

Language Learning and the Politics of Belonging: Sudanese Women Refugees *Becoming and Being “American”*

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In this article, I explore the complicated relationship between ideologies of language and language learning, discourses of immigration and belonging, and the actual lived experiences of individual language learners. The analysis demonstrates how questions of educational access, economic stability, and social membership are all influenced by a range of social, political, and historical factors, particularly for recently arrived immigrants and refugees from war-torn African contexts. [language learning, language ideology, immigration, belonging, membership]

Suárez-Orozco (2001) has observed that “unprecedented new patterns of large-scale immigration” promise to permanently alter social, economic, and political relations in communities and nations worldwide and that the increased “Americanization” of immigrants and their children over time often coincides with their decreased health, declining school achievement, and lowered aspirations. In response to this deepening crisis, she asks that educational researchers conduct more interdisciplinary research on the relationship between globalization and immigration in three specific arenas—work, identity, and belonging—especially as these factors impact the educational opportunities provided to more recent immigrant groups. Specifically, she calls on educational researchers to examine “the vicissitudes of identity formation” for immigrants and refugees trying to manage “the complexities of belonging both ‘here’ and ‘there’ simultaneously” (Suárez-Orozco 2001).

Although some accounts of immigration and globalization have theorized the “vicissitudes of identity formation” among members of newer immigrant groups in relation to the politics of citizenship and migration, the vast majority of this work has focused on questions of belonging and membership in relation to the experiences of Latinos/as and Chicanos/as in the United States (e.g., Delgado 1999; Fox 1996; Portes 1999; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Rosaldo 1999; Rouse 1995). In contrast, the particular situations of recently arrived African immigrants and refugees living on the margins in the United States remains underresearched and undertheorized in much research on immigration, education, language learning, and national identity formation. Similarly, although recent work on language issues among “American learners of African descent” (Hopson 2003) has contributed substantially to our understanding of the educational implications of the complicated relationship between language, dialect, race, and power (e.g., Alim and Baugh 2007; Baugh 1999; Hopson 2003; Morgan 2002; Smitherman 2000), this work has largely ignored the experiences of recently arrived African immigrants (incl. large groups of refugees from war-torn sub-Saharan African contexts such as the Republic of Congo, Somalia, and the Sudan).

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Because African immigrants in general—and African refugees in particular—dramatically represent the “changing face of immigration” (with all the race, language, class, and political distinctions implied by that turn of phrase), their firsthand experiences with immigration and language learning reveal some of the ongoing challenges associated with refugee resettlement in general and with accessing the educational, social, and economic opportunities needed for establishing self-sufficiency and securing a recognized “voice” in particular. For African women refugees, questions of language learning, educational access, identity formation, and belonging are exceedingly complicated—especially given the absence of a physical “homeland” to return to, the related “deterritorialization” of their national identities, the unstable relationship they have had with the government of that former (and now imagined) “homeland,” and their newly minoritized and racialized identities here in the U.S. context. With issues of language, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and international politics salient and consequential in their movement across borders, their claims to particular services (including high-quality English-language instruction) and their abilities to secure a job that provides a livable wage are challenged daily. Within this large and diverse group of newer immigrants, African refugee women find themselves in a precarious position with regard to how to self-identify. Questions of belonging and membership, as well as how to claim a voice that is heard, become salient and influential for these women—particularly in the realms of school, work, family, and community.

In this article, I explore the ways that language-learning processes and practices are connected to and influenced by questions of belonging and exclusion for a largely underresearched recent immigrant group—women refugees from the Sudan. I focus on how their experiences learning English prepare (and don’t prepare) them for taking an active engaged role in civil society, with a particular focus on the relationship between ideologies of language and language learning, discourses of immigration and belonging, and the actual lived experiences of individual language learners. To examine this issue, I explore a number of interrelated questions, including: How do ideologies about language and language learning intersect with dominant discourses about immigration, refugee resettlement, and belonging? How do those dominant ideologies and discourses, and the teaching and learning practices that are fostered by them, position learners (as a group and as individuals)? How do the narrative accounts and the experiences of individual women refugees from the Sudan interact with, reproduce, and challenge those ideologies of language (and language learning), dominant discourses of immigration, and notions of belonging and membership in the modern liberal nation-state?

My findings illuminate the ways that newcomers’ English-language proficiency does not always translate into economic self-sufficiency or social mobility, even though proficiency in English is considered one of the primary components of membership and often equated with patriotism, national identity, and a “rightful” place in society (Blommaert 2006). As such, these data serve as a critique of the assumption that English-language learning leads to—or results in—a secure sense of belonging and membership in the U.S. context. My analysis of the relationship between ideologies of language and language learning, discourses of immigration and diversity, teaching and learning practices, and the learners’ lived experiences as language learners and as new immigrants highlights a central contradiction of the immigrant experience in general and the refugee experience in particular: although English is sought after by almost all new immigrants and perceived to be “key” to the process

of establishing themselves and their families here in the United States, learning English by itself is, after all, not the “key.”

Theoretical Framework

Ideologies of Language and the Sociopolitics of English-Language Teaching

The United States has a long history of forced and coerced assimilation of immigrants and indigenous people with regard to language and cultural difference. This history includes efforts to eradicate the languages of indigenous peoples by sending them to boarding schools where the prohibition of the use of indigenous languages was violently enforced (Child 1999; Lomawaima 1994); restricted access to language and literacy instruction for African Americans during and after times of slavery (Baugh 1999); and more recent initiatives to constrain immigrants’ access to political and legal institutions of power by limiting their access to first language literacy and maintenance, effective second-language learning instruction, and quality educational programs overall (e.g., Proposition 227 in California, Proposition 203 in Arizona, “English-Only Resolutions” at the state and federal level, increased surveillance of the U.S.–Mexico border, and “immigration reform” efforts introduced to Congress). Although more recent efforts to assimilate those who are different are generally aimed at the rapidly growing population of Spanish-speaking immigrants, these policies have influenced educational and social opportunities provided to language minorities of all language and national backgrounds.

Further, a close examination of recent educational, social, and legal policies and practices demonstrates that the assimilation of ethnic minorities through the eradication of their languages and cultures is not a distant memory but a continuing reality. With English proficiency as an index of both nationalism and patriotism, the master narrative that equates speaking English with *becoming* and *being* American influences views of dominant and marginalized groups alike. To become insiders, the master narrative says, “outsiders” must learn English. Not only must they learn English, they must learn a particular kind of English (unaccented, “standard” English). If this belief is not expressed explicitly, it is conveyed implicitly through policies and practices that exclude those who do not speak “Standard American English” (Crawford 2004; Lippi-Green 1997) from the mainstream. Even when this picture is not entirely borne out in reality, it continues to resonate in the myths and legends that sustain and construct our “imagined” nation (Anderson 1983). Such ideologies of language and language learning fuel the English-only movement and are further supported and strengthened by discourses of immigration, belonging, and exclusion that operate on local and national levels simultaneously (Blommaert 2006; May 1999, 2006).

Discourses of Belonging and Membership

In this complicated discursive terrain, notions of belonging and membership are informed, influenced, and further defined by conceptions of who does not belong, that is, exclusion or marginalization. “Us” gains definition and meaning in relation to how we conceive of and construct (discursively and materially) “them”; and membership is attained through the processes of exclusion and marginalization. Influenced by this “Us”-versus-“Them” separatist approach to immigration and diversity, current discourses regarding language diversity in relation to the status of English in the United

States not only have a long history but have been influenced by attitudes and beliefs about other types of difference, including race and ethnicity (Pennycook 1998). Negative attitudes toward language diversity in the United States are also intimately connected to widely held assumptions that bilingualism or multilingualism pose a threat to national unity by contributing to “ethnic unrest” (Skutnabb-Kangas and Garcia 1995:223).

However, as May (2001) has observed, the attempt to frame the issue as one of only exclusion or inclusion obscures the actual complexity of the situation, including the power issues involved, and leaves the two sides with little common ground on which to stand. Instead, modern nation-states might benefit from embracing linguistic diversity while promoting the acquisition and use of a common language. As May posits,

It is clearly not unreasonable to expect from all language speakers within a given nation-state some knowledge of the common public language(s) of the state. Thus it needs to be made clear that the advocacy of minority language rights is not about replacing a majority language with a minority one. Rather, it is about questioning and contesting why the promotion of a majority language should necessarily be *at the expense* of all others. [2001:380]

Here, May challenges the widely held assumption that nation-states require cultural or linguistic homogeneity while highlighting how ideologies of English (and English-language learning) are influenced not only by ideologies of other languages (Phillipson 1992; Pennycook 1998; Wiley 2002) but, also, by ideologies of difference and race. That is, discussions of English in relation to other languages—and English speakers in relation to speakers of other languages—reflect a number of assumptions about who belongs and who does not, who is more educated and who is not, and who has access to certain material and nonmaterial goods in society. Citizens and noncitizens are defined and constructed in relation to each other, often in ways that index (and further promote) ideologies of language, race, and difference. With a view of discourse as an activity and a practice, as well as “a social, cultural, or political phenomenon” (Bucholtz 2003), I examine “how discourse can become a site of meaningful social differences, of conflict and struggle, and how this results in all kinds of social-structural effects” (Blommaert 2005:4). With a focus on the relationship between ideologies of English-language learning, discourses of immigration and belonging, and the lived experiences of recently arrived women refugees from the Sudan, I examine the ways that individual practices (within and outside of the school context) both support and challenge larger circulating discourses about language learning and national identity formation.

To this end, I examine the actual practice of language planning as well as the enactment or transformation of language policies through individual actions and decisions (following McGroarty 2002; Pennycook 2000, 2006; Ricento 2006; Tollefson 2002; Wiley 2006). That is, I investigate how “*discourses*, with their attendant ideologies and as sites where social relations were reflected, reproduced, and contested” (Ricento 2006:15; emphasis added) get taken up, appropriated, or transformed in local contexts. By paying increased attention to the practice-level (“bottom up”) aspects of language policy and planning, my analysis contributes greater complexity to our theories of language maintenance and shift as well as practical implications for integrating newcomers and “outsiders” and marginalized immigrants into schools, communities, and the nation.

I consider the ESL classroom as a “site of cultural politics” (Pennycook 2000) in which ideologies of language and language learning are played out interactionally

between teachers and students, students and their peers, and schools and communities. Increasingly, both educational researchers and practitioners working on the “front lines” understand that language teaching and learning cannot be examined as isolated, neutral, or individual processes. Instead, the teaching (and learning) of a language—particularly a language of power, prestige, and wider communication like English—is substantially influenced by a variety of cultural, social, economic, and political factors and contexts. In these ways, everyday interactions across a range of contexts serve to reflect, constitute, and challenge existing power relations with particular implications for language learning, meaning making, and identity construction. Further, to investigate the relationship between discursive influences and questions of belonging and membership, I have focused on the ways that individual actions and practices are not only circumscribed but further influence larger social structures, history, and tradition. With a view of historical processes as both structured and structuring (Holland and Lave 2001), I examine individual experiences and identities, with the assumption that those individual experiences and identities are not only constructed or influenced by specific situations, interlocutors, or purposes but also improvised and transformed (albeit within the constraints of the local situation) when available linguistic resources are used in new and productive ways.

Methods: Research Context, Selection of Participants, and Data Analysis

The data presented in this paper come out of a two-year study in which I utilized ethnographic methods (participant-observation, interviewing, document collection and analysis, and narrative analysis) to investigate the ways that women refugees enrolled in advanced classes in an adult ESL program were making sense of their experiences as new immigrants and as language learners. The program (Valley Instruction and Training Center) was located “in the heart of a mid-sized city in the Intermountain West,” about ten blocks south of the city’s business district and approximately halfway between the city’s “East” and “West” sides.² The adult ESL program served a large number of recently arrived refugees and a smaller number of Spanish-speaking immigrants from Mexico and other South and Central American countries. I worked as a part-time teacher and orientation coordinator in this program for about a year before approaching the administration to discuss my plans for conducting this study. As a former employee, I was provided access to students, teachers, documents, and staff meetings that I might not have been able to access without having worked there and established trusting relationships. My long-term involvement in the program provided extensive contextual information about the types of students who attended, what took place in different classrooms, and the strengths of the program.

When I began official data collection in the spring of 2000, I had both theoretical and practical interests in learning more about the situations and experiences of African women refugees, for they seemed to face the greatest challenges with language learning and adapting to their new context. My extended participant-observation in this educational context thus informs not only the theories I draw on, but also the methods I used to collect data, my interview questions, and my analysis of the data. In this article, I draw on data gathered through document collection and analysis, classroom observations, and narrative excerpts from individual recorded interviews with three Sudanese women enrolled in upper-level ESL classes (levels 4, 5, 6) at the time of data collection. The triangulation of this data has provided useful points of

comparison as well as provocative points of contrast or contradiction—both with regard to ideologies of language and language learning and also with regard to processes of accessing the job market, a livable wage, and full-fledged membership in local communities. I decided to focus on the experiences of women refugees in the highest-level ESL classes in the program (Levels 4, 5, and 6) because the women in these classes were considered “proficient” by the standards of the program and, as a result of their progress, would soon “graduate.” They were thus expected (by their teachers, their families, and themselves) to enter the world of work and become self-sufficient—in part because they had completed the degree requirements of the program—and in part because they were anxious to do so. As case studies, the experiences of individual women refugees in this study provide valuable information regarding processes of refugee resettlement, language learning, and accessing the job market that many newly arrived immigrants experience.

I view research interviews as socially constructed events, a social practice, a form of metacommunication, and a speech event jointly constructed by the interviewer and respondent (Briggs 1986; Mertz 1993; Mishler 1986, 1992; Milroy 1987). I also consider the research interview to be a communicative event that differs from the women’s norms of communication (Briggs 1986:2–3), and I assume that the presence of the audience or the listener influences both the content and the form of the narrative account (Erickson 1985; Goffman 1976). For example, the social status afforded me as a white woman and a native speaker of English from the U.S. likely influenced what (and how) the women told me about their reasons for studying English, their work-related aspirations, and the challenges they faced daily.

The Official Stance: “We place a very strong emphasis on job and career preparation.”

The adult ESL program at Valley Instruction and Training Center served a large number of recently arrived immigrants and refugees from all over the world. With the explicit goal of “moving public-assistance refugees to self-sufficiency in as short a time as possible” (a common goal of educational programs serving large numbers of refugees), there was a great deal of movement in the program, with 30–40 new students enrolling each week, 30–40 students moving to new levels each session, and a constant stream of students exiting the program for work-related opportunities or “graduating” from the program after completing coursework required for the GED (Graduation Equivalency Diploma). As many teachers and students admitted this high turnover presented a challenging context for teaching and learning, in large part because teachers felt torn between helping newer students catch up and pressing on so that previously enrolled students did not get bored. Another challenge facing both teachers and students was the variation in literacy levels within a class. Although all “pre-literate” (those who could not read or write in their first language) students were grouped together in one level, there were still a lot of diversity with regard to learners’ backgrounds, needs, abilities, and challenges; and this dilemma continued throughout the rest of the levels of instruction in the program, where students in Level 5 also came to class with a range of different levels of preparation, academic ability, and fluency, as well as varied goals and challenges. One assumption that appeared to be shared by the teacher and the students was that the primary purpose of the program was to help its students access the job market—and establish

self-sufficiency—as quickly as possible. The other shared assumption was that English-language learning was the key component of that access. Consider this excerpt, taken from the 2000 ESL Program Description:

We place a very strong emphasis on job and career preparation. An on-site office of the Department of Workforce Services, Career Fairs, Career Counseling, and other varied services help our students better prepare for meaningful careers. Each student is assigned an advisory teacher. That teacher has specific responsibility for those students. Their primary focus is to help those students reach their educational goals. These goals are, in almost every instance, linked with employment goals. The initial assessment of past educational or work experiences, identified in the registration/orientation process, combined with ongoing monitoring of student goals and progress helps teachers to implement specific learning activities that will lead to both career attainment and career enhancement.

This passage details the multiple ways that the program was designed to promote finding a job and career enhancement; it also illustrates the belief that assigning students to an advisory teacher who “has specific responsibility for those students” would provide students with the instruction and learning activities that suited their specific employment goals. However, the reality was somewhat different. Due to large class sizes, the open entry and exit policy of the program, a lack of instructional materials, and packed schedules for teachers, teachers had little time for talking with individual students about their goals, or addressing individual students’ language-learning needs. Indeed, during the time I worked as the orientation coordinator for this program, I found that despite my best intentions, there was little time to work with individual students to identify their personal and professional goals, their previous employment or educational history, or the dynamics of their family situations.

“What’s driving the policies and practices?”

Preparing refugees to find jobs quickly is an explicit concern and stated priority of this ESL program because it is a concern and priority of the federal and local governments responsible for bringing refugees to the United States, the refugee resettlement agencies that receive funding from those governments and place students in this educational program, the grant agencies that provide funding to this program, and the refugees themselves. This multidimensional and multilayered relationship between individual refugees, resettlement agencies, and the U.S. government influences the policies and practices of programs like those at Valley Instruction and Training Center. Such concerns and priorities were echoed in the ESL Program Director’s comments in which he prioritized students’ abilities to access an entry-level job (even over basic proficiency in English), arguing that students would be able to move into higher-paying employment opportunities after accessing the low-wage entry level job. That is, he did not believe that they would not be confined to dead-end jobs:

What I do see is the goal of being able to access resources within the community, in a general sense. . . . It isn’t so much grammatical fluency or proficiency as it would be being able to get a job at an entry level perhaps and then quickly improving that to a higher-paying job . . . a real concrete goal of ours . . . I know that wouldn’t fulfill everybody’s needs, but that would fulfill a lot of the vast majority of the students here.

With regard to other students’ needs, teachers and administrators admitted that there was a smaller group of students that was focused on attaining their high school

diplomas and going on for further education that would “enhance” their careers. Talking about these students, the director described the fact the program provided the opportunity to attain the equivalent of a high school diploma:

High school completion. That’s our strength, that’s our focus. We’re good at that. It’s a necessary component of this job and career enhancement. That high school diploma . . . we’re perfect for that. That’s what we do best. We’re great at that. Preparation for going on to the university or the community college, maybe as a side product or by-product, but once again, that’s not our goal. So in that sense, there’s two groups here. There’s certain students that will only be here two or three months and for whatever reason, they’ll have to go out and find a job, and so the real focus is that survival skill, and there’s other students that are here for six months and a year, trying to get that high school diploma.

This twofold mission—providing quick access to the job market for some students and providing credentials valued by certain employers in that job market for other students—drives a lot of the practices of the program, including teaching practices in the classroom. (See Warriner 2007 for a more detailed account of such practices.)

“Ideologies Language and Discourses of Differences”

The influence of ideologies of language (e.g., those who equate speaking English with being “American”), discourses of immigration (e.g., those who promote fear of immigration and immigrants), and discourses of difference (e.g., those who assume that difference is a problem) on the priorities and policies of this program are both significant and contradictory. Although English-language learning is valued because it is assumed that it will provide access to opportunity, the quality of that English-language learning experience is not prioritized because the learners themselves are members of marginalized groups. And, although newcomers are expected to obtain a job to become self-sufficient, the kinds of jobs that students obtain generally provide wages that are far below what is needed to be economically independent. In these ways, the program’s priorities and practices illustrate the ways that ideologies of language and discourses of immigration contribute to discriminatory and racist practices, practices that in turn influence how likely it is that newcomers will eventually be incorporated or excluded in local economies, local communities, and local politics.

Interestingly, the Sudanese women in my study had priorities and values that echoed the goals of the program and dominant ideologies of language and English-language learning, as described above. Like many recently arrived immigrants, they all believed that English-language learning was intimately connected to personal growth as well as educational and employment opportunities. They also equated studying English with improving individual circumstances, obtaining a “good” job, pursuing advanced education or training, and achieving success in the future. As such, their stated reasons for learning English both reflected and supported dominant ideologies of language and language learning (in which learning English is equated with going to college, getting a job, establishing themselves and their families, etc.), even though their firsthand experiences with resettlement and the job search did not. Let me now turn to the words of three women from the Sudan—Mary, Moría, and Ayak—with respect to their reasons for studying English, their individual experiences with language learning, and the challenges they faced with establishing self-sufficiency for themselves and their families.

The Unofficial Stance: The Women's Views, Experience and Challenges

Mary: *"I want to study English because I want to go to the college."*

Mary is from the Sudan and enrolled in this program on March 23, 2000 (one month after her arrival in the United States and one year before I met her and interviewed her for this study). Mary came to the United States as a single mother of three children, two sons (ages 11 and 9) and one daughter (age 7). Her three children all attended the same school, an elementary school on the edges of the larger metropolitan area, where—because this school had a relatively small immigrant population—they were all enrolled in the one ESL class offered by the school. When I met Mary in the winter of 2001, she was enrolled in Level 6, the highest level in the adult ESL program at Valley Instruction and Training Center, and taking classes such as pronunciation, English grammar, algebra, information processing, math and science, and computers.

Mary told me she wanted to go to college and study accounting. She had a degree and work experience in accounting from the Sudan and believed a degree from a community college in the United States would "maybe help [her] in the future." As Mary became more settled and accustomed to living in the United States, her focus shifted to her lack of reliable transportation. She told me many times that life was quite difficult for her because she did not own a car. Indeed, when Mary and I talked about what she might do after finishing at Valley Instruction and Training Center, she told me that her Department of Workforce Services (DWS) caseworker was helping her look for a job but that it was difficult to find work because she did not want to work far from her home. She explained that having three children and no car prevented her from taking a job that was too far away. Another time, I asked her what was the most difficult part of living in the United States, and she pointed to her lack of access to certain necessary resources but a strong desire to learn and work in spite of the limitations of her situation. Mary said: "No car. Caseworker has information about cars, but have no savings and gas is high. . . . I want to work. Any job is okay." Notwithstanding her desire to work and her willingness to take "any job," Mary was concerned about who would care for her children if she found a job that required her to work in the late afternoons or evenings or if she wanted to work during the summer when they were not in school. Mary said that in the Sudan, she lived with her relatives, and the large extended family had many kids. The fact that there was always someone to care for her children allowed Mary to go to work (as an accountant) without worrying about making childcare arrangements.

For Mary, the importance and value of learning English was clear and, in many ways, perceived to be the solution to her constrained situation and limited choices. When I asked Mary why she was studying English, she said:

I want to study English because I want to go to the college. Yeah, to train in accounting, because I take many years, so I forgot. So I want to go to the college to start, maybe help me in the future. . . . So I try to finish here because go to college, and I want to work.

Unfortunately, however, Mary continued to struggle to find an entry-level job and to go to college even after obtaining a GED from the program and scoring well on tests required by DWS. Although she did eventually find work at the local airport (in the service industry), the job was low-paying and part time with shifts that changed weekly, and this came as an unexpected outcome, given her hard work and dedication to studying English and "completing" the program requirements at Valley

Instruction and Training Center. Her ongoing frustrations with not being able to translate her knowledge of English into a higher degree or a job provide a harsh critique of the very ideologies she voiced during interviews with me. That is, although she was a proficient speaker of English, a good student, and an experienced accountant, she lacked the social networks or financial resources (to pay for childcare) needed to access the job market in the ways she thought she would. Even today, the translation of English-language proficiency into further education, a job that will provide economic security or social mobility, or educational opportunities for her children remains elusive.

Moría: "I cannot stay like this. Not here. I have to work."

Moría, also from the Sudan, came to the United States in February 2000 with her husband and two young children (a girl, age 4, and a boy, 14 months). I met her one year later, in the winter of 2001, when she was 38 years old and enrolled in Level 5 of the adult ESL program at Valley. At that time, she was taking classes such as preparation for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), advisory, advanced grammar, four information processing (computer) classes, childcare,³ and English (for high school completion). Moría considered herself quite proficient in English and confessed that the classes she was taking in the ESL program were not difficult. She said that she enrolled in this program because it had a childcare facility on the premises and because it's "better than to stay at home." She also said she was grateful for the opportunity to practice her English, because even though she has studied it for a long time in the Sudan, she had never had a chance to use it very much.

Moría had attended a university in Sudan and studied accounting there for three years. Afterward, she had worked as an accountant in Sudan for five years before moving to Cairo, Egypt, where she worked as a housekeeper for a year and a half before coming to the United States. When I met Moría, her husband had a full-time job working as a machine operator for a computer manufacturing company. As a result of his income, they were unable to qualify for assistance from DWS (or for Medicaid), and Moría said she wanted to get a job to help out. She explained the hardships created by her husband's full-time job in this excerpt from our interviews:

Before I came to school staying home is really difficult because I don't—I want to work. . . . And when my husband start to work, uh, we don't have any assistance because we are not given anything from Workforce. . . . It's not enough, I don't know why. Even up to now we don't have insurance. We don't have Medicaid, no Medicaid for children.

On another occasion, Moría said that she planned to continue studying English and take all the required exams until the end of the program's fifth session before looking for a job. She thought she could be a cashier, a salesperson, or a postal worker. When I asked her what she would do about childcare once she started working, Moría said she and her husband were "going to exchange" childcare arrangements, with her husband working at night and Moría working during the day so that one of them would always be with their children. After I asked her where the children would go if she found a job, she said:

We are going to exchange. If my husband is working, he is going to work in the night and I'm work at daytime. Maybe I'll start seven to three and he will start four, something like that. Because I cannot stay like this. Not here. I have to work.

Like Mary, Moría told me on many occasions that she wanted to go to college to study accounting so that she could continue with the same kind of work she had done in Sudan.

According to Moría, one reason she enrolled in this program was to create opportunities to practice her English. She strongly believed that studying grammar would help her to speak more correctly and fluently, and she was anxious to receive her high school diploma. She said she wanted to work for a while before going on to college. When I asked Moría what one of her greatest challenges was, she said “to take care of [the children]. Here I’m alone, no one is help me, everything, they need me. No relatives. But not too difficult. Children are learning English, they like it.” Here, we see the burden of raising a young family without family or friends to help out. But we also see evidence of dominant ideologies of language, in which English proficiency is viewed as something good for her children. Like Mary (and other women in my study), Moría believed that her children should learn in and through English and valued this over first-language literacy or maintenance. Indeed, Moría described her children’s acquisition of English as a gain that made all the other hardships worthwhile.

Like many immigrants, and like the other refugee women that I interviewed, Moría had multiple personal and professional priorities, all interconnected, and all informed by the belief that English-language proficiency would facilitate them. She wanted to work, she wanted to go to college, and—consistent with the mission articulated in the ESL Program Description and by the ESL Program Director—she viewed her enrollment in this program and the opportunities it provided to practice her English as an important first step towards those goals. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, Moría’s English-language proficiency, high school diploma, good test scores, work experience, and determination to find a job did not result in the entry-level job she hoped for. Instead, she decided to stay at home where she “had need to stay home with these children,” without a job interview after months of filling out job applications and without any idea how to access community resources or networks that would allow her to translate her knowledge and skills into an entry-level job and wage that would help support her family.

Ayak: “I want to continue my English.”

Ayak came to the United States with her husband and two children (two boys, ages 3 and 1) from the Sudan via Egypt (where they lived for ten months) in October 1998. Ayak and her husband started studying ESL in Valley’s adult ESL program the following month, with Ayak enrolled in Level 1 and her husband enrolled in Level 3. By the time we met in the winter of 2001, Ayak had moved up to Level 4 (a high-intermediate class), and her husband was working full-time. While telling me that her husband had a job, Ayak expressed both concern and regret that the burden of financially supporting the family rested solely on his shoulders because she was not contributing financially to the household expenses. Her comments, reminiscent of those made by Mary and Moría, highlight the many structural factors in place that limit options for affordable childcare and thus opportunities for women with young children to work. Even though her husband had studied English and secured a full-time job, the minimum-wage nature of that job prohibited their ability to become “self-sufficient.” Additionally, even though Ayak had been a diligent student in Valley’s ESL program for two years and had become relatively proficient, her efforts to find employment were constrained not only by the demands of caring for two young children but also by the fact that none of the job applications she filled out (with assistance from the DWS representative at the ESL program) yielded any interviews (much like Moría’s situation, described earlier).

Ayak's reasons for studying English were both personal and utilitarian. Ayak once told me it had been very hard to live in the United States at first because she did not know anybody and because she did not speak any English. She said that, on those occasions when she wondered why she came to the United States at all, her husband had reassured her that she would make friends, once she had learned some English, and she too had found this to be true. In this way, Ayak equated increased knowledge of and proficiency in English with greater personal fulfillment. On other occasions, Ayak (and her husband) equated learning English with opening doors to both educational and employment opportunities. For instance, while telling me how she recently got a job working at a fast-food restaurant at the local airport, Ayak made clear the value and importance she placed in continuing to learn English, even when offered an entry-level job. While talking with the supervisor of one of the fast-food restaurants directly about the potential for her to work there, Ayak made clear that she could not work in the mornings because she is a mother of two young children and because of her desire to continue studying English. This comes at the end of the excerpt below, where Ayak describes her rationale for going to the airport in person and the conversation she had with the prospective supervisor about her qualifications for and interest in the job:

When I go to interview, they ask me "what you do?" and "why you don't work before?" I tell him "because I have small children. I don't have somebody care about them." They ask me "what about now? You got somebody care about them?" I tell "Yeah, I have my family coming here now in this year, they care about my children." They tell me "you need work in the morning." I tell them "No, because I go to school in the morning. I want to learn English more. I want to finish high school. I want to take diploma for high school. After that I want to go to college, I want to *continue my English*." She's very happy, says "I like you, you sound good, you come in next week." She give me paper for direct test. I take direct test.

Indeed, because Ayak places such importance on continuing to learn English—and equates it with finishing high school and going to college—she asserts herself (and sets limits) during this interview in a way that is somewhat unusual and unexpected, given her status as a recent immigrant and a person in need of a job. However, as this excerpt indicates, Ayak finally succeeded in penetrating the elusive job market by taking action on her own behalf, without the assistance of anyone from the school; and this is in spite of the fact that one of the school's stated goals is to help its students find entry-level employment in as short a time as possible and has hired a full-time person to help students accomplish this goal. In these ways, Ayak's narrative account sheds light on her own ideologies of language and language learning—where speaking English is equated with other social and material goods—while offering a nuanced critique of that ideology, of the (inadequate) services provided by the school to help students find employment, and of the ways in which minimum-wage jobs that thrive on low-skill labor do not promote economic self-sufficiency.

Discussion

My analysis of program documents and interview data with the program director highlights the ways that individual learners in this adult ESL program are positioned by the program as well as the influence of dominant ideologies of language and language learning and discourses about immigration. My examination of interview data with the women, informed by my long-term participant-observation in classroom and out-of-school contexts, demonstrates the complicated ways that recently arrived refugees

might simultaneously take up, reconstitute, and challenge master narratives that promulgate the status and importance of English. Although their stated reasons for studying English echo and reinforce dominant discourses about the importance of English and English-language learning to processes of national identity formation and questions of belonging, their actual firsthand experiences begin to demonstrate the contradictory nature of life on the margins, in spite of those ideologies. That is, the women's experiences demonstrate the danger of simplistic accounts of the relationship between English-language proficiency and Americanization, national identity formation, or patriotism.

The women's firsthand experiences demonstrate that proficiency in English does not necessarily confer the social, cultural, economic, or political capital necessary to achieve "substantial citizenship" or, as Castles and Davidson describe, "equal chances of participation in various areas of society, such as politics, work, welfare systems and cultural relations" (2000:84). This paradox serves as a critique of the widely held assumption that new immigrants only need to learn (and speak) English to access educational and economic opportunities, political rights, and membership in local and national communities of practice.¹ That is, in spite of their efforts to enact the identity of a responsible and contributing citizen by studying English and obtaining employment, the quality and nature of their educational and work-related experiences results in a continued exclusion from networks and communities of practice that would help facilitate their integration into society.

Although Valley Instruction and Training Center's stated official purpose is to help its students manage the resettlement process by finding entry-level jobs in as short a time as possible, the ways in which students are prepared for this undertaking serves to provide them with minimal and basic second-language learning opportunities, certain types of (low-skill) literacies, and low expectations of themselves and their futures. The program's emphasis on job preparation and high-school completion, together with the use of English as the only language of instruction at all levels of language learning, creates a situation in which short-term goals are prioritized at the expense of helping students achieve authentic language learning, true economic self-sufficiency, and social mobility. Rather than work to incorporate newcomers into our economies and communities, institutions and organizations like this one serve to prepare them for minimum-wage, entry-level jobs that provide incomes insufficient for paying bills and that provide few possibilities for long-term social advancement, economic stability, or educational opportunity. It is simply not true that English-language proficiency—particularly as measured by test scores or credentials—automatically results in improved opportunities (educational and social), increased economic stability, or long-term social mobility.

Comparing ideologies about language or language learning and discourses of immigration with the lived experiences of individual learners highlights the complicated, situated nature of belonging and exclusion in the U.S. context. Although English-language proficiency, credentials, and test scores do not automatically result in full and equal participation in society (or "substantial citizenship"), it is not entirely clear what does. In these ways, Mary's, Ayak's, and Moria's positions in society are like those of many immigrants and refugees who remain excluded from meaningful participation in local communities even after they demonstrate a long-term commitment to studying English full-time, working long hours in dead-end entry-level jobs, and contributing to the daily functioning of local and national economies. Ideologies about language and language learning, together with increasingly hostile discourses

of immigration and difference, influence and are influenced by the complicated and contradictory nature of individual practices and beliefs. For example, although the women in this study accept some dominant ideologies regarding English- and second-language learning (such as the ideology that connects the acquisition of English with getting a job and improving one's situation), their lived experiences as language learners and as newly arrived immigrants illustrate how very complicated it can be to transform this rhetoric into reality.

Conclusion

McSpadden's observations about the dilemmas faced by the Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees in her ethnographic study highlight the dramatic costs associated with many "quick-fix" programs designed to serve the educational and language-learning needs of recently arrived refugees:

Not only does such an approach perpetuate poverty and maintain the refugees in the lower class of U.S. society with little, if any, means for upward social and economic mobility, it also inhibits individual effort, hard work, and self-reliance, the very behavior highly valued in United States culture. [1998:164]

Indeed, as McSpadden suggests, what is needed is a longer-term view that takes into account the steps involved in attaining true economic self-sufficiency along with social mobility and individual rights. McSpadden recommends "accepting that becoming economically independent through a dead-end job with no further training or education possibilities is not adequate for effective resettlement in the long run" (1998:165). In addition to emphasizing the need to take a longer-term view of the experiences and opportunities for refugees, it is important to rethink what is "realistic" and "practical" for refugees and to examine our assumptions about the options that might be available to them (McSpadden 1998:166). Considering the adult ESL classroom as "a site of cultural politics" (Pennycook 1998), this discussion highlights the ways in which educational policies and practices that aim to assimilate recently arrived refugees "in as short a time as possible" often provide very few of the skills, resources, and connections that refugees and immigrants need to become active, contributing members of local communities. In these ways, many adult ESL programs serve as "a Band-Aid" by doing the bare minimum and being informed and influenced by racist ideologies regarding language learning and approaching immigrants, thus viewing their languages and differences as problems (Ruiz 1984, 1994). The findings discussed here demonstrate the need to transform such "band-aid" approaches into teaching and learning practices that facilitate the transformations required for genuine educational access and inclusion, long-term economic self-sufficiency and stability, and social mobility for all groups historically marginalized in the United States, including recently arrived refugees from war-torn African contexts.

My research illustrates some of the ways that questions of language access and language ideologies are intimately related to the politics of belonging and inclusion for recently arrived immigrants and refugees. Additionally, it demonstrates the need for a more empirical work that theorizes the long-term educational, social, and economic costs associated with exclusionary practices in educational settings. A greater understanding of how newer immigrant groups manage "the complexities of belonging both 'here' and 'there' simultaneously" (Suárez-Orozco 2001), especially given the ideological and material constraints experienced across a range of local contexts,

promises to contribute—both practically and theoretically—to the fields of educational anthropology, applied linguistics, and the linguistic anthropology of education.

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Notes

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1. This paradox is not a contradiction within an ideology but, rather, a contradiction between an ideology (e.g., the one that fuels the English-only movement, the antibilingual education movement, and the Ebonics controversy) and the reality of the lived experiences of actual immigrants and refugees.

2. In this city, “East Side” residential communities are considered distinct from those on the “West Side,” where increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees—including a large number of Spanish-speaking immigrants and refugees from all over the world—work and live. For a more extensive discussion of the discursive and material realities that divide the two communities, see Buendia and colleagues 2004.

3. For one period each day, Moría worked in the school’s childcare program and received credit for it.

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