

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY IN TESOL:
A STUDY OF IMMIGRANT ENGLISH LEARNERS

An Honors Thesis by

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Submitted to the Dorothy and Bill Cohen Honors College
of Wichita State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Honors Baccalaureate

May 2020

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate with concentrations in Communication Sciences & Disorders and Linguistics.

Mythili Menon, Thesis Advisor

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe many thanks to those who supported me throughout this research process. First, I would like to thank Dr. Mythili Menon, who offered hours of her time to help me brainstorm topics, plan methodology, and analyze data. Without her, I would not know how to even begin a research project of this caliber. Because she is also the one who first introduced me to the field of linguistics, I have much more to thank her for, but that kind of thanks cannot be put into words. Thanks are also due to Dr. Kimberly Engber, the Dean of the Bill and Dorothy Cohen Honors College, who provided me with the opportunity to pursue an Honors Baccalaureate degree and thereby a means with which to pursue my research interests. She has been a very significant academic mentor and counselor throughout my undergraduate career, offering her advice as I wrestled with career choices and her supervision as I navigated the HB degree creation process. Dr. James Whiting of Plymouth State University has also greatly influenced me; it was because of Dr. Whiting and his class on Language Acquisition that I was inspired to ask questions like the ones addressed in this thesis.

Another reason I was inspired to begin this research was my interaction with international students at both Wichita State University and Plymouth State University. Witnessing their attempts to learn English and their struggles to assimilate into American culture motivated me to research ways to improve ESL programs. Of course, I must also acknowledge Wichita State University, the alma mater that made it possible for me to participate in such rich experiences. Finally, I would like to convey my immense gratitude for my family. They have been supportive as I have undergone challenge after challenge and were patient when I gave less time to them and more to my degree and thesis project.

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the educational expectations of immigrant students at Wichita State University. The data primarily compares students from Africa and from other countries and continents' educational expectations while additionally comparing students from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) specifically with students from other countries of Africa. While a considerable amount of research has focused on effective ways to teach English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) in general, little to no research has been administered concerning TESOL for Africans in particular. This is a gap in the literature, especially in refugee cities such as Wichita, Kansas that saw an upward of 200 African refugees resettled in 2019 (US Department of State, 2019b). This research fills this gap by conducting a survey of immigrant students at Wichita State University. Immigrant students were asked to complete a survey describing their cultural and linguistic background and education expectations. The results of this research study will promote further development of English as a second language (ESL) programs for Africans—and possibly refugees—as well as intercultural competency in Wichita, Kansas.

In efforts to understand immigrant cultural competency, the main research question asks: what are the educational expectations of English Language Learners, especially from the African continent? Who do the immigrants believe autonomy lies with in the classroom: the teacher or the students?

The research methodology utilizes a survey that asks participants questions about their ethnic, cultural, educational, and linguistic background, in addition to questions regarding autonomy in the classroom. Forty-eight total responses were gathered. Twenty respondents are from the African continent, and nine of those twenty are from the DRC. Twelve are from Asia,

ten are from the Middle East, and six are from Latin America. The data shows that African participants do not believe much differently about the responsibilities of teachers and students than participants from other regions. Neither do Congolese students believe that the teacher or student is either more or less responsible for a student's learning than their African counterparts.

Ultimately, this thesis encourages and gives direction for further research. Next steps could include reconstructing the survey in order to obtain more accurate results, administering the same survey to ESL teachers for comparison, or focusing on African-refugees as the predominant research subjects.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS / NOMENCLATURE

DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ELL	English Learner Language
ESL	English as a second language
LA	Language Acquisition
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis seeks to determine whether there are distinctions in immigrant English Language Learners' (ELLs) perceptions of education and autonomy in the classroom. In particular, the research investigates African ELLs' perceptions as compared to other ELLs from across the world. There has been little to no work done to investigate the learning styles of Africans immigrants, that is, those who were born in Africa and have immigrated to the US as an international student, refugee, or other. The study fills this gap by conducting research on Africans immigrants who are students at Wichita State University and whose second language is English and by comparing them with immigrants from other parts of the world.

Using methodology similar to the work of Fennelly and Palasz (2004), a survey was created and sent to immigrant students. The survey was developed and dispersed using an online platform called Qualtrics. Participants were asked 25 questions total, 15 involving matters of culture and language and 10 concerning education (see Appendix A for the complete survey questions). The questions on their English ability, which were based off questions in the Wilder Survey (2004), were given as multiple-choice, while most other questions, unless binary yes-no questions, were open-ended. A total of 48 participants undertook the study. Out of these, twenty participants were from Africa, and nine of those twenty were from the DRC. The rest of the participants were distributed as follows: twelve from Asia, six from Latin America, and ten from the Middle East.

The overall goal of this research is to benefit future learners of the English language by better equipping ESL teachers in their approach to teaching immigrants, especially those from

Africa and the DRC, and in their understanding of other cultures. Moreover, it will contribute to the fields of applied linguistics, intercultural competency, and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). More specifically, this thesis attempts to determine whether an important distinction exists between Africans' expectations and perceptions of education and other foreign students' expectations and perceptions. Likewise, it asks whether there is a distinction between the expectations of Congolese students and students from other African countries.

The next sections, two and three, provide a background as well as a roadmap of previous literature, and the primary research questions are listed in section four. The methodology is explained in the fifth section, while sections six through eight display the results and discuss the consequential implications of the data. Lastly, the ninth section paves a path for further research and presents questions that could continue the investigation.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

2.1 ESL in the US

Most ESL students in the United States are either immigrants or refugees. At least 185,871 refugees have entered the United States from 2016 to 2019 (US Department of State, 2019a). With such an influx of foreigners who may not be fluent in English, the need for English as a Second Language (ESL) courses is on the rise. However, one significant impediment to learning in the ESL classroom is that lessons do not accommodate learners from different linguistic and social backgrounds; they do not address the individual's struggle to understand American expectations in an educational environment nor the individual's present stage of integration. People of different cultures have different underlying beliefs about learning, teaching, and autonomy. ESL classes tend to place students from different cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds in the same course, and teachers may find it difficult to meet the individual needs of each student in such an environment.

In order to resolve this issue and better prepare ESL instructors to tailor their teaching, this research strives to develop an understanding of intercultural competency and to investigate some of the underlying beliefs African ELLs in particular may retain when it comes to education.

2.2 African ELLs

This thesis focuses on Africans primarily because the relocation of African refugees to the United States is growing, and little work has been done concerning African ELLs or African cultural competency.

Africa is a continent of over one billion people and 54 countries, approximately 50 of which did not gain independence until after 1950 (Boddy-Evans 2020). Some of its countries, like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), are in a state of civil unrest. As a result, a large fraction of refugees flee the country each year, and many are relocated to the United States.

According to the bar graph below created by Pew Research Center, African refugee admissions to the US steadily increased from 1975 to 2017 (Krogstad 2017). In 2016, the largest group of refugees to come to the US from one nation was from the DRC. Approximately 16,370 refugees came from the Congo, followed by 12,587 refugees from Syria. With the growing influx of refugees to the US, particularly from the DRC, it is important not only for Americans studying TESOL to have a knowledge of African culture but refugee culture as well.

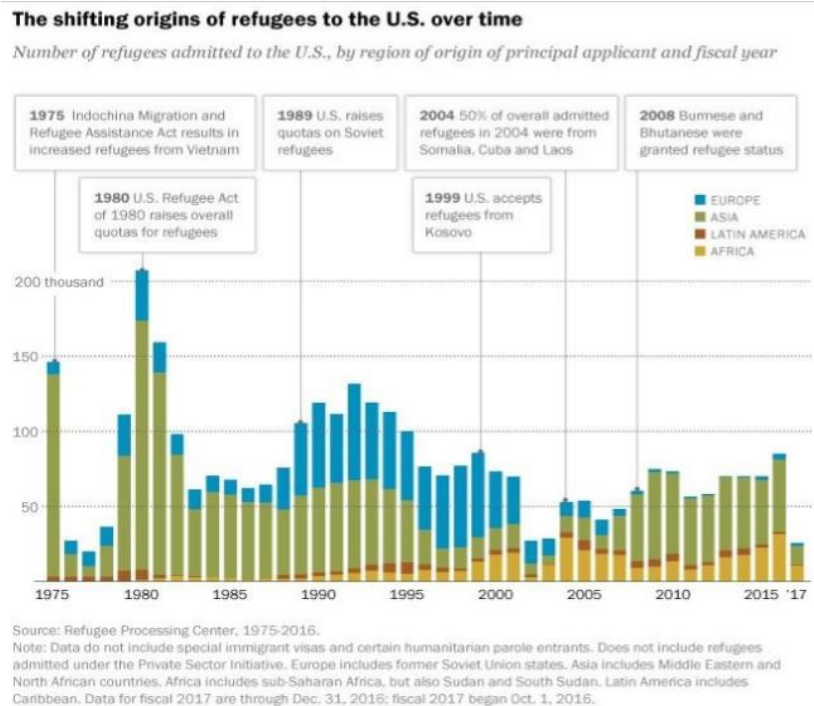


Figure 1: Pew Research Center Refugee

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in ESL programs for immigrants and African immigrants in particular is lacking, but so far, the relevant literature includes several approaches to intercultural competency, conducts investigations into perceptions of autonomy, and attempts to measure integration in the United States.

3.1 Intercultural Competency

Intercultural identity is defined as an “individual's display of belonging to, and sharing with speakers of, diverse language and cultural backgrounds in an adaptive form of intercultural verbal and nonverbal communication” (Yang, 2018). Researchers have suggested three areas wherein teachers develop their intercultural competency and three ways to further develop their intercultural competency. Teachers may develop their intercultural competency in three key dimensions: intercultural verbal communication competence, intercultural nonverbal communication competence, and co-construction of intercultural identity. Three strategies that are claimed to help develop TESOL teacher intercultural identity are “learning an additional language, undertaking cultural immersion, and promoting multicultural education in and outside of classroom settings” (Yang, 2018). This thesis especially seeks to help ESL instructors develop their intercultural identity with the third strategy—promoting multicultural education.

Fowler-Frey (1998) speaks to the idea of developing intercultural competency and communicating expectations in English language instruction. According to the research, two phenomena have a significant effect on the ESL classroom: communicative competence—the ability to choose the form of language appropriate for the occasion or social situation—and

participant structure rules, which are the teacher's implicit expectations of student interaction in the classroom. The cultural backgrounds of the learners and teachers affect communication and how well the target language is learned. Therefore, rather than assuming that their students' perceptions of education are the same as theirs, teachers should reflect on how to teach communicative competence as well as make their expectations of student participation explicit rather than implicit.

Fowler-Frey's two phenomena line up well with Yang's two dimensions of intercultural verbal and nonverbal communication competence. Both researchers affirm the importance of TESOL instructors' cultural competence in verbal/explicit communication and nonverbal/implicit communication.

Finally, Reid (1987), provides proof that students from different countries *do* learn through different means, once again establishing the cruciality of intercultural competency. The authors dispensed a survey whose results showed that ESL students tend to learn better through kinesthetic means—versus oral, visual, and other such means—while native students do not. According to the researchers, teachers should introduce students to the notion of learning styles and ask them to assess themselves. Once students have become aware of their preferred learning style, teachers should further encourage them to diversify their style or try to learn through a new means. These results beg the question: should ESL instructors teach students in their preferred style, or perhaps more specifically expounded for this thesis topic, within students' cultural expectations of an education environment?

3.1.1 African Intercultural Competency

Not much has been published on establishing an intercultural competency within the context of African culture and race, and the work that has been conducted on the matter has

taken place primarily in Australia. Nwosu (2009) introduces researchers to the thought of cultural competency in African culture. He proposes that through studying his preliminary taxonomy of African cultural orientations, researchers can begin to understand how Africans communicate and their conceptualizations of intercultural competency.

Based on Nwosu’s taxonomy, displayed in Figure 2, the way Africans relate to themselves and others contrasts greatly to the way Western society members do.

<i>Dimensions of Orientations</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Communicative Behaviors Considered Appropriate</i>
Self-orientation	Communalism	Deference to group, subordination of self, reverence for age and status, and value for interdependence
Relational orientation	Lineal	Deference to authority, including within-group authority; social distinctions made based on hierarchy; preference for formalized interactions; distinct gender roles; cautious approach to relational development but strong interpersonal bonds valued; focus on obligations and relational interdependence
Time orientation	Cyclical	Emphasis on the past; slow pace of life desired; time perceived as connections, ongoing, unlimited, and flexible; value for in-time polychromic orientation
Activity orientation	Being	Human events determined by fate; fatalistic; work seen as a means to an end; blurred distinction between work and play; workplace as extension of home; less mobility, extended loyalty to the organization, and longevity of service
Discourse orientation	Nonlinear	Indirect, nonlinear narrative style, oral emphasis; listener responsible, reliance on nonverbal codes; covert and implicit messages valued; greater value for face needs and a preference for reserved reactions. The purpose of communication is “to confirm, solidify, and promote communal social order” (Moemeka, 1996)

Figure 2: Nwosu Taxonomy of Intercultural Competence in Africa

The African value of community is evident in many tribal mantras, like the Xhosa people's saying "a person is a person through a person." It is possible that, because of an African's communal mindset, he may rely on his fellow students or teacher to share more of the burden of learning with him than would normally be acceptable in American classrooms.

The discourse section of the taxonomy suffices to answer Yang and Fowler-Frey's questions of verbal and nonverbal communication. According to Nwosu, Africans prefer indirect communication, rely greatly on nonverbal cues, and usually consider it the listener's responsibility to understand the speaker rather than the speaker's responsibility to make himself understood. In this respect, it may be possible that Africans do not believe it to be their teacher's job to make sure they understand the lesson, but maybe, in agreement with Nwosu's observations, consider it their own responsibility to understand the teacher and lesson. This very subject, the subject of self-responsibility, is extrapolated upon in the section below concerning autonomy.

3.2 Autonomy

Having a well-developed intercultural competency allows educators to notice differences in students' perceptions of autonomy. One's notion of autonomy, or the condition of having self-governance or independence ("Autonomy," 2014), is a major cultural characteristic that can play a role in an ELL's ability to learn English.

Koirala's (2019) work with Bhutanese refugees in Australia shows that an ELL's sense of autonomy depends on his experiences, cultural approaches to education, and favored learning methods, all of which are factors of intercultural competency. Koirala suggests that these factors be weighed considerably when preparing to teach refugees particularly; because of traumatic past experiences and ingrained cultural conceptions of education, the refugee students may feel—

subconsciously or consciously—as though they are not responsible for their own learning. Therefore, based on his or her country of origin or past experiences, an ELL’s history can affect his sense of autonomy in his own education.

3.3 Integration

In review, understanding the factors that play into a student’s perception of autonomy allows instructors to grow in their cultural competency and informs their instruction. A factor that contributes to one’s sense of autonomy is past experience, and one transforming and oftentimes difficult experience for immigrants or refugee students is their progress of integration into American society.

Tollefson (1985) draws two conclusions concerning refugee resettlement in the US; he states that English literacy is imperative for resettlement and that ESL classes must use “communicative curricula and methods” in order to teach refugee students English. Another finding of the article is that literate and non-literate students have different needs in learning English, and their needs should be addressed separately. Similarly, researcher Seufert (1999) explains that personal factors need to be considered when creating ESL programs for refugees. First, instructors must remember that refugees mostly likely have limited time to study. Second, refugees’ previous education experiences will affect their current experience, and lastly, they have psychological needs that teachers should give them the resources to address.

Not only do ESL instructors of refugees need to consider the different needs their students may have, but ESL instructors of all immigrants. They must realize that a refugee or immigrants’ position in the integration process may affect or even hinder their English learning. Fennelly and Palasz (2004) administered a multilingual telephone survey sponsored by the Wilder Foundation to an immigrant-heavy neighborhood in the Twin Cities, Minnesota.

Using the survey, they collected the self-reported English ability of Mexican, Hmong, Somali, and Russian immigrants and/or refugees. They also collected information on other factors said to influence English language learning, such as age at immigration, country of origin, and most importantly, previous education. As a result, the researchers found that “barriers to the acquisition of English are particularly steep for residents like the Hmong who are geographically and linguistically isolated, and who do not have a tradition of literacy.”

3.3.1 Integration in Wichita, Kansas

The lack of research on immigrants and refugees in the city of Wichita, Kansas, reveals yet another gap in literature. Branstetter’s (2017) article on the integration of refugees in Wichita is one of the only pieces completed on any immigrant or refugee group in Wichita within the last five years. Using a tool from Ager and Strang (2004), Branstetter analyzes the refugee situation in Wichita. She concludes that “despite weak integration in the ‘Rights and Citizenship’ and ‘Safety and Stability’ categories, refugees are integrating into the community.”

It is surprising that there is not more research on integration in Wichita. It is especially surprising in light of the fact that in 2017, the International Rescue Committee of Wichita resettled 181 refugees, 95 percent of which were from countries in the northeast part of Africa (International Rescue Committee, 2019); this data alone reveals that understanding African cultures and perspectives, particularly in the field of education, is essential to establishing an environment conducive to English learning in Wichita. Therefore, this thesis will suffice as scaffolding on which future researchers may build an understanding of African cultural competency in ESL programs in Wichita and around the United States.

3.4 Literature Review Summary

While a limited amount of research has been conducted on intercultural competency,

autonomy, and integration, there is even less documentation on developing intercultural competency in a classroom that includes immigrants from Africa in particular, and of course, even less data exists concerning African immigrants and refugees in the city of Wichita, Kansas. However, both under-researched subjects—Africans in ESL and Wichita ESL programs for immigrants and refugees—are central to this thesis, so below I show the methods and questions I have taken from the previous research that I would like to test in the context of African people in Wichita.

As previously mentioned, the goal of this research aligns with one of Yang's (2018) methods of developing ESL instructors' intercultural identities—encouraging multicultural education. Like the compilation of research states, teachers can become more culturally competent in African culture by studying how Africans verbally and nonverbally communicate, their preferred learning style, and their perceptions of autonomy. Koirala (2019) explains that one's sense of autonomy is affected by his past experiences, his culture's approach to education, and his favored learning methods. To investigate immigrants' levels of integration, Fennelly and Palasz (2004) asked participants about age at immigration, country of origin, and most importantly, previous education, because these affect English language learning. Notice that a few of these informational categories—for example, favored/preferred learning methods—are mentioned by multiple researchers.

In summary, based on the structural questions the previous research has provided, the survey of this thesis also asks questions that concern intercultural competency, autonomy, and integration: What are Africans' perceptions of autonomy? What are their past experiences and their previous education? What is their country of origin? How long ago did they leave their home country? Do they live with family or have a job? Lastly, is there a difference between the

answers of Africans and the rest of the world—namely, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East? Additionally, we must discern if there is a difference in the responses of Africans from the DRC and Africans from other countries? Because of possible refugee background, is there a difference in a Congolese’s past experiences and thereby her perception of autonomy? This thesis attempts to answer questions like the ones above through the Qualtrics survey. However, the *central research* questions, which will be the main focus of the results section as well, are more clearly laid out in section four below.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study, I attempt to answer the questions: What are the educational expectations of African ELLs? And who do they believe autonomy and responsibility lies with in the classroom? I also aim to answer these questions for Congolese ELLs specifically. I accomplish this by asking survey participants how responsible they believe a teacher is for student learning and how responsible they believe a student is for his own learning. In the survey, these are given as two separate questions, and respondents are asked to rate responsibility on a scale of one to five, one being “not at all responsible” and five being “completely responsible.” I hypothesize that students from Africa, in comparison to students from other parts of the world, will consider teachers to be more responsible for student learning and students less so. I make this hypothesis with Nwosu’s (2009) research in mind; if Africans typically uphold the ideal of communalism, they may be more dependent on those around them and see success as a group effort. I further hypothesize that students from the DRC will consider teachers as more responsible for student learning and students as less responsible than will their counterparts from the rest of Africa. Because the DRC is in an emergency state, more refugees are likely to come out of the country, and as Koirala suggests (2019), because of traumatic past experiences, a refugee may not have a strong sense of autonomy; he may not believe himself to be responsible for his own learning. If, in comparison with the results from other students, the data reveals that the majority of African participants answer that responsibility rests more with teachers than with students (for example, they give students a 3 for responsibility but a 5 to teachers), this shows that they may not have a strong sense of autonomy in their English education and expect teachers to do most of the work.

On the other hand, if most African participants think that students are more responsible for their learning than teachers (for example, giving student a 4 in level of responsibility but teachers a 2), it reveals that they believe themselves to be relatively autonomous and will most likely take responsibility for their own English education. To further the investigation, I will contrast Congolese responses against the rest of the African responses. By contrasting Congolese's data against the other African data, it may reveal whether cultural and past experiences really do affect one's sense of autonomy.

No matter what the results show, it is important to note that intercultural competency is still significant. Simply because the results of this project may show that Africans' perceptions of teachers and student responsibility are not different than other students' in this survey does not mean that it is not necessary for TESOL instructors to develop intercultural competency and to be aware of the cultural backgrounds of ELLs.

CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

5.1 Participants

Participants were students of Wichita State University, recruited to take the survey via physical poster, word of mouth, or Shocker Blast, a tri-weekly student email update. Students were eligible to take the survey if they were over 18 years old, were from a different country, and agreed to the consent form given before the survey. Finally, survey results were divided into participant groups. These groups were composed of participants from Africa and divided further into the Congo and the rest of Africa (including the countries of Morocco, Kenya, Nigeria, Gabon, Côte d'Ivoire, Tanzania, and Cambodia). In addition, results were also compared against participants from the following regions: Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

5.2 Survey

The survey is made up of 25 questions, the first 15 questions concerning cultural and linguistic background and the last ten concerning educational background. In this last section of questions, participants are asked their English education specifically, such as “How old were you when you began learning English?” Questions 24 and 25 ask the question of who is more responsible for students’ education—teachers or students? Moreover, the survey took participants a mode of 13 minutes and 40 seconds to complete. Questions three to eight and 11 to 16 were borrowed from or inspired by the Wilder Survey (Fennelly and Palasz, 2004) referred to in the literature review. See Appendix A for an entire list of the survey questions.

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS

The results of the survey will be organized similarly to the literature review in section three. The respondents' answers to questions of intercultural competency—or simply, culture—autonomy, and integration will be included and touched upon as they relate to the main question of “Who do African ELLs believe autonomy and responsibility lies with in the classroom?” However, because the main research question addresses autonomy, the results on questions of autonomy will be presented first in section 6.2; sections 6.3 and 6.4 on integration and intercultural competency respectively will follow.

The African students' results will be contrasted with those of students from other regions. In turn, participants from the DRC's answers will be compared to the answers of other Africans to see whether country of origin, and primarily, whether past experiences—most likely refugee experiences—affects one's perception of autonomy in education. Because autonomy is the main focus of the research, Congolese responses will only be singled out in the summary of participants in 6.1 and in the two questions concerning autonomy in section 6.2, although they are mentioned in section 6.4 on matters concerning integration.

6.1 Summary of Participants

To reiterate, the respondents are divided into groups based on area of origin so that comparisons can be made amongst them. I will refer to the following groupings throughout the remainder of thesis.

The first set of groupings in the data exists so that African responses can be studied in context.

Data was collected from students from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East with the goal of comparing the African data with the data from the other regions. The data table below gives each student group’s age range and the average amount of time that has passed since they left their home countries.

	Number of Respondents	Age Range (years)	Average Time Since Left Country (years)
Africa	20	18-40	3.6
Asia	12	18-27	3.3
Latin America	6	16-30	7.1
Middle East	10	19-41	2.3

Figure 3: Participant Summary of Africa and Other regions.

Below in Figure 4 is the gender make-up of the groups. The x-axis displays the participant’s region of origin while the y-axis measures the number of participants who selected a certain response. A key that explains the bar coloring can be seen on the righthand side of the chart. For example, in this chart, the number of females (F) from each region is represented by a blue bar, while the number of males (M) is represented by the orange bar.

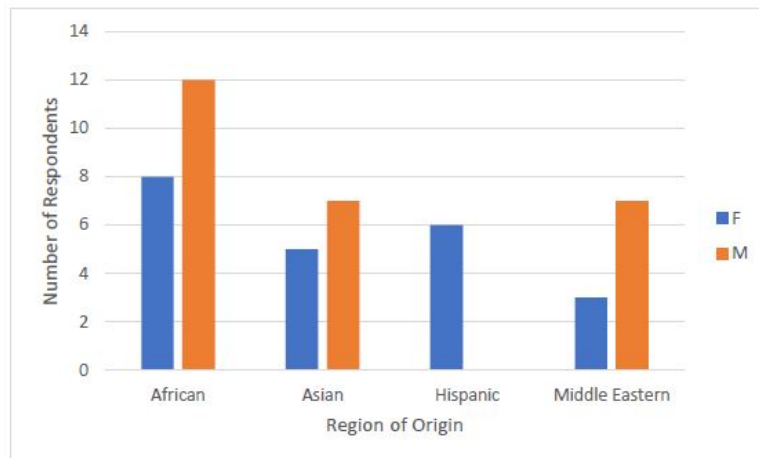


Figure 4: Gender Africa and Other Regions

The next chart shows students’ perceptions of their own English ability. It must be noted that the option “I cannot speak English” was also given to participants, but it was not selected. One African participant chose not to answer this question.

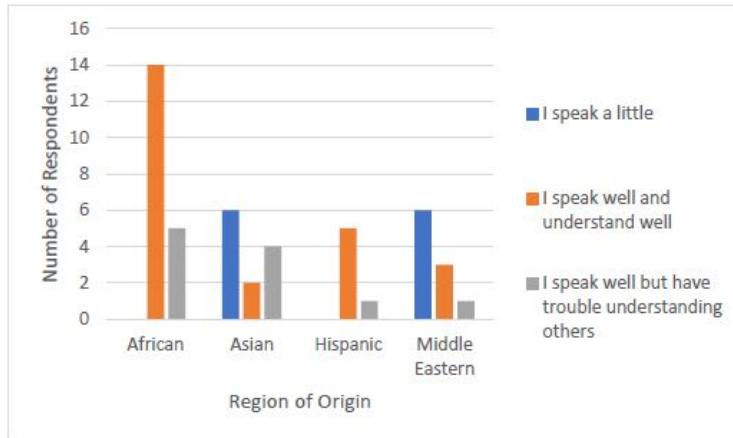


Figure 5: English Conference Africa and Other Regions

A second set of grouping exists in the data. To determine any distinctions in Congolese results, data was gathered from students from the DRC as well as a range of other African countries, including Cambodia, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, and Tanzania. These are often referred to in the text as “the rest of Africa” or “other African countries.” The data table below relays the Congolese and other Africans’ age range and the average amount of time it has been since they left their home countries.

	Number of Respondents	Age Range (years)	Average Time Since Left Country (years)
DRC	9	19-38	5.5
Other African Countries	11	18-40	1.9

Figure 6: Participant Summary of DRC and Other African Countries

The following bar graphs relay information concerning African respondents’ gender and English-speaking confidence. The first shows gender data.

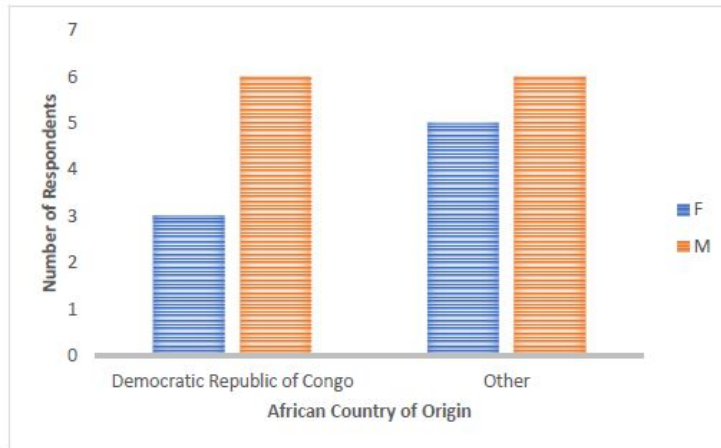


Figure 7: Gender DRC and Other African Countries

To contrast the English confidence of Congolese versus other Africans, see Figure 8. Notice that no African respondents selected “I cannot speak English” or “I speak a little.” Recall that one respondent from one of the “other” African countries chose not to answer this question.

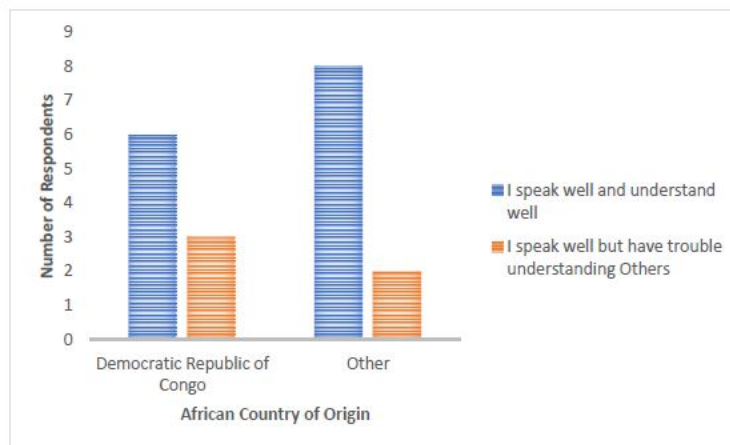


Figure 8: English Confidence DRC and other African Countries

6.2 Autonomy

Again, autonomy means self-governance. Students who have a strong sense of autonomy will take responsibility for their own learning. I hypothesized that Africans would have a weaker sense of autonomy than students of other countries, meaning that Africans will

credit teachers with a higher level of responsibility and students with a lower level of responsibility.

The question of autonomy is most clearly addressed in questions 24 and 25. These questions test participants' perceptions of autonomy in the US. Below are the responses of African, Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern participants presented in a bar graph.

6.2.1 Teacher Responsibility

Question 24 of the survey asks: "On a scale of one to five, how responsible is the teacher for student learning? 1 = Not at all responsible, and 5 = completely responsible." Each color on the bar graph represents a value on the one-to-five scale. For example, six participants of African origin gave teachers a three out of five on the scale of responsibility.

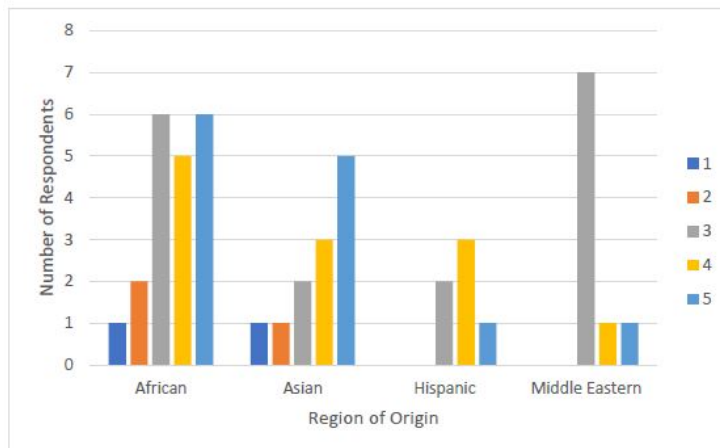


Figure 9: Teacher Responsibility Africa vs. Other Regions

The chart in Figure 9 shows that Africans hold teachers to be fairly responsible for student learning; the average scale placement given to teachers was approximately 3.7. Asians and Hispanic gave teachers a 3.8 on average, and the Middle Easterners who answered gave them a 3.3. Below the data narrows in on DRC and other African countries' results.

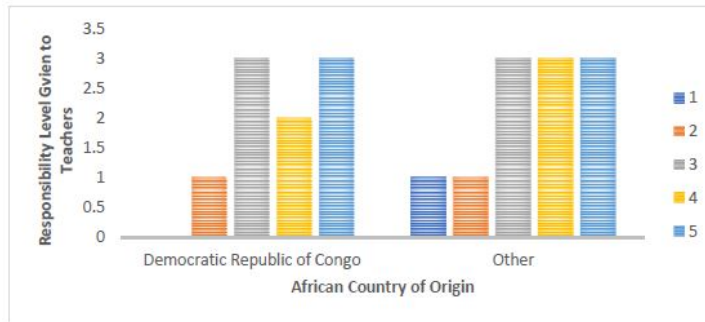


Figure 10: Teacher Responsibility DRC vs. Other African Countries.

While looking at the data, it is important to remember that there are only nine Congolese respondents but 11 “Other” responses. Because of this small difference in sum of participants, it may be more helpful to look at the data in terms of percentages or averages. It is noteworthy that while 11 percent of the Congolese gave teachers a responsibility level of 2 or less, 18 percent of other Africans gave them a 2 or less; while 33 percent of Congolese agreed that teachers should be held completely responsible for students’ learning, 27 percent of other Africans believed also so. The average rating for teaching responsibility given by the Congolese is 3.8. For the rest of Africa, the average is 3.6. The percentages and averages here show only miniscule differences among Congolese and other African ELLs. For the most part, both see the teacher as being partially responsible but not completely.

6.2.2 Student Responsibility

Responses to question 25 may provide more information about whether students see the teacher as being responsible for student learning. Question 25 asks: “On a scale of one to five, how responsible are students for their own learning? 1= Not at all responsible, and 5 = completely responsible.”.

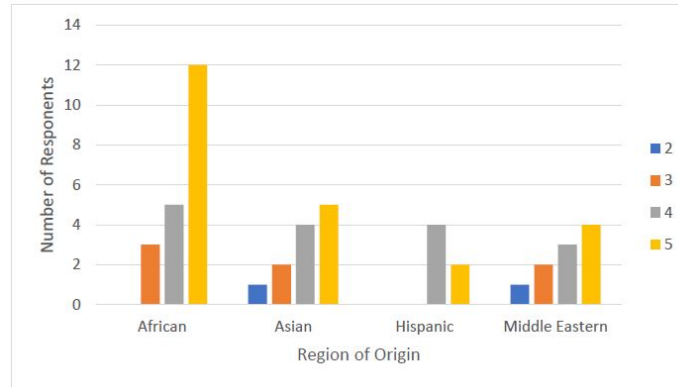


Figure 11: Student Responsibility Africa vs. Other Regions

The preceding chart that shows almost every region credited students with a high level of responsibility in their learning. Twelve out of 20 Africans agreed that students are completely responsible (which means they rated them with a “5”) for their own learning. In fact, a greater percentage of Africans (60 percent) gave students a 5 on the scale than Asians (only 42 percent rated students with a 5), Hispanics (33 percent), and Middle Easterners (40 percent). Below are results from the Congo compared to the results from other African countries.

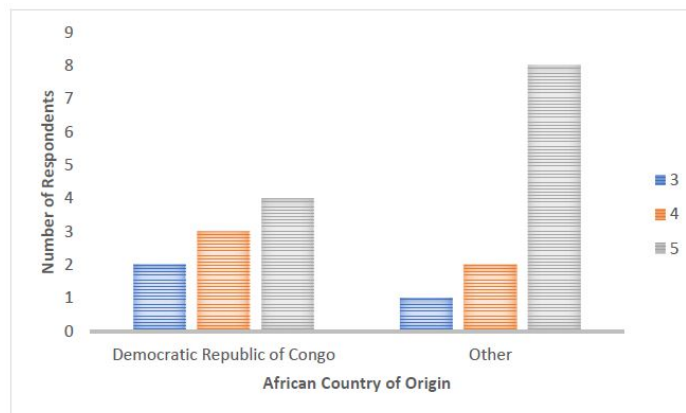


Figure 12: Student Responsibility DRC vs. Other African Countries

Four out of nine Congolese students gave students a 5, meaning 44 percent believe that students are completely responsible for their own learning, whereas 72 percent of other African students think that students are completely responsible for their own learning.

However, if averages are the best way to analyze the data, the Congolese average for student responsibility is 4.2, while the rest of Africa's average is 4.6. Once again, the difference between Congolese and other African responses is minimal. Both consider students to be very responsible for their own learning.

After examining responses to questions 24 and 25, the averages do not seem to uphold the theory that the Africans expect more of teachers and less of students than do the students of Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East. Neither do Congolese participants expect more of teachers and less of students than do those from other countries in Africa. The Congolese gave teachers an average of 3.8 on the scale of responsibility and students a 4.2, while other Africans similarly gave teachers an average of 3.6 and students a 4.6.

6.3 Intercultural Competency

Yang defines intercultural competency as “individual's display of belonging to, and sharing with speakers of, diverse language and cultural backgrounds in an adaptive form of intercultural verbal and nonverbal communication” (2018). I hypothesized that student responsibility would be seen not as important as teacher responsibility, due to the nature of intercultural competency in Africa. Included below are the results of questions related to culture, like previous education and age of learning English. Koirala states that knowledge of such factors is helpful in understanding someone's autonomy and culture. These results may help further inform the results of autonomy studied in section 6.2. I hypothesized that less Africans would have learned English in school due to the unrest of many of their countries; with that in mind, I also hypothesized that Africans would learn English later in life.

Question 17 of the survey asks: Did you learn English in school? The responses are summarized in Figure 13.

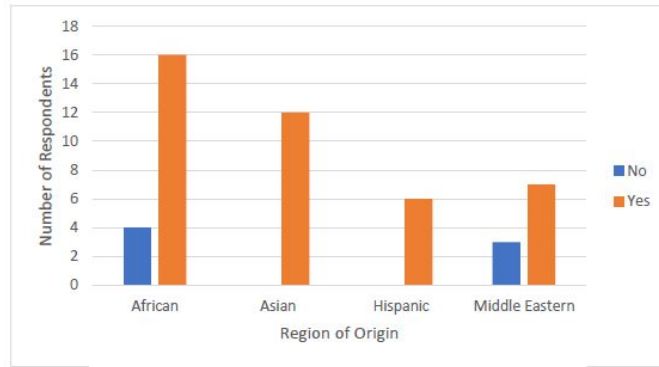


Figure 13: English in School Africa vs. Other Regions

While only four out of twenty Africans did not learn English in school, this is still a greater percentage than participants from Asian and Hispanic countries, all of whom learned English in school. This provides support for my hypothesis that a small portion of Africans learn English in school

Question 18 of the survey asks: How old were you when you began learning English? The age range for people from Asia was 0 to 16 years; from Latin America, 5 to 13 years; and from the Middle East, 10 to 19 years. For Africa, the age range for learning English was 0 to 29 years old, showing the largest range yet, and proving my hypothesis that Africans often learn English later than citizens from other continents.

6.4 Integration

Integration is a process that may contribute to an immigrant or refugee's key experiences or even her sense of autonomy. To gain insight into their current stage of integration, respondents were asked whether they currently worked or lived with family. Both components of their lives may affect how successfully they are able to integrate and learn English. I hypothesized that most Africans probably work and live with family. I concluded this because if many Africans are from countries of unrest and are consequently refugees, I

would suspect that those who have immigrated to the US plan to stay long-term; this means they will most likely need a source of income and a means with which to integrate into the community. Additionally, I would assume that they came to the US as a family unit, also necessitating a steady income.

6.4.1 Work

In question 15 of the survey, participants were asked if they currently worked. Below are their responses.

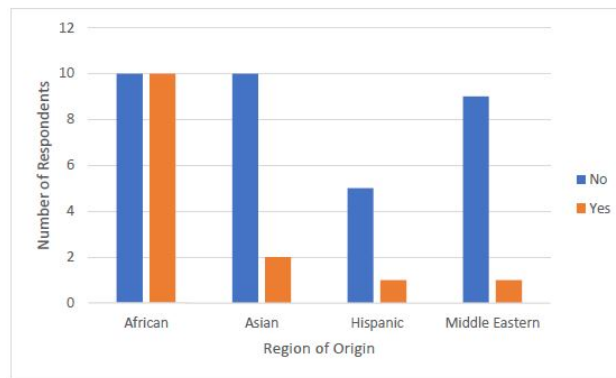


Figure 14: Work Africa vs. Other Regions

No more than 17 percent of the Asians, Hispanics, and Middle Easterners surveyed work, while half of the Africans do. This may support my hypothesis that the immigrated Africans at Wichita State University are attempting to integrate into American society and find a source of income.

Although the information is not presented in the bar graph, it might be noteworthy that while 66 percent of Congolese stated that they work, only 36 percent of other African respondents work. This could owe to a Congolese's likely refugee background.

6.4.2 Family

In question eight of the survey, participants were asked if they currently lived with family. Below are their responses.

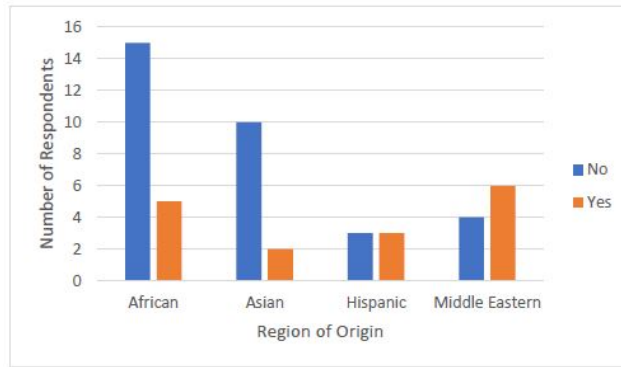


Figure 15: Family Africa vs. Other Regions.

According to Figure 15, students from the Middle East are more likely to live with family than students from any other region. Although I predicted that Africans would be most likely to live with family, a larger fraction of Middle Easterners and Hispanics live with their families.

Thus, my hypothesis that Africans in the US, assuming them more likely to be refugees in the process of integration, tend to live with family is not supported by this evidence. Once again, although it is not shown in the graph, there is a significant difference between the responses of Congolese and other African students. Forty-four percent of Congolese students live with family, but only nine percent, or one out of 11, other African students live with their families.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

Up until this point, I have discussed the background of ESL programs and African culture. I have reviewed the literature of intercultural competency, autonomy, and integration in the context of the ESL classroom, and I explained where the gaps in the research were and thereby how my research questions were developed. My hypothesis was that ELLs from Africa would give teachers a larger responsibility rating and students a smaller rating in comparison to ELLs from other regions. My sub-hypothesis was that ELLs from the DRC would give teachers a larger responsibility rating and students a smaller rating in comparison to ELLs from other countries in Africa. I designed a survey to elicit data that would either prove or disprove my hypothesis. Observing the results, I conclude that my hypothesis cannot be proven to be true, although I suggest that a few key items are worth discussing.

First, I will discuss the results concerning autonomy. It does not appear that the Africans surveyed consider the teacher or student to be any more or less responsible than do participants of other regions. Likewise, neither do Congolese students think either party is more or less responsible than do other African students. Because the results do not line up with my hypothesis does not necessarily mean that my hypothesis is incorrect in every aspect. Because of research like that of Koirala (2019), there is evidence that culture—and refugee status—can affect a person’s perception of autonomy. While students from the Congo are much more likely to be refugees than students from other parts of Africa, we cannot know this to be true, so we should not completely assume so and use the results of this survey as concrete evidence for anything

concerning refugee autonomy. However, researchers should look more into the correlation between refugee experiences and perceptions of autonomy in the ESL classroom.

Secondly, the results of the intercultural competency and integration sections are worth mentioning. According to the responses given, not as many Africans learned English in school compared to students from other countries. Similarly, the age range for learning English is much larger for Africans, signifying that the average age that they begin to learn English could be older. The African's ability to master English may be affected by these factors because learning languages is easier for children in the critical period who have not yet hit puberty. Based on the results of the integration section, my hypothesis that Africans are more likely to work than students of other regions is supported by the data; notably, Congolese students were also more likely to have a job than their African relatives. Although not much distinction can be seen between the family living situation of Africans and students from other regions, results did show that more Congolese students—possibly more likely to be refugees—live with their families than students from other parts of Africa. Because of these two factors of integration—work and family—which may serve as distractions at times, it may be harder for African and Congolese students to develop their English skills. It is important for ESL instructors to be aware of such information as it may affect student learning.

Naturally, an answer to one question produces ten additional questions. Therefore, the results of this thesis not only answer research questions; they evoke several more, summarized below.

Does the fact that most African and Congolese students, for that matter, tend to see students as more responsible for their education than teachers disprove Koirala's (2019) hypothesis that past experiences—especially those of a refugee—affect one's perception of autonomy? How else

can autonomy be measured? If students from Africa tend to take responsibility for their own learning, how can teachers equip them? If Africans and Congolese see themselves to be autonomous in their education, are there other cultural expectations that ESL instructors need to communicate in the classroom? Once both sides—teachers and students—are interculturally competent, how much should each side bend in order to accommodate for the other?

More research should be done as we attempt to discern the implications of this thesis' results.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

To reiterate, Africans at Wichita State University see themselves just as autonomous in their learning as do students from other regions of the world. Furthermore, Africans who are from the DRC, currently a country of violence, a country of political corruption, and a country that saw more than 16,000 refugees resettled in the US in 2016, still tend to see students highly responsible for their education, just as much as other Africans at Wichita State University (US Department of State, 2019a).

Asking Africans ELLs questions concerning autonomy, culture, preferred learning style, past experiences, integration, and more allows researchers and ESL instructors to develop intercultural competency. This is important knowing that, as evidenced in past research, that one's culture and past experiences can affect his or her education expectations. Whether they are the same or not, expectations need to be made known and understood so that ESL instructors and students know how to communicate across cultures and that, consequently, the process of English learning may be successful.

CHAPTER 9

FUTURE RESEARCH

For future research, the survey used in this research can be rewritten or the questions rephrased in order to clear up any misunderstandings among participants and then re-administered. Questions 24 and 25 specifically could be reworded so that the sum of the two responses must be a certain number. For example, if a respondent decides that teachers have no responsibility (1), then their answer to student responsibility must be that students have complete responsibility (5).

To see whether refugee status truly does affect a student's perception of autonomy and expectations of the teacher in an ESL setting, the survey could be administered to those who title themselves as refugees and who are currently taking ESL classes in the US. Because Fennelly and Palasz (2004) stated that they found the most significant barriers to English learning to be geographic and linguistic isolation and a lack of a tradition of literacy, it may be useful to incorporate questions into the survey that touch on those factors. The questions in this thesis concerning culture, education, and integration could be further investigated upon as well. How do they directly or indirectly relate to the answers given in response to questions of autonomy?

Another helpful tactic to further the investigation would be to ask American students and American ESL instructors in Wichita to take the survey to see how their responses compare to those of the African college student. The results would reveal how different American ESL instructors' and African ELLs' classroom expectations truly are from one another.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Menon-Bauman Survey

1. What is your ethnicity?
2. What country are you from?
3. When did you leave your country?
4. How long have you lived in the US?
5. What is your gender?
6. How old are you?
7. Are you married?
8. Do you have family living with you?
9. What languages do you speak?
10. What language do you normally speak in your house or apartment?
11. How well would you say you speak English?
1=cannot speak English; 2=speak a little bit; 3=speak well, but have a little trouble understanding; 4=speak and understand very well
12. Can you read English well enough to understand a daily newspaper that is written in English? 1=yes; 0=no
13. If yes, would you say that you can read the newspaper: 1=a little; 2=some; 3=completely
14. Being an immigrant in the United States probably causes a number of different kinds of stress. Right now, what one thing causes you the most stress? 1=language mentioned; 0=language not mentioned
15. Do you currently work?
16. Education* Less than high school; High school diploma only; College diploma or higher
17. Did you learn English in school?
18. When did you begin learning English?
19. What has been the hardest thing about learning English?
20. Do you think it's important to learn English? Why?
21. What are some hardships you have had to face because English is not your first language?
22. What help(ed) you learn English?
23. What helps you learn in general?
24. How responsible is the teacher for student learning? 0-5
25. How responsible are the students for their own learning? 0-5