

## Foreign-born TESOL Instructors Assisting Adult Immigrant Learners to Develop Civic Literacy Skills: A Pen Pal Project

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the contributions of foreign-born TESOL instructors helping adult language learners develop literacy skills through a pen pal project, which lasted 10 weeks and consisted of writing letters back and forth weekly. The project provided adult immigrant learners with an opportunity to practice meaningful writing to support their English literacy development. The research questions include (1) how do foreign-born TESOL instructors support adult immigrant learners develop literacy through a pen pal project? and (2) what components of the pen pal project promote the development of civic literacy skills? Data for this article come from 159 letters product of the writing exchange between instructors and learners, and individual conversational interviews with the instructors. Study findings are presented through four themes: teachers as cultural informants, emotional connection, life and learning advice, and adult ESL learners' linguistic competence. Study findings add to the body of literature focusing on the powerful contributions of foreign-born TESOL instructors to the education and language-culture acquisition of adult immigrant English learners.

**Key words:** Foreign-born Instructors, English as Second Language, Civic Literacy Development, Adult Immigrant Learners, Non-native English-speaking Instructors, TESOL Instructors, Pen Pal Letter Exchange

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout U.S. history, English as a second language (ESL) instruction has been an important form of adult education and a path to the preparation of passing the citizenship test for immigrants. During Colonial times, for example, when Europeans from different nationalities and languages accounted for most of the immigrant population, the government campaigned for Americanization via language education (Cavanaugh, 1996). Suffice it to say, language instruction has been a primary concern towards the acculturation of immigrants. However, with the growing number of immigrants living in the country—4.7 million in 2015 (Pew Research Center, 2017), federally funded adult ESL programs have been falling short in providing services. As a result, community-based entities have been offering ESL instruction and other programs to address the educational needs of immigrant adults and their families.

Attaining high levels of literacy is critical to success (e.g., health, finance, career, education, daily life). Being able to read and write is especially crucial in effective communication at all levels in the life of an adult (e.g., the job, school, daily routines) (Wilson, 2002). Yet, the uneven distribution of resources and lack of educational opportunities have left many adults with lacking general literacy and civic

literacy skills in tandem (Yap & Chan, 2010). Social transformation can only happen when adults possess adequate skills to participate and lead effectively. In responding to as such, for the last two decades, pen pal letter exchange has been employed successfully to support literacy development and cross-curricular learning (Barksdale, Watson, & Park, 2007; Larrotta, 2018; Larrotta & Serrano, 2012; Walker-Dalhouse, Sanders, & Dalhouse, 2009). However, there is a gap in the literature documenting the benefits and contributions of foreign-born TESOL (teachers of English to speakers of other languages) instructors supporting adult ESL learners' literacy development through writing. It has been acknowledged that these instructors bring with them their language and culture learning experiences to the ESL classroom (Kelch & Santana-Williamson, 2002; Maum, 2002). From professional experience, we know that being immigrants and language learners, foreign-born TESOL instructors have an insider perspective and the support they can offer to English learners is unique.

Drawing from a civic literacy framework, this article describes how six foreign-born TESOL instructors assisted a group of adult learners develop literacy skills through a pen pal letter project. The assumption is that pen pal writing supports literacy development and assists adult learners

to develop skills needed for civic literacy practices. The research questions guiding this article include:

1. How do foreign-born TESOL instructors support adult immigrant learners develop literacy through a pen pal project?
2. What components of the pen pal project promote the development of civic literacy skills?

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This qualitative study draws on a theoretical framework that envisions adult literacy development as shaped by civic literacy and communication infrastructure theory. This framework supports the authors' beliefs that:

1. Adult English learners must possess adequate skills to participate and lead effectively.
2. Developing writing skills is equally important as developing oral skills when learning a new language, ESL in this case.
3. Foreign-born TESOL instructors bring their culture and empathy to their teaching.
4. Foreign-born TESOL instructors are powerful role models for adult English learners.
5. Through storytelling, instructors and learners share their common experiences and build a sense of belonging in the new culture and community.

### Civic Literacy

Literacy refers to the ability to read, write, and speak English proficiently to communicate, make decisions, and solve problems in everyday life such as in the family and the workplace (Wilson, 2002). On top of this, civic literacy includes having the knowledge to take informed action and become involved as an active citizen (Morgan, 2016). According to Wilson (2002, p. 4), four broad areas of responsibilities need to be performed in order to participate in the myriad of civic literacy related tasks. They are: (a) becoming and staying informed, (b) forming and expressing opinions and ideas, (c) working together, and (d) taking action to strengthen communities. Civic literacy development does not happen in a vacuum; it must be developed through a process, practice, and the employment of four basic literacy skills—communication skills, decision making skills, interpersonal skills, and lifelong learning skills (Morgan, 2016; Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009). Especially, without interpersonal communication skills, adult immigrant ESL learners cannot express themselves “both vertically to community and world leaders, and horizontally, with fellow community members” (Brammer, Dumlao, Falk, Hollander, & Knutson, 2012, p. 20). In other words, we believe that developing civic literacy skills equips adult ESL learners with the means to navigate the challenges of citizenship and exercise their rights and obligations in multiple levels of the community.

### Communication Infrastructure Theory

Communication infrastructure theory (CIT) offers a unique perspective on literacy and civic engagement in urban areas.

It emphasizes that a community with high-level of civic engagement is a community with a well-integrated network of interpersonal communication opportunities, for example, talking with the neighbors, chatting online, or exchanging emails (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Wilkin, Moran, Ball-Rokeach, Gonzalez & Kim, 2010). Distinct from other frameworks, though, CIT refers to interpersonal communication as *storytelling*, which is the process by which members of a community exchange information, express their feelings, and discuss issues in the community, be it oral or written, positive or negative, and synchronous or asynchronous (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). According to Brammer et al. (2012), listening and negotiation skills are crucial to effective communication. More importantly, the communication action context, the space that facilitates a strong storytelling network with positive and active communication, cannot be discounted; the context can make it either harder or easier to have a strong storytelling network (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006).

### RELEVANT LITERATURE

#### ESL Community-based Instruction

Morgan (2002) reported that community programs identify and offer social and language services to “benefit a particular demographic group and sometimes these agencies are organized around categories of identity—a particular ethnicity, race, gender, or age—or their combination” (p. 146). Morgan further explained that “where there is a common language, bilingual classes are usually offered for basic levels students...at higher levels, L1 use and home and community literacy practices are often incorporated into ESL lessons” (Morgan, 2002, p. 146). Likewise, De Costa (2010) chronicled a group of Hmong students' linguistic development while enrolled in a community ESL program. De Costa argued that meaningful instruction happens when the personal experiences of the learners are valued in the classroom. Another study by Goodkind (2005) concluded that community-based advocacy and learning for Hmong refugees validate how unique attributes in the Hmong culture, such as its collective orientation, are critical to success.

More recently, Chao and Mantero (2014) examined how Latino and Asian immigrant parents' English learning through two church-based ESL programs affected their family literacy and home language practices. They reported that ESL classes offered through these community-based programs empowered these adult immigrant learners to enrich family literacy and participation in their communities. They argued, parents' participation in the programs promoted ESL acquisition and funds of knowledge, which in turn advanced their family literacy. Specifically, Chao and Mantero (2014) reported that the programs encouraged the adults to reclaim their home language and support children's home language development.

Similarly, Chao and Kuntz (2013) explained that community-based programs provide learners with the space for building agency and for creating/reaffirming their identities in the new language and community. Perhaps the biggest draw of community-based programs is their pragmatic

approach to learning: “One of the reasons for the growing interest in community-based learning stems from the fact that students want to apply what they are learning” (López, 2014, p. 72). These programs support adult learners in their journeys adapting to the new community and focus on establishing connections to the adults’ learning needs so they can successfully function, live, and work in their host communities.

### Non-native English-speaking TESOL Instructors

Non-native English-speaking TESOL instructors face a multitude of challenges inside and outside the language classroom. Of all, though, the teachers struggle to overcome the challenges followed by simply having learned English as an additional language, which is referred to as the native speaker fallacy (Canagarajah, 1999). The literature reports that often, these instructors face employment discrimination, lack of credibility in the workplace, discrimination with accents, and lack of experience in the target culture (Kelch & Santana-Williamson, 2002; Lazaraton, 2003; Thomas, 1999). In fact, according to Medgyes (2001), their extra effort to assert themselves and the dissonance stemming from the double cultural and linguistic identity aggregate these challenges. Universities and influential associations like TESOL International have responded to the issues by creating a professional environment for non-native English-speaking instructors (Maum, 2002). Nevertheless, they are still facing different challenges to this day.

Medgyes (2001) examined the perceived differences in teaching behaviors between the non-native and native teachers and reported that non-native teachers are perceived as more empathetic, committed, and insightful. Students reported that the non-native teachers are more attentive to accurate forms of the language, explaining the nuances more in-depth. Medgyes asserts that since their acquisition process was largely conscious and reflective, they are ideal learner models by implementing a rich list of language learning strategies in their teaching.

Likewise, Chun (2014) discovered that the non-native instructors are more accurate and competent at teaching grammar and writing, preparing the students to be good with passing their tests. When compared with the native teachers, students reported non-native teachers being better at teaching listening skills as they acknowledge the difficulty in acquiring a high level of listening skills. Furthermore, within the affective domain of language proficiency, the students added that non-native teachers help reduce their fears of talking to native speakers outside the classroom. Informed as such the benefits and strengths, the present article aims to add to the body of literature focusing on the powerful contributions of foreign-born TESOL instructors to the education and language-culture acquisition of adult immigrant English learners.

### THE STUDY

This qualitative case study took place in Central Texas and documented the implementation of a pen pal project

between 6 TESOL instructors and 14 adult ESL learners attending a community-based English literacy program. A “case study is defined by interest in individual cases...It draws attention to the question of what specifically can be learned from the single case” (Stake, 1994, p. 236). The focus of this article is on the TESOL instructors and the effect they had on the ESL learners participating in the pen pal project. The instructors were originally from Iraq, Egypt, Babylon, Israel, and Mexico (see Table 1). The names throughout the article are all pseudonyms.

The instructors were recruited from a public university as they were enrolled in an adult education master’s program. They were invited to participate as volunteers to exchange letters with adult English learners from a local ESL literacy program. As illustrated in Table 1, the instructors had some experience teaching English abroad and in the United States. An ESL teacher working at a local ESL literacy program invited her students to participate in the pen pal project. Thus, 14 adult English learners in her class volunteered to participate. They were Mexican immigrants aged 25 to 56, attending the same ESL course (intermediate English). Due to the ESL learners’ low level of computer literacy skills, all the participants in the project wrote their letters by hand. The researchers delivered the letters in person each week. The letters were sent in individual envelopes, and this allowed for the pen pal partners to personalize them. Delivering the letters in person was helpful for data collection purposes to keep track of the participants’ correspondence and to make photocopies of the letters.

### Data Collection

Data came from 159 pen pal letters and individual conversational interviews with the TESOL instructors. Study participants wrote letters back and forth for a period of ten weeks. The letters were photocopied, and an actual folder was assigned to each pair of pen pal participants to be able to monitor the progression of the communication. Since the number of ESL learners was larger than TESOL instructors, they each had at least two pen pal partners.

**Table 1.** TESOL instructors’ backgrounds

Name	Origin	Sex	Age	Teaching Experience
Ghanim	Iraq	Male	27	Taught English in Iraq for 3 years and ESL in Texas for a year
Akila	Egypt	Male	33	Taught English in Egypt for 4 years
Saabir	Babylon	Male	36	Taught English for 4 years in Iraq and ESL for a year in Texas
Nava	Israel	Female	25	Taught English in Israel for 3 years and ESL in Texas for 2 years
Gabriela	Mexico	Female	26	Taught ESL for 3 years in Texas
Danilo	Mexico	Male	27	Taught ESL for 2 years in Texas

Individual interviews served as another data collection source. The interviews took the form of a conversation (Patton, 2015). The TESOL instructors participated in a 45-minute face-to-face interview describing their background as language instructors, their teaching experiences, and their perceptions of adult language learners as they got to know them through the letter exchange project.

### Data Analysis

The first step was to compile and prepare the data for analysis. The interviews were transcribed using gisted transcription (Dempster & Woods, 2011); repetitive sentences were deleted, overlapping information was put together, and punctuation was added to preserve meaning. The essence of the messages and stories told by the participants were left intact. Next, we implemented the three stages of data analysis suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998): Open coding, axial coding, selective coding.

For open coding, we chunked data into small units, highlighted them using different colors (color coded them), and attached a descriptor (a code) to each of the units for easy recognition of patterns. For axial coding, we counted the codes and grouped them into categories. For selective coding, we identified themes that expressed the content of each of the groups. Therefore, inductive analysis (Patton, 2002, p. 41) or “immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships” assisted in analyzing the content of the letters and interviews. Inductive analysis was helpful to come up with patterns, categories, and themes without presupposing in advance what the emergent themes would be.

In addition, to conduct deductive analysis (Patton, 2002), a second round of analysis was performed to verify the identified categories and themes against the study framework. We built a matrix to establish connections between the theoretical framework components and the categories that emerged from the data during the first round of analysis. The

purpose was to interpret the data and bring it all together as a cohesive narrative (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). This systematic examination of the content of the letters and the interview transcripts allowed for meaningful themes to emerge (Creswell, 2007).

Regarding the ESL learner’s letters, an analysis of the errors and the frequency of the errors they made in the letters they wrote, coupled with an assessment of their linguistic gains, served as relevant processes to describe their progress learning English. A complementary study by Larrotta (2018) describes in detail the linguistic and educational gains of the ESL learners as a result of their participation in this pen pal project. For the present article and for the benefit of the reader, Table 2, adapted from Larrotta (2018), illustrates the findings examining the ESL learners’ communicative competence.

### STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The TESOL instructors had a strong sense of cultural heritage. Three of them, Nava, Gabriela, and Danilo, were raised in the United States, attended school here, and constantly traveled to their countries of origin. The other three instructors, Ghanim, Akila, and Saabir, worked as interpreters for the U.S. Government, immigrated through a specific visa program, and were in the process of obtaining citizenship. Study findings are presented through four emergent themes: (1) teachers as cultural informants, (2) emotional connection, (3) life and learning advice, and (4) adult ESL learners’ linguistic competence.

#### Teachers as Cultural Informants

In their letters, the instructors alluded to cultural topics and wrote about songs, sayings, places, holidays, and food from different countries. They discussed the values and meaning of traditions and holidays going beyond describing the holiday and focusing on what it meant to them. In cases when

**Table 2.** ESL learners’ communicative competence

<b>Organizational competence</b> <i>Examines grammatical competence and textual competence</i>	<b>Pragmatic competence</b> <i>Looks at illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence</i>
Practiced asking and answering questions	Used appropriate register to address their pen pal partner and tell stories
Asked different types of questions (e.g., scenario questions, yes/no questions, open-ended questions, personal questions, information questions, cultural knowledge questions)	Became aware of the level of in/formality and appropriateness of the messages
Copied correct sentences and language structures from their pen pal partners	Gave advice on life-related topics
Wrote longer letters each time	Increased confidence writing in ESL as evidenced in the increase length of the letters they wrote throughout the 10 weeks
Decreased the use of run-on sentences	Practiced using different greetings and closing the letters using a variety of expressions
Made fewer mistakes conjugating verbs each time	Wrote in English for authentic communication purposes
Used auxiliary verbs correctly more often	Gained knowledge of different cultures, food, and religion
Used prepositions in their writing	Increased affective learning as expressed in the letters they wrote
Wrote correct language structures	Engaged in problem-solving responding to the letters and the questions asked by their pen pal partners
Engaged in storytelling (e.g., beginning, middle, end of a story)	Missed fewer classes as reported in the class attendance record
Practiced the writing process weekly (e.g., drafting, revising, editing, and sharing)	
Negotiated meaning in writing	

the instructors' traditions were different from the American traditions, they were still able to explain these traditions to the learners and what they liked to do in America. Here is what Ghanim wrote to his student Esther:

Halloween means something different, for everyone. But compared to the pagan ways it was, historically, celebrated, we don't celebrate but we embrace it, or rather accept our version of it. For most children, it's a day for free candy, which only comes once a year. There is no Halloween in my culture, but I like the costumes and one day I will be part of that event... I like the thanksgiving holiday better; I believe this is my favorite holiday. The turkey roasting in the oven, sweet potatoes, pumpkin pie, turnip greens, homemade rolls, deviled eggs and pickled beets, turkey stuffing with all the herbs and onions and celery. the combination of all those smells and flavors make your brain go on a frenzy.

As illustrated in their letters, the instructors' writing was authentic and spontaneous. Their messages for the ESL students were clear and descriptive. Nava and Ghanim elaborated in their letters:

There is so much I love about Texas. I like the warm weather and it doesn't snow. I also like that there is so much Texas pride! Celebrating Thanksgiving is a favorite- it is a holiday that we don't have in Israel, but now that I live here, I celebrate it. My favorite part is eating the turkey- yummy! (Nava's letter to Laura)

I do not celebrate Christmas. It's not part of my religion. But I love to join my friends Christmas parties. My religion taught me to respect other people's religion/holidays and there's nothing wrong with joining in festivities. People are supposed to love and enjoy with each other, not hate. (Ghanim's letter to Lorena)

The instructors explained it was normal to miss the home country, family, and everyday life. They also gave hope to the learners that they would find a home in the new country by embracing opportunities for a better quality of life. Danilo and Akila wrote:

I understand about missing family and friends, the parties and holidays. I used to go with my parents and sister to visit my grandma for the holidays. My cousins, aunts, and uncles used to have an amazing time together by playing games, eating, and talking... I miss Mexico and the food. I used to go out to eat every weekend with my parents and friends... I wish I could visit soon, share some great Mexican cuisine with my family and friends. Nevertheless, I enjoy living in USA. I have continued my education and that's what I like the most about living here. (Danilo's letter to Edna)

I came from Egypt directly to Austin. I like it here very much. When I first arrived it was difficult, but now it is all good. Woohoo!!! You too will adapt and create a good life very soon. Just keep studying hard and practice speaking and writing English so you can have many opportunities. I learned English in college when I was in Egypt, then I came to the U.S. to obtain my master's. My English got polished here. (Akila's letter to Estefanee)

### Emotional Connection

The instructors showed a natural empathy for the learners' immigration stories and their journeys learning language-culture. It was evident that their emotional connection in the storytelling fostered learner growth within the learners' network of personal settings, as well as a sense of belonging in the United States and their individual communities. The instructors empathized with the learners in explaining that the English language has challenges and may be difficult to learn. They also found commonalities with learners' cultures. The instructors described their own adaption experiences in the U.S. to acknowledge their longing for places and people in their home countries. Danilo and Saabir wrote the following:

Learning another language is hard. I have witnessed it with both of my parents. They are in their mid 50s and they are still trying to learn English. They try hard and practice any time they can, but sometimes they have errands to run and are busy or overwhelmed... I am patient with them and keep encouraging their efforts to learn the language. I remember when I started learning English, it was always hard for me to follow all the rules when it comes to writing. I had issues with my grammar and spelling, but I always tried my best to write coherent sentences. Practice is very important; we must find the time to practice reading and writing to be able to improve. (Danilo's letter to Ramona)

I agree with your message from last week, yes, using adjectives before nouns in English does not seem natural. Arabic is like Spanish in that sense...we use adjectives after nouns... It can be confusing and make it hard to learn English. I am aware that I am an advanced language user; however, I still watch TV with close caption. I think it is a good way to improve your English. By the way, do not over worry about your letters, they are clear and understandable. Tell me more about what is similar and different in English and Spanish please. (Saabir's letter to Martha)

The TESOL instructors cultivated a sense of belonging by exchanging stories that displayed emotional support and confidence in each learners' skills and abilities. The instructors promoted the concept of Self-knowledge to be able to gain understanding and show respect for the Other. They were intentional in their letters to try to establish a strong rapport with the learners and shared personal stories:

It is wonderful that you are from Russia. I met a lot of Russians when I was in Egypt, they are very nice people. Tell me more about Russia please. It is great that you are learning English, and very soon you will be able to read in English and speak more fluently. (Akila's letter to Elena)

I learned to drive when I was 15 years old. I was living in Austin at the time and went to a driving school to learn how to drive. It was very scary at first but I'm glad I have a driver license and now that I've been driving for many years, I like it. Tell me about your own experience please. (Nava's letter to Laura)

To answer your question, what I liked about San Diego was the sea and the beach. The weather was amazing!

Yes, I agree that raising children is a hard task, but it is interesting that you see them grow up and become their own people. Despite difficulties one enjoys having children and family around. What is hard about raising children? (Saabir's letter to Martha)

I miss Egypt because my wife is still there ... She is six months pregnant and I wish I could be there to support her and for my son's birth. My long-term plans include becoming a U.S. citizen and bringing them to live with me. I go to visit every three months for a couple of weeks to see her... I don't like the situation in Egypt now. There is so much corruption from the government. I get sad when I watch the news and when I go to visit my family, I become even sadder, but I keep telling myself it will be fine soon ☺. Tell me about your country and what you miss the most please. It is okay to have mixed feelings about living here when we have relatives and a life history in our home countries. (Akila's letter to Ana)

Moreover, the instructors provided new conversation topics, shared new stories, and elicited new stories from the ESL learners to keep the written conversation going. They were aware of their role as language/literacy instructors and the effort they must put into helping the learners to keep participating and learning.

### Life and Learning Advice

Instructors and learners exchanged advice related to good learning habits and life lessons in general. The instructors were able to motivate the learners to continue their learning journeys for growth and development. They encouraged the learners not to give up learning English. For instance, Saabir and Nava wrote:

Read a lot, read newspapers, magazines, books. Also, read out loud so you can listen to yourself. I will help you improve your pronunciation. Watch TV and listen to pronunciation it helps you learn. All of it helped me learn English. It is always good to continue studying, it helps to develop our skills and the new learning gives us a new understanding of the world around us. (Saabir's letter to Martha)

Building relationships is a very important motivator for our learning. I hope this was a good motivator for you as it was for me. Through the letters I got to know you and we shared about our preoccupations and successes. (Nava's letter to Laura)

The TESOL instructors also shared their views of life in general to encourage learning and growth. They acknowledged the challenges the learners were going through and spoke to them about perseverance.

I agree with your comment about life dreams and goals. I always try to think of the next thing I want in life to keep things fun, interesting, and challenging. Although I believe in setting goals and thinking about the future, I believe it is equally important to live in the moment and appreciate what we have now. (Nava's letter to Flor)

Keep practicing even when you are not in class. During the day you can set a time to only think and speak in

English. I think reading and listening is great practice. When you don't know a word, look it up and pronounce it. (Gabiella's letter to Linet)

The instructors modeled self-reflection and problem-solving strategies to inspire the learners to have a vision and move forward with adapting to their new life and learning the language-culture of their new community in order to be able to successfully participate in it.

To read what someone else wrote for you and be able to understand all the words, sentences, and grammar is what takes you through a solid learning path. Remember that practice is what matters the most. Try to always practice your English at home or even when you are outside. Stepping out of your comfort zone will always push you to do better in English. Always be proud of your progress and know that every little step count towards your goal of learning the language... A useful strategy to improve your writing skills and vocabulary knowledge, have an English-Spanish dictionary around or a translator. Every time you see a word you do not know, look it up. Try to understand the meaning. Practice how you can use it when you do your own writing. This helped me a lot when I was learning English, so I'm sure it will come up handy when you do some writing in and out of the classroom. (Danilo's letter to Ramona)

The instructors helped the learners develop English literacy and meaningful interpersonal communication skills helpful in preparing them for civic literacy participation. Receiving a letter in an envelope each week was something that both instructors and learners felt excited about.

### Adult ESL Learners' Communicative Competence

Table 2, illustrates the findings from examining the letters written by the ESL learners regarding their progress in terms of communicative competence:

Study findings revealed that the learners participating in the ESL pen pal project had the opportunity to use language for authentic communication purposes. They mainly practiced reading and writing skills.

### Discussion

The previous section presented the study findings through four emergent themes: (1) teachers as cultural informants, (2) emotional connection, (3) life and learning advice, and (4) adult ESL learners' linguistic competence. In the current section, we discuss these findings and make a few relevant connections to the literature.

First, regarding teachers as cultural informants, the instructors created a safe emotional environment where diverse cultures were welcomed and included. Not sharing the same cultural traditions did not mean rejecting them but learning about them and, at times, embracing new traditions. The instructors were aware that understanding culture can give access to the fabric of community life (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006) and engages the individual as members of a community. Through storytelling, they explicitly communicated to the learners that to become a member of the new

community, they must appreciate and value what the new culture and community have to offer. They promoted respect and appreciation for the diverse values, beliefs, cultures, and history to counteract prejudice and stereotypes (Wilson, 2002), especially in a multicultural community –the adult ESL classroom.

Second, in relation to emotional connection, the instructors openly shared their immigration journeys, life stories, learning challenges, and advice with the learners. They helped build a sense of group membership by pursuing common interests. In addition, they invited the students to dream of what they and their community could become. Through reflecting on their emotions together, they were reminded of their dream, goals, and vision in the United States, which embodied their hope for the happiness of their family by adopting new holidays and traditions, fostering respect of diversity, and feeling as valuable members by bringing their own culture with them. Furthermore, the TESOL instructors cultivated a sense of belonging by exchanging stories that displayed emotional support and confidence in the learners' skills and abilities. This sense of belonging increased the likelihood of direct and indirect civic participation, as explained by Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006).

Third, concerning life and learning advice, the instructors used self-reflection and building inclusiveness as keys to performing effective civic engagement (Wilson, 2002). They understood the struggles related to ESL learning and gave helpful advice in improving English skills based on their experiences as immigrants and learners. "At the heart of education for civic engagement is the notion of the self in an ongoing relationship with others" (Musil, 2009, p. 61). The instructors emphasized on the need to know the Self to be able to embrace the Other. By finding commonalities, the TESOL instructors were pursuing *dynamic connectedness* with the learners and actively built an integrated storytelling network (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). They went beyond evident commonalities to find a deep personal connection with the learners. The TESOL instructors were able to take off some burden of storytelling from the learners by identifying new possible stories to be shared. The learners, otherwise, would have been disengaged from pen pal writing.

Fourth, pertaining to the ESL learners' linguistic competence was observed in terms of *organizational competence* (e.g., grammatical and textual competence) and *pragmatic competence* (e.g., sociolinguistic competence). Table 2 provided a detailed description of how the ESL learners benefited from participating in the project. They utilized the letter-writing opportunity to improve their linguistic competence and, as a result, developed interpersonal communication competence, which is crucial to navigating citizenship (Shah et al., 2009). For example, the instructors asked questions to help the ESL learners reflect and problem-solve utilizing real-life examples of actual experiences they had as learners and as immigrants.

The ESL learners utilized paper and pen to engage in storytelling. The letter writing process required them to read carefully, negotiate or deepen their understanding by asking appropriate questions, and share their stories considering the flow of conversation and choice of words. Writing and

receiving letters, the learners exchanged stories, established rapport, and practiced their interpersonal communication skills, which, all in all, help them build a sense of belonging in the new community and become an active citizen. Similar to the findings reported by Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006), the letters from the project illustrated that the more engaged the community members are through storytelling, the more connected they are to a network that facilitates civic literacy participation.

## CONCLUSION

Regarding the question of how foreign-born TESOL instructors support adult immigrant learners develop literacy through a pen pal project, it became evident that the instructors were able to connect with the ESL learners at a deep level due to their shared experiences as immigrants. They conveyed to the learners the value of knowing how to read, interpret, and use the written word for self-expression and active participation. They acted as independent agents building a community, initiating, and sustaining the written conversations that allowed the learners to imagine a viable membership to the U.S. community. The instructors encouraged the learners to voice their ideas, develop confidence, and engage in continuous self-reflection, which are crucial elements for civic literacy participation. Through the pen pal project, the instructors helped bring coherence and integration to the learners' identities, English literacy, and interpersonal communication skills. The instructors behaved as cultural informants, provided life and learning advice, and the opportunity to practice English in writing for authentic communication. It is evident in the letter excerpts shared in this article that the instructors promoted respect and appreciation for different cultures and lifestyles, as well as encouraged the learners to move forward, set goals, be resilient, and be persistent.

Considering the question of what components of the pen pal project promote the development of civic literacy skills, the letter exchange itself was the catalyst for this to happen. In light of communication infrastructure theory, a community with a well-integrated network of interpersonal communication opportunities, such as dialogue, texting, and exchanging ideas in writing, has the potential to promote civic engagement. Taking responsibility for their learning, developing ownership of place and culture, and finding voice were important realizations for the learners and crucial requirements for civic literacy to participate in the different facets of community engagement. Similarly, engaging in storytelling, the instructors facilitated the larger process of communicative socialization useful for civic literacy participation. Instructors and learners engaged in sharing immigration stories, telling about their experiences learning English, describing struggles to adapt to U.S. culture, and explaining the importance of embracing the new culture and community. The instructors also encouraged students to develop a personal voice by reflecting on their sense of self, values, and goals in relation to the larger community. This took place through conveying ideas in writing, developing interpersonal communication skills, negotiating meaning, and engaging in the writing process.

## Limitations

Our project is not without limitations. First, even though the project gave the ESL learners the opportunity to read and write in English, other literacy skills such as speaking were neglected in the process. They had the opportunity to communicate, make decisions, and solve problems but only using the written words. Second, the article focuses on the instructors and their points of view, and some readers would see this as a limitation. However, it is noteworthy that the authors have already published two articles focusing on the learners, and the gap in the literature calls for attention on understanding the role of foreign-born TESOL instructors in writing projects with adult ESL learners. Lastly, while the project provided space for reflection and problem solving, some readers may consider the project lacking a civic literacy component since the students were not directly involved in solving a civic issue they were facing in their community. Civic literacy, however, includes having the knowledge and appropriate skills to take informed action and become involved as an active citizen. We conceptualized that with the development of English literacy and interpersonal communication skills, the learners are readily equipped to make civic participation. Nonetheless, the development of civic literacy may have been more salient had we explicitly address and discussed an immediate issue they were facing in their community.

## Application

It is crucial that TESOL instructors broaden their definition of civic literacy to develop relevant skills within the constraints of the language/literacy classroom. For instance, they should focus on helping the learners develop interpersonal communication competence, self-esteem, and skills to navigate citizenship. Civic literacy is not just about activism; the ESL literacy classroom can offer tools for adults to become competent participants in the community (e.g., self-expression, effective communication, problem-solving) so they can use these tools outside the classroom, at their own capacity and will, and within their own ability for community leadership. The pen pal project described here has potential for implementation in different learning settings and with language learners at different levels of language proficiency and ages. The instructor can shape the project and implement it to cater to the needs of the learners and the teaching situation.

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