ABSTRACT

This case study has been developed to investigate the different motivational factors that drive immigrant students to enroll in and dedicate themselves to ESL classes in a local adult school. Struck by the disparity of economic and educational status between native English speakers and new immigrants in the area, I challenged myself to understand the motivations of this highly committed group of people and how they are changed by the opportunities offered through the adult school. Two important themes emerge from the unearthing of these student motivations – one is personal, internal drive and the other is pressure from external and economic stimuli. Background and fundamental information about immigrant and non-native speaking individuals is rooted in statistical data and each theme is further supported by discussion from students in an ESL class at the San Tahoma Adult Center for Education and Experience. The union of this content helps the reader understand the fundamental and diverse incentives that underlie fervent pursuits for English education.

INTRODUCTION

Inconspicuously snuggled inside a community that struggles between prosperity and disparity is STACEE, the San Tahoma Adult Center for Education and Experience, an institution that has been supporting educational efforts in San Tahoma County for 30 years. Fully funded by the State of California, adult education organizations are in full effect in major metropolitan counties such as Los Angeles and Sacramento as well as here in San Tahoma. Completely free of charge to local students, the school is proving to be one of the most effective methods of improving people’s future in the local area. STACEE is a school of over 14,000 annual enrollments and has been established to provide student-centered continuing education to a population diverse in age, economic status, education, language, and ethnicity by providing quality diploma programs, basic skills development and English-as-a-second language acquisition. (**STACEE Website)

I enter STACEE to understand how the minority people, most of whom cannot speak English, position themselves to succeed in a competitive and thriving society. Clearly, lack of proper education, or the ability to converse in English (the native tongue of the United States) prohibits members of any community to position
themselves in well-paying jobs, or to communicate properly in business transactions or among their colleagues. As a result, such individuals are likely left unable to afford certain luxuries and lifestyles. But is that the only reason they are here? It is my intention to uncover the true nature of this group of minorities and understand their motivations that underlie their English studies.

COUNTY BACKGROUND

POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHICS
San Tahoma County was created from the southern part of San Flores County in 1856. It has since grown to establish itself as one of nine counties that significantly contribute to the economy of the San Flores Bay Area as an urban center. While the primary population is Caucasian, the county is a diversified melting pot of African American, Native Indian, Asian, Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders and Hispanic and Latino groups.

Central to the large county is the City of San Tahoma, where total population is 92,482 (San Tahoma County, 2000 - Website) and the diversity of people is most evident. Major minority groups make up a clearly significant part of the population - 18,973 people are Hispanic while 13,961 are of Asian descent. (City of San Tahoma Website) In the past fifty years, San Tahoma has witnessed consistent growth in population, and with it, a resulting diminution in agriculture and farming. A subsequent increase in light industry and transportation has helped give rise to the main valley of San Flores and the computer industry.

LABOR AND SKILLS
On the contrary, there is still a host of blue-collar laborers in the city, contributing up to 32.2 percent of the City of San Tahoma’s workforce. Laborers gather on the street corners of the busy intersections in San Tahoma and wait eagerly for an opportunistic employer looking for inexpensive labor. They crouch in groups along the curbside; their baseball caps and ten-gallon hats shade them from the afternoon sun. Their soiled jeans and ratty, flannel shirts suggest that they have probably been relying on this form of work for a significant length of time. Within the city, an overwhelming portion of the community (36.9%) who are over 25 years of age have no more than a high school diploma, if even that. Only 29.9% have a college or higher degree. (City of San Tahoma Website)

This lack of education and a deficiency of job skills suggest a harsh economic outlook for those trying to survive in a new economy. Economic prosperity becomes a critical factor for residents in San Tahoma, especially in the housing market where, since 1970, property values have risen astronomically. The median price of a house in 1970 was $32,600. In 1980 the median price was $123,000 and in 1990, it was $344,300. In 1989, only 17% of the population could afford to purchase the median priced home. (San Tahoma, CA - Consolidated Plan Executive Summary) San Tahoma County is expected to experience a steady decline of housing affordability. The lower income groups in the county are likely to be impacted most, especially as apartment rents are, on the whole, increasing more rapidly than home sale prices. (Sustainable.Advocate.net Website)

Additionally, about 7% of the total households are overcrowded in the city. (US Department of Housing and Urban Development Website) This is assuredly due in part to the fact that homes are too expensive for the
average family and therefore, they must resort to methods by which they are able to occupy these homes. The solution becomes shared-family residences, usually between extended families that might include in-laws, aunts and uncles, grandparents and children.

There is a luminescent glow of opportunity, however, for those who are willing to see it, or for those who have the determination to use it. STACEE is dedicated to helping people survive in a this competitive community by providing computer-based and media rich courses to help build adequate job skills as well as basic needs classes like English as a Second Language, destined to grow a diverse yet successful community.

**METHODOLOGY**

**METHODS**

I chose STACEE because of my interest in adult education and since the classes are free, I expected that it would be a very easy place to observe without feeling suspect. Quite a bit of information can be gleaned in a short time in adult courses and I didn’t want to impose upon an organization that normally charged for its valuable courses and materials.

STACEE allowed me the opportunity to immerse myself in this new environment without any barriers to entry. Simple permission from a few instructors allowed me to quickly dive into this new culture and experience the lives of the students.

Information gathering was done on the premise of participant observation. I became closely tied to a single classroom environment and based the focus of the case study on the group of students who regularly attended the low-intermediate ESL class, 5 days a week for three hours each day. I conducted one formal interview with Grace, an Excel for ESL instructor, and an informal interview with Tom, the director of the ESL programs. Though I sat in on an Excel class for my first observation, I did not interview any of the students since I had not appropriately defined my focus. I was strictly an observer, sitting through the two hours and quietly observing the 13 students in attendance. Once I settled into the ESL classroom however, I held informal, conversational interviews with 8 of the regularly attending students throughout the remainder of my study. I was much more of a participant observer, talking with pupils and engaging in a few of the class activities. I conversed lightly with Lisa, the ESL instructor for the low-intermediate class and used dialogue from that exchange to support and round out my observations. Observations in the Low-Intermediate ESL class were typically three hours long but on each of two occasions, lasted only one and a half to two hours. The selection of student interviews is profiled in the following section and helps to gain an inside perspective on the true impact STACEE is having on minority lives in San Tahoma.

What will be clearly noted is the fact that over the course of this study, I made a major transition from my first area of interest (advanced ESL students and technology) and ended up in a low-intermediate ESL class for five weeks following my first observation. I began to focus not on minorities and technology, but in contrast, looked in on educational and economic disparities of low-level English speakers and investigated the different motivations by which they are drawn to the classes.
Data was captured purely through the use of pen and notebook. No recordings or tapings were executed during any observation. With a professional SLR camera, I captured a host of photographs during one class session with the permission of the students in the room. The data in its entirety was entered into a computer via word processing format and coded and chunked appropriately. Twenty-eight pages of single spaced documentation were scaled down to provide accurate and valid information to support the theme(s) of this case study.

THE STACEE FACILITY

The 10-year old main building at STACEE is a “technofied”, art-deco structure. The bright red, two-story building stands in stark contrast to the bus yard full of a dozen, canary yellow vehicles that are employed by the connected high school and which hide the STACEE building from view along the main street. That public high school serves a population of students who can't afford to enroll in the neighboring, affluent, private schools and the surrounding community is a cultural mix of old homes and eclectic, family-operated, corner markets. Though relatively quiet and subdued, the insides of STACEE buzz with an amazing, silent energy. Students engaging with the STACEE staff or hastily rushing off to classes after quick conversation envelops the building in that quiet vigor. A Hispanic man in a baseball cap and plaid vest arrives early to be first in line at the counselor’s desk in the morning. He anxiously checks his watch, reading and re-reading a sign on the side of the metal desk “ESL Registration 8:45 am – 12:00 noon”. At the same time, a group of young girls stops in front of a nearby classroom. Their trendy clothes suggest they might be of high school age and both sport long, silky black hair tied on top of their heads in tight buns. Their conversation in Spanish is barely audible but judging from the smiles on their faces and the close proximity in which they stand, it’s a light, friendly interaction. As I look up again, they’re waving goodbye to each other and one of them disappears into the classroom in front of me. Glass windows that provide an open and airy environment encase the classrooms, labs and conference rooms that encircle the perimeter of the first floor. Administrator cubes dot the central area of the first floor and are only three quarters enclosed, welcoming students with an inviting selection of candies and goodies.

Leading any wandering eye to the second floor is a retro, red, metallic staircase. A fully glass-enclosed conference room in the corner hovers just above eyesight and from there, one can get a bird's-eye view of the swarming energy below or peer across the second floor to see a myriad of video and distance-learning labs and a host of other staff members busily working to further the success of STACEE operations. “The people that work here, work here because they love it,” one staff member commented. The largest part of the blossoming success of STACEE is attributable to the one hundred and fifty instructors who teach a myriad of offerings from computer classes to seven levels of ESL (English as a Second Language). From my viewpoint in the glass conference room (where I spent my first meeting at STACEE talking with the Excel for ESL instructor, Grace) I engrossed myself in the prospect of a thrilling, 5-week observation at this exciting, educational institution.
EXCEL FOR ESL

The study begins in one of the school’s computer classes, specifically designed to teach ESL students the mechanisms and tools for Microsoft Excel. While this is not the focus of this case study, it is an important introduction to the nature of STACEE and will further explain how and why the theme of the study transitioned as it did. It will also provide a comparative benchmark to understand the significant difference between two courses at STACEE.

My first focus was the relationship between non-native speaking students and new technology. I was curious to know how they were attempting to further their exposure and experience in a computer-savvy community that is strongly English-influenced and to further determine how the fast-paced technology environments affect them at home and in the workplace.

On my first day of observation, I enter the second-floor classroom enclosed by five-foot temporary walls. I tiptoe past a bold sign: “Please be Quiet – People are learning English here”. The average age group of learners in the current Excel class is 30 to 40 years old. Sporting dressy skirts and sweaters and boasting attaches and spreadsheet assignments, the students work quietly at their computer stations. Thirty-two computers line the perimeter of the classroom and the students face walls unmarred by post, signage or artwork. The students hardly notice my presence as I enter the room, probably because they don’t always even know each other. Filled with students who speak broken English, the class emphasis is not on conversation, but on the essence of the English language as it relates to computers and technology. It thereby seems to limit the interaction that ensues. Moreover, the class is relatively short – five weeks long and only two days a week for two hours. It’s hardly enough time for students to really develop a sense of community between each other, especially when they are diligently concentrating at their computer stations during class time. During a group exercise, a student will be called upon to work out a problem set on the computer at the front of the room. However, the manipulations that she does at the main computer are reflected on everyone else’s machines and thus, require little personal interaction between pupils.

Occasionally, a few students are compelled to reach out in assistance, but because conversational English is not emphasized in this class, language barriers stunt even the smallest attempts at interaction. Keiko is an Asian woman with short, black, highlighted hair. Her corduroy pants produce “zip, zip, zip” sounds as she approaches her classmate Olga when she overhears Olga’s struggles. “What's happening?” Olga asks in a thick, Russian accent. Her long, fur-lined coat drapes over her chair. Keiko takes hold of Olga’s mouse and begins to maneuver it. They both giggle. “I don’t know,” Olga says and they giggle some more. She resorts to simple words in conversation and repeats them for emphasis. During the short conversation, Olga’s vocabulary expands only to include the words “which”, “where”, “how”, “B13” (noting the cell placement), “minus” and “yes”. The two don’t seem to exchange much conversation, but Keiko walks away, seemingly satisfied that her advice was communicated. Grace seemed to deliberately ignore them. “I try and make them do that,” Grace points out when I ask her about group interaction. “Too many of them try to resort to me for help and I try to encourage them to help each other.” It doesn’t always work. Yoko, a tall, Japanese woman in a fire-engine-red sweater approaches Grace and follows her like a shadow for some time before Grace acknowledges her presence.
Grace turns to her and is dragged back to Yoko’s workstation, realizing that she won’t be able to get Yoko to engage with another student for help.

My first two hours of observation in the Excel class have come to a close and just as I am packing up my things, I notice an older man enter the classroom, seating himself at an empty computer station. Other students are sitting stiffly with crumpled eyebrows and perplexed stares on their faces, still struggling with the assignment in the last, few available moments of their class. On the contrary, this new participant casually slumps into a seat and sits sideways as he types an unrecognizable document into the machine. In comparison to the others, he looks too unaffected by homework or an assignment to be a student of this class. Before I know it, Grace leads me over to him and I immediately discover that my assumptions are correct. “Tom?” Grace, in her sea foam-colored suit, startles the man and he swings around in his swivel chair. Tom Mahr, director of the ESL program at STACEE quickly takes a liking to my interests and directs me out the back door and down a cement ramp leading to a small neighborhood of portable buildings in the shadow of the big, red, main building.

And thus, I leave behind the technology classroom and begin a new journey inside the culture of English as a Second Language, seeking out information to uncover the true momentum that drives the ESL students.

LOW INTERMEDIATE ESL

After transitioning to the new ESL class, it wasn’t immediately apparent what main topic(s) might materialize from this new environment. However, it was evident to me that this classroom would provide a much richer foundation for discussion about minority students. It’s diversity and direction led to a number of exciting, thought-provoking themes. It becomes clear how the discussion with students and observations within this classroom led to the emergence of a pointed discourse surrounding minority students and their motivations for attending ESL courses.

The ESL program is the largest program at STACEE. “There are about 7,000 students a year passing through this program,” Tom explains as we hunker through the tree-lined, outdoor hallways. Simply from my position in the center of the courtyard the program’s enormity is revealed. Energized students, milling around before class, surround the courtyard in which we stand. The student population is diverse – Asian, Hispanic, Caucasian and European, young, old, well dressed and rugged. Everyone within my line of sight is conversing with someone else – there is no one in the yard who doesn’t have someone to talk to. Tom leads me to a portable office where we wait outside. The lack of classrooms had forced this teachers’ office to be moved out of one of the spacious rooms and into a narrow, virtually closet-sized space. Moments later, a young woman emerges from the compact office. Her leopard-print shirt and dressy, black pants sway in the light breeze as she jogs down a set of rickety steps supported by a metal handrail. Her shoulder-length hair is a bit tousled and suggests a tireless morning of activity but her beaming smile is infectious.

Joyce is the instructor for one of the low-intermediate ESL classes at STACEE. She is emphatic about my observation and warmly welcomes me into the classroom as she points to one of the flat-topped, cream-colored buildings right next door. A large rack, scattered with bicycles sits next to the door with an “11” printed in big,
bold, black numbers above the entryway. A short panel of tinted windows faces the courtyard, so I can’t really see in but the tan and heavy, metal door is awkwardly propped open to allow fresh air to circulate through the small classroom.

**SETTING**

I walk inside and carefully maneuver between a short computer table with an old, dusty, IBM clone perched atop and a large desk above which hangs a set of bathroom keys on a plastic chain. Clearly, the dust on the face of the computer screen gives ample indication that it’s used far less frequently than the keys.

The burlap-textured walls of the classroom are well-used – large maps, commercially printed as well as hand-drawn, line the back wall of the classroom and student photographs from a recent Halloween party are pinned near the exit. Plastic runners are peeling off the base of the wall behind me. I peer around and see staples and tacks scattered above me holding nothing but mere remnants – old corners of paper and lumps of gold tinsel suggesting the significance of the hard work and rewarded celebrations in the classroom. I quickly recall the Excel classroom with its sterile, pristine walls and little to show for the activities that might have ensued there.

I choose a seat in the back corner of the room. I no longer recline comfortably in the padded chairs behind glowing computer screens in the unblemished, main building. It is a chair connected to a desk and the legs are lopsided so that every time I shift my weight, the desk goes lurching forward. The collection of portables to which I have now moved is in the process of being replaced by a set of brand new classrooms. A huge development space just a few hundred yards away from the current schoolrooms is sprawling with construction workers everyday, laboring to complete a brand new building by January 2002. The current portables had been offered to the connected high school when its main building was going through renovation. The portables, however, were in such bad condition that even the high school didn’t want them. Consequently, STACEE needed all the space they could get and accepted the rooms for free. “The current ones here are so bad, a teacher fell through a hole in the floor during class one day,” Grace frowned on my first visit.

I am less inconspicuous in this classroom than I was in the Excel class. Students who have come in early from their breaks are curiously watching me. A young woman looks down at her desk to a pending homework assignment, fiddles with her pen and shyly gazes back in my direction. Students here are much more familiar with each other since they’ve been in this class for weeks on end, sharing conversation and experiences. A game called ‘hot seat’ is played with the students every week. A different individual is called to sit at the front of the room in the ‘hot seat’ each time and fields personal (but not incriminating) questions, giving students the chance to practice personal conversation. Jazz music pipes softly out of a boom box in the corner of the room under a television cart during the breaks. While Louis Armstrong is bee-bopping in the background, people are seated in the back row against the wall discussing their homework while others at the front of the room stand in a circle and converse casually. Since it is the nature of learning English as a language, they are much more engaged with each other. Unlike the Excel class, this group thrives on and relies on communication and speaking. One morning, I arrived to the classroom a few minutes early, only to find maintenance men aligning the classroom desks into neat and orderly rows. The first couple of students who enter the classroom on any given morning, however, immediately reposition the desks. Many students arrange their seats to face each
other while others face directly towards the front. It is an atmosphere of true interaction and the setup provides an opportune environment for engagement and learning.

Daily class attendance is, on average, 24 students. The youngest student looks to be about 20 years old and the oldest, in her late 60s. A host of different backgrounds are represented in class; a show of hands indicates that students come from Russia, Portugal, China, Brazil, Mexico and Japan. Bravery and determination must drive these individuals to this land of new opportunity, but why is it that they are so dedicated to learning the English language? I am compelled to find the answers.

PERSONAL MOTIVATORS

Personal motivators are a critical part of student attendance and devotion to ESL classes at STACEE. The interaction and discussion with three of the students in Lisa’s class provides a diversified panorama of their own, personal reasons for such commitments to learn English.

LILY

Lily is a mother of three, living in a crowded household with her children and other relatives. “I have three kids!” she exclaims. As we converse, I notice that her tiny frame hardly fills the seat under her and her large-heeled shoes boost her height. She is an immigrant from China and she is a busy housemother, raising her growing children.

“I do not like it here.” Lily offers information without my prompting. “You don’t like it here?” I confirm. She began to make a smashing gesture with her two hands, pushing them together. “Compressed?” I ask and she says, “Yes… no, no”, and repeats the smashing gesture. She mentions again that she has three children and then pulls out her translator. She quickly types some characters and turns the screen of the translator towards me. It reads, “pressure”. “Oh”, I nod, “You get lots of ‘pressure’.” “Yes!” she points at me, “from kids”. Her children are in local schools – one boy is in first grade and two girls are 14 and 18 years old. They speak English in school and tell Lily that she too has to learn English. She recognizes the importance but is still frustrated. “There is so much vocabulary,” she says. “When we came here,” Lily explains, “I speak more than they.” “You spoke more than ‘them’”, I correct. “Yes,” she giggles, “more than them. Now they speak more.” “More than you do?” I confirm. “Yes, now they speak more than me”, Lily replies. Since she's been here, Lily has only seen three movies in English. She says her children go all the time. “I will ask my children, ‘Do you understand the movie?’ and they always say yes.” She seems utterly amazed.

Lily’s motivation, though solely prompted by her children, is one that is not uncommon. There are second-generation immigrants to the United States who have learned to speak English almost as well as their own, native language and who understand the importance of being able to communicate in English. “We used to get in trouble for speaking English in the house,” said Jessica, a friend of mine who is the child of first-generation immigrants from China, “but we knew that the only way to get by in the United States was to be able to speak just as well as the natives. Our parents didn’t understand.”
As Lily speaks about her crowded home, she doesn’t seem disturbed by the over-populated conditions and thereby doesn’t give me any indication that she’s learning English for purposes of finding a job in order to make money and buy her own home for her and her children. She is driven only by the motivation to catch up to her children’s conversational abilities and the pressure to conform to an English-speaking community.

**XIANG**

The day the class takes off for a volunteer effort to sort food at a local food distribution agency, I walk back to the main building from the portables, across the ramp to the second floor. Xiang is sitting at a small round table outside of the distance-learning cubicle. She recognizes me from Joyce’s class and she smiles and says hello. Her wide smile reveals a set of teeth that are clean but primitive looking and their gold outlines complement her long, golden sweater. I talk with her for a while to find out why she didn’t go to the volunteer event. She apologetically explains in broken English that every Tuesday she borrows a video, takes it home, and watches it to learn English. “I understand volunteer,” she explains, but “I sorry.” As it turns out, she is skipping the volunteering at the Samaritan House so that she can continue with her studies with the videos just as she does every Tuesday. It is evident that she feels bad about not being able to attend. “It’s OK,” I said. “You have to study.”

“I understand volunteer,” Xiang repeats again, clearly still embarrassed and thinking Joyce might be mad at her. Xiang used to be a social worker for 18 years in Taiwan before coming out to the United States and has been here in San Tahoma for about three months. Here, she holds a temporary job as a clerk at a Chinese video store but she desperately wants to learn English. While she feels that her English-speaking skills are poor now, she hopes to advance quickly. Recognizing the need to find ways to practice, like talking to other people, Xiang still doesn’t speak English at home and doesn’t watch English TV. She tries to read the newspaper but constantly encounters new and difficult words that she can rarely translate.

“English is very hard,” Xiang comments. She has two sisters, Mary and Janet who have been here 10 and 25 years, respectively. I ask where she lives and she struggles to communicate her situation. After lengthy discussion, I finally understand that she resides in a house with one sister, Janet, Mondays through Fridays, along with the sister’s English-speaking children. Janet drops Xiang off at school in the mornings, she explains, and picks her up later in the afternoons. Then, Xiang goes to stay with the other sister, Mary, on Saturdays and Sundays. She articulates the fact that she stays the weekends with Mary so that she can attend Chinese church. Her sister Janet attends an English service with the children – one that Xiang can’t understand. “I want to go to English church, but I can’t hear.” She points to her ear and corrects herself, “Can’t understand.”

I admire Xiang for sacrificing a fun and festive volunteering effort (even as she knows it is a good cause) to continue her regimented study schedule. Completely self-motivated, Xiang seems caught between a rock and a hard place. There are things she has to forfeit, like the volunteer field trip, knowing that the outcome of her dedication will pay off in the end. She can obviously see the benefits her English-speaking sister, Janet has attained. Being bilingual affords Janet the freedom to attend church services held in either English or Chinese and provides her the opportunity to communicate with her children as well as her Chinese-speaking family. Clearly, Xiang wants to have such autonomy and her devotion to the ESL class is helping her reach that goal.
ALEXA

The class is involved in some silent group work. Joyce asks Alexa if she's doing ok. Others distract Joyce but Roberto, who had been working independently with her, has gone to sit down. “How about you four – Alexa? How are you doing?” Joyce looks over to the group of students who have formed a circle out of their desks and are struggling with an exercise. Out of the blue, Alexa says, “I no come tomorrow.” With a concerted effort to emit a scowl, Alexa continues working on her assignment.

Joyce: “You’re not coming for our Thanksgiving party tomorrow?”
Alexa: “No, I no come.”
Joyce: “Will you be back on Monday?”
Alexa: “No, I no back… never.”
Joyce: “You’re never coming back?”
Alexa: “No, I come back never.”

Joyce seems only a bit concerned – it’s evident that Alexa is just frustrated so she informs Alexa, “We need to talk about this then. Why aren't you ever coming back?” Alexa buries herself in her assignment with a half-hearted smirk on her face. Her frown is waning and the silver lining on her front tooth is revealed. Beneath her wire-framed eyeglasses, she continues to avoid eye contact with Joyce. “Because I no like.” Joyce asks why she doesn’t like it and Alexa sharply responds, “Yesterday you talk to Roberto, today you talk to Roberto, never talk to me!” Joyce is sedated by Alexa’s frustration but clearly unconcerned and retorts, “Come here and ask me anything – I’ll talk to you right now – anything you want to ask.” Alexa just stares at her paper and continues her work mumbling under her breath, “No. I no like. I no like.”

I notice after class that all the students have departed and Joyce is busily conversing with Alexa. They are leaning against a short table, smiling and laughing, speaking rapid and fluent Spanish. Just a week later, I walk briskly from my car up to the community of portable classrooms for another observation and see Alexa lingering in the courtyard before class, flanked by a couple of classmates. A loud bell alerts me to the start of the school day and Alexa happily saunters into the classroom and resumes her seat – the same one she occupies every week.

The attentiveness that Alexa receives in the ESL program is an important part of her motivation. Because interpersonal relationships are an central part of learning English, Alexa relies on Joyce’s encouragement and personal support, threatening to leave class if that assistance is not fulfilled. On the other hand, knowing that she would only be hurting herself by quitting the program, Alexa succumbs to her frustration and returns regularly to class, perhaps benefiting from the short, guilt-laden transaction with Joyce, prompting further, personal attention.
EXTERNAL AND ECONOMIC MOTIVATORS

On the flip side of personal drivers are external and economic motivators. While these have a very different grounding than more private, internal motivators, they are just as crucial for students making the decision to commit themselves to time consuming efforts required to learn the English language. Six students provide compelling insight into their set of pressures arising primarily from the outside world.

EMILIO

Emilio is buried in a crossword puzzle, printed on a single sheet of paper. I settle in and look over at him. “Ah, a crossword”, I say. “Is it hard?” He slowly peers out from under his blue Dodgers baseball cap and through his large, round spectacles. “Yes, for me,” he relaxes and replies with a chuckle. I ask him what he’s learning about and he shows me the front page of the crossword with all the clues. “1. Group of people. 2. Officers of the law,” it reads. I ask him if it was his homework and he replies, “Yes, I am copying – I sorry,” he says with a timid smile. He pulls out a sheet from under his own homework and I notice it’s filled out completely. His own work is smattered with only a couple of answers.

I adjust my desk a little closer. As I reach under my chair to lift it up underneath me, I feel a hardened wad of gum under my fingertips. I mask my displeasure help Emilio complete his puzzle. Prompted by the crossword topics, we begin to discuss living spaces and Emilio reveals that he owns a white, two-story house that he shares with his wife in San Burro. “Do you like it?” I inquire. “I like it,” he describes, “but I live by the airport,” he concludes. He begins gesturing with his hands to indicate the motion of the planes taking off. “Windows shake,” he explains. “Not when they are up here,” he motions with his hands, one representing the ground and the other hand high above it, “but here,” and he creates a small space between his two, flattened hands. I interpret it and repeated it back to him. “So when the planes are low, they make a lot of noise, shaking your windows. And when they are high, you can’t hear them?” “Yes,” Emilio says, and nods. He used to live in an apartment three years ago in the local area, but he was finally able to move into a home and likes his new house much better. “More comfortable,” he states, “but very noisy.” I ask Emilio if he drives a car, he answers, “Not yet.” He grimaces but seems to delight in the thought.

As Emilio becomes more comfortable, he swipes off his glasses and he speaks with enthusiasm as we continue to practice his English. Emilio has been taking classes at STACEE for one year. He moved from Nicaragua about 6 years ago and has been working at a local hotel ever since. He likes it, but he’s in the classroom because he needs to learn English for work. He is employed at a local hotel and while he doesn’t speak much English among his colleagues (typically a staff of about 8 people), he has encountered the need to communicate in English on quite a few occasions. Working nights, Emilio is responsible for setting up for large events at the hotel – big dinners, receptions or meetings and probably realizes the importance of being able to adequately communicate with English-speaking guests or other staff members.

“Does your wife speak English?” I inquire. “No,” he laughs, “she don (sic) want to”, he explains.
Emilio evidently feels pressure to learn English for interaction in the workplace. There is probably a performance issue that is attributed to his conversational abilities in his job, especially when confronted by hotel guests or upper management. For Emilio, there appears to be a need, more than a passion to learn a dose of English. As evidenced by his copying a classmate’s homework, Emilio seems determined just to get the work done. In my last couple weeks of observation, Emilio was only intermittently present in class. Unlike the personal motivations that Lily encounters at home, or the passionate drive of Xiang, Emilio’s need to learn is strictly driven by the need to communicate at work. There isn’t even a personal motivation in the home, where he has no method to practice and likely, no reason to try, since his wife won’t speak English and clearly doesn’t have any desire.

MARY
Mary’s tiny body frame is shrouded in a thick sweat suit. She is of Asian descent and stares at me with wide, intriguing eyes, excited to converse with another native English speaker. I ask her how long she’s been at the school and she heaves a heavy sigh. “Oh, a long time,” she emphasizes with a smile. I ask if she works and she says she used to work in a hotel but now “business is very bad” so she was a victim of a large layoff and now stays at home while continuing her quest for a new job.

Mary turns to me again and says, “I have a question for you. What’s the difference between ‘pronounce’ and ‘pronunciation’?” I write the two words in front of her and explain the difference between the noun and the verb. She continues to struggle to explain that she doesn’t know the best way for her son to learn English. During our conversation, Mary and Lily trade phrases in Chinese, translating for each other when they get stuck trying to communicate with me. “What is more important,” Mary asks, “to learn grammar or vocabulary or pronunciation?” Lily pipes in, “All of them!” and she walks away with a giggle, rushing to her seat before class starts again. “Yes,” I agree with a frown, “they are all important”.

Mary and I continue our quick conversation, the bell rings and Joyce comes in from the break. Mary leans over and opens her arms around me. She says, “you are so helpful” and grins as she hops back to her seat.

Over the next few weeks, her relentless, bright smile suggests that while the job market has been frustrating, she’s happy to be around her friends here at the school. She describes to me her large, one story, and blue house. It’s a full house with eight people; five of them are children. “Lots of people,” Mary claims and leads me to believe that it’s a nice respite, being in class and away from the busy house.

On my last observation, I hear Joyce exclaim, “You got the job at the Annex?” I follow her excited stare in the direction of Mary, who is shaking her head. “But you still have an interview?” Joyce questions. “Keep practicing your English so you can apply it,” she continues. I find out from Mary that she just recently got a job at a dry cleaner. She half frowns when I congratulate her, seeming a bit frustrated about her job because while it’s something, it’s probably not the ideal position she set out for. She is always graciously cheerful when I ask her about school and is thankful that she has the opportunity at STACEE.

Mary, unlike Lily, seems mildly discouraged with her over-crowded living space. In addition, her frustration mounts with the limited prospect of job opportunities. Likely driven by the desire to find a well-paying job and
thus have the ability to afford herself a quiet apartment close to her friends and family, Mary has been in an ongoing battle to find adequate employment. Her motivation seems two-fold, however, as supported by our discussion about her son. Not only do the English classes support her need to learn the language so that she can find a job, but also extends benefits to her son, who does not attend classes. Mary is able to pass on the wealth of knowledge that she acquires in class and share it with her older son who is also intent on learning English.

NERAS

An older gentleman in a sporty, gray turtleneck under a dark, blue blazer has opened his arms for me to take a seat at his table. I have been standing with Xiang in the center of the main building on the second floor. Our voices sound rather loud in the quiet, open area. A young, Asian girl has just started a lesson with an instructor in the distance-learning cube behind us. I match my speaking voice to that of the man – he’s been here longer than I have and probably knows the acceptable noise levels. I ask him if we’re distracting him and in a thick accent, he says, “No, I’m studying for my citizenship exam. It’s tomorrow at 9:40 am.” “Wow, how exciting,” I exclaim and acknowledge his welcome to have a seat across from him.

Neras is from Iran and has been here for over 20 years and has had his green card for three years now. He is not in Joyce’s class but welcomes me to talk with him. His thick, rounded glasses are reflecting the light from the skylight so I can’t clearly see his eyes but he appears to be a bright and insightful man. He is a businessman who has been involved a lucrative industry, exporting tea to China and Sri Lanka from Iran. He’s been to Sri Lanka 40 times, he explains when asked and into China about 10 times. Xiang, still hovering over the table, asks him if he speaks Chinese. “No,” he laughs.

I ask him if he’s nervous about his exam. “No, I’ve been here for over 20 years,” he boasts in his thick accent, but he still feels like he really needs to practice his English, he explains, to continue conducting a successful business. He lives in a large home in San Carlos and when asked how he came to the United States, he exclaimed, “Because this is the best place! The best place in the world!”

Neras nods in delight and asks, “Do you have time? Do you have time to learn English with me?” “You mean to teach you English?” I ask. He replies, “Yes!” I explain that I wish I could. “I don’t know how to teach rules,” I tell him. “I’m sorry, I’m not qualified to teach you.” He smiles but is clearly disappointed so I direct him to one of the classes here. “Well, all the teachers, they are too busy,” he explains. Neras had been taking one-on-one tutoring for his citizenship class for the past month (it’s a one month preparation class with a private tutor) so he’s clearly gotten used to the personalized treatment. His demands for a private tutor are clearly in contrast to Lily’s conflicts that private tutors are too expensive. Xiang immediately picks up on Neras’ fortune and notes how lucky he is to be able to consider private tutoring. “He likes one to one,” she smirks with her toothy grin.

Neras’ pressures are far from economic. Living in a large home in an affluent city and running a successful, overseas business suggest that his financial situation is much more solid than any of the students in Joyce’s class. On the same token, his motivation is external, stemming from a need to continue successful operation of his business and develop the credibility that he needs to continue his work as a United States citizen. Perhaps this gives him a substantial boost in the market, the ability to say that he is a bona fide and successful
inhabitant of a prosperous country. His genuine adoration for the San Flores Bay Area encourages him as well, and for him, the ability to speak the native tongue more fluently likely extends his pride.

**JULIO**

I ask how class has been going for him, if it is hard and if he is learning a lot. “Hard, yes,” he whispers. Without prompting, he offers information about his two jobs at two different restaurants. “Wow – that’s a lot of work,” I say. “Are you a server?” “No,” he responds. “Prepare.” “Oh,” I say. “You prepare food?” “Yes,” he answers. He works at two Greek restaurants – one in the neighboring city of Garrett and one in San Flores. I ask him if he speaks English at work and he says not really. “Is that why you’re here?” I ask. Through his big, toothy grin, I can see a row of shiny, silver-capped teeth. He’s only a young man of no more than 30. “Yes,” he replies. Moreover, he has the benefit of access to a car to get back and forth between jobs and ESL classes.

Before we can finish our conversation, he’s whisked off with a group of people who were not in class last week and who must take an exam. Joyce leads them to another room while the rest of the class puts homework on the board.

Julio is shy and thus, delivers very little information. I have only seen him twice in class and it isn’t until the second time that I am able to approach him. Despite our limited interaction, I am able to glean important particulars about his motivations. It is left unclear whether or not there are some other factors playing in Julio’s desire to learn English, but he left me with unambiguous details to suggest that English is a significant part of his working in the food services industry. With the English-speaking skills he will gain in Joyce’s class, the potential for him to move up to a cashier, wait-staff or even management position is largely feasible.

**ROBERTO**

“I have to move,” Roberto states. Joyce turns to him, “why do you have to move, Roberto?” He smiles shyly and says, “I have to be, uh…” “Roberto, give me a complete sentence,” Joyce urges. “I want to live in a new place,” Roberto finishes. “Good,” Joyce encourages, “you have to move because you want to live in a new place.”

I quietly approach Roberto’s desk after class and ask how he is. “Oh, OK, but tired,” he claims. He’s a young, Hispanic and well-groomed man. His eyes swell behind his wire-framed glasses and so I am compelled to ask, “have you been partying? I notice Joyce was trying to wake you up!” “No, no partying, but I live in a house and my… my roommates… they are so… so…” he makes a big gesture with his hands, “loud,” he says. He further complains that the house where he lives is built with only two bedrooms. Roberto lives with two other people so the living room has been converted into his bedroom. The only computer and television in the house are connected in that room and so he cannot get to sleep when his roommates are working or watching television late into the night. It appears to be a frequent occurrence. “Oh no,” I frown. “Go home and get some sleep now,” I advise.

After a four-day Thanksgiving break, Roberto indicates to me that he had too many days away from class. It seems indicative of his frustration with his cramped living conditions and that, perhaps, he had to spend so many rainy days inside his crowded home. “Too much time pass since I am in school. My house was
very...” he waves awkwardly with his hands, “...busy.” “It was helter-skelter.” I am impressed by the idiom – I am pleasantly amused by his use of such a colloquial term.

I confirm, “so you had too much time off for the holidays?” “Yes,” he claims. “Is that because you don’t get to practice English when you’re not in school?” I ask. “No, no – I practice,” he quickly interrupts, “but I like to be in school better.”

When I ask Roberto if he is working, he says no with a frown. He is looking for a job “anywhere.” “Hotel... anywhere,” he states. He is very excited this morning – he has good news. Roberto is a singer and had recently submitted a CD with a recording of his work to a local, hard rock band in Oakville. He got a letter back from them saying that they wanted to talk to him. He is cheerful and excited this morning but he is a bit afraid. He sings in English, but cannot speak and is nervous about going for this musical interview. “I'm not sure what they do when they find out I can-- cannot speak English,” Roberto wonders aloud.

Roberto exemplifies the current difficulties immigrants face when coming to the United States, and more specifically, inside the city of San Tahoma. He is clearly encouraged to continue his English studies, enforced by the need to find a new job and the passionate desire to get out of his overcrowded living space. His struggles with the English language are heightened when he comes across a potential job opportunity and worries that he cannot effectively communicate. Without adequate speaking skills, he fears the loss of a job opportunity and thus recognizes the impact upon the opportunity to change his current living situation. Without a good paying job, he will not be able to afford to live on his own and will have to continue surrendering private and personal time in his crowded apartment.

**OMAR**

Omar sits in the back of the classroom and during a class exercise about living spaces, he claims aloud; “I don (sic) like my neighborhood.” Joyce turns to him. “Why, Omar? Why don’t you like your neighborhood?” Omar is slouching in his seat in a black jogging suit. His short mustache twitches as he speaks. Omar says he doesn't want to move; he likes his apartment but doesn't like his neighborhood. He's shy and refuses to explain.

Omar provides just one more example of the dissatisfaction that the minority groups experience in their transition to the competitive San Flores Bay Area. With little or no indication as to why Omar is unhappy, it’s impossible to tell what his motivations are for committing himself to the ESL class – he is there every week. His comment, however, still mirrors struggles of a minority group within a community who cannot afford to break from their current conditions to afford desirable living spaces.
CONCLUSION

This study acknowledges the fact that there are deeply rooted motivational factors which drive new immigrants, minority groups and low-level English speakers to pledge their time to ESL classes offered at STACEE. Two themes emerged from these observations and interviews. It was consistently clear that dedication comes from different sources – personal or self-directed pressures and economic and external motivators.

Personal and self-guided pressures are very diverse. From familial pressures to self-directed passion, the intentions of students are strong and boundless. Many of these same students who come to class with a self-inflicted enthusiasm or demand also appear to suffer from economic strain, for instance those living in small, over-crowded homes. However, it is evident that the primary motivation from within their hearts fast outweighs the forces of economic security or satisfaction. Xiang and Lily are perfect examples of two individuals who seem comfortable despite their crowded homes but instead, struggle under the weight of family pressures and passionate desires to learn English.

Even those students that express general satisfaction with their living conditions or economic status continue to challenge themselves in order to persist in a growing society. STACEE students like Emilio and Neras, able to afford their own homes and who seem to possess overall contentment, still look for further opportunities to enhance their abilities and stature.

In contrast, students like Roberto and Mary appear to be driven by the awareness of economic factors and the prospect of financial stability as they continue their studies in the ESL class. Their conversation revolves around finding new jobs and, especially in Roberto’s case; every discussion is seized by talk of the daily frustrations he experiences under his own roof. Because of his willpower to continue his language studies, and his understanding of the opportunities for fluent English speakers, he is determined to overcome his situation.

Regardless of the underlying motivations, it is quite obvious that this is a classroom of participants who truly want to, or consequently realize the critical need to learn. Their dedication to a fifteen-hour week of classes suggests that their motivations are powerful drivers. The experience that they gain by being in class, and evidently that which is acquired by interacting with other English-speakers, is catapulting them to another level in an otherwise disparate community.

On the way out from one of my final observations, I see Alexa and Emilio sitting on the stairs near the main building. I walk by them to say goodbye and Emilio says with a big smile, “Hab (sic) a nice date?” Or at least that’s what I think he asks. After a few trials, I understand more correctly and hear, “Have a nice day.” “You too, Emilio, you too,” I respond and then trot back to my car, confident that Joyce’s devoted class, no matter what their motivators, are driven to capture a taste of, however they define it, their own ‘sweet success’.
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