

## NEW AMBITIONS IN A NEW LAND?

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*Studies have shown that when students settle on a certain career and embark on an educational journey to obtain the qualifications for that career, their outlooks and motivations are generally stable. The question for this study is whether students who are enrolled in a non-career specific Intensive English Program on a University campus, thus fulfilling their academic but not career prerequisites [as the IEP coursework does not relate to their careers] find their ambitions shifting as they progress through their coursework.*

**Keywords:** learning, English

The population being studied in this context- Intensive English Program students who are not enrolled in a set academic curriculum- is different from the ones described in the aforementioned studies because they do not have a clear major and in fact, successful completion of the IEP program is a prerequisite before they can even select a major. This uniqueness makes them a special group that can provide insight into the psychology of motivation- especially since they are immigrants who inevitably find their perspectives challenged, even if they have clear notions of why they will immigrate and where they will settle (Tseng, 1995).

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette, like many Universities, has an Intensive English Program. Intensive English Programs or IEPs, It follows a traditional educational model (Dehghanpisheh, 1987) where international students are enrolled, on-site, into an eight week long program of study with the goal of passing the coursework so that they will not need to sit for a TOEFL examination. Once that process is completed, these student will enroll the University of Louisiana as undergraduates in for-credit courses which place them in the same category as general undergraduates.

Because this researcher is not an expert on the visa process, it may be worthwhile, once this project expands, to see whether students who receive visas to study in the U.S. must committ, at least on paper, to a particular course of study and whether that commitment strengthens their conviction vis a vis their choice of major<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A search on Jstor found no resources that would point to prior studies on this or the more general question of whether the act of putting something in writing has any psychological impact on the writer that would prompt him/her to take the commitment more seriously.

## Methodology

A variety of methodologies exist within the realm of qualitative research. For the record, a research method is generally defined as "a technique for gathering evidence" (Harding, 1987). Qualitative research offers a variety of tools and it can yield ample and valuable information on a subject, through a process of dialogue and data analysis broad applicability throughout the field being studied. (Harklau, 2000)

Because we are interested in a subject's lived experience (Avital, 2000), we sought to focus on how a new environment and a new educational structure<sup>2</sup> intersected with his ambitions. To accomplish this, we needed two critical pieces of data- first, the structure of the IEP program- i.e. what does someone expect entering it and how the program is taught as well as what educational strategies are used and secondly how, if at all, these shape the educational and career outlooks of IEP students.

The first set of data, regarding how the IEP program is structured and taught can be approached from a number of angles. One could be taking field notes as either a participant observer or a non participant observer. The classes are set up in such a way that one could easily (given permission of course) listen in on the course being taught without actually being present in the classroom and observing the process. This is important since, as anyone who has ever been observed in any context knows, the mere presence of an observer fundamentally changes the classroom and workplace dynamic. Even if a researcher claims "objectivity", he or she still has an impact on what is being observed, even as a non-participant. (Alexander, 1982; Carey, 1980)

Another method with which to gain insight is artifact analysis, which has traditionally been associated with archeology (Whiteford, 1947) but can be used in a number of cultural contexts (Alexander, 1982; Hart, 1948) along with document analysis or written assignments (Stovel, 2000) which would also be useful as a means of studying both what materials are used in IEP classes and how students think about and process the information and in written assignments.

Finally, one can interview IEP personnel to gain insight. That was the path we chose. There are many forms of interviews available- the best known are structured, semi-structured and guided interviews. In a structured interview, "the subject's ideas and the subject matter under investigation are one and the same thing," while an unstructured interview has the subject and the researcher striving for "mutual understanding" but not complete agreement (Pawson, 1996).

The second issue- of what someone thinks- is best approached directly, by asking them either in interviews or surveys. Survey research is a valid form of qualitative study and administering it online is also become more and more acceptable, even though some (Litaker, 2003) are concerned about its validity when administered online. Litaker used a WB or web interface to administer a survey and compared that to traditional survey research result - finding a statistically significant amount of variability between the results. Nevertheless, as noted in footnote two, we chose the survey method since it seemed to be the

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<sup>2</sup> The subject whom we surveyed is from Oman. Were time more generous, we would have delved into his background and educational experiences to contrast the Omani education system, as he lived it with his present education experiences at ULL and whether a possible nexus existed between these contrasts and his change of ambitions or lack of change.

most time-efficient approach to take and, as discussed, it is a reliable and accepted means of qualitative research.

With regards to interviewing, Hart (1948) outlines a number of pitfalls that this research has strived to avoid:

- "The interviewer is typically a stranger"- both participants had prior knowledge of the researcher and have a pre existing relationship with him.
- "his visit interrupts...customary routine"- this was a difficult issue to work around. Email and phone are both less intrusive than personal interviews and in each case, the participants were assured that they could resume discussions another time or choose not to participate.
- "his auspices and purposes are not initially known by the respondent"- the first participant, Rose, was told early on- before the interview reproduced for this report- about the subject of the research. The second participant knows the researcher in a social context and knows his area of research in general terms but did not know in advance what the subject of this research would be.
- The experience of being interviewed is "new and somewhat embarrassing"- this depends on the subject's lived experiences and cannot be corrected for. However, previous social familiarity with the researcher may be helpful here.
- The interviewer may have an "ulterior motive"- many are approached by salesmen and political operatives in their daily lives and as discussed, surveys have gained a decidedly mixed reputation because of this.
- The interviewer "stands as a representative of the outside world...passing judgment"- The questions asked were either factual in nature or neutral in tone- or at least, that was the intent behind them. Care was taken to make sure that the respondents felt at ease.

## Review of Literature

As stated, the career outlooks of students tend to be stable (London, 1983) and immigrants who come to the United States generally do so with very specific locations and goals in mind (Tseng, 1995). Furthermore, many IEP programs are structured in a way as to promote specific academic goals, such as writing skills (Dehghanpisheh, 1987; Leki & Carson, 1994) and they do so from a generalist perspective. Indeed, it is this approach that led to discarding an earlier research question about whether IEP teaching and materials are politically influenced and whether said influence transfers to the student body either explicitly or implicitly.

Nevertheless, the question of career motivation was a worthwhile one to study because London's work took place in a Western culture where there was a broad agreement between participants. By contrast, international students often hold different cultural outlooks and values (Kuehn & Stanwick & Holland, 1990) towards issues and ideas which many Westerners consider givens, such as the prohibition on cheating in the classroom. If they hold differing perspectives on such issues, it would not be unreasonable of a researcher to believe that other issues, especially ones as individualized as career motivation would also differ from generally known Western attitudes.

Additionally, one of the key areas in which these differences emerge is education (Wennerstrom and Heiser, 1992) with non-native students often sharply diverging from their native counterparts on such issues as how they rate their instructors. Wennerstrom and Heiser found that immigrants and refugees may be gunshy about revealing their true preferences because of insecurity about living in a new country and such issues as fears of jeopardizing their visa or refugee status. Since many came from areas where free speech is suppressed, they view the expression of negative opinions towards those whom they see as authority figures, such as teachers, with apprehension. As such, traditional notions regarding the scientific soundness of survey and other forms of research are challenged. A second issue that emerged from Wennerstrom and Heiser's work is that even students without such fears can misinterpret survey items, particularly if they are lower level students. This is directly relevant to our work. As discussed, we chose participants who knew us on a personal level and were comfortable with our presence. This was done specifically to counter the issue of apprehension raised by Wennerstrom and Heiser.

Literature regarding shifts in career motivation as experienced by immigrant students is lacking. Specifically, it would be worthwhile to study, especially in light of the cultural truths espoused by Kuehn, Stanwick and Holland how the integration of IEP students into a new environment effects their career outlook. A longitudinal study tracking students through their years of scholarship would be worthwhile as it would help shed some light on issues of career motivation and possible external influences upon it, particularly as it effects those who grew up outside of Western cultural mores and find the underpinnings of many of their ideas and self-concepts challenged as they move to a new country and attempt to assimilate into a new culture. This would be particularly worthwhile given that research (Avruch, 1982; Schnittker, 2002) shows that immigrants, be it Americans to Israel (Avruch, 1982) or Chinese to America (Schnittker, 2002) experience many fundamental shifts in their self-concepts which in turn often lead to changes in their previously stable outlooks on life, career outlooks being among those that are challenged.

## Preliminary Results

Two significant pieces of data emerged to answer the questions posed, namely, a brief, highly structured interview with an instructor of the IEP program regarding the general framework of the ULL IEP courses and a survey designed to elicit responses from students regarding their goals and whether said goals have shifted over the course of their studies. The interview is reproduced below as Table 1.

<b>Table 1: Structured Interview with IEP Personnel Regarding Program</b>
A brief, highly structured interview with an employee of the ULL IEP program, conducted for information gathering purposes, was as follows:
1: Hi Rose.
2: Hi how are you?
3: I'm fine and you?
4: I'm doing okay. I just wondered, if a student completes the IEP program, does that mean
5: that they get to go on to college?
6: Yes, that's right.
7: And they won't need to take the TOEFL, if they pass, right?
8: That's right.
9: Thank you.

Now, line 7, in retrospect, sounds biased (as in leading) but she has no incentive to lie and no reason to feel pressured to answer a certain way. The data gleaned from this interview confirms that, as mentioned in the introduction, the University of Louisiana follows a traditional IEP model (Dehghanpisheh, 1987) where students can opt out of the TOEFL examination once they pass.

The second and more intriguing piece of data comes from a former participant in the IEP program. The survey and his answers are below as Table 2.

<b>Table 2: Survey response from former IEP student regarding career motivation<sup>3</sup></b>
Are you enrolled in the Intensive English Program? I was rolled but I'm in ULL now
Is it true that if your TOEFL is high enough you can skip the program? Yes
How long have you been studying at ULL? Two semesters
What did you come to study? The major " petroleum Eng." & the location & the weather.
Do any other subjects appeal to you? No
So will you stick with your major? 100% Sure

With regards to interviewing, Hart (1948) outlines a number of pitfalls that this research has strived to avoid and that were elaborated upon in the methodology section along with the strategies used to avoid these potential problems. As such, the data produced here appears to be scientifically valid. Of course, validity is a concern to all researchers- in the context of qualitative research, such validity is often established through corroboration with other researchers in the same area (Peshkin, 1993) who can corroborate general findings that are bought out in interviews. Literature reviews also serve a similar purpose, because they are drawn from peer-reviewed journals with the intent of verifying the interpretive stance and results of the researcher.

With these considerations in mind, the survey above gleaned several important pieces of data: first, the subject has already completed the IEP program at ULL successfully. Secondly, this subject independently verified the claim that once a student has a high enough TOEFL score, they can bypass the IEP program<sup>4</sup>. Third, no other subjects have come to interest the participant in his time as a student at ULL. This corroborates the findings in the literature review students generally have solid plans that are rarely altered through external influences (London, 1983). This finding does counter the implications (Avruch, 1982; Schnittker, 2002) of earlier work that immigration challenges the self-concepts of individual immigrants and may lead them down a different career path- however, the subject surveyed may not, in fact be an immigrant-earlier, informal conversations<sup>5</sup> indicated that once he obtains a degree he will return to his native land.

<sup>3</sup> This is referred to as a survey since it was conducted via email and was not a traditionally-formatted interview. However, a case may be made that despite its non-traditional setup, this piece of data is more of a structured interview than a survey since surveys generally use rating scales.

<sup>4</sup> Independent verification being one of the keys to solid qualitative research. Both data sets were valid in this regard since they confirmed findings in the literature even if they could be interpreted in a number of ways. This is why that question was posed to both participants.

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned earlier, this subject and the researcher are long time friends.

## Conclusion

This is merely the beginnings of a larger qualitative research project. A cursory review of qualitative dissertations at ULL revealed that qualitative research is far more in-depth and data intensive than what was gathered here. Nevertheless, it achieved several purposes, namely data verification and the honing of interview and data collection as well as analytical skills by a junior researcher. It also showed, as the researcher suspected, based on previous work, that motivations are rarely changeable<sup>6</sup>. This research backs up previous work in the field (London, 1983; Tseng, 1995) regarding motivation both among immigrants and non-immigrants alike.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be clarified here that the researcher had no bias or expectation when commencing, conducting or analyzing the research. Rather, the researcher suspected this outcome on the basis of previously reviewed literature and the results of a previous study conducted by the researcher on motivation.

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