language teaching and learning, such as prompting. Nonetheless, it is important to notice that the different forms of scaffolding can only take place in the interaction between the novice and more competent partner.

In conclusion, language learning depends on the individual experience and formation of identity which later influences motivation and investment. If both groups provide situations of input and practice, second language learners will benefit from their investment and construct a new language learning identity that gives them access to the social networks and increases their integration process. Furthermore, immigrant language learners will determine their status and receive respect in contexts, such as work, enhancing their self-esteem and lowering the affective filter, as well as anxiety.

**Female immigrant foreign language learners.** Special attention must be drawn towards female immigrants and refugees learning a foreign language in the country of settlement, since eighty per cent of the refugee population consists of women and their

children (Statista, 2019). Learning a language is their form of changing their representation in society, such as “victims” that need to be protected, as described in the previous section. Aiming for an English-only policy, scholars such as Fredricks & Warriner (2016) argue the benefits of English-only language and instruction in the classroom. Giving all students an English-immersion education is often considered the fastest way to integrate culturally and linguistically diverse students and help them overcome language difficulties. Not educating girls and women, from a feminist perspective, is a disadvantage for society. The World Bank Group (2014) found out that there are beneficial psychological and physiological factors associated with educating women and girls, such as lower levels of infectious disease, lower infant and child mortality, and lower birth rates.

Educating female refugees and immigrants, however, can have several positive outcomes which were revealed and addressed by McPherson (2014) and which include two main themes: quality of life and empowerment. According to her study with refugee women in Australia using semi-structured interviews, McPherson concluded that education fosters the individual life qualitatively because it gives women meaningful work and areas of engagement in their roles, as mothers, wives, and women of the new society. Additionally, these women expressed that they did not fear material safety or security, and some may even return to their home. Being educated was also related to having the power to address topics through a given voice and visibility, as well as a form of freedom to make decisions and being mobile. In conclusion, these are all expressions of autonomy and being able to care for oneself, which is considered an ethical act of

citizenship for many refugee women (p. 39). Having the ability to think critically and resist situations which are unpleasant and preparing the individual “for a certain complete achievement of life” (Foucault 2000 as cited in McPherson 2014, p. 42).

Women’s access to education is often denied based on their traditional roles in the family or their experience in the camps. For many girls and women, schools are not seen as necessary for their future and hence they might only receive primary forms of education in the refugee camps. In other cases, such as in the study by Heninger and McKenna (2005), girls were placed into lower grades and not with peers to make up for gaps in their previous education. Sieng and Thompson (1992) even described a situation in which a woman decided to learn English through the Bible because education was denied, and she did not have the resources to attend school. Disadvantages, such as the alphabet or oral traditions affect both genders. Other factors only influence women, such as a lower self-esteem and challenges through the cultural adaptation when caring for the private and public domains. Further disadvantages and educational challenges result from the trauma and stress women experienced during war, in refugee camps or in the country of settlement, such as sexual abuse, systematized rape or fleeing without any choices. Nonetheless, if women do have the chance to attend settlement education, some struggle to transition into mainstream education systems based on the previously named challenges (McPherson, 2014).

As stated above some cultures struggle more with the challenges of learning a new language due to their oral orientated L1 background. This affects Somali language learners massively since they come from a rich oral tradition, including many poems,

stories, and proverbs which were passed on verbally from generation to generation. Even in Somalian schools, learning the L1 mainly focused on memorization. Another challenge arises from the multiple forms of language use (i.e., Somali oral language and Qur'an Arabic) that seems incompatible with the nationwide literacy campaign that promotes Roman alphabet literacy. Previous language experiences and learning styles (listening and memorization) lose their importance and decrease (Farid, & McMahan, 2004). To bridge this gap and foster new learning styles and autonomy, foreign language learning cannot be reduced to oral language learning but needs to include literacy development as well.

## **L2 Literacy development based on L1 experiences**

“Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is *constructed*” (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). In this passage, Weedon (1997) is referring to the intertwined connection between identity and language. An individual rarely stands alone - most often in relationship with others in a social context; language is, therefore, needed to uphold the connection and foster their identity. Whenever language is used, the individual passes on meaning and negotiates his/her position in the social world. This becomes more important for a foreign language learner who is not just using the language as a native speaker but who needs language to build a new identity in order to find their position in the new context. The notion of voice and individualism is strongly emphasized in the discussions about second language writing. Scholars, such as Wu and Rubin (2000), state that writing “requires

assimilation of far more subtle yet pervasive cultural knowledge about ways of arguing, ways of addressing an audience, ways of expressing authority, and much more” (p. 148). Differences lie in the conventions that each society has, and which provide the chance for integration; especially important for immigrants and refugees. It is important to understand how these language learners can express themselves and gain their form of power through their voice, which Hyland (2008) describes as “writing always has voice in the sense that it conveys a representation of the writer” (as cited in Pearson Casanave, 2017, p. 292).

This section briefly focuses on foreign language learning from a socio-cultural perspective which is needed to understand the importance of literacy development. The main aim is to reveal the refugee and immigrant literacy development. This literacy development differs from other forms of literacy, since most refugees and immigrants do not access a foreign language through formal schooling. Their integration is based on out-of-school literacy practices, such as writing a letter to their children’s teacher or responding to an invoice.

**Refugee and Immigrant Literacy.** In many cases, literacy development is studied and discussed in the educational contexts, mainly focusing on children and adolescence (Bigelow, Vanek, King, & Abdi, 2017; Cranitch, 2010; Crea, Hasson, Evans, Cardoso, & Underwood, 2017; Frodesen, 2009; Harklau, & Siegal, 2009; Hirano, 2014). The difference however is that the participants of previous studies are generally part of a program that addresses and fosters the individual literacy development, like having additional composition classes or specific ESL classes. Adult refugees often do not have

this chance and struggle with different forms of settlement and integration, as described above in detail. In most cases, these people cannot attend a public school, such as a high school, due to their age; or if their age is suitable, they would have different responsibilities, like caring for their house and family which could prevent them from learning. Darvin and Norton (2014) declared that the “transnational habitus” (p.112) would form a new sense of identity that asks for different types of classrooms that are suitable for its learners. Not only does gender and age influence the access of education and learning the language, but “[w]ithin a globalized world, there also exists a global class hierarchy, and the location of a migrant’s country of origin in this hierarchy can also position migrants in particular ways in their country of settlement” (p. 113). These positions mark the use and exposure of the individual, such as limited L2 encounters for women who may have to stay at home to take care of the family or who may not be mobile without a driver’s license.

Rockhill (1987) conducted a research based on literacy of Hispanic immigrant women in the United States and concluded that there is more for the women than just the acquisition of English literacy. “Literacy is a social practice, as well as a discursive and ideological practice, and it symbolizes becoming ‘educated’” (p. 327-328). The women in his study did not see it as their right to be literate and that literacy education was only granted to their husbands. They expressed that their task was providing a better life for their families. Rockhill concluded that literacy was a social practice which was gendered as well. Norton (2000) extended this point of view with her study and expressed that the



exposure, and the practice women follow for learning the foreign language is structured through their life as a woman.

Additionally, Freedman (1997) highlighted the significance of gender. In many immigrant families, the first language is the connection to the past and the future. Freedman's study was extended through Skilton-Sylvester (2002), stating that if educators understood women's domestic and professional identity, that this would benefit their investment in the ESL setting. Individualization would then result in different forms of participation and learning outcomes. A mother wants to invest into an additional language to provide a better life for her children and therefore, needs English to perform certain tasks. According to her study, women's identities in the role of a spouse, mother, sister/daughter and worker influenced the way that these individuals participated in the ESL program. In some cases, being responsible for the family as an English learner or her language learning investment was seen as a threat because the husband was afraid that she would leave him. These different forms of support or barriers furthered the interest in the language and the resulting investment.

Participants in Norton (2000) declared that they tried to make sense of the new world by watching soap operas and connecting language with culture. However, they also expressed that they often felt nervous and anxious which led to silencing and being marginalized from the community. One of her participants even answered that she felt like a "foreigner person" (p. 104), referring to someone who is only temporarily a part of the community, such as a visitor and who is mobile in contrast to an immigrant.

Becoming literate is a part of the integration process in the country of settlement. Many refugees and immigrants, according to Benseman (2014), view the term literate as becoming independent by gaining new friends, employment, and even maintaining social and psychological well-being. According to Benseman's study, many refugees wished to fulfill regular tasks when literate, such as reading street signs, being able to support their children in school, having a job, and having the skill to identify food items (p. 97). He calls this situation in which many refugees find themselves, the "wheel of progress" (p. 101), meaning the inclusion and mutual influences of many factors, like understanding the life in the country of settlement, having literacy skills, learning skills, and self-confidence. To gain this self-confidence learners need to among other things develop L2 literacy, so that "social boundaries" (Soto Huerta & Pérez, 2015) between immigrants and the domestic population are lowered. Based on their study, they concluded that these distances are higher due to cultural and religious dissimilarities and because of low labor market skills. These affect the education and wider use of English, since most countries, such as the United States, forward processes of uniformity (p. 490).

Other current research focuses on the dominant gender – the man – when designing and conducting the research. One of these widely cited examples in the area of literacy development, is a literacy ethnography by Perry (2008), in which she analyzed the stories told by Sudanese refugees. The aim of the study was to analyze the transformation of storytelling into other literacy practices. The young men came from an orally-oriented culture and they spoke four different languages but were only literate in English due to the political situation. One of the main findings was that the participants

believed that education and literacy were an expression of power, alongside with their will to use language to educate others about their heritage and using the tool to construct the meaning of their heritage and resettlement. As this example shows, not much research has been conducted in the out-of-school context, especially not focusing on women's literacy experiences.

The latest PISA results (2015) have proven that girls outperform boys in reading in all participating countries. With these results in mind, many girls from developing countries cannot read and often need to spend more time in their homes helping the family instead of attending school (Stromquist, 2014). Building on Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", Stromquist argues that even though the development of literacy skills is complex and time consuming, it needs practice and support so that skills and strategies can be intensified and empower women to advocate their role in society. Literacy can be used as a political tool (p. 549) and familiarize its users with the society, giving them a voice against "oppressors" (p. 548). There is not only an aim to raise consciousness, but also to set goals and foster changes. Taking a closer look at previous studies regarding female refugee and immigrant literacy, most findings circulate around the health sector, analyzing women's knowledge about health issues (e.g. cancer and maternal problems). Little research can be found on the use of female refugee and immigrant literacy in out-of-school contexts, such as writing a letter for the child's teacher.

Previous studies, such as Kananen and Pettitt (2017) focused on female immigrants' desire to be part of the receiving country and their language learning development as part of the integration process. In their study, the authors primarily

analyzed the importance and beneficial effects of literacy on women's agency and their L2 use. The women in their study expressed that they decided to study the language in order to escape financial problems and improve their job opportunities. However, in most cases the access to educational programs was difficult, since many women simultaneously had to fulfill the role of a mother. Based on this fact, one of the research sites included an educational program in the United States in which women could develop English literacy while not neglecting their role as a mother. For the mothers, acquiring literacy skills meant that they could express their choices and shift their pre-determined gender roles.

Lam and Warriner (2012), on the other hand, focused on the connection between transnationalism and literacy in their review of previous studies. The main findings, which also follow the New Literacy Studies approach, stated that literacy must be viewed beyond borders and contexts. They defined literacy as "transnational habitus" (p. 195) which refers to Bourdieu's world view of capital and habitus but takes into consideration that migrated families need their habitus in the receiving and in the heritage communities. Furthermore, their review revealed that literacy is used as a tool of survival. In addition, Hornberger (2007) states that even though migrants move across borders, their ties to their country of heritage maintains. Biliteracy or even multiliteracy, namely written communication in more than one language, is therefore used to uphold this connection. Especially the use of technology forwards this process of globalization by constructing a fluid self between space and time. Hurtig's (2005) writing workshop "Padres como escritores" (Parents as writers) undertakes this boundary breaking experience of Mexican

women in Chicago. Participants wrote stories about their everyday life in the urban spaces which form their identity, but which were also influenced by their interaction in the sphere. These women used their opportunity during the study to express their recreation of the community and the experienced gender-based oppression. By using the writing tool, one participant wrote in her story: “We all have something important to tell and not knowing how to read and write doesn’t stop us from doing so” (p. 261). The focus of their stories was on the transformation between their heritage’s identity and the new identity. This movement and transformation play a major role in the process of integration as stated above, since women are confronted with several different challenges and new forms of identity construction when they arrive in the receiving country. In Hurtig’s workshop, this change was expressed through the symbolic and metaphoric use of the city, including its parks and paths, that defined the daily “maps” of its wanderers.

Granting and providing women access to literacy programs gives them chances not only to understand the world around them, but it also empowers them to shape this world. Women’s voices in writing need to be heard so that specific gender-based identities can be transformed and reorganized. Contributing to an inclusive and understanding society can create spaces of integration and supports women in becoming a major part of the receiving society. Especially female immigrants and refugees need the chance to express their experiences and roles as mothers, sisters, daughters and workers so that they can learn about their past and influence the future by passing on their stories.

**Religious Literacy.** Learning how to read and write differs depending on the cultural background and heritage. In some countries, such as Europe or the United States,

the first encounters with the written work occur when parents read bedtime stories or fairy tales to their children. Children listen carefully to these words and after a while they pretend they can read the story as well, since they have memorized the words of their favorite bedtime story. Countries with an Islamic culture or which originate from an oral tradition, often do not have this form of input for their children; their first written words come from the Qur'an. Islamic children attend a Qur'an school where they hear and learn to recite the Qur'an. In comparison, in many Western and Christian cultures older children attend Bible classes and hear Bible stories. Other religions, such as the Jewish faith, have their form of teaching their children and adolescents their values and beliefs. Through colonialism, many countries had to learn how to read and write through the Bible, which was brought to the learners by missionaries and schools were opened to educate the natives. Even in the Middle Ages, until Luther addressed the importance of education and provided the Bible to all and not just to the aristocrats, the education and language of the Bible (Hebrew and Greek) was only for white aristocratic and Christian men. Furthermore, the first printed book was the Bible, and it is still the most-sold book in the world. Current trends in education separate religion and literacy, leaving a gap for research purposes. As authors, such as Skerrett (2014), state "[I]teracy scholarship and pedagogical practice today pays little attention to the religious lives and literacies of an increasingly diverse student population" (p. 233).

According to Prothero (2007), religious literacy should be defined as "the ability to understand and use in one's day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions -their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors,

and narratives” (p. 11). Beyond that, he states that religious literacy should be separated into the specific areas, such as Islamic literacy, or its functions, such as narrative literacy. He concludes that religious literacy needs to be understood as a fluid process in which people constantly maneuver between conversations through interpretation, and not just the decoding process of the written word. Others, such as Stack-Nelson (2014), express the ongoing criticism that calls for “an alternative, thoughtful, and imaginative reader of the Bible” (p. 295). Using the Bible and religious texts to educate and guide a readerly reader “who is broadly literary, that is, her sensibilities toward the Bible are shaped by approaches that are applicable to and used with the study of other literary texts” (p. 295). Based on her findings, Stack-Nelson (2014) defines three essential characteristics for a “readerly reader”: skills, knowledge and sensibility. She states that readers should not only know the terms and history of the Bible but also be able to make connections to present life experiences (skills) and be open-minded when approaching these texts to generate self-reflection (sensibility).

Religion forms individuals, just like history and societies, and influences how people believe and communicate. In the current context of migration, people flee and leave their homes behind, due to religious differences. However, their religion is one thing they carry with them across borders (Skerrett, 2014). Even in Heath’s (1983) ethnography, the citizens of Roadville and Trackton built their beliefs upon the Bible. Mainly the citizens in Roadville told stories based on biblical parables and considered a story as something that avoids direct negative talk which is the “Christian ideal of

disciplined tongue” (p.154). In their community, the written materials are mainly excerpts and texts from the Bible.

Skerrett (2014) argues religious literacy in the aspect of multiliteracies as the following:

religious literacies align with contemporary theories of literacy as social practice that account for multiple literacies needed for living and learning in culturally and linguistically diverse societies that are technologically advanced (p. 237).

Skerrett then introduces her case study with a focus on identity, namely “that religious identities, literacy practices, values, and goals flow through, transform, and are transformed by the many contexts of people’s lives” (p. 238). The results, based on several observations and artifacts, lead to the conclusion that students and teachers used religious literacy to understand secondary texts they read, as well as the use of religion as a tool – in the Vygotskian perspective – to compose their own writings. Using and redefining religious symbols and beliefs can also be viewed under the term “code meshing” (Canagarajah, 2013). This term signifies the movement between different languages and Discourses, including the use of previous literacy knowledge, shaped and influenced by religion, to tell future stories and reflect on experiences.

For the purpose of the conducted study, religious literacy is understood as reading the written word of the book, suitable for each individual religion, like the Bible for Christians or the Qur’an for Muslims, being able to listen to the written word, and critically think about its interpretations. Beyond that, religious literate people can also be



children who are able to memorize and recite these words and make sense of what they mean. This form of literacy development needs to be included because, for example, the Qur'an (lit. "recitation") has its traditions in memorization (Prothero, 2007). Religious literacy is not limited to the Bible, even though it is mainly used, but it includes other religious scripts.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter presented the challenges in the educational setting in which many women are underrepresented and do not have the opportunities to learn the L2 formally in out-of-school contexts. The chapter also demonstrated current research findings that show how important language and education are for immigrants and refugees to strengthen their voice and acquire reading and writing competencies which they need in daily life. The conducted study focused on this aspect to shed light on how open exemplified educational setting can influence the learning outcomes. By laying out the issues and reasons for migration, emphasis was given to female immigrants and refugees who are often disregarded and not focused on in research, demonstrating the necessity for this study and their representation as the English learner population. At the same time, their identity change is more crucial in the discussion about future education and support in the integration process. Somali women living in the midwestern region of the United States are confronted with new challenges and identity reconstruction during their integration and language learning process. The concept of identity was defined and negotiated in particular to understand the different sociocultural influences and how they construct and deconstruct culture and society.

Equally important was the definition and focus on literacy development which has been the aim of several studies in the school-context during the past decades, but rarely considered in out-of-school settings or post-educational contexts. Many adult immigrants and refugees, particularly women, do not receive forms of general or literacy education. Nevertheless, their daily challenges as an independent part of the community require them to be literate. Consequently, a narrowed and female-focused perspective on the aspect of foreign language learning and their specific literacy development was offered. Afterwards, a definition of foreign language learning in more general terms and the effect on identity regarding motivation and investment was provided.

Finally, the term religious literacy was defined, and previous research was taken into account to shed light on the importance of integrating this aspect into foreign language learning; especially in the context of immigrant and refugee literacy development. Further, the focus was laid on religious identity that is used to approach reading secondary texts or when composing own writings. The following chapter shows the methodological steps that were taken throughout the research and introduces the participants and educational setting which is seen as an example of the current learning context. Data was collected over period of time and the different approaches as well as their justification are presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter III: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the current educational context in which female immigrants and refugees are placed if they have the opportunity to access such education. Further, the study showed how literacy is incorporated into the classroom and which role literacy plays in the daily encounters of immigrant and refugee women who may have had L1 literacy experience or not. In giving the participants journal prompts, the study answers two research questions: (1) What are the previous and current literacy experiences of adult female refugees and immigrants in an adult education program in the US? (2) How might female refugees' and immigrants' identity construction, influenced by labels as misrepresentations, be expressed in their L2 literacy experiences during their English language?

This chapter focuses on the methodology of the study and presents the relevant areas: (a) research purpose and rationale; (b) contextualization of the research, such as the setting and the participants; (c) how the data was collected with regards to narrative inquiries, observations and interviews; and (d) data analysis. As in the previous chapters, this chapter is concluded at the end as well.

### **Qualitative Research**

In the field of Arts and Humanities most research is based on a qualitative data collection and analysis. This field includes areas of education, social interaction, and research done in everyday life including people and their behavior or emotions. Most

studies in this field, address questions that can change the situation or solve a problem the people encounter. Applied research is one form of improving the quality of a practice in one specific discipline, such as teaching.

Qualitative research focuses on descriptive research designs, that gather observable and describable data and open the floor for interpretation. Merriam (2009) describes qualitative research as a form of understanding “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). Researchers, therefore, take a closer look at people’s lives and their social and cultural contexts to understand why a certain behavior or interaction is being used and how this can influence future interactions. Conducting qualitative research can be based on different beliefs and orientations, such as the *positivist orientation* in which the researcher generalizes hypotheses by evaluating situations and contexts through surveys. A researcher who has the assumption that the reality is socially constructed would use qualitative research to interpret this construct (*interpretive research*). Moreover, some studies, such as *critical research* view research as a form of challenging the natural order and how people view the world. These researchers conduct a study that tries to do more than just uncover how the world is seen; they use criticism to transform and empower this world view. Studies regarding feminism or social injustice would follow this research approach.

The conducted study on literacy development of female refugees and immigrants includes areas that could be seen as critical research, like focusing on women only or conducting a research with a minority group, such as refugees and immigrants. However,

the study has its roots in the *postmodern/post-structural approach*. This approach focuses on the question and interpretation of narrative inquiries that express the participants' personal experience and development in second/foreign language and literacy use. The collected data does not lead to generalizable interpretations but provides insight and includes multiple voices and perspectives which lead to "multiple truths" (Merriam, 2009, p.10) and focuses on a diverse population. The focus of qualitative research is on lived experiences and the effects these have on the individual (Merriam, 2009).

### **Research Purpose and Rationale**

By giving a detailed description of the participants' life, the study sheds light on how female immigrants and refugees in the United States context develop their literacies. Taking a closer look at how the participants acquire literacy and language skills in their first and second language, their daily use of the language and how they feel about these different forms of language and literacy, the study answers the following research questions:

- 1) What are the previous and current literacy experiences of adult female refugees and immigrants in an adult education program in the US?
- 2) How might female refugees' and immigrants' identity construction, influenced by labels as misrepresentations, be expressed in their L2 literacy experiences during their English language education?

Using three different data collection methods, the study also answers questions regarding the participants' identity, how this new identity differs from their heritage

identity, and which factors influence these perceptions. Participants give insight about their motivations to learn the foreign language (in this case English) and how their surroundings affect their individual investment. Using the tool of observation, the needed scaffolding approaches to support the learning process and forward the individual learning outcomes are described to understand how this important approach in return aids learning development.

The study exclusively focuses on female immigrants and refugees due to their silencing in previous research and the male dominated spotlight. Women experience their dislocation and stay in refugee camps differently from men. These difficulties challenge the access researchers have when contacting female refugees leading to an underrepresentation in educational research (McPherson, 2014). In many cases women suffer from post-traumatic stress and experienced violence, making interviews and direct questions impossible. This does not hinder giving women a voice and letting them tell their story but reminding researchers to be conscious and tactful about the situation. Knowing their background and experience influences how women are integrated in the education of settlement and which specific needs they might request to learn the language and be a part of the new life, since their traditional beliefs and roles have shifted and the need of education for them to find an employment rises. Language and literacy are the key for gaining access to this world.

Using narrative inquiries and interviews as a research method gives the participants a voice to express their feelings and thoughts which might not be heard otherwise. This study seeks to clarify which impact this approach has and how it

influences the literacy development which determines a progress in integration. Being a citizen in a country includes filing papers and other forms of written communication, which cannot be achieved without knowing the English alphabet and having literacy skills in reading different forms of texts and writing. This study sheds light on the problem and views “the newcomers” as individuals have by giving them a voice to express who they are and helping them develop their literacy skills. Special attention is given to religious literacy as a subcategory of literacy which differs in language use and expressions, such as Qur’anic Arabic. Muslim women wearing a hijab or covering their face are often represented as being oppressed and not having an individual voice. Their religion and beliefs are closely related to their identity and how they experience their lives and practice religion. Many Muslim women, depending on the country, learn how to read the Qur’an as the only formal way of education (Dahya & Jenson, 2015). Dahya and Jenson (2015) also state with their ethnographic study that “Muslim girls [are] a community who are subject to false assumptions and discriminatory representations related to Islam and the practice of veiling in particular” (p. 109). These religiously-based stereotypes resulted in exclusion and lack of access to educational resources in Western schools. (Dahya & Jenson, 2015).

According to Norton (2013) the relevance of researching identity in language learning contexts, includes several different areas of interest. On the one hand, her conducted research addresses the questions that arise in the intersection between the individual language learner and the social world. On the other hand, research aims at the relation of power which affects the language learner’s access to the language and target

language community; leading to another aspect which combines identity with practice and resources. Language learners who cannot access rich cultural and language resources, because their lived experiences exclude them from the target language community, will not have the chance to practice the foreign language and develop their identity. Learners who invest in the given setting are motivated to learn the language. Formal language classrooms often offer impractical forms of knowledge that cannot be applied in real world situations. In conclusion, the conducted study bridges the gap between learner's previous language learning experiences while giving them access to future educational opportunities and by developing their female voices and their identity construction so that it is not silenced but gains volume and tone.

### **Contextualizing the Research**

The research was from an *etic perspective*, meaning an outsider's viewpoint, and the researcher processed the information inductively and later formed hypothesis. Data collection was taken in different forms to receive a deeper understanding of the individual experiences and developments. Due to the setting, the participants, and the research capacity, there was no sampling before the study. However, the observations strengthen the writing prompts and interview questions.

At the beginning of the research, the researcher observed the classroom setting and potential participants. These observations also took place later in the study which resulted in four observations that were accompanied by written field notes. The researcher participated as an active observer, but she did not teach the course. The



resulting field notes were used to document the participants' participation in class. Findings, such as struggles or questions, influenced the later writing prompts. The observer mainly focused on how the participants used their L2 in the course setting orally and how the teacher used scaffolding techniques and incorporated their experiences in the lesson.

The main data was collected through narrative inquiries. Participants were asked to submit four journal entries to the researcher which focused on their second language learning experiences. These journal entries were written in class and were part of the whole class instruction. Therefore, the journal entries are either digital or hard-copies which were imported to a program (MAXQDA) for a more convenient analysis, after getting a first impression in a card-sorting approach. The journals were prompted (Appendix A) with questions given by the teacher and the participants answered these according to their experience and L2 literacy competences. To support the participants in their writing process, the teacher introduced each prompt with a discussion round or idea-finding phase based on the topic, so that the participants could brainstorm and collect needed vocabulary before writing.

As a final form of data collection, the participants were interviewed once by the researcher about their second language literacy practices, particularly the content they focused on in their journal entries. Each interview did not exceed an hour, was audio-taped using a digital recorder and transcribed for data analysis by the researcher. These interviews (Appendix B) shed light on themes and topics that arose in the writing prompts and deepen the understanding of the participants' experiences. In addition, the

interviews gave room for additional information which the participants, based on their lower language skills and knowledge, were not able to express through their writing.

The later analysis and descriptive interpretation included all three forms of data collection and interrelated the different factors. Such a detailed analysis does not generate data that can be generalized but offers extended data which go beyond a case study data collection.

Scholars, such as Brown (1984) and Norton (2000), used diaries as a form of retrieving language learning aspects when conducting foreign language research. Participants wrote diary entries based on their learning and day-to-day language encounters with the surrounding or in a language learning institute. Most of these entries, such as Brown's (1984) research, were written in the participants' mother tongue and aimed at the reflection about their learning inside the classroom context. Yet, Norton focused on the participants' English competences and asked them to write their entries in English. Participants reflected on their learning experiences in different contexts, such as workplace or in their surrounding community. Aspects to reflect on were feelings and thoughts during different language encounters which were shared in regular meetings with other participants and the researcher. Sharing the content with an audience supported the motivation of writing, which was researched by Zamel (1987) and states that "[i]n classrooms in which risk taking is encouraged, trust is established, choice and authority are shared, and writing is viewed as a meaning-making event, students change as writers, adopt positive attitudes toward written work and demonstrate real growth in writing performance" (p. 707-708).

As stated above, the main data was collected through prompted journal entries. According to Merriam (2009), “stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us” (p. 32). Most narratives, as a data source, are written in the first-person narration and follow the structure of a beginning, middle, and end. Narratives can either be biographies, life histories, autoethnographies, or even an oral history which is determined by the role of the author and how they interpret the described world. Viewing narratives from a hermeneutic perspective, the interplay takes place between the person analyzing the story, the spoken word and its resulting interpretation (Merriam, 2009).

Depending on the focus, the analysis of a narrative can be directed towards the participant’s life (biographical perspective) or psychologically by analyzing the person’s emotions and thoughts. Furthermore, a discourse analysis (Gee, 2015) or analyzing the structure of the narrative (Labov, 1982 as cited in Merriam, 2009) will lead to an intensive focus on the language.

As a researcher with an etic perspective, observational field notes support the process of understanding the context and research setting. Since I did not teach the classes in which the prompts were written, observations were a supporting method to understand the influence of the teacher in the participants’ writing process. The advantages of observations are, according to Merriam (2009), that they occur in a natural setting and are first-hand encounters of the situation.

The third form of data collection that was used during the conducted study were interviews. DeMarrais (2004) defines interviews as “a process in which a researcher and

participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (as cited in Merriam, 2004, p. 87). For a deeper understanding of the examined research context, additional data were collected through interviews. According to Lawler (2002), interviews can be used to examine people’s experiences and interpretations of the world. In most cases, these interviews are in a narrative structure in which people represent themselves and make sense of the world around them. Generally, there is a close connection between previous and present experiences which can be revealed through communication and asking questions.

Interviews are used to elicit additional information which cannot be observed through a purposeful conversation. There are several types of interviews with different advantages to serve specific purposes. Besides the semi-structured interview, which was used for this study, there are standardized and informal interviews. All interview forms are on a continuum of structuredness, between highly structured and unstructured.

**Research setting.** The research was conducted at a language learning center in a smaller midwestern town in the United States. This setting was chosen based on the participants’ current knowledge and their use of the foreign language, as well as the demographic situation of the town. During the past decades, the town has encountered several migration streams and the current population ranges around 45,000 people with an average of 11% non-white population. 30.65% of the people who are 25 years and older did not graduate from high school.

The learning center that was the current context for the conducted research supports students struggling with school, homework or other forms of learning, as well as immigrants with the need to learn English for their daily life. In 1967 the Learning Center<sup>1</sup> opened its doors and last year about 120 students attended the learning center, in which some students spent up to 50 hours of one-to-one tutoring. Two-thirds of the learners are adults and two-thirds of which are women. Most of the courses are organized and taught by nuns and voluntary retired teachers. The courses are held in small groups or individually, depending on the different learning requirements and needs. Some of the teachers even teach outside the center and visit the students' home if they are not able to commute to the center. The learners who come to the learning center, pay a funded tuition and receive learning materials from the teachers. Each learner, adult or child, has their own folder with personal details. In many situations, families come together and are taught individually. The organization of teachers and lessons are mainly performed by two nuns; one who is responsible for the courses taking place inside the center and one who is responsible for coordinating teachers outside as part of the Refugee Outreach Program that was founded in 2012. Some students, such as nuns at other monasteries with less educational support, may even have asynchronous online courses with one of the writing teachers.

Only a few of the teachers are paid for their work, like the teacher teaching the courses in which the study took place. She teaches four of the participants as a group, and

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<sup>1</sup> All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

one woman is taught individually. Her role as a teacher in the learning center is based on her previous education in the area of writing and teaching. In addition, she grew up with more than one language and her experience with literacy during her upbringing is also connected to her Jewish faith.

The participants' courses took place in the computer laboratory or in the former gym hall which was redesigned to function as individual learning stations. These learning stations or cubicals were equipped with materials to support the tutoring sessions. As described in detail below, the participants of the study were part of the writing program intended to develop learner reading, writing, and phonemic awareness skills associated with the Roman alphabet. Depending on the level of the language learners, the teacher provided the learner with sentence stems and models throughout the writing processes. In addition, the learners would then formulate their own sentences and read out different word families to familiarize themselves with the English language.

**Participants.** Participants were 4 female immigrants and refugees with different ethnic backgrounds: 2 Somalis, 1 Vietnamese, and 1 Brazilian. Participants agreed to take part by signing the consent forms (Appendix C) which were given to them during the informational meetings. The program coordinator and the teacher had provided the potential participants with a flyer (Appendix D) regarding the upcoming meetings. All participants were part of the learning center and participated in one of the English program courses. The study was on a voluntarily base and the participants had the chance to withdraw from the study at any point without fearing negative effects. Based on the form of data collection, participants had to have some prior knowledge in English and an

interest in writing which was ensured through the context of the writing and reading course.

Three of the participants belonged to the congregation and came from foreign monasteries to the United States. They lived on the grounds of the monastery and their daily routine included the tasks and life of a nun. Two of these nuns were from Vietnam and lived at a different monastery before coming to the one that was responsible for the learning center. Their language experiences in English were minor and they did not have much experience in writing and reading in English, except for the Bible and the hymns sung in church; both expressed their worries regarding their participation and questioned their skills to express their thoughts in writing during the informational meeting. The third nun came from Brazil. She had taught in a school and worked as a principal for many years. During our first meeting she was very interested in the study and willing to participate. All three expressed their wish to be informed about the results of the study and wanted to read the final paper. Based on their heritage and experience, these three participants had former schooling in their home country and were literate in their L1. Therefore, these women represent the pool of immigrants with previous knowledge about language and education.

The other two participants were female refugees from Somalia who did not belong to the congregation but attended the reading and writing courses at the learning center. These two women were working in a nearby company and attended the courses once a week after work or on the weekends. Based on their L1 (Somali) and upbringing, they hardly had any or even no previous experience in education and literacy. Their L1 had

been an oral language until the 1970s. Both women were Muslims and therefore, they had to go to madrassa to study the Qur'an and recite its content. Nevertheless, the language used in the Qur'an differs from the Arabic spoken in other countries and their L1. English was their third language. Most children in Somalia do not grow up with their parents yet are nurtured by their grandparents and do not attend school. Women are married at a young age and their children are given into their parents' responsibility. One of the women said that she did not learn English until she came to South Africa and did not attend any form of schooling until she arrived in the United States in 2014. She expressed that she wanted to learn the language to go to work and own a car, which she accomplished. The two Somali women are therefore the participants that represent the refugee population in the conducted study. The following table shows the participant makeup, including their primary language, previous experience and the time they had studying English.



Table 1: *Student Participant Makeup*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Primary language(s)</b>	<b>Previous language learning experience</b>	<b>Learning English</b>
Linh	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	– formal education in Vietnam	since 2015
Sophia	Brazilian	Portuguese	– formal education in Brazil – university – employment as a teacher	since 2008
Fawzia	Somalian	Somali Qur'an Arabic	– literacy education at home with private teacher & siblings – reading in Arabic (Qur'an school)	since 2005
Barkhado	Somalian	Somali Qur'an Arabic	– no formal education – reading in Arabic (Qur'an school)	since 2015

Since the participants were asked to respond to writing prompts, sampling excluded English beginners who had not yet been exposed to English and literacy. Moreover, the male participants were excluded because much research has been conducted on their language development in the past. Additionally, the age group and out-of-school context has been omitted in previous studies, leading to the participant makeup of this study, excluding learners, such as children or adolescents who attend a language program at a school or university.

## **Data Collection Process**

In qualitative research validity and reliability is secured through triangulation. The conducted study is separated in three different data collection methods: observations, narrative inquiries, and interviews to ensure a method triangulation. Triangulation is a form of quality control that is used in qualitative research to ensure validity, reliability, and generalizability. Nunan and Bailey (2009) suggest four different forms of triangulation: data triangulation (different sources), theory triangulation (varying different theories to confirm findings), researcher triangulation (more than one researcher), and methods triangulation (collecting data with various methods) (p.234). The conducted study can ensure a method triangulation since data was collected with three different approaches: narrative inquiries, observational field notes and interviews. An extensive literature review, based on previous and current theoretical beliefs, enables a reliable theory triangulation. Basing the findings on different sources, such as written, oral and observed data, strengthens the study according to Nunan and Bailey's (2009) data triangulation.

After contacting the potential research site, the application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was designed and reviewed. The revision of this board ensured the ethics of the data collection method and outcomes of the research design and process which was confirmed in an approval letter (Appendix E). The participants were made aware of the study through flyers (Appendix D) that invited them to two obligatory meetings. Two informational meetings were held at the learning center so that potential participants were informed about the details of the research project. Potential participants

had the chance to ask questions which were answered by the researcher. In addition to the meeting, the participants signed a consent form (Appendix C) and agreed to participate. Throughout the data collection, the teacher of the course was consistent, and she was responsible for teaching the needed material and foster the conceptualization phase of the writing process. *Table 2* describes the steps that were taken on a weekly basis to collect the data.

Week 1	Held two scheduled informational meetings at the learning center to inform potential participants; finalized participant selection and informed participants about data collection schedule
Week 2	Collected data from first journal entry with corresponding writing prompt Observed participants' foreign language class and took field notes
Week 3	Revised writing prompts Collected data from second journal entry with corresponding writing prompt
Week 4	Collected data from third journal entry with corresponding writing prompt Observed participants' foreign language class and took field notes
Week 5	Analyzed collected written artifacts and designed interview questions
Week 6	Collected data from fourth journal entry with corresponding writing prompt
Week 7	Analyzed collected written artifacts and revised interview questions
Week 8	Interviewed individual participants
Week 9	Transcribed the collected interview data
Week 10	Analyzed written artifacts and transcribed interview data
Week 11	Analyzed written artifacts and transcribed interview data
Week 12	Connected different data forms

**Narrative inquiry.** In the conducted study, the individual perspective of literacy and L2 use were analyzed, leading to a rather psychological approach. However, the

researcher also viewed the data according to the effect L1 literacy practices had on the development of the L2 (biological approach) and how these experiences influence the L2 literacy development, namely regarding the participants' writing.

To address these different areas of language use, the writing prompts referred to different areas of the participants' life in which they encountered literacy. The first writing prompt "How did your parents share language with you?" (Appendix A) referred to the biographical aspect of the study. The prompt was used so that the participants could write about their past language experience which had influence on their current language use. The second and the third prompt refer to the way the participants are using their languages (i.e., first and foreign languages) with their home community, referring to the community that might not be the community of residence. Further, it addressed how the language was used daily, including all situations in which they may use their first or foreign language (Appendix A). In the final journal entry, the participants are asked to identify the "person" they are with each language and how this differs from the "person" in their foreign language which is English (Appendix A). The term "person" is referring to individual characteristics and traits that form their personality and comfort level in each language.

**Observation.** The observations made throughout the conducted study, were based on an observer as participant situation and a non-participant observation. Depending on the class, I was part of the learning group or contributed to the course by giving examples of my personal experience; or a set by the group and observed the teaching and learning environment. I mainly sat with the participants and the teacher in a group and built a

relationship with the participants. The notes that were taken during the observations were kept in a researcher journal and revised as descriptive field notes with information regarding: the participants, setting, direct quotations, activities, and additional comments, as well as reflections on the observed. Field notes were taken over a period of four observations in the two different writing groups. In the case of the study, scaffolding techniques were used between the teacher and the participants, as well as between the participants. These examples are described in detail in the observational field notes (Appendix F). Observing these supportive systems made it easier to understand which support the individual student may need to approach the themes. In addition, many language learners, especially in the refugee and immigrant context, are still in the beginning of their learning process which can make it difficult for them to write completely autonomously, and therefore scaffolding is needed.

*Participant observation.* The first two observations mainly focused on the participants actions and oral expressions, trying to answer the questions as to how the participants approach literacy. In addition, field notes included how the teacher interacted with the students and how she was teaching them. The first two observational days provided background knowledge on how these classes were taught and which language level the participants had. The first day of observation took place during the second week of the data collection. The one-to-one literacy session with a Somali refugee employed sentence stems and teacher prompting to develop the learner's English reading and writing skills. After giving a prompt, the teacher asked the learner to write her own sentence, such as "My kitchen is...", with a focus on different forms of adjectives that

can be used to describe something. Later during the lesson, the learner had to identify differences and word families based on listening which the teacher used for a four-word story. This was the student's first attempt to write a story. The second observation took place in the same context and focused on how the learner was prompted for her first journal writing entry. The teacher had designed a handout with question prompts that the learner subsequently answered in sentence format and employed in the writing of her entry.

***Non-participant observation.*** However, the last two observations included how the teacher prompted the students and how she provided scaffolding to support the learners' understanding. In addition, the observation that took place in the group setting shed light on how the participants interacted and scaffolded each other in the pre-writing phase. Observation number three took place during the group writing class in which the more advanced students negotiated the given prompt and participated in an idea-finding activity supported by a table that focused on the different language forms: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Participants then started writing their own responses to the journal prompts, and, at the end of the class, participants were guided through the editing process.

**Interview.** For the purpose of this study, to gain more insight into the participants' thoughts and experiences, the semi-structured interview was suitable. Using the observational field notes and the journal entries, interview guidelines (Appendix B) were designed and put into a list of different questions that were used throughout the interview.

Participants then met individually with the researcher for a maximum of an hour and answered some of these questions; most questions varied, depending on the prior responses. Questions that all participants answered included questions about their motivation to learn the foreign language, their age, and their daily routines, such as having a job or studying for a future work position. Some questions referred to the participants' role as a language learner and speaker, such as: "How has your role at home or in the community changed since living in the US? How has that change impacted your language use?" or "In which situations do you feel like you cannot express what you are thinking in English? Why do you think that is?". These questions went beyond what the participants wrote during their journal entries. Questions regarding their motivation and future intentions were asked as well to understand why the participants decided to take part in the writing program and which motivation they had to participate in the study, such as "Which language goals did you set when you came to the United States?".

In some cases, additional probes were used to respond to new information that was given during the interview phase. Using the semi-structured interview approach made it possible for the researcher to adjust the questions during the interview, such as asking for clarification, or asking for more details and examples. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for a later data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data often serves as the base for making sense of the studied world. Strategies, such as consolidating, reducing, and interpreting the collected data, can be a

part of the meaning-making process (Merriam, 2009). How qualitative data is analyzed depends on the research question which the researcher wishes to answer through the analysis. In most cases, the procedure follows an inductive approach in which different categories and subcategories result in a hypothesis or further question.

The collected data, in the form of journal entries, field notes, and interview transcripts, were broken down into parts during a card sorting process. To look for answers regarding the first research question, the narrative inquiries are analyzed on a socio-cultural level, in a topic-coding manner, including topics that relate to language, literacy, and identity, but not limited to these codes. In the first set of sorting and category-finding, the journal entries were written sentence by sentence on cards. These cards were then sorted in an open coding process, by finding different groups that emerge when reading the sentences repeatedly. The words and questions (codes), which arose when reading, were written on a separate paper and stored. After proceeding in the same way with the other journal entries from the first prompt, the emerging words were written on cards again to see similarities and differences. The other three journal entries were approached in the same way. In the end, the cards from each week were observed and analyzed for similarities and contrasting ideas across all narratives.

After the individual entries were compared, field notes were included to look for similarities between the scaffolding procedures and the writing. Based on this analysis, a theory was generated and considered for interpreting the results and describing the findings.



Since the data analysis began during the writing process, the questions for the interviews included some of the emerging themes and topics. To deepen the data analysis, the interviews were imported and transcribed in a computerized program (MAXQDA). These transcripts and the texts from the narrative inquiries were coded in the program according to the card-sorting approach. The program was then used to find similarities that support the hypothesis and questions that arose in the first two sets of the data analysis.

Using these forms of analysis ensured an internal validity and triangulation through multiple methods and multiple sources of data because the data was collected over a period of five weeks. During the data collection process, peer reviews and conversations took place, as well as conversations between the researcher and the teacher to confirm and question observed findings. As Merriam (2009) states: “[t]he general lies in the particular” (p.225), the detailed description of the methodology ensures reliability and must not necessarily lead to generalizability, but certain findings can inform other areas of interest, such as further educational contexts and language learners with similar backgrounds.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the steps that were taken throughout the data collection process and the approach which was used for the analysis. The conducted research followed the methods of a qualitative study and guaranteed a validation and reliability through a methodological triangulation. As described above the data was collected

through narrative inquiries in the form of prompted journal entries, a detailed description of the research setting, participants and the learning situation based on observations and field notes, as well as in-depth insight of the participants' thoughts through additional individualized and semi-structured interviews. A detailed description of the data collection forms proved the necessity of these forms. In the end, a detailed data analysis described how the different forms of data collection were analyzed and set in a relation, to formulate reasonable findings and points of discussion which later led to the pedagogical implications. The following chapter discusses the findings from the collected data and answers the research questions.

## Chapter IV: Findings and Discussion

### Introduction

This chapter presents the different findings taken from the collected data. These findings are discussed regarding the two research questions (1) What are the previous and current literacy experiences of adult female refugees and immigrants in an adult education program in the US? and (2) How might female refugees' and immigrants' identity construction, influenced by labels as misrepresentations, be expressed in their L2 literacy experiences during their English language education? With these two main questions, further questions are answered: How is reading and especially writing hindered if we categorize people as refugees or "the Others"? Does this form of labeling influence their self-perception and identity construction in their written voice? Which influence does the L1 have on their identity as a language learner and how does this effect their literacy development? While giving answers to these questions, scholars and educators learn more about this exceptional situation of hosting many "newcomers" and finding ways to meet everyone's individual needs. The study intends to focus on the effects and results which can occur due to misrepresentations and tries to present the opportunities which prevent these possible negative effects. Based on the approach that language is used to convey meaning, there is no focus on form, but on the meaning and use of language.

### **Findings Pertaining to Research Question 1**

This section presents the findings of the data analysis related to the first research question. To understand the current and future literacy practices which developed throughout the period of the four weeks, the first question relates to the past literacy experience revealing if the participant had formal language instructions, attended a school, or learned how to read and write through the family. The first research question is: What are the previous and current literacy experiences of adult female refugees and immigrants in an adult education program in the US?

For the analysis of the first research question, the data collected during the first journal entry (i.e., How did your parents share language with you?) is especially important. In addition to understanding the different influential factors, the codes (i.e., identity and upbringing, language learner, and literacy) were defined and marked in the written entries.

**Identity.** In the analysis of the findings, the concept of identity is based on the upbringing and L1 exposure. Two of the participants (Sophia and Linh) stated at the beginning of their journal entry which language they speak or where they come from. Starting with “I grew up in Vietnam and my first language is Vietnamese”, Linh introduces the reader to her cultural and language background, including where she grew up and why this influenced how her parents shared language with her. A similar approach is found in Sophia’s entry which connects her personality with the approach that was chosen during her upbringing:

I will talk how I learned my mother language: Portuguese. For sure, I can't represent all the Brazilian people, because each person has their own way to learn and there are not a patronization to learn. In this way, I will tell my own story. I am from the South of Brazil and I am the oldest among four children. Being the oldest, my mom tried to teach me many things. In that time, my aunt lived with us, too. [...] I always was very talkative. I loved to talk and it was a way with they could teach me a lot. (Sophia, first journal entry)

In comparison, Fawzia used a fable to talk about her identity construction as a child, since telling stories was the way her mother incorporated literacy in the family and how they would spend their evenings at home because it was not safe to be outside ("she worry about if we go out without my sibling").

The life as a child differed between the participants and was determined by the family structure and the existing media which influenced their communication and informal education in their home. Linh expressed that she did not have a television, but that the family owned a radio. Moreover, the family's life was determined by the church and religious practices with the community, which she writes about in her first journal entry:

Because when I was a child, I remember my family do not have television, but radio, so in the evening we all go to the Church to pray or learn something in the Church or stay at home and had conversation and went to bed early. (Linh, first journal entry)

In contrast, Barkhado's childhood did not involve her mother and family as much as it did for the other participants. During one observation she told the teacher that she was left alone and with the other children in the streets when she was two years old. This is repeated in her first journal entry ("I talk to my friend but mom is busy"). She told us that her mother had many young children at once, and therefore they had to take care of each other and the upbringing was passed on to the extended family and friends and so her grandmother told her stories at night. Fawzia shares the same cultural background as Barkhado, but her connection to her mother is deeper and bed time stories were told by her. Three of the participants wrote about their mothers, aunts and grandmothers who shared language with them at home, only Linh talked about her parents.

**L1 language learning.** Another component that refers to the first research question is the aspect of how the participants learned their first language and if they had formal education. As stated above, the two Somalian women mainly heard bed time stories and communicated with their surroundings, whereas the other two had musical influences as well. Linh and Sophia both wrote in her first entry that music and songs were their first encounters with language learning:

In my opinion, I learn how to listen and speak in language the most before I came to learn formal education. Because I live with a large family, so we all talking, singing, and listening a lot too [...] Beside listening what is my parents, my brothers and sisters taught me, and the music I also listen to the radio with my parents in the evening and the public radio every morning from the government. Even I like or not the public radio in the middle of the village still open at least

two times everyday. So, I have chance to listen all the song the government want us to know (Linh, first journal entry).

My first memory is listening my mom and my aunt singing to me. I still remember their voices and their words. Many words I didn't understand at that time, but they are still in my mind. I have good memories about these songs. It was so nice and so kind. In addition, I remember my mother teaching me nursery rhymes trying make me a good child from her point of view. (Sophia, first journal entry)

In the last sentence Linh states that the government regulated the songs and radio content. Also, Fawzia and Barkhado had limitations in their language up-bringing which were defined as “good” and “bad” things, yet these were set by their religion: “I listen to Quran, some good thing. I did not listen to music, bad thing or singing” (Barkhado, first journal entry).

**L1 literacy.** Similarities occur when comparing all four participants because they all wrote about storytelling, e.g. nursery rhymes and fables which was their language instruction but for two of them these stories also included an educational purpose. The Somalian women mainly had oral language instruction and did not necessarily attend a school. Fawzia described during the post-interview that her father had asked someone to come to the family and teach the children how to read and write.

You can go to Qur'an school. That is the most of the religion. That is not like my father, I remember he brought us the guy, the guy who teach us our language.

How to write or how to read. And he buy in a in a white board and bring it in the home. And then he said: please he pay the money for the month and he can he... teach my children how to write because we speak but we didn't write. [...] And they teach us how to write and I was interested because even the other kids they say: you can't read, you can't be like: You didn't know, I know how to read. You know. Like competition and is a competition change you and I want interested in how to read like the teach you at little bed time. A, B, C and then like what do you say long vowel and after that you can read it because experience. It's easy for you. (Fawzia, interview)

In her case, her father was responsible for the formal instruction, and he gave his children a chance to learn how to read and write. Sophia and Linh went to school and learned how to read and write there and, additionally, had formal instructions at home before they attended school. Their parents taught them how to read and write simple words and sentences. Barkhado wrote that a teacher taught her how to read and write, yet the field notes that were taken during the first observations state that she did not learn the Roman alphabet until she came to South Africa; however, she learned to read the Qur'an in a Qur'an school.

Since the first journal entry was not a direct answer to the first research question but asked the participants to share their experiences of how their family shared language with them, an expanded answer was possible and some of the entries included culture- and heritage-related language learning approaches and literacy influences. Their answers proved to have some similarities, such as storytelling but also showed differences



regarding the formal instructions of language learning and which limitations they had based on the religion or culture.

### **Findings Pertaining to Research Question 2**

This section displays the results of the data collection related to the second research question. The second research question addresses the current stance about language use and how this influences the participants identity, as well as how this identity and attitude may have shifted and changed in contrast to the personality they have with their first language. In addition, the second research question deals with the identity construction that is influenced by others and expressed in labels and stereotypes and how these items can affect the participant's identity. Contrasting these individual findings, this section also showcases how the participants view these influential factors in language learning and literacy. These four major aspects - identity reconstruction, labels, language learning and literacy – are taken into consideration when answering the following question: How might female refugees' and immigrants' identity construction, influenced by labels as misrepresentations, be expressed in their L2 literacy experiences during their English language education?

These findings are based on the last three journal entries that included: how language is shared with the home community; how language is used in a weekday and which feelings result from this usage; and finally, how the participants would describe themselves in their first and in their second language. Observational field notes and the interviews are included in this discussion to show the teacher's focus on the different

forms how language can be shared (listening, reading, writing and speaking), addressing the different communicational contexts.

**Identity (re)construction.** When analyzing which form of communication is used to stay connected to the families, all participants expressed that they rely on the modern technology, such as WhatsApp and video chats. Another aspect that relates to all participants is the communication across borders; they all want to uphold the contact to their families and friends whom they left behind or who had to move to different countries. Fawzia and Barkhado expressed the greatest difficulties in reacting to the prompt about how they share language with their “home” community because they felt like Somalia was their home, but no one lived there anymore. It needed to be clarified that “home” needs to be seen in a broader sense and afterwards both wrote about the close tie they had with their family which is part of their identity as well. This differs for example for Sophia who sees her home in the congregation and amongst the sisters, as she expressed in her interview:

I listening my mam and dad and my best friend. We talk about kids and husband home and our other friend. My family and friend love in Africa and America. We speak by phone. (Barkhado, second journal entry)

I Spoke English or write them messages because family is important than everything. If I didn't talk with my mom 3 days I will worry her or she was worry me. But my sibling and friends difference then my parents maybe I wouldn't talk to them a week or a month because life is busy even though you love them, now

we had on the world excellent technology and video chatting. (Fawzia, second journal entry)

Feel comfortable I am amongst my family and this sister the sisters of “the congregation” are my family. I’m here home. I mean in the congregation more than I was in my parent’s house. (Sophia, interview)

The close connection and tie to their home community outside of the United States is important for all four participants. Linh writes in her third response that expresses how her L1, Vietnamese, is closely linked to her emotions and that this is the language she uses with her family:

In the Vietnamese language, I feel more emotional when I use to talk with my family sometime. And if I want to read the news faster and often skim in Vietnamese.

Whereas Sophia has managed to go beyond general communication and feels comfortable in her second language by telling jokes and sharing humor with native speakers. She even writes about her dreams in her prompt and how these are partially in English. Sophia has a similar interpretation to Linh’s about when she uses English or Portuguese and that this is related to her emotions which she writes about in her third response:

Also I like to teasing people and they do the same with me. Its happen almost every day, at home, in the Learning Center and at church. [...] A interesting experience in these days are my dreams and when I talk alone to myself. Many

times, I wake up thinking: I dreamed in English or in my mother language? In these days, they are mixed, but the majority of them are in my mother language. When I speak alone. [...] In these I days, I do my prayers in English because I live, I suffer, I joy, I teasing in this country, then the language come with my feelings. Just now, I realized it: the language comes to me with my emotions, my thoughts, my feelings... I think it is real life.

Another factor that influences the positive identity construction as a language learner is based on the fact that all participants consider themselves as open-minded and experimental characters who are not afraid of making mistakes. Sometimes they would not even care about making a mistake, or they indicated that they would laugh about themselves as well.

Sometimes no one answer you, I don't care. In Somali, they don't know stress, but in English they have. (Barkhado, fourth journal entry)

Something that is surprise me in these days. I realized that people are thinking that I am more friendly that I am really am. I am not so outgoing. Sometimes, I am nervous about be with strange people or people that I don't know. However, I think that my desire to survive is really big. (Sophia, fourth journal entry)

**Labels and Coping Strategies.** Sophia even expressed that others believed she was outgoing in the non-native setting which contradicted her own personal reflection and perception which she classified as an aspect of cultural differences. Especially,

Sophia and Linh talked about mistakes they had made in the past and how people reacted, as well as their feelings in that specific situation. The following is Sophia's reflection, taken from the interview:

For example, we were pray playing at home and I didn't want to play and the sister told me you are party poopy. [...] Party Pooper. And then I just laughed because I understood. But I forgot and then then when a sister when another sister came and its just they invited her to play. She said: no, I don't want. And then then I forgot the part party and just remembered pooper and instead of to call her poo-pooper, I call her poopy [...] They start to laugh and laugh and laugh. They didn't realize what's happen. And they laugh and they laugh and just laugh to crying. And after that they explain me what I am saying. And instead of saying one word, I was saying another word. It was very funny.

Even though Sophia did not express that she was careless about how the others perceived her, she found her own way to cope with the situation which is like Linh's experience who even laughed during the interview when she talked about the mistakes she had made. Nevertheless, the participants stated that they had experienced situations in which they were perceived as rude or impolite when they were not able to speak the language. Fawzia said during her interview:

Some people who can't speak your language they thought you are a rude person because you don't know how you will communicate them or some word you can't pronunciation well.

When Barkhado was asked during her interview how she felt when someone calls her a refugee and if this was something positive or negative for her, she answered:

That's okay. Because when you leave your country and you come another country, you can actually get anything. When in South Africa, they're not telling us refugee. They tellin' us bad words. Because refugee is not bad words. It's not good things but when you leave your country and you come another country, whatever people tellin' you, you have to allow because you you leave your country. So, not good but if I say in South Africa people, America people is good. [...] And you go into the work. So, no one tellin' you: Hey you, you are refugee, go out.

Sophia also experienced situations in which she felt uncomfortable even though that specific situation did not concern her personally. However, she demonstrated how to react to such situations. Coming from Brazil, Sophia commented during her interview that her first experience of people talking about other Latin Americans who came too late motivated her to change her behavior, and she would always arrive early now:

One day I was I was at a meeting and someone that supposed to talk was from my country, no not my country, from Latin-America. And this person was a little bit late and I was, I didn't understand the English very very well at that time but I heard one someone said: this persons from Latin-America. [...] Here they don't express when they think and I, maybe because they know they understand better, they don't tell. But I don't know if they think. Here they say that I am one person – I am happy, joyful, but I don't know if it's true or not.

Sophia and Linh, who are both immigrants to the United States, did not say that they came across many labels, yet encountered generalizations which were difficult for them to overcome.

**L2 Language Learning and Literacy.** For the two Somalian refugees who came from an oral-orientated culture and partially still at the beginning of the language learning experience, this aspect was the most challenging to answer. Barkhado wrote that she does not read and write that often because it was so difficult. In another entry, however, she stated that she would read in her workbook every day and at work. During the observations, the teacher introduced simple sentences which she had to complete or continue. When reading out loud from her workbook, she was asked to differentiate between the different sounds. Filing documents was difficult for her, and she stated in the interview that this has improved and if she is unsure, she would ask the officials. In contrast, Fawzia has included more reading and writing in her daily life. Since she works in the health sector, she needs to take notes and read the descriptions for the different patients. She even reads in her leisure time and combines language learning with reading:

Because I tol' you after I left here, night time is boring, I tell you. But I just sit here and I read books and I still have every day in the computer when I have time for half year proceed in a "Humans. Humans of, in New York". That's is a website. They have write stories. Stories. That is no some stories I don't. They talk about something. You know some – they talk nice and then I got it. Transfer it in my language. To google dictionary and check the right meaning. I learning

some more English for them, too. And have a – even I go to library. You know Lincoln I got some books I read it. That’s what I’m doin’.

Moreover, the reading and writing tasks for the female refugees in this study were simplified: like writing charts and reading lists at work. The two female immigrants, Sophia and Linh, have a stronger inclusion of literacy in their daily life. Linh started going to college and was placed into a regular nursing track. Based on this fact, she often spends the afternoons understanding the texts and notes from her classes:

Everyday, I read a lot of things related to physiology also. Beside that I read the bible in the morning early I spend a little time with spiritual books. (Linh, third writing prompt)

Sophia on the other hand wrote in her third response that she includes reading and writing into her leisure time, in the congregation or with her friends, focusing on the things that she is mainly interested in:

Writing about the language that use in the weekday, I can say that reading, speaking, writing and listening are connected. Many times I writing about what I read and speak with someone I listen. Normally, I read with my teachers, my community, by whatsapp and by email. Sometimes, I read alone. Most part of times my main subjects are: grammar, spelling, vocabulary, health, news, spirituality, poverty, politics and family subjects.

However, all participants agreed that they would use modern technology, written and oral, for communicative purposes and to learn the language. For example, Linh



listens to TED Talks in English to expand her knowledge. Her and Sophia would also read and listen to the news in English, whereas Barkhado and Fawzia often read the news in Somali. The two Christian women both pointed out that religion is connected to their daily use of English. Both read the Bible in English and pray with the other sisters in English, yet they added that it is easier for them to understand the Bible because they know it in their L1. This differs for the two Somalian women who do not have a connection between the Islam and English.

Based on the data analysis that resulted on the findings above, the participants' positive attitude in investment and their access during the learning process, through media and the learning center, affected the language learning positively and initiated some literacy practices which, however, increased during the longer residence in the United States. Their coping strategies are similar in situations in which they feel uncomfortable; namely they laugh about these moments or ignore them. The following discussion deepens the findings while focusing more on two major aspects: identity reconstruction and female immigrant and refugee literacy experiences

## **Discussion**

This section discusses the two major aspects related to the conducted study and sets these reoccurring themes in relation to one another. The main discussed areas are: 1) female immigrant and refugee literacy experiences; and 2) identity reconstruction which are then divided in relating subcategories, such as storytelling, formal education and current literacy challenges, as well as heritage, power relations, investment and access to language learning.

**Female immigrant and refugee literacy experiences.** The focus of this study was to shed light on the identity construction in literacy practices. In this specific case, the participants differed in their previous and current experiences, as well as in their language levels. Therefore, it is interesting to see which similarities are found in all four and how these resemblances interact with the current situation. This section discusses the aspect of storytelling in the L1, previous and current language learning, and literacy use and challenges. Some of these points contradict previous findings and are therefore, relevant for the context of out-of-school learning environments.

*Storytelling.* Across all participants, storytelling is the main aspect which is shared by all of them. In some of the families, bedtime stories were told by the parents or grandparents and offered them the first exposure to literacy. Even though these stories were orally transmitted, the concept behind storytelling is clear. Telling a story, especially together with children, grasps their interest and enriches their fantasy. According to Whaley (2002), children who are involved in the story can learn. Children naturally act out scenes and experiment with different roles. This aspect of drama can be the beginning for the story. Stories are often used to teach children a lesson or something about real life, such as the stories Fawzia's mother used, including a man who behaved like a coward and a woman who was a hero. Telling these stories communicates a message to the children that promotes their development. Linh's family used nursery rhymes which were later substituted by songs and lyrics. Even now, she expresses her interest in poetry which was a major part of her upbringing.

For the two nuns, first and current literacy experiences also included Biblical stories and parables. This inclusion and form of up-bringing, based on storytelling, was the foundation of Heath's (1983) ethnography. Stories were either considered as a "piece of truth" (in Roadville) or as a form of self-expression (in Trackton). Stories do not only include aspects of the past but have their own form of creating cohesion and interacting with the listener. This form of literacy can then later affect the writing process or interest in reading. Biblical stories can be used to tell a story, to guide the path someone is taking or to teach a lesson. Nevertheless, these stories invite listeners to participate and interact with the "story teller".

Even though, the learners and children may not have any access to media, storytelling cannot be taken away from them and is practiced across all historical and cultural backgrounds. Such stories can be understood and carried on by these children, transforming them into their own stories, but bringing these thoughts to paper is dependent on the form of education these individuals receive.

***Formal education and language learning.*** At this part of the discussion, the findings prove to have the greatest differences across the participants past and current experiences. As scholars, like McPherson (2014) have stated, educating female immigrants and refugees can positively contribute to society, so that the quality of life changes and these women feel empowered. Women do not see themselves as victims if they have the necessary language they need to express their needs. Sophia expressed during the interview that she did not feel free when she did not understand English and had to rely on others.

And you need to translate all the time, you are not free. For example, we are here and my English is not good, but I am able to communicate with you. To say what I want to say. Without another person between us. I don't want to be in a hand of a translator.

Nevertheless, the participants all had different educational backgrounds: Sophia and Linh attended a school when they were younger and learned how to read and write in their L1, whereas Fawzia had a private teacher, and Barkhado never attended a school. Barkhado has disadvantages compared to the other three participants, which can be seen in her use of simple sentences during her writings and the scaffolding processes provided by the teacher in preparation for the writing task. Most of the scaffolding was done orally and Barkhado then tried to rephrase it in simple sentences, partially even linking words together without formulating a clause or sentence. This approach and competence changed throughout the context of the study.

The findings show that it is easier for the participants, Linh and Sophia, to participate in the study since they have learned the Roman alphabet, have strategies they can use to approach the tasks and phrased their interest in the study. When looking at the amount of time each participant had spent learning English, Sophia and Fawzia can be compared, as well as Linh and Barkhado who each have about the same amount of time learning English. However, their input and the formal education was different, which is visible in their journal entries, starting with the quantity and quality of expressing their thoughts in their compositions. Both, Linh and Fawzia want to work in the health sector, but only Linh has reached the point in her language learning process in which she can

attend a public college. These findings agree with those of Farid and McMahan (2004) who explained that previous language learning experiences cannot be applied and, therefore, lose their value. This is true for Fawzia and Barkhado who cannot use memorizations to reproduce unanalyzed word chunks and lexical items. Generalizations, however, cannot be made because Sophia's and Linh's previous experiences were beneficial in the learning process.

Receiving education in the past, present or future is a step towards autonomy and should be granted to a wider population. This "transnational habitus" (Darvin and Norton, 2014) must become part of the learning environment, so that all types of learners are included. In the conducted study, Sophia and Linh were nuns that needed the L2 to continue their educational path as a nurse or to contribute to the congregation. On the other hand, Fawzia was a very self-confident woman who has the dream to go to nursing school and tried to include in-class and out-of-class reading and writing into her daily life to improve her English. Barkhado was a single-mother who works in a factory so that she can care for her two children. Her language learning courses, therefore, always took place on Saturdays when her children were in Qur'an school. Providing a flexible learning schedule made it possible for these four women to attend a language learning course, especially a course focusing on literacy.

*Literacy challenges and use.* According to Canagarajah (2004) immigrants often resist learning the language of the receiving country to uphold the membership of their vernacular. In addition, affected people would not openly practice literacy. This does not apply to the participants of this study because they openly practiced language and

sometimes even looked for new challenges. Knowing how to read and write is a symbol of being educated which is not only true for immigrants and refugees, but humans in general. As Sophia expressed above, she felt unfree when she was not able to use the language correctly, but she also writes that she feels guilty when speaking in her L1:

However, in these days, when I speak in my home language I feel guilty, because I know that it can be not really good in my journey to learn a second language.

Three of the participants expressed that writing and reading is hard, because in their daily life, it is not as integrated as speaking. Even though, all of them had a good network of friends and family in the United States and in other parts of the world, which is a part of being autonomous (Benseman, 2014), many conversations took place in oral communication, at least regarding the L2. Seeking for help is a general approach that all four participants share. Barkhado said during the interview that she would ask, for example, customer service to help her.

If literacy was used outside of the course, then the participants read online articles or in the Bible to improve their English. Emails were the main written communication form which was used in the L2. Linh admitted in her interview that she felt anxious when writing emails and that these are challenging based on the format; she would even ask others to write the emails for her:

They asked me, I send you many years to learn English, now you write for me. I don't know what I'm scared. So I now I focus learning like that. How to for example. Even if I learn everything people teach me to how to write an email, you

cannot write whatever you want, no. Write main idea. Write what you want first. Or write the title, write the subject. How to at the end everything I write like. How to write like that [...] Some important people they really good at writing, they send for me email. I thought oh that email pretty good.

To conclude on the findings of the collected data, the challenges result from previous experience (e.g., formal schooling) instead of the fact that the participants were adult female immigrants and refugees. Nevertheless, labeling has an influence on the affected people regarding the specific needs for flexible course structures and financial support to attend these courses. Another conclusion, learners need practice and support to acquire the needed learning strategies (Stromquist, 2014), such as scaffolding processes which are based on simple sentences that can be repeated as lexical items or in form of mapping strategies to aid the later writing process. In general, the findings of this study support Norton's (2000) findings and the acculturation model by Schuhmann (1978) (as cited in Norton, 2000) that learners need to maximize their contact with the native speaking community. However, the current study extends this result by stating that the contact needs to occur on all levels of communication: especially, reading and writing.

**Identity reconstruction.** Identity is not only who we are but who we want to be. This following discussion includes the subthemes that are related to identity and its reconstruction. It is defined as "*re*"-*construction* because the participants have their perception of who they are, depending on the language they use. Moreover, the participants base their personal beliefs on what they face on a daily base and which consequences they extract. Therefore, the "persona" has changed as a language learner

and as an immigrant/refugee while living in the United States. For some people these changes can be positive or negative. In the context of this study, the reconstruction has positive elements which are included in the following discussion that focuses on areas, such as heritage.

*Heritage and “home”*. In the context of this study, the term *migration* was defined as the geographical and social changes regarding mobility and movement across borders. This includes *globalization* as it is seen by scholars, such as Ariely (2012), namely the transportation of “capital”. Capital includes objects, like food and produced goods, as well as the transfer of communication and information. The participants in the study stated that they rely on technology to communicate with their family and friends living in different parts of the world. In most cases, their L1 is used because it is easier for them to express feelings and emotions, as Linh states in her writing. Connecting through technology in the modern world requires the vehicle of “language”, as it unites the past (family), the present (living in a different country) and the future (learning a new language, seeking help).

Using technology and language facilitates a transnational identity which includes the individual’s heritage or home and the current setting. The participants in the study used WhatsApp, video chat, emails, and news services to understand the ongoing situations in the world, but also in their home countries. As the data represents challenging classifications, the two Somalian women had difficulties defining their home which shows that their alienated context does not hinder their contact to family connections, but that “home” is more a feeling and the people than a place.



Viewing identity from a transnational perspective includes the idea that the individual persona is constructed through experiences in the past and the present. Journal entries and interviews demonstrated how the participants feel their cultural and language background is the key concept of their identity, just like their upbringing and family structure. This is especially striking in Barkhado's description of growing up through her extended family and friends. Or as Linh states in her writing that she lived at home when describing how her personality is different in both languages:

Moreover, in my first language, I lived at home which was much different to compare when I lived in the convent in Vietnam. So, I always have a plan ahead of me when I do something, but not at home. (Linh, fourth writing prompt)

This subtheme was chosen to show how closely linked "home" and "heritage" are for these participants, since some of them do not have a physical home anymore. The question also is if this is linked to their labels as immigrants or refugees; constantly including the questions, *Where are you from? Where is your home?*, and forgetting that the constant state and situation could be considered their home. Fawzia, for example, has lived outside of her country for most of her life, and consequently defining Somalia as her "home" is challenging. Looking at this aspect from the macro-level and understanding the background means to understand how *power* influences such stances.

***Power relations.*** In many countries of origin, the government sets rules and regulations that define what is right or wrong, and the same can occur with family structures or religious belief. Language is then used to set these borders and to construct a

framework, namely through contextualization (Bourdieu, 1984, 2001; Weedon, 1997). Changing the context changes the Discourse as Gee (2015) would describe it. Not only does the language change, but the way one is being positioned in that new setting. Positioning does not only occur in the receiving country; it has always happened in the individual's life.

These determined paths influence identity and upbringing. As seen in Linh's and Barkhado's first journal entry: the government forbid certain content or their religion (Islam) considered musical experiences as something bad. It can be asserted that symbolic or material resources (Norton, 2000) can affect the personal state in society. People in charge, or in other words people who have the power, provide or refuse access to needed social capital (Bourdieu, 2001). In the case of this study, the main social capital is the language the participants carry across borders from their country of origin and the language that they learn in the receiving country. Having access to adequate learning opportunities is the major piece of the puzzle. The conducted study shows how a flexible learning context for adult female immigrants and refugees can enrich the learning environment and foster the outcomes. All participants stated that they chose the learning center in which they could have individual courses or decide to work in small groups, since other institutions would not provide a flexible class participation for learners that had to work in shifts. Fawzia expressed during the interview how unsatisfied the past learning experiences were because there was no progress:

The way they teach because I know it. The way they teach is good, is like organized. And then the student, that they take the class and every level they have

the same different in the city. In the night time, they don't have enough teachers, could be and wouldn't like know their boss put together and that lesson, they teach you again, again, again is like the lesson you know already. And you can't say: I know this one, I know this one.

Based on the observable differences, such as race and gender, human agencies did not influence the participants in the conducted study. They all agreed that they felt comfortable in the U.S. society and that their attitude is based on their role(s) in the different social practices. Especially interesting is Sophia's statement that she can share the same humor as the native speakers, at least in the congregation and how other things, such as physical gestures contribute to the communication and interaction with others, and not just language:

To be able to live in a place that you feel home, despite of you speak or not the language of that place can make you comfortable and able to express yourself using different ways: a hug, a shake hands, a kiss or a simple note or even a candy is able to show to another the language of your heart. It is what really is important.

Often, humor is the main difference between different cultures and societies because it is strongly linked to pragmatics and knowing boundaries. Aligned with the findings of Pomerantz and Bell (2011) humor "can function to create safe houses that allow for the acknowledgment, development, and valuing of symbolic competence" (p. 159), and it is these "safe houses" that encourage the learners to express their thoughts and feelings, while playing with the language to create meaning. As stated above, the

people in power of a society regulate the access one has to very basic needs, like food and housing, and even which possibilities one can achieve in the future.

*Investment and access.* As scholars, such as Norton (2013) describe, the aspects of investment and accessibility strongly influence the positive and negative outcomes of the integration process. In the current study and as stated above, the participants had the needed access through the learning center. The language and literacy courses met their individual needs and language levels. However, their identity cannot be disregarded.

All four participants were open-minded and outgoing, constantly searching for possibilities to improve their learning, asking many questions and seeking constructive feedback. Situations in which they were criticized for their knowledge did not affect them negatively but motivated them to invest more and achieve better communicative skills. However, the four women responded that they would always feel nervous at first and it is harder for them to start a conversation with strangers, but as soon as they have taken the step into the interaction, they are comfortable. Sophia even disclosed that she sometimes feels like a child again when it comes to learning English, because she had to start with the basics and imitating others as if she was watching her mother as a child. As the data shows, the two main reasons for investigating in the language are: individual goals and overall politeness or respect. Fawzia wrote that she does not want to appear to be rude just because she does not know a word or how to express something. Barkhado on the other hand often does not care that she is making a mistake.

Imagined communities which the participants want to be a part of are an inducement for the participants of this study. The two Somalian women both have the

wish and goal to find a job in the health sector which means that they need to know the language and basic literacy practices to face daily challenges in that position. Linh is already on the path and attends nursing school, yet she needs reading and writing improvement to keep up with the native speakers in her classes. Her goal, however, motivates her and encourages her to continue learning or being part of the learning center courses. Sophia has the goal to work as translator that returns something to the community by helping people who cannot communicate in English inside the congregation. A similar wish is shared by Fawzia, who, in her position as a nurse, wants to give people a voice that do not speak English.

When taking a closer look at these discussion points it seems like the concept of the learning center literacy course was beneficial for these language learners. Their personal goals and previous experiences contribute positively to the integration process, such as asking for help, viewing criticism as a motivational factor, upholding a strong connection to their past through communication with the family, and feeling comfortable and welcomed in the society which has become their home. In addition, power relations restrict the access, but this does not hinder the participants to search for new ways to develop and construct a new identity that is more compatible with the United States, even if their previous experiences exacerbate the process.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter focused on presenting the findings that resulted from the data which was collected in form of journal entries, interviews and observational field notes. The results proved similarities between the participants, such as their extroverted personality

which they benefited from while learning the second language. Nevertheless, the findings pertaining the individual upbringings had an influence on the current literacy practices and future intentions of learning the language. All participants see the need of increasing their language proficiency at some degree and they have the will to learn the language to fulfill their goal, such as seeking a degree in nursing. Identity (re)construction has taken place when arriving the United States because all participants faced different challenges, like being a single mother, getting divorced, working to earn a living, or contributing to the congregation. These new or different Discourses challenged the participants as language learners and with the related literacy practices. At the beginning of the study, nearly all the participants expressed challenges and insecurity when writing the journal entries because they did not know what to expect and were not used to the situation, yet this changed throughout the course and the content of the individual entries got more specific and participants were able to express their thoughts better.

## **Chapter V: Pedagogical Implications, Suggestions for Future Studies, and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

The final chapter of the thesis debates the pedagogical implications and offers suggestions for future research. The purpose of this study was to demonstrate the current educational setting for female immigrant and refugees while highlighting their specific needs as language learners. Further, the study shed light on how identity is being constructed for these women and which influence this has on their literacy development. The two research questions dealt with the participants' primary literacy experience before coming to the United States and their investment in the adult education program in the US. The study also included their perception as women, immigrants, refugees and further labels towards their language learning and literacy process. The study's findings revealed that the participants were open towards their learning process and reflecting on their development and literacy use. Moreover, these women face their challenges with motivation and ease, proving that labels do not affect their learning process negatively but enrich their reflective approach.

The pedagogical implications section demonstrates how these findings contribute to the current female immigrant and refugee education that mainly takes place outside of formal teaching, yet which needs to include specific programs that focus on their needs. Following sections give insight as to how future research should develop or which areas need to be focused on to increase integration processes and female immigrant and refugee

language learning which is essential for their integration in the receiving country. Finally, the researcher gives her final statement regarding the study in the concluding section.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The findings of the study reveal that a positive learning atmosphere and a learning environment suitable for female immigrants and refugees can have beneficial outcomes for the participants, on their identity construction in the receiving society and on their literacy development. The setting for the conducted study had a strong focus on women helping other women during the language learning process. This approach could also be used to empower the women to support other women learning the language which was partially seen during the group observations. Giving the participants interesting topics to write about contributed to their own reflection and language awareness, which lowered the challenges and enriched their writing. Sophia stated in the reflection of her writing that it was not difficult, and she enjoyed writing for a purpose because she was interested in the outcome of the data collection. The others agreed and stated that writing gave them the time to think which made it easier. Giving the participants questions regarding their own learning experience was beneficial because it was an aspect, they could refer to. In contrast to the question “Where do you come from?”, writing about the way language was shared with the participants and their current use of language tells the reader something about their past, their culture and language learning process. This can also be used as a form of language evaluation. The participants’ personal experience can contribute to the teaching and learning of the L2. In the case of this study, knowing that the two Somalians had different L1 learning experiences - one knew how to read and



write in her L1 and the other one did not - made it easier for the teacher to separate the two participants and teach them individually. As Fawzia reflected on her learning experiences, she felt bored in the other language classes because she already knew the content but did not have the possibility to move on. Using topics that interested the learners, such as reading about other immigrants and their lived experiences, was motivating and fostered literacy development, as described by all participants in the conducted study. Each of them chose texts and sources in their leisure time that were suitable for their language level and could be incorporated into their life.

Another beneficial aspect that is related to the students' individual experiences is knowing about their culture and language heritage as a teacher. Miscommunication and wrong assumptions can be avoided when the teacher knows that certain character traits are typical for their heritage, such as in the example of the Somalian women who do not use expressions, like "please" and therefore, every statement seems as if it is a command. An additional example would be their oral tradition which can be beneficial for scaffolding approaches, such as asking the participant to respond first orally while the teacher is taking notes and later rephrasing these expressions in a written form (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Moreover, Fawzia was placed into the same course as Sophia and Linh, but because of her oral language focus she disturbed the other participants in the writing process. This resulted in dissatisfaction at first, yet the teacher rearranged the classroom setting and gave Fawzia the opportunity to speak at the beginning. Then a silent writing period took place which ended in a time for asking questions. Furthermore, if the teacher knows about the L1 it can contribute to understanding L1 transfers and

difficulties that can occur, such as minimal pairs which differ in one sound and which are unfamiliar for Barkhado because her competences of the Roman alphabet in relation to the sounds are still in the beginning phase, even though her oral production is intelligible. In contrast to previous studies, such as Ng (1981), the participants did not express any negative experience of “otherness”. On the contrary, the participants were welcomed in the learning center in which each individual received the needed attention and support.

Taking all these findings into consideration, a course that offers flexible time frames and structure is desirable. These courses should give working adult female immigrants and refugees the chance to attend a course during different times of the day, so they can coordinate working shifts and studying. Further, as Hurtig’s (2005) writing workshop “Padres como escritores” (Parents as writers) proved, the designed courses must give opportunities for mothers as well. In the case of the conducted study, the learning center offers possibilities for single mothers and parents to study in their courses while their children are being tutored. In some cases, the teachers would even go to the participants home so that the children are not unattended and are taken care of. For Barkhado, the teacher offers her time on Saturdays when her children are in Qur’an school, and she does not have to work. In Fawzia’s situation, the courses took place biweekly and gave her the chance to attend even if she had to work in shifts.

Linking the findings back to the initial stance and title “Writing is hard, but I think I like it”, a statement made by Fawzia in her first journal entry, shows that female immigrants and refugees are interested in expressing their thoughts and emotions through writing yet need more opportunities to unfold these competences. Providing reoccurring

writing occasions and prompts based on their own language experiences fosters the identity construction on the foundation of rich reflections. Even though English is their L2, writing gave the participants a tool to tell their personal story and opened the door for future literacy and cross-cultural experiences with a transnational identity.

### **Suggestions for Future Studies**

Even though the researcher attempted to present how adult female immigrants and refugees construct their identity in an US literacy course, the study exhibits limitations. These limitations lead to the following suggestions for further research that take into consideration the following factors: data collection procedures, methodology, context, and participants. First, the conducted study is a case study with four participants, two of which were nuns. In future research the number of women with children should increase to take a closer look at how their identity as mothers is reconstructed and which further challenges this may include. This study gave an insight to this influential factor, such as scheduling and commitment issues, since two of the participants were mothers, which future study can elaborate further. An increased number of mothers could lead to more recurring problems that need to be resolved. Further, more mothers could give insight in how these share literacies in the L1 or L2 with their children and how these different experiences are negotiated in the families. In some cases, immigrant children have the responsibility to translate for their parents, a topic expressed by one of the participants and previous research studies (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Future studies could address this unusual situation and the effects this may have on identity reconstruction, given that the current study could only provide the example of official translators and peers.

Reaching out to more adult female refugees and immigrants would provide additional data regarding individual characters and related attitudes towards different Discourses and how these coping strategies, partially expressed in humor, may differ.

Secondly, future research on adult female refugees must include a variety of learning and community contexts. In the conducted study, the courses took place in a Christian learning center that had many volunteers to provide individual learning environments. One motivated and engaging teacher that was specialized in teaching writing taught the course and knew which areas to focus on. However, this concept is not the general approach in the United States, and the variety of language courses across the country varies. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a smaller city, and therefore expanding the setting to larger urban areas would include more varieties in language backgrounds, L1 literacy experiences and L2 levels that could lead to a deeper understanding of the influential factors that contribute to literacy development. Reaching out to adult female immigrants and refugees who do not have a certain course setting would give even more insight in their daily struggles.

The third suggestion regards the time given to the data collection. Rich data can be taken over a longer period. Including newly arrived adult female immigrants and refugees would provide stronger details of literacy development. This data could be compared and provide valuable insight in the different developmental stages of the learners. In the conducted study, two participants each shared the same length of studying English, although their learning outcomes differed. Having data from different learning stages would provide detailed insight as to how the gaps, based on the different L1

literacies, need to be bridged in specific teaching materials. Following this approach, a variety of contexts can be analyzed and how these Discourses may further contribute to the literacy learning outcomes, such as how might literacy experiences in the health sector differ from those in other economic sectors and which conclusions can be drawn to provide the needed scaffolding materials that these different employees need. Another aspect that could be addressed through a longitudinal study would be the aspect of motivation. In the current study, motivation played a role for participating, such as personal experiences with teaching or being able to help others in the future. Collecting data over a broader period of time could include further motivational factors which may even change throughout the process of learning and integration.

Finally, future research could shed light on identity construction of adult female immigrants and refugees through written expressions that go beyond the focus of language learning and reflecting on this process. Participants could be asked to share other aspects of their upbringing, such as their family structure or cultural difference regarding stress and humor. Moreover, the understanding of one's role would foster transnationalism and cross-cultural understanding without misrepresentations and labels through understanding and receiving a voice in writing about one's emotions and experiences.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, I attempted to show how adult female immigrants and refugees construct their identities and express these constructions in their writings. Furthermore, I wanted to demonstrate the need for a change in the US learning environment so that language educators become aware of the benefits of educating female immigrants and refugees. In the same case, I wanted to display how the individual characteristics and L1 literacy experiences influence L2 literacy and investment.

The findings that result from the narrative inquiries and interviews show the participants' reflective competences and engagement in the writing process. The four women were aware of their previous experiences and differentiated between the two languages. They also demonstrated how these languages (L1 and L2) were used daily and which connections they drew between the languages, such as using the L1 to express emotions. I agree with Ennsner-Kananen & Pettitt (2017) that these people need to be heard and their voices should not be silenced. As stated in the introduction of this paper, women still justify themselves when they decide to live a life different than the majority. Minorities, such as refugee and immigrant women, have left their homes and families in the hope of finding safety and security in another country, yet as part of this arrival they must be able to express what they need. Instead of assuming these needs and suggesting changes, the goal should be to provide them the suitable tools that can be used and modified in their own terms. In particular, writing can be the preferable medium because it offers them time to think about their ideas and how to formulate these. Educating these women will have an impact on future generations. Their experiences, such as those

expressed in written stories, can be passed on and their children who will grow up in a society open to minorities actively listen to their desires and contribute to a cross-cultural understanding.

Motivation and goals were the biggest influential factors for the participants to take part in the language course and attend a writing class. Expanding their language repertoire proved to be beneficial for all participants, and these forms of investment should be the prior focus in language teaching, as they will support the participants throughout the language learning process. The study further demonstrated how providing support that is based on the understanding of the specific culture can foster their writing processes. A gap in teaching materials should therefore be a supportive factor that contributes to individualization and differentiation as well as provide suitable language courses. The structure of the program and courses can be a stepping stone to provide more support for the adult female immigrants and refugees.

Finally, the findings demonstrated how identity construction can occur when individuals have the feeling that their voices are heard and understood. Reacting to their needs and questions should be the aim of such courses. Their identity as “refugees” or “immigrants” is reconstructed, regardless whether they are presented as such or not. Each individual actively chooses the outcome of such labels. Taking a step outside of the comfort zone enriches and challenges previous concepts, perceptions and ways of thinking. The findings of this study show how strong these individual women were and how each of them found their ways of coping with unpleasant situations that motivated them, instead of pulling them back. Giving them writing prompts was one of these

challenges, yet as expressed in the title of this paper and further written and oral communication, it provided them with the needed tool to reflect on their lives.

Now, I am a new person, different from that person that came the first time to America, but also, different from that person that came from a different country and culture. I think, experience, time and maturity can make a person think and react in different ways. (Sophia, fourth writing prompt)



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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A**

#### Prompted Journal Entries

- 1) How did your parents share language with you?
- 2) How do you share language with your home community?
- 3) How do you use language in a weekday? How does this make you feel?
- 4) How would you describe the person you are with your first language? How is this person different from the person you are in English?

## Appendix B

### Sample Interview Questions

- 1) Which form of communication (oral or written) do you prefer? Why?
- 2) How does your daily life affect your English use?
- 3) How has your role at home or in the community changed since living in the US?  
How has that change impacted your language use?
- 4) How do you maintain writing in your first and/or second language?
- 5) Do you read English books or prefer reading books in your first language? Why?
- 6) How old were you when you started reading/writing?
- 7) Which everyday situations require you to write? How do you accomplish these writing tasks?
- 8) In which situations do you feel like you cannot express what you are thinking in English? Why do you think that is?
- 9) How would you describe the person you are with your first language? How is this person different from the person you are in English?
- 10) Which language goals did you set when you came to the United States? How did you reach these goals/how would you like to reach these goals?
- 11) What future language goals do you have? Why?
- 12) How old are you?
- 13) When did you start learning your L2? How long have you been learning your L2?
- 14) Why did you want to learn how to read and write in your L2?
- 15) What motivates you?
- 16) What are you afraid of?
- 17) Do you use your L2 during your daily employment/activities? Which kind of activities do you do during the day?
- 18) Teasing people?
- 19) When did you start speaking to yourself in English?
- 20) Why do you feel like a child again?
- 21) In which moments do you feel homesick? Does that effect your language (motivation)?

## Appendix C

### Consent Forms

Dear Participant,

My name is Svenja Trommler and I am currently enrolled as a graduate student in the English Department's Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I would like to conduct research on the second language literacy practices of immigrant and refugee women in the United States under the supervision of my graduate advisor, Dr. Sarah Henderson Lee. The purpose of this study is to better understand the literacy practices of this population to inform second language education.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will: 1) submit four written journal entries about your second language learning that you wrote in class, 2) have your participation in an advanced ESL class observed twice, and 3) be interviewed once as a follow-up to the related content in your journal entries. The time commitment to participate in this research will not exceed one hour beyond your normal class time (i.e., the interview time).

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. You can withdraw from the study at any time by contacting the faculty Principal Investigator (PI), Dr. Sarah Henderson Lee, at [sarah.henderson-lee@mnsu.edu](mailto:sarah.henderson-lee@mnsu.edu) or 507-389-1359. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits.

The risks you will encounter as a participant in this research are not more than experienced in your everyday life and may include issues related to academic success, peer pressure, and second language writing. Additionally, minimal stress can occur when audio-recording is used. Prior to the start of the interview, participants will be reminded that they can request the recording to stop at any time. If a participant chooses to continue the interview without use of audio-recording, the student PI will use interview notes. The benefits to participants are normal benefits associated with reflective writing practices, including heightened awareness of how their educational backgrounds and lived experiences affect their second language literacy development.

Consent forms will be reviewed and collected at an informational meeting and then stored in a locked cabinet in the faculty PI's office. All electronic documents, including written reflections, observation notes, and interview recordings and transcripts will be stored on a secure web server, as well as the student PI's password protected thumb drive. Both the faculty PI and student PI will have access to the research data. Individual participants will only be able to review data that pertains directly to them. In any

dissemination of this research, including publication and presentation, pseudonyms will be used for all names to ensure confidentiality. All consent forms and collected data will be retained for a minimum of three years before being destroyed, per federal regulations.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact my graduate advisor Dr. Sarah Henderson Lee, at [sarah.henderson-lee@mnsu.edu](mailto:sarah.henderson-lee@mnsu.edu) or 507-389-1359. If you have any questions about participants' rights and for research-related injuries, please contact the

Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Administrator of the Institutional Review Board, at 507-389-1242. If you would like more information about the specific privacy and anonymity risks posed by data stored online, please contact the Minnesota State University, Mankato Information and Technology Services Help Desk (507-389-6654) and ask to speak to the Information Security Manager.

A copy of this letter will be provided for you to keep. If you are willing to participate in this study, please initial the bottom of the first page and sign the second page before returning it. Your signature indicates that you are 18 or older and that you have read and understand the information above and willingly agree to participate.

Thank you for your consideration.

Your name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Your signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

IRBNet ID: 1324742

Date of MSU IRB Approval: 9/25/2018

## **Appendix D**

### Recruitment Flyer/Handout

#### *Informational Meeting for a Research Project*

My name is Svenja Trommler and I am currently enrolled as a graduate student in the English Department's Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

I would like to conduct research on the second language literacy practices of immigrant and refugee women in the United States under the supervision of my graduate advisor, Dr. Sarah Henderson Lee. The purpose of this study is to better understand the literacy practices of this population to inform second language education.

If you are interested in participating, please come to one of the below informational meetings at the Good Counsel Learning Center. On these days I will inform you about the research and answer any questions you might have.

#### **October 16<sup>th</sup> (Tuesday), 2018 at 3 pm**

Good Counsel Learning Center  
170 Good Counsel Drive  
Mankato, MN 56001

or

#### **October 18<sup>th</sup> (Friday), 2018 at 6 pm**

Good Counsel Learning Center  
170 Good Counsel Drive  
Mankato, MN 56001

#### **Contact Information:**

Svenja Trommler  
MA TESL Student, English Department  
German Graduate Assistant, World Languages and Cultures Department  
Minnesota State University Mankato  
230 Armstrong Hall (Office-AH 227)  
Mankato, MN, 56001  
507-389-1817  
[svenja.trommler@mnsu.edu](mailto:svenja.trommler@mnsu.edu)

IRBNet ID: 1324742

## Appendix E

### IRB Approval Letter



September 25, 2018

Dear Sarah Henderson Lee:

Re: IRB Proposal entitled "[1324742-4] Second Language (L2) Literacy Practices of Immigrant and Refugee Women in the US"

Review Level: Level [I]

Your IRB Proposal has been approved as of September 24, 2018. On behalf of the Minnesota State University, Mankato IRB, we wish you success with your study. Remember that you must seek approval for any changes in your study, its design, funding source, consent process, or any part of the study that may affect participants in the study (see <https://grad.mnsu.edu/irb/revision.html>). Should any of the participants in your study suffer a research-related injury or other harmful outcome, you are required to report them to the Associate Vice-President of Research and Dean of Graduate Studies immediately.

When you complete your data collection or should you discontinue your study, you must submit a Closure request (see <https://grad.mnsu.edu/irb/closure.html>). All documents related to this research must be stored for a minimum of three years following the date on your Closure request. Please include your IRBNet ID number with any correspondence with the IRB.

The Principal Investigator (PI) is responsible for maintaining signed consent forms in a secure location at MSU for 3 years following the submission of a Closure request. If the PI leaves MSU before the end of the 3-year timeline, he/she is responsible for following "Consent Form Maintenance" procedures posted online (see <http://grad.mnsu.edu/irb/storingconsentforms.pdf>).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mary Hadley".

Mary Hadley, Ph.D.  
IRB Coordinator

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jeffrey Buchanan".

Jeffrey Buchanan, PhD  
IRB Co-Chair

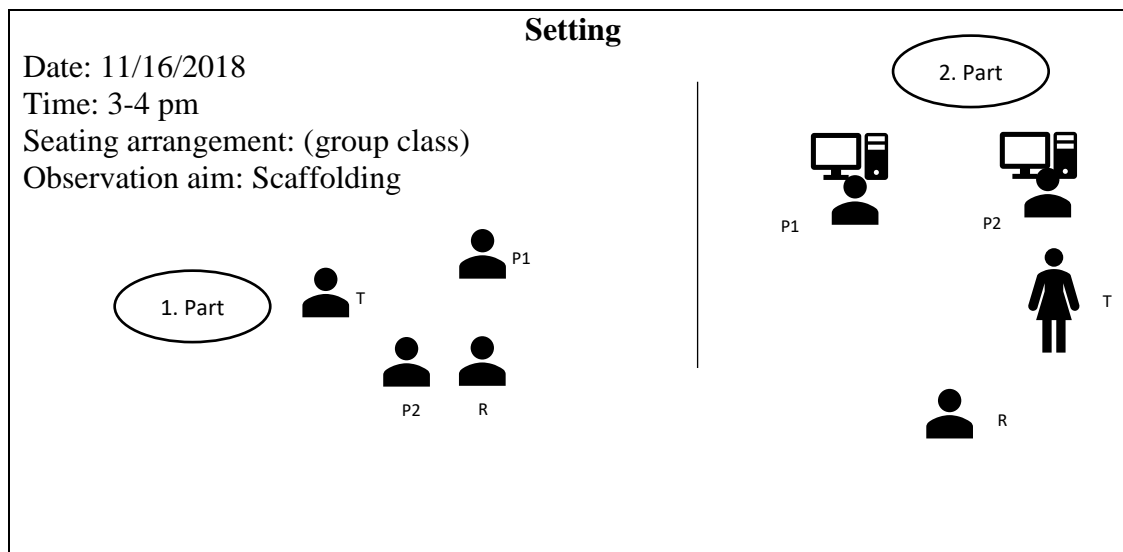
A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Julie A. Carlson".

Julie Carlson, Ed.D.  
IRB Co-Chair

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Minnesota State University, Mankato IRB's records.

## Appendix F

### Sample Observational Field Notes



### Field Notes

At the beginning of the class, P1 complained that in the previous class one of the participants was too loud and disturbed her writing process because she was asking a lot of questions. T therefore, created a worksheet to summarize the writing process and looks at the different steps with the students. These steps/guidelines included a question asking phase and a silent phase, so that the participants do not disturb each other.

T introduces the writing prompt by reading out the two questions: *How do you use language in a weekday? How does this make you feel?* T stresses that weekday is referring to Monday to Friday and does not include the “fun stuff” on the weekend. She says that some might be go to a class or working and that this is their weekday. In the following approach, T provides the Ps with a handout that has a table. Each column included one of the following: with who, about what, when/where, and how. The lines in the document referred to the four skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. T also had a version and provided me with one. While we were sitting in a square, she started with the reading section: “I read the news”. P2 says: “I read text messages” and all three engage in a conversation by adding different ideas to the different columns. Ps then work on the other lines individually. T also fills out the table according to her own preferences and lifestyle. P1: “Could it be that the first two are together and the other two”. T explains, that some people may prefer one form of communication over another form.

P2: “What about talking to yourself?” T: “Do you talk to yourself?” P2: “Yes, but which language?” T: “That is a good question. Maybe we should add which language we use for what and who”. Then the T asks me: “Which language do you dream in?” I said



that this was a good question/point and for me it would depend on whom I talked to last and what my current surrounding was primarily speaking. Ps express their thoughts and said that they had never thought about it. T tells them that she had been dreaming in Hebrew in the last weeks which she could not explain.

Ps then receive more time to finish the rest of the paper and talk about different sources, but most of the action is now done quietly. Afterwards, Ps walk over to the computers. Each of them has her own and the document for today's writing has already been opened. Ps start writing what they had discussed during the idea-finding phase and T asks after 20 minutes: "How are you doing?", Ps respond: "Slowly and surely". P1 asks T to spell *teasing* and P2 wants to know how to spell *skim*, T offers them the correct spelling, by giving explicit feedback.

T leaves the room to meet another student and tells Ps not to panic because she would be right back. Ps are completely focus and the room is so quiet, besides the noise of their fingers on the keyboard and the sound of the heating system. After 45 minutes, T goes through the editing steps that were discussed at the beginning of the class. She gives the Ps time to work on each step individually. They are asked to correct the red underlined words, and then to read out their own texts to themselves and find mistakes but listening to what they write. T sits behind the Ps and assists them when being asked. She encourages Ps to ask questions, but none of them do. T then stresses that Ps should also include what they had discussed before, namely when they use which language during their weekday and "Make sure to include the second part of the question. Be honest about your feelings".

At exactly 4 pm, Ps ask if they need to save the document and if they are done. T praises them for their "hard work" and tells them that they could leave, and the documents would be saved automatically.

### **Initial Conclusions**

Ps have a good understanding of the different skills and can profit from each other during the idea- finding phase. There is not much scaffolding needed for them to think outside of the box. They are even able to scaffold with each other and use their ZPDs in the construction process.

T can reduce her amount of feedback from explicit to implicit knowledge. Furthermore, the writing process is automatized, and Ps have a wider range of vocabulary. They are also familiar with the Roman alphabet and can write their texts independently while T may leave the room.