REFRAMING METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS FOR LOW-LITERATE L2 LEARNERS:
FOUR CASE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

The present dissertation seeks to expand the notion of metalinguistic awareness by exploring how it relates to L2 literacy and L2 learning, and also what it means to be “low-literate” in adult L2 English acquisition. The data came from an 11-week-long collective case study of four Central American women ranging in age from early 20s to early 60s and in years of formal schooling in their home countries from two and 12 years. These four women were attending an intensive adult ESL program where they spent 30 minutes every day attending a supplemental ESL literacy class. The etic and emic methodological approach connects (1) the instructional context with (2) their observed experiences and behaviors in the literacy classes with (3) their elicited interpretations of those experiences in the L1, pointing to the powerful if often hidden influences of pedagogical, personal, and environmental factors on the development and use of metalinguistic awareness in L2 learning.

Metalinguistic awareness has been defined as the ability to reflect on and manipulate language (Gombert, 1992; Jessner, 2006) and, as Bigelow, Tarone, and Hansen (2009) lament, it has been primarily investigated with children developing their L1 literacy and oral skills and with educated adolescents and adults developing L2 literacy and oral skills in formal instructional settings. The theoretical framework of Language Awareness (Svalberg, 2012) and engagement with language (Svalberg, 2009) provided a useful wider lens onto metalinguistic awareness as an analytical construct, and the two-pronged etic and emic exploration uncovered
evidence of remarkable metalinguistic awareness and engagement with language among these learners. Overall, the study challenges assumptions about the quality and type of linguistic awareness that low-literate adult learners bring to their English learning experience, allowing us to reframe our notions of these learners as multicompetent (Cook, 2003). It also suggests that metalinguistic awareness is best understood in a broad sociocognitive perspective, one that opens new ground for the conceptualization of the roles that cognitive, affective, and social engagement with language have on metalinguistic awareness and on second language acquisition – particularly for this understudied research population.
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Much of the research on adult instructed second language acquisition (SLA) to date has primarily been conducted on second language (L2) learners with relatively high levels of first language (L1) literacy, academic achievement, and socio-economic status, and who learned an alphabetic system of writing as an L1 or L2 (Ortega, 2012). As Bigelow and Tarone (2004) noted over a decade ago, this narrowly-bounded body of SLA research tends to skew our understanding of L2 learning toward those learners who have attained success through more explicit and formal methods of L2 instruction (Norris & Ortega, 2000). The gap and distortion in the research may exist, at least in part, due to accessibility issues in targeting and working with available participant populations (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Tarone, 2010a).

A good case in point is that of metalinguistic awareness, understood at the narrowest definitional level as the conscious and intentional ability to reflect on, analyze, and manipulate language (Jessner, 2006). Metalinguistic awareness has been found to facilitate L2 learning among adult learners when the populations studied are highly literate and college-educated (Roehr & Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2013). But how metalinguistically aware are beginning-level adult English language learners with six or fewer years of formal schooling and limited levels of
native language (L1) literacy when they embark on the learning of English, including reading and writing in English? How does their metalinguistic awareness change, as they become more able to utilize print-based tools and strategies in their efforts to learn both oral and written English? And are the definitions of this construct that work for highly literate, college-educated L2 learners equally workable when applied to this other learner population? These three questions give the impetus for the present dissertation study, which is an exploration of the metalinguistic awareness that can be observed in the learning experiences of four Central American women enrolled in a supplemental ESL literacy program.

As a highly literate person, I cannot remember a time when I did not rely on printed texts and my literacy skills to make sense of my own L2 studies in French and Spanish. My studies always started from text; from the beginning, I knew that the sounds of the alphabet would be different, the spelling system would be different, and the pronunciation of these new vocabulary words would rely on my careful decoding of these new grapheme-morpheme correspondences. I took spelling tests and dictations, I filled in the blanks, I translated sentences, I looked up words in the dictionary, I wrote paragraphs. My frame of reference included my native language and L1 alphabetic system, because what I learned in French and Spanish was often seen through the lens of how the system compared to English. My teachers’ formal methods of instruction and study encouraged this, as my classroom peers and I moved from reading short dialogues to short essays to magazines and eventually short novels; we memorized lists of vocabulary; we carefully drafted and practiced reading a speech for an oral presentation. Our speaking and listening skills developed as well, but they relied to a great extent on the use of our L1 literacy skills. So much of my thought in the L2 – even when I was working directly in the L2 and trying consciously to not translate from English – was visualized and enhanced through the written word.
My awareness of the impact that L1 literacy has on L2 acquisition gradually grew over time. When I began teaching beginning-level ESL to adult immigrants in the United States, I worked in an ESL program that had a separate literacy track for students who needed additional work in English reading and writing. Occasionally, I had students in my classes who came from this separate track, and who seemed to struggle to keep pace with the rest of the class. I was not yet familiar with the role that L1 literacy and formal education might have in L2 learning, given my own educational experiences. I assumed that all of my students had adequate L1 literacy skills, and I did nothing intentional or systematic to explain or clarify the nuances of English as a written language. Of course, we worked on spelling, parts of speech, decoding, synonyms and antonyms, the proper use of apostrophes and commas, and so on — but I did this with the assumption that I was simply “adding on” to their previous knowledge base and that they would make use of an inherent ability to transfer their L1 knowledge to the L2 system. For the most part, approaching instruction this way seemed to work with the majority of my students. There were occasionally younger students (usually male, usually from Central America) whose handwriting seemed underdeveloped or who hesitated to speak up too much in class, but their youth also seemed to help them catch on when older, more educated learners continued to struggle. I still did not make the connection, or notice the gap, between my learners’ (limited) L1 literacy skills and my own approach to teaching ESL in a formal instructional setting.

In our accepted paradigm of formal education in L2 acquisition, literacy skills are a given. When individual differences are considered in SLA research, these differences have focused largely on cognitive and psychological constructs such as motivation, aptitude, and working memory, while simultaneously taking for granted the L1 literacy and educational background of the participants (Bigelow & Watson, 2012). When we take literacy and
educational background for granted, focusing instead on these other individual differences, we ignore the L2 acquisition processes of millions of people around the world who do not represent “WEIRD,” or Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic, populations (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). In fact, Henrich et al. (2010) made a strong and comprehensive case against the dependence on WEIRD participants in the majority of research in behavioral sciences, arguing:

The sample of contemporary Western undergraduates that so overwhelms our database is not just an extraordinarily restricted sample of humanity; it is frequently a distinct outlier vis-à-vis other global samples. It may represent the worst population on which to base our understanding of Homo sapiens. (p. 22)

When we assume that all L2 learners have the “WEIRD” backgrounds that most SLA research participants have traditionally had, we make generalizations about L2 acquisition that are based on understandings of schooled language and practices. These generalizations are linked to the monolingual bias of SLA studies (Firth & Wagner, 1997), which Atkinson (2014) claims is linked to “the apparent belief that L2 learning takes place primarily through formal education” (p. 474). We assume, as I did myself, the same educational experiences and literacy practices that accompanied our own L1 language arts curricula or foreign language instruction. For example, when “WEIRD” learners study a foreign language formally, they often begin to develop a conscious awareness of metalinguistic concepts, as they acquire a new set of labels for talking about and expressing their knowledge of the L2 and language learning processes. L2 learners in these formal educational settings rely on printed textbooks, tables and charts, and explicitly stated rules and definitions to dissect and make sense of a new system of language that may be quite different from their L1. Highly literate L2 learners have been well-primed for this study of language at the “meta” level, by having developed the foundational skills that come
along with prior education and L1 literacy. These socialized classroom literacy practices (Duff & Talmy, 2011) include the ability to sit silently in class, matching the print surrounding them with the teacher’s voice, instructions, and explanations. Literate L2 learners become used to decoding the printed form of oral language, and to fitting language into boxes, answers into complete sentences, and facts and opinions into well-substantiated paragraphs with main ideas, supporting details, and conclusions. Most of the feedback on their academic performance and progress comes as a result of responding to written prompts in various forms. As such, these learners have grown comfortable enough with the written word in their L1 – in both concrete and abstract forms – that learning a L2 in any other way may seem unnatural. Their prior schooling experiences have prepared them to apply explicit knowledge and language learning strategies (Norris & Ortega, 2000) that reflect common interpretations of metalinguistic knowledge and awareness in SLA research.

But what happens when a L2 learner reaches adulthood and their formal schooling experiences have been limited or interrupted? What if their L1 education did not include learning basic literacy skills, due to war or displacement (Bigelow, 2010) or lack of a writing system for the L1 (Green & Reder, 1986)? In an alphabetic writing system, such as Spanish, what if their L1 literacy education stopped after they mastered the basics of the alphabet, handwriting, the ability to decode simple words or recognize sight words, and the ability to perhaps copy sentences from the board? We might assume that, in comparison to their L1 counterparts with more prior schooling, their metalinguistic awareness has had fewer opportunities to develop. With fewer opportunities for formal schooling, there are fewer opportunities for these learners to connect oral language with the written word or to encounter and comprehend increasingly complex texts. Reaching higher levels of literacy in formal education often means that learners are guided to
express their thoughts with increasing clarity and precision in writing, and to question critically how language is used to communicate and perform such a wide variety of functions (Belcher & Hirvela, 2008; Bigelow & Watson, 2012).

Are these assumptions about the linguistic and metalinguistic limitations of low-literate L2 learners true? Over time, my experiences with a variety of learners, their successes, and their struggles have led me to the research study described in this dissertation. In the adult ESL teaching community, one hears casual anecdotes about students who seem to make easy progress and students who do not. There is the question of who is “teachable,” who meets expectations of L2 performance and therefore can be promoted to the next class level, and who may never be able to make much progress due to a variety of factors. The adult ESL program where I taught was able to hold separate classes for students who came to the program with fewer years of schooling and/or lower levels of L1 literacy. But this is not true of many programs, as, ironically, these students with limited educational backgrounds are taught ESL in contexts that are also limited in terms of the instructional resources needed for working with this unique population. There are few textbooks that are geared for low-literate L2 learners – if textbooks are even the appropriate resource to use. Instructional materials may be based on the L1 literacy methods used in the primary grades for children. The students’ “WEIRD” teachers may not even be aware of the relationship between L1 literacy skills and L2 acquisition. If they are aware, they may not receive adequate training in how to address these learners’ L2 learning needs. There is little research on low-literate L2 learners for teachers and materials designers to consult when making instructional decisions (Condelli, 2004; Condelli & Wrigley, 2004; Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 2008).
In this study, I explore what it means to be “low-literate” in adult L2 English acquisition, while I simultaneously challenge assumptions about the quality and type of linguistic awareness that these learners bring to their English learning experience.

### 1.1 Definitions of Key Concepts

This study ties together three key theoretical concepts – literacy, the metalinguistic dimension, and language awareness – under the overlapping umbrellas of the field of SLA research and the practice of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Each concept is defined and explained below.

#### 1.1.1 Literacy.

In most human experience, literacy is the result of explicit, systematic instruction in a formal educational setting. The foundational skills of reading and writing, once mastered in one language, are believed to be carried over and adapted as necessary to the experiences in subsequent language and literacy development (August & Shanahan, 2006; Birch, 2007; Koda, 2008). Literacy has traditionally been thought of as the ability to read and write in a given script. For example, Ravid and Tolchinsky (2002) describe (alphabetic) literacy as the mastery of written language as both a discourse style and as a notational system, with the specific systems of phonology, orthography, morpho-phonology, and morphology coming into play. In 2004, UNESCO defined literacy as

> the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. (p. 13)

In recent years, the print-based representations of literacy that are most commonly associated with formal education have been expanded to include broader definitions within more
socially-oriented and contextualized models of literacy. Schleppegrell (2004) defined literacy as “a form of social action where language and context co-participate in making meaning” (p. 5). Research in New Literacy Studies (NLS) describes literacy as a locally situated set of emergent text-based practices, rather than a stable and separate set of skills acquired primarily through schooling (Gee, 2000; Jewitt, 2008; Street, 2003). These socially-informed models of literacy prioritize action, local use, personal meaning-making, and dynamism over the more traditional building blocks of schooled literacy. Developments in technology and our multimodal channels of communication have yielded a “pedagogy of multiliteracies” (The New London Group, 1996), which views “language and other modes of meaning [as] dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes” (p. 63). Jewitt (2008) noted that learners’ own ideas about literacy are constrained by the way that they have been schooled in literacy practices, given that “in the process of ‘doing’ literacy, students learn ‘what counts’ as literacy” (p. 248).

Research on L1 literacy in cognitive science has shown that engaging in literacy practices affects human cognition, changing the way that we store and access language in the brain, and how we process oral language and participate in social contexts (Olson, 2002; Ong, 1988). Differences have been found in how L1 literate and non-literate adults notice and process linguistic patterns, store and retrieve lexical and semantic information, manipulate phonemes in oral language, exploit short-term memory capacity, and organize information mentally (Adrian, Alegría, & Morais, 1995; Kolinsky, Cary, & Morais, 1987; Reis & Castro-Caldas, 1997). These findings have been extended to research on low-literate adult L2 learners, particularly in noticing and responding to corrective feedback, (Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2009), working memory
(Juffs & Rodríguez, 2008), and word segmentation (Onderdelinden, van de Craats, & Kurvers, 2009).

In this dissertation, my definition of literacy reflects the instructional approach taken in the research site where I conducted my study, as well as the participants’ own perceptions of what literacy entails. To the teachers in the adult ESL program, literacy entailed the recognition and production of letters, sounds, word families, vocabulary meanings, sight words, punctuation, spelling, grammar, and basic comprehension of story plots. The participants’ perceptions of literacy were certainly impacted by this instructional approach and by their own previous experiences in formal schooling. However, literacy is a complex concept and the participants engaged with it on a variety of levels over the course of the study. As I will show in this dissertation, literacy cannot be separated from emotions, from relationships with peers and families, from curiosity, from motivation, or from the teacher’s persona. It is not easily defined in its practical, daily applications. Literacy shifts and evolves with the learner’s engagement with language and classroom dynamics.

1.1.2 The metalinguistic dimension. As overlapping constructs in SLA research, metalinguistic awareness, metalinguistic knowledge, and explicit knowledge have tended to be presented as primarily cognitive concepts that privilege the individual mind (i.e., that which exists and is processed inside the learner’s brain) over social collaboration. These terms refer to the ability to consider language as an object that can be talked about, separated into different parts, analyzed, reflected on, manipulated, and recombined in new, meaning-making ways (Gombert, 1992; Jessner, 2006). Evidence of this ability tends to be measured through formal, rule-based methods that require some level of familiarity with literate schooling practices to demonstrate. For example, grammaticality judgment tests (Ellis, 2004) and rule explanation tests
(Alderson, Clapham, & Steel, 1997) require the ability to read and write in a concentrated, focused manner and to think abstractly about language in print. Koda (2008) explains the abstract nature of metalinguistic awareness as being distinct from explicit knowledge about language, in that “it implies an understanding of language in its most fundamental and generalized properties, independent of surface form variations” (p. 74).

Metalinguistic awareness has been found to be a significant precursor and component of L1 literacy development (Chapman, 2002; Tunmer, Herriman, & Nesdale, 1988), as well as of L2 language and literacy acquisition (Koda & Zehler, 2008; Nagy & Anderson, 1999). Chapman’s (2002) characterization of metalinguistic awareness in L1 literacy development encompasses all of the following:

- functions or purposes of language and literacy,
- visual-perceptual features of text,
- structural characteristics (from micro or word level to macro or text level),
- procedural knowledge (from encoding to self-regulating metacognitive reading and writing strategies),
- metalanguage (language used to talk about language and literacy, including grammar of sentences and genres),
- symbolic nature of writing and its relationship to oral language,
- the alphabetic principle (that there is a relationship between letters of the alphabet and speech sounds),
- the phonetic principle (that there are regular relationships between speech sound patterns and letter patterns), and
- phonological awareness (awareness of the sound dimension of oral language). (p. 94)

Kuo and Anderson (2008) portrayed metalinguistic awareness in its most developed form as an outcome of literacy, given the interdependence of oral language development, sensitivity to language, and the gradual understanding of the encoding of speech into print. Therefore, the connections among metalinguistic awareness, oral language, and the development of reading skills are perceived as quite strong:

[R]eading is embedded in a spoken language and its writing system, and its acquisition entails establishing a linkage between the two. As such, the present consensus is that learning to read is fundamentally metalinguistic because it necessitates an understanding of how spoken language elements are partitioned and mapped onto graphic symbols. (Koda, 2008, p. 74)
In many ways, the development and use of literacy goes hand in hand with the development and use of metalinguistic awareness. However, the question of how to demonstrate evidence of metalinguistic awareness becomes problematic when we consider what language and skills are required to do so. The use of metalanguage, or “language about language” (Johnson & Johnson, 1989), may be used often in explicit L2 instruction. Basturkmen (2013) argued that metalanguage may not be appropriate for low-proficiency learners, young learners, and low-literate adult L2 learners, and favored more indirect and contextualized ways of showing patterns in language rather than explaining the patterns. However, Berry (2014) pointed out that under the generally accepted definition of “language about language,” metalanguage language can include non-technical comments, such as “I don’t like the way he said that” (p. 24). Just as multimodal literacies – the pedagogy of multiliteracies – favor “communication as a process in which students… make meanings by selecting from, adapting, and remaking the range of representational and communicational resources … available to them in the classroom” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 263), so can we see metalinguistic awareness as a meaning-making resource.

1.1.3 Language awareness. As a pedagogical and social movement, Language Awareness (LA) can be seen in a similar but distinct category from the more cognitively-oriented metalinguistic dimension described above. Covering aspects of language arts education that range from literacy skills to sociolinguistics and intercultural awareness, LA as a field encapsulates and extends beyond the more narrowly defined concept of metalinguistic awareness proposed in cognitive/psycholinguistic research. The Association for Language Awareness (ALA) defines language awareness as “explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use” (‘About,’...
The fundamental questions asked by members of the ALA are parallel to some of the fundamental questions from the fields of [cognitive] SLA, critical pedagogies, cross-cultural communication, and critical sociolinguistic theories regarding language and power (e.g., Norton, 2013). For example, ALA’s mission includes the questions:

Can we become better language users or learners or teachers if we develop a better understanding [of language]? And can we gain other advantages: e.g., in our relations with other people and/or cultures, and in our ability to see through language that manipulates or discriminates?” (‘About,’ para. 3, n.d.)

The stance taken in LA is that these processes are facilitated by a certain type of explicit instruction and conscious learning of certain features of language, although a variety of task features, individual differences, and learner engagement with language all play a role in the effectiveness of these approaches (Bolitho, Carter, Hughes, Ivanic, Masuhara, & Tomlinson, 2003; Borg, 1994; Svalberg, 2007; Svalberg, 2012). The pedagogical and social underpinnings of LA are central to its implementation in L2 instruction. The features of an LA approach in explicit instruction can include student-centered processes of language exploration, discovery, and analysis; ownership of learning strategies; tolerance of ambiguity; social and communicative interaction; authentic (con)texts; sensitivity to form-meaning connections; personal engagement on cognitive, affective, and social levels; reflection; and a focus on language-related episodes and languaging (Borg, 1994; Svalberg, 2007; Svalberg, 2012; Svalberg, 2013; Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 2002; van Lier, 1998). “Consciousness-raising” approaches and activities (Ellis, 1997) are often considered synonymous with or illustrative of LA-oriented L2 instruction.

Svalberg’s (2007) characterization of language awareness provides an interesting counterpoint to the cognitive – and somewhat static – traditional perspective on metalinguistic awareness:
Language awareness does not refer to a purely intellectual awareness and is not passive… LA both engenders engagement with language and is constructed through it… The engagement can be intellectual, affective, social or political or, usually, a combination of the above. (p. 302)

Bolitho et al. (2003) do characterize language awareness as primarily a mental attribute, but they portray it as a dynamic, attention-driven process “which enables language learners to gradually gain insights into how languages work” (p. 251). The question remains, however, of how this process happens for low-literate adult ESL Learners, and what role that educational background and first and second language and literacy skills play in engaging learners in LA approaches to L2 instruction.

To sum up this overview of the key concepts of literacy, the metalinguistic dimension, and language awareness, I propose that L2 acquisition and instruction should be explored in relation to (a) its potential for engaging the learner in meaning-making, and (b) its potential in developing and exploiting the learner’s existing metalinguistic awareness. If literacy is taught primarily as a decontextualized set of building blocks, the learner’s [emerging] metalinguistic awareness will be restricted to this domain. The learner will notice, pay attention, and value the linguistic features that are highlighted in the instruction. For low-literate learners receiving explicit, phonics-based literacy instruction, their metalinguistic awareness may be centered on (and restricted to) these building blocks. In the research literature, which will be explored in more depth in Chapter 2, discussions of the effects of language (or metalinguistic) awareness on the development of literacy skills seem to jump from research findings on children learning L1 or L2 (e.g., Francis, 1999) to research findings on university students applying metalinguistic knowledge to L2 academic language and literacy skills (e.g., Gutiérrez, 2013) – ignoring the population currently under study: Low-literate adult English language learners who have
developed cognitively, affectively, and socially far beyond school children, but who have not benefited from the explicit language and literacy instruction that more highly educated learners are assumed to have.

### 1.2 Low-Literate Populations around the World

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2013), there were 774 million illiterate adults worldwide in 2011, representing 16% of the total world population; most of these adults reside in developing countries (including refugee populations). There has always been a population of low-literate L2 English learners in the United States (Wan, 2014), although numbers have grown in recent years due to trends in immigration. Every year, hundreds of thousands of adult English language learners enroll in free or low-cost publicly-funded adult ESL classes in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). They may be recent arrivals or longstanding naturalized citizens. They may have already attained a level of oral English abilities that allows them to communicate basic needs in social, community, and workplace contexts, even serving as linguistic or cultural translators for newcomers in their L1 community. However, for many of them, it is the first time they have set foot in a classroom as a student since they were children. Their low levels of L1 literacy may not have prepared them for learning a second language with an approach that relies on a textbook, on worksheets, on the labeling of oral language with print, and on connecting with the surrounding environmental print.

New federal education regulations under the 2014 Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act put the focus in adult education on employability. This focus links English language programming to employment training, high school credentials, post-secondary training and education. Adult ESL programs are held to higher standards for L2 acquisition for their learners,
which highlights the challenges of working with low-literate adult English language learners. Current sociopolitical circumstances around the world continue to bring refugees and immigrants from places with diverse educational, linguistic, and social policies. The level of training required for working with these diverse learner backgrounds is not currently reflected in most teacher preparation programs. However, a large-scale review of research on low-literate learners in adult ESL instruction in the United States concluded that a systematic approach to literacy development would need to include: “(1) a comprehensive instructional scope that includes direct instruction in phonics, fluency, vocabulary development and reading comprehension, (2) a strategic instruction sequence, (3) a consistent instructional format, (4) easy-to-follow lesson plans, and (5) strategies for differentiated instruction” (Condelli, Cronen, Bos, Tseng, & Altuna, 2010, p. xii).

Immigration, whether voluntary or forced, impacts education systems in many other areas of the world. Canada, Australia, and various European countries have also seen increases in L2 learners with limited schooling and L1 literacy skills. In recent years, children arriving in new locations as students with limited or interrupted formal education have been identified with the acronyms of SLIFE or SIFE (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009). A parallel term used for adult immigrant populations is known as those experiencing low-educated second language and literacy acquisition (LESLLA). LESLLA populations have been studied by a relatively small but well-positioned research community (van de Craats, Kurvers, & Young-Scholten, 2006), with a dedicated research focus on a learner population generally described as “low or non-literate adults with at the most primary schooling in their native language” (“About LESLLA,” n.d., para. 3). The members of this LESLLA community hold a small but growing annual international conference and publish conference proceedings that cover a variety of topics related
1.3 Presentation of the Study

The present dissertation study seeks to illuminate the construct of metalinguistic awareness, as both pre-existing and emerging through interaction and instruction, among low-literate adult L2 learners. In this sense, this study frames metalinguistic awareness and associated L2 learning “as both a developmental and social process” (Bigelow, 2014, p. 45) and thus the research is set within a sociocognitive perspective of SLA (Batstone, 2010) that is also usage-based in specific orientation (Eskildsen, 2009).

1.3.1 Purpose of the study. I hypothesize that metalinguistic awareness influences (and is influenced by) low-literate L2 learners’ (a) abilities to pay attention to and notice key elements of the language in the input and in interaction, (b) beliefs and perceptions about English language and literacy, and (c) contextualized language usage and literacy practices. I propose that metalinguistic awareness is connected to much broader levels of influence than what has been measured cognitively or psycholinguistically, and that research on adults with low L1 literacy will not serve them well or make theoretical contributions that are important unless the broader levels of influence are investigated. To that end, the purpose of this research study is threefold: (1) to examine from an etic perspective (i.e., through classroom observations guided by my researcher perspective) the apparent opportunities for demonstrating evidence of metalinguistic awareness in an ESL class for low-literate students; (2) to discover from an emic perspective (i.e., through researcher-participant interviews conducted in the learners’ L1 that attempt to
uncover the learner perspective) what metalinguistic awareness is like for the low-literate students themselves; and (3) to recommend new and effective ways of teaching low-literate adult ESL learners that draw from and help expand their views on and knowledge of language. I seek to describe and analyze the experiences, perspectives, and beliefs of these learners and how they make sense of their L2 learning “as both a developmental and social process” (Bigelow, 2014, p. 45) in a formal instructional setting.

**1.3.2 Rationale for and significance of the study.** Previous research indicates that metalinguistic awareness is (1) primarily the conscious ability to reflect on, manipulate, and analyze language, and (2) important for both L2 learning in general and [L2] literacy development specifically. This research is limited by the fact that it has been done primarily with highly educated L2 learners and/or children being educated in their L1, and it has focused on the cognitive rather than the social aspects of learning. We currently have very limited research on what adult L2 learners with low literacy in their L1 and limited formal education experiences pay attention to and notice in the L2 input. We have rarely asked these learners to describe how they make sense of the language around them, and what strategies they are using to do so. In order to begin addressing these research gaps, this study attempts to bridge and blend knowledge about metalinguistic awareness from cognitive and social research paradigms in order to explore the development and use of metalinguistic awareness among low-literate adult L2 learner populations. In particular, I examine metalinguistic awareness from a broader perspective—as a function of prior schooling and literacy experiences, as a demonstration of personal beliefs and perceptions about L2 learning, as a dynamic outcome of usage, and as a sociocognitive trait that is situated within local contexts (a point to be developed in section 2.1.4). The chosen methodology of collective case study (Stake, 2005) has some precedents in SLA (e.g., Schmidt,
1883; Schmidt & Frota, 1986) and its application to four Central American women will allow me to explore these perspectives through intensive observation, document review, and interviewing of participants.

In the preface to their edited volume, Łyda and Szceśniak (2014) noted that traditionally, research in metalinguistic or language awareness has been framed through the “expertise” of the L2 teacher’s perspective or L2 knowledge (e.g., Andrews, 2007). Over the past few years, more attention has been paid to what raising awareness can do for L2 learners (Roberts, 2011); however, most of this research has been conducted with advanced L2 learners in university settings. The collection of works in Łyda and Szceśniak’s volume examines “how much linguistic knowledge is open to learners’ conscious experience, what should or should not be considered ‘knowledge of language,’ how language awareness can be enhanced in the classroom, and what effects language awareness can have on attained proficiency” (p. vi). My own research mirrors these questions, but the focus is on low-literate adults in non-academic settings. By studying a marginalized population and context using mainstream SLA constructs, I aim to deepen and broaden the field’s knowledge of SLA (Ortega, 2013).

Unlike psycholinguistic characterizations of attention and noticing (e.g., Schmidt, 2001; Leow, 2001), Atkinson (2010) describes attention as “socially tuned and socially constructed – it is more than the product of individual minds” (p.34), and therefore what we tend to focus on is what is most salient in our immediate [interpersonal] environment. Tarone (2010b) also portrays attention as an important social and cognitive factor in both processing and producing language features. The importance of language use in social interaction is foundational to sociocognitive and usage-based theories of L2 development, as it is the means through which learners encounter
and derive linguistic patterns in meaningful and contextualized experiences (N. Ellis, 2014; Larsen-Freeman, 2012).

Usage-based theories characterize L2 learning as “a process of meaningfully revisiting the same territory again and again, although each visit begins at a different starting point” (Larsen-Freeman, 2012, p. 83), and consequently call for longitudinal data that do not separate the learner from the learning context. Therefore, the use of qualitative case study methodology is an appropriate one for broadening the scope of metalinguistic awareness to include learners’ experiences in and outside of the classroom, their beliefs and attitudes toward language and L2 learning, their self-reported strategies and struggles with English, and the linguistic features that they notice and pay attention to during their L2 experiences.

Within this framework, I conducted an 11-week-long collective case study focusing on four Central American women ranging in age from early 20s to early 60s. These four women were attending an intensive adult ESL program in the suburbs of Washington, DC. While they attended regular ESL classes with other learners at their oral proficiency level, these women spent 30 minutes every day attending a supplemental ESL literacy class taught by volunteers. The class was based on a scripted curriculum that included explicit instruction on phonics and phonology, orthography, vocabulary, decoding, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and writing. The data presented in this dissertation represent etic and emic perspectives, connecting instructional context with the learner-participants’ observed behaviors and their elicited interpretations of those experiences. This quality and quantity of data allows me to present a richer and much more complex picture of metalinguistic awareness than what has previously been covered in published research.
1.3.3 Organization of the study. The following chapters will be found in this dissertation. Chapter 2: Literature Review begins with a review of cognitive and social aspects of the popular concept of “the good language learner” (Norton & Toohey, 2001; Rubin, 1975). The construct of metalinguistic awareness is then defined and explored as a potential characteristic of good language learners. I then present the adult ESL learner population characterized as low-literate as a means of problematizing how SLA research has conceived successful L2 learning. Finally, I propose using research from Language Awareness (LA) and engagement as a useful resource for not only understanding this learner population but also working with them in instructional settings.

In Chapter 3: Methods, I describe and provide a rationale for the use of qualitative case study methods in my research. I frame my approach to the research with my own experiences as an L2 learner and teacher and I acknowledge issues of researcher positionality. I describe the research site and context, the recruitment and selection of the case study participants, and the data collection instruments. I introduce each of the four focal participants with a brief profile of their backgrounds and current life situations. I conclude with a discussion of the analysis process and the limitations of the research.

Chapter 4: Opportunities for Metalinguistic Awareness is the first results chapter. In it, I describe in rich detail the ESL literacy instructional context that the participants found themselves in, including the use of materials and instructional resources, and the typical structure of their daily lessons. I focus on the white board as a transactional space where the volunteer teachers brought students’ attention to key linguistic features and where students’ questions about language and L2 errors often played out. The white board served as an important tool in facilitating or managing students’ attention to, and therefore awareness of, language. The
teachers’ roles and knowledge of language are also considered as sources of the students’ metalinguistic development.

Chapter 5: Evidence of Metalinguistic Awareness is the second results chapter. In it, I focus in on the participants’ emic perspectives on language and L2 learning that were elicited during our Spanish interviews. I begin by re-examining the cognitive perspective on metalinguistic awareness (e.g., Jessner, 2006) and testing the participant data against that perspective to see what evidence it provides. I then present the participants’ own language about language to highlight their use of grammatical or school language, their language ideologies and beliefs, their personal learning strategies, and their reflections on how they define progress in L2 development. I conclude with the participants’ own recommendations for how L2 English should be presented and how ESL literacy instruction should be carried out.

In Chapter 6: Discussion, I bring the findings from both results chapters together to propose important implication for future research and practice with low-literate adult ESL learners. In this chapter, I return to the notions of the good language learner and engagement with language as a means of expanding our understanding of metalinguistic awareness, but also challenging our assumptions about the role that limited levels of formal schooling can have on knowledge about language.

Finally, in Chapter 7: Conclusion, I review the findings and recommendations from this study and share my final thoughts on this line of research.
2. Literature Review

“There does not exist a gap between social and cognitive approaches to L2 learning and teaching insofar as language learning is inherently social and, at the same time, all learning is cognitive by definition” (Hulstijn, 2014, p. 15).

In second language acquisition (SLA) research and second language (L2) pedagogy over the past 30 years, there has been an important emphasis on the role of what is often called the metalinguistic dimension of SLA, broadly defined as knowledge about language, and how it is connected to the development of L2 proficiency (Roehr & Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2013). This metalinguistic dimension comprises a family of related concepts, such as language awareness, explicit knowledge, metalinguistic knowledge, and metalinguistic awareness. As research into the metalinguistic dimension of SLA has grown, different definitions have appeared to describe these similar or often overlapping concepts, with distinctions often made along cognitive, psycholinguistic, pedagogical, educational, and social research lines. According to Norton (2013), these “artificial distinctions between the individual and the social, which lead to arbitrary mapping of particular factors on either the individual or the social” (p. 44) have been a source of struggle in mainstream SLA.

It is my intention with this literature review to begin providing a broader picture of metalinguistic awareness that represents a sociocognitive perspective on L2 development in formal instructional settings involving adults, and specifically adults with limited levels of education experience and first language (L1) literacy exposure. This perspective is sociocognitive, I argue, because it marries primarily cognitive concepts related to (1) linguistic features that are noticed, produced, and questioned and (2) perceptions and learning strategies that are brought to L2 experiences, with primarily social concepts related to (3) collaborative talk.
about language and (4) co-constructed meaning-making and shared attention. These connections provide the foundation for further explorations into the nature of literacy and metalinguistic awareness – how each influences the other in cognitive, social, and pedagogical ways.

Following on the recently published public dialogue regarding the cognitive and social research paradigms in SLA (Hulstijn et al., 2014), I propose a similar exploration of metalinguistic awareness from both ends of the so-called continuum. I agree with Hulstijn’s (2014) assertion that “there does not exist a gap between social and cognitive approaches to L2 learning and teaching insofar as language learning is inherently social and, at the same time, all learning is cognitive by definition” (p. 15), and also with Talmy (2014) when he adds that “binarisms like these are reductive and fail to capture the kinds of complex inquiries often undertaken in their name” (p. 24).

This review begins with a review of the cognitive and social aspects of the popular concept of “the good language learner” (Naiman, Frolich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Rubin, 1975). The construct of metalinguistic awareness is then defined and explored as a potential characteristic of good language learners. I then present the adult ESL learner population characterized as “low-literate” (Tarone, 2005) as a means of problematizing how SLA research has conceived successful L2 learning. Finally, I propose Language Awareness (LA) and language engagement as useful resources for not only researching this learner population but also working with them in instructional settings.
2.1 Good Language Learners and Metalinguistic Awareness

This section begins by considering the concept of the good language learner as it has appeared in the applied linguistics and SLA literature, noting that the research has focused almost entirely on highly educated L2 learners in Western contexts. Metalinguistic awareness, as a characteristic of good language learners, is then examined from cognitive, pedagogical, and sociocognitive perspectives.

2.1.1 The evolution of the good language learner over time. Rubin’s (1975) article on good language learners was seen as revolutionary at a time when most of the L2 pedagogical research was focused on teachers’ skills and strategies in successful L2 instruction (Griffiths, 2008). Based on her own observations, Rubin proposed that a good language learner was “a willing and accurate guesser” (p. 45), had a “strong drive to communicate” (p. 46), lacked inhibition, attended to both meaning and form, and found plenty of opportunities to practice and monitor one’s own speech. Shortly thereafter, Naiman, Frolich, Stern, and Todesco (1978) published results of two empirical studies purporting to provide a thorough description of the characteristics of a successful L2 learner, with characteristics similar to what Rubin proposed. Both publications were based on high school or university-educated L2 learners. These lines of research focused heavily on the cognitive strategies that successful L2 learners use, with pedagogical implications for teaching or strengthening these strategies among less successful L2 learners.

In 2001, Norton and Toohey proposed a socially-informed revision to the previous cognitive findings on so-called good language learners from the 1970s. They criticized the findings in this research tradition because of the underlying false assumption that all L2 learners have the ability to choose and gain access to the target language community:
“[W]e approach the explanation of the success of good language learners on the basis of their access to a variety of conversations in their communities rather than on the basis of their control of a wider variety of linguistic forms or meaning than their peers or on the basis of their speed of acquisition of linguistic forms and meanings. (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 310)

In an equally compelling study on good language learning, Cervatiuc (2009) provided evidence of adult immigrants experiencing but then overcoming these types of social barriers by embracing personal ideologies of agency and internal power. This learner population featured highly educated and professionally successful non-native English-speaking immigrants to Canada who initially arrived with limited English language skills. Unlike Norton and Toohey (2001), who focused on the macro-level issues of access to social communities, Cervatiuc emphasized the attitudes of self-confidence, internal power, and human agency that the learners cultivated: “Good L2 learners refuse to be marginalized by the native speaker group for imperfect mastery of the target language and generate a counter-discourse to boost their self-confidence and continue to make progress in learning the L2” (p. 266). Although these learners recognized that they were potentially marginalized from the English-speaking community, they created identities in which they saw themselves as successful multilinguals who had the right to gain access to the target language community.

Thirty years after Rubin’s (1975) seminal article, Griffiths (2008) produced an edited volume in commemoration of the field’s work on good language learners. None of the 23 chapters in this volume make any mention of literacy abilities or educational background as being variables relevant to good language learners. Typical variables are addressed, such as motivation, age, personality, beliefs, aptitude, and strategy instruction. However, these variables are all discussed vis-à-vis empirical studies with highly educated participants. Calls for future research point to volitional strategies, “which take up where motivational strategies leave off”
(Oxford & Lee, 2008, p. 313) but neglect to mention the impact that educational background has on all of these good language learners. Griffiths (2015) later emphasized the controversies in the SLA field about L2 learning strategies, concluding that “the theory underlying language learning strategies is eclectic and extremely complex” (p. 428) – but again, without any mention of L2 learners with limited literacy skills in these formal instructed L2 learning environments.

2.1.2 The metalinguistic dimension in SLA and L2 proficiency from a cognitive perspective. SLA research into the metalinguistic dimension within cognitive/psycholinguistic research orientations has used the overlapping constructs of *metalinguistic awareness*, *metalinguistic knowledge*, and *explicit knowledge* and has tended to present all three as primarily cognitive concepts that (a) privilege the individual mind (i.e., that which exists and is processed inside the learner’s brain), (b) are measured in more formal, structural ways, and (c) require some level of cognitive development and familiarity with literate schooling practices as a prerequisite for demonstration. For example, Gombert (1992) characterized metalinguistic awareness as the decontextualized, conscious, and intentional ability to analyze, manipulate, or reflect on properties of language. Jessner’s (2006) definition is similar: “the ability to focus attention on language as an object in itself or to think abstractly about language and, consequently, to play with or manipulate language” (p. 42).

Beyond the fundamental ability to analyze or manipulate features of language in some way, James (1999) ascribed a link between metalinguistic awareness and further metacognitive processes, by converting intuitions about language to deeper insights about the linguistic system itself, leading the learner to reflect on “language as an object outside of oneself” (p. 102) in order to then relate to it. If we define metalinguistic awareness, following Malakoff (1992), as a fundamentally cognitive concept that “allows the individual to step back from the comprehension
or production of an utterance in order to consider the *linguistic form* and structure underlying the meaning of the utterance” (p. 518), this ability would most likely be demonstrated by learners who have been trained to think objectively and abstractly about language as an object, and who have access to and use of some form of metalanguage in order to do so.

Metalanguage refers to language that is used to talk or write about language. For example, grammatical rules and exemplars, parts of speech, definitions, and linguistic terminology can be considered as forms of metalanguage (Basturkmen, 2013; Berry, 2005). This verbalized, explicit knowledge about how oral and written language work in systemic, meaning-oriented ways (associated with the concept of *metalinguistic knowledge*) is different from the cognitive ability to conceive of and manipulate language as an object (associated with the concept of *metalinguistic awareness*). Berry’s (2014) critique of different tests that have been used to measure L2 awareness and metalinguistic knowledge speaks to the inconsistent use of metalinguistic terminology as a means of assessing awareness. Basturkmen, Berry, Erlam (2013), and others have argued that the use of metalanguage is not necessary for demonstrating metalinguistic knowledge in the L2. However, it has usually played an essential role in SLA research that attempts to measure L2 learners’ levels of L2 metalinguistic (or explicit) knowledge.

In SLA research, metalinguistic knowledge has been defined as explicit knowledge about the phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features of an L2 (Erlam, 2013; Simard, Foucambert, & Labelle, 2013; Wrembel, 2013) that can be represented declaratively, brought into conscious awareness, and is available for verbal report (Hulstijn, 2005; Roehr, 2008). Often presented as synonyms in L2 research, metalinguistic knowledge and explicit knowledge are usually measured through labeling of parts of speech, error correction
tasks, and grammatical rule verbalization tasks (R. Ellis, 2004; Erlam, 2013), presupposing a
schooled and literate L2 learner population. Written grammaticality judgment tasks have also
been considered by some as a measure that taps explicit, and potentially metalinguistic,
knowledge (R. Ellis, 2004), despite its original development and ongoing use among Chomskyan
linguists for the purpose of tapping tacit, intuitive linguistic knowledge (e.g., Sprouse &
Almeida, 2012). Although somewhat controversial in the reported role it plays in L2
development and proficiency (see, e.g., Alderson, Clapham, & Steel, 1997; Gutiérrez, 2013),
metalinguistic/explicit knowledge may help learners (a) connect form and meaning (R. Ellis,
1994), (b) notice more salient grammatical features (N. Ellis, 2011), and (c) consciously produce
language – thereby resulting in the development of implicit knowledge (N. Ellis, 2011). This
emphasis on declarative, conscious, explicit knowledge about language seems particularly suited
to formal instructional settings in which language is explored through print and through
grammatical (form-based) frameworks.

Connections have been made between metalinguistic awareness and the role of conscious
awareness and noticing in cognitively-oriented SLA research. In his Noticing Hypothesis,
Schmidt (1990, 2001) defined noticing as the conscious awareness of linguistic surface feature
characteristics, and proposed that conscious awareness (at the level of noticing) of language as
object is an essential component of L2 proficiency: “SLA is largely driven by what learners pay
attention to and notice in target language input and what they understand the significance of
noticed input to be” (Schmidt, 2001, pp. 3-4). He maintained that attention and noticing must
happen at the point of processing language, even though acknowledging that this
phenomenological experience of awareness can be fleeting and therefore not always remaining
available to consciousness at a later point. It is this ability to notice the gaps between models of
language input and the learner’s own language production in real time that results in L2 learning (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). Swain (1995) and Swain and Lapkin (2002) applied and connected Schmidt’s (1990) Noticing Hypothesis to the Output Hypothesis, noting that conscious reflection, retrospection, and hypothesis testing about language, followed by production, aids the L2 learning process and leads to a deeper understanding of the L2.

If this is the case, it is likely that the L2 learner’s metalinguistic awareness might influence (and be influenced by) the learner’s ability to pay attention to and notice key elements of the language in the input and in interaction. Pedagogical techniques such as visual input enhancement are used to direct L2 learners’ attention to specific linguistic features through the use of some kind of text formatting, although the effects on L2 learning are still debated (Simard, French, & Fortier, 2007). The exact nature of attention, awareness, and noticing in implicit and explicit learning and knowledge continues to be explored, and is not addressed in this dissertation. It can be argued that noticing and metalinguistic awareness are interconnected and that research on metalinguistic awareness among low-literate L2 learners offers a novel ground for exploring this connection.

Learner beliefs and perceptions of language and L2 learning may shape metalinguistic awareness via the strategies that L2 learners choose to employ. Horwitz’s (1988) Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) was among the first research tools developed to examine learner beliefs and perceptions of L2 learning. The inventory addresses L2 learners’ perceptions of difficulty of the L2, beliefs about language aptitude, the nature of L2 learning processes, the role of explicit grammar knowledge in L2 proficiency, and effective L2 learning strategies. There may be an important connection between learner beliefs and L2 learner strategies. For example, in their study of university L2 English learners in Hong Kong, Benson and Lor (1999)
found that learners who believe that grammar learning is the best way to learn a language will be predisposed to L2 learning strategies that draw more heavily on metalinguistic knowledge. Other studies of university L2 learner beliefs have examined various aspects of metalinguistic knowledge and awareness, including beliefs about explicit grammar instruction and corrective feedback (Schulz, 2001; Loewen et al., 2009), and perceived levels of difficulty and usefulness of instruction for 12 targeted grammar points (Thepseenu & Roehr, 2013).

Overall, it stands to reason that metalinguistic awareness has, to a certain extent, a reciprocal relationship with learner beliefs and perceptions of language. Many published research studies provide a rich picture of the beliefs and perceptions of language that have been articulated by educated L2 learners, usually university students. These studies and the research methods used tend to reflect the formal educational paradigm that these learners operate within when they are asked to articulate their awareness, beliefs, and perceptions about the L2, based on years of explicit instruction.

Written questionnaires and other formal tools for eliciting beliefs and knowledge about L2 may not be appropriate for low-literate and low L2-proficient adults. The use of oral interviews, particularly in the L1, may be preferable for tapping into learner perceptions about language and literacy. For example, Lee’s (2008) dissertation on adult L2 English learners’ beliefs and perceptions about their experiences in basic adult ESL instruction avoided the use of written questionnaires in data collection. Instead, data collection focused on interviews and classroom observations. These methods that used oral and behavioral data were effective in addressing the dissertation’s research questions.

In this section, I have presented metalinguistic awareness primarily from a cognitive point of view. In this orientation, it is often perceived as existing within the individual learner’s
mind as a static kind of construct. It is demonstrated through explicit knowledge and verbal (or written) reports about L2 knowledge, L2 beliefs, and L2 use resulting from a particular kind of attention and noticing. In the next section, I expand the view of metalinguistic awareness to include research from more educational (pedagogical) and social orientations. In doing so, I address the divergence in research orientations illustrated by Masny’s (1997) separation of the psycholinguistic aspect of language awareness (operationalized as metalinguistic knowledge used in the analysis and manipulation of language) and the pedagogical aspect of language awareness (operationalized as the metalanguage used in classroom consciousness-raising activities).

2.1.3 The metalinguistic dimension in SLA and L2 proficiency from a Language Awareness (LA) perspective. One of the most important lines of educationally and socially-informed research and practice in the metalinguistic dimension of language learning is the Language Awareness (LA) movement, which began in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s. This broad socio-educational movement formed in response to the perceived gaps and weaknesses in L1 literacy skills and foreign language achievement among the general population in the United Kingdom and beyond (James, 1999; Komorowska, 2014; Svalberg, 2007). Covering aspects of language arts education that range from literacy skills to sociolinguistics and intercultural awareness, LA as a field encapsulates but also extends beyond the more narrowly defined concept of metalinguistic awareness proposed in the cognitive/psycholinguistic research orientations described above.

The Association for Language Awareness (ALA) defines language awareness as “explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning.
language teaching and language use” (‘About,’ para. 1, n.d.). Two key questions asked by the ALA have direct application to L2 classroom practices:

Can we become better language users or learners or teachers if we develop a better understanding? And can we gain other advantages: e.g., in our relations with other people and/or cultures, and in our ability to see through language that manipulates or discriminates?” (‘About,’ para. 3, n.d.)

The stance taken in LA is that these processes are facilitated by a certain type of explicit instruction and conscious learning of certain features of language, although a variety of task features, individual differences, and learner engagement with language all play a role in the effectiveness of these approaches (Svalberg, 2007, 2012).

The pedagogical and social underpinnings of LA are central to its implementation in L2 instruction. The features of an LA approach in explicit instruction include student-centered processes of language exploration, discovery, and analysis; ownership of learning strategies; tolerance of ambiguity; social and communicative interaction; authentic (con)texts; sensitivity to form-meaning connections; personal engagement on cognitive, affective, and social levels; reflection; and a focus on language-related episodes and languaging (Borg, 1994; Svalberg, 2007, 2012, 2013; Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 2002; van Lier, 1998). The pedagogical approaches and activities known as consciousness-raising (Ellis, 1997) are often considered synonymous with or illustrative of LA-oriented L2 instruction.

The question remains, however, of how much and what type of educational background and L1/L2 language and literacy skills are necessary in order for L2 learners to both engage in and learn from such explicit LA approaches. Svalberg’s (2009) study reported on adult English language learners’ beliefs and engagement with language, but did not provide any information
about the educational background of the focal participants who were interviewed. One of the participants stated his beliefs about grammar teaching as:

> Seems very useful because, I think that just a simple grammar is not enough because if I want to read a newspaper, sometimes there is not just a simple sentence, will and write a lot of clause or compound, complex so I want to try out, to really take the maybe the subject and the object and which one is adjective which one is something, it’s very complicated I think. But I think the grammar is the most important tool. More understand a lot of different piece of writing. (p. 249)

Although this participant was simply identified by Svalberg (2009) as an adult ESOL student, the use of metalanguage in his description indicates a learner who has studied grammar in a very explicit and print-oriented way, and who seems to have regular literacy habits like reading a newspaper. Discussions of the effects of language (or metalinguistic) awareness on the development of literacy skills seem to jump from research findings on children learning L1 or L2 (e.g., Francis, 1999) to research findings on university students applying metalinguistic knowledge to L2 academic language and literacy skills (e.g., Gutiérrez, 2013) – ignoring the population that I intend to research: Low-literate adult English language learners who have developed cognitively, affectively, and socially far beyond school children, but who have not benefited from the explicit language and literacy instruction that more highly educated learners are assumed to have.

According to Svalberg (2007, 2009), cognitive, affective, and social engagement with language are essential concepts in LA, although “the degree to which language as vehicle contributes to LA may depend on the user’s analytical skills and what other demands there are on their attentional resources” (Svalberg, 2009, p. 248). She described these three aspects of engagement with language – cognitive, affective, and social – as dynamic, active, and productive. Cognitive engagement according to Svalberg (2009, pp. 246-247) may be related to
alertness, focused attention and reflection, and problem solving; it can be observed based on whether or not a learner makes comparisons, asks questions, or draws conclusions about language features. Affective engagement, she further hypothesized, is related to willingness to interact with the L2 and/or an L2 interlocutor, a positive and purposeful orientation toward the L2, and an autonomous disposition to L2 learning; it can be observed based on whether a learner seems withdrawn or eager to participate, demonstrates independent or dependent learning behavior, and seems bored or focused on the task. Finally, social engagement is related, in Svalberg’s proposal, to initiating and maintaining interaction behaviors; it can be observed based on whether or not the learner uses social interaction for learning, engages in negotiation for meaning, and initiates interactions with others. These types of engagement with language all point to behaviors of so-called good language learners.

Svalberg (2009) only mentions educational background as one possible facilitator or impediment to engagement with language (among many other factors such as energy level, physical surroundings, task/activity design, personality type, motivation, and power differentials between interlocutors). However, I propose that using her framework of cognitive, affective, and social engagement with language may prove effective in understanding what metalinguistic awareness entails for low-literate L2 learners. In working with this population, we may examine Svalberg’s (2009) hypotheses about engagement with language with carefully constructed observation and L1 interview protocols, rather than relying on previous methods of metalinguistic testing.

2.1.4 The metalinguistic dimension in SLA and L2 proficiency from a sociocognitive perspective. As an alternative to the mainstream SLA characterizations of the cognitive connection between metalinguistic awareness and noticing (Schmidt, 1990, 2001) described
earlier, I draw on the suggestions of Larsen-Freeman (2007), Atkinson (2011), and Tarone (2010b) to explore sociocognitive approaches as well. According to Batstone (2010), “Sociocognition is based on the view that neither language use nor language learning can be adequately defined or understood without recognizing that they have both a social and a cognitive dimension which interact” (p. 5). Atkinson (2010) and Tarone both argue that noticing and attention are sociocognitive phenomena rather than purely cognitive. During interaction, L2 users pay attention to language and features of language that are most salient and meaningful for the communicative purpose they are engaged in, resulting in attentional processes that are “socially tuned and socially constructed… more than the product of individual minds” (Atkinson, 2010, p. 37).

Tarone (2010b) argued against the assumption in cognitive-interaction SLA that noticing is fundamentally asocial regardless of focus on form or focus on meaning (e.g., Long, 1996), highlighting instead the essential role that social factors have in directing L2 learners’ attention, such as the social context in which the L2 occurs, power relationships among interlocutors, interlocutors’ orientation to negotiation of meaning, and interlocutor willingness to incorporate corrective feedback. Pedagogical techniques that illustrate the social aspect of noticing (and consequently metalinguistic awareness) have been described as collaborative text reconstruction (Lindberg, 2003b) and think-alouds while composing a written text (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Both of these examples require advanced literacy skills.

Sociocognitive theories of metalinguistic awareness can be associated to usage-based linguistics (UBL), which explains L2 development as emergence of language forms and knowledge based on a learner’s contextualized L2 experiences and shared attention and cognition (N. Ellis, 2008, 2014). Consciousness is co-constructed through social interaction, and
cognitive connections made within an individual’s associative memory networks are “socially
gated” (N. Ellis, 2014, p. 40). By adding the dimension of UBL in SLA (Ellis & Larsen-
Freeman, 2006; Robinson & Ellis, 2008) to descriptions and examinations of metalinguistic
awareness, a more complete picture can form as to how the L2 learner develops within a locally
situated, experiential learning environment (Eskildsen, 2009). My study pushes these issues
further by showing how this family of theories can also enrich what we do when studying
metalinguistic awareness (which presumably also influences L2 development) among low-
literate adult L2 learners.

If every day brings new experiences, new interactions, and new opportunities for
learning, and our cognitive processes and language communications are dependent on these
contexts of use (Gibbs, 2013), an L2 learner’s metalinguistic awareness must also be in a
dynamic state of change based on use. The function of awareness and attention is much more
complex than previous research may have led us to believe, if Ellis’ (2014) assertion is correct:

> Language is used to focus the listener’s attention to the world; it can foreground different
> elements in the theatre of consciousness to potentially relate many different stories and
> perspectives about the same scene. What is attended is the focus of learning, and so
> attention controls the acquisition of language itself. The functions of language in
discourse determine its usage and learning. (p. 37)

To reflect the complexity inherent in each learner’s individual developmental trajectory,
calls have been made for longitudinal corpora of language learning, as the learners encounter
linguistic patterns provided by the interactional environments they experience, which in turn
affect the input, practice, and opportunities for entrenchment these patterns undergo (Eskildsen,
2012; Robinson & Ellis, 2008). In this respect, Eskildsen (2009) has described language
acquisition as a series of “stepping stones” that are gradually added to a learner’s linguistic
inventory, but that can be traceable to previously experienced language (p. 348). If this is the
case, the development of metalinguistic awareness mirrors and can be explained by these “stepping stones” imagery as well. Hall, Cheng, and Carlson (2006) hypothesized that active, frequent participation in varied (both new and familiar) L2 instructional practices will result in more expansive L2 knowledge; what these “stepping stones” may look like for low-literate adult L2 learners as they encounter and use language in formal instructional settings is the primary focus of my research.

It is worth reiterating, then, that from a sociocognitive perspective that borrows from UBL, metalinguistic awareness is not something that exists in static form in the L2 learner’s mind, but rather is a dynamic process that develops based on usage and experience. Language knowledge changes as a result of language use: “… rather than a prerequisite to performance, language knowledge is an emergent property of it, developing from its locally-situated uses in culturally-framed and discursively-patterned communicative activities” (Hall et al., 2006, p. 228). I argue that, by extension, metalinguistic awareness grows as a result of applying that awareness to iterative, regularly occurring language use events. Therefore, differences in metalinguistic awareness among groups of learners –say, highly literate and educated versus little familiarity with print literacy and formal grammar instruction– are more likely to be based on learning experiences themselves than any inherent cognitive properties.

Throughout my discussion thus far, I have tried to highlight the gaps in these research orientations and findings regarding low-literate adult L2 learners as well as the potential opportunities for expanding our vision of metalinguistic awareness. In the next section I will continue this reflection. My purpose in doing so is to lay the groundwork for my proposed research, which seeks to contribute to our description and understanding of how these learners draw on both individual and socially constructed aspects of metalinguistic awareness in order to
develop their second language and literacy skills and to make sense of their experiences in a formal ESOL instructional setting.

2.2 Low-Literate L2 Learners as Good Language Learners

Most research on metalinguistic awareness has been based almost entirely on either childhood monolingual or bilingual language and literacy acquisition or well-educated adolescent and adult L2 acquisition within formal instructional settings (for oft-cited examples, see Gombert, 1992; Koda & Zehler, 2008; and Roehr & Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2013), respectively). There is a significant gap in existing research into metalinguistic awareness regarding adult English language learners with limited formal L1 schooling and/or L1 literacy skills. We know that all learners use various strategies and draw on personal motivations and beliefs for approaching language learning, but what do we know about the particular strategies and motivations that low-educated learners use (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011)? Research is sorely missing that can illuminate the qualities and characteristics of low-literate adult L2 learners, their prior and current literacy experiences, their views on L2 literacy, what they notice and attend to during literacy instruction, how well this noticing and this instruction helps them develop L2 literacy skills, and what metalinguistic awareness they bring to their learning experiences. The research has not documented how they are good language learners, only that they lack print literacy skills.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of adult English language learners enroll in free or low-cost publicly-funded adult ESL classes in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). They may be recent arrivals or longstanding naturalized citizens. They may have already attained a level of oral English abilities that allows them to communicate basic needs in social,
community, and workplace contexts, even serving as linguistic or cultural brokers for newcomers in their L1 community. However, for many of them, it is the first time they set foot in a classroom as a student since they were children. Their low levels of L1 literacy, due to limited prior schooling, may not have prepared them for learning a second language with an approach that relies, even at the most basic levels, on a textbook, on worksheets, on the labeling of all oral language with print, and on connecting with the environmental print surrounding them.

2.2.1 Operationalizing literacy. What exactly do we mean when we characterize adult ESL students as “low-literate L2 learners”? In a previous synthesis of existing research on the topic (Warren & Young, 2012), my co-author and I discovered that there were no clear definitions or consistent operationalizations for the varying levels of literacy that exist in adult L1 and L2 populations. In our review of 23 studies that were published between 1986 and 2012 and examined to some extent the relationship between L1 literacy and L2 development, we found a great deal of variation in how L1 literacy was operationalized. In the 23 studies, researchers were most likely to operationalize L1 literacy level with years of education (57%) and least likely to operationalize it with a test (13%). Nineteen of the 23 studies provided some kind of definition or description of literacy/illiteracy, a literate/nonliterate person, and/or some component of literacy skills. Some of the researchers in the body of work synthesized recommended that L1 literacy not be operationalized as years of education (Tarone et al., 2009), but rather as a description of a learner’s overall literacy history and literacy activities in their home culture (Gardner, Polyzoi, & Rampaul, 1996). Many pointed out the difficulty in obtaining reliable L1 literacy and educational background data.

In their discussion of adult English language learners in the United States, Burt, Peyton, and Adams (2003) distinguished among four different L1 literacy types of L2 learners enrolled in
publicly-funded ESL classes. Learners who are truly *non-literate* have no or almost no formal schooling in any language. Learners who are *preliterate* come from a society that does not have a written language system, such as is the case for speakers of minority languages or dialects in different parts of the world. Learners who are *semi-literate* in an alphabetic writing system, perhaps having attended a few years of formal schooling, may have mastered the basics of alphabetic print literacy and “reading universals,” such as understanding that text approximates speech, that graphs represent sounds and blend together to form words, that meaning is carried through conventionalized forms of print, and that the order of linguistic units carries meaning. Semi-literate learners may not actually partake in regular literacy activities in the L1, but they can be considered to have functional literacy skills for daily needs. Farther along the continuum are L2 learners who are *literate*, and within this category, Burt et al. distinguish among Roman alphabet literate, non-Roman alphabet literate, and non-alphabet (i.e., logographic) literate.

Many nonliterate, preliterate, and semi-literate adult English language learners are served in adult ESL programs in the United States, and they struggle when a certain level of L1 literacy is assumed and L2 literacy is not taught explicitly. Many L2 learners who are literate in a non-alphabetic language will also face a challenge in learning English literacy, but they can apply many of their skills and concepts from their L1 experiences to the task (Koda & Zehler, 2008). The four focal participants in this dissertation can be classified as Roman alphabet literate, given that they demonstrated elements of print awareness, alphabatics, handwriting, spelling, and decoding during my observations of their literacy classes. I had originally intended to study learners who were closer to nonliterate or semiliterate in the L1 (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003), but those learners may be rare in adult education, for a variety of reasons. As I will discuss in the following chapters, the participants in this study represent many of the learners who emigrate
from Central America. They have basic L1 literacy skills, but they tend to remain in the shadows in mainstream ESL classes – if they attend at all – struggling with just enough language skills to get by, but unable to make significant progress without targeted and intensive instruction.

**2.2.2 Literacy abilities and metalinguistic awareness of low-literate adult L2 learners.** Published research tends to focus on the deficiencies of nonliterate or low-literate adult L2 learners, who themselves are bilingual or multilingual, by comparison to highly educated L2 learners. This is particularly true when it comes to metalinguistic awareness, which is assumed to be under-developed as a result of limited literacy training or prior education. Yet, it has long been known that bilingualism and multilingualism can contribute to enhanced metalinguistic awareness. The paradox, perhaps, can be explained in part by the fact that most research on bilinguals’ advantage in metalinguistic awareness over monolinguals has been conducted with literate bilinguals only. Early research findings showed (literate) bilinguals to be more metalinguistically aware and more flexible in their use of language learning strategies than (literate) monolinguals (Galambos & Goldin-Meadow, 1990; Nayak, Hasen, Krueger, & McLaughlin, 1989). It is based on these research insights that Cook (1991) proposed multicompetence as “‘the compound state of a mind with two grammars” (p. 112), represented as “a language supersystem” (Cook, 2003, p. 2) that causes the multilingual person to approach language (and metalinguistic awareness) in different ways than the monolingual person. Findings from bilingualism research for both children and adults have since then supported these hypotheses of cognitive differences as compared to monolinguals (Jessner, 2008). Unfortunately, these theoretical and empirical lines of research have rarely included non-literate or low-literacy bilingual and multilingual adult participants.
In considering the impact that bi/multilingualism may have on metalinguistic awareness for all L2 populations, including those who may be low-literate, I appreciate Lambert’s (1991) characterization of bilingualism as providing the user “with a comparative, three-dimensional insight into language, a type of stereolinguistic optic on communication that the monolingual rarely experiences” (p. 212). For nonliterate or low-literate adults L2 learners, many of whom successfully acquired (oral) multilingual skills in their native countries, this three-dimensional insight might be in place as well. Koda (2008) urged researchers to stop viewing L1 influence as either negative or positive transfer in L2 acquisition, but rather to consider prior educational experience “as a reservoir of knowledge, skills, and abilities” so we focus on “identifying the resources available to L2 learners when learning a new language as well as literacy skills in that language” (p. 71). Unfortunately to date, low-literate learners seem to be excluded from characterizations of multicompetence and bilingual advantages. There is little published consideration of the reservoirs of resources that low-literate learners bring to the task of L2 learning and little discussion of the impact that (purely or mostly oral) multicompetence has on their metalinguistic awareness. One of the goals in the present dissertation is to identify such assets, with respect to metalinguistic awareness, that these learners bring to their L2 experiences. These assets have yet to be identified by mainstream SLA or literacy research.

Metalinguistic awareness has been found to be a significant precursor and component of childhood L1 literacy development (Chapman, 2002; Tunmer, Herriman, & Nesdale, 1988). Chapman’s characterization of metalinguistic awareness in children’s L1 literacy development encompasses all of the following:

- functions or purposes of language and literacy,
- visual-perceptual features of text,
- structural characteristics (from micro or word level to macro or text level),
- procedural knowledge (from encoding to self-regulating metacognitive reading and writing
strategies), metalanguage (language used to talk about language and literacy, including grammar of sentences and genres), and symbolic nature of writing and its relationship to oral language, the alphabetic principle (that there is a relationship between letters of the alphabet and speech sounds), the phonetic principle (that there are regular relationships between speech sound patterns and letter patterns), and phonological awareness (awareness of the sound dimension of oral language). (p. 94)

Koda (2008) explained that L2 literacy development is fundamentally a metalinguistic endeavor, as it involves the segmenting and analysis of the spoken word in order to decode and encode language in written symbols. The connection between oracy and literacy is foundational: “… metalinguistic awareness, emanating from oral-language development, substantially expedites the initial stages of reading acquisition” (Koda, p. 69). The complex relationship between metalinguistic knowledge and literacy development is bidirectional, as metalinguistic awareness is both a precursor to literacy development and the result of literacy development (Bamberg, 2002). According to Koda and Zehler (2008):

Although metalinguistic ability expedites the initial task in reading acquisition, substantial print decoding and encoding experience are necessary for its refinement. In this regard, metalinguistic awareness and literacy are developmentally reciprocal, and, therefore, the resulting metalinguistic competencies are assumed to reflect the specific ways spoken language elements are graphically represented in the writing system. (p. 5)

Indeed, there is an underlying assumption in research that metalinguistic knowledge is “universal,” in that once it is developed and demonstrated consciously within the areas of L1 phonological awareness, semantic awareness, morphological awareness, syntactic awareness, grapho-phonological awareness, and grapho-morphological awareness, it is a (cognitive) feature that is present across all languages used by a given individual (Kuo & Anderson, 2008). Prior literacy instruction and L1 literacy skills have been found to be predictors of success in both child and adult L2 literacy development (August & Shanahan, 2006; Bernhardt, 2003; Koda, 2008; Kurvers, Stockmann, & van de Craats, 2010). However, in her description of her Transfer
Facilitation model, Koda (2008) cautioned that although L1 and L2 reading abilities appear to be closely related, there are still gaps in the field’s understanding of “the mechanisms conjoining literacy learning in two languages” (p. 68).

From the child L1 literacy and metalinguistic awareness literature, it seems that certain elements of metalinguistic awareness must be developed and in place in order to facilitate children’s literacy development in the L1 and subsequent languages. These metalinguistic elements are broadly labeled by Koda and Zehler (2008) as segmental understanding, symbolic awareness, phonological awareness, morphological awareness, syntactic awareness, graphophonological awareness, grapho-morphological awareness, concept of print, the mapping principle, and the alphabetic principle. Research points to the effects of these elements on metalinguistic awareness in L1 literacy in adults as well (Adrian, Alegría, & Morais, 1995).

In one of the few studies on metalinguistic awareness and nonliterate adult L2 learners, Kurvers, Vallen, and van Hout (2005) compared nonliterate adults with low-literate adults and young children (non-readers) to determine if there were differences among these groups and if these differences would be attributable to maturational cognitive effects or literacy effects. In their study, metalinguistic awareness was operationalized through phonological awareness tasks, lexical/semantic awareness tasks, and textual awareness tasks in the participants’ native languages (Turkish, Somali, Moroccan Arabic, Tarifit, Sranan Tongo, Papiamento) or in L2 Dutch. They hypothesized that differences in metalinguistic awareness between the children and the low-literate/nonliterate adults would be attributable to maturational cognitive effects, while differences between the low-literate and nonliterate adults would be attributable to literacy effects. Their results showed that there was a significant difference between the low-literate and nonliterate adults’ performances on all language awareness tasks. The children performed
similarly to the low-literate adults in the phonological tasks (except for phoneme segmentation) and in sub-lexical segmentation. This finding is similar to other findings in child and adult L1 literacy development that illustrate non-readers’ difficulty with recognizing phonemes as linguistic units (e.g., Adrian, Alegría, & Morais, 1995). In their analysis of the nonliterate adults’ performance on the metalinguistic tasks, Kurvers, Vallen, and van Hout (2005) found that these adults considered language to be “a referential system and a medium of communication, but not an object accessible to reflection” (p. 84), which they attribute to a lack of literacy training – but the authors noted that because of their cognitive development and life experience, these adults demonstrated other aspects of language awareness, including reflecting on the content of the message, the meaning behind an utterance as a whole, and the way something was said.

In a related study, Kurvers, van Hout, and Vallen (2006) examined the awareness of word boundaries of preschool children (nonreaders), adult nonliterate, and low-literate adults from the same L2 Dutch populations. Using a sentence segmentation task and progressively smaller word group segmentation tasks in the L1, participants’ responses were scored correct if they were able to separate the words groups along conventional word boundaries. For example, the participants first heard the sentence, “I come from the south of Morocco,” and they were asked if they could separate the sentence into pieces. Then they were given a word group from the sentence, such as “the south of Morocco,” and were asked again to divide it into smaller pieces, and so on. The findings demonstrated that L1 literacy skills affected awareness of word segmentation conventions, with the child and adult nonreaders segmenting words according to semantic phrases (“apples and tomatoes”), word groups (“in the shop”), or syllables, and the adult readers following conventional word boundaries.
In their study of how low and moderate levels of alphabetic print literacy affect the cognitive processing of oral L2 input among Somali adolescents and adults, Tarone et al. (2009) found that alphabetic print literacy level was significantly related to accuracy of recall of recasts on morphosyntactic errors. The researchers explained this finding as a confirmation of other studies (e.g., Reis & Castro-Caldas, 1997) looking at nonliterate and low-literate adults’ preferences for using semantic and lexical processing strategies rather than phonological or metalinguistic processing strategies – suggesting that the assumptions made by researchers operating in a cognitive-interactionist approach to SLA regarding the metalinguistic tools that L2 learners use to process oral input may not hold up for nonliterate or low-literate learners. These findings led Tarone et al. (2009) to call for further research on the appropriateness of the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990, 2001) for L2 learners who are not alphabetically literate, with queries regarding what these learners notice in the L2 input and in corrective feedback, and what threshold of phonemic awareness may need to be reached in order to notice corrective feedback targeted to smaller (morphophonemic) linguistic units.

In all of the studies described above, adult participants’ limited knowledge of a written system and skills in (alphabetic) print literacy appeared to impact their performance on metalinguistic tasks related to noticing certain linguistic units at the phonemic, morphophonemic, lexical, morphosyntactic, or textual level(s). Kurvers et al. (2005) and Kurvers et al. (2007) built on the limited existing research comparing child non-readers, adult non-readers, and adult (low-literate) readers – which focused primarily on phonological awareness – to address adults’ awareness of other structural linguistic features. These two studies provide some of the only existing evidence that differences in adult L2 learners’ performance on metalinguistic tasks are due primarily to literacy (e.g., schooling) level. Working within the...
cognitive-interactionist SLA framework, Tarone et al. (2009) were the only researchers to make the explicit connection between noticing (Schmidt, 1990, 2001) and L1 literacy level as it related to metalinguistic awareness.

Based on the research that has been done measuring adult non-literate and low-literate performances on controlled individual cognitive tasks (Adrian et al., 1995; Kurvers et al., 2005; Kurvers et al., 2007) and on controlled cognitive tasks during paired interaction (Tarone et al., 2009), it seems that there is a reciprocal and bidirectional relationship between metalinguistic awareness and literacy. Adults with lower L1 literacy skills do not seem to manipulate language (as an object) or to provide evidence of noticing certain linguistic features in the same ways as adults with higher L1 literacy skills – at least, given the metalinguistic awareness tasks and measurement tools that have been used to date.

These are important findings generated from the cognitive perspective, but they are narrow in scope. If cognition, context, experience, and social interaction shape one another (Atkinson, 2011; Batsone, 2010; N. Ellis, 2014; Eskildsen, 2009; Robinson & Ellis, 2008; Tarone, 2010b), L2 learners’ awareness of linguistic features – what it is they notice and how they put the pieces of the language puzzle together – must be connected in broader ways as well. The limited schooling history and educational background of low-literate L2 adult learners may certainly impact their metalinguistic awareness when learning L2 literacy, but focusing on the so-called deficiencies of these learners may prevent researchers from uncovering the assets that these learners bring to the L2 experience. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is imperative that we have a better understanding of what metalinguistic awareness these adult L2 learners do bring to the instructional setting (once they make it there) and how it emerges through use.
2.2.3 Addressing metalinguistic knowledge in adult ESL instruction. As should be clear from the review of the relevant literatures thus far, much of the research on metalinguistic knowledge and awareness in SLA relies to a great extent on discrete assessments of learners’ abilities to verbalize or reflect on particular linguistic features of the L2 system, often using metalanguage or grammatical terminology that has not always been consistently defined or operationalized within the field (Berry, 2014). Arguments have been made by Berry (2005) and Erlam (2013) against the perceived need for using metalanguage or metalingual terminology to demonstrate metalinguistic awareness or to facilitate L2 instruction, particularly for young learners and low-literate adolescent and adult learners. Other important scholars in this area have agreed, including Basturkmen (2013) and Lindberg (2003a). In a related argument, many widely respected authorities in grammar teaching assume it is inappropriate or inefficient to teach L2 grammar to preliterate adults. For example, Celce-Murcia’s (1993, cited in Lindberg, 2003a, p. 168) advice about explicitly teaching L2 grammar to preliterate adults is clearly against the use of focused attention on form:

If students are preliterate with little formal education, then it is probably not very productive to focus extensively on form. Even this population (i.e. preliterate or semiliterate adults with little formal education) may demand some grammar because of cultural expectations regarding what constitutes language instruction. While they may not benefit linguistically from grammar instruction, the teacher who satisfies their cultural expectations with some grammar may then do other things that will be beneficial and which the students will accept. (p. 292)

In her challenge of the assumption that language awareness activities are most appropriate for L2 learners with higher levels of schooling and literacy, Lindberg (2003a) invoked evidence from a socioculturally-oriented longitudinal study she carried out with low-literate adult L2 learners of Swedish engaged in collaborative form-focused activities (Lindberg, 2003b). She found that these learners’ repeated participation in text-reconstruction tasks over a
four-month period “increased attention to language form and promoted metalinguistic awareness in all groups irrespective of the learners’ formal education but most notably among learners with limited formal schooling” (Lindberg, 2003a, p. 168). She attributed this progress to the process of raising language awareness and combining personal linguistic resources through social interaction, which participants could do despite their limited prior schooling. Based on my experience and the present research, I side with Lindberg (2003a, 2003b) and question Celce-Murcia’s and others’ assumption about the limited benefits that low-literate adult L2 learners can receive from explicit form-focused instruction. The qualities that we expect from good language learners, including curiosity and analytic ability in discovering new features of the language, should not be presupposed to be lacking in low-literate L2 learners.

2.3 Metalinguistic Awareness as a Facet of Language Awareness and Engagement

In 1985, the National Council of Language in Education “stressed the need for sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language in its social, affective, and cognitive domains” (Komorowska, 2014, p. 5). As the field has grown, we have conceived of many terms and definitions associated with language awareness. Overlapping definitions, terms with multiple meanings in different contexts, offshoots, and terms being defined by other related terms has been the result of disparate research done in metalinguistic/language awareness. According to Komorowska, this is at least in part due to the fact that most of the concepts related to language awareness in SLA have come from other disciplines: “When a concept from another discipline is transferred to the field of SLA or FLT, it often starts a new ‘limbo’ life of vagueness with no links either to the discipline from which it comes or to other fields of science” (p. 9). The terms and definitions found in the field of language awareness are diverse and sometimes overlapping.
Through his analysis of the various terms and tests used to get at metalinguistic awareness, Berry (2014) concluded that “each narrow field of research, e.g., phonemic awareness or teacher language awareness (Andrews, 2007) needs its own separate definition,” and further suggested that “such vagueness is not useful when it comes to devising concrete constructs that may be reliably tested” (p. 22).

As the definitions continue to evolve, I find that identifying the correct technical definition of metalinguistic awareness, if there were one, is less interesting than asking the question of how such consciousness develops and what impacts it for adult low-literate English learners. Komorowska (2014) pointed out that in the field of neurobiology, consciousness is considered to be “a multi-faceted, highly subjective, and individual characteristic” (p. 11). It makes sense then that my research in metalinguistic awareness also reflects broad spheres of influence for individual learners, and that I have found concepts in LA and language engagement to be more theoretically and practically fruitful for this learner population.

According to Bolitho et al. (2003), “Language Awareness is a mental attribute which develops through paying motivated attention to language in use, and which enables language learners to gradually gain insights into how languages work” (p. 251). Some of the key words here are develops, motivated attention, language in use, and gradually gain insights. This definition serves my research study well, as the focus is on the development of language knowledge rather than the construct of language knowledge as a static, decontextualized characteristic. LA is a broad umbrella model under which narrower concepts of metalinguistic awareness may be fit. The difference between LA and a general teaching approach that just addresses explicit language knowledge is the focus on how the learner makes sense of the language over time, based on what she is curious about and motivated to discover. The
instructional focus may very well be on linguistic forms, but it is cultivated by a discovery process that is initiated by the learner.

However, we must keep in mind that LA has been proposed under the unstated assumption that the learners are literate and in a formal schooling setting, with the appropriate educational background experiences to benefit from the LA approach. The process of experience, discovery, hypothesizing, research, and confirmation of research in LA publications implies a formal, literacy-based instructional setting. There is very limited research or pedagogical work on applying LA to adults with limited L1 schooling backgrounds (Lindberg, 2003a; 2003b). It is my proposal in this dissertation that the key to determining its efficacy with this population of learners may be in its principle of engagement (Svalberg, 2009), which can be addressed with any level of learners.

2.4 Research Questions

The primary purpose of the preceding literature review was threefold: First, I considered the connection among good language learners, L2 proficiency, and metalinguistic awareness from a cognitive perspective, and then I re-visioned it from a sociocognitive perspective. Second, I built on previous arguments for the need to expand SLA research to include the understudied population of low-literate adult L2 learners, given our current understandings of the relationship between literacy and metalinguistic awareness. Finally, I re-examined metalinguistic awareness in light of the Language Awareness movement and engagement with language as a potentially fruitful framework to consider for this population. In doing so, I laid the groundwork for the qualitative research that was carried out for this dissertation, which follows two main strands of inquiry from both etic and emic perspectives.
My first set of research questions focuses on identifying what opportunities actually exist for building on metalinguistic awareness in adult ESL instruction, and how these opportunities can be maximized to build on the assets that these learners bring to the classroom. This research inquiry strand then leads to important implications for how we can integrate principles from Language Awareness and engagement with language to improve adult ESL instruction (see Discussion chapter).

*Research Inquiry Strand 1.* What pedagogical and environmental factors influence what students notice about the L2 and how metalinguistic awareness might be demonstrated? How supportive are the instructional practices that these students are typically offered, in terms of offering opportunities for demonstrating metalinguistic awareness and/or engagement with language?

*Strand 1 Implications.* What do the answers in Research Strand 1 tell us about the potential for developing and exploiting learners existing metalinguistic awareness? What types of data provide evidence of these factors? Is the use of metalanguage and explicit explanations useful for this population? If so, in what ways? How can engagement with language be revived?

My second set of research questions focuses on reaching a more nuanced understanding of what metalinguistic awareness is, as well as its relevance in L2 acquisition for low-literate adult L2 learners. This research inquiry strand then leads to important implications for how we define, recognize, and exploit metalinguistic awareness in SLA (see Discussion chapter).

*Research Inquiry Strand 2.* What does metalinguistic awareness look like for this learner population? What metalinguistic assets do they bring to the ESL classroom? Based on observation and interview data, what do these learners notice about English? What do they believe about language? What do they struggle with? What do they wonder about? What personal metalinguistic tools are they using to make sense of English language and literacy? What evidence of cognitive, affective, and social engagement with language do they demonstrate?

*Strand 2 Implications.* What do the answers in Research Inquiry Strand 2 tell us about metalinguistic awareness? Is there any truth in the assumption that this population lacks adequate metalinguistic awareness for L2 development? Is the current widely-accepted definition of metalinguistic awareness useful and appropriate, or do we need an expansion or a re-visioning of it? If an expansion is needed, what type of data is
necessary to support it? In what concrete ways is the conscious ability to reflect on, manipulate, and analyze language important for each participant’s L2 learning? In what concrete ways is engagement with language important for each participant’s L2 learning?

These two encompassing inquiry strands will be woven into a sociocognitively-oriented framework for understanding the development and use of metalinguistic awareness in low-literate adult L2 learner populations. The underlying question that I seek to address is, *In what ways are low-literate adult L2 learners good language learners?*

### 2.5 Conclusion

Adding educational and social concepts to understandings of metalinguistic awareness as a primarily cognitive concept increases the possible directions taken in researching a construct that has largely presupposed L2 learners with extensive schooling backgrounds and strong L1 literacy skills. In attempting to link sociocognitive research to metalinguistic awareness, I concluded with the proposal that metalinguistic awareness be considered as a dynamic outcome of usage, based on the usage-based linguistics theory of language that is currently gaining ground in mainstream SLA research. In usage-based and sociocognitive perspectives, the concept of metalinguistic awareness is not solely focused in the individual’s own cognition or personal traits. Rather, these alternative approaches to SLA re-vision metalinguistic awareness as a consequence of the learners’ experiences in L1 and L2 language and literacy development, bringing both the cognitive and social aspects together to conceive of metalinguistic awareness as something much broader and more complex.

In this chapter, I have presented and questioned the various definitions and operationalizations of metalinguistic awareness that have been used in SLA. I highlighted the artificial separation between the cognitive and the social by drawing on theories of L2 learning
and experiences that integrate both research orientations. I put forth the Language Awareness model as an alternative to the narrower concepts of metalinguistic awareness and literacy that have been used primarily with children and adults with formal L1 schooling. In this way, I prioritize learners’ engagement with language (Svalberg, 2009), and I seek evidence of this by looking at what they appear to notice in language-in-use, what questions they ask, what strategies they report using, how they self-assess their language skills, and how they (co-)construct meanings in their linguistic and instructional environments.
3. Methods

“Qualitative approaches to [adult] literacy and second language acquisition research have much to offer researchers in ESL literacy, where complex and multiple features of language, culture, and social context interact” (Gillespie, 1993, p. 531).

This chapter provides an overview and discussion of the methodological approach and research design chosen in this dissertation study to address the phenomenon of metalinguistic awareness in low-literate adult English language learners. It begins with a description and rationale for the qualitative nature of the research design and data collection. The chapter then provides an in-depth description of the research site and context, with an overview of the participant selection criteria and profiles of the four focal participants. The chapter continues with a description and justification of the qualitative data collection instruments and processes followed in the study, and concludes with an explanation of the data analysis procedures. The details of the methods section combined with the accompanying results chapters provide the foundation for the claims that I make related to both practical recommendations and theoretical implications for researching metalinguistic awareness within a sociocognitive framework.

3.1 An Overview of Qualitative Case Study Research

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials… that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. (p. 2)

The qualitative focus of my study has guided me to study metalinguistic awareness in an atypical manner for mainstream SLA. My multimethod focus examines both etic and emic evidence from
participant interviews, my observations, teacher reports, and documents reviews regarding low-literate ESL learners’ awareness of language. My intention in pursuing this methodology while researching the phenomenon of metalinguistic awareness is to “identify and gain analytic insight into the dimensions and dynamics of the phenomenon” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 81).

This paradigm draws on research traditions associated with constructivism and interpretivism, which Duff (2008) identified as being the most common approach to qualitative case studies in applied linguistics. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) represented interpretivism as the reflexive relationship between the researcher and the social world. It is the researcher’s responsibility to make clear how her claims about reality came about through her interpretations of the information she has collected about the studied phenomenon.

In a similar vein, proponents of constructivism believe that reality and knowledge are context-dependent and socially constructed (Richards, 2009), meaning that researchers operating in this paradigm help their readers construct knowledge through experiential and contextual reports (Stake, 2005). The goal of constructivism is to clarify how knowledge is constructed, rather than “discovered,” through multiple perspectives in particular contexts. This distinction between knowledge “construction” and knowledge “discovery” is an important one to frame my study, because it speaks to my belief about how L2 learning in general, and metalinguistic awareness in particular, is most appropriately researched. Although much of applied linguistics research has traditionally drawn on (post)positivist epistemologies, there is a growing trend toward using interpretivist or constructivist paradigms to explore these areas (Richards, 2009). Yin (2014) argued that case study research in the qualitative tradition has often been oriented toward a realist perspective (meaning that a single reality exists to be discovered, that is independent of any particular observer), but that it can also reflect a relativist perspective.
(meaning that there are multiple realities to be interpreted through observer-dependent perspectives). Likewise, Stake (1995) pointed out that historically, qualitative researchers “nourish the belief that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (p. 99).

3.1.1 Characteristics of case study design. Case study research is a commonly used method in qualitative inquiry, but a variety of definitions have been proposed to characterize what this type of research entails (Richards, 2011). I find Merriam’s (1988) characterization of qualitative case study to be the most useful and comprehensive for my purposes: “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit. Case studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic and rely heavily on inductive reasoning in handling multiple data sources” (p. 16). The two most common data collection methods in qualitative case study research are interviews and observations; document review, physical artifacts, verbal reports, focus groups, questionnaires, and diaries are also commonly used techniques in qualitative case studies (Duff, 2008; Hood, 2009; Knight, 2002; Richards, 2011; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). My own case study aligns with this broad description, given the nature of the sources of data from multiple etic and emic perspectives and the thematic content analysis used to draw conclusions from the data.

Stake (1995; 2005) distinguished between intrinsic and instrumental case studies, the former chosen for the inherent value of understanding one very particular case (e.g., a person, a group, or an event) and the latter being used to better understand a phenomenon represented by the case. Stake (1995) framed instrumental case studies in terms of the issues addressed in these studies, and how these issues might drive the research questions as well as the organization of a case study. He later added that the purpose of instrumental and collective (two or more instrumental case studies combined around a single issue) case studies is “to provide insight into
an issue or to redraw a generalization. The case is of secondary interest… and it facilitates our understanding of something else” (2005, p. 445). The benefit of a collective case study, therefore, is that the combined data collection and analysis of two or more instrumental cases will lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Case studies are effective when they show the reader something about a particular phenomenon that is recognizable or familiar as well as something new or different (Stake, 2005). The relevance of a case study is in its particularity in a given context as well as its transferability to the greater world (Duff, 2008; Stake, 2005). Case studies are deeply personal to the researcher, who identifies a particular and complex bounded issue that she wants to understand in greater depth, and to possibly “challenge, refine, or illustrate existing perspectives and theory” (Duff, p. 174). Boundedness implies clear boundaries around the issue, organization, or person being studied. An appropriate issue to explore in qualitative case study would be one that represents “complex, situated, problematic relationships… [pulling] attention both to ordinary experience and also to the disciplines of knowledge” (Stake, p. 448).

In reviewing a variety of case study definitions from different social science fields, Duff (2008) outlined six common principles of case study research across fields: boundedness, in-depth study, triangulation, particularity, contextualization, and interpretation. To illustrate these principles, I will briefly discuss four of these areas that are most relevant to the methodology of my study: In-depth study and contextualization, triangulation, and interpretation.

A key characteristic of the in-depth and contextualized nature of qualitative case study research is the kind of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) that provides “vicarious experiences for the reader” (Stake, 1995, p. 63). This in-depth description is necessarily and directly connected to the researcher’s own interests, experiences, perspectives, and curiosities:
You write what you have been attracted to and convinced by. You write what you have read as meaningful; you interpret what you have read as a meaningful pattern. The story you write will be part of the larger story of who you are, where you’ve been, what you’ve read and argued over, what you believe in and value, what you feel compelled to name as significant. (Goodall, 2000, p. 87)

Although case study researchers are intimately and experientially tied to their case, they strive to openly position themselves within a particular context while avoiding any direct intervention or testing of hypotheses (Stake, 1995). This approach allows constructivist-minded case study researchers to co-create knowledge through their dialogue with the reader, by providing “a substantial body of uncontestable description… [so that] almost anyone, who had our opportunity to observe it, would have noticed and recorded, much as we did” (Stake, p. 110). In the field of applied linguistics, this approach is particularly appropriate, given the complexity of human beings and their systems of language (Duff, 2008).

The second key aspect of case study design that is relevant to my research is the importance of triangulation. Given the sheer quantity of data that is generated by qualitative case study research, data source triangulation and methodological triangulation assist the researcher in finding salient patterns to analyze while also considering possible alternatives (Stake, 1995). The triangulation of data sources (e.g., multiple informants within a case) combined with the triangulation of methodological approaches (e.g., observation, interviews, and document review) helps to make sense of a complex phenomenon and to “clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (Stake, p. 454). In other words, triangulation is critical to making propositions or assertions, offering plausible interpretations, and avoiding vague or unsubstantiated descriptions. However, Hood (2009) cautioned against using triangulation methods as a source of absolute confirmation, and argued that they “may reveal both the complexity of the issue and apparently contradictory ways of viewing it” (p. 81).
A third relevant aspect of case study design addresses the relationship that *interpretation* has to data, information, and understanding. This relationship represents a fundamental path in qualitative inquiry, in that information comes from raw data, understanding comes from organized information, and interpretation follows on understanding (Knight, 2002). Thoroughly understanding a case through progressive focusing and refocusing allows qualitative researchers to engage in systematic interpretations of raw data, which ultimately lead to well-founded assertions (Stake, 1995). The process of interpretation, therefore, is an inductive one that leads the researcher to look for, describe, and account for observed patterns in the data rather than testing pre-determined hypotheses (Duff, 2008). Through multiple constructions and perspectives of reality, the researcher focuses on the interpretive process rather than absolute outcomes, in a way that is systematic but not formulaic (Croker, 2009).

The level of researcher engagement in these qualitative interpretations is quite high, and this iterative and close construction of knowledge can be viewed as an advantage of case study research. Consequently, the researcher must provide a thorough and candid treatment of her own biases and involvement with the research, to substantiate the reasoning and decision-making processes behind the reported interpretations and claims. Although “case studies are not replicable per se… [but] are a concrete instantiation of a theorized phenomenon” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 116), the researcher must skillfully and thoroughly describe the context in ways that lead to the development of claims that enhance the field’s understanding of the phenomenon in question: “The quality and utility of the research is not based on its reproducibility but on whether or not the meanings generated, by the researcher or the reader, are valued” (Stake, 1995, p. 135).
3.1.2 Challenges of case study design. Case study is a widely accepted and respected method within the qualitative research paradigm. However, even its strongest proponents and most well-known methodologists caution about the difficulty, effort, and time required to conduct a successful case study. The work itself is slow and methodical, often costly in time and money, and carries ethical risks that must be carefully considered and controlled (Stake, 1995). Not only should case study researchers have excellent writing skills, but they must also be highly reflective, self-aware, and forthright about their identity, positioning, and impact vis-à-vis the participants and the research setting itself (Croker, 2009). They must be able to sort through a “staggering volume of rich data… [which may cause them to] lose their sense of proportion as they confront vivid, voluminous data” (Eisenhardt, 2002, p. 27), while seeking to identify the most important relationships within the data. Yin (2014, p. 72) described the workload and demands “on [one’s] intellect, ego, and emotions” as outweighing the demands of all other forms of research. Conducting a case study requires a great deal of sensitivity, critical thinking, experience, and reflective practice (Stake, 1995) – all of which are desirable researcher characteristics, but are not developed easily.

3.1.3 Perceived benefits and learning outcomes of case study research. The strongest argument for using case study research in the social sciences lies in the human phenomenon being studied and the participants themselves. Qualitative inquiry differs from quantitative inquiry in that it emphasizes understanding over explanation, a personal rather than impersonal role for the researcher, and constructed knowledge over discovered knowledge in the examination of complex interrelationships in human experience (Stake, 1995). Where quantitatively-oriented postpositivist research seeks out testable cause-and-effect relationships, limits contextual variables, downplays personal subjectivity, and strives for generalization and
replication, qualitatively-oriented interpretivist research thrives on context-dependent inquiry (Croker, 2009).

Flyvbjerg (2006) argued that human learning begins as context-dependent and is applied and extended through context-dependent experiences. Predictive rules, abstractions, and general understandings about how things work independently of specific contexts are certainly necessary components of learning and knowledge, but true expertise comes from “detailed case-experience” (p. 23). Effective case study researchers experience a “constant juxtaposition of conflicting realities [which] tends to ‘unfreeze’ thinking, and so the process has the potential to generate theory with less researcher bias than theory built from incremental studies or armchair, axiomatic deduction” (Eisenhardt, 2002, p. 26). Although case study researchers are certainly not immune to bias, preconceptions, or blind interpretation, the in-depth and contextualized study of human experience combined with systematic methods of triangulation can lead to a level of understanding that generates new dialogue, questions, and knowledge. In fact, Flyvbjerg argued that the elimination of preconceived notions and theories is a fundamental strength of case study research.

3.1.4 Researcher positionality. Researcher positionality is a key feature of qualitative research that informs the design, interpretation, and reporting of case study findings. Stake (1995) described a range of roles that case study researchers may assume, such as teacher (meant to inform an audience and facilitate understanding), advocate (in terms of being forthright about the values associated with the research), evaluator (in terms of the interpretations being made), biographer, and interpreter (by finding new connections and making them comprehensible to others). The case study researcher must balance the reality of one’s etic position outside of a bounded case with the quest to represent the participant’s emic perspective within the case. As
Stake (1995) indicated, case study researchers make overt choices about how much to participate personally in the context being studied, how much understanding to reveal to the participants themselves, and how much advocacy or storytelling to provide to the readership.

The researcher’s choice of role affects the interpreting, reporting, and dialoguing with an academic audience that the researcher undertakes; however, it also affects the relationship that the researcher has with the participant – which ultimately impacts the data collected. In reflecting about her longitudinal case study research with adult English language learner Jim, Duff (2008) reported that the content of Jim’s life history narratives changed noticeably over the first year of interviews as his trust in her increased. Norton (2013) noted an increased interest in the impact that researcher identity has in applied linguistics studies, and she has emphasized the need for qualitative researchers to weigh their own experience and knowledge as carefully as they do that of their own research participants. Bigelow’s (2010) thoughtful discussions of researcher positionality vis-á-vis participant advocacy led me, as the researcher, to ask myself, “How much do I want to be ‘myself’ in my interactions with my participants?” The eventual roles and positions that I took during data collection are described in detail in section 3.2 below.

3.2 Researcher Narrative

This section of the Methodology chapter serves as a bridge between section 3.1, which provided general background about design and methods in qualitative case study research, and sections 3.3-3.8, which will provide specific background about my research site and context, participant recruitment and selection, data collection procedures and instruments, and data analysis procedures. To follow Norton’s (2013) recommendation about addressing researcher identity, I will briefly share how my professional and academic interests have developed over
time. Figure 1 illustrates how my personal, professional, and academic journeys brought me to this choice of research study.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>Studied French and Spanish in high school; trained to be a French and Spanish teacher in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>1999-2001</td>
<td>Served as Peace Corps Volunteer English teacher in high-poverty area. Began to consider the impact that education and resources can have on L2 learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>Earned MA in TESOL.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington, DC area</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Began working as a research assistant at the Center for Applied Linguistics. Began teaching part-time at ESL Pathways, which is a large adult ESL program and later became the chosen site of the dissertation study.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stopped regularly teaching ESL at ESL Pathways, but began occasionally volunteering as an ESL literacy tutor in the program.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Began PhD program in Linguistics. Pursued research interests regarding the impact that low literacy and limited prior schooling have on L2 acquisition among adult English language learners.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Completed a research synthesis paper on low literacy and L2 acquisition among adult English language learners (Warren &amp; Young, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>January 2014</td>
<td>Began planning for dissertation data collection by “casing the joint” (Dyson &amp; Genishi, 2005, p. 19) at ESL Pathways. Volunteered as a literacy teacher for one 12-week session to gain additional experience in the context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>September 2014 – December 2014</td>
<td>Conducted and completed data collection for dissertation study at ESL Pathways.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Figure 1. My personal, professional, and academic career trajectory.*
When I began teaching adult ESL in the Washington, DC area in 2003, most of my L2 teaching experience up to that point had been in a formal academic setting. Consequently, when I encountered ESL learners who struggled to participate in basic literacy and academic practices in the ESL classroom, I was bewildered as to how to work with them. I had never received training in how to teach literacy skills. Since the focus of the program’s curriculum was on “life skills” and oral communication, I did not spend much time on reading and writing with my students beyond what was required by the topics of the curriculum. I became aware of the differences in progress that some of my students made compared to others, but the reasons behind these differences were not clear. My own L2 learning had been so heavily influenced by personal and academic literacies that I was often at a loss for how to help students who did not seem to share my own educational background.

Later, as a PhD student I became interested in exploring the role that L1 literacy has in L2 acquisition. Through a research synthesis project with a classmate, I began identifying areas of SLA that were under-theorized or under-studied in low-literate adult English language learner populations (Warren & Young, 2012). The following semester, I enrolled in a language program evaluation course, and decided to combine my developing program evaluation skills with my academic interests in L1 literacy and SLA. I returned to the adult ESL program and asked if there was any interest in having an evaluation of the ESL literacy tutoring program, which had been developing and expanding for about seven years at that time. The program staff agreed, and with a classmate I conducted an evaluation of the literacy program, focusing on the strengths, weaknesses, and areas for development from the point of view of the program coordinator, volunteer teachers, and a few students (Young & Feagin, 2013).
Through the program evaluation project, I learned more about the instructional materials and approaches used in the literacy classes, and I captured perspectives from the volunteer teachers about the progress that some students made while others continued to struggle. Some of the main recommendations of the project included the need for (1) more consistent and transparent methods of placing students in the literacy classes and measuring their progress; (2) instructional materials and content that were more closely related to the students’ lives; and (3) more training on how to teach literacy, phonics, and vocabulary for the volunteer teachers.

As a result of these academic projects, I focused in more intently on the concept of metalinguistic awareness and L2 acquisition. I was curious about the impact that language awareness, noticing, knowledge about language, knowledge about schooling and literacy practices, and use of print might have on L2 acquisition – particularly for those low-literate ESL students who were enrolled in instructional environments that relied mainly on printed materials and literacy practices to provide a framework for L2 learning. I struggled to make sense of the vast array of information coming from L1 child literacy development (e.g., Bamberg, 2002; Chapman, 2002), L2 child literacy development (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006; Koda & Zehler, 2008); L1 adult literacy development (e.g., Adrian et al., 1995; Kolinsky et al., 1987), (critical) literacy studies (Gee, 2009; Street, 2003), and noticing from a SLA-interactionist theoretical perspective (e.g., Schmidt, 2001; Tarone et al., 2009). I returned to my own experiences with teaching and observing low-literate adult English language learners, reflecting on the features of language that they would notice, the strategies that they seemed to be using, and their apparent attitudes and beliefs about learning English in a formal setting. I eventually began to formulate a research agenda that focuses in on the experiences, perspectives, and beliefs that this understudied learner population has in learning ESL – with the goal of developing a
more complete understanding of the phenomenon of metalinguistic awareness in the field of
SLA.

Almost a year after completing our literacy program evaluation (Young & Feagin, 2013),
I returned to the program and began weekly observations of three groups of literacy learners
while they attended their 30-minute daily literacy classes during the 12-week instructional
session. Dyson and Genishi (2005) refer lightheartedly to the design phase of a case study as
“casing the joint” (p. 19) and I find this label to be helpful in describing how my own case study
design emerged. I took unobtrusive field notes about the questions the students raised, errors
they made, struggles they had in understanding, interactions they had with each other, and
moments when they demonstrated new understanding during the literacy session. I reviewed
these notes and talked with the literacy program coordinator to try and make sense of what was
happening for these students as they worked through the literacy materials and activities in these
literacy classes. I tried to connect what I had read in the literature in our research synthesis
(Warren & Young, 2012) with what I was observing in the literacy classes. I considered all of the
ways that metalinguistic awareness had been operationalized and measured in published SLA
research to date, and I noted that most of those definitions and tools did not seem appropriate for
research with low-literate adult L2 learners. By spring 2014, I was ready to design and propose a
formal study –this dissertation– which was then approved by the Institutional Review Board at
my university in August 2014 (IRB number 2014-0723). I also received approval from the ESL
Pathways program director as well as the local school system’s research department (project
number 2014-03) to conduct the study.

As Eisenhardt (2002) suggested, early research questions and constructs are helpful, but
they should be considered as tentative at the beginning of case study research. As my study
evolved, my research questions changed, and different themes came into focus as more perspectives were provided by the data. My observations allowed me to identify my own interests and predilections when it came to researching the area of metalinguistic awareness and SLA, but I needed to focus on developing relevant and empirical questions based on these observations (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I began tutoring in the literacy program once a week myself, and by communicating with the other volunteer teachers via our daily email reports, I started to track what was happening with these students more systematically. My observations and experiences did not lead to evaluations or criticisms of how the teaching was happening per se, but rather to bigger questions about the nature of metalinguistic development and how it is facilitated (or not) by formal instruction. From my observation notes, my own tutoring lesson plans, and the daily emails from other volunteer teachers, I began to develop data collection instruments and protocols that could capture some of the research themes related to metalinguistic awareness and SLA that I wanted to explore. This phase helped me to map the terrain and engage in strategic decision-making to build my inquiry process, with the understanding that

Instead of seeking to justify outcomes of case study in terms of whether they can be generalized, it is probably more productive to examine the relevant case as carefully as possible in order to decide what sort of contribution it might make to understanding and how this might best be represented…The impact of such outcomes might then be felt in the strength of their resonance with other researchers or professionals, the success of the practical recommendations they make, or the nature of their contribution to the development of theory. (Richards, 2011)
3.3 Description of Research Site and Context

The study was conducted with low-literate adult English language learners enrolled in ESL classes in the ESL Pathways (pseudonym) Program in a suburb of Washington, DC. In setting the context of the research study, my aim is not to portray the ESL Pathways Program as a model program, or to assume that adult ESL learning in other places is similar to what it is at the ESL Pathways Program. However, in describing the context and the setting of the program, I hope to give a rich description of what it is like to be an English language learner at the ESL Pathways Program and in the literacy groups, particularly when it comes to discussions of and reflections on language and metalinguistic awareness. In doing so, I follow Stake’s (2005) recommendation: “These activities are expected to be influenced by contexts, so contexts need to be described, even if evidence of influence is not found” (p. 131). In this section, I provide contextual information about the research site and participant population.

3.3.1 Overview of research site, program curriculum, and learner population.

According to the program’s website, the ESL Pathways Program was founded in 1975 and has educated more than 90,000 adult English language learners from more than 90 countries since then. The ESL Pathways Program offers intensive 12-week instructional sessions in the mornings (15 hours per week), afternoons (10 hours per week), and evenings (10 hours per week). The content of the curriculum is designed around life skills topics relevant to adults living and working in the United States, such as work, health, community, consumerism, and housing. Each curriculum unit covers approximately 20 hours of instruction. The content of the curriculum is further organized into nine proficiency levels, allowing students to be placed in classes categorized as beginning (levels 100, 150, 200, 250), intermediate (levels 300, 350, 400, 450), and advanced (500/550). The primary difference between the -00 level classes and the -50
level classes is the amount of previous formal schooling and/or literacy skills that students report having upon enrolling in the ESL Pathways program. Students who enroll with fewer than six years of formal schooling and/or weaker L1 or L2 literacy skills tend to be placed in the -00 level classes, and proceed more gradually through the nine program proficiency levels. In general, these students enroll in level 100 and then proceed through each subsequent level in order (e.g., 150, 200, 250, etc.), possibly repeating any given level if necessary. In contrast, those students who enroll in the ESL Pathways program with seven or more years of formal schooling and/or stronger L1 or L2 literacy skills tend to be placed in -50 level classes and then proceed through the subsequent -50 level classes, skipping the -00 level classes altogether (e.g., 150, 250, 350, 450).

Program data from 2014 showed that 803 students enrolled in intensive (10-15 hours per week) ESL classes during the period of October-December 2014, which corresponded with the period of data collection for this dissertation study. Scholarships were provided to 37% of these students, allowing them to pay a discounted registration fee of $35 instead of the regular fee of $200-$285 for the 12-week session. During this quarter, 44% of the enrolled students were categorized as “Beginners,” 39% were categorized as “Intermediates,” and 17% were categorized as “Advanced” by the ESL Pathways Program. The majority of enrolled students during this quarter were aged 25-44 years (62%), were female (60%), and reported having seven to 12 years of formal education (52%).

3.3.2 ESL literacy classes at the research site. The overwhelming majority of the ESL Pathways students remain in their mainstream ESL class for all of the allotted instructional time. A very small subset of these students is invited to receive supplementary ESL literacy instruction through a separate program, which requires them to leave their mainstream class for 30 minutes.
each day. Potential participants in these ESL literacy classes are initially identified by their classroom teachers in the first week of class as struggling to keep up with the reading and writing demands of the mainstream ESL classroom. The combination of intensive mainstream ESL classroom instruction with the daily literacy classes is meant to provide targeted and structured English literacy support for students who are most in need of these services. The two primary goals of the literacy classes are to increase students’ awareness of, motivation for, and confidence in their literacy skills, and to improve the quality of their daily lives through increased literacy skills (Literacy program coordinator, personal communication, February 2013).

There are no standardized criteria for recommending students for placement in these supplementary classes, but classroom teachers may look for behaviors associated with low-literate learners, such as struggling to (1) grip a pencil or manipulate print materials properly; (2) form letters or numbers; (3) locate specific text on a page; (4) write or read level-appropriate vocabulary words; (5) copy text from the board or from paper; or (6) interpret drawings, charts, maps, or graphic organizers used in class (Spiegel & Sunderland, 2006). ESL Pathways instructional staff reported other behavioral clues that may indicate that learners struggle with the reading and writing demands of the mainstream ESL classroom. For example, low-literate learners may look at the teacher or other students rather than the printed text while the class is doing a reading activity. They may paraphrase or “read from memory” rather than reading from the page during a reading activity. They may say that they forgot their glasses or cannot see well during a reading activity, often squinting when looking at print materials or the board. During speaking activities, they may participate actively but then become withdrawn or disruptive.
during literacy activities. They may seem very concerned with accurate pronunciation, repetition, or checking their neighbor’s writing in order to compensate for lower literacy skills.

After these kinds of informal classroom observations, consultations with mainstream ESL teachers, and some informal literacy assessments, the literacy program coordinator places participants into a level-appropriate literacy group for the remainder of the instructional session. Each literacy group is capped at six students, with most groups having two to four members who consistently attend the literacy class. The majority of students who attend the literacy groups tend to be native Spanish speakers from Central America and South America, but many other L1 groups have been represented over the years, including those from East Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Some students may be recent arrivals in the United States, while others may have lived here for much of their adult lives. Most participating students have six or fewer years of formal education in their home countries, and/or no experience with Roman alphabets. Students generally have a low level of oral proficiency, but some students have developed stronger speaking and listening skills as a result of living and working in the United States for many years (Literacy program coordinator, personal communication, February 2013).

3.4 Research Participant Recruitment, Selection, and Considerations

In this section, I describe my participant recruitment and selection procedures and my decision-making process on defining the boundaries for the case studies themselves. Although I do not consider myself to be a participant in the case study (either as a participant-observer or as a teacher), I describe how my position and relationship to the participants evolved over the course of the study. Finally, I discuss caveats and ethical considerations to take into account when working with these groups of participants.
3.4.1 Defining the boundaries of the case study. Identifying and clearly defining the boundaries of a case is of primary importance in case study design (Duff, 2008; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The decision on how to draw boundary lines around and among the different groups of participants in my study was a difficult one. Was the entire literacy program considered the case, with the volunteer teachers and all the different literacy levels of students embedded within (cf. Yin’s (2014) single-embedded case study design)? Was each 30-minute literacy session (i.e., the Sam and Pat group, the Talk of the Block group) considered a case, with individual learners in each group embedded within (cf. Yin’s (2014) multiple-embedded case study design)? It was impossible to define the exact case model to be used before I recruited participants, because I could not predict how many students at which levels in which configurations might attend literacy classes in the given instructional cycle. Even during data collection, it was not clear to me how the cases might be bounded until I saw who would complete the 12-week instructional cycle and how the relationships among the students might evolve over the course of the session. In the end, I decided to frame the data as multiple case studies – in other words, as ‘collective/instrumental’ cases in Stake’s (1995) terms and as ‘multiple-holistic’ cases in Yin’s (2014) terms.

3.4.2 Participant recruitment, eligibility, and incentives: Students. Not all case study methodologists agree on the most effective way to identify and select potential participants. I followed Stake’s (2005) recommendations for purposive sampling to identify and select participants for my case studies during the fall 2014 session at the ESL Pathways Program. After a period of initial observations and assessments done by the mainstream ESL classroom teachers and the literacy program coordinator, a total of 15 students agreed to receive supplementary literacy instruction in three leveled literacy groups.
Students who were placed into these literacy groups were invited to participate in my dissertation research. Two types of student participation were solicited: (1) *focal* participants with Spanish L1 for targeted case studies, and (2) *cohort* participants with any L1 who attended the literacy but who were not the focus of the study. Table 1 features the pool of students from which I drew the focal and cohort participants at the beginning of the instructional cycle. All names are pseudonyms. There are asterisk marks next to the students who I had worked with previously as a volunteer literacy teacher during the summer 2014 session. Names in bold are students who initially agreed to serve as focal participants for the targeted case studies and who remained in the study until the end.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Initial Literacy Group Attendees</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Talk of the Block</em></td>
<td>Sara*</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dahlia*</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tina*</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frida*</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mario*</td>
<td>Honduras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rebeca</td>
<td>Bolivia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Marta</em></td>
<td>Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sam and Pat</em></td>
<td>Fana*</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adam*</td>
<td>East Turkistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nera</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Misrak</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Hana</em></td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saidou</td>
<td>Mauritania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sam and Pat</em></td>
<td>Magna*</td>
<td>Paraguay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fatiha*</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Asterisked student names were those I had worked with previously as a volunteer literacy teacher during the summer 2014 session. Bolded student names were those who initially agreed to serve as focal participants for the targeted case studies and remained in the study until the end.
In total, four focal participants with Spanish L1 contributed to the targeted case studies, while up to seven cohort participants attended the literacy groups at different times throughout the fall 2014 morning session. I began recruitment on the first day that the students attended the literacy classes. I introduced myself to the students as an observer, and briefly mentioned that I would be doing a research project at ESL Pathways and was looking for participants. I translated this message into Spanish for the Spanish L1 speakers in each group, but had to rely on very simplified English to communicate with other L1 students. I distributed an informed consent form in Spanish to recruit focal participants for targeted case studies and an informed consent form in English to recruit cohort participants. (See Appendix A for consent forms.) I summarized the information on the form in English and in Spanish, and asked students to consider participating in the project.

Voluntary consent for focal participants (Spanish L1) involved signing the consent form in the L1 (read aloud in the L1 if necessary), agreeing to allow me to audiorecord and observe the literacy classes as a silent observer (taking unobtrusive notes), and agreeing to participate in three audiorecorded interviews and three metalinguistic reflection sessions (presented as “actividades en ingles”). Only literacy students with Spanish L1 were eligible to be focal participants, because Spanish is the only language represented in the student population that I could communicate in for interviews and follow-up communications. All interviews and metalinguistic reflection sessions were conducted primarily in the students’ L1 of Spanish. Focal participants were offered two types of incentives for participation: (1) $10/hour in cash for time spent in interviews and metalinguistic reflection sessions, and (2) a selection of level-appropriate books from www.readinga-z.com provided at the end of the study (no cash value).
Voluntary consent for cohort participants (i.e., all other students) involved signing the consent form in English (read aloud in simplified English if necessary) and agreeing to allow me to audiorecord and observe the literacy classes as a silent observer (taking unobtrusive notes). All literacy students were eligible to be cohort participants. Cohort participants were offered one incentive for participation: A selection of level-appropriate books from www.readinga-z.com provided at the end of the study (no cash value).

By the end of the study, four focal participants remained: Marta (Mexico), Tina (Guatemala), and Frida (Guatemala) from the Talk of the Block group and Hana (Guatemala) from the Sam and Pat group. These students attended the literacy classes consistently through the end of the fall session and completed all or most of the individual data collection tasks. I followed these students’ participation in their respective literacy groups closely, by observing their literacy classes approximately twice per week and by collecting their volunteer teachers’ daily email reports on their progress. These four focal participants are each described in more detail below. The only cohort participant who remained by the end of the study was Hana’s classmate Mizrak in the Sam and Pat group, who attended her literacy class consistently.

3.4.3 Participant recruitment, eligibility, and incentives: Volunteer teachers. Prior to the start of the fall 2014 session, I contacted each of the volunteer literacy teachers via email to explain my research study and solicit their participation in the study. Given our respective involvement with ESL Pathways in various capacities over the years, most of the volunteer teachers and I were already familiar with one another. Voluntary consent for the volunteer teachers involved signing the informed consent form, agreeing to allow me to audiorecord and observe the literacy classes as a silent observer (taking unobtrusive notes), and agreeing to include me on the distribution list of their daily email reports about the literacy groups.
volunteer teachers were informed and assured that their observed teaching techniques or perceived teaching effectiveness would not be the focus of my study and would not be evaluated in any way during my study.

The volunteer teachers were offered two types of incentive for participation: (1) a $10 Amazon gift card, and (2) a selection of level-appropriate books from www.readinga-z.com for use with literacy students, to be provided at the end of the study (no cash value). I received consent from all five volunteer teachers. The names and scheduled teaching days of the volunteer teachers are represented in Table 2. All names are pseudonyms. All of the volunteers had taught in the literacy program before. They were all white women in their 50s or 60s, with English L1. Jane was the only teacher with some Spanish proficiency. No further demographic or other personal information was solicited from the volunteer teachers, as they are not considered to be key participants in the study and their participation was solicited with the understanding that they would not be the focus of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scheduled day to teach</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of times observed by me</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Over the 11 weeks of the study.
3.5 Portraits of the Four Focal Participants

These profiles introduce the case studies of four unique female adult English language learners: Frida, Hana, Marta, and Tina. Three of the four had six or fewer years of formal schooling in their native countries (Tina, Hana, Marta). They range in age from early 20s to late 50s. Their length of residence in the United States ranges from one and one-half years to 25 years. Three of the four are originally from Guatemala (Tina, Frida, Hana). Three of the four are married and have children (Tina, Hana, Marta). Three of the four were in the same mainstream ESL class and in the same literacy group during the data collection (Tina, Frida, Marta). All of them expressed strong motivations and desires to develop their English language skills and reach higher levels of proficiency.

3.5.1 Hana (Sam and Pat group). Hana is a Guatemalan woman in her early 20s. She attended two years of school in Guatemala, where she described her school as being impoverished and like a “casita.” She came to the United States in 2007, joining her sister as the only other member of her family here. She met her husband, also Guatemalan, shortly after arriving here. She has a six year-old daughter who speaks both English and Spanish and is enrolled in school. Bilingual classes do not seem to be available to her daughter, so Hana chooses to speak to her only in Spanish to help her maintain her home language. In her free time, Hana runs errands or takes her daughter to the park or to go shopping. Hana has worked in fast food or restaurants since arriving in the United States. At her current job as a cook, she is one of three native Spanish speakers in the restaurant.

She first started ESL classes in January 2014, in a different community-based ESL program, and then switched to ESL Pathways in September 2014. She indicated that improving her writing and speaking skills were her biggest English learning goals, although she was not
able to give many specific examples of how she might use these skills in her life. Given the time
and money, she would attend ESL classes twice a day – once in the morning and once in the
evening. She expressed frustration that because she has to work, she doesn’t have as much time
as she would like to study English. With more English skills, she would like to get a better job,
such as a cashier or a waitress.

3.5.2 Marta (Talk of the Block group). Marta is a Mexican woman in her early 60s. She
arrived in the United States with three of her eight children in 2001, joining her husband and
oldest son in Virginia. All eight of her children now live in the United States, and she describes
them as having a range of English language abilities. Marta had two years of formal schooling in
Mexico, characterizing it as “just enough to learn how to write my name.” Marta’s first
experience with learning English was in a community-based school, about one year after arriving
in the United States. She reported that when she started studying English, she entered school at
“zero,” and she thought to herself that she would never be able to learn the English alphabet. She
continued attending this class once or twice a week, because she wanted to learn a few words,
but ended up stopping out not too long after beginning.

After struggling to find work and taking care of her large family, Marta now has a job
cleaning the machines at a gym. Although she doesn’t use English at her job, she puts on the TV
so that she can hear English while she is cleaning. She enrolled in ESL Pathways in 2014, and
she was placed in a high beginning class because she already had some vocabulary in English
after living in the United States for 13 years. Throughout our interview times, Marta spoke
passionately about her desire to learn English and to be able to write. She pushes herself to
advance because she needs English in her daily life. For example, when she goes to see a doctor,
she doesn’t want to wait for an interpreter. If she could speak English, her appointments could go
faster. Marta currently has a green card, with permanent residency that needs to be renewed in four years. Now that she has lived in the United States for more than five years, she is eligible to become a citizen. Citizenship is a primary goal and a driving force for continuing to improve her English, particularly because it is an expensive venture and she doesn’t want to have to pay for the application process more than once. Marta hopes that one day, someone will hear her English and ask her, with admiration, where she learned it.

3.5.3 Tina (*Talk of the Block group*). Tina is a Guatemalan woman in her late 40s. She attended school in Guatemala through the sixth grade, and noted that people can’t often finish school in Central America because of various obstacles there. She arrived in the United States in 1989, when there were not yet many Spanish speakers in the suburban area. Her husband worked and she mostly stayed at home alone, raising her daughters. She didn’t leave the house much, because she couldn’t speak English and she was afraid of even going to the store without her husband. He passed away in 2007, and her daughters have since graduated from a local university. Her husband’s death was the catalyst for her getting a job outside of the home, cleaning rooms at a local hospital. She needs to speak a little bit of English every day with her supervisor, who doesn’t speak Spanish, but mostly she has to follow instructions in English from the nurses on her floor, who ask her things like, “Can you clean here?”

Tina began studying English formally in 2014. Tina is very positive about her classroom experiences. She said that writing is one of her favorite activities, but she prefers for her writing to be focused on copying what her teacher writes on the board. On weekends, she studies English in her house and spends time with her family. In fact, she reports that she enjoys spending her free time studying English, emphasizing again her desire to learn English. If Tina had unlimited time and money, she would like to focus her time on improving her reading and writing in
English. This process would be facilitated by having her own personal teacher, who could explain things to her as needed. A current goal for her is to be able to speak more with the nurses at work. However, her long-term job goal is to get a job as a receptionist or secretary, taking appointments perhaps at the hospital. She noted that she would need to write more in order to get that type of job.

3.5.4 Frida (Talk of the Block group). Frida is a Guatemalan woman in her early 20s. With 12 years of education in Guatemala, Frida has the most formal education of the four participants, and is the only one without children or a spouse. She had two years of basic English in high school and had planned on attending university in Guatemala, but her family’s plans to immigrate to the United States changed that goal. She arrived in the United States in 2013 with her parents and siblings. She often mentioned her family, giving the impression that her family is very close and depends on one another a great deal.

Her first job in the United States was as an assistant to a 10-year old Latina girl in a wheelchair. The girl could speak Spanish, but preferred to speak English and would get angry with Frida when she didn’t understand her English. She later switched to a job cleaning offices and a shopping mall, where she works alone and the other workers are Spanish speakers.

Frida started ESL classes in 2013. She believes that her life has been changed quite a bit by her ESL classes, and will continue to change for the better. Being young, single, and childless, Frida’s plan is to get a GED in English and then attend college. She would eventually like to leave her part-time cleaning job to work in a store as a salesperson or cashier, once her English improves.
3.6 Caveats and Considerations for Working with This Population

In any qualitative inquiry, there are specific features of the research that lend themselves to careful consideration of ethics and participant protections (Stake, 2005). Richards (2009) noted concepts related to consent, honesty, privacy, ownership of data, and harm of research participants. Additionally, Yin (2014) described how case study researchers have a responsibility to scholarship, avoiding deception, accepting responsibility for one’s own work, keeping up with related research, ensuring accuracy, striving for credibility, and divulging limitations.

There are important ethical issues to consider when working with low-literate adult English language learners in a research capacity. As Norton (2013) noted, “In research with adult immigrants, researchers need to be particularly cognizant of the unequal relationship between researcher and researched since such subjects, new to a society, have few institutional protections and are frequently vulnerable and isolated” (p. 61). Participants must have a full understanding of the voluntary nature of their participation and of the purpose of the research itself. They must not feel coerced in any way to participate or to share information that they are not comfortable sharing. Their information must be held confidential, and they should understand that no harm is associated with participation. These ethical considerations hold for any research population, but they seem especially important to ensure for participants who may come from underprivileged or disadvantaged backgrounds in which any relationships with perceived authority may be cause for concern.

Another important concern in working with this population is the potential for undiagnosed learning disabilities that may affect or have affected in some way their literacy development and/or educational experiences over the years. It is not within the scope of my research (or, to a general extent, the ESL Pathways program itself) to diagnose or to treat any
learning disabilities. Therefore, the topic of learning disabilities was not broached with the participants during data collection.

I intended for my contact with the participants to occur in several distinct ways. To the volunteer teachers and other ESL Pathways program staff, I wanted to be seen as a colleague who had been involved with ESL Pathways in various capacities since 2003, as a graduate student who needed their help to complete an important dissertation project, and as a fledgling researcher who could provide some useful information to contribute to the continual improvement of the literacy program. Having conducted the literacy program evaluation (Young & Feagin, 2013), I was also invited to join ESL Pathways’ newly established Literacy Task Force, which was formed as a result of the evaluation project. The Task Force consisted of the program specialist, the literacy program coordinator, three current volunteer literacy teachers, three current mainstream ESL classroom teachers, and me.

In order to take on these roles with program and volunteer staff during my observations, I arrived to the literacy classroom early and chatted briefly with the volunteer teacher for that day to make sure that my presence was still welcome. While the literacy classes were being conducted, I positioned myself as far back into the corner as possible (given the extremely small dimensions of the room). I placed the audiorecorder on the table or kept it in my hand, depending on how full the room was on a particular day. I followed along with what was happening during the literacy group, taking note of everything I could. I did not speak up unless I was asked to; for the most part, I was acknowledged as a silent observer in the class. On rare occasions, if there was a misunderstanding or other challenge, the volunteer teacher would elicit my help in providing a clarification or example in English or in Spanish. If a student was missing when the
literacy class started, I would often volunteer to go to their mainstream class to see if they were absent or to encourage them to come to the literacy session.

My relationships with the volunteer teachers varied; this was a function in part of the opportunities I had to observe them while teaching. Some volunteers had fewer opportunities to teach because of school holidays or personal vacations. I observed Jane and Linda the most frequently (six times each over the course of nine weeks), followed by Carla (four times) and Diane (three times) (see Table 2). My presence in their classes seemed to be welcome, and we enjoyed chatting with each other while waiting for students to arrive. We often shared anecdotes or our own observations or questions about what we were encountering with the literacy students. The volunteers often expressed support and curiosity about my research topics and data collection progress. I only observed the other regular volunteer teacher, Ellen, once; although she readily consented to participate in the research study, she expressed discomfort when I attended her literacy class for the first time. When I attempted to attend a second time, she expressed additional discomfort so I removed myself and did not return. All five volunteers copied me on their daily email reports to one another.

To the student participants (focal and cohort participants), I wanted to be seen as an ESL professional, as an advocate, and as a L2 learner/user. I initially presented myself as an ESL teacher and university TESOL trainer who was very invested in learning more about adult English language learners’ experiences, so that we might improve adult ESL instruction at the ESL Pathways program and elsewhere. I wanted to be seen as someone who was intimately connected to the program, but also someone who could be an impartial “message-bearer” on the part of students to provide suggestions for improving their learning experiences. During my one-on-one conversations with students, I presented myself as someone who was very interested in
capturing their lived experiences, ideas, beliefs, and opinions related to ESL learning – always with the aim of improving adult ESL instruction by knowing more about how adults learn English.

During my observations of the literacy classes, I usually interacted with participants only in English. However, my interviews with the focal participants were conducted entirely in Spanish and took place after the morning classes ended. In these one-on-one conversations, I positioned myself as a tentative L2 user of Spanish. To avoid possible miscommunications due to my intermediate-level oral proficiency in Spanish, I followed my scripted, semi-structured interview protocol as closely as possible. I formulated follow-up questions on the spot, which sometimes led to small communication breakdowns that my participants helped me to repair. I volunteered information about my own L2 learning experiences and beliefs, and occasionally answered questions from the participants about my personal life and my own learning and uses of Spanish.

In my one-on-one interactions with the focal participants, I aimed to establish and maintain an informal, conversational, and friendly tone. However, I also wanted to make it clear that the interview time was structured, finite, and respectful of their limited amount of time. At the end of each interview (intended to last one hour), I gave participants $10 in cash. At the end of each metalinguistic reflection session (intended to last 30 minutes), I gave each participant $5 in cash. This monetary exchange seemed to create some awkwardness at times between the participant and me. After the first interview, every participant seemed reluctant to take the cash incentive. I had to remind them that the incentive was included in the consent form and as part of their participation. In some cases, the participants wanted me to explain again or in more detail where the money was coming from and why I was giving it to them. They all eventually
accepted the cash with reluctance and after insistence on my part. In subsequent interviews and reflection sessions, some participants continued to show reluctance in accepting the money, stating that they did not mind helping the project and that they enjoyed talking to me. I tried to maintain a friendly and appreciative tone rather than a business-like tone in encouraging them to accept the incentive, pointing out that I valued their time and their contributions were important.

### 3.7 Data Collection Process and Instruments

I relied on four primary sources of data during the period of data collection: (1) My field notes and audio-recordings from my observations of the literacy classes; (2) the volunteer teachers’ daily email notes to one another, which I used to corroborate my observations and to provide continuity when I did not attend the literacy classes; (3) the audio-recorded interviews with focal participants; and (4) the audio-recorded metalinguistic reflection sessions with focal participants. These four sources can be categorized according to the perspective they provide on the issue of metalinguistic awareness and literacy instruction: My literacy class observations and my review of the teachers’ daily emails provide an etic perspective on the data, while the individual interviews and metalinguistic reflection sessions provide an emic perspective on the data. Table 3 provides an overview of how these two perspectives were represented vis-à-vis the participants, data collection methods, data collection sources, instruments, and approximate data collection timeline.
### Table 3
**Overview of Data Collection Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Data Collection Method</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Etic Perspectives: Understanding the Context</strong></td>
<td>All adult ESL students enrolled in literacy groups</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>30-minute literacy classes (<em>Sam and Pat</em> and <em>Talk of the Block</em> groups)</td>
<td>Observation Protocol and field notes; digital audio recorder</td>
<td>2-3 observations conducted per week, from Week 3 to Week 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer literacy teachers</td>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>Daily email reports shared by teachers</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Email reports collected after every literacy class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Emic Perspectives: In the Participants’ Own Words** | Marta Frida Tina Hana | Semi-structured oral interviews | Three 30-60 minute interviews conducted in Spanish | Interview Protocol (in Spanish) | Week 3 Week 8 Week 12 |
| Verbal report | Two 20-30 minute metalinguistic reflection sessions | Reflections on English Literacy Tasks Protocol (in Spanish) | Week 6 Week 11 |
**3.7.1 Etic perspectives: Literacy class observations.** Data collection first began with methods that sought to capture the outsider perspective: Observations and document reviews. My literacy class observations were initially guided by the Observation Protocol (see Appendix B). I developed the Observation Protocol after extensive piloting in the morning literacy classes from January through June 2014 at ESL Pathways. The items on the protocol represent observable behaviors related to metalinguistic awareness, classroom interactions, and literacy skill development. These items emerged from my own observation notes of these classes, conversations with the literacy program coordinator, and volunteer teachers’ daily emailed reports that were shared with me during piloting. Although the Observation Protocol was grounded in an understanding of metalinguistic awareness from existing SLA research, it was specifically created for the unique population of low-literate adult ESL learners enrolled in the literacy classes at ESL Pathways.

My use of the Observation Protocol as a data collection instrument evolved over time. However, it was grounded in my assumptions about metalinguistic awareness and interaction from a sociocognitive perspective (Tarone, 2010b). These assumptions include the following: (1) Awareness can be observed behaviorally when it takes place within social interaction; (2) questions and self- or other-corrections are evidence of metalinguistic awareness; (3) commentary on what is being learned is evidence of metalinguistic awareness; (4) dialogue among students and teacher is relevant in allowing evidence of metalinguistic awareness to emerge; and (5) metalinguistic awareness emerges as students interact with one another and verbalize their own thoughts during interaction. Based on these assumptions, I believe that the observations can be used to identify, problematize, and categorize evidence of metalinguistic awareness that occurred during the literacy groups.
From October 16 to December 18, 2014, I observed 20 literacy class sessions (a total of 10 hours) for the *Talk of the Block* group and 17 literacy class sessions (a total of 8.5 hours) for the *Sam and Pat* group. During data collection I did not rely on the original Observation Protocol as a format for taking and organizing my field notes. I found that I preferred taking unstructured chronological field notes that were not categorized preemptively by the prompts on the original protocol. At the same time, my field notes adhered closely to the prompts on the original protocol in that they were primarily focused on noting the following behaviors: (a) the students’ questions posed to the teacher; (b) the students’ strategies they used to complete a given literacy task; (c) any evidence of the students’ analysis of, manipulation of, or reflection on language; and (d) the students’ errors and error corrections related to the literacy skills being addressed at that time. Thus, it can be said perhaps that the intention and attempt to use a formal Observation Protocol trained my eyes and ears to be attuned to certain behaviors and cues in the ongoing classroom interactions, but these were best captured and made sense of qualitatively as field notes.

Figure 2 shows an excerpt of what my field notes evolved into, which took the format of a chronological narrative rather than preemptive categorization. I found this to be a more appropriate format to use, given that “One never simply observes a classroom. The ‘classroom’ itself is a gloss for a complex dynamic among people” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 18). My field notes were accompanied by digital audio recordings of every literacy class I observed. Given the power of the digital device and the small size of the literacy class, the audio recordings were useful in later verifying my handwritten notes.
L emphasized the pronunciation of ‘appointment,’ then asked each student to make a complete sentence using the word. L then emphasized the pronunciation of ‘first,’ saying ‘/ir/ is a new sound for you.’ It sounds like [ɪ].’ She compared it to ‘fur’ and ‘firs.’ They all struggled with saying ‘first,’ but L directed, “Say it in three steps: [f] [ɪ] [st].” L noted that Mario was reversing the /st/ to /ts/ = /firts/. L struggled to get Ss to just say ‘firs’ to begin. No one understood that she wanted them to just say ‘fir.’ Then she separated it to /firs/ and /t/, which was easier for them to do. Mario eventually emphasized the /t/ in ‘last,’ show that he was paying attention.

M struggled with ‘desk,’ saying ‘dik’ first. L asked Ss to define ‘desk’ and F said: “Table is the big.” The group discussed the difference between a table and a desk. L pointed out that M was pronouncing ‘spell’ as “espell,” but she [naturally] had a hard time trying to get him to drop the /e/. Then she presented “I am sick of waiting,” then explaining “It doesn’t mean you’re sick.” T gave an example: “I am sick of my job.” M gave several examples: “I am sick of church. I am sick of school. I am sick of home.” F said: “I am sick of the bank.” L finished by reviewing choral repetition of all vocabulary pronunciation.

L then presented: “What is the short /i/ sound? Not long /ɪ/ [in response to someone’s guess]. What’s our short /ɪ/ sound? What word did you think of to help you?” L pointed out (with some help from Ss): ‘inch,’ ‘fish,’ ‘Indian,’ ‘igloo.’ L said: “The sound of short /ɪ/ is /ɪ/-/ɪ/-/ɪ/- /fish.’ /ʃ/ - /ɪ/ - /ʃ/. She pointed out that ‘is’ also has a short /ɪ/ sound, and ‘sick.” She said: “Let’s look at the story and see if there are others in the story.”

L read the story one time aloud. T tracked with her pencil while following along. T then did the read aloud first, with L emphasizing for her the pronunciation of the final /s/ on her words. F read much more fluently than M and T.

**Figure 2.** Excerpt from chronological narrative-style observation field notes.

As I observed each session, I kept a running handwritten narrative of what the volunteer teacher and the participants said and did. I noted what the teacher wrote on the board, and tried to describe how text was manipulated on the board in real-time (e.g., the teacher wrote a sentence with a missing word or letter and then filled it in with the help of the students). When students completed writing activities in their binders (e.g., answering reading comprehension questions from the day’s story, completing a dictation based on sentences from the story, or freewriting on blank paper), I made informal notes about what I saw in the students’ writing, depending on who I was sitting next to at the time.
During my observations, I paid particular attention to the focal participants’ successful oral responses as well as mistakes made during practice activities, their questions about language, their discussions about language, their informal assessments of their own learning strategies and successes, and the comments they made about things they found strange or funny or interesting about language. I began to think of these (often) brief interactions about language as a kind of “language-related episode (LRE)” (Swain & Lapkin, 2002), in that they reflect dialogue “where learners talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others” (p. 292). It was helpful for me to view these interactions as bounded episodes where evidence of metalinguistic awareness was being broadly demonstrated. I starred or circled these particular utterances or bounded interactions in my notes so that I could return later to the audio-recordings and capture the exact words in transcription.

3.7.2 Etic perspectives: Daily email reports. The other data sources representing an etic perspective were the daily email reports that the volunteer literacy teachers shared with one another after each day’s literacy class. All of these literacy teachers gave me permission to read the daily reports, and copied me on each day’s email so that I could stay informed of what happened in class even on the days that I did not observe. These daily progress reports were instituted by the literacy program coordinator as a means of keeping the volunteers on track with the scripted curriculum, and of keeping everyone aware of any particular issues or challenges that arose for the students in completing the day’s activities.

Having been a literacy class teacher myself, I was familiar with the typical content of these emails. Some volunteers tended to give more detail about the day’s lessons or to share more personal anecdotes, suggestions, or queries about the learners’ progress or struggles. Other volunteers kept their daily emails very short, and provided only a brief outline of the content and
activities that were covered along with a general assessment of the learners’ performance that day. During the piloting phase, I reviewed all of the volunteer emails that I had collected to date (amounting to approximately two 12-week instructional cycles’ worth of daily reports). I found that the most relevant comments that the volunteer teachers tended to make regarding metalinguistic awareness covered (a) what students noticed about language; (b) what students struggled with; (c) what students did well on; (d) how students felt or responded to a particular activity; and (e) what progress students made. The Daily Lesson Notes Coding Protocol (Appendix C) emerged from the pilot and was used during my initial data analysis.

My intention in reviewing the daily lesson notes was not to evaluate the volunteer teachers in any way; I only used the daily notes as a means of collecting potential information of interest about the four focal participants in order to corroborate my own observations, the students’ self-reports during interviews, or gaps in my own knowledge about how the literacy classes functioned.

3.7.3 **Emic perspectives: Interviews.** I sought to capture an emic perspective from the four focal participants primarily through a series of one-on-one interviews (Kvale, 2009; Pavlenko, 2007; Talmy, 2011) conducted in Spanish. The data collection instrument was the Interview Protocol (see Appendix D). The items on the semi-structured protocol were designed to elicit first-person descriptions of ideas, feelings, beliefs, opinions, and experiences related to language, L2 learning, and L2 literacy skill development. These interview items emerged from topics in my literature review that portray L2 learning within the frameworks of Language Awareness (Bolitho et al., 2003) and engagement with language (Svalberg, 2009). The items in the Interview Protocol were informed by review of the literature and my previous teaching and
research interests, but they were specifically created for the population of low-literate adult ESL learners enrolled in the literacy classes at ESL Pathways.

I designed the Interview Protocol to be administered in three parts over three separate interview sessions, taking place approximately in week 3, week 7, and week 12 of the 12-week instructional session at ESL Pathways. A semi-structured protocol design was used, to allow for follow-up questions, for questions that might take the interview in a different direction, and for greater responsiveness to how the participant oriented to the interview itself (Knight, 2002). However, it was important to establish some structure and follow a basic protocol, in order to ensure that most of the same issues or themes would be addressed across participants.

There are several important purposes for using interviews in applied linguistics research. Pavlenko (2007; 2008) and Talmy (2011) have described the research interview as a collaborative achievement that can provide insights about interviewer-interviewee interactions in L2 data. De Fina (2009) emphasized this interaction in narrative accounts. Kvale (2007) and Duff (2008) highlighted the importance of using insights and perspectives from interviews in conducting a content or thematic analysis. My approach to the interviews aligns particularly with Kvale and Duff. The semi-structured interview questions were carefully crafted to ensure comprehensibility in both content and format for focal participants. To ensure comprehensibility, the questions were first drafted with an eye to avoiding jargon, unfamiliar metalanguage about language and literacy concepts, and leading or unclear questions about educational history, beliefs, perceptions, or experiences. The draft questions were reviewed by an applied linguistics colleague who has experience in working with low-literate adult English language learners. I then translated the questions into Spanish, and had two native Spanish speakers proofread and edit the questions for accuracy and comprehensibility. One of the translators was a bilingual
Mexican-American male in his late 50s who grew up in a Spanish-speaking home in Texas. The other translator was a bilingual Ecuadorian female in her late 30s who grew up speaking Spanish but learned English as a teenager and adult.

The three interview protocols correspond with the following topics:

- Protocol 1 (administered in week 3) asked the participant about her life before coming to the United States, expectations about life and language use in the United States, arriving and adjusting to life and language use in the United States, and her current daily routines, work, and family life.

- Protocol 2 (administered approximately in week 7) asked the participant about her current experiences learning and using English inside and outside of the ESL program.

- Protocol 3 (administered approximately in week 11 or 12) asked the participant about her experiences with and beliefs about other languages (including her L1), comparisons between English and Spanish, and goals and future plans for using English.

The purpose of Protocol 1 (Week 3) was to establish a framework for understanding the relationship between the participant’s background and metalinguistic awareness – demonstrating that it is not a stable quality but rather a dynamic phenomenon that is impacted by a variety of life and language experiences. I asked each participant about attending school in her native country to establish a baseline for educational experiences and literacy development. I asked them to reflect on their expectations of English and learning English prior to coming to the United States to get a sense of how they might characterize the task of language learning and use, which is usually represented in more grammar-focused ways in cognitively-oriented research on
metalinguistic awareness (e.g., Thepseenu & Roehr, 2013). I also asked the participants about their daily lives, and how they learned about life in the United States, in terms of public transportation, shopping, health care, employment, and so on. I asked about these elements of their daily lives in order to connect language use with concrete, real-world, and even mundane experience. In my attempts to avoid educational research jargon related to literacy and language use, I tried to elicit information about their literacy and language use through their descriptions of their daily lives.

The purpose of Protocol 2 (Week 7) was to focus in on the participants’ experiences in their mainstream ESL classes and their literacy groups, their learning preferences and strategies, and their interactions with teachers and other students. I started the second interview by asking the participants to describe a typical lesson in their mainstream ESL class, with the assumption that what they reported would relate to what they notice and how they learn in the L2. To elicit further details about what they pay attention to in the L2 instructional context, I asked them to identify and compare various elements of their mainstream ESL class to their literacy class, such as the materials used in each setting, the practice activities used, the teaching style of the teachers, and working with other students. I asked them to reflect on their own progress as well as the progress of other students, covering strengths, weaknesses, and common problems in English. I then asked them to talk about how they learn or practice English in formal or informal ways outside of the school setting. Since out-of-school L2 experiences can be so much more variable than in-school experiences, this information gave me insight into how the participants preferred to engage with the L2 on their own and what aspects of language they paid attention to when they weren’t being directed to do so by a teacher or a textbook.
The purpose of Protocol 3 (Week 11-12) was to prompt participants to reflect on language and language use in a slightly more abstract way. I asked them about their use of Spanish in their daily lives, and then asked them about regional differences they have noticed in how Spanish is used. With this line of questioning, I intended to probe for areas of metalinguistic awareness about their L1. I then transitioned to asking them about differences and similarities between Spanish and English, to examine what features of language they might notice and to see how they compare these features across languages. I asked them to identify specific features of English that were different or challenging for them, and the strategies they might use to address these differences. Finally, I asked them about their goals and plans for learning and using English in the future.

In reality, we were unable to cover all of the predetermined questions in each interview. Some of the interviews had to be cut short due to participants’ schedules. In some cases, the line of questioning did not seem to yield any response from the participants, so it had to be abandoned (although lack of response was noted). Some questions did not seem appropriate to ask in the moment, in the context of the interview and what had previously been said. On a few occasions, the question was not comprehensible to the participant and I could not find a way to clarify the meaning, so the question was abandoned.

My decision to conduct all of the interviews in the participants’ L1 of Spanish was an important one. Duff’s (2008) description of her case study of Jim, which was conducted entirely in English and focused on his L2 development, highlighted the challenges that adult English language learners face in becoming proficient in English even in “best case” scenarios. My use of Spanish was necessary to elicit as much information as I could from learners whose L2 English proficiency level would not have allowed them to express themselves fully and with
comfort. The choice of language was not only a pragmatic one but also an interpersonal one. By communicating in a language that I am not fully proficient in, and readily acknowledging my own limitations and struggles in dealing with the L2, I hoped to equalize in some way the power asymmetry inherent between interviewer and interviewee (Kvale, 2007).

Transcribing is a theoretical decision (Ochs, 1979). Each interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed in Microsoft word. The transcription process went through several phases. I first attempted to transcribe each interview verbatim, and I found the process of verbatim transcription in Spanish to be useful for developing my own metalinguistic awareness, as I had never before attempted L2 transcription and found it to be very good practice for developing my own L2 listening skills. However, I found that that level of detail was unnecessary for the first round of transcribing. I switched to paraphrasing in English the content of each of my participants’ utterances, noting the time stamp for each exchange. The purpose of this initial round of transcribing or paraphrasing was to capture key themes and utterances for subsequent coding and data analysis.

As I did with the field notes, I flagged key ideas in each interview that I wanted to return to for verbatim transcription and coding during the analysis phase of the project. I returned to the audio recordings of the interviews several times throughout the coding and analysis process to fully transcribe key participant insights in Spanish. In the write-up of the results, I include the verbatim transcriptions in Spanish as well as an English paraphrase in parentheses. I am not a highly proficient Spanish speaker, and although I believe that I have done my best to represent what the participants said on the digital recordings (either verbatim or through paraphrasing), I do not want to risk presenting inaccurate data due to any misunderstandings in my aural comprehension of their Spanish.
3.7.4 Emic perspectives: Metalinguistic reflections. The second data source representing an emic perspective were the verbal reports taken during the metalinguistic reflection tasks. It should be noted that my elicitation of their reflections was directed from my own etic perspective, but my questions were general enough to allow for participant-directed emic responses. Each focal participant completed two metalinguistic reflection sessions that featured English literacy tasks that were similar or identical to the tasks they had recently completed in their literacy classes. The sessions were conducted using the Reflections on English Literacy Tasks Protocol (see Appendix E), and took place around Week 6 and Week 11 of the 12-week instructional cycle. The first metalinguistic reflection session took place after the participants’ first interview, so they were already somewhat familiar with the process of meeting with me individually, answering questions, and being audio-recorded. Each session was designed to last approximately 30 minutes, and featured four or five English literacy tasks. After each task or activity was completed (in English), I asked the participant five reflection questions in Spanish about these tasks:

1. Tell me what you were thinking when you completed the activity. How did you complete it?
2. What was easy for you about the activity?
3. What was difficult for you about the activity?
4. What could help you do this activity better? For example, what if the teacher had given some explanation in Spanish, if you had seen a picture, or if another student had given an example?
5. How does this activity help you learn English?

I chose familiar tasks because I wanted these reflection sessions to be a successful rather than a frustrating experience for the participants. There were many instances when the participants completed the task successfully and reflected to some extent on the progress that they had made in this area after practicing in the literacy class. As members of the Talk of the
Block group, Frida, Tina, and Marta all completed the same tasks. Some of Hana’s tasks were different, because her literacy class was not covering the same content the other participants’. However, everyone completed the same types of tasks related to English vowels, quotation marks, reading aloud, answering story comprehension questions, translating from English to Spanish, and dictation. Occasionally I added a task or a few questions about something that an individual participant had struggled with or questioned in the literacy class, in order to learn more about her thoughts on it as expressed in the L1. In doing so, I ran the risk of turning the metalinguistic reflection session into a mini-tutorial, with me giving explanations to clarify what the participant didn’t understand. I decided that the risk was acceptable, because these conversations allowed me to capture the participants’ thoughts as they made sense of the language or literacy task at hand. However, I kept in mind McKay’s (2009) warning that “verbal reports do not mirror the thought process” (p. 222) and used this data only as a way to corroborate other data sources throughout the project.

Table 4 provides an overview of the body of data that was ultimately collected from the four focal participants.
Table 4  
*Body of Data Collection from October 10-December 18, 2014*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Literacy Classes Attended</th>
<th>Number of Hours Attended&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Number of Classes Attended During Researcher Observations</th>
<th>Number of Hours Attended&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Dates of Interviews</th>
<th>Dates of Metalinguistic Reflection Sessions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Talk of the Block” group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10/16/14</td>
<td>10/29/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11/25/14</td>
<td>11/25/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12/9/14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marta</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10/31/14</td>
<td>10/31/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11/21/14</td>
<td>12/4/14</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10/22/14</td>
<td>11/3/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11/14/14</td>
<td>12/12/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12/12/14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sam and Pat” group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hana</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10/20/14</td>
<td>11/4/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12/15/14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Total hours of the literacy classes each participant attended; <sup>b</sup> Hours when a given participant was in attendance during the literacy classes observed.

As Table 4 demonstrates, Tina and Hana were the most frequent attendees in their literacy classes, attending 40 and 38 sessions respectively out of a total possible 44 30-minute sessions offered by the volunteer teachers. This attendance translates into 20 hours of intensive literacy instruction over the course of 10 weeks for Tina, and 19 hours for Hana. These hours are summarized in the daily email notes that the volunteer teachers shared with one another after each literacy class. Given their high levels of attendance, Tina and Hana were usually present when I observed the literacy classes during this period. Their presence during my observations translates into 9.5 hours of audio-recorded literacy classes with my accompanying field notes featuring Tina and 8 hours of audio-recorded literacy classes with my accompanying field notes featuring Hana. Marta and Frida attended with less regularity, but still appear frequently in the volunteer teachers’ daily email reports and my field notes and audio-recordings. Three focal
participants completed three interviews, although the length of each interview ranged from 30 minutes to one hour, depending on their availability. I was not able to interview Marta a third time as planned, because she became sick toward the end of the 12-week session. I attempted to contact her after the end of the session, but she was not responsive. All four focal participants completed two metalinguistic reflection sessions; the original research design called for three metalinguistic reflection sessions, but scheduling conflicts and participant availability did not allow for the third session.

3.7.5 Decisions and unexpected challenges. The primary challenge that I faced in data collection was the relatively high level of attrition among the cohort participants, although the attendance of the focal participants remained relatively stable. The sporadic attendance of nine of the original 15 students across the three literacy groups meant that the interactions that the focal participants had in the literacy classes were bounded by fewer partners and possibly weaker relationships among the partners. For the Talk of the Block group, most of Tina’s, Frida’s, and Marta’s interactions occurred among the three of them, with other students sporadically attending. For the Sam and Pat group, regular attendance among group members fell from five or six in the beginning of the cycle to only Hana and her classmate Mizrak by the last third of the cycle. The silver lining in these levels of attrition may be that it was easier to focus in on key participants, rather than trying to juggle larger bodies of data with peripheral participants as well.

Nera and Mizrak in the Sam and Pat group expressed strong interest in being focal participants, but because their L1 was Amharic, they were not eligible for participating in that capacity. I spoke with them several times to express my regrets at my inability to work with them as focal participants, but I explained that I had no communicative ability in Amharic and the majority of the data collection needed to be conducted in their L1. Their strong desire to
participate caused me to feel that my L2 Spanish proficiency was both a blessing and a barrier to different participant groups. The exchange of money for participation, which may have been seen as privileging Spanish over other L1s, raised this unexpected and unsettling issue for me.

One other unexpected situation was that the focal participants had higher levels of L1 literacy skills than I had anticipated. Marta and Hana attended two years of school in their home countries, Tina attended six years of school, and Frida attended 12 years of school. I could not capture the specifics of what their schooling or literacy experiences had been like, but it was clear from their participation in the literacy classes that the “basics” of L1 literacy development – such as print awareness, alphabetics, handwriting, spelling, and decoding – were already in place. I had originally intended to study learners who were closer to “nonliterate” in any language (Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2003), but those learners may be rare in adult education, for a variety of reasons. However, I believe that Marta, Hana, and Tina represent some of the typical learners that emigrate from Central America. They have basic L1 literacy skills, but they tend to remain in the shadows in mainstream ESL classes – if they attend at all – struggling with “just enough” language skills to get by.

Frida was an anomaly in that she had a high school education and was not a typical student found in ESL Pathways’ literacy classes. It was not entirely clear to me why she was initially placed there, since the program did not retain detailed records of these placements. The program guidelines simply ask teachers to identify students who may be struggling to keep up with the reading and writing demands of the mainstream classroom; perhaps Frida was placed there because her literacy skills were lacking as compared to other students in her mainstream class. Frida never appeared to express discomfort or disagreement with her placement in the literacy classes. On the contrary, she expressed enthusiasm and appreciation for this extra help.
Her inclusion as a focal participant in my study provides an informative contrast in perspectives within the same literacy class context.

3.8 Data Analysis Procedures

In this section, I describe the tools and methods used to engage in the cyclical process of data review, reflection, coding, pattern finding, and analysis. Data interpretation and analysis began almost simultaneously with data collection. After the observations, I typed up my handwritten field notes into Microsoft Word documents for each group. I used the “comment” feature to note anything I wanted to return to or later transcribe from the audio-recordings. I began jotting down questions or ideas about things I noticed during the observations, and flagged particular interactions for future thematic codings. I regularly added new observations to the running file. I did not spend much time re-reading previous field note entries during the data collection phase of my project. Later on, during the analysis phase, I returned to the field notes and began re-listening to the audio-recordings and transcribed the flagged utterances and interactions for possible inclusion in the coding process.

Part of my analysis of the teachers’ daily email reports and my own observation field notes focused on the whiteboard (or “board”) in the literacy room and how it was used to support L2 learning and teaching. I began by loosely categorizing instances of board work that were mentioned in the email reports or my field notes. These categories were based on the purpose that the board work seemed intended to serve, as well as who initiated the text-based interaction on the board. In this initial round of coding, there seemed to be many diverse purposes for and types of board work occurring in the literacy classes. I began to weave these apparent purposes in with the global themes in the other data sources.
I followed a similar process in compiling and reviewing the teachers’ daily email reports and in transcribing the interviews and metalinguistic reflection sessions. During the coding phase, I returned to the Daily Lesson Notes Protocol and used those categories to begin coding comments that the teachers made specifically about the four focal participants (Tina, Marta, Frida, and Hana) only. I tried to be conscious of my own potential biases by not making any judgments about the volunteer teachers’ report or evaluation of the day’s lesson. The coding of the interviews and metalinguistic reflection sessions was initially aligned with the original protocols for these data sources as well.

My data collection instruments were designed to reflect and elicit themes regarding language, L2 learning, and L2 instruction: Beliefs and attitudes, experiences, strategies, struggles and successes, and analysis of or reflection on language. My analysis procedures needed to allow for both the expected and the unexpected, in order to be open to multiple possible interpretations. At the same time, my approach to data collection and analysis tasks needed to be efficient: “The critical task in qualitative research is not to accumulate all the data you can, but to ‘can’ most of the data you accumulate” (Wolcott, 1990, p. 35). Yin (2014) urged case study researchers to pay close attention to all of the data, acknowledging any and all plausible interpretations, before using their own expert knowledge to focus in on the most significant aspect of the data. This requires data immersion or repeated reading of the data in an active way, in search of meanings, possible interpretations, and patterns. Duff (2008) and Yin (2014) suggested creating memos to study emerging data by focusing in on hints, clues, suggestions, and any preliminary interpretations to help conceptualize the data prior to and during successive rounds of coding. Although my memos were not a source of data, their role in my analysis process helped in triangulating different perspectives: “However accuracy is construed, researchers don’t want to
be inaccurate, caught without confirmation. Counterintuitive though it may be, the author has some responsibility for the validity of the readers’ interpretations” (Stake, 2005, p. 453). The ongoing use of memos as a means of exploring the data strengthens the claims in my analyses.

3.8.1 Thematic content analysis. Richards (2009) characterized the general process of qualitative data analysis as a cycle of collecting data, thinking, categorizing, reflecting, organizing, connecting ideas, and collecting more data if needed. Braun and Clarke (2006) established thematic analysis as a foundational method in the area of qualitative inquiry and outlined six key steps in this process: (1) familiarize oneself with the data; (2) generate initial codes that emerge from the data; (3) search for themes within the patterns of the coded data; (4) review the themes in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework; (5) define and name the final themes; and (6) write the report. They defined ‘theme’ as an idea that “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). The question, however, is how to quantify or qualify the salience or importance of a particular theme that emerges from these patterns. The benefit of thematic analysis is that it allows the researcher to come up with her own criteria for what makes a theme, as long as the criteria are clear and applied consistently.

Because my data collection protocols were, to a great extent, informed by the literature on metalinguistic awareness and my own hypotheses about framing this phenomenon from a sociocognitive perspective, I believe that my analytical approach aligns closely with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) definition of theoretical thematic analysis:

[It] tends to provide less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data…You can either code for a quite specific research question (which maps onto the more theoretical approach) or the specific research question can evolve through the coding process (which maps onto the inductive approach). (p. 84)
For example, in reviewing and trying to categorize the comments shared by the teachers in their daily email reports, I found that they often seemed to be inferring what students were feeling or thinking. Some of the comments were accompanied by specific examples of what the students said or did during the literacy class. These comments were helpful in understanding how the teachers interpreted the relative success of the literacy classes. However, throughout the data collection process and subsequent coding and analysis, I regarded the daily email reports and the subsequent document reviews as being only a small piece of the overall body of data, because I am primarily interested in what the learners themselves do, say, and report about their own learning and engagement with language. The etic perspectives identified by my observations and the daily email reports provide context for my interpretations of what the focal participants reported themselves. In this way, I sought to triangulate the data from the interviews (“This is what they say about X”), the observations (“This is how X fits into the following routines”), and the metalinguistic reflections (“This is what they say about X in their everyday talk”) (Richards, 2009, p. 280).

3.8.3 The emergence of codes and the development of themes. Although I approached the thematic analysis from a theoretical perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I tried to begin the coding process with an open mind – reading the teacher emails, my observation field notes, and the transcribed interviews and reflection sessions with an eye to anything that might be of interest regarding metalinguistic awareness. The data collection instruments and protocols that I used were designed to elicit a range of relevant information that might focus on social meanings and importance that go beyond behavioral descriptions alone. I started a coding book from scratch that was continually refined and eventually defined the parameters for each code.
Keeping a coding book with my notes on what each code meant allowed me to address Yin’s (2014) prompt: “In what ways do the codes or concepts accurately reflect the meaning of the retrieved words and phrases, and why?” (p. 135).

Braun and Clarke (2006) warned against depicting the themes as simply “emerging,” disregarding the active role that the researcher plays in choosing what to attend to and report on. It is not a mystical “emergence,” but is the result of painstaking attention to detail and critical thinking that acknowledges the fact that themes do not “reside” anywhere except in our minds. In my case, global themes were inherent in the data collection protocols that I originally designed. For example, the first Interview Protocol was focused on the participants’ backgrounds and experiences prior to coming to the United States and after arriving. The second Interview Protocol was focused on the participants’ current L2 learning experiences and uses in their daily lives. The third Interview Protocol addressed the participants’ more global views on language and literacy as well as their goals for L2 learning. Our conversations strayed from these topics at times, but the themes remained relatively consistent throughout all of the interviews. Certain findings emerged from the participants that I had not expected, and those themes were carefully identified and matched to other pieces of data. This inductive approach guided me in looking for, describing, and accounting for observed patterns, rather than trying to test for explicitly stated hypotheses (Duff, 2008).
3.9 Limitations in Research Methodology

There are some gaps in the research methodology that may weaken the claims made in the following results chapters.

First, additional background information on the participants’ language and literacy skills would have been useful. I did not obtain any standardized measurements of the participants’ L1 literacy skills. This information could have been elicited using an instrument such as the Native Language and Literacy Screening Device, which is not a standardized assessment, but it has been used in other research studies targeting this learner population (e.g., Tarone et al., 2009). I did not obtain any standardized measurements of the participants’ L2 oral or written proficiency, such as the commonly used standardized assessments BEST Plus or CASAS.

Secondly, my observation data would have been strengthened by informal follow-up questions right after the literacy classes to inquire about specific interactions that I observed. Unfortunately, the timing usually seemed too rushed or too intrusive to approach participants at the time when they were leaving the literacy class and going on to their next commitment. During the observations, I was occasionally able to see and make note of the writing that the participants did in their binders, such as written notes to themselves, written answers to reading comprehension questions, dictation exercises, and freewriting. However, it would have been useful to conduct a systematic review of the focal participants’ class binders. Written data would have provided evidence of literacy use, and could also have been used as prompts to elicit metalinguistic reflection from the participants themselves.

Finally, my methodology would be strengthened by engaging in member checking practices with the four focal participants themselves. Member checking is a standard practice in qualitative case studies, allowing for verification of data as well as claims made about the
findings. Along with member checking, I would have liked to conduct some of the interviews and metalinguistic reflection sessions in pairs to elicit the participants’ ideas in a more collaborative way. The nature of the one-on-one interview sessions may have highlighted the power inequality between interviewer and interviewee particularly among this participant population. Collecting some of their emic perspectives in pairs may have yielded more evidence of the sociocognitive aspects of metalinguistic awareness and L2 learning, and may also have made the participants more comfortable.

3.10 Preview of Results

Given the methodology and design presented in this chapter, the results will be reported into two main chapters that follow here. In the first results chapter, I focus on the literacy program and explore from an etic perspective how metalinguistic awareness is addressed, encouraged, and revealed during the participants’ experiences in the classroom. The focus in chapter 4 is the opportunities for demonstration for metalinguistic awareness and language engagement within the instructional context, based on my literacy class observations and my review of the teachers’ daily email reports. Chapter 4 then serves as the backdrop for the second results chapter that will draw on the participants’ emic perspectives of their L2 learning during the interviews and metalinguistic reflection sessions.
4. Opportunities for Metalinguistic Awareness and Engagement with Language

“I wrote two cloze sentences on the board for Hana to review ‘his/has’ while we were waiting for Mizrak. Hana was still confused about these. I conjugated ‘have,’ and she asked if ‘has’ was the same as ‘have.’

Light bulb! Please check to see if it is still lit tomorrow 😊”.

[Carla’s email report, Sam and Pat group, 11/17/2014]

This chapter is the first of two chapters focusing on findings from the case study research. In this first results chapter, I focus on the literacy program and explore from an etic perspective how metalinguistic awareness is addressed, encouraged, and revealed during the participants’ experiences in the classroom. This chapter serves as the backdrop for the second results chapter that will draw on the participants’ emic perspectives of their L2 learning during the interviews and metalinguistic reflection sessions. The focus on this chapter are the opportunities for demonstration for metalinguistic awareness and language engagement within the instructional context, while the next chapter focuses on evidence of metalinguistic awareness from the participants’ emic perspective.

The research questions addressed in this chapter focus on identifying what opportunities actually existed for building on metalinguistic awareness in adult ESL instruction, with the eventual implication of maximizing these opportunities to build on the assets that these learners bring to the classroom.

- What pedagogical and environmental factors influence what students notice about the L2 and how metalinguistic awareness might be demonstrated?

- How supportive are the instructional practices that these students are typically offered, in terms of offering opportunities for demonstrating metalinguistic awareness and/or engagement with language?
4.1 Pedagogical and Environmental Factors Influencing Metalinguistic Awareness

In this section, I address the question, What pedagogical and environmental factors influence what students notice about the L2 and how metalinguistic awareness might be demonstrated? To do so, I describe the principal language and literacy skills as presented to the learners by the instructional materials and related practice activities. These data were compiled from document reviews of all instructional materials used in both of the literacy groups, as well as my observations of 37 literacy classes for these two groups during the data collection period. The purpose of this is to portray the range of options that students were given for paying attention to, noticing, engaging with, and interacting with different features of language – demonstrating that metalinguistic awareness is not just an innate ability of the individual but that it emerges as a reaction to the language input and exposure in the instructional environment.

4.1.1 Context of the literacy program. For many years, the ESL Pathways program has had a separate literacy track for students whose oral English skills were on par with their proficiency level but whose reading and writing skills lagged behind, often due to limited schooling in their home countries. In 2006, the literacy program was established as a supplementary program by one of the volunteer ESL teachers, so as to better serve the needs of those literacy track students who were struggling to keep up with their classmates in the literacy track classes. This teacher developed a stand-alone curriculum and set of literacy materials to address these students’ needs, and eventually expanded this literacy program to several sites in the community and trained other volunteers to provide the teaching.

The volunteer teachers follow a highly structured scope and sequence that covers a set amount of material in designated basal readers over the course of session, divided into 3-day or 4-day units. A basic lesson plan routine is used for each day of the unit, that incorporates various
combinations of activities related to students’ background knowledge, story vocabulary, alphabets, phonics and phonemic awareness, silent and spoken reading, oral comprehension, written comprehension, spelling, dictation of story vocabulary, and free-writing to demonstrate story comprehension and to practice writing skills. (See Appendix F for lesson plan templates.) 

This approach to L2 literacy development reflects Koda’s (2008) focus on grapho-phonological and grapho-morphological mapping as being “two specific facets [of metalinguistic awareness] of vital significance to learning to read in any language” (p. 75). It emphasizes bottom-up learning by building word families from vowel sounds, by narrowing language exposure to a tightly controlled script, and by prioritizing pre-determined content over the students’ personal needs for literacy use.

There are no formal assessments used to place students in the literacy classes or to measure their progress throughout the session. The literacy program coordinator relies on the volunteer teachers’ and classroom teachers’ reports regarding the students’ participation and progress in the literacy classes. Based on teacher recommendations, some students may continue receiving this additional literacy support for one or more sessions (if they choose to), while other students may find that one 11-week session of literacy classes is sufficient for bridging gaps in their literacy skills.

The literacy classes are held in a small breakout room, with just enough space for a table and six chairs and a supply cabinet in the corner. There is a white board at the front of the room and a large, colorful alphabet vocabulary chart on one of the walls. Other visual materials may be occasionally set in the tray attached to the white board, but in general it is not easy to display additional materials. One of the walls of the room is a floor to ceiling window that looks out into the hallway. The literacy classroom is in a wing of the school that is slightly set off from the
mainstream classrooms. Some of the students attending the class only have to walk a few feet to get from their classroom to the classroom, while others walk from one end of the school to the other.

As noted in the Methodology chapter, a cohort of five volunteer teachers provided the morning literacy classes featured in this study. (See Table 5 below.) Each volunteer teaches one literacy class per week, sharing the teaching duties with four other volunteer teachers. Many of the volunteer teachers have been working with ESL Pathways in various capacities for several years. Most of them do not have much formal training or certification in education, TESOL, or literacy development. They follow a highly scripted scope and sequence of work, with accompanying student materials, provided by the program’s literacy coordinator. To maintain consistency in delivering the content of the literacy curriculum, the volunteer teachers email a brief progress report to each other and to the classroom teachers every day, noting the main activities in the literacy class and any particular issues or challenges that arose for the students in completing the activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scheduled day to teach</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of times observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focal participants in this study were placed into two leveled groups, based on their classroom teachers’ and the literacy program coordinator’s observations. Hana was placed in the lower of the two groups, the Sam and Pat Group. This group used the adult literacy basal reader
Sam and Pat (Hartel, Lowry, & Hendon, 2005) to practice basic phonics (focus on short vowels), sight words, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and sentence dictation. The stories in this reader contain 10-17 simple sentences each, with a range of three to ten words per sentence. Each story is accompanied by approximately five comprehension questions (true/false statements or yes/no/WH- questions, depending on the level). (See Appendix G for a sample story.)

Tina, Marta, and Frida were placed in the more advanced Talk of the Block Group. The group used the adult literacy basal reader Talk of the Block (Haffner, 2005) to practice basic phonics (focus on short and long vowels), sight words, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and sentence dictation. The stories in this reader contain 14-25 sentences each, with a range of three to 12 words per sentence. Each story is accompanied by five to seven comprehension questions. According to program guidelines, students this group may be able to summarize the content of the stories in this basal reader through topical free-writing activities (short sentences). (See Appendix G for a sample story.)

To facilitate the reading process with these basal readers, the ESL Pathways staff dismantled the original published textbooks, putting each page into a plastic sheet protector that can be written on and erased using dry erase markers. These original textbook pages feature simple pictures that accompany any story, and were used to introduce the story at the beginning of each three-day unit. Keeping the original textbook pages in plastic sheets in binders also served to preserve the materials, which is important in a program that has limited financial resources to fund these literacy groups. The students were given their own copies of the story texts in binders to take home. These versions of the story text were typed and reformatted into Microsoft Word documents, without the accompanying pictures. The story text font in the student binders was Comic Sans MS, size 14. The sentences in the stories were divided into
separate lines and numbered, to help students focus on each line of text. After every two stories that were formatted in this way, the two stories were then combined into paragraph form to approximate “more authentic” forms of text and to provide additional review of the story content for the students.

The students’ binders contained the story pages for the given level, as well as approximately 20 blank pages of wide-ruled lined paper for the students to take notes on, do dictation activities, and complete their freewriting activities. The students were strongly encouraged to practice reading the stories and reviewing the activities at home on their own. They were also encouraged to keep their binders organized, by keeping the pages in order and by not adding extra materials to the binders. When students began a new writing exercise on the blank pages, they were encouraged to start writing on a fresh sheet of paper and to use the pages chronologically rather than skipping around and starting on random pages.

4.1.2 The primacy of vowels: “At, egg, in, on, up!” The presentation and practice of English vowels was the starting point and an underlying thread for all of the literacy classes. Each literacy class tended to begin with some phonemic awareness activities related to English vowels. The Sam and Pat group focused only on what was referred to as “short vowels” by the literacy program materials, while the Talk of the Block group covered both “short” and “long” vowels. The literacy program curriculum identified one particular short or long vowel focus for each literacy class, which was usually linked directly to the day’s story. For example, in the Talk of the Block story “A Bad Cold,” the “short /i/” phoneme [ɪ] is featured in the following words: is, with, Hill, Clinic, ill, in, will, give, pills, fix (see Figure 3). Some of these story words would be elicited by the teacher to prepare the students to connect the focus vowel sound with the
vocabulary found in the story. The featured vowel sound might be emphasized again later in the lesson during the story read-aloud, and again during the dictation exercise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 3. “A Bad Cold.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bob is with the doctor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. He is with the doctor at Hill Street Clinic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Bob says, “I don’t feel well. I feel ill.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The doctor tells Bob,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “You have a bad cold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Go home and get in bed.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The doctor says, “Don’t go to work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Get a lot of rest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Drink a lot of water.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Bob asks the doctor,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. “Will you give me pills?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Will pills fix my cold?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The doctor tells Bob,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. But pills can’t fix a cold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. You need rest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Don’t get upset.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. You will get well.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Referring to English vowels as “short” or “long” is common in L1 and L2 literacy materials, although the English vowel system is more complex and varied than this simplistic distinction (Derwing & Munro, 2015). This complexity was never addressed during my observations. However, the dichotomy of short versus long vowels was offered to the Talk of the Block group as a tool for decoding unfamiliar words that they encountered. This difference in vowel length does not exist in Spanish, so it was a new concept for the literacy students and one that needed much reinforcement – even when the primary focus of a practice activity was not on phonics.
Each literacy class generally began with a review of the same short vowel reference words (at, egg, in, on, up) or long vowel reference words (day, see, time, go, June) and then a focus on one of the vowels to build word families for phonological awareness, such as at-Pat-mat-sat-rat. These vowel reference words were consistently used by the literacy program to help the learners practice the English vowel sounds. In this way, the fundamental importance of English vowel sounds as being the key building block for all English words was emphasized repeatedly. In the following excerpt from my observation field notes, this emphasis is demonstrated in the overt shift in pedagogical focus from story comprehension to phonemic awareness. The class was using the illustration that accompanied the *Talk of the Block* story “At the Clinic” to recall the story plot and elicit relevant story vocabulary:

Jane (showing the story picture): “Tell me about the story.”
Mario: “Secretary sick the Bob.”
Jane: “What happens at the clinic?”
Marta: “Ask question what time is your appointment.”
Mario: “Sit and sit and sit.”
Frida: “Bob wants an appointment.”
Jane: “What else can you tell me about the story?”
Marco: “Desk.”
Jane: “A good short vowel sound, desk.”

[My observation notes, *Talk of the Block* group, 10/29/2014]

The primacy of the vowel sounds was also reinforced through general learning strategies or supplementary practice activities the teachers shared. Vowels were sometimes presented by the teachers as objects to scan for in the learners’ print environment:

“As you read, look for and be aware of words with short vowel sounds and long vowel sounds. These words [long vowels] say their name. It’s new for you.”


When Jane introduced herself to the *Talk of the Block* students for the first time, she started by spelling her own name and asking students to count the number of vowels in her name.
She then wrote each student’s name on the board, asked how many vowels were in each name, and asked if the vowels were long or short. Four weeks later in the literacy class, Jane reported that students continued being aware of the metalinguistic difference:

“I elicited the vowels and asked for words they knew with the sounds. Mario said, ‘Long or short?’ That comment itself was gratifying! I said, ‘Short,’ and they gave me several (correct) words for each vowel.”


In another lesson with the same group, Jane started the class with a vowel review and then a vowel reference word review. She distinguished the names (a, e, i, o, u) from the sounds that they represent (at, egg, it, on, up). To make an analogy with the difference between names and sounds, she drew a picture of a cat and asked “What is it? [a cat] What sound does it make? [meow]”. Jane’s attempt to connect letters with sounds exemplified the alphabetic principle for her students (Kruidenier, 2002). The learners in this class would have already had a solid grasp of the alphabetic principle given their L1 literacy skills, however limited they might be. The analogy is a useful one in the context of alphabetic literacy development, but it can only go so far in addressing the opaqueness of the English spelling system (Birch, 2007). In the literacy classes, the students’ attention was purposefully narrowed to this (mis)representation of vowels as having a one-to-one correspondence with sounds and as being either long or short.

### 4.1.3 The vocabulary of adult literacy stories

As *Talk of the Block* and *Sam and Pat* are both story-based literacy materials, the content-based vocabulary of the stories were also strongly emphasized in the literacy class curriculum. Both sets of texts reflect common themes and related vocabulary for adults’ lives in the United States: Family, health care, health problems, home life, shopping, work, and community. The teachers were given four to six vocabulary words for each story to pre-teach and then review while the students read the story.
Putting the vocabulary words on the board before reading the story drew attention to their spelling, their pronunciation, their meaning, and their potential use in the story context before they were even encountered in the story. All of the stories had accompanying illustrations, which were used along with realia to help students understand the meaning of the vocabulary words.

Previewing vocabulary words is a common strategy used in L2 reading instruction (Anderson, 1999; Ely, Kennedy, Pullen, Williams, & Hirsch, 2014; Perfetti & Stafura, 2015). In this ESL literacy setting, vocabulary words were often connected to the phonics focus of the day and used for additional practice with vowels or consonants. For example, Ellen reported in her daily email report on November 13: “I wrote the new vocab on the board; stress, jog, quit, get rid of, don’t have time, well, exercise; they pointed out the short vowel sounds [in each of those words].” In general, the teachers wrote the vocabulary words on the board and went over them one by one, eliciting meanings from the students whenever possible. When a student arrived late to the session, she was sometimes directed to read whatever words had been written on the board aloud as a means of getting integrated into the lesson as quickly as possible.

The students also served as vocabulary resources for one another by drawing on their background knowledge of their classmates’ lives. In one instance in the Sam and Pat group, Adam struggled to understand the vocabulary words “day off.” Hana knew Adam’s work schedule, and when attempts by others in the class failed to help him understand this term, Hana said to him, “Today and tomorrow,” to illustrate that those were his days off from work. It was clear from their often telegraphic illustrations of vocabulary words that the students understood many of the words covered in the literacy classes. For example, Mizrak equated the vocabulary word “expensive” with the supermarkets Giant and Whole Foods. For the word “who,” Hana said, “Who Mizrak, no?” to indicate that “who” refers to a person. For the word “gas,” Hana
said, “Gas is the stove, gas the car.” In many cases, the literacy students were able to relate the meanings of the vocabulary words directly to their own lives. The students were often eager to provide whatever illustrations or examples that they could during the vocabulary focus of the lesson, while their attempts at phonemic awareness and story comprehension were not always as successful.

**4.1.4 Reading and writing the stories.** The literacy groups used stories from *Talk of the Block* or *Sam and Pat* as the focus of instruction. Each story was usually covered in three days, as dictated by the literacy program curriculum. The students were routinely asked to respond to story comprehension questions orally and in writing. The comprehension questions were written very explicitly, so that the students could find the answers directly in the texts. During the first two days of a story, the students responded to the questions orally, and were not allowed to write the answers to the questions. On the third day of a story, the students were then directed to write the answers to the questions. This prioritizing of oral response before written response is a common approach in working with low-literate adult L2 learners (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010). The purpose of doing so is to build literacy skills on a strong foundation of oral language and content knowledge. The expectation was that by the third day of the story, the content of the expected responses would be clear to the students, and the focus could then shift to writing practice. Table 6 provides a few examples of the types of story comprehension questions and their expected answers found in both basal readers. Students were strongly guided to answer questions in complete sentences.
Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basal Reader</th>
<th>Story Text</th>
<th>Story Comprehension Questions</th>
<th>Expected Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam and Pat</td>
<td>1. Sam and Pat are happy. 2. Pat and Sam need help. Pat can work. But Sam has no job.</td>
<td>1. Are Sam and Pat happy? 2. Who has no job?</td>
<td>1. Yes, Sam and Pat are happy. 2. Sam has no job.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The final activity of most classes was a short dictation exercise based on the day’s story. The students were directed to turn to a blank or clean sheet of paper in their binders. The teachers would dictate between one and three sentences directly from the day’s story, and the students would write down what they heard and then check their answers with the teacher. The dictation was intended to help students practice their spelling, the story vocabulary, and mechanics such as capital letters and periods. Sometimes the teachers I observed would scaffold the dictation for the students by telling them how many words were in the sentence or by representing the number of words to listen for with lines on the board. Providing the number of expected words allowed the students to count or follow along with their finger as they checked their sentences against the target answer. If students struggled with the spelling of a word in the dictation, the teachers might do a quick review of the spelling on the board or direct the students to look in their binders for the correct spelling.
Dictation and other short writing exercises provided the primary opportunity for students to learn about punctuation. The teachers usually emphasized and corrected the use of capital letters at the beginning of sentences and in names, as well as the period at the end of the sentence, which students often left off but would quickly remember to add if reminded. The use of quotation marks, however, proved to be much more challenging. In one Talk of the Block dictation activity, the students were directed to write the sentence from the story: ‘Bob tells Pam, “My name is Bob Finn.”’ It appeared that the students were able to write most of the words but neglected to include any punctuation. Jane directed their attention to this by saying, “Anything else you might add? Which words are exactly what Bob said? What are Bob’s words?” The students were able to identify Bob’s words as being “My name is Bob Finn,” so Jane then asked them, “So what do we put [for punctuation]?” Tina offered, “Apostrophe?” Jane corrected her with, “Quotation marks. One here at the beginning [visual emphasis on the board] and one here at the end [visual emphasis on the board]” [My observation notes, Talk of the Block group, 10/29/14].

4.1.5 The use of the white board. The board is the focal point in most L2 classrooms that rely on print-based methods to teach language and literacy. It can be an essential source of information, a reflection of expected classroom behaviors, and a model of how one should engage with the L2 and schooling practices. The usefulness and relevance of the board to students, however, is dependent to a certain extent on how students have been socialized into print literacy and formal instruction. The teachers often used the board to focus students’ attention on phonemes, word analysis, spelling and mechanics, vocabulary and story content, and linguistic features that were persistently challenging. The board space was also used to decode new words or to compare and contrast phonemes that the students might confuse, such as [bæt]
Teachers often led students through transformation exercises to build automaticity in recognizing and producing the focal vowel sound of the day. In these drills, the teacher would write one short word on the board and change one consonant at a time, having the students read the new word with each change (e.g., rat – pat – pan – ran – tan – can – fan – fat). The teachers often drew the students’ attention to this series of word transformations written on the board, saying something similar to what Linda explained to the *Sam and Pat* group:

“That’s how you’ll be able to read words you don’t know. It’s the same sound… It’s the same thing, you just sound [it] out.”

[My observation notes, *Sam and Pat* group, 10/21/14]

The teachers used the board for word analysis exercises to draw students’ attention to linguistic features that were separated out – for example, to break words up into syllables or morphemes for pronunciation. This type of practice was often linked to the story vocabulary itself. In addition to providing linguistic input, the teachers often used the board to illustrate something graphically or to provide some visual to aid in the students’ comprehension of a concept or linguistic feature. These illustrations included drawings and diagrams to illustrate vocabulary words, charts used to categorize linguistic features into patterns, abstract representations of idiomatic expressions such as “up to 30 days,” punctuation marks, and shifts in word order from questions to answers.

The teachers often directed students to look at the board when they were struggling or searching for answer, under the assumption that the students’ use of the board as a resource would assist them in learning. In my observations, I rarely saw the teachers explicitly state this as a strategy to the students, but it was something that was encouraged in different ways. During one dictation exercise, the *Sam and Pat* group was asked to write down the story sentence, “Gus can get Sam.” Hana struggled with this sentence, eventually writing, “Gas can ge Sam” on her
paper. When she saw the correct answer that Carla had written on the board, Hana independently self-corrected her written sentence in her binder. Carla noticed her self-correction and praised her, “I like the way you wrote it, you looked at it, and you corrected it” [My observation notes, Sam and Pat group, 11/10/2014].

During the dictation exercises in particular, the teachers often reminded the students to look at the board since the words to be dictated or the target answers had often already been written up there earlier in the lesson. However, it was not always an automatic reaction for the students to check the board while they were writing, so this type of practice to socialize students into classroom literacy may have taken time to develop. Even in the last week of the 11-week session, Tina still needed these reminders from her teacher to look at the board if she had trouble spelling a word or if she wanted to check her work [My observation notes, Talk of the Block group, 12/10/2014].

In sum, I found that the teachers brought the students’ attention to English vowels frequently during each literacy class, using the story texts and board work as the basis for focusing this attention. The name and articulated sound(s) of the vowels, the word families and patterns they created, and strategies for decoding them were a point of attention and an underlying topic of discussion or practice at any given time in the literacy class. Regardless of whether the intended instructional focus was on phonics, orthography, story vocabulary, story comprehension, content, dictation, or pronunciation, vowels were woven into the classroom talk and classroom consciousness. The stories themselves were used primarily to build vocabulary knowledge and to practice connecting comprehension questions to answers in the text. The story exercises and the white board were mainly used to focus students’ attention on phonemic awareness, spelling, pronunciation, and punctuation. A trajectory often seemed to be followed
between the board and the students’ binders that focused the learners’ attention on particular linguistic features. When these features went up on the board, the students knew that they needed to pay attention. The board was the focal point in the room and the teacher’s use of it dictated the students needed to attend to. In this middle space, students used the board as a reference for what they should be looking at or doing in their binder. Overall, the environment was heavily print-based, with students expected to imitate these print-based practices in their own personal notebooks. The connection between these findings and the focal participants’ own metalinguistic ideas and beliefs about language and L2 learning is explored later in Chapter 5.

4.2 Recognizing and Maximizing Opportunities for Metalinguistic Awareness and Engagement with Language

In this section, I address the question, *How supportive are the instructional practices that these students are typically offered, in terms of offering opportunities for demonstrating metalinguistic awareness and/or engagement with language?* To do so, I begin by examining some of the perspectives regarding English language instruction that were offered by the literacy teachers themselves. These perspectives give us a glimpse into how the teachers approached literacy instruction, which provides some necessary background information for interpreting the primary results. I then present evidence of opportunities for cognitive, affective, and social engagement (Svalberg, 2009) provided by the instructional setting, followed by examples of potentially missed opportunities for engagement with language. These data were compiled from the teachers’ daily email reports and my own literacy class observations. The purpose of this exploration is to ascertain how amenable the instructional environment was for engaging in language about language – e.g., metalinguistic awareness.
4.2.1 The L2 perspectives of the ESL literacy teachers. In considering the opportunities offered to the participants to engage with language, it is important to make some comment on the teachers’ stated beliefs and practices related to L2 awareness. Thornbury (1997) defined teacher language awareness as “the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively” (p. x). Borg’s (1999) qualitative study of L2 teachers’ use of grammatical knowledge in the classroom suggested that it is this particular knowledge – and how it is shared with students – that impacts the learners’ knowledge, not any particular methodology or materials itself. Andrews (2007) claimed that “the language-aware L2 teacher is more likely to be effective in promoting student learning than the teacher who is less language-aware” (p. ix). According to these authors, teacher language awareness and their ability to convey language knowledge play important roles in the success of their students’ learning.

Only one of the five volunteer literacy teachers in this study had received sustained, formal training in adult literacy or L2 instruction: Diane had spent most of her adult life working in adult ESL programs and in teacher training. The other four teachers had limited formal training in adult L2 literacy instruction. It is reasonable to assume that much of the teachers’ language awareness came about as a result of their own previous learning experiences – which would certainly have been colored by their high levels of formal education in a print-based context throughout their lives. On a methodological note, I did not interview any of the teachers or follow up with any of them about their classes. What is analyzed here is based only on my literacy class observations and my review of their daily email reports, which represents a very small piece of what would be each teacher’s much larger and more complex perspective on L2 learning, L2 teaching, and metalinguistic awareness.
The teachers’ talk about language during and after the literacy classes, via their daily email reports, implied three relevant perspectives: (1) L2 instruction can be described by what has been covered (e.g., linguistic features, vocabulary words, practice activities) and what appears to have been (mis)understood; (2) L2 instruction should be responsive to students’ questions, errors, and interests through direct explanations, the provision and elicitation of examples, and additional review or practice opportunities; and (3) L2 instruction is quite often a guessing game for teachers and students alike.

When the students asked a question about a linguistic feature or demonstrated a lack of understanding, the literacy teachers reported using a variety of strategies to address the issue. One language function covered in the literacy classes was the asking and answering of questions, as each story was accompanied by reading comprehension questions that were answered orally or in writing. The teachers reported on their students’ struggles with English question words, with word order in English questions, with auxiliaries in English questions, and with the transformation of questions into responses. One strategy that was occasionally used by Jane to deal with these problems with English questions was simple L1 translation, possible because she spoke Spanish:

“They asked the meaning of ‘What do you do?’ … I really hate the verb ‘do’. I just gave them the Spanish translation ‘qué haces?’ Seemed much easier in that moment.”

[Jane’s email report, Talk of the Block group, 11/5/2014]

More often, the literacy teachers reported tackling these issues directly with the students. When Diane noticed that all four students incorrectly wrote the answer to a comprehension question as ‘My doctor not cost a lot,’ she viewed it as a teachable moment:
“I pointed out the missing word does. Marta asked me when to use it. We did a mini grammar lesson. I explained that questions and negatives get the extra verb – do/does. Marta said this was always confusing, but she understands now. It will be interesting to see.”
[Diane’s email report, Talk of the Block group, 11/7/2014]

The teachers sometimes reported asking students to come up with examples on their own, and one example from Linda highlights how fruitful that strategy could be:

“Then we reviewed ‘how many’ and they made up questions to ask each other and they did well. Frida then asked about ‘nothing’ so we had a discussion with lots of examples about this word – ex., ‘What are you doing tonight?’ ‘Nothing.’ We talked about how nothing is different from how many.”
[Linda’s email report, Talk of the Block group, 11/14/2014]

In this instance, Linda’s openness to taking on Frida’s question led to more language-focused discussion. A similar episode occurred when Linda reviewed the phrase ‘I am sick of ____’:

“We worked on ‘I am sick of ____’ and I think they've got it - at least they gave some pretty entertaining examples - especially Mario!”
[Linda’s email report, Talk of the Block group, 10/28/2014]

The literacy teachers often expressed doubts about whether or not students understood what had been presented or practiced in class. Given the 30-minute length of each literacy session and the amount of material to be covered, there was little time for any kind of formal assessment of student learning. This limitation resulted in guesses or intuitions about understanding, such as:

“We did the comprehension questions orally. [Mizrak’s] answers were all over the map -- inserting ‘I’ into every answer. For ex., ‘No, I am Sam and Pat are married.’ I tried to explain that ‘I’ meant ‘Mizrak.’ Maybe she got it” [my italics].
[Substitute teacher’s email report, Sam and Pat group, 10/15/2014]

“Seemed there was some confusion between ‘come’ and ‘go’ as well, so I tried to show the difference with a perspective diagram on the board of Sandra here and her Mom in El Salvador. Also pointed out that they have the same distinction in Spanish with ‘come’ and ‘go’. I think it sank in.” [my italics].
[Jane’s email report, Talk of the Block group, 10/22/2014]
Here, Diane described the challenge of answering Mizrak’s question about the conjunction ‘but’:

“We discussed how it is used. I tried to give a very simple explanation about using it when we say two contrasting things. A difficult concept to explain. I’m not sure it was clearer than mud in the end 😅” [my italics].
[Diame’s email report, Sam and Pat group, 11/7/2014]

From the teachers’ reports, it seems that they often relied on the students’ tentative questions or guesses as evidence of understanding. In the excerpt below, Carla had been asked by another teacher to review the difference between ‘his’ and ‘has’ with Hana, since she had struggled with it previously when trying to distinguish the vowels:

“I wrote two cloze sentences on the board for Hana to review ‘his/has’ while we were waiting for Mizrak. Hana was still confused about these. I conjugated ‘have,’ and she asked if ‘has’ was the same as ‘have.’ Light bulb! Please check to see if it is still lit tomorrow 😊” [my italics].
[Carla’s email report, Sam and Pat group, 11/17/2014]

In my observation, the literacy teachers relied primarily on trying to explain difficult concepts for students through definitions, examples, and other illustrations. In some cases, the teachers used grammatical explanations that were technically correct but did not seem appropriate for the learners’ comprehension. The reliance on explanation could have been a result of the limited amount of time that each teacher had to cover the assigned material. Formal opportunities for student-centered discovery or awareness-raising activities would certainly be limited in a 30-minute period that needs to include phonics, vocabulary, reading, story comprehension, and writing. However, as I demonstrate in the next section, the teachers did welcome and encourage questions and comments that were raised by the students – providing evidence of many opportunities for engagement with language at various levels.
4.2.2 Opportunities for cognitive engagement with language. Cognitive engagement according to Svalberg (2009, pp. 246-247) may be related to alertness, focused attention and reflection, and problem solving; it can be observed based on whether or not a learner makes comparisons, asks questions, or draws conclusions about language features. Given this definition, it seemed that cognitive engagement was the most frequent way that the participants were engaged in language during the literacy classes. This focus on attention and reflection about the L2 is the most similar in definition to the traditional cognitive notion of metalinguistic awareness. For example, the teachers would often use the vocabulary words written on the board for what I have come to think of as opening the bidding from students on their knowledge or understanding of a particular word. To preview one lesson’s story vocabulary, Jane wrote the word “ready” on the board, and then opened the bidding by asking, “Does anyone know this word? Are you ready to go home? Are you ready to eat? Are you ready for the cold?” The students nodded to acknowledge that they knew the word, so Jane moved on and wrote the word “costs” on the board. Everyone read the word aloud, then Marta offered an example of the word’s use in context, “In the store. You pay the cost.” Jane confirmed Marta’s example, “Right. How much money.” [My observation notes, Talk of the Block group, 11/5/2014].

The students’ cognitive engagement was not limited to opportunities when the teachers opened the bidding for student responses, but rather was demonstrated by the students’ self-directed questioning of the teachers. During the 11 weeks of the literacy classes, the use of quotation marks in the story dialogues was a paralinguistic feature that was not easily understood by the learners. In one of several attempts to explain the meaning and function of quotation marks to the Talk of the Block group, Linda tried to use the white board to illustrate visually the beginning and the end of quoted speech using quotation marks, saying, “Someone is speaking
directly. Look at line 3 in the story: ‘Bob says, “I don’t feel well.”’ [points to quotation marks in line 3 of the story in each one of the students’ binders] This is the beginning [points to opening quotation mark], this is the end [points to closing quotation mark]. He speaks. It’s what he says. Look at line 5. This is what the doctor says: You have a bad cold. Go home and get in bed.” Tina noticed that the doctor’s response began in line 5 – “You have a bad cold. – but continued to line 6: Go home and get in bed.” The opening quotation mark was on line 5 and the closing quotation mark was on line 6. Tina very astutely asked: “Why only here and here?” [pointing to the fact that the quotation goes across multiple lines, and wondering why the marks aren’t at the end of every line]. Linda’s explanation was succinct: “He talks for two lines” [My observation notes, Talk of the Block group, 11/4/2014].

Tina’s question is a strong example of cognitive engagement, but we can argue that the required follow up was not there in Linda’s response. The teachers’ signaling of quoted speech in the literacy class texts was done in two-dimensional, text-oriented ways rather than in ways that would highlight the true nature of interaction between speakers. The punctuation was made visible to students and attempts were made to explain the purpose of the quotation marks in text (e.g., “He speaks. It’s what he says”). However, the students continued to struggle with quotation marks throughout the 12-week session, and my questions to them in interviews and metalinguistic reflections indicated that they were still unsure about the usage. This uncertainty may be due to the lack of multimodal resources in illustrating the dynamic nature of dialogue as represented in print. Multimodal resources such as gestures, voice dramatization, or role play may have been more effective in addressing this issue. More directly, it would be difficult for these learners to express understanding and to engage at length in the L2English.
The following example indicates how cognitive engagement did not always lead to expected learning outcomes, particularly when different language features were conflated by the instructional focus. In one of the *Sam and Pat* stories, Pat’s job as a school cafeteria worker is described in Figure 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson 12: Pat’s Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pat works in a school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a big school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her job is to fix lunch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She can fix lunch for the kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today she will fix fish sticks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The kids come in at 11:30 A.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish sticks are good for the kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But the kids say, “Ick! Fish sticks!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Fish sticks stink!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.* Text from “Pat’s Job.”

After reading this riveting story about cafeteria fish sticks, Jane asked Hana and Mizrak to talk about what was happening in the story. Hana began by providing the general context (line 1), and Mizrak chimed in with some details (line 2) before a misunderstanding arose about the fish that Pat cooks (lines 5-7):

```
1  Hana: “Pat work in the school.”
2  Mizrak: “Is cooker. Make food. [Mizrak lists the food that Pat can make.]”
3  Hana: “Fish.”
4  Jane: “What kind of fish?”
5  Hana: “11:30.”
6  Mizrak: “Salmon.”
7  Hana: “What time. What time.”
```

[Jane draws a picture of a fish and a fish stick, then writes ‘sticks’ on the board.]

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8  Mizrak and Hana (in unison): “Oh yeah sticks.”
9  Jane: “Do the kids like it?”
10  Hana: “No like. Stink.”
11  Mizrak: “[smɪl] not good.”
12  Jane (contrasting ‘smell’ and ‘smile,’ draws a picture of a nose and a smiling mouth): “Can you hear the difference?”
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133
Hana: “Smile is the teeth?”
Jane: “Smile is happy. Stink means bad smell.”

[My observation notes, Sam and Pat group, 12/3/2014]

Lines 5 and 7 indicate that Hana had misunderstood the question “What kind of fish?” as “What time [are the fish sticks served]?” Misunderstandings are a normal occurrence among beginners, but it is interesting to note how quickly and emphatically Hana tried to answer a different question. It was almost as if Hana was poised to answer a specific question about time. Her emphatic attempt to correct Mizrak in line 7 indicated how certain she was of the question that Jane asked. It may be, however, that with the nature of this question-based literacy curriculum, the students were frequently trying to guess or anticipate the answer expected by the teacher (or, by extension, the instructional materials themselves). It seems as if Hana was prioritizing the schooling practice that could be described as “figure out what the teacher wants” over her more careful comprehension of the story.

A different shift in focus then occurred in lines 11-14. In line 11, Mizrak indicated that she understood the word “stink” by offering the definition “smell not good.” Rather than validating Mizrak’s vocabulary knowledge, Jane instead focused on Mizrak’s (mis)pronunciation of “smell” as [smaɪl] and thus shifted the discussion to a pronunciation focus. In line 12, Jane tried to show Mizrak the problem with pronouncing “smell” as “[smaɪl].” The drawing then confused Hana, who questioned in line 13 if the word “smile” meant “teeth,” since that is how the drawing appeared. Jane’s response in line 14 brings the conversation back around to the synonymous relationship between “stink” and “bad smell.” Jane’s focus on Mizrak’s slight mispronunciation of the word “smell” brought the conversation farther off-topic than necessary and, in fact, overlooked the fact that Mizrak’s comprehension of the word “stink” was actually correct.
Opportunities for affective engagement with language. Svalberg’s (2009) affective engagement is related to the learner’s willingness to interact with the L2 and/or an L2 interlocutor, a positive and purposeful orientation toward the L2, and an autonomous disposition to L2 learning. It can be observed when a learner seems eager to participate rather than withdrawn, demonstrates independent rather than dependent learning behavior, and seems focused on the task rather than bored. This aspect of engagement with language is perhaps more difficult to observe and assess from an outsider’s perspective, and may be conflated with a variety of other factors that cannot be distinguished objectively. All of the participants had been recommended to the literacy classes by their classroom teachers, but their continued attendance was voluntary, indicating a definite willingness to interact in the L2. Their willingness to interact with L2 interlocutors, however, may have been much more oriented to communicating with their teachers rather than their classmates. This orientation must have been influenced naturally by the teacher-centered, explanation-heavy, and print-focused method of instruction. In this sense, affective engagement would be constrained by who they were interested in communicating with and what they were interested in communicating about. Nevertheless, the continued attendance of Tina, Marta, Frida, and Hana – when many of their other classmates stopped coming to the ESL classes – is an indication of their affective engagement with their L2 learning.

A counter-example that might illustrate a certain level of affective withdrawal can be offered in the following excerpt. As illustrated in Table 6 above, some of the reading comprehension questions in Talk of the Block required students to understand a shift in perspective when quoted speech appeared. This often caused a problem for the students, who consistently struggled with quoted speech and the verb “says,” which I noted in my observations and in the metalinguistic reflection tasks. In this example, Mario is referring back to quoted
dialogue in the story text to answer the question, “How does Bob spell his last name?” Mario did not recognize the function of ‘Bob says’ with the quoted speech, but Linda emphasized the expected response through her corrective feedback. Given Mario’s silence after Linda’s final correction, it is not clear if her point was understood:

1 Linda: OK, Mario.
2 Mario: Who does-
3 Linda: Not who. What’s that word?
4 Mario: How does Bob spell his last name? Um. [pauses as he looks for the answer in the text] Uh. F-I-N-N Bob says.
5 Linda: Well, how does he spell his last name? Just give me the four letters. F…
6 Mario: F-I-N-N –
7 Linda: Mm hm that’s the only, that’s all–
8 Mario: – Bob says
9 Linda: – You don’t say Bob says. Cuz the question is, ‘How does he spell his last name?’ F-I-N-N. Right?
10 Mario: [silence]

[My observation notes, Talk of the Block group, 10/28/2014]

In line 5, Linda responded to Mario’s error in reproducing the entire sentence from the story text: “‘F-I-N-N,’ Bob says.” She prompted him to focus just on the four letters of Bob’s last name, and jumped to interrupt him in line 7 as soon as he finished spelling the name, perhaps with the intention of preempting another error. In line 9, she repeats her corrective feedback, which Mario responds to with silence.

In my observations, the instructional emphasis in the story comprehension questions was on “getting it right” and providing a complete sentence, following the exact information in the text. The literacy teachers usually wrote the target answer on the board and guided students to make corrections in their content, spelling, or mechanics as needed. The focus on full-sentence answers may have been helpful in reproducing vocabulary and formulating sentence structure, but it likely caused some concern or confusion in the students as they scrambled to find the exact phrasing required by the teacher without necessarily comprehending the content. However,
negative corrective feedback did not always result in a dip in affective engagement; in my observations, Marta seemed particularly willing and eager to continue actively engaging in the class even after her errors were pointed out. In fact, receiving corrective feedback often seemed to increase Marta’s affective engagement with language. Her high level of affective engagement is discussed in the Chapter 6.

4.2.4 Opportunities for social engagement with language. In Svalberg’s (2009) proposal, social engagement is related to initiating and maintaining interaction behaviors. It can be observed based on whether or not the learner uses social interaction for learning, engages in negotiation for meaning, and initiates interactions with others. Although the literacy lessons tended to follow a more traditional initiation-response-feedback loop (Walsh, 2011) between the teacher and each student, some of the richest opportunities for social engagement occurred when students encountered difficult vocabulary words. In contrast to the story vocabulary words that were relatively concrete, the students sometimes struggled with more abstract vocabulary (e.g., “get well,” “get help,” “upset,” “can” [modal]). In these cases, the students were usually encouraged to listen to the teacher’s explanation and then think through the word meanings as a group by offering possible definitions, L1 translations, or examples. Some of these group discussions resulted in very rich, engaging interactions as the students worked together to build comprehension. In the following excerpt, Carla asked the learners about the meaning of the word “quit,” which appeared in the story. The students initially struggled with decoding the word, but then they quickly came together to contribute meaningful examples demonstrating their understanding of the word:

Carla: What about this word [points to ‘quit’]?
Students: [kyut]… [kIt]?
Carla: Quit! What does quit mean?
Dahlia: Fat? [meaning ‘fast’]
Carla: No, that’s quick.
Tina: When no like one job. Quit.
Mario: No more here!
All: I quit! I quit! [laughter]
Marta: I quit! Is difficult English. I quit. No more English! Is correct? ....
      Only example.
[My observation notes, Talk of the Block group, 11/10/2014]

The excerpt above captures a moment of collective levity in the literacy class, as they used their English to briefly abandon themselves to the idea of quitting whatever bothered them. The episode culminated with Marta’s playful threat to quit studying English, but after Carla expressed dismay at this prospect, Marta quickly reassured her teacher that it was only an example that illustrated her comprehension of the word. We can hypothesize that this interaction was the culmination of social engagement that provided the necessary group-think to arrive at Marta’s final example.

4.2.5 The board’s role in engaging students. The board was a visual and physical focal point and resource in each literacy class, and therefore had the potential to engage learners cognitively, affectively, and socially. However, the use of the board as an instructional resource did not always seem to be as effective as intended. When the role of the board as a source of information was prioritized, it may have led to students copying from the board indiscriminately or getting slowed down due to time spent on laborious copy work. In one dictation activity from the Talk of the Block text, the students took a long time to write down the dictated sentence “Pam and Jean can talk about good food.” What Jane ended up writing on the board as the target version of the sentence was quite different than what most of the students initially produced. Time seemed to stand still while the students slowly and painstakingly checked their own work
against the board and made corrections as needed [My observation notes, Talk of the Block group, 12/3/2014].

I might argue that the teachers’ practice of writing the correct answer on the board deterred students from taking initiative in their own literacy development. I often observed students waiting to write down part or all of an expected answer until they could see it written on the board and copy down the correct version. On one occasion, students were asked to write down the syntactically and semantically complex sentence, “The boss says I can’t come back.” I watched Hana write “The boss saysa” in her binder and stop, waiting to see the dictation written on the board before attempting anything further [My observation notes, Sam and Pat group, 12/10/2014]. In another class, the students were trying to answer the reading comprehension question “Who is upset?” No one seemed able to answer it, but I watched Marta write “Quién” in her binder twice while patiently waiting for the answer to be written on the board so she could copy it.

Social engagement around board work was rare, as the students themselves rarely went to the board to draw or write on it. More regularly, the teachers elicited oral responses from students that they (the teachers) would then transcribe on the board. In my observations, I only saw three episodes in which the teacher invited students to come to the board to write their answer. Interestingly, Frida and Tina both mentioned their desire to write more on the board in our interviews (see Chapter 6). In the incident depicted below, Tina had been invited to come to the board and write her response to the story comprehension question “Who is Jean?” After the class negotiated the correct answer (“Jean is Pam’s mom”), and Tina wrote her response on the board: Jean is Pams mom. Marta noticed the missing apostrophe from Tina’s written sentence on
the board. Unable to explain in English exactly what was wrong with Tina’s sentence, Marta took the initiative to go to the board to make the correction herself:

Marta: “In the Pams [tries to indicate something is missing; goes to board to put in the apostrophe]... What is the name?”
Jane: “Apostrophe. [writes ‘apostrophe’ on board] It shows possession.”
[My observation notes, Talk of the Block group, 12/3/2014]

When Marta returned to her seat, she came back to her binder where she had originally written “Pam’s,” drew an arrow to the apostrophe, and copied the word ‘apostrophe’ next to it – presumably so that she could remember the name of the mark in the future.

When peers wrote on the board, the students had the opportunity to notice and talk through the errors that they saw their peers making. Board work – either reading from the board or contributing text to the board—was often a source of peer corrective feedback. In one email report, Jane described how the students’ board work resulted in “just enough mistakes to work with” for everyone to collaboratively provide corrective feedback:

“I thought I’d see what they could write BEFORE seeing the story again. So I asked them to write several sentences about Kim’s story. Then I had them each select one of the sentences and write it on the board so that we could review it together. Tina wrote: ‘Kim is at home.’ Mario wrote, ‘Kim sick at you house.’ Marta wrote, ‘Kim has two kinds.’ Just enough mistakes to work with! One of the ladies noted the missing ‘is’ from Mario's sentence. We discussed possessive pronouns, deciding Mario wanted ‘her house.’ And we noted the difference between kind and kid.”
[Jane’s email report, Talk of the Block group, 11/19/14]

Using the board to engage in collaborative corrective feedback seemed to create a transactional space in the classroom through which language was passed back and forth among the teachers and students. This transactional space – where language is given, received, and exchanged – was also evident in the feedback loop it provided for the students. By this I mean that seeing the word sometimes surprised the students because they had no idea it was spelled that way, or hearing a word sometimes surprised the students because it didn’t look like it should
be pronounced that way. In other words, reading words from the board and seeing words written on the board helped create a feedback loop connecting the students’ phonemic awareness with orthographic knowledge. The students’ metalinguistic awareness was potentially developed or used during this give-and-take using the board.

Given the relatively low experience with print and formal education settings, it seemed that the board could both positively and negatively impact the students’ learning practices. Many of the examples here illustrate how the board was used in some way to facilitate the students’ understanding and production of phonemes, vocabulary words, story meanings, and the mechanics of writing. In these ways, board work had a role in mediating these students’ opportunities for display and development of metalinguistic awareness. However, the board could also be seen as a barrier to literacy development, particularly when its role was not clearly understood by the students or they saw it as preempting their practice.

4.3 Concluding Thoughts on Opportunities for Language Engagement

My in-depth observation of the logistical and programmatic context for ESL Pathways’ volunteer teacher-run literacy classes made it obvious that these 30-minute classes made use of a scripted, story-based curriculum that provided content relevant to adults’ lives. The stories in *Talk of the Block* and *Sam and Pat* were carefully crafted to focus on particular features of phonics, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary within familiar topics of work, health, and family. The teachers’ daily email reports provided a general sense of what was prioritized in the literacy classes, aligning with the curricular expectations: A focus on short and/or long vowels, an introduction or review of vocabulary words and sight words from the day’s story, a read-aloud of
the story, oral or written responses to reading comprehension questions about the story, and then
dictation of several sentences taken directly from the story.

This pattern was designed to be beneficial to the volunteer literacy teachers and the
students themselves, as it assured plenty of routine and repetition for the students, with little
lesson planning required for the teachers. It is not surprising, therefore, that the teachers tended
to report on the practice, successes, and challenges that the students had with these components
of L2 literacy development. These building blocks are related in important ways to the
connection between metalinguistic awareness and literacy development:

The significance of this [metalinguistic] ability lies in its capacity for enabling the learner
to analyze words into their phonological and morphological constituents. Since learning
to read entails learning to map between spoken language elements and the graphic
symbols that encode those elements, metalinguistic awareness, emanating from oral-
language development, substantially expedites the initial stages of reading acquisition.
(Koda, 2008, p. 70)

It is commendable that ESL Pathways provides this level of explicit, focused, and
intentional L2 literacy instruction to students who are in need of it, while still managing to keep
these students integrated in their mainstream classroom for most of their instructional time. It is
remarkable to see how well this system is organized and functions, particularly given the limited
resources and limited teacher training for working with this learner population. In this tight
structure and explicit bottom-up approach, the students found some virtue, as they seemed to
take advantage of opportunities for the display of their metalinguistic resources and their
language engagement. They also were able to expand and extend their metalinguistic awareness
in some ways. In other ways, nonetheless, the capacity of this instructional context to welcome
and challenge processes of metalinguistic awareness and language engagement also showed
some limitations.
From my time observing the literacy classes and reviewing the teachers’ own reports of their literacy classes, I am able to draw several tentative conclusions about the nature of the classes’ context and content and its impact on students’ metalinguistic awareness. Regarding the question of the pedagogical and environmental factors that influence what students notice about the L2 and how metalinguistic awareness might be demonstrated: If the primary focus of the classes remains on vowels, phonics, and rather isolated word study, that focus will likely impact how the students themselves perceive English and their metalinguistic awareness of English. Much of the vocabulary work is done word-by-word, and sometimes phoneme-by-phoneme. Although the words are couched in life-skills stories, there is an absence of semantic, meaning-oriented work on words. Word work is done in a rather piecemeal way, with much of the focus on definitions and pronunciations of the words. The students’ focus on language and their development of language awareness will be constrained by the models, explanations, and analysis provided by their teachers. Given that virtually all of the teachers’ language is in English and represents a highly literate native English speaker’s perspective, the students’ metalinguistic awareness can only be demonstrated to the extent that (1) they understand and can respond to their teachers’ utterances, and (2) their teachers understand and can respond to the students’ utterances.

Regarding the question of how supportive the instructional practices are, in terms of offering opportunities for demonstrating metalinguistic awareness and/or engagement with language: The instructional practices were oriented more to opportunities for cognitive engagement with language rather than social engagement. The pace of these 30-minute classes moved quickly, and the students had to use their attentional resources on the class activities and their teachers’ explanations in order to keep up. The primary interactional trajectory was teacher
student → teacher, with consultations of text in the story books or text written on the board as necessary. There were much fewer opportunities for student → student interactions, and therefore less opportunity for social engagement with L2 interlocutors besides the teacher. In my analysis, the students demonstrated affective engagement with language primarily by continuing to attend the literacy classes, even when other students stopped attending. During moments of confusion or misunderstanding, affective engagement could dip, as evidenced by the students’ silence or withdrawal from interaction, particularly after corrective feedback that was not clarified. Corrective feedback can be seen, however, as a supportive instructional practice for Marta and others who seemed to experience a higher affective engagement with language as a result of it.

In sum, defining metalinguistic awareness simply as focused attention on language does not provide a complete enough or meaningful enough picture of the instructional environment that facilitates (or not) engagement with language. This awareness and engagement with language is influenced by the curriculum, materials, activities, participation requirements, and practice opportunities given to the students. Moreover, the teachers’ perspectives on L2 instruction, whether explicit or unstated, will dictate how they talk about language, answer questions, provide corrective feedback, and direct students’ attention.
5. Expanding Views of Metalinguistic Awareness


The opening quotation for this chapter comes from Mizrak, Hana’s classmate in the Sam and Pat group, during one of my observations. In a very spontaneous stream of speech, she pinpointed two features of English that were difficult for her – the distinction between /sh/ and /ch/, and the distinction between vowel sounds. She very astutely identified these challenges and the accompanying emotion of uncertainty, as well as the progress that she had made, which she attributed to both writing and speaking practice and to God. This quotation portrays many facets of metalinguistic awareness and engagement with language that low-literate L2 learners might experience: The focused attention on linguistic features as evidence of cognitive engagement, the willingness to learn despite many acknowledged challenges as evidence of affective engagement, and the effort to communicate and practice the language as evidence of social engagement (Svalberg, 2009).

Hall, Cheng, and Carlson (2006) hypothesized that active, frequent participation in varied (both new and familiar) L2 instructional practices will result in more expansive L2 knowledge; what these “stepping stones” may look like for low-literate adult L2 learners as they analyze and reflect on the language they encounter in formal instructional settings is the focus of this second results chapter. The research questions addressed in this chapter focus on examining the participants’ own beliefs, perspectives, and self-reported experiences regarding language and L2 learning. The intention is to develop a more nuanced understanding of metalinguistic awareness.
based on what the participants report noticing, struggling with, wondering about, and believing about English, as well as what personal tools and strategies they use in their learning.

- What metalinguistic assets do these learners bring to their L2 learning experiences?
- What evidence of cognitive, affective, and social engagement with language do they demonstrate?

In the previous results chapter, I explored the opportunities afforded by the environment to engage in awareness of L2 features through an etic description of the context and content of the literacy classes, paying close attention to the interactions between students and teachers, the ways the scripted curriculum shaped lessons plans and execution, the ambivalent roles of the board, and the role of teachers’ own metalinguistic awareness. My goal was to gauge affordances and missed opportunities in the literacy classes for display and utilization of whatever metalinguistic awareness students brought with them to as well as for elaboration and further development of their metalinguistic awareness and engagement with language. In this results chapter, I focus on the evidence of metalinguistic awareness from the participants themselves. I seek to capture their emic perspectives on the topics that I imposed on them through the interviews: How do they label their experiences and their uses of language? How do they interpret the literacy and L2 learning time and space? What experiential, linguistic, and textual resources do they draw on as they participate in the literacy classes? What problems do they report having with language and literacy? My goal is now to create a theoretical and empirical space for expansion of notions of metalinguistic awareness, so as to illuminate the more personal and social sides of this concept.
This exploration is divided into three main sections: First, I invite readers into an expanded view of metalinguistic awareness through the participants’ talk about language, language ideologies and beliefs, L2 learning strategies and preferences, and L2 progress. Second, I revisit the notion of attention on language as an object (Gombert, 2002; Jessner, 2006) and add an exploration of attention as a mental state and as a precursor for analysis and reflection. Finally, I review my analysis to challenge the notion that metalinguistic awareness can only be demonstrated through high levels of literacy skills. I present the findings within the Language Awareness framework to better understand what these participants actually can do. My intention is to gradually widen the field’s scope of metalinguistic awareness to include elements of social interaction that can inform sociocognitive approaches to the study of metalinguistic awareness in SLA, in general, and with low-educated, limited-literacy adult L2 learners, in particular.

A methodological qualification is in order first. For each of these sections, I drew primarily on the participants’ own words from our interviews and metalinguistic reflection sessions conducted in Spanish. Duff (2008) noted that an interview will always be a “version of truth, a snapshot of competence or of ideas elicited for a specific purpose in a particular space and time” (p. 133), and I am cognizant of the highly personal nature of interview data. As I mentioned in the Methodology chapter, I assume that some amount of the participants’ responses were impacted to some extent by the research environment and our relationship as researcher/teacher and participant/student. Holliday (2009) said it well:

Although the actual words that people say undeniably represent their views, verbatim data is as much mediated by the presence of the researcher, what she chooses to ask, the way she asks it, how she leads the conversation, how she frames the interview event, what she chooses to select from the broader corpus, how she interprets what she selects, and so on. (p. 61)
By including many perspectives throughout this dissertation from observations, interviews, metalinguistic reflection sessions, and teacher reports, themes in the data eventually emerged that counteract the potentially unbalanced nature of the researcher-participant relationship. The participant data that I present here is the result of several rounds of listening, transcribing, reading, re-listening, coding, recoding, rearranging, and reimagining, as I tried to capture the range of perspectives represented in these four unique women’s lived experiences. I appreciate Norton’s (2013) description of her approach in portraying and interpreting her interview data:

I have sought to capture what for me were particularly salient identities with respect to each woman’s investment in English… I have sought to understand the world as they have understood it, and have not questioned whether their interpretation of events was the correct or true interpretation. (p. 96)

Conducting interviews and metalinguistic reflections in Spanish was essential for capturing the participants’ perspectives to the greatest extent possible, but the work here must be seen through my own limitations as a Spanish speaker. My transcriptions of the original interviews in Spanish are included here, with most conversational noise edited out (e.g., pauses, repetitions, false starts, etc.). To retain as much of the voice of the participants as possible, the original Spanish utterances are placed in quotation marks, and my paraphrased loose translation in English is italicized and put below the quotation. My transcriptions were informally proofread by a native Spanish speaker and an advanced non-native Spanish speaker, but all remaining errors are mine.

As a final reminder before launching into the findings, Table 7 provides an overview of the participants in the study that should help facilitate the reader’s understanding and
interpretation of the analyses and interpretations that follow. Data was collected from October to December 2014.

Table 7
Background Information about Focal Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Literacy Group</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nat’lty</th>
<th>Years of Formal L1 Schooling</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Year Arrived in U.S.</th>
<th>Work History in U.S.</th>
<th>Began ESL Classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hana</td>
<td><em>Sam and Pat</em></td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Guatemalan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Married; one daughter in primary school</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Restaurants</td>
<td>Sept. 2014^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marta</td>
<td><em>Talk of the Block</em></td>
<td>Late 50s</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Separated; eight children</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Custodial work</td>
<td>July 2014^b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td><em>Talk of the Block</em></td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Guatemalan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Widowed; two grown daughters</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Housewife; custodial work in hospital</td>
<td>July 2014^b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td><em>Talk of the Block</em></td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Guatemalan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Single; lives with parents and younger brother</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Home health aide; custodial work in offices</td>
<td>March 2014^b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^a Reported brief or minimal attendance in another adult ESL program prior to ESL Pathways.

^b No previous attendance at another adult ESL program reported.
5.1 Language Beliefs: How We Learn is Shaped by What We Think

In Svalberg’s (2009) model of language engagement, she proposed several factors that could be facilitators or impediments to learners’ potential engagement with language. Emotional state, educational background, self-perception, power, and social networks, among other factors, were listed as potentially positive or negative influences. Svalberg acknowledged that the cognitive, affective, and social factors overlap and are intertwined in complex ways, making it difficult to separate them operationally. These factors are not easily measurable, but they can be elicited through learners’ own perspectives. For this reason, I have not attempted to artificially separate them in this analysis. The four participants in this study ranged in age from early 20s to late 50s, with a variety of life experiences. This section on beliefs covers the participants’ initial impressions of English and life in the United States, their reflections on their personal progress, their preferences for ESL instruction and their own learning strategies, and their views on peer collaboration in ESL classes. I present these emic perspectives with the understanding that “conceptions and beliefs are understood as relational and responsive to context. In other words, beliefs are made manifest in approaches to learning” (Benson & Lor, 1999, p. 464).

5.1.1 Initial impressions of English and life in the United States. Excitement, fear, and admiration of English were the primary feelings that all four participants reported having when they first came to the United States. With 12 years of education in Guatemala but almost no English language skills, Frida was nervous about not being able to communicate, and worried that she might say an inappropriate word and would not know it. Eventually, Frida began to equate successful mastery of an L2 with complete utterances that meet pragmatic standards for politeness and appropriateness:
Frida: [xx] aprender pero bien, bien el inglés. Algunos que hablan español, no lo hablan bien. Solo dicen palabritas.

Yes, exactly. So I’d like to learn to speak English in complete sentences. My brother told me that if I want to order something, saying ‘One more chicken’ isn’t right. You have to say, ‘Give me please one more chicken.’ Politely, right?

Sarah: ¿Cómo los americanos?

You mean like Americans?

Frida: Sí, exacto. Entonces a mí me gustaría aprender así como, decir la oración completa, o the sentences… Porque mi hermano me dice, “Si vas a pedir algo, ‘One more chicken,’ – no. Tienes que decir ‘Give me please one more chicken.’ Con educación, ¿verdad?”

Tina and Hilda also described English as “muy bonito” many times throughout our interviews. When Tina arrived in the United States in 1989 with her husband, she initially thought that she would be able to learn it quickly, because she thought it would be like Spanish. However, she soon felt overcome by English and how different it was than what she expected. She spent most of her time alone in the house while her husband was at work. She was afraid of hearing so much English around her, but at the same time, she liked the sound of English and was motivated to learn it:

“My heart was scared. I never imagined that they speak English… It scared me and at the same time, I liked when I heard speaking… It sounds nice, the tone of English. But however, I can’t… But I’m trying to learn in a way of learning”
I was just scared. I never imagined that so much English would be spoken... Scared, but at the same time I liked hearing English. It sounds nice. Nevertheless, I can’t speak it now. But I’m trying to learn it.

It is interesting to note that, like the soon-to-be-immigrant participants in Barkhuizen and de Klerk (2006), Tina had prospective imaginations of what she would encounter or not (“Yo nunca me imaginé que se hablaba inglés…”). Also interesting is that expressions of fear, anxiety, and yet evolving resilience in overcoming such negative feelings are also documented by Cervatiuc (2009) among L2 learners who are immigrants, but are highly proficient and from a privileged background in their home countries, and thus at the opposite end of the spectrum from Tina and Hana: “They cultivated extroversion and resilience, in spite of being rejected or ridiculed by NS at times” (Cervatiuc, p. 261). Tina reported feeling scared when she first went shopping or tried to order a hamburger at a fast food restaurant, and depended on her husband to translate whenever she went out. She reported feeling scared about driving, scared when she started working as a housekeeper at a local hospital, and scared about learning English. Her fear is not surprising or unusual, but it does come through as a strong theme during all of her narratives. Likewise, Hana arrived in the United States in 2007 without knowing any English, but she came knowing that she would need to “luchar” [struggle]. She described her initial time here as being mute: “Yo andaba muda,” without being able to ask a question or respond to something.

Marta did not refer to English as being ‘bonito’ in the ways that the others did. Rather, she saw her limited schooling as a barrier to being able to learn English:

“I thought that it was something unreachable for me. Since I had only a little school... me with English, I just said no, no, no. Too difficult. Something to learn that was really difficult.”
In reflecting back on her first few months in the United States, Marta talked about never leaving the apartment because she was afraid that she wouldn’t be able to speak English: “El temor al idioma, que no entendía” [The fear of language, that I wouldn’t understand it.] She was surprised when she finally began leaving the house and realized that people all around her spoke Spanish in the area.

The parallel themes of admiration and fear of the English language were echoed in the participants’ reflections on what they believed life would be like in the United States. They all spoke about their expectations of life here as being “bonito,” to one degree or the other, but they later realized that life in the United States would be much more difficult than they had anticipated. The difficulty of finding and affording a place to live, finding and working a job, and learning English were common themes in their narratives. However, each participant reported having people in their lives who supported them and their English language learning and use in different ways.

The participants reflected on the possible impacts that prior schooling can have on L2 learning. Hana believed that her classmates in the mainstream ESL class who were advancing faster than her did so because they had studied English before and came with strong speaking skills, so they were able to focus more on learning how to write. Hana saw a noticeable difference between the students who came with English speaking skills and those who did not. For herself, she found it difficult to follow what they were doing in class and to remember what she had to write.

Frida made similar distinctions about her classmates who struggled with English oral or literacy skills. She noted that some people speak English very well, but they cannot write. She
attributed these struggles to having been in the United States for a long time but never going to
school, or to having recently arrived in the United States. Frida gave two specific examples of
women in her classes who had strong oral communication skills, but had to repeat English
classes more than once because of their limited literacy skills. We pondered why some students
struggle and need the literacy classes while others do not. Frida hypothesized:

“It could be that they came from their countries with a bit of English already. And there
are just people who are super smart!”

Hana ranked personal motivation as carrying more weight than the instructional setting
itself:

“No importa dónde seas estudiar, pero si tengo la mente-habilidad de aprender el
inglés, sea como sea. Si quiero aprender inglés, no importa una buena clase, o una
clase menos. Pero si yo tengo ganas de estudiar, sí puedo leer y escribir o hablar.”

It doesn’t matter where you study, but if I have the mentality to learn English, it will be
OK. If I want to learn English, it doesn't matter if it's a good class or a not so good
class. If I want to study, I can read and write or speak.

Hana’s belief in the importance of determination and motivation for learning language was
echoed in her later description about what she needs to focus on in her own English learning. She
listed talking on the phone, talking in person, writing, reading, listening, and speaking as all
important. In fact,

“¡De todo! Sí. Porque, de todas las palabras se usa, hacer cualquier pregunta o
conversar. Se necesita todo, como el pasado, el presente.”

Everything. Because all of the words are used, to ask whatever questions or to talk.
You need everything, like past and present tense.
Throughout our interviews, Marta spoke of her difficulties and frustrations learning English, as well as her fears that she did not belong in ESL classes, for various reasons. Marta shared memories with me of specific language features that stood out as particularly challenging for her in her early English learning. She also made comparisons between her age and the younger students in class several times during our interviews. When she thought about her classmates’ participation in class, Marta considered their age and stage in life as being a factor in their success. She pointed out that younger students have fewer worries and responsibilities, so they can apply themselves to the task of school and stay more focused than older adults with more responsibilities. She was happy when she saw people her age attending ESL classes. Although she liked going to school, she would sometimes get frustrated because of how much younger many of the students were. She would think that English was for them, the younger generation, not her. She eventually came to realize and accept that regardless of her age, she still needed English to manage her life, and she drew motivation from these needs:

“¡Me voy aunque estoy vieja!... Ay, yo deseo, deseo hablar el inglés. Por lo menos, más o menos bien. No perfecto pero de entenderme.”

_I go to school even though I’m old! I really want to speak English. At least somewhat well. Not perfect, but so people can understand me._

Age, socioeconomic status, working conditions, and anxiety must all feed into one’s notion of a successful L2 learner. Marta gave examples of the internal questioning that might go on about what age is most appropriate or beneficial for learning literacy. At what cost to one’s self-image must there be to address literacy at an older age? In addition, class and access to social groups are both key factors in the amount of meaningful interactions one has (Norton & Toohey, 2001), but socioeconomic status also impacts working conditions, fatigue, and time.
Marta, who was so often lively and engaged in the literacy classes I observed, told me that she sometimes came to class tired and did not feel like being there at all: “I spend my money. My job is hard. I attend my class. I need for understand English. Me cuesta ganar mi dinero” [I work hard for my money.] Of the four participants, only Hana and Tina reported having any interactions in English at the workplace at all. This lack of English access in the workplace places additional burdens on the learners to make the most of their class time. Nevertheless, Marta consistently drew from a seemingly never-ending well of persistence and motivation, which she said that she would share with any other woman who wanted to learn English but was afraid to try:

> “Que venga, que no se desespere, que días la clase está pesada y no entiende, pero viniendo, viniendo... Continuo, continuo, se le va uno quedando. De poquito en poquito cuando ya tiene un tiempo de venir y de venir, ya entiende. Entonces ya uno dice, ‘Oh sí puedo’.”

> *Just come, don’t give up. Some days class is overwhelming and you don’t understand, but keep coming. Continue, and you’ll get it. Little by little, when you’ve been coming for a while, you’ll start understanding. And then you’ll say, ‘Oh, yes I can.’*

Marta also compared herself to other students who used smart phones in class to search for an unfamiliar word on their phone and then write it down. In contrast, Marta had to do all of this work

> “con mi pura mente – con mi pura práctica de escribir y leer los papeles”

> *with my own head, with just my practice of writing and reading papers.*

While other students could use their phones to translate, to find answers and understand quickly, she has to ask questions in order to understand what a word is. We agreed, however, that depending on a smart phone might not be the best way to learn a language, as Marta pointed out:
5.1.2 Reflections on personal progress in L2 learning. It is difficult to measure the type of progress that is happening in L2 learning for many reasons. For these learners, there were no formal or systematic formative assessments of any kind on their progress in the literacy class. The volunteer teachers were encouraging and praised the learners at every chance, but the learners’ ability to reflect on their own progress provided particularly meaningful insights. Marta’s earliest memory of taking ESL in the United States was when the teacher started the lesson by giving the English equivalent of the letter “A” in Spanish. She doubted that she would ever be able to learn the letters. The teacher started with the alphabet, and Marta didn’t understand anything. Marta’s recollections are interesting to consider, because they indicate a particular kind of progress that she saw as being important in her L2 development. She listed words and sounds that were previously unknown to her, but that she had since been able to reflect on and reproduce on her own. To a certain extent, Marta’s metalanguage is grounded in her memories of initial L2 learning experiences, and she used metalinguistic terms to provide evidence of these early struggles. Marta described her first experiences in ESL classes as very difficult:

“I felt that it was too difficult. I felt like no, this is too much. I couldn’t write ‘work’ or ‘you’ or ‘see’ or ‘they’ – everything was new for me. I felt like I couldn’t do it. But I told myself, ‘Come on, come on.’”

“No se la grabó bien. No trabajó para que se le quede la palabra.”

They didn’t really get it. They didn’t work so that the word would stick.
Marta saw progress in her English outside of the classroom setting as well. She was making an effort to listen to English on TV while at work, cleaning the machines at a gym. She saw progress in her listening comprehension, because she was able to understand more and more of what was on TV. Her eagerness to discuss her progress and her potential in English was inspiring. During one conversation, I complimented her on her English, and she promptly asked me if one day she would be able to speak perfect English. I downplayed the reaching for ‘perfect English,’ and she quickly agreed with me and shared the story of how even though her daughter went to school for four years in the United States, she still didn’t know how to say “onion” in English:

“Ay, tengo la prueba que nadie entiende el inglés complete… Es que hay mucho que aprender del inglés y nunca lo va a entender. No, yo me refiero a hablar el inglés lo básico. Lo básico. Yo deseo con todo mi corazón y con toda mis vida. Poder hablar el inglés, lo básico. No digo lo perfecto, pero lo básico.”

There I have proof that no one knows everything about English. There’s so much to learn and you’ll never understand it all. No, I’m talking about speaking basic English. I want it with all of my heart and soul. To be able to speak English, just the basics. I’m not saying perfect English, just the basics.

Marta was pushing herself to advance because she needed English. When she would go to the doctor, she wouldn’t want to have to wait for a translator. Her long-term goals were to apply for U.S. citizenship and to increasingly become more independent as an English user in her community.

Tina also noted that her English had improved outside of the ESL classroom context. She gave me examples of instructions her boss had given her that she now understood. She gave me examples of the pleasantries that the nurses exchanged with her, and noted her value with the nurses because she helps them on the job. She was proud to report that she has more confidence
now to socialize with a friend of a friend who is a monolingual English-speaking American. Tina attributed much of this progress to the personal reading, writing, and studying that she does on her own at home, which includes watching You Tube videos. She reported that her daughters believe that she is making progress, but that she needs to practice speaking it without being afraid. Tina’s continued fear is that when she speaks, she won’t say the words correctly and people will laugh at her. When Tina speaks English with her daughters, she feels confident and not scared. In contrast, when she speaks English outside of their home, she’s afraid and forgets the words that she wants to say.

Hana also related her progress in English to her accomplishments at work:

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“Sí. Ya descubrí muchas, como se escribe. O cuando hay una persona que está hablando inglés, a veces le entiendo algunas palabras. Más o menos le entiendo. En mi trabajo, antes yo no sabía. Me preguntaba y no, no podía. Entonces ahorita me dicen, ‘¿Cuántos sandwiches hay?’ y ya le entiendo yo, y ya le digo, ‘OK. Tanto. I have five.’ O ‘hay muchos, a lot.’ I hear more.
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Yes, I’ve learned a lot, like how to write. Or when someone is speaking English, sometimes I can understand a few words, more or less. At work, I didn’t know how to communicate. They asked me questions but I couldn’t answer. Now they say, ‘How many sandwiches are there?’ and I understand and can say, ‘OK, this many. I have five.’ Or ‘there’s a lot.’ I hear more.

Aspirations for future employment and other opportunities are also part of the learners’ reflections on their English progress. Hana would like to be a cashier or a waitress. Tina would like to work as a receptionist in the same hospital where she now cleans rooms. Frida’s optimistic confidence about her eventual success is apparent in her framing of her goals over the next few years, which include learning English, switching into a store or customer service job that will require interacting in English, and getting her GED and then college degree. She
believes that with the opportunities afforded in the United States to study and work, “todo es posible si uno se propone metas” [everything is possible if you set goals for yourself].

5.1.3 Beliefs about effective L2 instructional practices. Throughout our interviews, I guided the participants to think about their mainstream ESL classes as well as their supplementary literacy classes, and at times to compare and reflect on the difference in approaches to L2 instruction. Overwhelmingly, the four participants remarked on the benefits of the literacy classes – from the small class size and personal attention to the focused explanations of linguistic features (such as vowels) and the slower pace. According to Hana, the literacy class was easier than the mainstream class in large part because of how the content was broken down into small pieces, just a few letters at a time. Because of the nature of the literacy classes, she could make connections to content in the mainstream classes as well:

“They are words that I don’t know from there, but I come here and learn them. There are these words I hear there, and I look at the letters they teach me here and then I know what those words are.”

Tina codeswitched to English, perhaps for emphasis, when she explained the benefits of the literacy classes over the mainstream class:


Because she explains things well. She explains very well. But over there, there are a lot people, it goes quickly. I mean, many people. But in here, it’s small people, few people, and explain good.
In contrast to the texts in the mainstream class, Frida described the literacy group stories as being relatively simple with two characters, with many repetitions of the same words. In the mainstream class, the texts seemed more complicated to her because they used unfamiliar words that were difficult to pronounce. When I asked her to tell me about a story that she recently read in her mainstream class, she shared a few details but ultimately said that she couldn’t remember much about the story. Marta pointed out another difference between the literacy class and the mainstream class, in terms of the focus on phonics and pronunciation:

“The difference is that here, with the short words they teach the sounds. They teach that letters make up words, even if they are short words but how they are written. The differences in sounds. There’s more specificity for the sounds of pronunciation. It’s a good class.”

The mainstream ESL teacher and the literacy class volunteer teachers figured prominently in the participants’ discussions of their ESL learning experiences. Their comments about their teachers were overwhelmingly positive in our interviews, emphasizing their ability to explain features of language, their willingness to elicit questions from the students, their talent in providing a pleasant learning environment, and their usefulness in correcting errors. I believe that the positive feedback was genuine, but nonetheless we have to be cognizant of the interview situation – the participants were likely concerned with providing amenable answers and not sharing anything negative with me. Although the interviews were presented as confidential and participation as anonymous, I expected that their answers would be colored by their concerns that something might get back to their mainstream or literacy class teachers. The participants’
general respect and admiration for teachers, given the power differentials in a classroom setting, might also have influenced their responses.

The participants highlighted their teachers’ role in explaining things and answering questions. When I asked Tina what a typical lesson was like in her mainstream ESL class, she first emphasized the metalinguistic nature of her teacher Andrea’s teaching style:

“Andrea nos explica muy bien. Nos explica mucho los verbos, verbos pasados, presentes…”

*Andrea explains things to us really well. She explains like verbs, past tense and present tense.*

While Tina emphasized Andrea’s focus on explaining things, Marta gave a more explicit description of what ‘explaining things’ might mean:

“She gives us papers. She gives us examples of usage, practicing past tense verbs. She makes sentences with the past tense. And writes [xx] on the board. She has us look at them and practice them, how they’re written. Which verbs use the past. If we’re practicing the past, we do the past. How to put the past tense verb together with the present tense in a sentence. And whatever word that we don’t know, we can ask, ‘No understand this word. What is it? The word. What does it mean?’ Sometimes they are new and difficult words. I don’t know what word this is or that is. And she answers whatever question you ask. She gives new sentences and examples to help us understand.”

Marta valued the fact that although Andrea seemed to keep things moving at a fairly rapid pace in class, she always took the time to elicit questions or to clear up confusions from the students.
The participants often referred to the classroom teacher’s role in creating a positive and engaging environment for learning. Frida attributed Andrea’s success at helping her students learn through the use of “mímicas” or games, other dynamic activities, and her upbeat mood:

“No ayuda cuando ella explica y hace mímicas. Es alegre, motivada. A veces está triste pero se ve alegre. Y tal vez uno viene desanimado, y con la alegría de la maestra, uno también se pone con ganas de estudiar. Eso es lo que nos ayuda, que es bien alegre.”

She helps us when she explains and uses gestures. She’s happy and motivated. Sometimes things seem sad but she appears happy. And sometimes someone comes to class feeling discouraged, but with the teacher’s good cheer, the student feels like studying. That’s how she helps us – she’s really cheerful.

Marta and Tina also painted a picture of Andrea as being a positive and lively force in their mainstream class. Tina appreciated Andrea’s way of addressing the class, highlighting her teacher’s explanatory skills and funny personality with approval:

“Habla de todo, ella. Me gusta cuando ella habla más, porque se le queda a uno más inglés. Me gusta cuando explica. Ella tiene una manera para explicar la cosa que es bien, como, funny… Ella nunca está enojada. Siempre está activa, enseñando al alumno.”

Andrea explains things to us really well. She explains like verbs, past tense and present tense. She talks about everything. I like it when she talks more, because it sticks with us more. I like it when she explains things. She has a way of explaining something that is good, like funny. She’s never angry. She’s always energetic while teaching.

The participants were all in agreement that having the teacher correct their errors was preferable to having classmates do so. They mentioned the danger of having inaccurate information given by a confused classmate. As I mentioned elsewhere, Tina often expressed her fears or concerns about speaking English and being understood, without having people laugh at her. Having peers who would try to correct her was another blow to her confidence:
The general feeling about error correction was that it was better coming from the teacher.

I was curious about the role that Spanish played in the participants’ classroom interactions with their classmates, in the participants’ thought processes when learning English, and in their perceptions about the connections between English and Spanish (Hornberger, 2012; Hornberger & Link, 2012). It is possible that metalinguistic awareness is required to translate between two languages; to find similarities, patterns, or cognates between two languages; and to use this knowledge to increase one’s own proficiency in the L2 as well as one’s literacy skills.

From my observations and my own experiences in working in the program, I knew that the use of the L1 was discouraged in the classes for a variety of reasons. I also knew, however, that teachers who could speak the L1 (usually Spanish) would sometimes use it to explain or relate something to the learners. I was curious to see if the learners themselves said that they used the L1, and if they appreciated the use of the L1 in their L2 learning. Two themes emerged from this line of questioning regarding the appropriate and inappropriate use of Spanish in the ESL class.

I asked the participants directly if they would like to see more opportunities for translation between the L1 and L2 in their ESL classes. Hana believed that translating from English to Spanish was acceptable if she could not understand what was being said, because once she heard it in Spanish, she would know what it meant. She liked the idea of knowing what something means in both Spanish and English. On the other hand, Tina, Marta, and Frida mostly frowned on the idea of using Spanish in the ESL class. Tina believed that using Spanish would
prevent them from learning English. Marta pointed out that there are plenty of people who speak Spanish in her mainstream class, but Andrea doesn’t like it when they speak Spanish. Andrea believed that it’s better to use the time in class to practice English, and Marta agreed. However, Marta believed that sometimes it is necessary to speak in Spanish if there is a word that one doesn’t understand and it can’t be explained any other way. Frida also discouraged the use of Spanish among her classmates while in class, preferring that people try to give examples in English or draw a picture before giving a translation in Spanish.

At another level, Marta and Frida both questioned the pragmatic utility of translating between two languages when there are not always exact equivalents. They were also concerned about the potential for over-reliance on translation rather than more automatic communication. Frida was particularly vocal about this issue:

**Frida:** “Así como… A ver.. como ‘bed’… [T]odos van a andar así, escribiendo ‘bed – cama.’ Y ‘living room – sala.’ Y entonces no aprenden bien el inglés.”

*Like here, like ‘bed.’ Everyone’s gonna walk around writing ‘bed – cama.’ ‘Living room – sala.’ And they’re not gonna learn English well.*

**Sarah:** “¿Porque está escribiendo en español…?”

*Because they’re writing in Spanish?*

**Frida:** “Español e inglés. Español e inglés. Entonces no van a aprender nada. Entonces es mejor que sepa una palabra y como ‘board’ [/bor/] es pizarrón. Y si uno lo escribe ‘Ah ‘board’ es pizarrón pero imagínese que si uno anda afuera y no carga cuaderno, no va a saber que es ‘board.’ En cambio, sí lo tiene acá [points to head], ya lo sabe.”

*Spanish and English. Spanish and English. So they’re not going to learn anything. So it’s better that you know a word, like ‘board’ is ‘board.’ And if someone writes it down, imagine that if someone is out walking around and they didn’t bring their notebook, they’re not going to know what ‘board’ is. However, if you have it here (points to head), you already know it.*
These beliefs about the separation between English and Spanish seemed to extend to their home life. Frida described her home as being one in which English media (TV programs, movies, music) is consumed along with Spanish media and information streams. She watches children’s programs in English to learn vocabulary, “para que se me queden” [So it sticks with me.] She sometimes watches English programming with English but not Spanish subtitles. She uses the English subtitles because it confuses her if she hears something in English but reads it in Spanish. She also noted that hearing and seeing English at the same time is better for the learner to connect how it is heard to how it is written. Tina said that she almost never writes in Spanish, although she has not forgotten how to do so. She prefers studying and reading in English to doing so in Spanish.

At the same time, some of the participants’ descriptions of what they were thinking about during an English task indicated that Spanish and English were interwoven in their processing of the language. I asked Marta to describe to me what she was thinking when she read aloud the story “Bob is Sick” during one of our metalinguistic reflection sessions. Her response indicates that much of her reading process involved a back-and-forth connection between Spanish and English:

“Como aquí, yo voy pensando, ‘This is Bob.’ Como ‘Quién es esa persona?’ así como en español. Pero al mismo tiempo como es, para practicarlo en inglés. Y como pensando, lo que está pensando en ese momento, de ‘Bob is in bed.’ Como pensar ‘Oh él está enfermo, está en la cama.’ Así, eh. Bob is sick in bed. Bob is in bed. Él está en la cama. Como pensando como en el español, pero a transmitirlo en inglés.”

Like here I’m thinking, ‘This is Bob,’ like ‘Who is this person?’ in Spanish. But at the same time, I’m practicing it in English. And I’m thinking that in this moment, Bob is in bed. Like, Oh, he’s sick. He’s in bed. Like that. Bob is sick in bed. Bob is in bed. He’s in bed. Like thinking about what it is in Spanish, but changing it to English.
When I tried to confirm that she’s using two languages at once, she agreed, saying that it helps her understand the story. Hana also drew a direct connection between English and Spanish when she talked about why spelling some words during a dictation, like “happy” and “Gus,” was easy for her but others like “thank you” were difficult:

Sarah: “¿Por qué es más fácil para Ud.?”

So why was it easier for you?

Hana: “Porque va siendo como el español. ‘Happy’ es h-a-p-p-e.’”

Because it would be like in Spanish. ‘Happy’ is spelled h-a-p-p-e.

Sarah: “¿Por qué es más fácil para Ud.?”

Hm. Why was it easier for you?

Hana: “Porque va siendo como el español. Porque no cambia otra letras aquí.”

You read it like in Spanish, because there are no letter changes.

Sarah: “¿Por qué es más difícil?”

And what’s difficult?

Hana: “Como ‘thank you’. ”

Well, ‘thank you.’

Sarah: “Me pregunto por qué…”

I wonder why…?

Hana: “Es ‘eh’ en español es /a/ pero en inglés, es ‘ah’.”

The /a/ sound in Spanish is pronounced like ‘eh’ but in English it’s pronounced ‘ah’.

Hana seemed to be saying that the word ‘happy’ was easy enough to remember how to write in English because it would be written similarly in Spanish. I interpreted this assertion to mean that she saw a one-to-one correspondence between the letters and the sounds, without the changing in vowel quality that often happens in English. With the words ‘thank you,’ however, Hana pointed out that the similarity between ‘a’ and ‘e’ could be confusing; perhaps she struggled with trying to decide if it would be written as ‘thenk’ or ‘thank.’ As one reader pointed
out, there is also the issue of L1-L2 phonotactics creating ease or difficulty. ‘Happy’ conforms to the CVCV structure of Spanish, but ‘Thank you’ is alien, with its CVCC V, which then can be more assimilated to ‘than-kyou’ but with very low correspondence with the written form, where the word boundaries are not what Spanish would allow.

In Chapter 4, I relied on my etic perspective to describe how the teachers and the students used the board to facilitate the teaching and learning of the literacy class content. Here, I present the participants’ own words regarding their preferences with board work. Tina and Marta emphasized the benefits of copying from the board, while Frida focused on the use of the board for assessment and corrective feedback. Tina said that her favorite mainstream classroom activity was writing – but not writing English on her own. She preferred it when the teacher would write on the board and she could copy whatever the teacher writes: “Porque me gusta copiarlo y después, yo lo leo” [Because I like copying it, and then later I can read it.] She admitted that she doesn’t understand everything Andrea writes on the board, but she tried and she asked her classmates if she did not understand.

Marta also reported that one of her frequent strategies was copying sentences from the board in order to practice spelling and writing on her own. She liked it when Andrea would write sentences on the board and then explain what they mean. Like Tina, Marta would try to copy what she could from the board in order to practice English later:

**Marta:** “Yo lo que hago es trato lo más que puedo de copiar sentencias para practicar la [spill lid]. Pues practicar el escribir. Y en lo que- yo también creo es que si una palabra ya entiende en inglés, que la hablara, continuar hablando la palabra que entiende.”

*What I do is I try as much as I can to copy sentence, to practice the spell letter. Then practice writing. And I also think that you already know a word in English, you should say it, keep using the word.*

**Sarah:** “¿Repetirla?”
You mean to repeat it?

Marta: “Usarla en las conversaciones.”
Use it in conversations.

Sarah: “Con otros.”
With others.

Marta: “Sí, con otros. Con los amigos, con los friends in the class.”
Yeah, with others. With friends, with friends in class.

According to Marta and Tina, the board provided both a source of input and opportunities for further L2 practice. They depended a great deal on the teacher to use the board as much as possible in this way. Tina believed that new words need to be put on the board so that students can read them. For Tina, it was easier to focus on the board than in a book – perhaps because she could always tell where the teacher was pointing at the board, but struggled to figure out where the text would be in the book. When the literacy class does their dictation activity, Tina would like each person to write a sentence on the board for everyone to consider:

“It would be great, because I think everything could be seen and we could correct one by one. That’s my way of thinking. Or with drawings sometimes.”

Frida had a similar suggestion for the dictation activity in the literacy class. By putting one’s sentence on the board for everyone to see, the teacher could pinpoint exact problems in the dictation that everyone could benefit from. They could also work together to correct the mistakes, which emphasized a more collaborative approach to what is usually an individually completed activity.
5.1.4 Personal strategies for L2 learning. I attempted to elicit many examples from the participants on their personal learning strategies and preferences for tackling the job of learning English. Some of what they found most helpful was related to what took place in the literacy classes, while other strategies seemed to be unique to them. For example, one of the regular reading practices in each literacy class was to talk about the illustrations accompanying each story before reading it as a group. All of the participants agreed that this step helped their comprehension of vocabulary words and story plot. As usual, Marta’s explanation of the benefit of this activity was particularly vivid:

“Ayudan porque desde que veo los dibujos, ya tengo una imaginación de qué es en la historia. … Y ya al leer la historia, entiendes qué frases necesitas para este dibujo que viste. Yo así le tomo. Por ejemplo si yo miro que un hombre va caminando en la calle, ya es ‘he’ ‘talk’ ‘talk in the street.’ Y eso ayuda, porque de allí, piensas en cómo va a ser, que cómo van a venir las sentencias en la historia. Los dibujos ayudan, sí.”

They help because as soon as I see the pictures, I can already picture what’s in the story. And when you read the story, you understand what the phrases are that go along with the picture you saw. That’s how I do it. For example, if I see a man walking down the street, it’s going to be ‘he’ ‘talk’ ‘talk in the street’ in the story. That helps, because then you can think about what it’s going to be like, how the sentences will appear in the story. Yes, drawings help.

Although Marta confused ‘talk’ and ‘walk’ in this example, it still shows the clear connection she is making between the written language and visuals.

One reading comprehension strategy that is used consistently in the pullout class is the answering of comprehension questions orally before students write down their answers. The class spends at least three days on each story, repeating the same reading comprehension questions each day. On the first two days, the students are only allowed to respond orally to the comprehension questions. On the third day, the students are then asked to write the answers down in their binders. Frida found this approach, focusing first on oral responses, helpful
“porque uno recuerda lo que leyó. Y cuando uno lo va a escribir, se recuerda cuando oralmente lo dijo.”

You remember what you read, and when you go to write it down, you remember how you first said it.

Hana also appreciated this activity, and gave an example of the personal connections that using a fictional story in a textbook allowed her to make:

“Me ayuda, para saber qué es lo que significa ‘is’ and ‘happy’ and ‘get Sam’ and ‘with the taxi.’ Me ayuda para …para hablar. Así como, ‘I am happy.’ No para decir ‘Sam is happy’ but ‘I am’ – yo estoy feliz.”

It helps me, to learn what the words ‘is’ and ‘happy’ and ‘get Sam’ and ‘with the taxi’ mean. It helps me to… to speak. Like, ‘I am happy.’ Not so I can say ‘Sam is happy’ but ‘I am’ – I am happy.

Similarly, Marta believed that answering the reading comprehension questions orally in addition to in writing was necessary because one won’t always be communicating in writing: “Va a tener conversaciones con la gente!” [You’re going to have to talk with people!]

Hana described a specific way of remembering or retaining information that was presented in class. After Hana confirmed with me that the word “says” means “dice” in Spanish, she wrote it down in her binder, explaining: “Para que no se me olvide. Que eso significa eso” [So I don’t forget, that this means this.] Hana often reported using a cognitive/visual strategy to remember or access language features that she had learned. Table 8 features three examples of Hana’s self-described mental strategies, all of which she described as residing in her head or mind.
Table 8
*Hana’s Strategies for Remembering*

| Task: Identify and write the vowels and short vowel references words. | “Ya lo tengo en la cabeza, que sí, así es.” |
| Prompt: How did you remember the vowels in English? | *I’ve already got it in my head, that that’s how it is.* |

| Task: List some new words that you’ve learned recently in English. Prompt: How do you remember those words? | “Yo pienso como que estuviera el libro en mi mente, como que yo estuviera leyendo.” |
| | *It’s like I have the book in my head, as if I were reading it.* |

| | *This one I already know. Who – who is. I already have it in my head and I already know what it is.* |

Frida described another approach for remembering the meaning of question words that was more focused on contextualized examples. She easily reeled off a variety of examples to indicate what each of the question words meant:

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“Where. ¿Dónde va a ser la fiesta?’ ‘Where is the party?’ Who. Who is quién. ‘Fíjate que me invitaron a una fiesta.’ ‘Quién?’ When. Cuándo. ‘Cuándo fuiste al doctor?’”
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Marta’s strategy for dealing with question words in English was to focus on clues to indicate that someone might be asking her a question:

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“Porque a veces cuando la persona va a preguntar, usa esas palabras al principio, ¿verdad? Es question, ¿verdad? Question. Pero yo ya entiendo, que cuando va a usar esas palabras al principio, me va a preguntar algo…”
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*Sometimes when someone is going to ask a question, they use these words at the beginning, right? It makes it a question, right? A question. I do understand already that when they use these words at the beginning, they’re going to ask me something.*
All of the participants reported studying or practicing English outside of the classroom. Frida often studied with her father and sometimes her brother at home. Unlike Frida, Tina preferred to study alone, but she asked her grown daughters for help when she was stuck. She believed that studying alone helped her concentrate better in English. When I complimented Marta on her English, she responded with an explanation of her learning strategy:

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“Trato de…practicarlo en mi mente… Siempre miro palabras nuevas y .. no la he visto, pero voy a tratar de asimilarla para tenerla.. para usarla en las frases.”
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*I try to practice what I’ve learned in my head. I always look at new words and if I haven’t seen it before, I try to keep it in my head, to use it in sentences.*

Marta recognized that she had gaps in her knowledge, and one way to bridge this gap was to focus more on learning new words. She sometimes practiced English on her own, reminding herself for example that ‘la silla’ is ‘chair’ in English, or asked her son to help her with the pronunciation of these words. Frida suggested that the ESL classes use more games to help students learn vocabulary by guessing the teacher’s gestures:

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“Aquí en la escuela cuando una palabra uno no sabe, [xxx] los maestros con mímicas. Para que uno vaya adivinando, eso se la va quedando la palabra.”
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*When you don’t know a word, the teacher can give (?) the word with gestures. By guessing the word, you’ll remember it.*

Because the Spanish word “mímicas” was new to me when I heard it for the first time in our interview, I wasn’t sure if it meant miming (like the game Charades) or mimicking to imitate someone. Frida eagerly and carefully explained the meaning, comparing it to “rompecabezas, como un dibujo y tiene diferentes partes. Entonces se va formando” [puzzles – like when you
have a picture and it has different parts, and you have to put it together]. For Frida, the use of
games like this was one of the best ways to learn a second language.

5.1.5 Peer collaboration and interaction. I asked the participants about their views on the other students in their classes, particularly in terms of group work, collaboration, and corrective feedback. I was curious to see how the participants envisioned the multiple social networks that exist in the mainstream and literacy classes between teacher-student and student-student. These relationships are particularly important to consider within a sociocognitive view of metalinguistic awareness and L2 acquisition. How helpful were their peers? What did they help them with? How was their L2 learning impacted – positively or negatively – by their peers? The positive impacts touched on elements of collaborative learning and affect, while the negative impacts touched on error correction, inaccuracies, and communicative frustration.

All of the participants expressed a preference for working with peers over working alone in the L2 classroom. In her mainstream ESL class, Hana preferred working in groups over working alone on activities or textbook exercises. Working in a group allowed her to ask questions if she did not understand, or to help others when she understood but they did not. When the mainstream class did reading or writing activities, they were usually done individually, which Hana did not like because “tu cabeza tiene que trabajar sola” [Your head has to work alone.] At the table where she sat, three students spoke Spanish and the other two students were Ethiopian. Although they did not share a common first language, she found that they were able to help one another sometimes in English. Hana appreciated it when her classmates made an effort to speak English and ask questions in class.

Positive affect and community rapport were also mentioned as important factors by Frida and Tina. Several times,
Frida mentioned the use of games and “cosas dinámicas” to enliven the class. She found this type of ambience to be important for learning, “para que se sienta alegre la clase” [so the class feels cheerful.] Frida attributed the success of a good English class to the students as well as the teacher, and believed that having motivated classmates helped her learn better.

“Si los demás de los compañeros están motivados, los motivan a uno. Para que uno pueda aprender bien, uno también tiene que tener mucho entusiasmo. Muchas ganas de aprender. Palabra que uno no entiende, apuntarla y si uno no tiene el tiempo de preguntarle, en la casa uno con diccionario puede verificar qué significa, cómo se pronuncia”

If most of your classmates are motivated to learn, you’ll be motivated, too. You need to really be enthusiastic, to really want to learn, in order to learn well. If there’s a word you don’t know, note it and if there’s not time to ask about it, look it up in the dictionary when you get home to see what it means, to see how it’s pronounced.

Tina also valued her classmates when they paid attention in class. She contrasted her current classmates with her classmates from her first cycle at ESL Pathways, when everyone in the class spoke Spanish and no one was paying attention. She described her current classmates as being good students and good classmates, primarily because they paid attention in class. Tina would be distracted when others around her spoke Spanish, because she ended up paying more attention to them than to the teacher. However, Tina was comfortable with asking a Spanish-speaking friend to help her in class if she had a problem understanding something in class.

The concept of helping and the benefits of collaboration were important for the participants. Frida identified that working with other students who were the same level as her was more helpful than working with more advanced students. She preferred to practice English with her dad at home, because they were at the same level and they both made mistakes. In contrast, her younger brother could already speak English too quickly and she could not always understand what he said. In class, Frida relied to a certain extent on classmates who understood
more of what the teacher said and could help her understand. Likewise, Marta recognized the benefit of having classmates contribute different ideas during a class activity:

“Es bien porque yo tengo la idea de hacer por ejemplo de un modo la sentencia y él tiene el modo de la idea de otro, y vemos cual es la más correcta. ¡Está bien! Como que allí, uno aprende más. Más, cuando está el par de alguien que más o menos sabemos igual.”

It’s good because I have an idea of one way to do something and he has another idea, and we see which one is more correct. It’s great! We learn more like that. Especially when you’re partnered with someone who more or less knows the same as you.

When I worked with Frida, I found it interesting that she would often answer my questions about her perspectives and experiences in the third person singular *we*. After she completed a story dictation activity in a metalinguistic reflection session, I asked her how she thought the activity might help her learn English. She responded with several examples using the plural:

“Porque lo que vimos en la historia, leímos, analizamos, respondimos… Nos afirmamos más a tener la palabra buena.”

*Because what we saw in the story, we read, analyzed, responded to… We confirmed that we had the right word.*

This example was not the only one that appeared in Frida’s talk about her learning experiences. She extrapolated her own perspective to what seemed to work or happen with the larger group of learners, which may indicate her general sense of collaboration in the learning process.

On the other hand, the participants expressed some challenges or downsides of peer collaboration. As literacy class attendance dwindled over the 12-week session, Mizrak who was an Amharic speaker, was Hana’s primary companion. Based on my observations, it seemed that they worked fairly well together during the literacy class. However, Hana’s perspective differed;
she didn’t find Mizrak’s English very comprehensible and didn’t find it very beneficial to work with her in the pullout group:

“Ella tiene otro inglés. Cuando ella habla, no entiendo.”

*She has a different English. When she talks, I don’t understand.*

Hana had complained to her husband about this, but his advice was to learn to deal with it, because everyone speaks differently and it is something that she needed to get used to. In this sense, Hana put the burden of comprehensibility on Mizrak and her “otro inglés,” rather than on her own attempts to address the communication issues (Subtirelu & Lindemann, 2014).

In addition, the preferences for peer collaboration described above did not extend to preferences for peer correction. There may be a fine line between helping one another and correcting one another. None of the participants liked it when their peers corrected their mistakes. Frida described conflicts that would come up when students were reading aloud and their classmates thought that they knew the pronunciation better than the person who was reading. At the same time, Frida admitted to correcting her classmates like this in the past, but eventually realized that her classmates would also correct her in the same way – and she didn’t like that. She preferred to leave all corrections up to the teacher.

The participants sometimes witnessed or perceived negative or discouraging attitudes coming from their classmates. Tina’s underlying fear of being made fun of impacted her willingness to practice speaking with her peers. She was not shy about expressing her frustration with her classmate Mario, whom she found to be a distraction in both the literacy class and the mainstream class. Tina complained that he talked too much, laughed too much, corrected others too much, spoke too much Spanish, and did not really focus much on classwork. Tina’s
perspective on Mario was different than my own from my observations. What I saw as a fairly bubbly and engaged learner who was not afraid to make mistakes and to keep trying, Tina seemed to view as being not serious enough or quiet enough for appropriate classroom behavior. Frida complained about students who came to school just to avoid being at home. While other students wanted to practice speaking and wanted to learn, these students did not seem interested. When sporadically attending students returned to class, they bothered their classmates with questions about what was happening in class, thus preventing the regularly attending students from paying attention.

The participants also reported a few incidences of conflict in the mainstream ESL class. Hana noted that a physical fight broke out among students in her class when one non-Spanish-speaking student accused some Spanish-speaking classmates of talking about her in Spanish behind her back. After Marta spoke up several times in class to ask questions and participate, she was told by a classmate to stop talking: “You no talk. You no talk.” She countered this admonition with her own: “Sí, is practice. Is practice for speak English.” I tried to understand this interaction, because I was surprised to hear that classmates would discourage her from talking. When I asked Marta about it during one of the interviews, I didn’t get a clear reason for why her classmate wouldn’t want her to talk or to ask questions beyond “Algunas no les gusta” [Some people don’t like it.] However, Marta reported standing her ground with her classmate, and countered that she needed to clear up any doubts to find out if something was correct or not: “Y yo le digo a mi partner, ‘It’ time the school. It’s time the exercise for speaking’.” [And I told my partner…]

Finally, Frida articulated some of the logistical problems of peer collaboration in the ESL setting. One of the reading practices that they would do in the literacy classes was choral reading
or choral repetition of the stories. Frida pointed out that the teacher is unable to provide personalized corrective feedback on pronunciation during this kind of collaborative reading. She also noticed a problem during dictation when some students would interrupt to ask for repetitions when others tried to follow what the teacher said:

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**Frida:** “Lo único que nos cuesta, en mi opinión a mí me cuesta, es cuando dictan y uno está escuchando que vuelven a repetir lo mismo… ‘¿Qué dijo? ¡Repita! ¡No escuché!’...Cuando repiten, que digan ‘I will go to the clinic today.’ Y lo demás de los compañeros – ‘¿Qué dijo? Go to? Go to the?’ Y entonces lo equivocan a uno.”

*The only thing that bothers us, what bothers me, is when the teachers do the dictation and someone is trying to get them to repeat the same things over and over.... ‘What did she say? Repeat! I didn’t hear!’ ... And when they repeat, they should just say ‘I will go to the clinic today.’ But most of my classmates say ‘What did she say? Go to? Go to the?’ And then they miss something.*

**Sarah:** “Ah porque su compañero está tratando de escuchar...”

*Oh, because the classmate is trying to listen...*

**Frida:** “Si, y todos hablamos a la misma vez.”

*Yes, and everyone is talking at the same time.*

---

Frida seemed to be saying two related things: First, she preferred that dictations be presented in a chunk, rather than word by word. Secondly, she noted that her classmates often missed what the teacher was saying, because they kept interrupting her to check their own comprehension in their determination to get every word right. Frida believed that it was better for everyone to go slowly. If there was someone in the class who was a bit slower than everyone else, it would be better for everyone to stop and wait to match that student’s pace.

To summarize, the participants seemed to value collaboration with peers in their ESL classes, particularly when they are well-matched with other learners. Collaboration does not extend to peer correction or to over-use of the L1. In addition, there are many attitudes and
conflicts that arise during collaboration that we may not be aware of, but that affect the learners’ participation in class.

5.1.6 Summary. The participants brought a variety of beliefs and ideologies about the nature of L2 learning and L2 interaction to their own experiences. Their admiration of English was initially tempered by varying levels of fear and uncertainty when they first arrived in the United States. Despite their challenges, motivation played strongly into all of their L2 learning experiences. Frida was the youngest participant, with no children and no spouse to be responsible for, and 12 years of education in her home country. Given her circumstances, she was optimistic about her prospects for reaching high levels of proficiency. She spoke confidently and in detail about English and all of the features of the language that she had learned and used in her practice. Marta was the oldest participant, with eight children and a spouse, and two years of education in Mexico. We might say that in spite of her circumstances, she demonstrated an equally high level of confidence, analysis, and reflection on language as Frida. Marta was driven by her desire to get U.S. citizenship and to learn English, “lo básico,” to gain additional independence in her life. Frida and Marta rarely hesitated when it came to asking and answering questions, hypothesizing about language, and giving details or examples of language features – usually with the underlying motivation of using the language in their daily lives.

The role that the participants’ classmates played in their L2 learning is an interesting one. There might be several plausible reasons for Marta’s classmate’s admonition of “Marta! You no talk. You no talk!” Classmates could be annoyed or jealous of Marta’s willingness to communicate. They could see it as competition for air time or as disrespectful to the teacher, who may be seen as the preferred voice in the classroom. Marta’s talking – even under the breath practicing that I heard her do – could distract her classmates from paying attention to the teacher,
which as a big concern for Tina. It is a double irony that Marta’s desire to practice so much in class is discouraged by others and that she needs to go to class to practice to begin with, given that she lives in an English-speaking community.

Tina stood out as being particularly reticent when it came to sharing her thoughts and beliefs about language, as she was often unsure about her own abilities and knowledge of the language. She had been in the United States for the longest amount of time, yet her exposure to English had been relatively limited for her first 18 years here. These circumstances bring to mind the question of how personal aspirations feed into ideas about good language learning. On the one hand, Marta recognized the enormity of the task of English learning based, in part, on her own daughter’s schooled but incomplete English knowledge, whereas Tina viewed the enormity of the task as being due in part to her own deficiencies as a language learner. Marta’s perspective on the enormity of learning English (e.g., there is so much to learn that no one can know it all) seems to represent a helpful L2 ideology, as opposed to Tina’s perspectives which seems to be an unhelpful L2 ideology. However, Tina reported experiencing a recent turning point at work, because she began to see herself as an asset to the nurses, who needed her help with cleaning rooms, and she realized the opportunity she had to make friendly small talk with them. This great range of personal factors helps to lay the foundation for expanding our understanding of the influences on metalinguistic awareness from a strictly cognitive perspective.

5.2 Focused Attention: How We Learn is Shaped by What We Notice

Attention is a key element of cognitively-oriented definitions of metalinguistic awareness. As a reminder, Jessner (2006) defined metalinguistic awareness as “the ability to focus attention on language as an object in itself or to think abstractly about language and,
consequently, to play with or manipulate language” (p. 42). Jessner (2008) elaborated on the (2006) definition, stating that metalinguistically aware people can “categorize words into parts of speech; switch focus between form, function, and meaning; and explain why a word has a particular function” (p. 277). Gombert’s (1992) earlier description of metalinguistic awareness is still cited, with the focus on decontextualized, conscious, and intentional ability to analyze, manipulate, or reflect on properties of language. These cognitive conceptions of metalinguistic awareness often require the use of metalinguistic terms in explaining rules or making judgments about the grammaticality of utterances. I begin this section by asking, Do my data fit cognitively-oriented definitions of metalinguistic awareness? Are these definitions sufficient to capture these four adults’ metalinguistic awareness, in terms of breadth, depth, and meaningfulness of attention, language awareness, and use?

5.2.1 Objects of attention. The first part of Jessner’s (2006) definition, “the ability to focus attention on language as an object in itself” (p. 42), can be observed from the participants’ performance in their literacy classes. The primary intention of these classes seemed to be to focus explicitly on language as object – in particular, English vowels, phonemes, spelling, and vocabulary. The participants demonstrated ability to focus their attention on language through their successful completion of many of these form-focused activities. They demonstrated focused attention on language whenever they asked the teacher or one of their classmates about a particular linguistic feature or meaning in question, as well as when they offered responses to others’ questions and comments about language. During our interviews, the participants answered many questions about what they had noticed about language, which required focused attention on language. Hana’s description of the ways that her literacy teacher helps her learn English demonstrates her level of attention on the language:
Marta also talked about paying attention to different aspects of the language that had been covered in class. In the following excerpt, I asked her to describe her thought process during a metalinguistic reflection task she completed about short and long vowels, which also touched on double vowels such as ‘ea’ in ‘Jean.’ Marta’s explanation of silent letters in English is remarkable, and she ties them to her own learning strategies and experiences as well:

Sarah: “¿Qué estaba pensando mientras que completó la actividad? ¿Cómo lo hizo?”
What were you thinking about when you did the activity? How did you do it?

Marta: “La atención al oído, cuando la pronuncia. Y recordar lo que he oído en las clases. Las palabras.”
By paying attention to the sounds when they were said. And remembering what I heard in class, those words.

Sarah: “¿Y de qué manera esta actividad le ayudará a aprender inglés?
And how does this activity help you learn English?

Marta: “Me ayuda para entender que cuando hay dos vowells, a veces se pronuncia una letra. Que hay palabras que no se pronuncia los dos. Only one. Eso me ayuda. Porque yo antes estaba pensando que era pronunciar todas las letras en el inglés. Yo no tenía idea que hay letras que no se pronuncian. Es lo que me ayuda con las clases de las palabras cortitas, a ver cómo van el orden de la palabra, y que vowells están escritos, cómo en la pronunciación. Facilita entender cuando habla de algo, de alguien, una conversación.”

It helps me understand that when there are two vowels, sometimes you only pronounce one letter. That there are words where you don’t pronounce both. Only one. That helps me. Because before, I was thinking that you have to pronounce all of the letters in English. I had
The “palabras cortitas” [small words] that she is referring to above are probably the vowel reference words for short and long vowels that are focused on at the start of each literacy class. Given that our interviews were conducted primarily in Spanish, most of the metalanguage or metalinguistic terms that the participants used were in Spanish. They used the word “abecedario” (alphabet) when talking about what they studied in primary school or when referring to their initial English schooling here in the United States. They used grammatical terms such as “verbos pasados y presentes” (past tense or present tense verbs) and “pregunta” (question), as well as literacy-oriented terms such “letras” (letters), “palabras” (words), “oraciones” or “sentencias” (sentences), “frases” (phrases or short sentences), and “punto” (period) in describing their classroom activities. They used the English words “short vowels” and “long vowels” that they had learned in their literacy classes, but “sonidos” (sounds) and “vocales” (vowels) when talking more generally about English phonics. The words “quotation mark” and “apostrophe” were occasionally discussed in the literacy classes. The participants struggled to produce these writing terms in English during our interviews, and never produced the equivalents in Spanish.

To a certain extent, this collection of metalinguistic terms reflects the parameters of what was covered or emphasized in the literacy classes. Based on my observations, the participants were exposed to and responded to many more metalinguistic terms in English during the literacy classes than I have catalogued here. Indeed, there is quite a bit of evidence from Marta that she had paid attention enough in classes to be comfortable using a variety of metalinguistic terms
during our metalinguistic reflection sessions. In the following example, I asked her to talk about
the process of trying to translate some of the story sentences from English into Spanish, and what
was easiest and most difficult for her in doing so. Unprompted, Marta used words like “el sujeto”
(the subject) and “el negativo” (the negative), and then broke down a sentence into constituent
parts that were particularly challenging for her:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sarah [And what part was easiest for you to translate?]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marta:</strong> “I have a problem.” Es fácil porque como es el sujeto [pointing to ‘I’], y este es tener, a problem. Como que, ya lo relaciono más esta frase… Y aquí, ‘Pam says don’t be upset Mom. Porque es como el negativo. Y es que ya dijo, ella dijo, ‘No be upset Mom,’ es como cortita. Sólo se habla de que dijo y la persona que dijo.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sarah [And which part was the hardest to translate or explain in Spanish?]</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marta</strong> (first reading back quietly through lines): “Esta: ‘You can do a lot to help your heart.’ Porque este es que como fueron dos sentencias. Más grande. Y porque a veces no entiende uno, como dar ‘do’ o ‘a’ o ‘to’ en la sentencia.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sarah:</strong> “Si, son palabras pequeñas”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marta:</strong> “Pequeñas, pero que necesitan una orden. Que vayan exacto. Para agarrar la sentencia bien.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marta focused on the phrase “You can do a lot to __,” pointing out that it contains several small words that were difficult to translate. This formulaic expression (Wray, 2002)
cannot be translated in a word-by-word way, yet the pedagogical focus of the literacy classes often portrayed language in this piecemeal way.

Nevertheless, the separation of certain linguistic features for focused attention had benefits. The routine work on vowels in the literacy classes, described in Chapter 4, resulted in an important insight from Frida:

“En las vocales está la clave de las palabras. Hay que saber cómo pronunciar las vocales, y las consonantes – ya sólo se dicen como están. En las vocales, hay un cambio, verdad?”

_Vowels are the key to words. You have to know how to pronounce the vowels and the consonants – but those are pronounced like they’re written. There’s a change for vowels, right?_

Not everyone used the terms and explanations that Marta and Frida did, but their absence in the participants’ productive vocabularies does not provide evidence that they lacked knowledge of these terms or concepts. Some of the participants’ theories about particular linguistic features may have been incorrect or incomplete from a pedagogical or linguistic viewpoint, such as Marta’s attempt at explaining the difference between short vowels and long vowels:

“Short vowels – es la letra que se habla directo– lo que está al escrito. Long es la pronunciación de la letra pero al largo. El sonido largo.”

_A short vowel is the letter that’s said just as it is written. Pronouncing a long vowel is pronouncing the letter but longer. The long sound._

Despite the inaccuracy in her explanation, Marta’s ability to theorize in this way is certainly proof of metalinguistic ability. It is also evidence of willingness to engage in reflection on language, which seemed be missing to a great extent in Tina’s data, discussed below.
Similarly, Frida gave a very detailed explanation of the difference between short and long vowels. In the excerpt from one of our metalinguistic reflection tasks included below, she listened as I read words written on index cards and then she placed them in a “short vowel” or “long vowel” pile. Frida did this task with a high level of accuracy. When I asked her how she knew which words would go in which pile, she went into a lengthy explanation about vowel length that exhibited manipulation of phonemes based on the example of the word “take”:


So here, since these words are short, the ‘pit’ is just ‘pit.’ But ‘take’ – here it’s pronounced ‘taaaaaake.’ If ‘take’ were a short word, you’d say ‘tak,’ right?

Sarah: “¡Sin la ‘e’? Tak.”
Without the e? Tak.

Frida: “Tak.”
Tak.

Sarah: “¿Sin la ‘e’?
And with the e?

Frida: “Take… Entonces en la corta es que no lleva cambio, así como ‘wan’.
Tuviere otra palabra ‘waaaane.’”
Take… So the short word doesn’t change, like ‘wan.’ It would be a different word, ‘wane’.

Frida’s theory about short and long vowels and how the sound of a word changes according to the length of the word is interesting. She exaggerated the /a/ sound in “take” and “wane” to emphasize the difference without the silent /e/ at the end of each word. Her theory seemed to be based on the number of letters in the word as being the reason for the vowel quality to be short or long. Her analysis is nuanced and reasonable, given the evidence that she had been provided in her literacy classes.
5.2.2 Attention as a focused mental state. For Tina, paying attention to language often required intense concentration that mixed with her own doubts about her L2 abilities. During one of our metalinguistic reflection sessions, I asked Tina what she was paying attention to or thinking about while she completed an activity. Her response did not include specifics about the language features she was noticing, but rather focused on her need for intense concentration:

“It is thinking that I have to learn. I’m focused on the fact that I have to learn. Very nervous [x] I forget. Here, I can do it but later, I forget, since I’m afraid of speaking.”

Tina seemed to mix her own particular cocktail of attention, memorization, anxiety, and fear when completing tasks in English. Although she could often pinpoint something that was difficult for her, she usually stopped there and focused more on her struggles to learn English. During one metalinguistic reflection activity, I asked her for the vowels in English, and then asked her to write the accompanying vowel reference words she had learned in class (at, egg, in, on, up). Although she was able to easily write the reference words, she reported struggling to remember the pronunciation of the vowels: “No sé porque era tan difícil. Estas letras, me confundo” [I don’t know why it was so difficult. These letters, I’m confused.] When I asked her what the teacher does to teach vowels in the literacy class, her response was also vague:

“What does she do? With patience. I like how she – but sometimes it doesn’t stick in my head. She teaches very well. I like how she teaches. In the moment, I remember it, but then I forget.”

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Some of these examples provide evidence of conscious attention on language, but more often than not, Tina seemed to focus her attention on her own L2 abilities (or lack thereof) rather than on the language itself. After our interviews, I came away with impressions of Tina as being a learner who was quick to praise English and her ESL classes while emphasizing her difficulty remembering words and being afraid to speak English. I gently asked her if she has problems with her memory in other things as well, and she emphatically said no: “¡Con el inglés, nada más! ¡Porque no tengo mala memoria!” [Only with English, nothing else! I don’t have a bad memory!] I asked her for another example of something she struggles with in class, and she replied with a vague description: “A veces, no puedo decir las palabras correctas. Pero después, pongo atención.” [Sometimes, I can’t say the correct words. But after, I pay attention.] In this response, we again see that she notes her mistakes, but attributes getting past those mistakes by paying attention, presumably to what the teacher is saying.

“Paying attention” was a concept that came up often in the participants’ talk about English and L2 learning. Tina believed that in a good English class, the teacher explains things well, and the students pay attention – a lot of attention. She thought that having written words in the book or binder were also helpful to pay attention to, but it is better to focus on language that is written on the blackboard, because “uno se fija más en el pizarrón” [but you can focus more when it’s on the board].

Frida seemed to blame some of her literacy group classmates’ struggles with English on their lack of engagement with learning English and the efforts required to do so. According to Frida, her classmates were not paying enough attention to what the teacher said or how the teacher would point out and correct their errors. When the students were learning the word ‘health’ and some students pronounced it ‘heth,’ despite the teacher’s efforts to model the correct
pronunciation, Frida labeled it as an error, “porque la maestra nos está enseñando y uno no está poniendo interés” [because the teacher is showing us, and they’re not interested]. Frida emphasized the need to ask questions when one needs help. Her strategy for being successful in class is to pay attention and do what the teacher says, making sure to review the day’s work at home.

In my experience, reflection and analysis of language naturally lead to – and are a result of – learner questions about language. For these participants, asking questions was an important element in their L2 learning. In fact, Frida was proud that her teacher Andrea teased her about how much she liked to ask questions in class. Marta emphasized the importance of asking questions to clear up any doubts that she had, such as with the phonemic difference between ‘this’ and ‘these.’ She switched to English to explain to me, “I like ask question for doubt. Understand for how the sound the word. Sometime the word different. I listen. Same… I need what is the pronunciation?” She seemed to be very clear about why she needed certain words, and what her limitations might be in mastering them. Hana did not hesitate to ask language-related questions in the literacy class or in her individual conversations with me. She also reported being able to ask questions in Spanish to her mainstream classroom teacher Pete if she struggled with something in English. Being able to ask questions is not only important for the learners, but it also provides valuable feedback to their teachers that they could then build on in future instruction.

5.2.3 Analysis and reflection on language. A fundamental goal of ESL instruction is to provide learners with the knowledge and practice to eventually use English successfully outside of the classroom setting. Marta reflected on how the literacy classes taught her phrases or
expressions that she could transfer to talking about her own life, referring to examples from one of the Talk of the Block characters, Kim:

> “Y la conversación, y las frases del libro que son chiquitas. Eso me gusta, porque son bien útiles. En la vida diaria son bien útiles entender esas frases chiquitas. Por ejemplo, ‘Kim is sick in bed.’ ‘My son is sick in bed.’ ‘I sick in bed.’ […] ‘Kim has two kids.’ ‘I have 8 kids.’ Son cortitas pero ya uno puede practicarlo para- en diferente ocasión, ¿verdad?’”

And conversation practice, and the short expressions from the book. I like this, because they’re really helpful. These short phrases are really helpful in daily life. For example, ‘Kim is sick in bed. My son is sick in bed. I sick in bed… Kim has two kids. I have eight kids. They’re short but you can practice them for different things, right?

Frida mentioned her desire to play games in her English classes several times during our interviews. She suggested the games Hot Potato and Concentration, where students must practice language learned in class to find matching pairs of words. Here, Frida demonstrates an analysis of verb conjugations by purposefully recreating errors that her classmates made, to explain the benefits of using games for L2 learning:

> “Puede ayudar. Porque las mímicas serían como relacionado con la clase. Como ‘I am.’ ‘You are.’ ‘They are.’ ‘He is.’ ‘It is.’ …Entonces se revuelven las cartas y entonces entre el grupo, uno le da vuelta y dice ‘I’ y el otro busca la pareja ‘are.’ No va, no pareja. Adivinen dónde están y se le queden. Porque yo he visto que a mis compañeros se les olvidan. Confunden el ‘do’ con el ‘does.’ Entonces ‘He does.’ ‘I do.’ … Si ellos ponen ‘I does,’ entonces no es pareja. Ayudaría al alumno con el inglés.”

It can help, because the games would be related to what happens in class. Like ‘I am. You are. They are. He is. It is.’ So you turn the cards over and then someone in the group flips the card over and reads ‘I’ and someone else, looking for the match, gets ‘are.’ That’s not a match. You have to guess where the words are and then remember. I’ve seen that my classmates confuse ‘do’ with ‘does.’ It should be ‘He does. I do.’ If they put ‘I does’ together, it’s not a match. This game would help students learn English.

Gombert’s (1992) characterization of metalinguistic awareness explicitly focused on the decontextualized, conscious, and intentional ability to analyze and reflect on language.
Decontextualized analysis or reflection on language seems to be a hallmark of metalinguistic awareness from a cognitive perspective, but it is strongly discouraged in adult education practices and literature. One of the most emphasized principles in working with literacy-level L2 learners is contextualized and personalized instruction: Print materials need to be grounded in and connected to the learners’ lives (Auerbach, 1990). Throughout our interviews and metalinguistic reflection sessions, I asked each of the participants a variety of questions about what they noticed about English, what they struggled with, what they thought about while completing a particular task, what they found helpful, why they liked or disliked certain elements of language or ESL class, why they believed something about language or learning, and so on – all in the effort to elicit this kind of decontextualized and conscious analysis and reflection on language. In many cases, the participants were able to pinpoint particular features that were difficult for them, but then could not always explain the source of the difficulty. In our first metalinguistic reflection session, I asked Hana to tell me which vowels were easiest for her to remember. She pointed to each vowel, clearly saying A, I, O, U, but then went back to E and said, “El E, este me confundo” [The E, this confuses me]. When I asked her why ‘E’ might be difficult, she shrugged her shoulders and replied, “No sé, no se me queda” [I don’t know, it doesn’t stick with me].

In a similar vein, I asked Tina for sounds that are difficult for her in English. She seemed unsure of how to respond, and asked me for an example of what I meant. I offered the example of the [θ] in ‘health,’ which many non-native English speakers may struggle with. She responded by giving the example of the word “disease,” but no particular sound within the word. As I mentioned above, Tina seemed to respond more readily about her feelings about learning English (fear, motivation, determination, anxiety) than about English itself. While her responses to many
of my questions were colored with emphatic proclamations about wanting to learn English and
earnest praise for her teachers and the classes, Tina described almost everything about English as
being difficult. When pressed to give specific examples of her analysis of language, Tina usually
responded with general statements about her need to learn and the overall usefulness of her
English classes and teachers.

In contrast, I found less of a focus on these feelings of frustration and more of a focus on
analysis of language when I asked these questions to Marta and Frida. These reflections extended
to specific examples of the similarities and differences between the mainstream class and the
literacy classes, as well as the particularities of the teachers’ actions in each one. Marta pointed
to the focus on phonics as a highlight of the literacy classes, with one example being the phrase
“a lot of water.” She described how she used to pronounce “a lot” with a certain vowel quality [ǝ
lot] but then learned to pronounce it “correctly” as [ǝ lat]. She gave the literacy class a great deal
of credit for helping her with her pronunciation and her spelling. She appreciated learning how
something is said and how it would be written, but was emphatic about how much easier it is to
respond orally than in writing:

“En la escritura, hay veces que lleva dos letras y habla una, nada más. Hay que
entender bien los sonidos de las letras porque a veces van dos, ¿verdad? Como ‘keep.’
Son dos letras, [i] [i]. [ki-i-i-pee]. Tengo que memorizarlas, porque al hablarla, keep,
only es una. Por eso, escribirla tiene que ser bien inteligente para tener la escritura
correcta, grabárselo bien en la mente.”

In writing, sometimes there are two letters but you only say one. You have to
understand the sounds of the letters very well, because sometimes there are two, right?
For example, ‘keep.’ It’s 2 letters: e-e-. ki-e-e-pay. I have to memorize those, because
in speaking, keep, it’s only one. You have to be very intelligent to remember the
correct way to write it.
As I discussed in Chapter 4, the meaning and use of quotation marks was a theme throughout the literacy classes, given that so much of the reading texts included them in the dialogues. After asking the participants to read aloud the already familiar story “Bob is Sick” in their individual metalinguistic reflection sessions, I asked them to reflect on the use of quotation marks and what their significance was in the story. Here is a side-by-side comparison of how each of the participants responded to my question about the meaning or usage of quotation marks:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tina</th>
<th>“La palabra correcta, la palabra es.. No sé, como…”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The exact word, the word is.. I don’t know…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marta</td>
<td>“Como hablar una cosa exacta, no? Como, ‘OK, Bob.’ Como una oración, pero super saliente, de lo que está hablando, no?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It’s like when you’re saying a specific thing, right? Like, ‘OK, Bob.’ Like a sentence, but really important speech, right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Note: Marta then summed things up, pointing out that the main problem for her is “para definir bien cuáles son las palabras donde llevan los puntos. Cuales son la exacta frase que llevan la puntuación.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>identifying which words get the marks, which is the exact phrase that gets the punctuation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>“Se me olvidó… Porque son las palabras más importantes de la historia… Porque cómo lo podría explicar… Porque Bob- es cuando necesita la, donde pide al jefe que necesita ayuda. Entonces allí son las palabras más importantes porque en la historia dice que Bob está en la cama, que Bob se siente mal. Entonces cuando está en – cómo se llama? [S: Quotation marks] quotation mark, allí es donde Bob está de como, decidido ir a la clínica pero necesita ayuda entonces son partes más importantes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I forget… Because they are the most important words in the story. Because Bob- it’s when, where he needed to ask his boss for help. So these are the most important words, because in the story it says that Bob is in bed, that Bob doesn’t feel well. So when it’s in – how do you call them? – quotation marks, that’s how Bob decides to go to the clinic, but he needs help so those are the most important parts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This mark is for the start, right? And this mark is for the end of the word.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. Participants’ explanations of the function of quotation marks.

No claim can be made that Tina’s response above indicates that she is less capable of reflecting on or analyzing language. Like many other examples in Tina’s data, her brief response may indicate her unwillingness to attempt an answer, for fear of being wrong. The differences among participants’ responses highlight a problem with the Gombert (1992) and Jessner (2006)
descriptions of metalinguistic awareness related to analysis and reflection – how much analysis is required, and how accurate must it be? In Figure 5, none of the participants’ explanations of quotation marks were technically correct – but Frida, Marta, and Hana all demonstrated a level of analysis in considering the punctuation. What type of reflection is appropriate? What if analysis and reflection are impacted by personal factors such as confidence, motivation, and risk-taking?

5.2.4 Summary. In this section, I focused on two well-accepted cognitive perspectives on metalinguistic awareness. The data from Marta and Frida in particular fit nicely with the Jessner (2006) and Gombert (1992) definitions, which is interesting to consider in light of the difference in years of formal L1 education between Marta (two years) and Frida (12 years). These definitions can also apply to Tina and Hana’s metalinguistic reflections on language, but with an important nuance in particular regarding Tina’s data: In her case, the traditional cognitive view of metalinguistic awareness seems to be clouded by other personal factors affecting her ability to analyze, manipulate, or reflect on language in a public setting. These personal factors may include lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, anxiety about not making progress, and the belief that intense concentration is needed when learning.

5.3 Reconfiguring the Pieces of the Metalinguistic Awareness Puzzle: What Makes a Good Language Learner?

The findings distilled in this chapter came mostly from our individual interviews and metalinguistic reflection sessions, conducted primarily in the participants’ L1 Spanish. The themes that emerged from these sessions were originally shaped by the questions that I asked – but the participants’ responses often went beyond my initial expectations for the data. It is
important to note, once again, that these beliefs and perceptions shared by the participants were “snapshots” at a certain time, in a certain place, and in a certain context. There was a great deal of consistency across the participants’ self-reports and from my observations. Their descriptions of their literacy classes were similar to my own observations in many ways, which I believe strengthens the evidence of data triangulation. For example, when I asked Tina to describe her literacy class, she listed the main activities in simple terms: Vocabulary words, vowels, reading, practice, and writing. In this simple description, Tina succinctly grasped the main points/purposes of the literacy classes. It was telling to hear their individual take on some of the activities or interactions or strategies that I was quite familiar with as a teacher/observer. I believe these shared perspectives lend additional credibility to the findings of this chapter.

A tentative hypothesis about L2 learning emerges from this examination of the participants’ personal insights, beliefs, and experiences: Perhaps metalinguistic awareness has much less to do with years of education or L1 literacy abilities than what has been supposed, and much more to do with other factors that have been neglected in the SLA research. To further refine my findings, I would like to focus once more on Marta, who was a married woman and mother in her late 50s with two years of education in her native Mexico.

Marta demonstrated a remarkable level of cognitive, affective, and social engagement in her literacy classes and in our interview sessions. She fit all of Svalberg’s (2009) criteria of alertness, focus, reflection, analysis, noticing, and problem-solving as demonstrations of cognitive engagement. She asked questions, volunteered answers, constantly practiced aloud and under her breath, took notes, offered hypotheses, gave examples, and provided key details about language when asked. From an affective perspective, she emphasized many times her desire to learn English and her willingness to try to use English even when she was discouraged by
classmates or tired from the effort – meeting Svalberg’s affective engagement criteria for willingness to engage, purposeful language use, and autonomous learning. From a social perspective, Marta regularly tried to engage her classmates in English practice opportunities, noting that using English phrases intentionally in conversation helped her retain the new language. She seemed to use every opportunity possible to ask questions to clear up doubts or to cement new information in her mind.

My initial research questions in Research Inquiry Strand 2 include: What does metalinguistic awareness look like for this learner population? What metalinguistic assets do they bring to the ESL classroom? For Marta, metalinguistic awareness not only fits Jessner’s (2006) cognitively-oriented definition, but it also more poignantly represents Svalberg’s (2009) more sociocognitively-oriented definition of language engagement. I return to the Bolitho et al. (2003) description of Language Awareness, previously shared in Chapter 3: “Language Awareness is a mental attribute which develops through paying motivated attention to language in use, and which enables language learners to gradually gain insights into how languages work” (p. 251). The active process of discovery proposed by Bolitho et al. is one that Marta embodied. Given that Marta did not have the high levels of L1 literacy or formal schooling that is generally associated with these abilities, other personal factors must be at play.

In the following Discussion chapter, I review and compare the opportunities for metalinguistic development with the participants’ evidence of metalinguistic awareness to propose new insights in bridging these gaps and better understanding this understudied learner population in the context of SLA. The implications of this study touch on important questions: Is the current widely-accepted definition of metalinguistic awareness useful and appropriate, or do we need an expansion or a re-visioning of it? In what concrete ways is the conscious ability to
reflect on, manipulate, and analyze language important for low-literate L2 learners? In what concrete ways is engagement with language important for low-literate L2 learners? The remainder of this dissertation seeks to propose recommendations for both research and teaching in these areas.
6. Discussion

I demur from the role of omniscient narrator and summarizer. Instead, I tell the story in its diversity, allowing the story to unfold from the many-sided, complex, and sometimes conflicting stories that the actors in the case have told me.

(Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 22)

In this Discussion chapter, my goal is to review the findings from Chapters 4 and 5 in order to address previous claims about metalinguistic awareness (Jessner, 2006) and good language learners (Cervatiuc, 2009; Griffiths, 2008; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Rubin, 1975) with an eye to providing recommendations for working with low-literate adult English language learners in ESL instructional settings. My use of a qualitative case study approach connects (1) instructional experiences (literacy classes) with (2) their observed behaviors in those experiences (participation in literacy classes) with (3) their elicited interpretations of those experiences (interviews in L1). With my primary methodological focus on observation and interviews, the data collected is certainly subjective, but it is centered on a particular context and can be seen through a predictable lens that is familiar and logical for the participants involved.

There are four main findings and related implications discussed in this chapter. These findings address the opportunities for metalinguistic work in the literacy classes and the evidence of metalinguistic awareness and language engagement shared directly by the participants themselves. I then share limitations of the research methodology and findings. After discussing these findings, I provide recommendations in three important areas: (1) a proposed revision of our understanding of metalinguistic awareness as a sociocognitive rather than a cognitive phenomenon; (2) the use of Language Awareness strategies in ESL instruction; and (3) a proposed revision of our understanding of good language learners. I conclude with an answer to the question, In what ways are low-literate L2 learners good language learners?
6.1 Findings: Opportunities for Metalinguistic Work in the Literacy Classes

My first set of research questions focused on identifying what opportunities actually existed for building on metalinguistic awareness in the literacy classes, how supportive those opportunities were, and what factors influenced those opportunities. This research inquiry strand then leads to important implications for how we can integrate principles from Language Awareness and engagement with language to improve adult ESL instruction.

6.1.1 Finding 1: Factors influencing the opportunities for demonstrating metalinguistic awareness. The most influential factor was the scripted literacy curriculum itself, along with the story-based materials *Sam and Pat* and *Talk of the Block*. This curriculum focused a great deal on phonemic awareness, particularly short or long vowels and certain consonant blends. The importance of vowels in learning to read and write was reiterated by Frida herself: “En las vocales está la clave de las palabras” [Vowels are the key to words.]. This emphasis on vowels as being a key to literacy often led the teachers to shift focus from vocabulary meaning or another linguistic aspect back to the identification or production of the vowels. At the same time, the teachers elicited the students’ help in contributing to vocabulary meanings or examples of new words that had been learned. Vocabulary work provided one of the most frequent opportunities for students to contribute their own knowledge to classroom interactions. The board was heavily used as a focal point in each class; key sounds, words, phrases, and answers to comprehension questions or dictation exercises were put on the board by the teachers. Students were expected to consult the board for examples, answers, patterns, clues, and language input to copy or produce orally – placing the text on the board as a source of expert knowledge equal almost to the teacher.
As a story-based curriculum, much of the class focus eventually turned to the stories and characters in *Talk of the Block* or *Sam and Pat*. The general routine would be to read the stories aloud, read and answer the story comprehension questions orally, and then complete a dictation exercise with key sentences from each story. The students would read and answer the questions orally first before they wrote the answers, and the focus there was on providing the correct answer, according to the text, in a complete sentence. The students would often struggle due to the dialogic nature of many of the stories; quotation marks representing speech seemed to confuse students and the literacy teachers struggled to express their function and meaning.

**6.1.2 Implications for finding 1.** For these students, talk about language was generated primarily by fictional texts that were intentionally constructed to help students with particular features of language. Students had to work not only to understand the linguistic features but to understand the plots of the stories, which were not always immediately relevant to their lives. These findings tell us that the opportunity for developing and using learners’ metalinguistic awareness is constrained by language and content outside of themselves. The learners must work diligently to extract information from the stories and the teachers’ explanations for their own use and practice. Dialogues and quoted speech are very prevalent in the reading materials. They create special challenges, as intuitive as it is to assume that they help learners bridge oral language and print. Multimodal resources are needed to represent the speakers who are encoded in the written text of these stories, such as additional pictures, role plays, cartoons, or even figures to represent the story characters.

Nevertheless, the existence of this supplemental literacy class provides a unique and highly valued opportunity for these students – this level of attention to literacy skills, practice with reading and writing, and freedom to ask questions in a small group is not available in the
mainstream ESL classes. Although the materials themselves may not be ideal, this 30-minute literacy class allows students the chance to put language under a microscope through daily familiar routines. There are certainly many pedagogical and environmental factors that positively and negatively influence the opportunities students have to build their metalinguistic awareness in the literacy classes, but the existence of the classes themselves already provide an important opportunity for the students. I propose that these kinds of small-sized classes focusing explicitly on language and literacy skills be offered to all students, regardless of their proficiency level; the opportunities for engagement with language in the literacy classes would be difficult to match in larger more generalized ESL life skills classes.

6.1.3. Finding 2: The supportiveness of instructional practices. In addition to examining the factors that might have influenced the opportunities to demonstrate metalinguistic awareness, I wanted to examine the quality of the instructional practices themselves. In particular, I wanted to look at how supportive the teachers seemed to be regarding the students’ demonstrations of metalinguistic awareness, and how encouraging their practices were in terms of engaging students with language. The purpose of this line of inquiry was, in part, to identify practices that particularly helped or particularly hindered the students’ metalinguistic awareness or engagement with language.

Some practices were potentially more supportive than others. The teachers seemed very open to what has been called “teachable moments,” when a key question or error would pop up and generate much student interest. They often drew on the students’ own knowledge by eliciting their answers, guesses, or suggestions in class. The teachers did their best to answer questions, build on students’ examples or ideas, and incorporate relevant examples into their explanations. They used a variety of strategies to try to help students understand when there was confusion or
misunderstandings about language features or story content. They looked for evidence of student progress and comprehension, and pointed the evidence out to the students with praise.

At the same time, the teachers were constrained in a way by their own high levels of education and literacy. We tend to teach how we were taught, and these teachers all learned language and literacy in very formal, print-based settings. Diane was the only literacy teacher who had spent her career teaching adult ESL; the other teachers had received some training and had previous teaching or tutoring experiences, but were not well-versed in ESL literacy instruction. They often relied on overly technical explanations or print-based examples that seemed out of place with this group of learners. They sometimes shifted the instructional focus to a problem they saw in the learners’ language production, giving corrective feedback that was unexpected or potentially confusing to the learners. In their daily email reports, the teachers occasionally alluded to the guessing game nature of the instructional context – hoping that the student had understood some key point, but unable to communicate successfully with the student due to language barriers. I believe much more research needs to be done regarding teacher language awareness (Andrews, 2007) and its impact on low-literate adult English language learners. Some of the volunteer teachers seemed to provide an environment that was more amenable to the facilitation of metalinguistic awareness and development than others, simply through their teaching style.

The classroom’s white board seemed to be both a helpful and a hindering element of the instructional practices. The teachers and students alike relied on the board for providing models, patterns, corrections, answers, and other visual or linguistic input. It served in many ways as a transactional middle space for students’ questions to be answered, contributions to be highlighted, and errors to be corrected. It provided visual support and reinforcement elements of
language that students needed to pay attention to. Because it played such a central role in the literacy classes, it often seemed to become a hindrance when students tried to copy everything from the board. Students sometimes would fall behind in their efforts to copy text from the board. At other times, the visual support provided by the board seemed to discourage students from attempting their own writing. Sometimes, students struggled to write their own answer to a story comprehension question or a dictated sentence. When they knew that it would eventually be written on the board, they seemed less likely to attempt to write the answer in their binder themselves – preferring to wait and see how it was written on the board so they could copy it.

6.1.4 Implications for finding 2. There are two overall implications to consider when evaluating the supportiveness of the instructional practices. First, the use of an English-only approach means that the students’ metalinguistic awareness can only be demonstrated to the extent that they understand and can respond to their teachers’ utterances, and their teachers understand and can respond to the students’ utterances. Program policy is to use English as much as possible in the ESL classes, although teachers and students are not forbidden from using other languages. Jane was the only teacher I observed to use Spanish in the literacy classes, and she used it sparingly if at all. I regularly observed the students briefly consulting with each other in Spanish during the literacy classes, but in our interviews they said that too much Spanish use was problematic in an English class. The students were naturally able to express much more knowledge, understanding, and nuanced language use during our Spanish interviews than in the literacy classes. I believe that the teachers would be quite interested by the evidence of metalinguistic awareness that the students can provide in the L1; the implication is that instructional practices could be more supportive with L1 support – and possibly with more explicit efforts at translanguaging throughout the learning process.
My interviewing of the participants in their L1 Spanish resulted in important contributions to the current research in this area, as R. Ellis (2004) explained that “Learners may possess explicit knowledge of a specific rule but fail to verbalize it satisfactorily simply because they lack the necessary skill to talk about language” (p. 263). Using Spanish allowed me to tap into and verify their metalinguistic awareness and knowledge, to the extent that the participants were willing and able to discuss it in their L1. The questions I asked and the comments I shared were designed to avoid the use of technical terms or grammatical jargon that may be found in studies of metalinguistic awareness with university-level students. However, the use of Spanish allowed the participants to freely use or construct their own language about language in the terms that were most natural to them. The language that these participants used to talk about language provides additional insights into our understanding of metalinguistic awareness in this population.

Secondly, the instructional practices seemed to orient more to opportunities for cognitive engagement with language rather than social engagement. The pace of these 30-minute classes moved quickly, and the students had to focus their attentional resources on the class activities and their teachers’ explanations in order to keep up. With the teacher and the accompanying text as the central focus in these literacy classes, there were few opportunities for students to interact with one another and to demonstrate social engagement with language beyond their interactions with the teachers. It would be difficult to gauge affective engagement, particularly without a shared language that the teachers and students were all fluent in. This finding is important to consider because the lack of purposeful affectively and socially engaging activities might be seen as a weakness by students, particularly those who are struggling with the literacy and language demands and need a break from the cognitive focus.
This also brings to mind the question of peer collaboration and cooperation; in their interviews, the participants spoke enthusiastically about group work but most of the work in the literacy classes was individual. There were few opportunities for students to examine texts together. Each student worked from an individual binder where the story text was printed, and usually wrote their answers independently in their binders with the teacher coming around to check. In their interviews, several of the participants suggested using the board to share answers and correct mistakes together, so that everyone could learn from the mistakes. A primary focus on cognitive engagement necessarily privileges the teachers’ explanations and dependence on printed material, rather than more socially oriented interactions around shared texts.

One consequence of this dependence on printed material is that oral language (dialogues) ends up being read in written text without adequate support to ensure comprehension. In other words, a conversation on paper is very different than in person. The linguistic forms are different (i.e., no one really talks like that), the use of punctuation such as quotation marks sets certain aspects of language part, and the shifts in speakers are not always as clear. A related challenge of working with the story texts is that the comprehension questions tended to ask that the reader simply locate an answer in the text, requiring very little true comprehension. In addition, the comprehension questions are tightly controlled so that students focus more on “what does the teacher want me to say?” than on what they have actually understood. The focus on very tightly controlled questions seemed to limit the students’ knowledge of how meaning is actually constructed within and across the text itself.
6.2 Findings: Evidence of Metalinguistic Awareness and Engagement with Language

My second set of research questions focused on reaching a more nuanced understanding of what metalinguistic awareness is, its relevance in L2 acquisition for low-literate adult L2 learners, and what these learners value in their L2 learning. This research inquiry strand then leads to important implications for how we define, recognize, and exploit metalinguistic awareness in SLA.

6.2.1 Finding 3: Learners’ metalinguistic assets and engagement with language.

These findings are likely the most important outcomes of this dissertation. To date, there has been very little research published that investigates what metalinguistic awareness looks like for low-literate L2 learners (see, however, Kurvers, Vallen, & van Hout, 2005), or that questions whether or not the mainstream SLA operationalizations of metalinguistic awareness hold true for such a different learner population (see, however, Tarone, Bigelow, & Hanson, 2009). There has been perhaps even less research that focuses on the metalinguistic strengths and assets that these learners bring to the classroom. Part of the reason for this lack of research may be due to the logistics of research methodology; at a lower oral L2 proficiency level, learners must be able to express themselves completely in their L1, which means that data must be collected in the L1, and then transcribed and translated.

The list of metalinguistic assets that these learners bring is long. We should include in this not only cognitively-oriented examples of metalinguistic awareness, but also sociocognitively-oriented examples of engagement with language and the broader Language Awareness model. Before enumerating these assets, it is important to remember Svalberg’s (2009) caveat that her engagement with language model was still a proposal, and had not yet
been tested. As such, she saw overlap among the three aspects of the model (cognitive, social, and affective). In an attempting to use this model, I may also create some artificial boundaries between one of these elements that are not entirely accurate.

The cognitive assets evident in this data refer to Jessner’s (2006) well-known description of metalinguistic awareness as well as Svalberg’s (2009) proposed cognitive engagement with language. There are many examples in the interview data of the learners’ focused attention on language as an object, and of focused attention as a desirable mental state in learning the L2. All four participants reported identifying key language features from the literacy curriculum that were relevant to their lives, and then using various strategies to remember and practice these features outside of the classroom. Some of these strategies included taking notes in their binders of how words were spelled, pronounced, or translated into the L1, and looking for clues to guess the meaning of a word.

They were able to pinpoint learning strategies or learning preferences that they believed worked for them. These strategies often referenced mental abilities or mental practice such as repeating something silently in their head, depending on their mind to work something out, or rehearsing language silently before producing it orally. They all believed that memorization, intelligence, and education were important factors in L2 success. They gave examples of L2 features that they understood well or conversely had trouble with, while often reflecting on what the source of the trouble might be. None of them believed that Spanish should be used frequently in learning English, but they all reported using their L1 at times when it suited their learning needs. All of them were able to describe the type of progress they had made so far in English and to project what their future English use might look like.
The affective assets evident in this data are framed almost entirely within Svalberg’s (2009) proposed model of language engagement and sociocognitive perspectives on SLA (e.g., Batstone, 2010), as this perspective is not included in mainstream SLA literature on metalinguistic awareness. Perhaps the most remarkable affective asset that these learners displayed in their perspective on English was their ability to get past their fears of communicating in the L2, drawing on deep wells of motivation and persistence to study English. It is likely that their overall positive orientations to English as a language they desired to learn played a part in their persistence and in their efforts to make connections between the content of their ESL classes and their outside lives. They all showed willingness in the classes and in our interviews to ask questions to clarify their L2 knowledge. Tina spoke at length about her study routines at home and at work, where she liked to review class materials, such as handouts, and *Talk of the Block* stories on her own. According to Svalberg, autonomous learning of this kind is a key example of affective engagement.

However, Tina stood apart from the other three participants, relatively speaking, in her seeming reluctance or inability to engage in in-depth reflection on or analysis of English and her L2 learning experiences. She appeared to focus more on her own perceived limitations in English and her intense yearning to learn English than on English as an object to be discussed. I hypothesize that there is a link between her deficiency perspective and her reluctance to engage in metalinguistic reflection. Where the other participants often demonstrated affective engagement through their willingness to engage in these types of analysis, Tina did not. Her views of her own limitations may have resulted in some kind of mental block in analyzing language, or perhaps vice versa. The directionality of this possible relationship is not clear from.
the data. It is worth proposing, however, that metalinguistic awareness may be affected by (lack of) affective engagement with language.

The social assets evident in this data are framed almost entirely within Svalberg’s (2009) proposed model of language engagement and sociocognitive perspectives on SLA (e.g., Batstone, 2010), as this perspective is not included in mainstream SLA literature on metalinguistic awareness. The participants shared many examples of their uses of English that would fall under social engagement with language. The most salient examples related to their reported interactions with family, friends, and co-workers. Frida frequently talked about her father and brother, who were both studying English at different levels; Frida’s family motto appeared to be “Juntos vamos a progresar” [Together we will prosper]. Tina’s two daughters had been born and raised in the United States as bilinguals, so she would rely on them to get extra practice outside of school. Tina was also focused on cultivating better ties with the nurses at the hospital where she worked, and once asked me what “My dear” meant, since it was something that the nurses would say to her when they spoke. Tina pointed out that she is a great help to the nurses, and believed that she could build relationships with the nurses based on her contributions in the workplace if she could just get over her fears of speaking English.

Marta did not report using much English with her family, and none at work, but she was insistent on using English during her ESL classes at every chance she could. She spoke about intentionally practicing some of the phrases she learned in class with classmates and friends, so she could remember them. All of the participants elicited help in Spanish from classmates when they could, which contributed to a feeling of support for them in the ESL classes.

6.2.2 Implications for finding 3. Based on the breadth of data presented here on the metalinguistic assets and engagement with language that the students brought to their L2
learning experiences, it is clear that an expanded definition of metalinguistic awareness would be useful for the SLA field to consider. Focused attention on language as an object is certainly a key component of metalinguistic awareness, but it is not the complete picture. Attention is affected by social interaction, as Tarone (2010b) argued. Attention is heightened or lowered to a certain extent by emotion.

It is a disservice to L2 learners to favor the cognitive over the affective and social facets of metalinguistic awareness, and this disservice is made clear when we consider the incredible range of assets that these four learners make use of in their L2 learning. These learners may or may not be able to have the literacy and formal education skills to demonstrate their metalinguistic awareness using the previously used methods in SLA research, but their perspectives captured here certainly speak to the knowledge, strategies, beliefs, and experiences with language are assets in their learning.

6.2.3 Finding 4: The value of ESL instruction. The final set of findings discussed here draws on the participants’ perspectives about effective ESL instruction as a means of further recognizing the previously unexplored connection between metalinguistic awareness and learning experiences. The participants seemed to see their teachers as the most valuable element of their ESL instruction, both in the literacy classes and the mainstream ESL classes. They repeatedly emphasized the value of their mainstream teacher Andrea’s classroom persona, using words like happy, motivated, upbeat, cheerful, funny, never angry, and active to describe her. They appreciated her and the other teachers’ skills in explaining things, using the board to provide examples, being open to questions from students, correcting errors, and creating a positive atmosphere for learning.
Maintaining a positive atmosphere was not only the teacher’s responsibility but their classmates’ as well; the participants appreciated having motivated classmates who paid attention, were happy, came to class regularly and on time, and did not correct or make fun of other students’ mistakes. Frida particularly emphasized the use of dynamic activities and games in the ESL classroom as a means of keeping students engaged and focused. The small class size and slower pace of the literacy classes were seen as significant benefits. They pointed out how tailored the content could be, and how English seemed easier to understand because the literacy classes broke things down into smaller, more manageable parts. One suggestion that some of the participants had was to have the students write on the board more frequently. They viewed student use of the board as a means of collaboratively sharing and correcting mistakes, as a means of learning from one another.

6.2.4 Implications for finding 4. It stands to reason that what learners value in their instructional experiences will impact what they notice, pay attention to, and reflect on when it comes to language. The links between metalinguistic awareness, learning experiences, and beliefs or preferences about learning have yet to be explored in the SLA literature. Through triangulation of observation and interview data, the findings from the present study point to a complex relationship among these aspects of L2 acquisition. This complexity not only makes it difficult to operationally separate the cognitive from the social, but it makes it impractical. If metalinguistic awareness is a positive influence in L2 acquisition, it would be preferable to know as much as we can about the factors that help or hinder its development. When we consider the under-studied population of low-literate adult L2 learners, this knowledge is even more potentially useful in serving them.
Learners’ perspectives of what is valuable in their instructional experiences should be considered carefully along with the other metalinguistic assets described above. These students are rarely asked to give extensive input into the planning and delivery of their education, and some might find it strange to be asked. The concept of who has the L2 knowledge in the ESL classroom seems to be firmly placed on the teachers’ shoulders, and our instructional methods do not usually suggest differently. The learners themselves report being comfortable and appreciative of this power differential, but the data in this study point to L2 knowledge that lays within the learners themselves. In the next section, I propose building off of this knowledge using a Language Awareness approach. However, if this approach is undertaken, it will require a shift in what learners value in their ESL instruction, to include their own self-knowledge and metalinguistic awareness as well as that of their teachers.

6.3 Limitations to Consider

In qualitative case study research, the researcher-participant relationship is a curious one. I tried to adhere to good practices in establishing a relationship with them of trust and empathy. Even though my chosen methodology avoids characterizing the researcher as a “contaminant” in the data collection (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), I have still wondered how the focal participants’ perceptions of me and my L2 skills might have affected what they chose to tell me in the interviews. Given that the case study featured only four female participants from the same geographical region and L1, we must question whether or not my findings would be representative enough to be useful to others. The broader the claims may be, the more necessary it is for the data to be as accurate and as complete as possible, with interpretations that are adequately grounded in participants’ perspectives.
I make many claims in this study. These claims can be referred to as “qualitative warrants” (Edge & Richards, 1999), which require reflection along the lines of “Do these claims seem to fairly capture the ways in which participants think about and make sense of the phenomenon or situation?” (Freeman, 2009 p. 38). I argue that my claims are representative of what the participants thought and said at the particular time of my data collection. However, given the complexity and under-researched nature of the topic, these claims would be strengthened by more and different types of data. I would have liked to conduct at least one pair or group interview and metalinguistic reflection session with the participants. It was important to get their individual perspectives on the themes of the dissertation, but having them collaboratively share their perspectives would have been truer to the “socio” aspect of my chosen sociocognitive framework.

Making claims about the prior schooling and L1 literacy skills of the participants would be much stronger if I had some data to demonstrate those skills. The Native Language Literacy Screening Device, although it is not standardized, would have given me some idea of just how “low-literate” these learners were in the L1. This kind of instrument could then have served as a prompt for additional reflection on metalinguistic awareness in the participants’ L1, and would have served for some comparison with what they said about their L2. Given the participants’ comments about memory, it could have been useful to administer a test of working memory, to at least get a baseline idea for consideration.

6.4 Toward a Sociocognitive Perspective on Metalinguistic Awareness

As I argued above, the SLA field needs to sharpen its understanding of the construct of metalinguistic awareness (Berry, 2014), a process which involves “(1) refining the definition of
the construct and (2) building evidence which measures the construct in each case” (Eisenhardt, 2002, p. 17). This dissertation is an attempt at both refining the definition and building evidence for the refined definition. Regardless of how metalinguistic awareness has been measured or operationalized, we must question whether or not claims about metalinguistic awareness hold for different populations of adult L2 learners. If most measures of metalinguistic awareness have been print-based and required a certain level of schooling experience to complete them, how can we extrapolate the findings to learners who are unable to complete those measurements? This question can begin to be answered by expanding our perspective on metalinguistic awareness to include social aspects of L2 learning, in a sociocognitive framework.

Marta – with her two years of formal schooling in Mexico – consistently provided some of the richest definitions or illustrations of vocabulary words of anyone I observed. I believe that it is necessary to consider these demonstrations of language about language particularly when examining the metalinguistic awareness of low-literate learners, because it provides insight into what they know about language that cannot be captured by more traditional means of testing grammatical or lexical knowledge. In terms of research methods for looking at metalinguistic awareness within this population, a different set of research tools that are more qualitative, more holistic, and more proficiency-oriented rather than deficiency-oriented would be helpful. Above all, the research tools need to allow participant to express themselves fully, through their use of their L1 and any other linguistic resources that they have.

Postpositivist quantitative research seeks to generalize findings to a greater population in order to prove or disprove concrete hypotheses. Interpretive qualitative research seeks to contribute to theory building by enriching our understanding of the complexity of human nature. My approach in this dissertation has been very different than what has been done in research on
metalinguistic awareness in general and on adult L2 learners with limited education in particular. I took an extremely wide lens that was grounded in a very particular learning context, with the intention to collect and analyze both etic and emic perspectives on the issue. This approach was informed and driven by sociocognitive theory in SLA, which by definition disregards the dichotomy of cognitive vs. sociocultural research (Hulstijn et al, 2014).

**6.5 Implementing a Language Awareness Approach with Low-Literate Learners**

Historically, metalinguistic awareness has been considered as an important component of children’s native language and literacy development, influencing and being influenced by perceptions of the nature and functions of reading, awareness of print conventions, the ability to manipulate units of speech and to hold language as an object of thought, and the understanding of relationships among the concepts of ‘sound,’ ‘word,’ and ‘sentence’ (Johns, 1984). Research in adult L1 literacy and L2 literacy and language acquisition has followed suit (e.g., Koda & Zehler, 2008; Kruidenier, 2000), with an increasing interest in the L2 literacy and language development of low-literate adult learners with limited prior schooling in recent years (Tarone & Bigelow, 2012). Given the findings discussed in the previous section, I have proposed that these formulations of metalinguistic awareness are limited and need to be reconsidered in light of other cognitive, affective, and social factors. My proposal in doing so is to implement Language Awareness strategies in ESL instruction for low-literate adult L2 learners.

Language Awareness prioritizes engagement with language and discovery of language (Bolitho et al, 2003), rather than testing of metalinguistic knowledge. Bourke (2008) provides the following summary of four generic steps in a Language Awareness process, along with much longer descriptions of 10 different activities that follow this process:
(1) The student is exposed to oral or written structured input where the initial focus is on the meaning of the text. (2) The student notices the target structure and the context in which it occurs; this can include observation of syntactic patterning, judgments and discriminations, and the articulation of rules. (3) The student checks that the rule holds against further data and, if not, revises the rule. (4) The student uses the structure in a short production task. (p. 16)

This approach could benefit all L2 learners whose goals include authentic communication and integration into an immersive L2 environment, as opposed to strictly academic goals. The concept of engagement within this model, as well as in Svalberg’s (2009) work, provides a way to legitimize the language awareness and explicit knowledge that the participants brought to their learning experiences. This gentler and more meaningful approach could be particularly significant for learners like Tina, who have struggled so much with fear and anxiety regarding their L2 knowledge and performance:

Engagement with a foreign or second language almost always provokes an emotional response in learners… A Language Awareness approach opens doors to these affective dimensions in ways which might make all the difference to learners struggling cognitively with grammatical and lexical difficulties. (Bolitho et al, 2003, pp. 255-256)

The observation and interview data shared in this study clearly point to the participants’ ability to engage in these discovery-oriented activities. The lack of direction in explicitly engaging with English and L2 learning outside of the formal instructional setting may have been a missed opportunity for these students as their metalinguistic awareness was emerging. There is a need to connect the language that the learners notice, pay attention to, and experience in their daily lives to what goes on in the classroom. The students themselves are resources and founts of linguistic knowledge. There are certainly advantages to using a scripted literacy curriculum and materials such as Sam and Pat or Talk of the Block, but the participants’ own linguistic environments have much to discover and digest. One concern with shifting focus away from the literacy materials and toward the students’ own linguistic discoveries is that it will require a
paradigm shift for the students themselves; they appear to greatly value the teacher’s ability to explain things in class and rely on the structured format of the printed materials to navigate the English literacy system. In this respect, it is worth noting that whatever happens in the social setting of a classroom and in the name of raising literacy skills and metalinguistic awareness is not one-sided (imposed by the official curriculum or the teachers), but co-constructed at all levels of the agents involved.

Much more reading and research needs to be done on how to effectively implement Language Awareness (Bolitho et al., 2003; Burke, 2008) into ESL literacy instruction. However, by considering the potentials of engagement with language and discovery of language, we come across new insights into the metalinguistic assets that low-literate adult L2 learners bring to the classroom. Doing so puts us in the position to propose innovative pedagogical principles that make wise use of print and traditional classroom mediating tools (e.g., boards, explicit grammar teaching, some metalanguage) and introduce other means to support and promote further metalinguistic awareness for this population. It also pays respect to the learners’ perspectives as adults who are analytic and seek to build their explicit knowledge in various aspects of English.

6.6 The Intersection of Low-Literate L2 Learners and Good Language Learners

The notion of the good language learner, which has evolved over the years (Griffiths, 2008; Naiman et al, 1978; Rubin, 1975; Norton & Toohey, 2001), still needs to be revised in light of research on adults with limited prior schooling. Rarely, if ever, have the words ‘low-literate’ and ‘good language learner’ appeared in the same sentence. In one unique study, Kurvers and van de Craats (2007) explored the notion of “the illiterate language learning genius” (p. 49) in a study of predictors of successful or unsuccessful L2 learners in the Netherlands,
concluding that there is no one specific factor that influenced learner success. They called for further research and micro-level analyses of the various factors linking low-literate (or in their case, initially illiterate) learners with L2 success.

The links that have been made between intelligence and literacy are historical, social, educational, cultural, and even political. The participants themselves linked intelligence with success in L2 learning, if we recall for example Marta’s admonition: “You have to be very intelligent to remember the correct way to write.” Given popular notions of intelligence, we might expect that considering oneself as intelligent would aid in awareness of language. For example, if an average college student is asked to take a grammaticality judgment test in an L2, she would assume that she was intelligent enough to do so, even if she had not yet mastered a high level of L2 fluency. The participants’ own concepts of intelligence may have hindered them from identifying and drawing on their own cognitive and linguistic resources already at their disposal in their L2 learning. Perhaps it is not only teachers or researchers who may take a deficiency view of low-educated adults as L2 learners, or at least be blind to their assets and funds of knowledge in metalinguistic awareness. The learners themselves may also buy into these ideological constructions, given the deeply historical and ideological collective links between print literacy and intelligence.

In sum, research and practice regarding adults with low literacy/limited schooling will not serve them well or make theoretical contributions that are important unless the broader spheres of influence are investigated. In the relatively brief history of modern-day adult ESL literacy instruction, we have proposed many things to improve teaching and learning over the years. We have conducted picture-based needs assessments to elicit input from our students on what life skills they want to learn. We have tried participatory approaches such as the Language
Experience Approach and community-based learning (Auerbach, 1990), based on theories of critical pedagogies (Freire, 1970), to empower their learning. We have used our own experiences and gut instincts to make decisions in instructional design, classroom management, lesson planning, grouping, materials selection and use, and classroom activities.

However, we have rarely elicited rich descriptions and perspectives on language and L2 learning from the very students who may struggle the most to express themselves and who, consequently, most need to be asked. As teachers, we so often easily forget how difficult it is to learn another language, and most of us have never been in the position of adult ESL immigrants who came to this country under hardship conditions and with limited education. We may make our best attempts at serving these students, but our decisions may be based on our own learning and teaching experiences – or at best, they are based on what we have observed happening in student populations who are highly educated in their L1.

The empirical evidence from this dissertation provides a resounding “Yes!” to the question, *Are low-literate L2 learners good language learners?* However, the affirmation is more meaningful if we consider the instructional contexts, practices, and materials that we are providing these learners to maximize the assets that they bring to their classes. There is nothing inherently deficient about low-literate L2 learners, but there may be much room for improvement in the methods that we use to teach them. Another way to put this finding in a wider perspective is to think of these four women as multicompetent, emerging bilinguals (e.g., Cook, 1991, 1992, 2003). They were able to actively and fruitfully use their multilingual skills in their native and new language. Their emergent bilingualism in itself was likely feeding into their growing metalinguistic awareness. At a minimum, this dissertation furnished evidence that low-educated
learners bring to the classroom rich funds of metalinguistic awareness and are good language learners.
7. Conclusion

In this study, I explored what it means to be “low-literate” in adult L2 English acquisition, while simultaneously challenging assumptions about the quality and type of linguistic awareness that these learners bring to their English learning experience. I proposed that L2 acquisition and instruction should be explored in relation to (a) potential for engaging the learner in meaning-making, and (b) potential in developing and exploiting the learner’s existing metalinguistic awareness. If literacy is taught primarily as a decontextualized set of building blocks, the learner’s [emerging] metalinguistic awareness will be restricted to this domain. The learner will notice, pay attention, and value the linguistic features that are highlighted in the instruction. For low-literate learners receiving explicit, phonics-based literacy instruction, their metalinguistic awareness may be centered on (and restricted to) these building blocks. In this respect, I have suggested that metalinguistic awareness is connected to much broader levels of influence than what has been measured cognitively or psycholinguistically, and that research on adults with low L1 literacy will not serve them well or make theoretical contributions that are important unless the broader levels of influence are investigated.

7.1. Thoughts on Research Methodology

Following Firth and Wagner’s (1997) call for SLA research with “an increased emic sensitivity towards fundamental concepts” (p. 286), I used a qualitative case study design to examine metalinguistic awareness and engagement with language in an explicit ESL literacy instructional context. The participants were four women from Mexico and Guatemala, ranging in age from early 20s to late 50s. Two of these learners had two years of education in their native countries; all of the learners had been attending ESL classes regularly for less than one year. Yin
(2014) suggested that case study methods be used when “a how or why question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which a researcher has little or no control” (p. 14). Case study has a long history in the field of SLA dating back at least to Schmidt (1983) and Schmidt and Frota (1986) and is currently widely used within certain theoretical SLA perspectives with a strong social orientation, notably language socialization (Duff, 2008). On the other hand, the norm has been to either favor language development and psychological introspective data in the early studies, or interpretive emic data in more recent applications of case study. My choice to approach the study of metalinguistic awareness from an interpretivist orientation meant that I could blend etic and emic evidence, producing rich detailed descriptions of the language involved in literacy instruction as well as the perceptions of participants. In addition, emic data about perceptions of metalinguistic awareness have often been collected in the participants’ L2, thus imposing an unfortunate limit to what can be gleaned from the participants beyond observation or testing. These methodological choices reflect the broader set of insights that I hoped to gain by engaging in a recursive process of reading, observing, questioning, thinking, writing, more questioning, and interacting on various levels with the participants and the data. The sociocognitive perspective that framed my inquiry integrated cognitive and social concepts (Atkinson, 2010; Tarone, 2010b) that might contribute to our field’s understanding of the “stepping stones” (Eskildsen, 2009) encountered and utilized by this population of learners, for whom metalinguistic awareness, literacy, and L2 learning must be framed “as both a developmental and social process” (Bigelow, 2014, p. 45).

The setting itself, which contained intact cohorts of low-literate adult English language learners attending supplemental literacy classes, provided clear boundaries for carrying out the study. As a frequent observer and presence in the literacy groups during data collection, I could
develop the kind of relationships and connections with the students that would facilitate this type of rich data collection. As a relatively fluent speaker of Spanish, I interviewed the participants in their L1. The use of observational and L1 oral interview methods was appropriate for working with a population of L2 learners who may not have had the schooling experiences and/or literacy skills necessary for print-based data collection (e.g., traditional pencil-and-paper tests, questionnaires, or writing samples). The variety of perspectives elicited over time (e.g., student interviews, student reflections on English literacy tasks, the literacy teachers’ daily notes to one another reporting on student performance, my observation notes) allowed for thick description and triangulation of data (Richards, 2003) that was essential for uncovering patterns in low-literate L2 learners’ educational experiences and proposing expanded understandings of metalinguistic awareness beyond the traditional or mainstream cognitive approach. I have sought to identify and describe the multiple lenses that I looked through to view the action and to capture their beliefs and assertions about their L2 learning. This study connected (1) the learners’ experiences (literacy classes) with (2) their observed behaviors/spoken thoughts in those experiences (participation in pullouts) with (3) their elicited interpretation of those experiences (interviews in L1). My fundamental goal was to gain insight into some of the factors that might shape or influence metalinguistic awareness in this learner population. To do so, I tried to see the learning context through their eyes.

Qualitative inquiry does not assume that one person is substitutable for another, or that we can control and isolate variables because everything is stable or changes in predictable ways. In my research, I cannot claim that my participants represent all low-literate adult English language learners, or that the findings from my reporting can be directly applicable to others. My approach “reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants,” using “a method
that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). In this approach, the researcher is not seen as a contaminant, but rather as an asset. To do this successfully, my assumptions about ‘reality’ and the data must be made clear. One problem is that for concepts like “literacy” or “metalinguistic awareness” or “language proficiency,” there is no fixed meaning per se; definitions are based on the frameworks for interpretation that are brought to the teaching and learning experience. However, an anticipated outcome from case study methods in applied linguistics may be to “open up new areas for future research, by isolating variables and interactions among factors that have not previously been identified” (Duff, 2008, p. 44), and possibly providing counter-evidence to what has been claimed about adult SLA in previous research (e.g., Bigelow & Tarone, 2004).

7.2 Key Insights

In conclusion, I would like to focus on three key insights that have emerged from this study. First, in order to study metalinguistic awareness, we (as researchers and teachers) need to build our own awareness of learner language, beliefs, strategies, and practices. There is very little research that empirically examines the L2 educational experiences of low-literate adult English language learners. Much of the existing ESL literacy instructional materials and teacher training resources are based in large part on what we know about L1 reading instruction and what have come to be known as the building blocks of literacy. We need more research on how metalinguistic awareness impacts L2 literacy development for adults; we need to be more aware of our own unawareness in this area. Svalberg (2009) suggests micro-analysis of conversational data and classroom interactions in order to carry out research into her framework of Language Awareness and engagement with language. I believe the same methods will be profitable in
future studies of low-literacy adult learners and their recruitment and development of metalinguistic awareness.

It might well be that researchers and teachers expend effort contemplating low-educated adults’ awareness of language, according to our preconceived notions of the construct, without being aware of our own biases in this area. Most ESL programs would not think twice about categorizing Marta as low-literate, with her 2 years of education that was just enough to learn the basics of literacy, as she herself put it. Many programs would possibly view her as a lost cause. Her data in the present study completely and unexpectedly contradict this perception of deficiency and hopelessness, for Marta and for many learners like her. Had I not been able to interview her in Spanish (her L1 and stronger language), I do not think it would have been possible to uncover her multicompetence and her good language learning assets. This also suggests that teachers must somehow make much more space for the L1 in literacy instruction, if they want to support L2 literacy in effective ways. Proposals such as translanguaging (Garcia & Wei, 2014) would be well worth exploring in future studies with low-literacy adults.

Secondly, after reviewing the opportunities for working on metalinguistic awareness in the ESL literacy classes (chapter 4) and the evidence of metalinguistic awareness provided by the participants (chapter 5), it is clear that there are gaps between the abilities of the learners and the opportunities that are provided by the context. For example, knowing how willing and able Marta was to hypothesize about abstract language features, it would be fairly easy to take her one step further in discovering more about vowel quality in English. Yet opportunities for extending learners’ analysis and reflection on language were few during the literacy classes. This observation is not meant as a critique of the literacy program; on the contrary, this program is a model for other adult ESL programs that need to provide explicit ESL literacy instruction but
have limited resources to do so. However, in considering an expansion of the notion of metalinguistic awareness, I must also propose an expansion of the instructional opportunities that we provide to low-literate learners like Marta, Tina, Frida, and Hana, along the lines of a Language Awareness approach that “enables them to ‘get beneath the surface’ of a language in ways which knowledge-based approaches alone can never achieve” (Bolitho et al, 2003, p. 257).

Thirdly, the data presented here clearly indicate that low levels of L1 literacy do not presuppose a lack of metalinguistic awareness in adult L2 learners. This finding should not come as a surprise, given current thought about multicompetence in bilinguals (e.g., Cook, 2003). Many nonliterate or low-literate L2 adults successfully acquired (oral) multilingual skills in their native countries, and all are developing bi/multilinguals by virtue of acquiring (yet another) language. It has long been known that bi/multilinguals are multicompetent and that bi/multilingualism can contribute to enhanced metalinguistic awareness. Yet nonliterate or low-literacy adult L2 learners are excluded from characterizations of multicompetence and bilingual advantages, and their metalinguistic awareness is assumed to be greatly under-developed as a result of limited literacy training or prior education. This needs to be redressed, and this dissertation does so, by finding evidence that low-educated learners (a) do bring to the classroom rich funds of metalinguistic awareness and (b) are good language learners.

My thinking along these lines started when I was in the initial piloting and planning phase for this study, and I noticed some of the descriptive yet evaluative comments that one of the literacy teachers made about new literacy students upon intake (my italics):

“Ricardo will be fun to work with. He knows the letter names…He knows most of the consonant sounds and blending sounds into words with word families was easy for him. His written answers to personal information questions were pretty good… He seems appreciative and teachable.”
“We did a quick test of vocabulary using the pictures in the text. Michelle had no problems… Her issue was /h/ at the beginning of non-h words. I had Arnaud read the combined story… His issue was the short-u sound. These are two teachable students - when they stopped and thought about a pronunciation issue they could get it correct.”

I thought the characterization of “teachable” was odd, yet at the same time I knew exactly what the literacy teacher meant. There was something about my untested assumptions about teachable or good language learners that bore further investigation.

Focused attention on language as an object is certainly a key component of metalinguistic awareness (Gombert, 2002; Jessner, 2006), but it is not the complete picture. Portraying it as such hints at the existence of a static and innate ability that is inherent in some L2 learners and not others. On the contrary, the results of this study indicate that metalinguistic awareness is dynamic, context-dependent, and potentially tied not only cognitive engagement but also affective and social engagement. If every day brings new experiences, new interactions, and new opportunities for learning, and our cognitive processes and language communications are dependent on these contexts of use (Gibbs, 2013), an L2 learner’s metalinguistic awareness must also be in a dynamic state of change based on use. Our understanding of metalinguistic awareness and the instructional implications that arise from this understanding will be strengthened by considering it as a sociocognitive phenomenon rather than a purely cognitive one.
Appendices
Appendix A

Consent to Participate in Research: Literacy Pullout Students in Part 1
[to be translated into native languages of potential participants]

Introduction: I, Sarah Young, with the Linguistics Department of Georgetown University, invite you to participate in a research study about your experiences as an English language learner at ____ program in ____. The results of this study will contribute to my dissertation research requirement for the Ph.D. degree.

You are being asked to be a participant in this study because of your attendance in the extra English reading and writing classes (“Literacy Pullout”) that are offered at ____. Your experiences in learning and using English make you a good participant for this study.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to collect information about how adults learn English and use English, in school and out of school. The information from this study will be used to improve classroom teaching of English to adults, and to better meet the needs and goals of adults learning English.

Participation: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary at all times. You can choose not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time. Regardless of your decision, there will be no consequences or effects on your relationship with your teachers, the ____ program, or the researcher. The study begins on the first day of the fall instructional cycle at ____ (September 29, 2014) and ends on the last day of the fall instructional cycle (December 19, 2014).

Procedures: If you agree to participate, I will ask you for the following:

Background Questionnaire – I will ask you to complete a questionnaire with 8 short questions on it. This questionnaire asks you to provide information about your country, your age, the number of years you have attended school, and the languages that you speak, read, and write. I will not use your real name on the form or in any other documents for this project. This activity will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. You can complete it in English or in your native language. You can ask someone else to read the form to you and write your answers if you prefer.

Permission to observe and record Literacy Pullout classes – I will ask you for your permission to allow me to sit in, observe, and audiorecord your Literacy Pullout classes three times a week. During my observations, I will watch and take notes about what the teacher and the students do in class, in order to better understand how adults learn English. I will audiorecord the class to supplement my own notes, but I will not share the recordings with anyone else. I will destroy the recordings when I am finished with the project.

Compensation: If you agree to participate in the study, you will receive five books written in English.

Potential Risks and Discomforts: Your participation in this study will not bring any risk or inconvenience to you. Nevertheless, it is possible that you may feel uncomfortable with my observation or audiorecording of your Literacy Pullout class. If this occurs, please let me know and I will immediately withdraw from the observation or stop audiorecording the class.

Potential Benefits to Participants and/or to Society: Your participation in this study will not directly benefit you. However, your participation in this study will help English teachers and programs develop better instructional methods, materials, and activities for adult English language learners like you.
Confidentiality: Your privacy and confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent possible. All information (Background Questionnaire, my observation notes, the audio recordings) will be kept on my computer with password protection. Paper copies of the Background Questionnaires and observation notes will be transferred to digital files, and the paper forms will be destroyed. The audio recordings of the observations will be erased after two years. Your identity will be kept confidential throughout the study and afterwards, if the study is published, your name will be substituted for pseudonyms.

Withdrawal: You can choose whether to participate in this study or not. If you volunteer to participate you may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions on the Background Questionnaire that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. As your participation is voluntary, you may decide to not participate in the study at any time.

Identification of Investigator and Supervisors: If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please contact me with them either in person or by telephone at 202-746-4430. If you have other program-related concerns or complaints about your participation in this study, please contact the _____ program specialist ____ at _____ or my supervisor at Georgetown University, Dr. Lourdes Ortega at (202) 687-5956. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Georgetown University IRB at (202) 687-6553 or irboard@georgetown.edu.

Signature of Research Participant
I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form in my native language.

__________________________________________________________  
Name of Participant (please print)  
__________________________________________________________  
Signature of Participant  
__________________________________________________________  
Date

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly providing informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

__________________________________________________________  
Name of Investigator (please print)  
__________________________________________________________  
Signature of Investigator  
__________________________________________________________  
Date
Appendix A
Consent to Participate in Research: Focal Students (Part 2)
[to be translated into native languages of potential participants]

Introduction: I, Sarah Young, with the Linguistics Department of Georgetown University, invite you to participate in a research study about your experiences as an English language learner at the ____ program in ________. The results of this study will contribute to my dissertation research requirement for the Ph.D. degree. You are being asked to be a focal participant in this study because of your attendance in the extra English reading and writing classes (“Literacy Pullout”) that are offered at _____, and because you are a native speaker of French or Spanish. Your experiences in learning and using English make you a good participant for this study.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to collect information about how adults learn English and use English, in school and out of school. The information from this study will be used to improve classroom teaching of English to adults, and to better meet the needs and goals of adults learning English.

Participation: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary at all times. You can choose not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time. Regardless of your decision, there will be no consequences or effects on your relationship with your teachers, the ____ program, or the researcher. The study begins on the first day of the fall instructional cycle at _____ (September 29, 2014) and ends on the last day of the fall instructional cycle (December 19, 2014).

Procedures: If you agree to participate, I will ask you for the following:

Background Questionnaire – I will ask you to complete a questionnaire with 8 short questions on it. This questionnaire asks you to provide information about your country, your age, the number of years you have attended school, and the languages that you speak, read, and write. I will not use your real name on the form or in any other documents for this project. This activity will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. You can complete it in English or in your native language. You can ask someone else to read the form to you and write your answers if you prefer.

Permission to observe and record Literacy Pullout classes – I will ask you for your permission to allow me to sit in, observe, and audio record your Literacy Pullout classes three times a week. During my observations, I will watch and take notes about what the teacher and the students do in class, in order to better understand how adults learn English. I will audio record the class to supplement my own notes, but I will not share the recordings with anyone else. I will destroy the recordings when I am finished with the project.

Interviews – I will ask you to participate in three one-hour interviews that will take place at _____ near your usual classroom. The interviews will take place at a time before or after your usual English class that is convenient to you. One interview will happen during Week 2, Week 7, and Week 12 of the instructional cycle. In the interviews, I will ask you questions in your native language about your experiences in learning and using English. All of the questions and your responses will be given in your native language. With your permission, I will audio record the interviews.

Literacy activity sessions – I will ask you to participate in three 30-minute activity sessions that will take place at _____ near your usual classroom. These sessions will take place
at a time before or after your usual English class that is convenient to you. One session will happen during Week 3, Week 8, and Week 12 of the instructional cycle. In these sessions, you will do short reading and writing activities in English that are similar to the ones you usually do in your Literacy Pullout classes. After each activity, I will ask you some questions in your native language about the activity and how it helps you learn English. All of my questions and your responses will be given in your native language. With your permission, I will audio record the sessions.

Documents – I may ask you for permission to look at and photocopy some of the writing activities that you complete in your Literacy Pullout class binder. I may ask you for permission to photocopy the answers to the reading questions that you write or the sentences that you write. Your permission for me look at and photocopy your written work is completely voluntary. You can refuse to grant me permission, without any consequences to you.

Compensation: If you agree to participate in the study, you will receive five books written in English. You will receive $10 cash for each one-hour interview that you complete. You will receive $5 cash for each 30-minute literacy activity that you complete.

Potential Risks and Discomforts: Your participation in this study will not bring any risk or inconvenience to you. Nevertheless, it is possible that you may feel uncomfortable with my observation or audio recording of your Literacy Pullout class, the interviews, or the literacy activity sessions. If this occurs, please let me know and I will immediately stop audio recording, and I will withdraw from the observation, the interview, or the literacy activity session.

Potential Benefits to Participants and/or to Society: Your participation in this study will not directly benefit you. It is possible that by participating in this study, you will indirectly benefit from the additional practice in English or in talking about your experiences related to language learning. However, your participation in this study will help English teachers and programs develop better instructional methods, materials, and activities for adult English language learners like you.

Confidentiality: Your privacy and confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent possible. All information (Background Questionnaire, my observation notes, the audio recordings) will be kept on my computer with password protection. Paper copies of the Background Questionnaires and observation notes will be transferred to digital files, and the paper forms will be destroyed. The audio recordings of the observations, interviews, and literacy activity sessions will be erased after two years. Your identity will be kept confidential throughout the study and afterwards, if the study is published, your name will be substituted for pseudonyms.

Withdrawal: You can choose whether to participate in this study or not. If you volunteer to participate you may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions on the Background Questionnaire, in the interviews, or in the literacy activity sessions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. As your participation is voluntary, you may decide to not participate in the study at any time.

Identification of Investigator and Supervisors: If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please contact me with them either in person or by telephone at 202-746-4430. If you have other program-related concerns or complaints about your participation in this study, please contact the _____ program specialist _____ at _____- or my supervisor at
Georgetown University, Dr. Lourdes Ortega at (202) 687-5956. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Georgetown University IRB at (202) 687-6553 or irboard@georgetown.edu.

Signature of Research Participant
I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form in my native language.

________________________________________________________________________
Name of Participant (please print)

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant

________________________________________________________________________
Date

In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly providing informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

________________________________________________________________________
Name of Investigator (please print)

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator

________________________________________________________________________
Date
**Appendix B**  
**Observation Protocol (original)**

**Description of Instrument:** This observation protocol will be used each time the researcher observes one of the Literacy Pullout classes (Level 1, 2, or 3). Each class will be observed three times per week.

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<th>Teacher:</th>
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<th>Day/topic in curriculum schedule:</th>
<th>Students present:</th>
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<tr>
<th>Alphabets/phonics focus:</th>
<th>Sight words/ vocabulary words:</th>
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**What** _questions_ **do the learners ask about language?**

**What evidence is there of **_language analysis_** (e.g., separating language into component parts, manipulating components to create new forms)?**

**What evidence is there of **_reflection_** on language (e.g., noticing and discussing a feature of language, making comparisons, inferring conclusions about language)?**

**What errors** **do learners make? How are they corrected, and by whom?**

**What** _metalanguage_ **do learners use to talk about language (e.g., linguistic terms, labels, parts of speech)?**

**How engaged** **do learners appear to be in the lesson (e.g., active participation, autonomous learning)?**

**How do learners appear to perceive the difficulty of the literacy tasks?**

**What** _information or clues_ **do learners appear to focus on to comprehend or produce language?**

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Appendix C  
Daily Lesson Notes Coding Protocol

**Description of Instrument:** In a normally scheduled week, there will be five daily reports completed and emailed by the volunteer teachers to one another. These emailed reports tend to be brief (about a paragraph per class level), describe which activities were completed, and share learner successes or challenges of note. This Daily Lesson Notes Coding Protocol will be applied by the researcher to each report that the volunteer teachers email one another to describe the day’s lesson. Each daily report may not address all five areas of the protocol outlined below (noticing, struggles, successes, affect, and progress).

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<tr>
<td>Level/Group:</td>
<td>Teacher:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Day/topic in curriculum schedule:</td>
<td>Students present:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alphabetics/phonics focus:</td>
<td>Sight words/vocabulary words:</td>
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</table>

- What did students *notice* (as evidenced by their questions)?
- What did students *struggle* with (as evidenced by mistakes or problems with tasks)?
- What did students *do well on* (as evidenced by expected performance on tasks)?
- How did students *feel* about the tasks (as evidenced by behaviors/comments related to emotions: confidence, enthusiasm, discouragement)?
- What *progress* do the students seem to be making (as evidenced by perceived improvement)?
Appendix D
Student Interview Protocol

**Description of Instrument:** This semi-structured Interview Protocol will be administered three times to each focal participant in Part 2 of my 12-week study, at Week 2, Week 7, and Week 12. The Interview Protocol will be administered and responded to in the participant’s native language (Spanish or French). All questions on the Interview Protocol may not be asked during every administration, and the order of questions might vary according to the direction that the interview takes. Each interview will be audiorecorded and transcribed with the participant’s permission. The researcher will check in with the participant at various points during the interview to confirm that the participant is willing and able to continue the interview.

**Instructions [to be read to the participant]:** Gracias por tomar el tiempo para hablar conmigo hoy. Quiero hablar con Ud. acerca de sus experiencias y ideas sobre el aprendizaje de inglés y la clase especial de lectura y escritura que sigue a REEP. Me interesa entender sus experiencias y sus ideas al respecto. Para ello, he preparado esta encuesta. Sus respuestas me ayudarán saber más sobre el tema del aprendizaje de inglés, y lo que los profesores deben hacer para mejorar el aprendizaje de inglés. Se le va preguntar sobre sus experiencias anteriores y presentes con su aprendizaje de inglés, el uso de todos los idiomas que usa en su vida, y su prácticas para leer y escribir. Se le preguntará también sobre sus objetivos del uso de inglés en el futuro. Esta conversación se va tomar una hora. Voy a grabar nuestra conversación para que después poder escuchar y transcribir sus respuestas. No voy a compartir la grabación con nadie. No es obligatorio responder a cada pregunta. No hay problema si necesita interrumpir nuestra conversación o si no quiere responder a alguna pregunta en particular. Si no entiende alguna pregunta o si necesita más información sobre alguna pregunta, por favor déjeme saber sus dudas. El español no es mi idioma nativa, por lo tanto le doy gracias antemano por su paciencia conmigo. Tiene preguntas o dudas antes de empezar?

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<th>Date:</th>
<th>Time:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Name:</td>
<td>Country of origin:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 1, 2, 3?</td>
<td>Interview Location:</td>
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INTERVIEW 1 (WEEK 2)

Background and previous experiences

Researcher says: Quisiera comenzar preguntandole cómo fue su vida antes de llegar a los EEUU, y después de haber llegado. Me interesa saber especialmente sus ideas y sus experiencias con el inglés antes y después de llegar aquí. [I’d like to start by asking you about your life before you came to the U.S., and what your life was like when you arrived. I’m very interested in your ideas and experiences with English before you arrived and then when you first arrived in the US.]

1. Asistió a la escuela en su país? Cómo era la escuela? Qué estudió? Qué recuerdas haber hecho en la escuela? [Did you go to school in your country? What was school like? What did you study? What do you remember doing in school?]

2. Antes de vivir en los EEUU, que pensaba del inglés? Qué imaginaba sobre la vida en los EEUU? Qué creía que iba ser lo más fácil? Qué creía que sería difícil? [Before coming to the U.S., what did you think about English? What did you think life would be like in the US? What did you think would be easy? What did you think would be difficult?]


4. En qué año empezó las clases de inglés en los EEUU? Qué pensaba de la escuela? Qué pensaba de la clase? Qué pensaba del libro y otros materiales que se usaron en la clase? Cómo se sentía? [When did you start coming to English classes? What did you think about the school? What did you think about the class? What did you think about the book and materials used in class? How did you feel?]

Current life experiences

Researcher says: Gracias por compartir un poco sobre sus experiencias e ideas cuando llegó a los EEUU. ¿Me permite de preguntarle sobre su experiencias e ideas sobre el inglés actualmente? [Thank you for telling me a little bit about your experiences and ideas about English when you first came to the United States. Is it OK if I ask you some questions about your experiences and ideas about English now?]

1. Descríbame su día típico. Qué haces durante la semana? Qué haces en la fin de semana? Qué le gusta hacer cuando tiene tiempo libre? [What is your typical day like? What do you do on weekdays? What do you do on weekends? What do you like to do when you have free time?]

2. Le gusta seguir las noticias de su país? Cómo se entera de lo que está pasando en su país? Le gusta seguir las noticias de los EEUU? De Arlington? De otro país u otro lugar? Cómo se entera de lo que está pasando en los EEUU? En
Arlington? En otro lugar? [Do you like to follow the news from your country? How do you find out about what’s going on there? Do you like to follow the news in the United States? In Arlington? From other countries or places? How do you find out about what is going on in this area or in other areas?]

3. **Qué ha aprendido sobre las compras en los EEUU? Cómo lo aprendió?**
   [What have you learned about shopping in the United States? How have you learned it?]

4. **Qué ha aprendido sobre el transporte en los EEUU? Cómo lo aprendió?**
   [What have you learned about transportation in the United States? How have you learned it?]

5. **Qué ha aprendido sobre el trabajo en los EEUU? Cómo lo aprendió?**
   [What have you learned about working in the United States? How have you learned it?]

6. **Qué ha aprendido sobre la atención médica en los EEUU? Cómo lo aprendió?**
   [What have you learned about getting medical care in the United States? How have you learned it?]

7. **Qué ha aprendido sobre la vida diaria en los EEUU? Cómo lo aprendió?**
   [What have you learned about living in the United States? How have you learned it?]

8. **Qué ha aprendido sobre la gente en los EEUU? Cómo lo aprendió?**
   [What have you learned about people in the United States? How have you learned it?]

9. **En cuáles maneras es su vida en los EEUU similar a la vida en su país? Cómo es diferente? Qué le gustaría cambiar de su vida aquí?**
   [How is your life in the United States similar to your life in your native country? How is it different? What do you like about your life here? What would you like to change?]
INTERVIEW 2 (WEEK 7)

Current school learning experiences

Researcher says: Gracias por compartir un poco sobre su vida aquí en los EEUU. Me permite de preguntarle un poco sobre sus experiencias con el estudio del inglés aquí en REEP? [Thank you for telling me a bit about your life here in the United States. Is it OK if I ask you some questions now about your experiences in studying English at REEP?]

1. Describame una lección típica (o un día típico) en su clase grande de inglés. ¿Qué hace el profesor? ¿Qué hacen los estudiantes? ¿Qué actividades hacen Uds. juntos? ¿Cómo son las materiales? ¿Cómo es el libro? ¿Qué le gusta de su clase? [Can you tell me about a typical lesson in your regular ESL class? What does the teacher do? What do the students do? What types of activities does the class do? What are the materials like? What do you like about it?]

2. Describame una lección típica en su clase especial de lectura y escritura. ¿Qué hace el profesor? ¿Qué hacen los estudiantes? ¿Qué actividades hacen Uds. juntos? ¿Cómo son las materiales? ¿Qué le gusta de su clase? [Can you tell me about a typical lesson in your Literacy Pullout class? What does the teacher do? What do the students do? What types of activities does the class do? What are the materials like? What do you like about it?]

3. En cuáles maneras es su clase especial diferente de su clase grande de inglés? Describa las diferencias. [How is your Literacy Pullout class different from your regular ESL class? Can you talk to me about the differences?]

4. Cómo el profesor le ayuda a aprender inglés? Cómo los compañeros de clase le ayudan a aprender inglés? [What kinds of things does the teacher do to help you learn English? What kinds of things do other students do to help you learn English?]

5. Cuáles actividades le gustan para practicar al inglés? ¿Qué tipo de ejercicio o de actividad prefiere hacer? [What are some of your favorite activities to do to practice English?]

6. En su opinión, qué características tiene una buena clase de inglés? ¿Qué hace el profesor en una buena clase de inglés? ¿Qué hacen los estudiantes? ¿Qué hace Ud.? ¿Cómo sabe que es una buena clase de inglés? [What do you think makes for a good English class? What does the teacher do in a good English class? What do the other students do? What do you do?]

7. En su clase especial de lectura y de escritura, tal vez se lee un cuento. Pero antes de leer el cuento, se mira a los dibujos que acompañan al cuento. Le ayuda cuando se mira a los dibujos antes de leer el cuento? ¿Cómo se le ayuda? [Sometimes in class you look at pictures before you read a story. Does it help you to look at the pictures before you read the story? How?]

8. En su clase especial de lectura y de escritura, tal vez se lee un cuento y pues se responden a las preguntas sobre el cuento. Describa lo que hace o lo que piensa cuando trata de responder a esas preguntas. ¿Qué le ayuda para responder? Le ayuda cuando se responde oralmente antes de escribir las respuestas? Porqué o por qué no? [Sometimes you read stories in class, and then you answer questions about the story. What do you do to answer the questions? What helps you answer the questions? Does it help you to answer the questions orally before you write them? Why or why not?]

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9. En su clase especial de lectura y de escritura, tal vez se escribe palabras o frases del cuento - es decir, se hace un dictado sobre lo que el profesor dice. Describa lo que hace o lo que piensa cuando trata de escribir lo que escucha. ¿Qué le ayuda para escribir las palabras o las frases cuando escucha al profesor? [Sometimes you write words or sentences in class that the teacher says. Can you tell me how you do that? What helps you to write the words or sentences when you listen to the teacher?]

10. Entiende lo que el profesor les dice en clase de inglés? ¿Qué es más fácil de entender? ¿Qué es más difícil de entender? [Do you understand everything your teacher says? What is easy to follow? What is difficult?]

11. Cuando no entiende algo en la clase de inglés, qué hace? Pregunta al profesor? Pregunta a otro estudiante? Pide al profesor de explicar o de repetir? Por qué o por qué no? [When you don’t understand something in class, what do you do? Do you ask questions? Do you ask the teacher to explain or to repeat?]

12. ¿Qué tipo de problemas tienen otros estudiantes en la clase de inglés? Qué ha notado Ud.? [What types of problems do other students have in English class that you’ve noticed?]

13. Cuáles otras actividades o ejercicios le gustarían hacer en la clase de inglés? [What other practice activities would you like to do in class?]

Current out-of-school learning experiences

Researcher says: Gracias por compartir un poco sobre sus experiencias aprendiendo el inglés en REEP. Me permite de preguntarle un poco sobre sus experiencias aprendiendo y usando el inglés cuando no está en las clases de inglés? [Thank you for telling me a bit about your experiences in learning English at REEP. Is it OK if I ask you some questions now about learning and using English when you’re not at school?]

1. Cómo le gusta practicar el inglés cuando no está en clase? Si tuviese más tiempo, qué le gustaría hacer para mejorar su inglés? [What do you like to do to practice English when you’re not in class? If you had more time, what would you like to do to work on your English?]

2. Cuáles son algunas palabras nuevas que ha aprendido recientemente en inglés? Qué hace para recordárselos? Cómo se recuerda lo que significan esos palabras? Cómo se recuerda como se escriben esos palabras? [What are some new words you’ve recently learned in English? What do you do to remember them? How do you remember what they mean? How do you remember how they’re written?]

3. Cree que sus clases de inglés han cambiado algo en su vida? Sus clases de inglés le ayudan en su trabajo? En la casa? Cuando va de compras? Cuando va salir de la casa? [Do you think your English classes have changed something in your life? How do your English classes help you at work? At home? When you’re shopping? When you’re out?]

4. Qué le gustaría aprender sobre el inglés ahora? Cuáles preguntas tiene todavía sobre el uso de inglés en el trabajo? En las compras? En la comunidad? En el transporte? En la cultura? En la vida diaria? [What are some things you would like to learn about English now? What questions do you have about using English in the United States?]
5. En su vida diaria, qué hace si necesita leer algo en inglés, pero no sabe lo que quiere decir? Qué hace si necesita escribir algo en inglés, pero no sabe cómo escribirlo? Qué hace si necesita decir algo en inglés pero no sabe cómo decirlo? [What do you do if you need to read or write or say something in English outside of the classroom?]
INTERVIEW 3 (WEEK 12)

Other language experiences

Researcher says: Gracias por compartir un poco sobre su uso de inglés en su vida diaria. Me permite de preguntarle un poco sobre las idiomas que usa en su vida? [Thank you for telling me more about how you use English in your life. Can I ask you a few more questions now about the languages that you use in your life?]


2. En su país, Ud. probablemente ha notado que la gente habla español en maneras diferentes según su lugar geográfico. Por ejemplo, la gente que vive en un lado del país tiene un acento un poco diferente de la gente que vive en otro lado del país. Tal vez la gente usa palabras diferentes cuando está hablando de la misma cosa. Por ejemplo, en un país, se dice “el bus” pero en otro país, se puede decir “el camión.” En un país, se dice “el maní” pero en otro país, se puede decir “el cacahuete.” Qué ha notado de las diferencias en el español que se habla en su país? Qué son las diferencias entre el español que se habla en su país y el que habla la gente de otros países hispanohablantes? En como se habla el español en los EEUU? [You have probably noticed in your own country that people speak Spanish in different ways depending on where they live. People may use a different accent or use different words when they are talking about the same thing in Spanish. In what ways have you noticed differences in how people use or speak your native language, in your own country, in the United States, or in other parts of the world?]

3. Algunas personas dicen que si necesitan recordarse lo que significa o cómo se deletrea alguna palabra, les ayuda escribirlo o que otra persona lo escriba. Es el mismo caso para Ud. en español? Es esto el caso para Ud. en inglés? [Some people say that if they need to remember a word, it helps them to write it down or to see someone else write it. Is this true for you in Spanish? In English?]

4. En cuáles maneras cree que el inglés es similar al español? En cuáles maneras cree que es diferente? [In what ways do you think English is similar to your native language? In what ways do you think it is different?]

5. En cuáles maneras cree que el inglés oral es similar al inglés escrito? En cuáles maneras cree que es diferente? [In what ways do you think spoken English is similar to written English? In what ways do you think it is different?]
6. Describame un momento cuando usó el inglés para cumplir algo en su trabajo. En su casa? [Can you tell me about a time when you used your English to do something at work? At home? What did you do?]

7. Describame un momento cuando quería usar el inglés, pero no sabía qué decir o cómo decirlo en inglés? Qué hizo? [Can you tell me about a time when you wanted to use English, but you didn’t know what to say or how to say it? What did you do?]


9. Piensa en su vida y sus experiencias usando el inglés en los EEUU. Describame un momento cuando se sentía orgulloso de su inglés? [Think about all of your experiences in using English in the United States. What is something that you are proud of?]

10. Hablamos de la lectura en español. Si alguien no sabía cómo leer, cómo le explicaría lo que necesita aprender para leer? [If someone didn’t know how to read, what would you tell him/her that he/she would need to learn?]

11. Hablamos de la escritura en español. Si alguien no sabía cómo escribir, cómo le explicaría lo que necesita aprender para escribir? [If someone didn’t know how to write, what would you tell him/her that he/she would need to learn?]

12. Cuáles sonidos son más difíciles en inglés? Más fáciles? [What sounds are most difficult in English?]

13. En su opinión, es más fácil leer en silencio o en voz alta? [Is it easier to read silently or aloud? Why?]

Future language use
Researcher says: Gracias por decirme cómo usa diferentes idiomas en su vida. Me permite de preguntarle sobre sus deseos y sus objetivos para su vida futura? [Thank you for telling me more about how you use different languages in your life. Can I ask you a few more questions now about what you want to do in the future?]

1. Por cuánto tiempo piensa seguir tomando clases de inglés? De qué manera cree que su inglés seguirá mejorándose? [How long do you think you will continue to study English? How do you think your English will improve if you continue to study it?]

2. En qué maneras o para qué le gustaría usar el inglés en su vida futura? [In what ways would you like to use English in the future?]

3. En su vida futura, cree que va a usar el inglés escrito con más frecuencia? ¿Qué va a escribir en inglés? [In the future, do you think you will use English to write more? If so, what will you write?]

4. En su vida futura, cree que va a leer el inglés escrito con más frecuencia? ¿Qué va a leer en inglés? [In the future, do you think you will use English to read more? If so, what will you read?]

5. En su vida futura, cree que su habilidad en inglés va a ayudarle? De qué manera? [In the future, do you think English will help you? If so, how will it help you?]

formación o entrenamiento? [If you could have any job, what would you like to have? Why? What will you need to learn in order to have that job? Will you need to get more education or training?]
Appendix E

Metalinguistic Reflection Protocol for Group 1 (Talk of the Block-Health Group)

Instructions [said to the participant]: We are going to do three English practice activities now that are similar to the activities that you do in the Literacy Pullout class. After we do each activity, I will ask you some questions in your language [Spanish or French] to help you think about the activity. You can answer the questions in your language. You can take as much time as you need to answer the questions. If you do not want to answer any of the questions, you do not have to answer them. You can stop answering the questions at any time.

After administering each task, ask and record answers to these questions:

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Qué estaba pensando mientras que completó la actividad? Cómo lo hizo? [Tell me what you were thinking when you completed the activity. How did you complete it?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cuáles partes fueron fácil para Ud? Porqué? [What was easy for you about the activity?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cuáles partes fueron difícil para Ud? Porqué? [What was difficult for you about the activity?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Si cambiara algo con esta actividad, qué podría ayudarle a hacerla mejor? Por ejemplo, el profesor lo explica en español, o hay dibujos o otro estudiante da un modelo? [What could help you do this activity better?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. De qué manera esta actividad le ayudará a aprender ingles? [How does this activity help you learn English?]</td>
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Administration 1 (Week 4-5)

Task 1. Vowels
Ask: What are the vowels in English? Can you write them for me? Why are they important? How does the teacher use them to teach English?

Dictate: at, egg, in, on, up

- Questions

Task 2. Read aloud the story: “Bob is Sick”

- Questions

Task 3. Vocabulary
Ask: Can you translate this: “OK, Bob,” says the boss. “I want you to get well. You can get help. You can get help at the clinic.” What does “get well” mean? What does “get help” mean?

- Questions

Task 4. Comprehension
a. Read the comprehension questions orally, and have the student answer them orally (without looking at the questions). Read the sentences on the index cards, and place them in 2 piles: What does Bob say? What does the boss say?

- Questions

Task 5. Dictation
Dictate: “You can get help at the clinic.” “I will go to the clinic today.”

- Questions
Appendix F

Literacy Classes: Lesson Plan Templates

Day 1 activities:

1. Teach story vocabulary
   - Keep it simple. Teach only the meaning of the word as it appears in the story unless a student brings up another meaning.
   - Use pictures when appropriate
   - Ask a few questions to make sure that all students understand the word, not just the more vocal students.
   - Introduce and practice the new sight words.

2. Phonics: story words, word families (choose one of the following, or something similar)
   - It’s important to help the students HEAR the difference between vowel sounds. Read a list of words and have the students raise their hand when they hear a certain sound.
   - Contrast just two sounds: for example, short-a vs long-e.
   - Give each student a small white board, have them write the word family, for example, give them “at”, then have them write fat, sat, pat, etc.
   - Make columns of words from the story by vowel sounds, emphasize the vowel sound as a student reads down the columns.

3. Discuss pictures, predict story
   - This is very important. More and more research is showing that especially for adult learners it’s important that the material they are learning is put in context.

4. Read story using the books in plastic sleeves, so students can refer to the pictures
   a. Teacher reads story aloud
   b. Teacher reads 1 line at a time, class repeats line by line
   c. Students take turns reading
   d. Sometimes before asking the comprehension questions it’s good to have the students read the story silently. It takes a lot of “cognitive energy” for our students to read aloud. Often they are not focusing on the meaning of the words when they are focusing on how to pronounce them.

5. Ask comprehension questions from student book
   - It’s important for the students to answer the comprehension questions verbally on day one and day two. Again, it’s a question of cognitive energy, by day three we want them to definitely know the answer to the question so they can concentrate on their writing.

6. Dictate words or sentences from the story for writing practice
   - Use your best judgment on whether to dictate individual words or sentences from the story.
• Give the students the correct responses so they can correct their own.

**Day 2 activities:** (repeat these for day 3 if on a 4-day schedule)

1. Review story vocabulary
   • Our students need to revisit new words over and over again (research suggests 16 times!) before it becomes a word they can use.
   • And because of absences, reviewing the vocabulary is important

2. Work with phonics for story words – whatever activity you enjoy

3. Read story:
   a. If needed: Teacher reads line-by-line, class repeats
   b. Students read aloud
   c. Consider having students read silently if you are comfortable with it

4. **Ask the comprehension questions from student book (orally)**

5. **Dictate sentences from story for writing practice.**

6. If there’s time, start activities in book after story

**Day 3 activities:** (Day 4 if on a 4-day schedule)

1. Review story vocabulary
2. Work with phonics for story words
3. Read story:
   a. Teacher reads line-by-line, class repeats
   b. Students read one line at a time and/or silently.

4. **Ask the comprehension questions from the student book (orally).**

5. **Students write answers to comprehension questions in their student books.**
   Ideally this should be students writing on their own. Correct answers are given (either the teacher or students write answers on the board.) This can be done question by question or after all questions are answered.

6. Do other activities in book after story

"Combo" + **Writing of Two Lessons**
1. The purpose of these combined lessons is to demonstrate to the students they can read more “adult looking” material and not always numbered sentences.

2. After reading the combined stories have students write sentences in their own words about the stories or about themselves.
Lesson 9: Sam Can't Get Up

1. Gus can get Sam.

2. Sam can go with Gus in the taxi.

3. But it's 8:15 A.M.

4. Sam is not up.

5. Gus is at the house.

6. But Sam is not up.

7. “Come on, Sam,” Pat says.

8. “Gus is here. Get up!”

9. “Get up fast!”

10. “It's 8:15.”
Appendix G
Sample Story from *Talk of the Block – Health*

**At the Clinic**

1. Bob is at the Hill Street Clinic.
2. Bob is sick.
3. He wants to get well.

4. Pam works at Hill Street Clinic.
5. She sits at a big desk.

   I have an appointment with the doctor.”
7. Pam helps Bob with his appointment.

8. Pam asks, “What is your first name?
    What is your last name?”
9. Bob tells her, “My name is Bob Finn.”
10. Pam asks Bob to spell his last name.
    “F-I-N-N,” Bob says.

11. Pam tells Bob to sit.
13. Bob sits and thinks, “I am sick of this clinic.”

14. Then Pam stands up. She says,
    “Bob Finn. The doctor can see you.”
Bibliography


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