Learning English as an Adult:
A Narrative of Women’s Improvised and Empowered Lives

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Abstract

This thesis is a narrative inquiry of learning English as an adult. It stories the journey of 7 women, including me, and unravels lived experiences that serve as learning models.

Learning English as an adult presents challenges and results in lifelong implications both in personal and professional life. Every learner's experience is unique and, when reflected upon, each experience is a valuable source of knowledge for constructing meanings and forging new identities. The stories are testimony to the participants' lives: interrupted yet improvised, silenced yet roused, dependent yet independent, intimidated yet courageous, vulnerable yet empowered. The personal experiences elucidate the passion, the inner voices, the dreams, and the rewards that compel persistence in learning a new language and relearning new social roles. The stories provide encouragement and hope to other women who are learning or will learn English in their adult years, and the lived experiences will offer insights for English language teachers.

This thesis employs the phenomenology methodology of research with heuristic (discovery) and hermeneutical (interpretative) approaches using the reflective-responsive-reflexive writing and interviewing methods for data gathering and unravelling. The narrative inquiry approach reaffirms that storytelling is an important tool in conducting research and constructing new knowledge. This thesis narrates a new story about sharing experiences, interconnecting, and continuing to learn.
Acknowledgments

This thesis is a collective work. Family, friends, and mentors have helped enrich and strengthen this personal narrative. My research interconnected me with Arminé, Lea Na, Kaori, Nora, Pat, and Vera, whose life experiences have enlightened my knowing and assisted me in composing an intertwined story—my thesis.

I extend a heartfelt thank-you to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Milree Latimer, who was truly present and attentive. With clear directions, she kept me focused, and with subtle suggestions, she illuminated my narrative inquiry. Her gentle, yet firm guidance taught me, in turn, to become a compassionate teacher.

I sincerely thank my committee members, Dr. Sharon Abbey and Dr. Alice Schutz. Their literary knowledge enlightened my learning journey, and their intuitive instructions challenged my thinking and refined my writing.

Dr. Gail Lindsay, my external examiner, honoured me with her presence and inspired me to expand my knowing in narrative inquiry. I thank her with gratitude.

I am indebted to Dr. Carmen Shields who introduced me to new challenges.

I am always thankful for my husband’s supportive assistance in all stages of my life. He is my confidant, my soul mate, and my best critic. I apologize, dear, if I pushed your empirical and quantitative research mindset to its limit.

My children, Ani and Matt, are my inspiration. I am grateful for their patience and appreciative for their understanding of having an unordinary mother. Thank you, Ani, for your meticulous editing skills. Thank you, Matt, for keeping me hip and young.

I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Nouritsa Panossian, who was a great storyteller and inspired me to tell my own story.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Living and learning are everywhere.

– Mary Catherine Bateson, 1994, p. 9

The Phenomenon

This is a narrative about learning English. It is about learning and adapting, learning and improvising, learning and finding voice, learning and changing, living and learning.

This thesis stories the essence of the phenomenon of learning English as an adult. It narrates the experiences of 7 women, including myself. For us, learning a new language presented challenges and resulted in lifelong implications. Our experiences are unique and, when reflected upon, each is a valuable source of knowledge that we use in constructing new meanings and paving new learning paths. Lived stories serve as learning models; hence, they are worthwhile to capture, document, and unravel.

Where Do I Begin?

Women's lives are joined together with stories and everyday experiences. As social beings, we exchange stories at every interaction. We tell each other what we did, what we intend to do, and in turn we expect similar response from our audience. Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) observes: “Our species ... learns through stories” (p. 9). It is in our nature to exchange experiences because that is how we accumulate knowledge (Bateson, 1989). Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000) explain that learning and experiencing are inextricably intertwined: “People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others” (p. xxvi). Accordingly, stories revisited, stories reconstructed, and stories interpreted form the basis of my thesis.
Learning English has been a long and arduous but exhilarating journey for me. Along the way, I have met others whose lives paralleled mine, and thus I was intrigued by their experiences. Fascination for women's stories of learning provided the incentive to begin my research. My interest concentrated on the motivations of learning and what sustained these compelling forces. I was curious to understand why some of us have a need to learn English that goes beyond mere functional necessity.

I grounded my inquiry within adult learning models such as learning for empowerment (Fetterman, 2001), need of lifelong learning (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant, & Yates, 2003), self-directed learning (Merriam, 2001), and narrative learning (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000). My field data supported new models such as persistence in learning, learning through interruptions, and learning from silences. My epistemology, nurtured by feminist theory, guided me to respect individual differences of women (Hayes & Flannery, 2000), to seek multiple truths (Richardson, 1990, 1994), to be attentive to the dignity of both genders (Thompson, 2001; Weedon, 1991), to struggle against all oppressions while refusing to compromise (Abbey, 1999), to conduct research with my heart, mind, and soul (Nielsen, 1998), and to promote the empowerment of women through education (Tisdell, 1998).

We Have a Different Story to Tell

Literature about women learning a new language as adults is not abundant. Books and articles that I came across discussed language learning from a sociolinguistic perspective, within an exploratory qualitative research framework and/or a feminist theory approach (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, & Tarule, 1986; Cranton, 2000; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Heilbrun, 1988; Kramsch, 1998; McKay & Hornberger, 1996; Merriam & Caffarella 1999). I must admit that these materials were extremely useful in
establishing my own research approach and theoretical frameworks—narrative phenomenology based on theoretical perspectives of adult learning and feminism.

Compilations of women’s stories that I read addressed a variety of issues, but none of these included a story of a middle-aged woman learning English as her second language (Bateson, 1989; Hannah, Paul, & Vethamany-Globus, 2002; hooks, 1994; Mukherjee, 1993; Neilsen, 1998; Sharkey, 2004; Shields & Anderson, 2001). My thesis fills this gap in the academic literature.

My research is unique in its approach—it unravels the challenges and implications of learning English from within personal stories. I employ narrative phenomenology to collect as well as to unravel field data. I use different writing styles to discover meanings and at the same time to construct interpretations. My research reveals personal stories of learning that otherwise were forgotten or perhaps considered unimportant or insignificant.

Kathleen Weiler (1988) suggests: “Feminist scholarship, by revealing the everyday lives of women, opens up the other half of social reality which has been ignored in studies of public life” (p. 62). I do not claim that my study speaks for all women, but what I offer are the voices of 7 mature women who model lifelong learning, self-directedness, persistence, independence, courage, and empowerment. I believe that moving one small piece at a time can relocate a mountain.

New Voices on Stage

This study reaffirms that past events guide present actions (Bateson, 1994; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). It also substantiates assumptions that adult women often are independent learners, have passion for learning, and guide their paths according to their personal needs and ambitions (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Merriam, 2001; Mezirow, 1991). The voices of 7 women add new learning characteristics to the
knowledge bank of adult education. My participants and I, motivated by our desires to learn, dreams to fulfill, and inner voices to follow, persist and learn even when we are under tremendous stress, contrary to the assumption that adults do not learn when overstimulated and under time constraints (MacKeracher, 1996). We improvise and persist through everyday life interruptions. We persist because we have courage.

This thesis introduces women whose life achievements may encourage other women to strive to reach their goals instead of giving up their dreams. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (1993) encourage women to “unmake the web of oppression and reweave the web of life” (p. 4). Lorri Neilsen (1998) suggests that women’s work is “to continually make explicit all the silences, the voices, the differences, and the shared assumptions” (p. 272). My participants’ and my voices contribute to the “participatory and collective” knowledge—a knowledge that may guide our readers and ourselves through life’s discontinuities and challenges (Hurtado, 1996, p. 386).

This research also offers insights into effective teaching of mature female students for whom English is a second language (Sauvé, 2000). It provides new knowledge which professors and teachers in training at Brock University may take into consideration when designing their curricula. It may aid instructors in developing a more sensitive approach that avoids discriminating against the adult learner. At the same time, this study may caution teachers not to become sensitized towards linguistic deficiencies of the learners but rather assist them in their efforts to achieve higher levels of English language proficiency.

Furthermore, this thesis demonstrates that the narrative methodology of inquiry and the heuristic method of writing offer alternate ways of conducting research. Whereas some in the traditional research community still doubt the validity of narrative inquiry
because of its subjective as opposed to objective nature, I embrace the rich body of knowledge within personal experiences. My stories intersect with those of my participants, and together we express ourselves in a variety of styles: we journal, we draw, we paint, we act, we teach, we garden, we tell stories. Neilsen (1998) reminds me that, as researchers, “we are better equipped to communicate our experience when we see the inquiry process as a relationship, not only among people or participants, but with our unarticulated selves” (p. 183). Through narrative, I am able to give voice to the silences and the forgotten stories. I am able to extract meanings from the untold stories.

While working towards the completion of my Master of Education program at Brock University, I learned a great deal about the sustaining force of motivations in adult education. But it was not until the very last course that I realized that my persistence to learn was not only for myself but also for my children, Ani and Matt. The following is a recollected story that reveals one of my learning characteristics:

In The Reflective Practitioner Course, Dr. Milree Latimer asked us to tear pictures out of the magazines that she had brought to class, to prepare a collage, and then tell the class what it represented. This was an exercise to bring the subconscious forward and to attempt to understand ourselves. I had put together pictures of potted plants with blooms, an embroidered tablecloth, a dairy cow, a picture of a baby in a beautiful wood frame, and a platter of cheeses. I had cut the pictures out of the magazines randomly without thinking beyond satisfying my colour palette. Just before it was my turn to speak, I saw a caring mother protrude from my assemblage of colours and form. Almost all classmates had revealed their characteristics as teachers: I introduced myself as a mothering person. I said: I am
a mother at home, a mother at work, a mother always. (personal story: The Collage)

This experience demonstrates the insight I gained from critical reflection on things that surround me and that are usually taken for granted (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). I am now more certain that I took child developmental courses in psychology and education to assist my children fulfill their learning needs. I also understand my need to nurture a nursery at home with flowerpots and houseplants that I grow from small cuttings. I understand why at work I maintain the department’s records in an organized manner, even though that responsibility is not part of my job description. And more important, I understand why I continue to learn—I want to nurture my students’, my family’s, and my needs with greater care and insight.

The above story is testimony that my recollected and reconstructed stories are an effective means of gaining knowledge. Bateson (1994) asserts that past stories must be “unpacked for new layers of meaning. … What was once barely intelligible may be deeply meaningful a second time, and a third” (pp. 30, 31). This research reveals the importance of reliving past events—events that illuminate the past, guide the present, and shape the future.

I Would Have, I Could Have

The obvious limitation of this study is the lack of stories of men learning English. I did not include male participants because I do not have tacit or intuitive knowledge about male perspectives. I did not think that I could interpret their stories accurately and authentically. As a feminist, I believe that women’s voices should be separated from men’s in order to acknowledge the independence of women, their self-sustainability, and
their visibility. I join Virginia Woolf (1929) in asserting that a woman needs "a room of her own" (p. 58).

Moreover, male participants would have changed the dynamic of my group, and I would have had to engage in comparative gender discussions, which would have exceeded the scope of my research at this time.

A further limitation of this study may be its locatedness in context, time, and place. The knowledge gleaned here is subjective, fluid, and hermeneutic. Neilsen (1998) asserts that "stories and the telling of them are always partial, always selective, always open to interrogation. The threads we use to weave the fabric of our stories will always be saturated with ideological hues" (p. 98). My knowing and telling are my own. My knowledge is biased with my beliefs.

I cannot help wondering whether I was able to uncover all there was to uncover from my participants' and my experiences. I am reminded of Laurel Richardson's (1994) observation that "we know more and doubt what we know" (p. 522). I was attentive to Magda Gere Lewis's (1993) suggestion, but was I successful hearing "both the voices and the silence"? (p. 41). Did I interpret accurately what Arminé, Kaori, Lea Na, Nora, Pat, Vera, and I revealed as well as what we concealed?

**Previewing the Chapters**

This thesis is my narrative inquiry into learning English as an adult. I heuristically unravel my participants' and my stories and hermeneutically reconstruct their meanings.

I use italics to distinguish my participants’ and my personal stories from the balance of my thesis (see List of Personal Stories). For further emphasis, my participants' voices also are in italics.
I insert epigraphs at the beginning of the chapters and sections to introduce my underlying thoughts. I also end the chapters with afterthoughts that reveal further reflections, realizations, observations, or inquiries.

Chapter Two, Positionalities—Theoretical and Personal Perspectives, reviews the literature that influences my thoughts and guides my research. It stories the literature I consulted while introducing the authors who afforded me a clear understanding of theories and helped me develop new perspectives. I discuss how I serendipitously was introduced to the notion of storying, how language and culture are an inseparable pair, why I am a feminist, how adult learning theories frame my inquiry, and how the English language has become an empowering tool and a passage to higher education. I introduce my metaphor for learning as the children’s playground and the pathway that leads to the playground as the English language.

Chapter Three, My Friends and I in the Intellectual Playground, unravels my field data. It stories my participants’ and my personal experiences of crafting new lives while learning English and continuing our education. I discuss the motivated and self-directed learners within the Told Stories section and the persistent and the independent learner as part of the Untold Stories. I recognize interruptions as moments of learning and redirecting our lives. I observe that we are creative and use strategies such as time efficiency, improvisation, adaptation, and flexibility to pursue lifelong learning. Both independently and collectively, we work towards development and empowerment in order to carve our lives in a society where education offers independence and strength. I end the chapter with an afterthought that clarifies my thinking about the importance of receiving emotional and financial support from our family members.
Chapter Four, English Language Learning, narrates the linguistic and cultural challenges relevant to learning English as adults. It explains that communicative competence requires not only linguistic skill; it also requires the knowledge of the situated micropolitics of that language. The chapter also explores the use of English as a tool for global communications, a tool adapted to local needs, and a tool for empowerment. Related to this chapter, I include Appendix A that discusses the status of the English language globally and the emerging new Englishes throughout the world. This section is in response to my findings from the international students, Lea Na, Kaori, and Vera, and explains why there is an unrelenting need in the world to learn English. This information is pertinent to the topic of English as a global language but does not flow well with the narrative style of writing; therefore, it is attached as an Appendix. The Afterthought at the end of this chapter illustrates the elitism of higher education and the gravity of global illiteracy among women.

Contrary to the traditional ordering, the data-unravelling chapters precede the Methodology chapter. This mirrors the intuitive flow of narrative phenomenological inquiry: My research guides me and teaches me how to interweave my findings. Repeated cycles of responsive writing are necessary to both uncover and unravel the data; thus, the process of my research is evolving and fluid. For example, I was accommodative when Lea Na had invited her two friends to our scheduled interview, increasing the number of participants beyond what I had proposed. I am now quite thankful to her, as Kaori and Vera enriched my narrative immensely—Chapter Four and Appendix A were born out of that interview. Furthermore, I wrote the methodology section after the data interpretation chapters, and I want my readers to somewhat experience the chronological and organic processes of this thesis. My research resembles the braiding of a colourful string—one
stitch follows the other. Accordingly, I first display my work before you and then demonstrate how I did what I did.

Chapter Five narrates the process of research and thesis writing. I illustrate the use of phenomenology as both research methodology and method, writing and interviewing as my heuristic methods for data collection, and reflective-responsive-reflexive writing and rewriting as my hermeneutic method of unravelling field data. In the Afterthought, I reveal that writing for discovery was the surprising moment in the process of preparing this thesis. Finally, I formally introduce myself to my readers.

The concluding chapter weaves together all previous chapters and brings us back to the intellectual playground, which I hope to frequent even after I no longer exist in a physical form.

This is a narrative of lifelong learning. This is the story of my journey. It is my journey of learning English—a language that frustrated me, excited me, silenced me, and at the same time afforded me my own voice. This is my voice expressed in a language that I began learning as an adult 29 years ago. The English language took me into classrooms, boardrooms, lecture halls, the far corners of libraries, and most important, it introduced me to wonderful people from whom I have learned and continue to learn.

The following poem is a segue to subsequent chapters:
The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

– Mary Oliver, 1992, p. 114
CHAPTER TWO: POSITIONALITIES – THEORETICAL AND PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

'Women's experience', ... like 'consciousness', is an intentional construction, an artefact of the first importance. Experience may also be re-constructed, re-membered, re-articulated.

– Donna Jeanne Haraway, 1991, p. 113

The Landscape of Learning

This is my storied journey into and through academe. It is the narrative of how I crafted my life in the academic discourse where I entered as a mature student in an English for Beginners class and where I now work towards exiting from a Master of Education (M.Ed.) program. I have envisioned this moment of writing a thesis in the English language many times since I came to Canada in late fall of 1976. Many life events such as having children, divorce, remarriage, relocation, job change, and constant family obligations interrupted and delayed my attaining a university education. Finally, the past and the future are intersecting in the present. I must take advantage of these serene times that I am now privileged to have, and tell my story.

This review of the literature is organized around the path of my intellectual growth and travels in the landscape of learning a new language as an adult woman. The text is embedded throughout a narrative that exposes my knowledge (what I know), reveals my epistemology (how I know what I know), and grounds my positionality (subjective knowing and worldview). I begin with the notion of storying as a research method. I travel back in time and observe myself in college classrooms and trace my footsteps into university lecture halls and seminar rooms where I was introduced to new theoretical concepts—many of which I have rejected and a few that I have adopted. In my journey, I
have learned about the language-culture dichotomy, the complexity of theoretical concepts in the social sciences and education, and the lived experiences of the multitasked, mature student. I discuss these concepts with a postmodern feminist theory in mind and locate them within the adult learning framework.

**Storying**

*In my first M.Ed. class, the professor went through the steps of writing a good essay. I felt uneasy thinking that I already knew how to write; after all, I have been writing papers for the last 6 years. My mind wandered, but then, suddenly, I heard her conclude: “Tell me a story.”* (personal story: Tell Me a Story)

These four words have stayed with me since then. Now, when I write anything—even a literature review—I tend to write a story, my story.

I share Nel Noddings’s (1991) belief that not only do stories “contribute both to our knowing and our being known” but also that “stories have the power to direct and change our lives” (pp. 1, 157). For example, when, on the day after I arrived to Canada, my Aunt went to the local community college and registered me for English classes, the subsequent events steered my life towards a new direction and onto a new path. It is this notion of lived stories guiding and redirecting our lives that I explore in my thesis. I believe that my stories and those of my participants learning English as adults help me understand why I tirelessly and against many odds continue my education in order to master the English language.

One of my favorite authors is Mary Catherine Bateson, an anthropologist and an educator, whose book, *Composing a Life*, has illuminated my thinking and influenced my writing style. The stories in this book are about five women who relearn, refocus, improvise, and continue to adapt to new situations. Bateson (1989) says: “Storytelling is
fundamental to the human research for meaning” and that each time we tell a story we invent a new one because

it is impossible to know what [our] memories of the past will be when [we] bring them out again in the future, in some new and changed context. ... The past empowers the present, and the groping footsteps leading to this present mark the pathways to the future. (p. 34)

With Bateson, I believe that when we reflect on the past, we remember events mostly in story format and that when we tell the story, we add meaning to it based on our life experience at the time the events occurred and according to the accumulated knowledge since then. For example, the anecdote I narrated above is my story of how I was introduced to the concept of writing in a story-telling style. I reflected on a past event in order to understand why I am presently storying my literature review. In addition, I am now able to interpret the experience because, 3 years later, I have further insight into the narrative methods of research and writing. I am storying the past in the context of the present, and the intuitive knowledge I glean from that exercise provides a foundation for my future writing style. Thus, stories are valuable tools for learning about our past and for carving a new future. When critically reflected upon, stories may surprise us with new meanings and understandings.

Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000) reiterate: “People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others” (p. xxvi). For example, the following story and the unpacking of it provided insight about how I view myself as a graduate student:

At that very first M.Ed. class, we were asked what it meant for each of us to be a graduate student. The first thought I had and expressed jokingly was that I could
now borrow library books for over 100 days instead of just the usual 28. I received puzzled faces in response. For the following 10 minutes, we discussed borrowing privileges as graduate students, visiting students at other institutions, and as faculty or staff members. (personal story: Graduate Student)

This incident might appear insignificant on the surface, but it reveals both a told and an untold story. For me, it is a testimony that I value books and I could not part from them that quickly. It indicates that I am privileged to be trusted with books for a longer time, which may mean that I am expected to perform at a higher capacity. For not only am I given enough time to read the book, but I am provided with extra time to read it analytically and critically. Furthermore, my joking intonation demonstrates a sense of humour that offsets my serious and mature look as the oldest student in the room, and it also sends a message that I should not be considered the old wise woman. What I am trying to demonstrate here is that life is a story at every moment and every story has a teaching element to it, especially when it is retold at a specific time, in a specific context, and for a specific purpose.

I recognize that memories are selective, and as a storyteller, I have authority over what I reveal and what I conceal. My audience also dictates how and what I express in a given situation. Kathy Carter (1993) observes: “Stories exist within a social context and are motivated, that is, are told for a purpose. ... We are, in the very act of story making, deciding what to tell and what to leave out and imposing structure and meaning on events” (p. 9). From the story I told earlier, I deliberately omitted the part in which I felt talked-down to by the professor when she was explaining the elementary mechanics of writing an essay. I felt angry, somewhat humiliated, and then embarrassed thinking that maybe she was specifically addressing me because I was the odd one in the classroom—I was the
immigrant talking with an accent; therefore, I must not know how to write a proper essay. I did not include my emotions when I first told the story because the context of telling the story was to demonstrate where I first heard about writing in a narrative style—my feelings of anger and inferiority were not relevant to my topic.

William Randall and Gary Kenyon (2001) explain that in a narrative, one might "thicken," "narrow," or even omit certain details depending on the audience (p. 45). Referring to the same story above, I would not omit my feelings from my story if I were telling it to fellow students. But I certainly would conceal my displeasure if I were to tell the story to my professor; or perhaps, I would tell it apologetically. In this case, there is a certain sensitivity and etiquette that I feel I need to uphold with my professor. Perhaps, it is the recognition of authority or the uneasiness of displeasing the instructor that I continue to maintain. I have learned to use silence and reticence as an act of preserving my dignity and to carve a comfortable space in the classrooms. Similar feelings exist between researcher and participants; therefore, when I analyze my field data, not only must I carefully read the told stories but also the untold stories between the lines. I must remember Clandinin and Connelly's notion of "safe stories" that we tell others and the "lived stories" that we conceal from the world (cited in Judy Sharkey, 2004, p. 507). I must also bear in mind Magda Gere Lewis's (1993) observation that "there is an active discourse of silence which is politically grounded as well as politically contained" (p. 31).

This phenomenon of silence as a conscious act is a familiar one to most women. As little girls we are told not to talk loudly, not to laugh hysterically, not to argue with our brothers, not to contradict our elders, not to enter a church or a mosque without covering our heads, and so on. Silence is a behaviour that we learn in order to tell another story—the
story of our silence. The discourse of silence is twofold: first, it is socially imposed; and second, it is socially learned or “appropriated as an act of resistance and transformation” (Lewis, 1993, p. 49). During the first 2 years of my schooling in Canada, I had learned not to talk about learning new things with my then husband in order to keep peace in the house and to ensure that I would be permitted to continue my education, as he was opposed to my being exposed to “Western ways of life,” as he put it. I left my books at school and went to class early or stayed late to do homework. I was learning to improvise, to be resilient, and to manage my own life.

**Language and Culture**

The English for Beginners class was not enough for me, because I wanted to be able to read and understand all those books at the library where I took my daughter as a toddler and introduced her to a new world. In the evenings, I began taking craft courses—these apparently did not challenge my husband. Ceramics, macramé, pottery, sketching, interior design, anything I could register for, I attended. These courses did not require doing homework, preparing for exams, or writing essays. Being with English-speaking people gave me the chance to hear the every-day-spoken language and to familiarize myself with idioms, phrasal verbs, and colloquial expressions, which were all overwhelming and confusing. Not only did I lack vocabulary, but I also did not understand the social aspect of the language. I was not part of the speech community (Kramsch, 1998)—I did not share a history, traditions, values, or beliefs with Canadians. Claire Kramsch asserts that “language expresses ... [and] embodies cultural reality” (pp. 3, 11). For example, if I did not associate with and befriend Canadians, how was I to know that when you invite someone to your house, she or he would accept or decline the invitation the first time you ask?
At the end of the first month in our new apartment, the superintendent came to the door to collect the rent for the following month (that was the norm in the '70s). I politely gestured her in and asked: "Coffee?" To my surprise, she came in and sat down. I was annoyed because I was not prepared for this uninvited visit. I did not even have coffee brewing, nor did I have any treats to offer her. In the Middle East, where I had just emigrated from, one would never accept an impromptu invitation until one had been asked at least three times. (personal story: The Superintendent)

Learning the nuances of the Canadian culture was as important as learning the English language. John Haycraft (1978) points out that language is a unique expression that stems from a social awareness and facilitates distinct ways of thinking and that there are "different thought patterns inherent in English" (p. 87). Not only had I to attain "linguistic competence" (proper use of lexicon and syntax), but also simultaneously I had to acquire "communicative competence—the knowledge of what is and what is not appropriate to say in any specific cultural context" (Salzmann, 1993, p. 193). I had to learn the interconnectedness of language and discourse of that language—la langue et la parole.

According to the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the langue is the language system that enables us to produce well-formed sentences and the parole is the actual speech that is made possible by the language. "For Saussure, the underlying structure of rules and codes (langue) was the social part of language. .... The second part of language, the individual speech-act or utterance (parole), he regarded as the 'surface' of language" (Hall, 1997, p. 33).

Continuing my story about the superintendent's visit,
I asked my husband to put the kettle on and I busied myself with writing my first rent cheque. The superintendent checked the cheque and found no errors; she put it in her binder and looked towards the kitchen. Then she stood up and I think she might have expressed that since the coffee was not ready yet she would leave and come again another time (she spoke very fast and I did not understand all her words). At the door, she thanked me and said: “Bye, catch you later.” I was terrified. I turned to my husband and said: “What have we done that she is going to catch us later?”

(personal story: Catch You Later)

Coming from a war-torn country, I was conditioned to be suspicious of all things and afraid of all people. Only after I had called my Aunt, who lived a few blocks away from us, and received an explanation, did I calm down; I became determined to learn this foreign language as quickly as possible. Thankfully, I had my Aunt’s constant support: A year later, I was at college upgrading my math and science skills and continuing to learn English while absorbing its culture. One course led to another, and within 3 years, along with all my certificates in crafts, I had a diploma in mechanical design from a reputable college.

Finding a job was not difficult, but keeping it was painful when I discovered that I had chosen a “man’s profession” (Belenky et al., 1986; Glaspell, 1916; Lewis, 1993). Except for the secretaries, I was the only woman in the Engineering Department. I was given the smaller projects and was not expected to go into the machine shop (the supervisor sent one of the young boys on my behalf). I soon found out that not only did I have to stand my ground in the house but also at work. However, I was not equipped with adequate knowledge about equal rights, discrimination, and feminism to voice my opinions or to protect myself. Instead, I worked hard to demonstrate my capacities, compromised to avoid
confrontation, and kept silent to survive. I was like the woman Lewis describes: "We speak only very quietly—often tentatively—always with a fragile trembling like china on an insecure wall mount. ... [We] embrace invisibility and silence as a strategy of survival" (p. 9). This is how I described my situation then in one of my journal entries:

January 1, 1981 — I am a caged mouse. I am too small to reach and open the door. I’ve become too big to squeeze through the bars. I am too soft-spoken to be heard and rescued. I start liking my cage. It’s comfortable and has all the necessities to survive. I don’t need to get out. I am scared. I don’t want to think anymore. I need a change. (personal story: The Mouse)

As an optimist, I knew that if I continued to learn I would conquer some of the linguistic challenges and gender-based obstacles. I had not yet read any feminist literature, but I was certain that as I acquired proficiency in the English language and became accustomed to the Canadian culture, I would attain deeper understanding of my experiences and acquire a voice with which I could clearly express myself (Weedon, 1991).

**Adult Learning**

Learning a new language and understanding a foreign culture do not only occur in educational institutions—adult learning is often self-directed, serendipitous, and may take place informally at the workplace (Tuijnman & Van Der Kamp, 1992). Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins (2001) observe that informal and “incidental learning are often the result of a significant unplanned or unexpected event” (p. 27). Serendipitous learning may take place where there is attentiveness, need, motivation, and opportunity. Marsick and Watkins characterize informal learning as follows:
It is integrated with daily routines; it is triggered by an internal or external jolt; it is not highly conscious; it is haphazard and influenced by chance; it is an inductive process of reflection and action; it is linked to learning of others. (p. 28)

Indeed, every day I encountered learning opportunities from the moment I left the house for work to the time I came home. My pocket dictionary and notepad accompanied me wherever I went; and at home, the radio and the TV were my English-language-learning friends.

In 1984, I had met all requirements and felt mentally as well as financially somewhat prepared to begin a new journey in the academe, this time at a university. However, as I had just met my now second husband, who was just establishing his law practice, I realized that I was unable to attend to multiple commitments: single motherhood, a full-time job, and dating. So, I packed my documents in an envelope, labelled it University, and put it in my home security box. I knew that some day, when I was really ready, I would definitely need it again. Bateson's (1989) words, published some years later, mirror my experience then: “Our lives are full of surprises. ... We learn from interruptions and improvise from the materials that come to hand, reshaping and reinterpreting. ... Our very visions are products of growth and adaptation, not fixed but emergent” (p. 237).

I began taking courses at a college again and attending technology seminars through my workplace to learn computing, graphic design, team co-ordinating, and project management. I was responding to yet another situation and readjusting, improvising, but most important, continuing to learn. As a lifelong learner, I was adapting to change, accumulating new skills and qualifications, and was demonstrating that, as an autonomous agent, I was capable of self-change (Chappell et al., 2003). Between 1988
and 1996, I translated and published five children’s books in the Armenian language. The titles were carefully selected to feature little female heroines who were strong, witty, and creative such as Elizabeth in Robert Munsch’s *Paper Bag Princess* and Jennie in Michael Martchenko’s *Birdfeeder Banquet*. These girls were independent thinkers and intelligent problem solvers and had the courage to defy their society’s imposed image that pictures them as helpless little dolls: Elizabeth rescues the prince from a dragon, and Jennie single-handedly solves the problem of fat birds in the city. Was publishing these books my way of exercising feminism? Or was it my way of staying intellectually active and remaining a lifelong learner? These thoughts did not occur to me then.


1) has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning,
2) has accumulated a reservoir of experiences,
3) has learning needs closely related to changing social roles,
4) is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and
5) is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors. (p. 5)

Merriam explains that not all adults possess all these characteristics—but I did fall into Knowles’s model. I was definitely an adult learner: I was directing my learning, had gathered a mass of experiences, was able to adjust my learning needs to my changing social roles, was seeking practical and applicable knowledge, and was introvertly motivated. I would add persistence as yet another characteristic of most lifelong learners, for I was persistent.

I began my journey of formal learning, English language learning in particular, in 1977. I have not yet stopped learning, even though I encountered many obstacles and
continue to face numerous interruptions. In fact, while I was typing these lines, I received an email from a former colleague about an announcement for a 3-day seminar on the topic of The Future of Lifelong Learning and Work at University of Toronto. The abstract for one of the lectures read:

There is now much attention being paid to the effects of technological change, especially computerization, on work requirements. Many herald the emergence of a new knowledge-based economy, which will require workers to become continuous learners throughout their working lives. So there is growing preoccupation with stimulating lifelong learning to ensure competitiveness of both companies and countries. This part of the conference will critically review dominant theories of learning and work and draw on recent empirical research to assess the accuracy of their claims. The massive but ignored significance of unpaid work and informal learning will also be carefully considered. (OISE/U of T)

I am not sure if inserting this quote is appropriate here, but as a believer in serendipitous learning, I considered this interruption as a sign for me to do further research on the topic of lifelong learning. I marked June 20, 21, and 22 on my calendar to attend the seminar.

Lifelong learning was addictive for me in a positive way. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn. This also coincided with midlife anxieties and restlessness.

On my 45th birthday, I mentioned to my husband that my goal was to stop working at the age of 50 in order to go to University full time. His response was, why not go now on part-time basis? Making a decision was not hard, especially when a few days later I received a journal notebook as a gift with this inscription: “The unexamined life is not worth living—Socrates / xoxo, Daved.” My daughter also encouraged me to start university sooner rather than later. She said: “You’re not getting younger,
"Mom." I had already overcome the hardest step: I had Support! I immediately took out my envelope marked University and reactivated my application at York University. (personal story: 45th Birthday)

In Léonie Sugarman’s (2000) words, I gave my dream “a clearer definition” and found a way of “living it out” (p. 110). Following a lifelong dream is yet another characteristic of adult learners.

With multiple tasks to attend to, both at home and outside, I developed an efficient way of accomplishing it all. Like Bateson (1989), I truly believe that women often do serve many masters. ... It is the mother who has to divide her attention between father and child and between different children. ... This quality of dividedness has always been part of women’s role, ... double and triple and quadruple roles. (pp. 163, 165)

As many women do, I too have learned to “piggyback one task on another ... stretching resources to respond to multiple needs” (Bateson, p. 238) or to simply deny myself any personal time and sometimes even sleep. Here, I must admit that I continue to receive constant support from my husband and children; after all, I am not superwoman.

Unlike one of the characteristics of adult learners that Dorothy MacKeracher (1996) suggests, I DID “learn when over stimulated, or when experiencing extreme stress or anxiety, ... and under time constraints,” as I was so very busy that I did not have time to dwell on such things (p. 32). My tireless persistence in all my duties as a mother, a wife, a professional, and a student was my way of raising consciousness of oppressions, inequities, and discriminations in my community. Was I then a feminist?
Feminism and Feminist Theory

In September of 1996, I attended my first university class: Introduction to Psychology. Both the class size and the topic were overwhelming. I was still wearing my language insecurity vest, even though that summer I had taken a pre university course and had done very well. But this was the real thing! I kept quiet most of the time, even when I had something to say, for I was not sure if my sentences would come out grammatically correct or if my accent would render my thoughts unintelligible.

Many immigrant women share my concern, and large numbers of them take the extra step and attend special classes with the hope of losing their accents and not being differentiated as newcomers. For example, at the Learning Annex in Toronto, Murray Kash teaches a class called How to Lose Your Foreign Accent. His students are adults who “believe their speech has hindered their ability to get ahead in their careers,” “are tired of standing out as foreigners,” and are convinced that “people hear the accent and become fixated on the background instead of listening to what [one] has to say” (Muhtadie, 2003, p. A9). Seneca College offers a Pronunciation course, not for beginner learners, but for those who are “at the high intermediate level” (Spring/Summer 2005 Part-Time Studies Calendar, pp. 48, 49). Arun Mukherjee’s (1993) compilation of autobiographical stories of Canadian women of Aboriginal, Asian, African, Caribbean, and Middle Eastern descent reveals that women of colour continue to be asked where they are from, thus implying that only whites are “real” Canadians. Mukherjee observes that “second or third generation white immigrant women, once they no longer speak with an accent, do not face the kind of systemic discrimination that remains the lot of immigrant women of colour, no matter which generation they belong to” (p. 5).
Similarly, my participant, Vera, has written: "Since I’m not fluent in expressing myself in English, they [classmates] think my intelligence and experience are also at the level of English proficiency" (personal correspondence, December 2004). Vera was a teacher before coming to Canada, but her knowledge and work experience are in doubt because she does not speak English fluently. Fortunately, I was encouraged to speak up by an attentive teaching assistant, for she believed that my contribution was valuable to the class. Since then, I have learned not to give in and perpetuate linguistic discriminations—I have made no conscious effort to lose my accent; furthermore, in all my classrooms, I demonstrated courage and almost always spoke up.

Linguistic accents are racialized, politicized, and sometimes even gendered according to sociopolitical and economic hierarchies. For example, a British accent is not discriminated against, but a Caribbean accent often is; a young girl with a high-pitched voice is labelled as an insecure "ditz" but a young boy with a deep voice is respected as a confident baritone. Here, the differences in speech are discriminated and discredited.

Henry, Tator, Mattis, and Rees (2000) identify the forces of persisting discrimination as "systemic and democratic racism" which refers to an ideology that permits and sustains the ability to justify the maintaining of two apparently conflicting values. One set of values consists of a commitment to a democratic society motivated by egalitarian values of fairness, justice, and equality. Conflicting with these liberal values are attitudes and behaviours including negative feelings about people of colour, which have the potential for differential treatment or discrimination against them. (p. 407)

As an immigrant woman, I have experienced discriminations and imposed silences in schools and at workplaces (Hurtado, 1996; Lewis, 1993). For example, I have endured a
professor’s comment: “You are doing very well for a woman like you,” and at a job site, I have ignored a manager’s insensitivity: “You are the first woman they’ve sent here, do you know what you’re doing?” If I did not have a middle-eastern accent, or if I had a fair complexion, or if I were a man, would they have questioned my competence? Are these the types of oppression that I would have spoken up about if I were a feminist?

In one of the early anthropology classes, the professor asked for a show of hands of all the feminists. I did not put my hand up. Later, in the discussion session, the teaching assistant (TA) asked why did I not consider myself to be a feminist. My response was that I was married and I wore a bra. After we all recovered from the lengthy chuckle, I expressed that I believed in equality of men and women and that in our household we try to live by it, but beyond that, I did not understand what feminism was all about. (personal story: Who’s a Feminist?)

The TA explained that feminists not only advocate women’s rights but also focus on women’s individual differences—they promote subjectivity, multiple truths, collaborative research, nurturing relationships between ethnographer and participants, and equities between and within genders (class notes, November 1996). She also pointed out that my being in her class at my age was testimony to her that I was a feminist. Many courses later, I finally began to understand the intricacies of feminist theory.

I have read untold numbers of articles about feminism in the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, philosophy, urban studies, humanities, English literature, and education. However, none were as clear as the ones written by Chris Weedon (1991), Lorri Neilsen (1998), Elizabeth Tisdell (1998), Sharon Abbey (1999), Elizabeth Hayes & Daniele Flannery (2000), and Denise Thompson (2001). These authors are a pleasure to read, for they write so very succinctly. Tisdell simply states that the “feminist resistance
is concerned about and uses education to work for social change for women and other marginalized groups” (p. 143). Was I not using education for social change? At a middle age, I was continuing my education and hoping to be a role model for my children—I even took a psychology course with my daughter. I published Armenian children’s books, dedicating them to girls (I was interviewed on the community TV channel and proclaimed that it is more important for girls to have higher education than boys, as they will be the first educators of their children). Neilsen reveals that feminist inquiry is the “work of the heart, the hands, our sense-making body, our many-toned voices” (p. 205). For many years, feminism had lived in my heart, my hands, my body, my voice, but I was not aware of it.

For the best part of my undergraduate years, I was trying to understand feminism only from a theoretical perspective rather than from a pragmatic point of view. I was trying to generalize the radical feminist concept to all women and in all situations. Because I did not fit within the image of an activist feminist, I excluded myself from that scene and took an “ungendered humanist approach,” claiming to be a believer of equality of men and women while disregarding differences (Weedon, 1991, p. 7). What I had not yet realized was that there are many feminisms, which since the formation of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1960s are all “concerned with gender relations and women’s emancipation” (Tisdell, 1998, p. 140). Weedon describes different forms of feminist politics:

Liberal feminism aims to achieve full equality of opportunity in all spheres of life without radically transforming the present social and political system. … Radical feminism envisages a new social order in which women will not be subordinated to men and femininity and femaleness will not be debased and devalued. …
socialist feminists, patriarchy, as a social system, is integrally tied in with class and racial oppressions and can only be abolished through a full transformation of the social system. (p. 4)

Not only are there differences in the political strata of feminism but also within its philosophical thought. The structuralists focus on the social structure of oppressions such as race, class, and sexuality, while overlooking individual differences, uniqueness of situation, and political/religious beliefs (Tisdell, 1998). Poststructuralists, on the other hand, "deconstruct the category 'woman'" and insist that the positionality–personal experience and epistemology–of women, create a different kind of feminist discourse which is subject to constant change and shifting identities (Tisdell, p. 144). Tisdell also asserts that poststructuralism "deconstructs categories and binary opposites such as white-black, heterosexual-homosexual, man-woman" (p. 144). She refers to the many differences among and within these categories; after all, not all black women think alike and not all lesbians are radical feminists.

It was illuminating to read Hayes and Flannery (2000), who stress the "understanding [of] how individual women respond to their unique and particular experience of oppression [rather] than developing theories about how broad types of oppression affect groups of women" (p. 13). Not all women can be the front-runners. There are those of us who work behind the scenes and from our own kitchens.

In turn, Thompson (2001) elaborates:

The task of feminism is neither to improve the situation of women within conventional and subordinated statuses, nor to abolish them absolutely, but to recognize the importance, worth and human dignity of women, and to create (or maintain) possibilities for genuinely human choices for women however and
wherever we are placed. More importantly, feminism is concerned with the whole of the human condition, and not just with that restricted sphere conventionally allocated to women. (p. 70)

I was pleased to hear someone finally illustrating feminism not in juxtaposition to masculinism but in partnership with it. Why create a feminist orientalism where the female’s role must be defined against the male Other?

I am reminded of Edward Said’s (1979) concept of orientalism that the Orient is understood only in juxtaposition to the Occident. This power relation stems from the hegemonic thinking that the “European superiority” prevails over the inferiority or the “Oriental backwardness” (Said, pp. 7, 35). Since the days of Herodotus, Alexander, and Napoleon, the West assumed political leadership to conquer and contain the East. It perched itself on a higher ground, convinced that its knowledge and morality are superior. "A sizable body of literature produced by novelists, poets, translators, and gifted travelers ... [put] Europe in a position of strength," says Said (p. 40). This position of power created an “intellectual and moral leadership,” which led to further exploitation and appropriation (Said, p. 40).

The West’s desire to possess the East was driven from its "hegemonism ... allied with Eurocentrism," concludes Said (p. 108). Subsequently, a hierarchical relationship is constructed and the suppressor assumes that because he/she is dominant, then the suppressed must be a lesser human being. This formed hierarchy and leadership evolved into cultural hegemony—a form of domination by ideas, values, morality, and culture, not necessarily by force but rather by deliberate alliance. Antonio Gramsci (1932) writes: "The supremacy of social group is manifested in two ways: as domination and as intellectual and moral leadership" (p. 141).
Ella Shohat (1994) explains that "Eurocentrism is the discursive residue or precipitate of colonialism, the process by which the European powers reached positions of economic, military, political, and cultural hegemony in much of Asia, Africa, and the Americas," and that this was the "long history of glorification of Whiteness and the devalorization of Blackness" (pp. 15, 91).

Resuming the topic of feminist theory, Sharon Abbey (1999) succinctly summarizes feminism as

a very personal act; a struggle against sexism, racism, and classism as paradigms for all oppression; a woman’s assertion of her own power and a refusal to compromise; a commitment to end white male domination; the creation of inclusivity and mutuality; and the insistence on the well-being of all women. (p. 46)

I advocate and promote feminism in my own subjective way—my thesis is testimony to that. As an immigrant woman, I continue to struggle against many "isms." Even though I usually avoid verbal confrontations, I refuse to compromise my opinion about dominations, both male and female, black and white. I embrace diversity and speak up against discriminations. The well-being of women in my network is my concern. In my capacity, I help women attain English language proficiency in their search for an independent voice. Today, I would proudly raise my hand if someone asked for a show of hands of all the feminists in the room.

**English: A Passage to Higher Education and a Tool for Empowerment**

*One of the group exercises in my Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) course was to conceptualize learning within a personal metaphor in order to collectively demonstrate that metaphors are learning and teaching tools and that they facilitate critical reflections (Gross-Davis, 2001). I explained to the class that learning*
brings great joy in my life; I am very happy in a classroom; I feel excitement in a library; when I learn something new, I run to my family, just like a little child, and share my new knowledge with them for which, most often, I get the "yes, dear," "sure, Mom" response. Therefore, my metaphor for learning was: learning is fun.

(personal story: Learning is Fun as Metaphor)

A year later, this time in an M.Ed. course, we discussed metaphors as a writing style. Illustrating what is a metaphor, Laurel Richardson (1994) gives an example: "In standard social writing, the metaphor for theory is that it is a 'building' (structure, foundation, construction, framework, and so on)" (p. 524). Not only did I think that this was a great metaphor for theory, but, for me, it was a metaphor for metaphor itself. I really understood the use of metaphor in writing as a foundation to build upon, a framework to enclose concepts within, a construction of new ideas, and a concrete structure that envelops the topic. Building on my previous metaphor of learning as fun, I chose the children's playground as my metaphor for theory.

Research theory is a playground where I am able to use the equipment only when I am ready for it. I keep my balance on the seesaw and soar up in the sky with my friend's help who sits across, smiling. I become very dizzy on the suspended rotary tire swing, yet I find it exhilarating. I am able to lift my weight up on the monkey bars and even hang upside down. The slide is boring, but not when I come down headfirst and do a tumble at the bottom. Sometimes I use caution, and sometimes I am daring. Sometimes I have great fun. Other times I go home crying, with bleeding knees. I love the playground, especially when my friend is there.

I use my playground image not only as a metaphor for theory but also to understand why I am passionate about learning, and especially about learning English. Learning is a
child's playground for me—fun most of the time but also filled with anxieties and unpleasant moments. For example, *when I introduced myself as an Armenian to a classmate in an M.Ed. course, he responded: “Armenians are not educated people, how come you're here? My mechanic was an Armenian”* (personal story: An Educated Armenian). Perhaps his remark was intended as a compliment; however, it felt discriminatory to me. My heart bled.

The English language is the pathway that takes me to the playground. When I gained proficiency and confidence, I was able to use the playground equipment—that is, I was able to read and understand the library books. My classmates, teaching assistants, and the professors sat across from me, smiling, cheering, and helping me find a balance between theory and practice, between home, school, and office. Most often, I was overwhelmed with new ideologies and felt dizzy because of my changing worldview. Finally, when I found comfort in being uncomfortable with many ambiguities, I felt secure, just as I had when I learned to keep my balance on the monkey bar in the playground and then mastered hanging upside down. Reading untold numbers of articles was boring, but when I discovered something new in them, I felt exhilarated. I wrote essays according to all the writing rules and regulations; other times, for example, I took a risk and chose to analyze an Oscar Wilde play for an anthropology paper. Almost always, I had great fun in the classroom; but at times, I was frustrated and hurt by insensitive and discriminatory remarks. I continue to love the playground, especially when my thoughts intersect with others’ and I learn.

In the playground, I have met philosophers, thinkers, artists, and friends. Together, we jumped, ran, swung, hopped, tumbled, and slid down. Our conversations stimulated
and refined my thinking; new thoughts intrigued and inspired me. I am still mesmerized by some of the concepts and images that illuminate my pathway.

Virginia Woolf (1929) encouraged me to have “a room of [my] own”—a physical space where I could flourish intellectually and prosper financially (p. 4). I must not “whisk away in the background, concealing,” but rather strengthen my female body and develop my intellect, talents, and skills (Woolf, p. 58). Woolf states: “It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men” (p. 114). Even though we still live in a man’s world, and, pity, they still set the rules, we are at the brink of writing with our own pens and making our own rules to avoid looking like men.

You may imagine my astonishment when I read Susan Glaspell’s (1916) play, titled Trifles, in which she explores differences between male and female perceptions, values, and roles. With her subtle yet forceful pen, she brings her female characters from the background to the foreground and positions them in the spotlight. In the farm kitchen, the town’s Sheriff, the Attorney, and their respective wives try to find evidence of a murder. The Sheriff looks around and says: “Nothing here but kitchen things” and leaves the room (Glaspell, p. 6). But it is in the kitchen that the women locate evidence of the physical, psychological, and emotional brutality which may have forced Mrs. Wright into murdering her abusive husband.

The notion that women’s work in the house and sometimes even in the workplace is trivial continues to prevail today. Nearly 70 years after Glaspell wrote her play, May Sarton (1973) finds that “men still do rather consistently undervalue or devalue women’s powers as serious contributors to civilization except as homemakers” (p. 122). But she adds: “And women, no doubt, equally devalue their own powers” (p. 122). Twenty-two years later, I found myself undermining my own academic achievement. Was it because I
have learned to believe that my “soft-spoken and accommodative language is heard as babble”? (Williams, 1991, p. 197).

At a meeting with my thesis supervisor, I explained to her how I intend to merge my field data with my own experiences and present them in a narrative style:

Milree: I think you have a brilliant thing here.

Arpi: That’s good. So, it’s not just bla-bla-bla in my head.

Milree: No it’s not. It’s interesting you say that. That’s what we, women, do. We minimize our experiences even with one another.

Arpi: Men boast, we minimize.

Milree: Even when they talk about hockey.

Arpi: Women’s experiences are not valuable enough. They’re like kitchen utensils that appear insignificant.

Milree: But you cannot cook without them! (personal conversation, March 7, 2005: Women Minimize, Men Boast)

Glaspell and Woolf might be disappointed in my insecurity. I must promise that that was a momentary lapse, and as I continue learning and mastering the English language, I will cook great meals and perhaps even create new recipes with my kitchen utensils. With Neilsen (1998), I must speak up and work towards changing the centuries-old attitude that the kitchen is “always symbolic of the material inequities between the labor of women and men and the labor of women with privilege and women without” (p. 139).

On the other hand, not all learning is beneficial for me. I have learned to be a woman—a woman in a patriarchal society. I have learned to be an immigrant—a hardworking underpaid citizen. Borrowing from Goffman (1959), Judith Butler (1990) refers to this creation of identity through everyday behaviour as “performativity,” and she
observes that “an identity [is] tenuously constituted in time [and] instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 270). She asserts that behaviour is “compelled by social sanction and taboo” and “through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (pp. 271, 274). Subsequently, individuals express themselves as per the role they are assigned to or that is available to them in a given situation and a specific time and place. The role becomes the person, and thus she “becomes a woman” by conforming to a historical “idea” or a “category” of a woman (Butler, pp. 273, 279, 281). Gender is a learned performance that is enacted and continuously expressed in predetermined and expected particular manners.

Erving Goffman’s (1959) concept of performativity is the conscious and the unconscious identity-building through everyday activities while following (or not) predetermined social and cultural patterns and hence becoming who we are. Performativity is the timeless process of constructing identities, both directed and impromptu. Goffman explains that an individual knows “the proper ways of conducting oneself” because one has learned from his/her milieu and follows the tacit script of life (p. 73). However, as a feminist, if what I have learned threatens to hinder my progress, then I must become aware of that learning, learn not to be influenced by the imposed role, and relearn a new one, hopefully one that I compose for myself.

Composing a life is what most self-reliant and independent women do. Bateson (1989) speaks from her and her participants’ collective experiences and describes her research: “This is a study of five artists engaged in that act of creation … –the composition of our lives. Each of us has worked by improvisation, discovering the shape of our creation along the way, rather than pursuing a vision already defined” (p. 1).
These women have set their gaze on their intuitions and aspirations; and with a flexible frame of mind and patience, they have discovered new paths to walk on. Have I not done the very same? I think I have. At the age of 26, I began learning English in my new home country. Against the wishes of my then husband, I continued my education, which in turn led to a job in a “man’s world,” as he described it. I continued my learning until some years later I followed a new path in the academe.

My life has taken different directions during the last 30 years; however, I do not think that it was transformed in Jack Mezirow’s (1991) terms. His concept of “transformative learning” refers to

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true ... to guide action. (pp. 7-8)

To be transformed, one must be set in a particular situation, from which one would finally deviate completely (Cranton, 1998). I was never really deeply set in a life-style but rather was continuing to learn to find my niche, so to speak, in society. I describe my life changes as adaptation rather than transformation, maturation rather than makeover. My worldview evolved as I learned a new language and as I began to think within the frames of a new culture.

One thing I am certain of is that education has afforded me a “sword” in my hand. This image is portrayed in Alfred-Pierre Agache’s (1896) oil on canvas, *The Sword*, which was displayed at the Art Gallery of Ontario some years ago. The reduced-size print, a gift from my daughter, hangs over my desk in my home office. It illustrates a woman dressed in black, sitting erect, left hand on her waist and with the right holding a
sword that rests on her lap. She appears to be an independent, strong, intelligent, and courageous middle-aged woman, whose stature demands and receives respect. Some of us reach that stage in life much later than others, while many never seize the chance to get there. Here, I am reminded of Carol Shields’s (2001) recollection of the hot June day in 1957 when she graduated from university with a Bachelor of Arts degree:

We were utterly ignorant of what lay ahead of us, but imbued, for some reason, with a nose-thumbing rejection of the suffocating shell of convention that enclosed us. And yet most of us were prepared to inhabit that safe place our parents had defined for us. We married the same summer we graduated, joined our lives with men no older than we were, and within a year we were buying houses, having babies and planting petunias. Hardly any of us thought of a career other than wife and mother. No one had suggested such a notion to us. (p. 343)

However, Shields did not whisk away in the background. While raising her five children, she discovered that she had “a sword” in her hand: a pen that empowered her as an extraordinary and prolific writer.

I had read the word empowerment in relation to adult learning many times in my B.Ed. courses, but it had never moved me until I came across David Fetterman’s (1993, 2001) work in the area of empowerment evaluation. Finding that book was like picking up that one letter which wins the scrabble game. What struck me was Fetterman’s enthusiasm and clever way of promoting learning for the final goal of empowering the participants in his seminars. Fetterman (2001) explains that his method is “a constructive force designed to help people help themselves [by] using evaluation as a tool” (p. 119). He identifies the way in which one might develop characteristics of empowerment:
The ability to identify and express needs; to establish goals or expectations and a plan of action to achieve them; to identify resources; to make rational choices from various alternative courses of action; to take appropriate steps to pursue objectives; to evaluate short- and long-term results, including reassessing plans and expectations and taking necessary detours; and to persist in the pursuit of those goals. (p. 13)

These words clearly describe what I must strive for in order to carve a new life for myself. I must have a mission as well as a contingency plan to cleverly materialize my success.

Fetterman (2001) suggests employing empowerment steps such as “training, facilitation, advocacy, illumination, and liberation ... with an emphasis on development, improvement, and lifelong learning” (p. 34). Reflecting on my experiences, I recognize that the training stage was the capacity-building phase, when I became more self-sufficient in establishing my own goals and strategies to achieve them. Instructors, role models, peers, and family members have facilitated my learning and provided me with guidance in achieving my objectives. Subsequently, this learning stage led to advocacy and the crafting or composing of my own future. The illumination stage was when I gained new insights through self-reflections and self-evaluations, striving for new opportunities. And finally, I reached the liberation stage, which “unleash[ed] powerful emancipatory forces for self-determination” and freed me from “pre-existing roles and constraints” (pp. 34-38). I no longer wore a “headdress” so to speak; instead, I have put on a belt to hang my sword from. It was Fetterman’s careful choice of words, his succinct expressions, or perhaps my readiness to recognize the dynamic energy of the passages that awoke in me a reverence to the word “empowerment.” I recognized myself in that word, for I finally had realized that English language learning has indeed empowered me.
Conclusion

The reviewing of the literature in this chapter told the story of how the text interconnected, overlapped, diverged, and merged in order to support my thesis topic—the challenges and the implications of English language learning as an adult. With the belief that remembered, reconstructed, rearticulated experiences illuminate the present and guide the future, I reflected on my experiences of learning English, and at the same time I revisited the literature and retold some of the experiences of the authors whose words spoke to my heart and to my topic. The telling and retelling of the stories may have been selective, but both the voices and the silences revealed hidden and underlying emotions and motivations that facilitated the understanding of certain phenomena.

My metaphor that learning is a playground and learning English is the pathway that leads to that playground guided my thoughts throughout the chapter. In the intellectual playground, we took turns in sharing the see-saw with Haycraft, Kramsch, Merriam, and Salzmann while arguing the dichotomy of language and culture. We concluded that linguistic competence is achieved only if communicative competence is gained simultaneously because thought patterns are inherent in one’s language. One after the other, Bateson, Fetterman, Knowles, MacKeracher, Mezirow, Sugarman, and I jumped on and over the suspended tires and shouted out how one learns to keep her and his balance on the moving tires: self-guided, prior experience, ready to learn, must succeed, interested, motivated, focused, persistent, strong, rewarded, empowered. We had a dizzying group discussion on the merry-go-round about our feminist outlook with Abbey, Bateson, Belenky, Butler, Flannery, Glaspell, Hayes, Hurtado, Lewis, Neilsen, Richardson, Sarton, Shields, Tisdell, Weedon, and Woolf. We deliberated that women’s way of learning is subjective, fluid, improvisational, and always within context. As we
spun, we invited more women to join us in our exhilarating spin, for we believe that we must work, both independently and collectively, towards development and empowerment.

New and familiar faces filled the playground every day. Of the many friends I made there, 6 walked home with me on several occasions. They are my participants, whom you shall meet in the next trip to the playground.
CHAPTER THREE: MY FRIENDS AND I IN THE INTELLECTUAL PLAYGROUND

If you want to know me, then you must know my story. For my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then, I, too, must come to know my own story. I must come to see in all its particulars the narrative of the self—the personal myth—that I have tacitly, even unconsciously, composed over the course of my years. It is a story I continue to revise, and tell to myself (and sometimes to others) as I go on living. We are all tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories. —McAdams, 1993, p. 11

Interconnections

Learning a new language does not occur in isolation. I must interact both with text and with people. This interaction is a long journey whereby I am introduced to new vocabulary, grammar, and a culture rooted in its language. The pathway is long and arduous, but it leads to interesting destinations. The journey is exhilarating when along the way I make new friends and discover their parallel lives. Suddenly, I recognize myself in the stories of the other, and thus the pains, the frustrations, the challenges become less intense as lives intersect, minds interconnect, and spirits join. We gain insight. We are reenergized. We travel. We learn. I am in the company of friends who understand the challenges and the implications of learning English as an adult. This is my experience with Arminé, Kaori, Lea Na, Nora, Pat, and Vera.

I developed friendships in my intellectual playground not only because I enjoyed my friends’ company but for camaraderie—a source of social sustainability and academic stimulation. I observed, asked questions, probed, and invited them to have discussions. I was there, close emotionally, present mentally, our lives intersected and our stories
interconnected, resonating similar voices. As I was writing this section, Milree Latimer, my thesis supervisor, who is always present and attentive, commented:

One piece that stands on the horizon at this moment is the idea of interconnectedness, and the way we (women) often find layers of meaning in our connectedness. It doesn’t happen as a matter of course, it happens when we take those steps to be present, to listen, to see the world through the eyes of another. What I’m wondering and thinking is, that somewhere within the psyche/nature of the feminine is a yearning to connect. Might it be that conversely our masculine side gives us what we need to stand alone sometimes, and to keep moving forward? (email correspondence, April 14, 2005).

This chapter is the story of my interconnections with my participants. It brings together our experiences of learning English and reveals the many similar challenges that we faced and continue to confront. The stories are testimony to our passion for and persistence in learning. Everyday life interruptions did not deter but urged us to improvise and find new ways of continuing to learn. Imposed silences did not keep us quiet but compelled us to raise our voices. Oppressions angered us; thus, we took charge and carved independent lifestyles. Intimidations did not suppress our courage to express our desires and to meet our aspirations. We were no longer weak but empowered with knowledge.

The stories in this chapter unravel some of the characteristics of adult learners such as motivated, self-directed, persistent, and independent. The learning moments elucidate the passion, the dreams, the improvisations, the silences, the interruptions, and the rewards that Arminé, Kaori, Lea Na, Nora, Pat, Vera, and I experienced while we learned a new language and relearned our roles as multitasked women.
The Told Stories

*Without a story, we perish. Stories define our lives: they teach us what is possible and good, help set our goals and limits, offer us role models and explain mysteries. Without stories—myths and legends, folktales and sacred texts, romances and comedies and tragedies—our lives would be formless.* —Marylin Farwell, 1988, p. 29

The Motivated Learners

My participants' and my motivations are both internal and external. We are motivated by our need to learn in order to secure a better paying job or a comfortable social standing and by our intrinsic enjoyment of learning new things. We have an inner drive—a passion for learning, dreams to fulfill, and inner voices to follow. Sharan Merriam (2001) reminds us that not only are adult learners “problem-centered learners interested in immediate application of knowledge,” but they are also “motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors” (p. 5).

Passion for Learning

Nora is an artist, an actor, and an elementary school teacher. She lives the drama of her life as she asserts that drama *is* her life. She remembers a hectic time when she staged a play a few years ago and was involved in all aspects of its production: “*I was busy preparing the script, analyzing the characters, finding costumes, painting the props, writing the program, photocopying, inviting dignitaries, and even distributing the flyers*” (interview, December 3, 2004). Nora’s love for the arts has been with her all her life. She recalls:

* Dance, drama, visual arts, singing, and acting were my strength. Through the arts, I gained self-confidence in dealing with day-to-day problems of growing up. At age ten, I coordinated the school’s yearly concerts and directed a play. My math and...*
science teachers used to always criticize me for not doing very well in their subject areas. Instead of praising my exceptional talents, they suggested that I needed to spend more time in studying math and science. However, I did not pay attention to their suggestions and continued to further educate myself in literature and the arts.

(email correspondence, October 24, 2004: The Child, the Artist)

Nora appears to have been motivated to direct her learning even as a child. In 1987, her life took a turn because of political unrest in the Middle East, and she found herself in Canada, where once again she had to redirect her footsteps. Mary Catherine Bateson (1989) reminds us that life is full of surprises and that interruptions are “part of a life whose theme is response rather than purpose, response that makes us more broadly attentive, rather than purpose that might narrow our view” (p. 237). Nora responded to her new situation and quickly decided that she had to go back to school. She writes:

   *It was not easy to come to a new country with no money. We had to stay for months at my sister's apartment, which had only three bedrooms. She had children of her own so we all had to share that tiny apartment until my husband got a job. The struggles were endless. ... I asked myself many times the same questions: what kind of job would pay me decent money when I hardly spoke the language and how would Canadians react to my broken English or accent? Unfortunately, the answers to my questions were not very encouraging so I decided to go back to school and get to know the system better.* (email correspondence, October 24, 2004: Nora in Canada)

Nora's motivation stemmed from her need to take care of her family. It was necessary to learn English in order to earn money. But earning money was not her only motivation. She could not bear the intimidation of not knowing English. Just knowing English at the
level of finding any job was not enough. She wanted a reputable job. Society’s opinion of her mattered. Not only did she have a need to learn to speak English, but she also had a desire to understand the culture. She acknowledges now that the necessity of learning English was not her only motivation to go back to school but also that her “passion for learning new things” compelled her to attain higher education (interview, December 3, 2004).

Pat, now a teacher at a reputable college, came to Canada from Eastern Europe at the age of 18. She immediately enrolled in government-offered English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes. Even though “nervous to use the language outside the classroom,” she applied for a sales position at a department store: “My friend came with me to the interview. He was talking to the lady for me. The lady said: Doesn’t she speak? I felt really bad” (interview, November 16, 2004: First Interview). Regardless, Pat got the job, and while working with people she gained the confidence to speak more often.

Pat did not continue her education until she was confident with her English, which took about 6 years. She reminisces: “Had I stayed in Europe, I would have gone to university. I couldn’t when I just arrived because of the language. Eventually, I returned, but not until I was married and had my daughter. It was a bit tough. I knew that I had to go; I needed to go. Without higher education you cannot get ahead” (interview, November 16, 2004: I Needed to Go to University). Like Nora, Pat felt the need to attain higher education for financial gains as well as for personal growth and satisfaction. She says: “I always need a challenge. ... I am always trying to learn new things to better myself. ... I like to learn. It gives me a sense of accomplishment” (interview, December 13, 2004).
Parallel to Nora's and Pat's experience, I too had both an immediate need to learn English and an inner desire to continue my education when I immigrated to Canada in 1976 fleeing a civil war. Years later, I still remember:

*In Toronto's airport, I was very angry at not having learned the "right" language or coming to the "right" city, as I observed that my French was not useful in Ontario because not all Canadians spoke their two official languages: English and French. But not having a choice in the matter, I soon started learning English in an ESL class at the age of 26. My desire to learn English was driven by the frustration of not understanding my environment (people, customs, attitudes) and anger at not knowing something so "essential."*

*I do not know if it was chance or destiny that dropped me in Toronto. But I do know that I felt as if I was indeed dropped on an alien, flat land. I did not understand the language, the culture, and the relentless talk about the weather. I did not like the bulky winter clothes, the greasy food, nor did I care to listen to the music that was played wherever I went: stores, offices, clinics. However, I greatly appreciated the personal safety and freedom I now had and therefore decided that I was going to make the best of my new situation. My first step was to acknowledge and convince myself that I was at the right place. My second was to learn English. If I understood the language, I would understand the culture of the city; if I understood the culture, I would understand its music, perhaps even its sports; if I learned more about the sports, I would hopefully like the weather. Not only was learning English necessary, but it was essential.*

*Before migrating to Canada, I had aspirations to continue my education, but these were unexpectedly interrupted by wars in the Middle East. For some years,*
autumn was a nostalgic time for me. I envied those who were in school, and I dreamed of going back one day. Learning new things was always my passion, and now, in Canada, I had the opportunity to pursue higher education. But first, I absolutely had to learn English. (personal story: Canada, the Foreign Country)

Nora’s, Pat’s, and my pursuit of learning English was in response to our new situation in a new country. The shifting global sociopolitical and economic changes forced us to emigrate and adopt a new language and a foreign culture. Chappell et al. (2003) observe that lifelong learning may be “a response to the features of contemporary life … such as continuous change and uncertainty, the erosion of traditional life trajectories, the need to negotiate one’s life more reflexively” (p. 3). Necessities, such as shelter, food, and physical freedom, urge us to acquire basic needs of learning English, but it is our passion for learning that pushes us to attain higher education. The question I ask here is: What compels that passion?

Dreams and Inner Voices

Why do some of us persist in mastering the English language against many challenges and interruptions? When I asked Nora this question, she took a few days to reflect, and then she replied, telling a story of a childhood experience:

One day, my brother, my elder sister, and I were sent home early from school. The tuition was not paid. It was the first time I saw my mother crying. She was crying and sighing, “You must continue your education no matter what. You must.”

These words haunted me forever. (email correspondence, October 22, 2004: A Voice From Childhood)

Now an adult, Nora has heard a voice from her childhood, a voice that may have been silenced deep in her subconscious. Here, I am reminded of Clark Moustakas’s (1994)
remark that when "the looking and noticing and looking again is complete, a more
definitely **reflective** process occurs, aimed at grasping the full nature of a phenomenon. ... Things become clearer as they are considered again and again” (pp. 92, 93). As Nora probed deeper into her experiences in adulthood, she uncovered new layers of knowledge and wrote the following:

As I look back, there were moments when I thought I could no longer take my husband's words: "You can't handle the stress. I know you." I had never doubted my abilities of handling the stress of going back to school. The irony was that my husband unintentionally was creating all the stress to a point that I began to believe him. I vividly remember once, I was on my way to leave the house to go to school; I noticed there was dust over the movable vegetable rack. I stopped for a moment and tried to convince myself that indeed, going to school was preventing me from taking good care of my house. Then I quickly decided, that was a silly thought and such little things should not matter. So, I locked the door and went to school.

Unfortunately, these sort of things were pressuring me to an extent that I thought I could no longer focus on school. Many times, I stopped and thought about dropping out of school but my mother's words "Education is the key to success" kept me going. ... All of the experiences that I went through had helped shape my personality and made me the person I am today: I owe it to you MOM! (email correspondence, October 24, 2004: Mother's Words)

Nora's drive to attain higher education was rooted in her mother's attitude towards education. She respected her mother's opinion and believed in it. When I asked why her mother believed that education was the key to success, Nora explained that her mother and father did not have the chance to receive formal education, and as a result they were
not able to earn a comfortable living for their family. Nora lived both her mother's and her own dream of attaining higher education. (I will revisit this story to unpack it further and discuss silence, courage, autonomy, and persistence.)

I too had a dream. When I was in my teens, I dreamt about going to Armenia and becoming a psychiatrist, but at the beginning of a civil war, what my parents had planned for me was a good husband and a big wedding. Dutifully, I “inhabit[ed] that safe place [my] parents had defined for [me]” (Shields & Anderson, 2001). It was a safe place but not a fun place. Not all pathways lead to an amusing playground.

After rereading Nora’s story, I reflected on my related experiences, trying to uncover if I have had an inner voice that drives my passion for learning. Instead of a voice, I found a mental image: my grandmother sitting by the window reading and my mother complaining that she does not help out with cooking. My grandmother was a great storyteller. In the evenings, her friends would gather around and listen to her narrate what she had read that day. To my brothers and me, she told great bedtime stories. At the time, I wanted to be like her when I grew up.

At our next interview, I asked Pat if she was guided by an inner voice. She could not remember having an inner voice, but she recalled an image from the day she arrived to Toronto: “*We stayed at a downtown hotel. I hated that. I stood by the window and said to my father that I wanted to go back home. He said, this is our home now*” (interview, November 16, 2004: A New Home). That was the moment when Pat realized that she must start building a new life in a new home country.

Still intrigued by the notion of inner voices and lifelong dreams, I asked Lea Na, an international graduate student on sabbatical from being a high school teacher, if she had an inner voice guiding her. She explained that what guided her to pursue higher
education was first, to follow her father's footsteps, and second, to follow her own dream of going to university in an English-speaking country. Lea Na's father, a biology teacher at the time, studied in Michigan for 3 years through a university exchange program when he was 40 years old. Even though he encouraged Lea Na to study English in her hometown, he did not allow her to travel abroad "because he knew how difficult it was, especially for a young lady. He said: 'Happiness does not only come from studying. Just get married and have a happy life'" (interview, November 26, 2004: Just Get Married).

Lea Na obeyed her father but never stopped dreaming about going abroad to learn English. Twenty years later, on her way home from work and thinking about the prospect of coming to Canada to study, her car radio was playing Elvis Presley's It's Now or Never. She knew what to do next. Lea Na's inner voice is Elvis's beautiful voice (email correspondence, November 18, 2004: Now or Never).

I was now more determined to find out whether I too had a voice, as I remembered Magda Gere Lewis's (1993) words that the "stories of other women are often the precipitating moments that force us to acknowledge our own" (p. x). That evening, I looked through my old photo albums, hoping that the old pictures would trigger past and forgotten memories. There it was, a picture of my Aunt and me on the balcony of our home in the Middle East.

Spring of 1972. I was not happy with my Aunt. Just before my wedding, she was suggesting that I explore the world. She said, pointing to the Mediterranean Sea, a few hundred meters ahead: "Look ahead. There is a world out there. Go and explore." How could I have explored a world when my parents made all my decisions for me? Soon after, my Aunt left for Canada. Four years later, I also crossed the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. In Canada, my Aunt
enrolled me in an English-for-Beginners class and on the way there, she said that education would help me explore a new world. As my memory of events untangled, I remembered standing in the Central Public Library in Toronto and thinking that the library was a world worth exploring and that I could stay there forever.

(personal story: Go and Explore)

This insight into my past was triggered by my participants' stories and the "introspective, meditative, and reflective" inquisition of my own experiences (Moustakas, 1990, p. 11). Moustakas reveals that he begins his heuristic investigation with his own "self-awareness and explicate that awareness with reference to a question or problem until an essential insight is achieved" (p. 11).

Nora, Pat, Lea Na, and I began learning English because we felt it was necessary to do so in order to make a decent living as well as to avoid the intimidation of not knowing. We are problem-centred learners and are motivated by both external and internal factors. Therefore, we persist and continue our education to master the English language because we have a passion for learning and inner voices that urge us to make learning a priority. Furthermore, we have dreams of playing in the intellectual playground.

**The Self-Directed Learners**

Motivation is not enough to fulfill a dream. We must have a mission, a plan, and means to materialize the dream (Fetterman, 2001). In other words, we must be self-directed (Knowles, 1980, 1986; Merriam, 2001).

**Guiding Our Own Steps**

My participants' mission paralleled mine to enter an academic institution; our plan was to ensure the care-taking of our children and to fulfill numerous family responsibilities. To materialize all this, we had to work and save money for tuition fees,
we had to improve our mental capacities and linguistic skills, and we had to attain the support of our respective spouses. Once in school, we also had to direct our learning by devising strategies to study, research, and write effectively. This was all clear and would have been straightforward if life were predictable and we were men.

But, each of us is a daughter, a wife, a mother, and a student—all at the same time.

Bateson (1989) reminds us:

Women have not been permitted to focus on single goals but have tended to live with ambiguity and multiplicity. ... Women ... are torn by multiple commitments; men become capable of true dedication when they ... have families organized to provide support but not distraction—the little woman behind the great man. ... The fact that many women work a second shift while their husbands work only one is deeply unfair. ... The style of attention that allows a housewife to hold the phone with one hand while she checks the pot with the other and watches the toddler playing across the kitchen may be a genuinely creative model. (pp. 166-168, 184)

Bateson illustrates an image so very familiar to all working mothers. My participants and I are among the thousands or even the millions of women who manage multitasking quite efficiently. We accept our multiple roles, and with a smile (most of the time), walk forward while guiding our footsteps with our inner voices in mind and dreams in our hearts. Lea Na says: "I became very strong. It's not easy to live, study, and take care of two teenage children. I do everything here. In [the Far East], many people around me helped me: my parents, my in-laws, people helping me with housework. Here I have to do everything" (interview, November 26, 2004: Multitasked). Pat also has mentioned that it was "tough" to go to school when at the same time she had a family to take care of (interview, November 16, 2004). In turn, Nora writes:
My struggles were "ALMIGHTY." I had to be in charge of my children, husband, and the house. In addition, I had to go back to school. For me, going back to school was not an issue, but it created a big problem in our marriage. Unfortunately, he was getting upset each-and-every time he saw me studying. I had to sneak out of bed in the middle of the night and study until 5:00 am. Since he was so tired, he used to sleep like a log. Therefore, I cooked, cleaned, and made sure that everything was in order. I worked very hard so he won’t have any excuses of blaming me for falling behind in my duties. (email correspondence, October 22, 2004: “Almighty” Struggles)

Nora received financial support from her husband, but the raising of her young children, housework, and attending to in-laws were all her responsibilities. Nora’s emotional support came from her mother’s encouraging words that education is key to success. She drew strength from her passion for learning and the prospect of one day having “an amazing career in teaching” (email correspondence, November 2, 2004).

Similar to Nora’s experience, I had to conceal my learning activities from my first husband. I left my books at school and, when at home, I avoided talking about anything related to school. I remember incidents when I had to be quick in thinking and acting:

*When my husband and I were grocery shopping one evening, a classmate recognized me and walked towards us. Quickly, I turned around and went to the next aisle, where she followed me. I whispered that I cannot talk to her in front of my husband and that I would explain the next day at school.*

*Nevertheless, I was fortunate to have financial support from my husband and emotional support from my Aunt. Furthermore, schooling would not have been possible without my mother’s help as she lovingly took care of my daughter during...*
the day when I was at school. I remember that at 3 o'clock, I rushed to pick up my
daughter, went home, quickly cleaned the apartment, and started cooking. Like a
child who was promised to be taken to the playground if she picked up her toys, I
looked after all my household responsibilities. Everything was under control.

(personal story: Sneaky)

I now realize that maintaining a peaceful relationship with my first husband was more
important than building relationships with friends. I chose to “use silence to please, to
comply or to avoid confrontation” (Abbey, 1999, p. 52). I learned to improvise.

*Improvisations*

Adapting to change is a characteristic that my participants and I have developed
since the day we arrived to Canada—new land, new weather, new culture, new rules, new
life-style, new language. Bateson (1989) illustrates this adaptation as improvisation:
“Life shifts constantly. When paths disappear in the underbrush or are blocked, we face
the problem of finding a new path that will seem like a continuation of the old” (p. 215).

Nora has found a way to improvise and still continue to pursue her dream. Guided
by her mother’s words, she “squeezed in” her schoolwork with her home responsibilities;
she “made sure that the house was clean, the stove was always on, and the children were
clean and healthy”; she “sacrificed night’s sleep, got up early in the morning to read or
write” (interview, December 3, 2004: Sacrifices). Nora was improvising, even when, like
Bateson, she believed that “women are taught to deny themselves for the sake of the
marriage, men are taught that the marriage exists to support them” in carrying out their
family responsibilities (Bateson, 1989, p. 200). She was almost convinced that she could
not simultaneously manage children, husband, house, and school. But she learned that
through improvisation, she could handle it all in her own time frame—she ignored the dust
over the movable vegetable rack and went to school. The dust could wait until she came back home.

I too had learned to improvise. Instead of night classes, I took daytime classes. When my then husband objected to my going to school because he did not condone Western ideologies, I went to school during the day when he was at work and returned before he came home. I believed in my learning, and therefore I had become accommodative and flexible. With humor, I had engraved, “Bend to Not Break” on my ceramic mug, which I always intentionally left on the kitchen counter. I played the game of compromising and sacrificing for 5 years until finally it was my marriage that broke.

Improvisation in women’s lives most often is covert to the point that it becomes second nature. We let children, husband, and parents take precedence and sometimes even run our lives. But when self-directed, we address the problem creatively, seize the opportunity, make a detour, and pursue our aspirations, our dreams, and inner voices. Bateson (1989) calls this flexibility “the art of improvisation”—the combining of “familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations” like the “improvised meal” that a woman prepares for unexpected guests (pp. 3, 4). Most women follow the adage: “When life gives you lemons—make lemonade.” In fact, every time I was handed lemons, I made lemonade. (If you would believe, these words printed on a bookmark still hang from my home office door.)

I have made lemonade quite often. For example, in 1984, when I could not handle my multiple roles—I had just met my second husband who was starting a law practice and greatly appreciated my support—I shelved my plan to study full time at university. This time, I took night courses at college and learned computing and graphic arts. When my second child arrived, I stayed home to raise him, established a home-based business, and
published children’s books. Finally, when at university, I took courses at times that did not interfere with fulfilling my spousal and maternal responsibilities—I learned to be a night owl. Surprisingly, I still get up in the middle of the night to complete a task that I was not able to finish during the day because I had to take care of my family’s needs.

It is only now that I am able to recognize my life as a chain of improvisations—a self-directed and reshaped life. I paraphrase Marylin Farwell’s (1988) words that I used as an epigraph for this section: My stories define my life; I find role models within them; stories explain the mysteries in my life; my life takes form within my lived stories; I learn.

**The Untold Stories**

*When we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet.*


**The Persistent Learners**

Gazing at the tapestry of a beautiful carpet from a distance is not enough to appreciate its intricate pattern and to understand how the different-coloured threads harmoniously weave together, forming a tasteful art piece. One must look closely and perhaps inquire about when and where the carpet was woven and who was the craftsperson. Similarly, it would not have been possible for me to really observe and appreciate my participants’ lives and connect with them if I had not stood close, very close. Milree Latimer asserts that “interconnectedness … happens when we take those steps to be present, to listen, to see the world through the eyes of another” (email correspondence, April 14, 2005). I was present and I really listened. I noticed the knots and the ends of the
joining threads when I turned up the end of the carpet. I heard the silences in the stories of my participants.

The echo I hear from my participants' stories and from mine is: *We do not give up.* None of us actually articulated persistence but rather we illustrated the characteristic in our life-stories. Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles (2001) remind me that "the stories we remember and tell about our lives reflect who we are, how we see ourselves, and perhaps, how we wish to be seen" (p. 119). Our storied lives reveal persistence at every junction, stop, turn, and detour. Persistence is present in our passion for learning, in our dreams, in our self-directedness, in our improvised lives, and in the endurance of constant interruptions.

**Interruptions**

Here, interruptions are not the "discontinuities that disrupt [our] lives" such as emigration to another country or having to choose working instead of going to university (Bateson, 1989, p. 41). I would like to talk about the interruptions that we do not recognize, are very painful, or conversely too miniscule to discuss openly—interruptions that my participants and I conceal or disregard.

*Mom, I am in a rush. I am working on a PowerPoint presentation, and I cannot fit my chart on one page. Would you please fix it for me? I am sending it to you as we speak. Please email it back right away.* (telephone conversation, April 14, 2005, 9:45 a.m.)

My participants and I mentioned being married, but we did not talk about the interruption that followed. We mentioned raising children, but we did not talk about how having children interrupted our lives. We mentioned second husbands, but we did not discuss divorce or its painful interruption. We mentioned getting up in the middle of the
night to catch up on work, but we did not talk about the many interruptions from family members during the day that stole our time and drained our energy.

*Hi Love. Any calls? Would you call Xxx and tell him .... And also would you do me a favour and run to my office ....* (telephone conversation, April 14, 2005, 1:05 p.m.)

Perhaps marriage, remarriage, and childbearing are the continuities of life and not the interruptions, but did we not alter our life-styles after marriage, did we not halt everything and nurture our child after childbirth? Did divorce not turn our lives upside down?

The every day interruptions may be very taxing, but we attend to them and often forget that they even happened. Do we remember how many times we interrupted our work and rushed to pick up our child from school, or ran into the kitchen to make dinner, or took the day off just to nurse back to health a loved one. Bateson (1989) reminds me that “intimacy and nurturance are woven into [my] achievements” (p. 50). This means that my care-giving must not be disregarded as trivial, but rather should be appreciated as part of my life achievement. However, the reality is that women’s work at home continues to hold “connotations of inferiority” (Bateson, p. 39).

*Hi Arpi,*

*I really need Matt’s muscles. My desk was delivered and it’s sitting in the middle of the living room in a box. As you know, none of us here can move it or even assemble it. Would you please bring Matt to help? I’ll drive him back and even let him drive part of the distance since he just got his driver’s license.*

*Thanks,*

*Your loving brother.* (email correspondence, April 14, 2005, 2:11 p.m.)
Since this morning, I have been reminded of all the interruptions that are interfering with my concentration. It is now 4:20 p.m. and I have wasted much time in trying to recollect my thoughts. I have been able to write only one page thus far.

*Hi Mom, my stomach kinda hurts. Would you please come and get me from school?*

(telephone conversation, April 14, 2005, 4:20 p.m.)

I am back. It is 5:27 p.m. I cannot continue writing now because I must start cooking dinner. You will hear from me again later tonight.

Interruptions, large or small, dramatic or insignificant, life changing or mood changing, they are challenges that redirect the flow of our lives or the flow of great ideas—which sometimes escape our memory and never make it onto paper. Interruptions may derail a career or disturb a much-needed afternoon relaxation. On the other hand, interruptions also force us to pause and to reflect, to assess our path and our goals, and to redirect our footsteps. Neilsen (1998) illustrates interruptions as “an ecological process, a project of integrating and furthering sustainable growth” (p. 175). It is only through persistence that my participants and I take control of life’s constant interruptions, use them as learning opportunities, and benefit from their dynamic forces.

**Silences**

I am grateful to my participants for trusting me with their stories, which I believe reveal candour and sincerity. However, I am convinced that within each story there is another untold, for memories are selective and the context of telling stories always changes. Cole and Knowles (2001) assert that “stories are reconstructions, ... structural images” that we tell each other for a purpose (p. 119). For example, the purpose of telling stories here is for me to demonstrate that we speak not only with words but in silences as
well—I am narrating the storying concept while bringing textual and oral stories to support my point.

Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000) believe that untold stories are “narrative secrets,” and thus they advise researchers to listen to both their own and their participants’ silences: “Our silences, both those we choose and those we are unaware of, are also considerations of voice in our research texts” (pp. 147, 182). Our stories may conceal private moments, opinions, or personal tragedies that may be embarrassing and painful to share with others. We may think that our experiences are not relevant to the context of the storytelling. Or perhaps we may want to spare the listener’s feelings. Often, we tell what our audience wants to hear. For example, I did not write down my story of divorce because first, I did not think that it was relevant to my topic of learning English (although, when going through the experience, I learned the vocabulary of divorce and the culture of the legal system. Also, because of financial loss, I was not able to take courses for a while). Second, in my culture, divorce is testimony to my failure as a spouse. Third, I did not want to create a situation of empathy. Therefore, I chose silence to safeguard my social status and ensure a comfortable relationship between my participants and me. Clandinin and Connelly confirm that we tell “safe stories” and conceal the “lived stories” (pp. 177, 182). This discourse of silence is both socially learned and imposed. Because divorce is a topic that I avoid discussing, which in itself is a socially learned silence, I did not probe the issue with my participants, even though from casual comments and expressions, I learned that two of them have gone through the painful experience.

Learned silences. Silences I discuss here are those that are concealed not only from our safe stories but also from our lived stories. I talk about the learned silences within our silent stories. Women learn to keep silent at an early age. We are advised to obey our
parents, not to contradict our husbands. We are reminded of proverbs such as “The word is silver and silence is gold,” “God gave two ears but one tongue,” “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all,” and my very own saying: “The less you talk the less mistakes you make.” I remember advising my daughter numerous times not to have the last word when she is amongst her seniors and not to argue with her brother.

Here, I join Sharon Abbey (1999) in admitting that “our sons had learned to use silence as a form of resistance or rebellion whereas our daughter, modelling their mothers perhaps, had used silence to please, to comply or to avoid confrontation” (p. 52). In both my marriages, I have learned to use silence to carve a more comfortable situation for myself. This silence is not only vocal but also reactional. For example, when I did not bring my schoolbooks home or when I did not talk to my classmate in the store, I was acting in a particular manner to avoid confrontation. Not only had I learned not to voice my opinion verbally in order to please my husband but also to not jeopardize my going to school. At the time, I did not have any other voice but silence.

Similarly, when Nora did her homework in the middle of the night and when she ensured that all her house-managing responsibilities were fulfilled, she was silent to ensure a more comfortable role as wife, mother, and student. She was not fearing her husband but rather persistently reacting creatively to a new situation whereby she had found a way to please both her husband and her desire to continue learning.

Nora came very close to giving in to her husband’s silencing tactics; she writes: “I could no longer take the verbal abuse: ‘You can’t handle the stress. I know you. You will be stressed and won’t be able to take care of the children and prepare food or clean the house. Just forget about school and find yourself a job that you can do’” (interview, October 24, 2004: Verbal Abuse). Regardless of the tremendous external pressure, Nora
allowed silence to dictate to her only to an extent. After all, she continued her education and thus did not compromise her love for learning. She would not allow anyone or anything to silence her dream.

On the other hand, Lea Na’s dream of studying abroad when very young was silenced by her father. Having said that, I do not think that Nora’s and Lea Na’s life situations were identical to compare and decide that one individual is stronger than the other. Here, age, culture, and personality must be taken into consideration. Lea Na was a young, single woman living with her parents. Nora, on the other hand, was a middle-aged, married woman and a mother of three. One was from the Far East and the other from the Middle East, where cultures and traditions vary. Furthermore, Nora’s personality appears to be that of an extrovert and Lea Na’s that of an introvert. Regardless, Lea Na was silenced because of her gender and young age. Her predefined role in society to marry and have children did not allow her the freedom to travel abroad. Bateson (1989) explains that there are two kinds of “vulnerability that women raised in our society tend to have. The first is the quality of self-sacrifice, a learned willingness to set their own interests aside. ... The second kind ... is a readiness to believe messages of disdain and derogation” whereby women are no longer secure and thus “their sense of who they [are] match[es] the perceptions of others” (p. 54). Both Nora and Lea Na possessed the characteristic of self-sacrifice and the readiness to believe in their incapacities. Nora, more mature in her age and social status, was able to pursue her interest while resisting her self-doubts. Lea Na made the sacrifice of not studying abroad but held on to her aspirations and waited for another opportunity to fulfill her dream.

Age appears to be a factor in finding a voice in society. Léonie Sugarman (2000) observes that upon entering mature adulthood one earns more independence, self-
confidence, and thus autonomy to redefine the self. Twenty years after her father’s advice to marry, Lea Na decided to take her two children, leave the Far East, and come to Canada to study English. Her life experience afforded her a voice, an autonomous will to break the silence. Ironically, she almost believed in her society’s notion that, this time, she was too old to go back to school. She recalls:

_when I told people around me about my plan [to go abroad to study], most of them told me that I am too old to start something new or to take a risk. Perhaps they were right because it is rare for a person who is over forty to start studying [again] in my country. But I was reminded of my personal resolve and decision._ (email correspondence, November 18, 2004: Too Old to Study)

Lea Na must continue to assert her voice in the academe. She has observed that she is “the oldest international student from Asian countries” and often she feels “an age gap” between classmates and her. She recalls: “One of my classmates invited all the ones her age to a party—a party with some classmates for those who are her age, she actually said. I was a bit hurt, because I am older but I usually forget my age. I felt old and depressed” (interview, November 26, 2004: I Forget My Age). Here, Lea Na is silenced again, this time because she is older.

At the age of 45, I still dreamed of becoming a psychiatrist. However, when I did not do very well on the first multiple-choice exam in psychology, which required sharp memory, I was discouraged, and I did not think that I could survive another 10 years of studying—I felt too old. I dreamt a new dream: to be an anthropologist.

First year anthropology presented its own challenges. As an older student in the classroom, I remember feeling silenced because of my age. I often felt alone and isolated. At times, even my learning was suppressed. I recall:
In a first year anthropology class, we were to watch a movie and then discuss some of the cultural aspects arising from its content and images. To my surprise and disappointment, the film was Angels and Insects. I had already seen the film with my husband at the movie theatre, and I remembered that it was restricted and rated as 18+ as it contained nudity and mature subject matter. Uncomfortable and not wanting to watch a restricted film with a young crowd barely 18, I left the class feeling alone and silenced. (personal story: Angels and Insects)

This silence was learned–a silence that I had learned in a society that imposes a variety of censorships upon its members, such as the taboo of inappropriate speech in the presence of minors as well as elders and the taboos of sex and sexuality.

**Imposed silences.** Imposed silences are somewhat different than learned silences as they are systemic and often covert. Lewis (1993) asserts that “there is an active discourse of silence which is politically grounded as well as politically contained” (p. 31). Silence is political when used for resistance and emancipation. In the same instance, that silence can be contained for political reasons. It is a political strategy to obtain knowledge from remaining silent and then using that knowledge to liberate the oppressed (Hurtado, 1996).

Aida Hurtado observes: “White women have learned a great deal about White men by silently observing them. ... Knowledge obtained by remaining silent is like a reconnaissance flight into enemy territory that allows for individual and group survival” (p. 382). For example, the feminist movement works against patriarchal oppressions and for the emancipation of women. But at the same time, the movement is contained by that force because severing male/female relationships would cause irreparable damage to the delicate balance between genders. Lewis points out that “women’s social/economic
survival is structurally connected to our relations with men” and men’s with women (p. 31).

Women’s unappreciated work as home managers is a systemic silencing. My participants and I, at one point or another, have faced the reality that “men still do rather consistently undervalue or devalue women's powers as serious contributors to civilization” (Sarton, 1973, p. 122). Over a decade later, Bateson (1989) reveals: “I never questioned the assumption that when I married what I could do would take second place to what my husband could do” (p. 40). Similarly, Dr. Swani Vethamany-Globus (2002), a developmental biologist, commiserates:

When two hearts lock in the euphoria of romance, practical considerations as to its effects on the careers of the partners invariably take a back seat. With academic couples, this casual attitude generally affects the wife’s career more than that of the husband. Nor was I aware that my identity as a bona fide scientist would forever fight the image of the wife coming to the laboratory to clean glassware and assist her husband in her spare time, while raising her children. (Hannah et al., 2002, p. 236)

Bateson’s and Vethamany-Globus’s careers took a back seat to the task of raising their children. To improvise, they chose to work part time or from home. Unfortunately, in our society, a working mother’s flexible characteristic is not considered an asset but rather a disadvantage, for she is labelled “undependable” in the job market. Furthermore, Bateson illustrates another reality:

These attitudes show up again and again in the texture of everyday life. For at least twenty years, whenever I interrupted my husband when he was busy, he finished what he was doing before he responded. When he interrupted me, I would drop
what I was doing to respond to him, automatically giving his concerns priority. As

time passed, I learned occasionally to say please let me finish here first, but usually
this has made me so uncomfortable that my concentration has been lost. (p. 40)

I recognize myself in Bateson’s story. I, too, am attentive to my husband’s need for
physical and mental spaces to work in, and rarely do I interrupt him when he meets with
clients or friends in the house. Perhaps I have been very accommodating—a habit that is
heightened by motherhood.

I had invited a participant to my house for our first interview. For her comfort, I
had moved my car into the garage so that she could park hers onto the driveway
next to my husband’s instead of the street. She arrived on time and quickly we
proceeded with our discussion. Ten minutes later, my husband came into the living
room, introduced himself to her, and asked her to move her car because he was
expecting a friend to come with computer equipment. Then he opened the window
blind and asked me to watch the driveway and inform him when Henry arrived. I
was upset, but all I could do at the time was to apologize to Arminé for the
interruption and the inconvenience. She gracefully put her boots and coat on,
apologized to have parked in the driveway, and moved her car. (personal story: Car
in the Driveway)

My husband could have moved his car to make space for his friend’s, but that did not
occur to him. Was it because inconveniencing me is a trivial matter or because he
considered my interview an idle chitchat? Perhaps men are conditioned to women’s
“willingness to sacrifice [their] time and [their] space, as if [their] goals were
automatically less important than those of other members of the family” (Bateson, p. 40).
Efforts for gender equality have been slow but steady. Women around the globe work tirelessly to improve discriminations, and much is accomplished thus far. The Minister of Canadian Heritage and Minister responsible for status of women, Liza Frulla (2005), reports:

For women today, in many ways, things are just different, and not necessarily better, in Canada, for example, women continue to do the lion’s share of unpaid work, such as care giving and household work—fully two-thirds, a rate that is almost the same as it was over 30 years ago. Although the wage gap has narrowed, it persists: women still earn only about 74 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts. (p. W3)

Women who live with partners, especially working mothers, sacrifice much more then their spouses do. Sharda Prashad (2005) makes a bright observation about women’s financial loss when they marry:

Men’s opportunities for promotion increase with marriage. The same status change for a woman has the opposite effect. Because of the question of impending maternity, a woman is often perceived as less committed to her job by employers when she enters into marriage. ... She takes care of his logistical needs, while he invests in becoming a better doctor or lawyer. ... Marriage changes the bargaining power. His increases in value from the outset and hers, decreases in value. (p. D3)

With lesser bargaining power, most women accept the reality of being paid less for the same work than their male counterparts. For example, I worked full time over 15 years knowing that my salary was considerably less than my male associates’. Arminé, one of my participants, who is an Art Director in a large Canadian corporation, reveals:
Where I came from, women would get paid equally. So it was odd that men were paid more than women in Canada. That was shocking. It was strange to see that happen in a civilized country like this. At the beginning, I thought because I was from another country, so I didn’t say anything. ... Actually, I was very happy that I had a job. (interview, February 1, 2005: Unequally Paid)

Arminé and I were silenced by the systemic inequity. We did not raise our voices because we thought we had no right to do so. Both the imposed silence upon an immigrant and a learned silence of a female prevented Arminé and me from speaking out. At my first workplace, I was not encouraged to go to the machine shop even though I helped design tools and dies. My manager insisted that the shop was not a place for a lady—he would send one of the young boys on my behalf. Was that not an act of silencing my equal rights for equal opportunity to gain work experience, which was crucial for future promotions?

Because women’s contributions in their homes and in their workplaces are not greatly valued, “institutions do not offer the flexibility for women to balance careers and mothering” (Hannah et al., 2002, p. 10). Working mothers face difficult decisions as their lives become hectic with demanding professions and child rearing. When they choose working part time, not only must they be content with loss of substantial income but also with “loss of seniority, ... loss or reduction of benefits, and job security” (Hannah et al., p. 7). I remember my own situation at my last workplace:

When I had a second child in my late 30s, I could no longer handle working full time, managing my household, and raising a child. Because my husband had a secure and well-paying job, we decided that I would work part time. As a result, my connection with the working world was intermittent: I no longer attended all
meetings, did not receive regular interoffice mail and new technology bulletins.

The company no longer was willing to invest in me as my productivity was at 50%; therefore, I was not sent for training on new products. (personal story: Part-timer)

Working part time meant loss of income, health benefits, vacation pay, and seniority. Gradually, I became the invisible employee. I was silenced.

Learned and imposed silences are covert ways of discouraging personal development, social progress, and economic growth. Silences perpetuate inequities between and within genders, give rise to socioeconomic imbalance, and thus promote discriminations.

**Discriminations**

Discrimination is a powerful silencing tool—a tool that penetrates deep and causes great pain. Discriminations sometimes arise from linguistic and communicative incompetence (appropriateness of speech, which I will discuss in Chapter Four), from imposed factors such as societal myths (economic status), from systemic unfair treatments (hidden inequities), and from people’s insensitivities (negative attitudes and stereotypes). These invisible discriminations are often not recognized and thus not addressed.

The myth that immigrants must work hard and not expect quick upward mobility is ingrained in diverse societies (Sleeter, 1993). When an immigrant or a newcomer does not fall into this image, then discrimination follows. For example, Lea Na was heartbroken when she found out that her property owner takes advantage and charges her higher rent and ridiculously high prices for property maintenance because she is from the Far East and considered to be financially affluent.
Other than unequal pay for equal work, I have rarely experienced overt
discrimination. However, I have endured discriminatory remarks and insensitive
comments from co-workers, managers, classmates, and professors:

*I was sent to a corporate building to install and service a software program. When
I introduced myself, I was faced with a puzzled expression and was asked, “Where’s Tony? Are you sure you’ll know what to do?” I do not think that these questions
were innocent. I am convinced that my ability as a woman was the issue. I also
think that my looks and my accent were associated with the women who worked in
the maintenance and cleaning department of that building. In fact, I found out later
that these women were mainly Portuguese new immigrants who spoke very little
English. My gender, appearance, and speech impose a silence. A silence that I
continue to bear but I hope to break with my forceful speech, an expensive
briefcase, and a fashionable suit jacket. (personal story: Where’s Tony?)

I am not shocked when I hear discriminatory remarks from people who I know have
no higher education, but I am extremely hurt and angry when I hear insensitive remarks
from highly educated individuals:

*My last undergraduate course in English Literature was one for which I worked
very hard. My grade for my first paper was not very satisfactory to me, so I met
with the professor. I asked her how to improve my writing. She replied: “Your
writing is very good for a person like you.” Astonished at this response, I just
stared at her. She continued: “English is not your first language, is it? I doubt that
you could do any better.” This shattered my confidence even though I had done
extremely well in my other English courses. That was the deciding point to only
minor in English instead of majoring in it. However, I did not feel defeated because I knew I would continue my education. (personal story: A Woman Like Me)

When I shared this story with Lea Na, she remembered experiencing a similar situation:

*My professor is very kind. But on my paper, she had only positive comments and not even one negative. I wanted to know how I could make my paper better. So I asked her again for advice on how to write better. She said: “It’s OK, I am sensitized to your writing and I grade it accordingly.” I was hurt and very upset. How can I improve myself if she doesn’t make suggestions? (interview, November 26, 2004: A Sensitized Professor)*

When I asked Pat if she had felt limitations because she was an immigrant, she disclosed the following:

*I have friends who are third generation Canadians. They say things about immigrants and laugh about it, forgetting that I am an immigrant. This makes me angry. For example, my friend A absolutely hates the xxxs. She is a bigot, but she is educated. She is a teacher. ... One day she said: “Oh these immigrants, da, da, da.” I said: “A, you’re forgetting that I am an immigrant.” She said: “I don’t mean you.” She means the minorities. “That’s wrong,” I said. She doesn’t put me in that category because I have a white face. From that perspective, if I were a weaker person, I would feel limitations as an immigrant (but I am a little). The fact that I said something means that I am bothered by it. I tell her that I don’t accept that. Canadians in general have prejudices against each other. They make fun of each other like the Newfoundlanders and the British Colombians don’t like us Ontarians. (interview, December 13, 2004: An Educated Bigot)*
How should one deal with these visible and invisible discriminations? Pat thinks that these challenges have made her stronger, but she feels that it is unnecessary for each generation of immigrants to go through the same hardships. With humour, she suggests "a mandatory course for those insensitive colleagues. A course that introduces different cultures and discusses the fears, the frustrations, and the embarrassments that the immigrant students experience in college" (interview, November 16, 2004: A Mandatory Course). Not a bad idea.

Progress in self-development is very slow when my participants and I constantly battle against silences and systemic discriminations.Insensitive remarks from peers and professors awaken in us linguistic insecurities that we have worked so very hard to overcome. We greatly appreciate the respect we receive in classrooms and meeting rooms, but just accepting our linguistic deficiencies and not helping to overcome them stagnates our learning. A passive tolerance is not enough to promote learning.

These shared stories teach us how to laugh, how to endure pain, how to learn, and how to persist. Even though, "I—and many women—go about our daily work repressing our pain and hiding our open wounds even (or perhaps especially) for ourselves," I am grateful that my participants discuss some of their silenced moments with me because while "ignoring or covering up the raw scars of oppression, we manage to achieve a level of active engagement most of the time. We raise children, do work both inside and outside our homes, go to school, and engage in social [activities]” (Lewis, 1993, p. ix). Perhaps, because we are now strong and courageous, our collective voice may be heard.

The Independent Learners

It takes courage to leave a birth home, a mother tongue, and kin support. It takes courage to come to a new country to build a new life, to adapt to a new culture, to find
new friends, and to learn a new language. Innate survival skills help us along the way when we possess motivations such as passion, dreams, and inner voices; when we improvise and self-direct our learning; when we persist through interruptions, silences, and discriminations. Finally, we become independent learners: courageous, empowered, and comfortable with our new self and even our deficiencies.

**Courage**

My participants and I have never described ourselves as courageous women. Perhaps we were conditioned to minimize our accomplishment just as May Sarton (1973) observes that often women “devalue their own powers” (p. 122). Or perhaps as immigrants, it was given that we would work hard and be undervalued. Nevertheless, I had not thought about being courageous until I saw the word *courage* written next to one of my personal stories in Chapter Two, which Dr. Latimer had read and responded to as follows: “Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber (1987) writes that ‘Courage plays a part in everything we do, even when we aren’t aware of it’ (p. 2).” I took Servan-Schreiber’s book out of the library and found it to be an uplifting read. He talks about the everyday courage that helps us sustain a fulfilled life. He states:

> Courage is the energy which permits us to act in spite of physical laziness or psychological fears. Courage is the very condition of facing up directly to another person or to the world. Our intentions become decisions and our desires change into will only under the impulse of the courage which incarnates them. … Courage is necessary … to simply exist. (pp. 136, 137)

Indeed, I heard my participants’ and my untold stories of courage when I reflected on our experiences. For example, Nora ignored her husband’s discouragement to pursue higher education. She did not drop out of university when she doubted her ability to
manage home and school. She deprived herself of sleep in order to complete her reading and writing. Proudly yet humbly she says: "I have self-confidence now. Before, when my husband said no, it had to stop right there. There was no room for discussion. Now, I raise my voice and I discuss things openly ... and it works" (interview, December 3, 2004: Now I Raise My Voice).

With courage, Pat went to her first interview knowing that she could barely speak English. With courage, she went to university when her daughter was almost a teenager. When I asked why she decided to continue her education, she replied:

To challenge myself. I always try to learn new things to better myself. And later, a colleague encouraged me and said: "When you start your M.Ed., you'll be a different teacher. You will have more patience and you will grow." So, I thought I could do that. I always need a challenge. (interview, November 16, 2004: I Need a Challenge)

Lea Na, regardless of discouragement received from colleagues, decided to move to Canada with her two teenage children to fulfill her lifelong dream of studying English abroad. She says:

In the [Far East], people do not go to university after graduation, especially women. I am taking a risk. But, it is hard for us because my family is separated now. I miss my husband and I worry about my children that they don't have their father as a role model. It is hard for all of us. (interview, November 26, 2004: Taking a Risk)

Like Nora, the anxiety of going to school was augmented by lack of support from my first spouse; furthermore, sneaking around to attend classes and do homework added extra stress to my already stressful life. I believe now that it was courage that
accompanied me on my journey of learning a new language and a new culture. It was
courage that helped me through marriage, motherhood, divorce, working with men,
remarrying, and going to university. It was courage that put words in my mouth in family
rooms, boardrooms, and classrooms. It was courage that made me an independent thinker
and an independent learner. I was empowered with courage.

Empowerment

Empowerment is attained when a person learns how to help herself or himself.
David Fetterman (2001) defines this characteristic as the capability of identifying one’s
needs, establishing goals, action plans, and contingency plans, evaluating ongoing
progress, taking necessary detours, and persisting in the pursuit of long- or short-term
goals. I have observed all of these qualities in my participants and in me. We had a
mission as well as a contingency plan to cleverly materialize our goals. Through
education, we built our capacities to become self-directed and independent learners. With
the help of mentors, role models, peers, and family members, we achieved our objectives.
Through self-reflections and self-evaluations, we seized opportunities for new
knowledge. Finally, we were liberated from “pre-existing roles and constraints”
(Fetterman, 2001, pp. 34-38). We were empowered.

At the end of our first meeting, I encouraged Nora to express herself through any
medium she would be comfortable with. She remembered having created an art piece for
one of her courses. She ran to her basement and brought up a folded 5x7 feet artwork.
We carefully unfolded it and held it up. It was a beautiful collage of oil, papier-mâché,
china ink, foil paper, and rope. Enthusiastically she explained:

The diagonal line dividing the canvas in two separates my life in Middle East from
my life in Canada. The square boxes next to each other fill the left triangle up to
the diagonal line and then I draw them as half boxes. My thinking was like a closed box before, but then it started opening through knowledge. The person at the right corner (me) is reaching upward to the theatre masques at the top of the left corner. 

At the opposite corner, a bird flies towards the Chinese inscription of my name. The bird is flying like my soul and I strive and strive. What I illustrate here is that education sets me free through the theatre. (interview, September 25, 2004: Enlightenment)

Nora’s source of empowerment is the theatre and higher education.

Pat is empowered through books—books that she learned from and now teaches from. She elaborates:

I read books, lots of books. I always challenged myself and got the really hard books. I looked up the words in the dictionary and almost always was carried away with all the new words. ... I was reluctant to use these new words, not knowing how to pronounce them correctly, but then slowly, I started using them and realized that I could. That’s how one gets confidence. ... I came here 35 years ago. I’ve accomplished a lot. I teach here. Hats off for me, I say." (interview, November 16, 2004: Hats Off)

I met Lea Na at university to have our last interview in January 2005. She humbly guided me through the maze of the library stacks to her study room. It was a small room, but I sensed that that space was the foundation of her empowerment—finally she was living out her dream in her own personal space amongst the intellectual geniuses of the world. Her desire to learn English has carved a small, yet comfortable space for her in the English-speaking academe.
Comfort Within Discomfort

The last class of a course is a nostalgic time for me, especially if my intellect was challenged by new knowledge. I am both happy that I was able to complete yet another course and sad that it would soon end. Just as when I finally had the courage to hang upside down on the monkey bar, it was time to go home. I loved my intellectual playground:

I had just completed a joint anthropology/education graduate course that was taught by a professor from whom I had taken an undergraduate course years ago and still remembered that he had confused me more than taught me. Just last year, when I was informed that he is teaching a new graduate seminar (Discourses of Race, Racist Discourse), I seized the opportunity and enrolled in the course as a visiting student to give us both a second chance, so to speak. It was déjà vu. However, at the very last class, he asked that each of us reveal how we have benefited from the course. I chose to speak last because I could not think of anything to say. When it was finally my turn, I still remained silent for a moment and then said: "When I took a course with you 6 years ago, you confused me greatly, and I was very uncomfortable. This time around, you still confused me but I am comfortable with being uncomfortable." I thought I had talked nonsense until after the class he thanked me for my comment. On my way home that day, I reflected on my sentence and was surprised to realize how much I had learned from my professor and how I was beginning to think critically. I was aware of my awareness. (personal story: Comfort With Discomfort)

This comfortable feeling might be characterized as expansiveness. Milree Latimer suggests that "mature adulthood is a time for the natural expansion of the self, free of
constraining social expectations. ... This is a spirit in those who remain enlivened throughout the course of aging—it's a quality of expansion” (correspondence, April 30, 2005). Was I at a stage in my life when my society no longer could impose roles and no longer could dictate how I played them? Was I empowered to discard what did not contribute to my intellectual growth and to embrace only what expanded my mind? Had I mastered all the equipment in the playground?

Education has opened my mind to welcome new thoughts and ideologies. I am no longer intimidated by philosophical concepts, nor do I fear reading Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Donna Haraway, or Antonio Gramsci. I do not profess to comprehend all that they write and all the ambiguities that surround complex theories, but I am comfortable saying: “I do not understand.” I am comfortable being confused, because that is when I would probe deeper and as a result, gain another perspective.

Lea Na observes the change in herself: “I became very strong. I think I am different now, I take risks” (interview, November 26, 2004). Pat reveals that she is no longer bothered when asked where she is from. She says: “I am at a position now that I will not fall apart” (interview, December 13, 2004). Arminé states: “When you reach that comfort zone, when you have the license to make it up as you go along, it's great” (interview, February 1, 2005).

It was the English language learning and the pursuit of higher education that empowered us to become comfortable in our insecurities, doubts, and uncomfortable learning moments. Nora's words, “Education gives me power as if it's a weapon, ... I can protect and defend myself. I have more confidence now,” resonate from the picture that hangs over my desk: Alfred-Pierre Agache's (1896) The Sword, which illustrates a woman sitting erect, left hand on her waist and with the right holding a sword that rests
on her lap. Arminé, Lea Na, Nora, Pat, and I are comfortable within our discomforts because we hold in our hands the powerful "sword" of education.

**Conclusion**

My participants' and my lived, told, revisited, reconstructed, and interpreted stories elucidate our passion for learning, the dreams we followed, the improvisations we crafted, the silences we endured, the interruptions we sustained, and the rewards we reaped. Empowered with language, knowledge, experience, and voice, we are motivated learners because our hearts are filled with the passion of learning new things and our spirits are driven by our inner voices and dreams. We are self-directed learners because, while faced with multiple commitments, we learned to improvise and compose our lives, guiding our own steps in our own time frame. We are persistent learners because interruptions did not discourage us and, even though silenced as young girls, as wives, as homemakers, as female employees, and as older students, we gained a voice through new knowledge. We are independent learners because with courage we have learned to help ourselves to become comfortable in our choices even when others did not condone the alternative paths we took and "kept shouting their bad advice" (Oliver, 1992, p. 114).

English language learning guided Arminé's, Lea Na's, Nora's, Pat's, and my footsteps to the intellectual playground where our minds interconnected, our learning was stimulated, and our critical thinking was grounded. The pathway to the playground—a metaphor for learning English—is exhilarating, but at the same time long, arduous, and filled with linguistic challenges, which I will discuss in the next chapter.
Afterthought

This research stories my participants’ and my experiences. It resonates our female voices. It does not speak for all women or men. Our perspectives are grounded within our particular situations and relationships with our life-partners, partners who return home from a day’s work and expect to enter a paradise that was promised to them by their forefathers, the patriarchal rulers. We adapt our lifestyles to this worldview, and at the same time we introduce new ones as we grow intellectually. We follow our mothers’ advice, but we also learn from the feminists before us who bravely questioned the status quo and raised their voices—we are interconnected. We understand Virginia Woolf’s words that a women needs to learn to sustain herself independently from her husband both emotionally and financially—we have been doing that. However, we cannot disregard the fact that without support from our spouses, it would have been extremely difficult to achieve what 5 of us have thus far. True, we worked around the clock and were not paid overtime, but at least we knew that our partners were paying some of the bills and they were there when we needed a shoulder to cry on. This is not to say that we must not strive to achieve full equalities between and within genders.

We are the few women who are privileged to have caring family members. We are the few whose partners are intelligent and successful, thus empathizing and helping us through our learning endeavours. We are the few who finally earned our partners’ respect to pursue our dreams.
CHAPTER FOUR: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

*Insight, I believe, refers to that depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another.* — Bateson, 1994, p. 14

**Linguistic Interactions**

I begin this chapter with a story that demonstrates the dichotomy of language and culture. This is an anecdote that taught me the importance of learning appropriateness of both speech and behaviour in all sociocultural interactions. As I found out, tacit and taken-for-granted knowledge is an essential part of learning a new language:

*The company I worked for had put together an employee baseball team. The team needed another player for the evening’s game, and I was asked to join in. I accepted the offer, thinking that it would give me a chance to socialize and become acquainted with people I had just started working with. However, I did not know how to play, nor had I watched others play. It was an attractive challenge!* I arrived late as I got lost trying to find the field and missed the warm-up practice. Nevertheless, I was provided with a mitt and a bat and shown very quickly how to hit and catch the ball. The game started, and I was the first batter. I hit the ball and watched it fly when I heard everyone yell, "run, run, run." Puzzled, I looked around and noticed all hands pointing in one direction. I started running but the yelling continued, this time, "drop it, drop it, drop it." I dropped the bat just when I reached the square pad on the ground when I heard, "go, go, run, run, run." Needless to say, I was the talk of the evening and of the month! (personal story: Baseball)
Learning vocabulary and grammar is only the beginning of learning English. I must also learn the culture of the language: the language of sports, social protocols, and the sociology of the workplace. Like baseball, I should not just hit the ball and watch it fall. I must reach first base, run to the second and third, and then back to home base in order to score. Learning English is a long process. Furthermore, language is a dynamic human relationship—"a social practice [and] socially rather than individually owned" (Sharkey, 2004, p. 500).

The challenges of learning a new language are rooted in both linguistic and sociocultural competence. Language and culture complement and sustain each other, thus are interconnected. Alexander von Humboldt (1836) explains:

> Language is the formative organ of thought. Intellectual activity, entirely mental, entirely internal, and to some extent passing without trace, becomes through sound, externalized in speech and perceptible to the senses. Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other. (cited in Gumperz & Levinson, 1996, p. 21)

Meanings are produced within language and expressed according to the discourses or social schema that are available to us (Hall, 1997).

Linguistic interactions are complex because they involve not only grammar, syntax, and lexicon, but also cultural context, situated social settings, ongoing interpretations, presuppositions, and inferences. Frederick Erickson (1996) observes that

> a given situation [of an interaction] may be powerfully influenced by general societal processes—the economy, the labor market, and the class position of participants in the situation; ... ethnic and gender relations; religious identification and beliefs; broad patterns of language and culture in the society at large. (p. 283)
Social interactions are situated processes constructed within a particular sociopolitical framework. Interlocutors make sense of each other’s conversation through a shared contextual knowledge and understanding of the “micropolities” or the “locally framed situation” surrounding their interaction (Erickson, pp. 284, 295). Communicative competence is achieved not only through linguistic competence but also through knowledge of shared cultural values and history.

Arminé’s, Kaori’s, Lea Na’s, Nora’s, Pat’s, Vera’s, and my anxieties about learning and using the English language were fed by our inadequate vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation. To overcome these challenges, not only had we to attain “linguistic competence,” but also simultaneously we had to acquire “communicative competence—the knowledge of what is and what is not appropriate to say in any specific cultural context” (Salzmann, 1993, p. 193). We learned that learning English through textbooks is not sufficient to understand and to speak the colloquial language. We learned the interconnectedness of language and culture. We learned the discourse of the English language. We learned not only to speak the language but also to think within the language. Mastering all the above is a lifelong journey.

This chapter stories the linguistic and communicative challenges that my participants and I have lived through and continue to confront. Our experiences voice the importance of a common medium of interconnection and unravel the reality that learning English empowers us intellectually, socially, and economically. The language affords us opportunities of attaining higher education, well-paid jobs, social status, and personal accomplishments. As English becomes widely spoken in the world, we reap the benefit of the capacity of global communication. Once again, we find ourselves empowered.
Linguistic Challenges

*Human experience is only possible because we have language.*
— Max Van Manen, 1997, p. 38

**Linguistic Competence**

Language is a social affair. It is a dynamic human relationship enhanced by everyday interconnections and experiences. Words are given meaning when used appropriately and in a coherent and comprehensible manner. Meaningful interpretations of words take place within the context, the place, and the time they are used. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) asserts that language is a “system” inclusive of “rules” of grammar and “social codes” or “langue” that enables us to produce well-formed sentences using a “parole” that is a “speech-act or utterance” of the language (cited in Hall, 1997, p. 33). Linguistic competence is the knowledge of the lexicon and the syntax of a language. However, a person may have a repertoire of words and an understanding of grammar yet may not be able to speak intelligibly. For example, Arminé had taken English courses at university in her country of birth. Confident, she came to Canada only to feel “tongue wrapped.” She remembers how “depressing” it was not to understand and be understood. Frustrated, she isolated herself:

*I didn’t talk much to people. I used silence as a defence mechanism. I was afraid that I would not understand or I would give the wrong answer. I wouldn’t talk because I thought maybe people will think, oh my God, she can’t even speak English. It was like being in jail.* (interview, February 1, 2005: Tongue Wrapped)

Arminé was not familiar with the micropolitics or the situated context of the local English language. The language she learned in an English as a Foreign Language class was very different than the one she heard on the street in everyday life situations. Arminé’s
knowledge of English was classroom situated; hence, she could understand the words but not the meaning of the sentences.

Meaningful interaction takes place in a particular situation that dictates the language of the conversation, the style of that language, the content discussed, the social setting, and the meanings constructed both by the speaker and by the audience. Erickson (1996) explains that "the relation between speech style, audience relationships, participation structure, and the political framing of cultural difference within the situation" shape the conditions of how language becomes a communicative act (p. 302). Just as when my superintendent said to me "Bye, catch you later," I understood the words but interpreted them to be hostile because I had just come from a country where the identities of my enemies changed constantly and I did not trust anyone; whereas, my superintendent expressed herself from within her micropolitics of a peaceful environment. Her words were an invitation for a future friendly relationship (see the full story in Chapter Two, p. 18, The Superintendent; p. 19, Catch You Later).

Like Arminé, Lea Na had learned English in her home country. She does not have a great deal of difficulty understanding academic English but struggles with vernacular language. A simple expression such as "Oh, Boy," or social propriety such as when to shake hands and when to hug frustrates and confuses her. She recalls:

_I was talking about my daughter, and my classmate said, "Oh, Boy, you have a child. I said no she is a girl. ... Sometimes I cannot express exactly what I want to say because conversation style is very different here. We speak in a figurative way. Here everyone speaks in a very direct way, so I don't always understand. ... Also, I am not used to small talk or shaking hands or hugging. When someone says, Oh, I like your sweater or something like that, I don't know how to respond. I don't know_
when to shake hands or when to hug. I see here women start shaking first. I don't know if I should do that. (interview, November 26, 2004: Small Talk)

The expression, "Oh, Boy," is a figure of speech but one that Lea Na is not familiar with; therefore, she attempted to understand literally and or by translating it into her mother tongue, which in this case gave her the wrong meaning. In order for Lea Na to understand the local English words, expressions, and social manners, she must attentively listen and observe her local community to comprehend its meta discourse and in time, and only in time, she will master the "micropolitics of interaction"—the situated everyday social communications (Erickson, 1996, p. 302).

After living in Canada for 20 years, in 1996 I found out that my knowledge of grammar, sports, religion, and North American traditions was still not adequate:

My first multiple-choice exam for Psychology 1101 was very disappointing. I was devastated that I had retained only 60% of the course content. I was determined to understand what had gone wrong. I met with the professor and reviewed the exam questions with her. To my and her surprise, when she rephrased the questions, I was able to give her the correct answers to almost all the questions for which I had selected the wrong answers. Fortunately, she had studied linguistics and understood that because English was my fourth language, I was thinking in the grammar of my dominant language and that was the reason why I was unable to understand the trick questions (in the Armenian language, sentence structure or the order of noun, verb, and adjective/adverb are placed in a reverse order).

Furthermore, the professor realized that some of the questions on the exam were culture based and that a student who is not familiar with certain aspects of the Canadian culture would not be able to answer them correctly. She acknowledged
that these questions required knowledge of particular religious traditions and a great deal of familiarity with Canadian sports. (personal story: Multiple-Choice)

In a multilingual society, linguistic accents or pronunciation of words in certain ways reveal cultural differences. For example, when I pronounce my “Rs” strongly, I may be an immigrant from the Middle East, or if I pronounce them softly, I may be from India. These accents are politicized or respected according to the political stance of my listener. Subsequently, a distinguishable accent may become a “boundary,” and often boundaries turn into politicized “borders” (Erickson, 1996, p. 295). Erickson illustrates:

On the Mexican side of the border, no one is stopped and frisked for knowing Spanish. But on the U.S. side of the border, being a native speaker of Spanish or of English is politicized—much more so than is the knowledge of Spanish or English at the border between United States and Canada. (p. 294)

Let me illustrate a similar scenario—a story that I began telling in Chapter Three, page 71, A Woman Like Me:

I was two thirds into my major in English, averaging an “A.” I was taking two English courses during that term, and one of my professors had told me that my writing style was at a graduate level already, but the other said the following when I asked her how I could improve my writing: “Your writing is very good for a person like you. English is not your first language, is it? I doubt that you could do any better.” (personal story: A Person Like You)

I truly believe that I would not have received that response from my English professor—who incidentally spoke with an Irish accent—if I spoke with a British accent rather than a Middle Eastern one.
My very first conversation with Pat was centred on the topic of foreign accents. I have written in my journal: “I don’t think Pat has an accent, but she is still concerned about it, especially when she feels tired and she is unable to concentrate on her speech” (November 2, 2004). Pat told me about the traumatic incident she experienced years ago:

I didn’t think about my accent at first, because here [in Canada], many people have accents. But when people asked where I am from, that made me think that they can tell from how I speak and that I must have a heavy accent. That made me conscious of things. And then one day, when I was shopping at a store, I bumped my cart to another’s and the lady said something. I spoke up (I always spoke when I was challenged) and I said that she was taking too much of space in the aisle. She replied that I should go back to my own country. I felt really bad. The only reason she said that, not because I spoke up but because I spoke with an accent. I felt really bad. And then I heard other people’s stories, which made me realize that people here are not happy with immigrants. They don’t say it, but it’s there. You may not see it, but you sense it. (interview, November 16, 2004: Shopping Cart)

Let me ask again: If Pat, who, incidentally, has a fair, European complexion, spoke clearly and with a British accent, would she have been told to go back to her own country? This experience is testimony that differences in speech are politicized according to their sociopolitical hierarchies and thus are treated as a border.

To avoid embarrassments, intimidations, and discriminations, many immigrants keep silent or attend classes to lose their accent. The Globe and Mail reports on a course devised and taught by Mr. Murray Kash, a retired radio broadcaster and an actor with a silky smooth voice, British trained:
Each month, a group of 10 to 20 people from disparate backgrounds who share a sense of insecurity about their accented English sign up for the Learning Annex course, [How to Lose Your Accent], hoping it will serve as a conduit to perfectly Canadian speech—and, real Canadian-ness, so to speak. ... Among them: a Chinese flight attendant who had immigrated to Canada 39 years ago, a doctor from Ghana who has been here for 30 years, a Spanish-speaking meat inspector who moved from Mexico 13 years ago, a Nigerian accountant who has been here for three years, ... and a chemist who has come to Canada 13 years ago. ... Mr. Kash said many of his students are parents who are tired of being corrected by their accent-free children. Others believe their speech had hindered their ability to get ahead in their careers.

(Muhtadie, 2003, p. A9)

Here, the underlying need is to develop a more desirable accent, an accent that is identified as Euro-North American, an accent that signifies progress and not backwardness, the accent of the colonizer and not the colonized. The issue is not the speech differences themselves but the meta politics of those differences—Anglo-American versus the rest of the world, “us” versus “them.”

As my participants and I attain a good command of the English language and receive higher education, we enjoy a higher socioeconomic status, and thus we become comfortable with our linguistic accents. Nora says: “I don’t care about my accent. I just speak” (interview, December 3, 2004). Furthermore, as we observe the social context and learn the discourse of the English language, we become aware of the micropolitics of interaction or the situational and political framing of linguistic interactions, and thus our communicative competence is enhanced.
Communicative Competence

In order to develop communicative competence, I must become familiar with my social situations. Erving Goffman (1959) explains that individuals know the proper ways of conducting themselves because they learn from their milieu and follow the tacitly approved script of life. He observes:

When the individual does move into a new position in society and obtains a new part to perform, ... he [or she] will be given a few cues, hints, and stage directions, and it will be assumed that he [or she] already has in his [or her] repertoire a large number of bits and pieces of performances that will be required in the new setting. (p. 72)

These social identities are learned and expressed according to one’s age, sex, social status, and the social settings she/he lives in. John Gumperz (1982) points out that understanding the grammatical, phonetic, and semantic systems of a language “is a function of our culturally determined predisposition to perceive and assimilate” (p. 12). For example, Lea Na, whose ethnicity is Far Eastern, is able to converse in English, but she cannot function fully in her new environment without assimilating into the new situational setting—a Canadian university. For instance, she found out that she should address her professors, the administration staff, the caretakers, and her fellow classmates all by their first names in informal situations, but with honorific titles in formal settings or in certain circumstances; moreover, she should not ask the age of a person as it is impolite to do so here in the West, even though it is customary in the Far East for the purpose of determining how to address the person with the appropriate honorific (personal conversation, June 2004).

Language adds “meaning and structure” to social interactions (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 308). We make sense of our environment because we construct our identities in relation
to our community and the wider society. We learn how and when to express ourselves both verbally and nonverbally as per our society’s norms. Deborah Schiffrin, reflecting on Goffman’s (1982) analysis of self and society, states that micro level processes such as life at home, school, and work “help organize and give meaning to our everyday behaviors and help provide us with a sense of self. ... The identities that we adopt also help produce social order” (p. 308, 309). There is always a shared knowledge between speaker and audience that changes and develops over time, space, and context, facilitating better communicative competence.

Pat remembers that she kept quiet at her workplace, even after graduating from university, because she had learned certain behaviours of a young woman in an engineering firm: “I was afraid that I’ll make a mistake. So, I didn’t speak in meetings. I thought that they wouldn’t listen to me anyway as I am a woman and such. You know” (interview, December 13, 2004: A Woman and Such). Yes, I did know. I too was reluctant to speak, not because of my fear to make a mistake, but because I was a young female in the company of older and professional men. I must explain here that the reason I was not insecure about my proficiency in English was that I was hired for my knowledge of French. Part of my duties was to translate blueprints and interoffice communications between French- and English-speaking branches of the corporation. In accordance to Schiffrin’s (1996) observation above, the identity that I had adapted in that particular environment has afforded me the status of a French-speaking Canadian rather than an Armenian-speaking immigrant. Therefore, my accent was not frowned upon but respected; consequently, I spoke with less insecurity in that workplace than I spoke elsewhere.
When Arminé went to her first job interview in Canada, she was still very unsure of her ability to speak English, even though, at the time, she was attending college to accredit her previous university degree in the Fine Arts. She reveals:

*English was crippling me. I was having a complex. Language was really holding me back for a long time. But anyway, first year of college, I went to a job interview. I had brought some work with me that I was showing them but not speaking at all. I was thinking: If I start talking, he might not hire me. So, I showed my portfolio and let my work talk for me.* (interview, February 1, 2004: Portfolio)

Arminé had the good fortune of meeting a manager at that job interview who spoke her native language. She thinks that she impressed him with both her art and mother tongue. She was offered the job, and the logical action for her was to take it and quit school. She admits that she struggled with the English language for a while, but she was determined to put aside her "fears and insecurities" and accept that "it was OK to make mistakes." She confides:

*I used safe words, words that I had practiced and was familiar with. If I did not know the right word and its correct pronunciation, I described the word. I learned to be a listener and observer. ... I would look at their faces and if they had a puzzled look, quickly I would use other words. I think that attitude helped me. ... I thought if I could learn a word a day, I'll know 365 words a year, and I did. ... I remember, one time I wanted to use an expression but did not know if it sounded OK. So, I called home and left a voice mail into my answering machine, and then replayed it to hear myself speak. ... I was learning English from my experiences.* (interview, February 1, 2004: Voice Mail)
In a face-to-face conversation, both speaker and listener follow each other’s signals such as pause, gaze, body posture, facial expression, and back channel cues (hmms, aahs, and nods) to take turns in speaking (Chick, 1996; Nieto, 2002). These cues also convey interest in the conversation and understanding of the underlying meaning of the spoken words. Furthermore, if the interlocutors belong to the same speech network, they will then enhance their communicative competence because they share similar tacit knowledge and situated social identities—they would speak a common language. Thus, linguistic interactions are collaborative productions that “link meaning, context, culture, and society together” (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996, p. 361). Listeners are active participants in interactions. Without their attentiveness to verbal and nonverbal signals, a conversation cannot go forward. Arminé has mastered the interconnectedness of communications in her workplace. She was attentive to all cues and thus had negotiated a comfortable and often a multilingual situation in her new environment. With her manager, she has found an intercultural communication through their common Eastern European language and, at the same time, earned a special kind of respect from her English-speaking associates because of her multilingual relationship with the boss—she was no longer “crippled” by the English language.

Arminé’s linguistic and communicative competence has increased immensely as she persisted and thrived in her friendly work environment, which is where she mastered her English proficiency. She admits that “there’s always that doubt” that she still carries. She continues to learn English and something new every day. “Learning is my life,” she says. Arminé manages an entire department, where she has carved a unique and a very comfortable space for herself:
Now I talk a lot. With my staff, I have my own English. ... For example, to describe a specific pink colour, I say not pink, not fuchsia, a little bit ‘fuchshish’. Now they understand. It’s really, really funny. They say: “Oh, it’s Arminé’s English” and I reply: “I am enriching your dictionary.” It’s also friendlier that way—to make jokes and such. ... English is a flexible language; it can be modified. For example, we “christmasized” our Christmas campaign! I took the advertising format and added Christmas elements to it. I don’t know why that word doesn’t exist, but now it does in our lingo at work. Even though those words do not exist, my staff understands them. It’s no problem, especially when you reach that comfort zone, when you have the licence to make up as you go along, it’s great. (interview, February 1, 2004: Arminé’s English)

Arminé’s motivation to succeed, her courage to self-direct her learning, and her comfortable work environment have provided an ideal situation where she has grown both intellectually and professionally.

Understanding the relationships between thought, language, culture, and communication provides insight for improving intercultural interactions. My participants’ and my stories increase my awareness of the inseparable link between language and culture. Communicative competence can be achieved only through simultaneous linguistic and cultural interpretations. Language and thought are indeed inseparable. Thoughts are not developed in a vacuum but rather in a sociolinguistic milieu. Language has meaning when it is not only uttered with correct grammar and appropriate syntax, but when interlocutors share background knowledge, employ appropriate speaking and listening practices, and understand the micropolitics surrounding their interactions. Understanding and respecting societal norms and
expectations maximizes comprehension and facilitates successful conversations. If communicative competence is achieved, then cultural differences may be overcome, boundaries removed, and borders collapsed. Van Manen (1997) says: “Human experience is only possible because we have language” (p. 38). I would add to his statement: Interhuman experience is possible when we have a common language.

**English: The Pathway That Leads to New Destinations**

_New ways of imagining our literacies and our possibilities might help us all read, write, sing, touch, hear, and, in richer ways, resonate on the paths. We are passionate, resonant bodies seeking connection and survival._

_— Lorri Nielson, 1998, p. 208_

**English: A Global Utility Language**

In one of my M.Ed. courses, I met four international students from Asia. They were highly educated and already teachers of English in their respective countries. They took sabbaticals and came to Canada to improve their English proficiency. Their stories intrigued me, and I admired their motivation and their ongoing sacrifices to further their knowledge of the English language. When I asked why they had left their comfortable lives and submitted themselves to the hardships of assimilating into a foreign environment, I was told that improving their English was a personal, family, and state investment (class notes, October 2003).

I met Lea Na in this class. I was particularly interested in her story because, like me, she was a mature student with two grown children. Chance brought us back together in another course, and we became friends. One evening, I asked her: "Why do you study English? What does learning English mean to you?" I suggested that she reflects on my questions before responding. A few weeks later, she sent me an email:
Language is not just a skill for communication. It is more than that. It's like a window for me to see another world. Learning another language means that I can understand what other people think, how they act, and how other cultures are different. Further, I can gain different, and broader perspectives. We encounter many problems every day. The journey of endless problem-solving, that's life. How do we cope with the problem wisely, how do we find the right direction, and which way do we have to choose? I believe that proper and judicious choice in making decisions comes from our own experience and knowledge. In this sense, the ability to speak another language means to attain another MENTALITY. For me, having another mentality adds richness to my life and provides new perspectives to see a world from a different vantage point. ... Also, when speaking other languages, we can draw close to each other and have a deeper mutual understanding. Therefore, I believe learning [English] and having good communication would be a way of bringing peace to the world eventually. (personal correspondence, July 25, 2004: Another Language, Another Mentality)

The English language, as a pathway, has taken Lea Na to physical and intellectual destinations. She has traveled from the Far East to Canada in order to master her English proficiency. In her journey of learning, she is exposed to new perspectives and new approaches to understand the world. She envisions a peaceful world where language barriers are lifted and the global community speaks through a common language—English.

Enthusiastic about the topic of learning English, Lea Na invited a few of her friends to join us in our conversation. Kaori, a young mother of two, has been at the university for a year. Vera, the youngest of the three, is also in her first year of the M.Ed. program. Lea Na, Kaori, and Vera were teachers of English in their home countries. Four of us sat
in a library study room one afternoon and had a lively and interesting conversation about English as a global language. The discussion centred on the themes of global communications through the English language, learning English as an investment to advance their careers, to secure a higher socioeconomic status, and to increase their intellectual growth.

**English: A tool for global communication.** Globalization refers to the economic, sociopolitical, and cultural interconnectedness of the nations and peoples of the world (Edwards & Usher, 2000). The vast expansion of the English language has played a significant role in globalization. The British Empire, the industrial revolution, two world wars, the end of the cold war, United States’s economic and military might, satellite and wireless communications, international education programs, and Hollywood/Disney films and music have placed the English language at the forefront of all other languages. Vera points out that through mass media and the Internet, “we are in the global village.” Lea Na says that “Western society is very far away [from my home country], but we see everything on TV. Western countries leave a good impression. So I thought my dream can come true in Canada” (interview, November 26, 2004).

All corners of the globe are joined via satellites and the mass media. Therefore, cultures and languages intersect and even merge, creating an interconnected world. In his broadcast, Marshall McLuhan (1960) coined a new expression that described our global community: “Television has transformed the world into an interconnected tribe, a global village. ... And today's teenager, the future villager, who feels especially at home with our new gadgets — the telephone, the television — will bring our tribe even closer together” (clip 2). The people of the world have come closer together, not only through electronics but also through the English language. International business, popular
entertainment, diplomatic negotiations, and web-based education are conducted primarily in English throughout the world (Crystal, 1997, 2000, 2001; Edwards & Usher, 2000; Spring, 1998). Mottos such as “Think globally, act locally” initiate teaching projects that aim to improve the life-styles of many and provide new opportunities for education, economic sustainability, and independence (Singh, Kell, & Pandian, 2002).

English language teaching has become a lucrative business around the world, generating billions of dollars (Crystal, 1997). In 2000, there were over 1 billion people learning English as an auxiliary language (Crystal, 2003). Because, at the present, the primary language of electronic technologies and popular entertainment are most readily accessible in English, there is a great need to learn the language. For example, “In Hong Kong, English … enjoys a higher status than the mother-tongue of the people (Cantonese) and is viewed as a valuable asset in career terms” (Tang & Ng, 1997, p. 47). In Mainland China, “students as well as their parents believe it would be more important to learn English than Putonghua [Mandarin] (the official spoken language in China)” (Tang & Ng, p. 48). In Japan, students are taught English along with the national language because “English is necessary for entrance into higher education” and is considered “essential for the global economy” (Spring, 1998, pp. 30, 64). (See Appendix A for a detailed argument on English as a global language.)

**English: An investment.** Presently, English dominates the international exchange of knowledge, as “it is the main language of global discussions of education. … English is considered a symbol of modernization, a key to expanded functional roles, and an extra arm for success and mobility in culturally and linguistically complex and pluralistic societies” (Spring, 1998, p. 28). In fact, 90% of the published scientific papers and medical journals are written in English (Crystal, 2000, p. 102). Thus, competence in
English is essential to benefit from the wealth of global knowledge. Lea Na agrees that learning English enhances her chances for upward mobility:

*In my country, teachers are judged according to their English proficiency. Xxx is a small country with large population. There are very little natural resources.*

*Cultivating the human resources is very important. ... English proficiency is important to get a good job in Xxx and to survive in the globalized world. It is an investment for our future. My husband says that the future is built in the present.*

Kaori agrees with Lea Na and says:

*This society, the globalized society is changing. English is very important now. Universities in Xxx must provide education that meets high standards. As an English teacher, I need to be proficient in speaking. This language is more predominant now in the global economy. America is in the centre of the economy.*

Vera also thinks that “Speaking English proficiently is very important. Having a good command of English promises a good future in Xxx.” Lea Na concludes:

*“English language is a tool. ... It is an investment for our future”* (personal conversation, November 26, 2004: Predominance of English).

Global trade is not only in goods and services but also in language and culture. Hybrid or joint programs between universities exchange knowledge and thus expand the global information pool, which in turn translates into progress and wealth for individuals and institutions. For example, the international students at Brock University bring with them a vast knowledge contributing to the understanding of multiculturalism in Canada.

My personal experience with my own ESL international exchange students is that they bring new perspectives to their joint research projects at their respective universities. For example, without a common language, the Brazilian and Canadian doctors, the
Japanese and Canadian civil engineers would not be able to work hand in hand, exchange research findings, design new ways of dental surgery, or discuss innovative plans to prevent urban decay (personal discussions, December, 2002). Here, the international students invest in their future, and the institutions invest in their reputations (Jones, 2000).

**English: A tool adapted to local needs.** Lea Na, Kaori, and Vera agree that the English language is a tool for global communications and thus an investment for a better future. They realize that the English language is a pathway that leads to exciting destinations and prosperous lives. Their need to learn English is socioeconomic and political—proficiency in English offers higher social status, a more comfortable life, and powerful political standing. Thus, the English language is commodified as a utility language.

As a commodity, English is transformed, adapted, and submitted to many local uses. According to David Crystal (1997), countries where English is the primary language have developed “their own national varieties of English” such as “pidgin and creole” or the cyber English such as Chinglish, Konglish, and Singlish (p. 55). English-speaking diasporas have developed their own Englishes and are identified as Canadian English, American English, Caribbean English, Euro-English, South Asian English, etc., and they all have “thousands of differences” among them (p. 131). Crystal observes that “dialects emerge because they give identity to the groups which own them. … International varieties thus express national identities” (p. 133). Speakers of English in one region do not use the language exactly the same way as do speakers in other regions; therefore, they retain their unique identities, maintaining linguistic and cultural diversities (see Appendix A for examples of Englishes).
The number of people who speak English as a second or as a foreign language is far greater than those who speak English as their first language (Smith, 1987). Thus, the ownership of English is now a global one. This may mean that the commodified English language is independent of social controls as no specific culture can claim English as its own. Larry Smith explains that a language may be considered an international or a global language when people use it as a second language or as a language other than one’s mother tongue. He further delineates several characteristics of a truly global utility language that only English now holds:

1) There is no necessity for second language speakers to internalize the cultural norms or behavior of the mother tongue speakers of a language to use it effectively.

2) An international language becomes denationalized. It is not the property of its mother tongue speakers.

3) Since English as an international language plays a purely functional role, the goal of teaching it is to facilitate communication of learners’ ideas and culture in an English medium. (pp. 38, 39)

According to Smith, it is not necessary to become more like Americans/British/Canadians or any other English speaker in order to appropriate the language, nor is there a need to appreciate the English culture and its practices in order to use the language effectively. As such, the technical/communicative aspect of the language is somewhat separated from its culture and politics.

Speakers of English as a second or foreign language continue to alter it to suit their particular needs. bell hooks (1994), a Black feminist and English language teacher, says: “Beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination ... English was altered, transformed, and became a different speech” (p. 170). English is a tool for communications used for
different reasons in different parts of the world. Learning English as a second or as a foreign language affords new opportunities and diversified outlooks. Speaking more than one language certainly enriches the mind and the soul. Furthermore, the use of English as a global utility language “might build a unitary world, but one that celebrates difference” (Jones, 2000, p. 34). Lea Na also believes that “learning [English] and having good communication would be a way of bringing peace to the world eventually” (personal correspondence, July 25, 2004).

Globalization provides a space for social and personal progress and increases interaction and relationships between nations and people. Proficiency in English means new life-styles, opportunities for transnational mobility, and a valuable investment in education, jobs, travel, and entertainment. Bilingualism and/or multilingualism are valuable assets for a fulfilled life. My ESL student from Korea writes: “I like to know other cultures and for that I need English. Learning English helps [me] understand your culture and explain to you my culture” (journal entry, July 2, 2003).

**English: A tool for empowerment.** At the end of Chapter Three, I discussed empowerment within the framework of the independent learner. I identified the sources that empowered my participants and me, such as our passion for learning, our motivation to follow inner voices and to fulfill dreams, our courage to explore higher education. The English language introduced us to its rich literature and thus expanded our knowledge.

In this Chapter, I discuss how linguistic competence empowers learners with confidence to overcome challenges such as pronunciation and sociocultural misinterpretations. Attaining English language proficiency provides us with a communicative skill that is valued as an investment not only for higher paying jobs but also for socioeconomic status. Most important, we feel empowered because, as Lea Na
It shows intelligence to speak English. Not many women in Xxx speak English. When we speak English it means we have high education.” (November 26, 2004). Kamal Sridhar (1996) points out that “English empowers the speaker to gain access to higher education. ... English also bestows a tangible competitive advantage and a certain intangible glamour or prestige value” (p. 53). It is not only the linguistic utility of English that is valued here but also what the language stands for—its extravagant media culture, its political and economic power, its innovations in electronic technology, its large knowledge bank, and its prestigious educational institutions. Speaking English means access to global knowledge economy and its lucrative markets; thus, fluency in English translates into higher education, higher income, and higher social standing. It is this seduction of the culture of the English language that attracts millions of people into its web.

Learners of English as a second or foreign language around the globe are not necessarily attracted to English literature but to its language of technology and pop culture—its utility. Similarly, English learned at workplaces in Canada is also used as a commodity to enhance one’s capacities to become a productive employee and to advance her or his career. English is modified to accommodate situated needs and to empower the learner. For example, Arminé has created a comfortable position in her workplace where she modifies words and with humour says that she is “enriching” the English dictionary.

English as a global utility language is a tool for communication, a tool adapted to individual needs, and thus a tool for empowerment. We are able to tell our stories because we have language—a common language that you and I understand. We speak, listen, interconnect, and thus communicate. We share a language, a culture, and most important, we share our experiences. We continue learning and crafting our future, independent, strong, and courageous.
**Conclusion**

My participants and I had coherent and comprehensible conversations because we had learned a common language. Our discussions made sense to us because we had learned the situatedness of our interactions as students, teachers, and friends. Our dialogue was meaningful because we had accumulated a repertoire of sociocultural values and thus learned the appropriateness of speech exchange. English language introduced us to new literature through which we developed new perspectives; it interconnected us with new people from whom we learned new perspectives; it taught us new sports that sharpened our physical, mental, and social capacities; and it provided us with a valuable tool to succeed in our feat. The pathway of learning English took us not only to the intellectual playground but also into the professional workplace.

**Afterthought**

As I reflect on my conversation with Lea Na, Kaori, and Vera—the international students—I realize that higher education is a privilege (Bowles, 2001). It is the privilege of those who have seized opportunities, who have financial and emotional support, and who have learned to be independent.

Global education, through hybrid and electronic programs, provides a space for social and personal change, increases interaction amongst the people of the world, and creates opportunities for new learning. In addition, lifelong learning promotes the forging of new identities and the reevaluation of established social values and schema. Education is essential for social progress. Women’s empowerment can be achieved only if all women have full and equal access to education.

However, who has access to global education? Article 26 of the United Nations’ (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “Everyone has the right to
education. ... Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (p. 5). Are all women in the world capable of reading the Human Rights Declaration, which incidentally, guarantees all women equal status and rights with men (Article 2)? According to a recent UNESCO (2005) report, illiteracy in the developed world is under 10%, but in the developing world, it ranges from 33 to 66% (p. 1). The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2005) estimates that two thirds of the world’s 875 million illiterate adults are women—that is, 583 million women who cannot read and write (p. 1). In Southern Asia, nearly three in five women are uneducated, and it is estimated that half of all women in Africa and in the Arab region are still illiterate (UNESCO Women Watch, 2000, p. 1).

Acknowledging the gravity of the situation, UNESCO Education Today (2004) calls for 30 million teachers to achieve Education for All (EFA) by 2015 and reports that “hundreds of thousands of activists, in one hundred-ten countries, are gearing up for the EFA project as UNESCO’s education staff set their sights on developing projects to assist countries in providing education” (p. 1).

Great efforts continue to improve literacies in the world. English language teaching may have political and economic controlling effects, but the language is a passport to wider opportunities in education and mobility.
CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY

For me there is only the traveling on paths that have heart, on any path that may have heart. There I travel, and the only worthwhile challenge is to traverse its full length. And there I travel looking, looking, breathlessly.
— Carlos Castaneda, 1998, p. xxvi

Braiding

I visited my mother and found her knitting a beautiful sweater for me. Appreciating her intricate pattern, I asked her to teach me the stitches. At the end of the day she gave me her extra needles and some wool. Going through her craft tools, I found a wooden spool that had five nails at one end of it. I asked what that was for and she explained that my father had made that for her and she uses it to make ornamental strings and ropes. While she demonstrated how it is used and started braiding a beautiful string, I thought about how my participants’ stories are woven together with mine and create a colourful narrative. (personal story: Braiding)

When reading Mary Catherine Bateson’s (1994) Peripheral Visions, I was reminded of my experience with my mother: “Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories” (p. 11).

This chapter reveals the interconnections with my mentors, peers, and participants. It stories the braiding of my thesis. To be more precise, this is my narrative of the process of researching and writing. Here, I illustrate my approach to qualitative research design, why I chose the narrative methodology to construct my thesis project, why I chose phenomenology as both method and methodology, why I used the storying and writing methods to compile my raw data, how I selected my participants, when, where, and how I conducted interviews, how I unravelled my field data, why my findings are credible, and
what limitations I encountered. Throughout this chapter, I narrate how I kept Castaneda’s (1998) words in mind and traveled on paths where I found hearts and learning partners. I traveled and met new challenges. I traveled and learned.

Research Perspective

When I enrolled in the Research Theory course as part of my Master of Education program, all I was certain of was that I wanted to engage in qualitative research and explore a topic that I was passionate about. I was fortunate to have classmates who were also inclined towards qualitative research and a professor who was experienced in the field; therefore, as a group, we focused on developing our individual research perspectives. Every week, I was fascinated not only by the new research theories and paradigms but also by the personal stories of our group, for each brought to the class her or his unique worldview and life experience. At the end of the course, I was convinced that research inquiry is an open-ended process rooted in individual, contextual, temporal, and spatial experiences. The most important element of researching for me was the human dynamic, especially its unique emotional and psychological aspects. With Magda Gere Lewis (1993), I believed that

our moments of experience transform our ways of seeing not only what is to follow, but as well, what has gone before. [Experiences] re/form our consciousness at the moment of their generation, uncover understandings, and generate constantly new visions of past events and future possibilities. (p.15)

I led a life with many twists and turns, but one thing that has remained constant throughout was my lifelong learning—learning English. Therefore, I was curious to uncover the compelling reasons for my persistence. I decided to explore my lived experiences and unravel the phenomenon of learning English.
Research is a unique narrative that includes the researcher, the participants, and the reader, hence constituting a social construction and a collaborative relationship (Carter, 1993; Cole & Knowles, 2001; Murray, 2003). I am fully aware of the subjective—as opposed to the objective—basis of research. This allows me to recognize my reflexivity while gathering and interpreting data. I concur with Castaneda (1998) that “field notes disclose the subjective version of what [we] perceive while undergoing the experience” (p. xxxiii). I see only through my own lenses, and thus my observations are quite different from everyone else’s—I see what I want to and what I am conditioned to see. I therefore recognize my own biases and positionality in this narrative.

Laurel Richardson (1994) explains: “What something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them” (p. 518). For example, what I interpret as gender-based submissiveness, my friend understands as respectfulness to her husband. Here, our respective interpretations stem from our personal beliefs and the social context through which we have each constructed very different narratives (discourses). My observations and interpretations are the reconstruction of my experiences at that particular time and place.

Just as my research is my own particular expression, almost autobiographical (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Neumann, 1998), my narrative is my “privilege” and “authority” of authoring (Richardson, 1990, p. 26). As the narrator, I am responsible for the text I generate. I am sensitive and speak about rather than for my participants. However, as Richardson also points out: “No matter how we stage the text, we—as authors—are doing the staging. As we speak about the people we study, we also speak for them. As we inscribe their lives, we bestow meaning and promulgate values” (p. 12). Every step of the
way, regardless of what methodology and methods I use, I am always present in my research as I interpret and construct meanings.

I could not, nor would I try to, separate my beliefs, attitudes, or both tacit and explicit knowledge from what I am researching. I am gendered as a woman, ethnically situated as an Armenian born in the Middle East, and thus see the world with my own set of eyes (Denzin, 1994). As a participant myself, I have the “insider privilege,” and thus I capture the complexity of my participants and my lived experiences (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 169). The result is a hermeneutical approach whereby my participants’ and my motives, the sociopolitical positions we speak in or from, and the audience we intend to address influence the perceptions and the narrative.

**Methodology and Methods Selection**

As I was introduced to new knowledge every week in my Research Theory class, I discovered new methodologies and methods as well as new styles of data analysis, interpretation, and writing. I came to understand my professor’s, Dr. Carmen Shields’s expressions that “realities are multiple,” “knowledge is constructed through personal experiences as it integrates with the worlds we live in,” “we tell the story of our storied life,” and “bias becomes biography” (class notes, Winter 2003). I embraced the ideology that research is a subjective enterprise, for personal experiences are inextricably intertwined with everyday life (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000; Cole & Knowles, 2001; Dewey, 1938; Richardson, 1994).

I was encouraged to adapt theoretical frameworks that suited my research topic, personal epistemology, and beliefs (Merriam & Simpson, 1995). Hence, I approached research from a postmodern feminist epistemology, as I was convinced that there was no *absolute* knowledge and that research findings were context driven, subjectively

Having these criteria in mind, I used the process of elimination to select methodologies and methods for my research. I did not hold a positivist research approach to prove an absolute truth by means of collecting empirical data. I was not interested in employing quantitative research methodologies whereby statistical frameworks sway the direction of the inquiry; for I believed that responses from human beings cannot always be defined accurately through figures and numbers. Instead, I focused on qualitative research using heuristic (discovery) and hermeneutical (interpretive) approaches followed by dialectic reasoning (logical examination of ideas) in order to discover and interpret data. Norman Denzin (1994) asserts: “In the social sciences there is only interpretation. Nothing speaks for itself” (p. 500). Therefore, interpretation was the crucial skill to hone.

Narrative research appealed to me because I wanted to collect and document stories about learning English. I believed that “human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures” (Sarbin, 1986, p. 8). I was convinced that “storytelling is fundamental to the human research for meaning” as life is an unending story (Bateson, 1989, p. 34). My experiences have altered the course of my life, just as Nel Noddings (1991) had observed that “stories have the power to direct and change our lives” (p. 157). I remembered that my Grandmother’s lived and told stories about the first World War educated her and encouraged those who listened to her (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Heilbrun, 1988). With all this new knowledge, I finally
conceptualized a framework of how to incorporate my fascination for life stories into a narrative thesis project.

The concept of “storied lives” had been germinating in my mind for several years: *I was driving my then 12-year-old son to school one morning when he pointed to the person running to catch the bus and asked: “What do you think his story is, Mom?” “Maybe, he is late for work,” I said. “No, not just that. I mean his life story, who is he?” he replied. By the time we arrived at school, Matt had constructed an elaborate story about the man. For the next few days, Matt and I composed the life story of a few other people we observed while driving to school.* (personal story: Driving to School)

Since then, I carry with me a fascination for people’s life stories.

However, I was not interested in writing my participants’ life history but was curious to explore the recollected moments of learning English; thus, biography was not the appropriate research method for my intended topic (Creswell, 2003, 2005). If I had wished to implement new ways to teach adults a new language and intended to create a student-centred curriculum, or to demonstrate that Toronto needs English as a second language programs at every public library, or to advocate that all newcomers to Canada must enrol in ESL programs, then I would have conducted action research (McNiff, 2000). If I had intended to conduct an in-depth analysis of a specific individual or a group, then I would have employed the case study methodology (Stake, 1994). However, I was not interested in representing any one and I did not seek to focus on a particular aspect of learning English but rather was curious about my participants’ experiences in learning English in a broader context. Ethnography appeared to have been suited for my topic as it employed reflexivity and subjectivity in data analysis and interpretations, but I
was not interested in observing my participants in the process of learning English (Castaneda, 1998; Glesne, 1999). Furthermore, in ethnographic fieldwork, it is imperative to study the sociopolitical and economic forces that impact participants’ behaviour, which I did not intend to engage in deeply at this time. Grounded theory emphasizes developing a substantive theory ground up (Creswell, 2003). Often, it combines both quantitative and qualitative data while an initial theory is “generated,” tested, “elaborated, and modified as incoming data are meticulously” incorporated (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). If I were to discover new teaching and learning theories for adults and believed that students should be involved in that process, then I would have engaged in grounded theory. My intent was to allow my participants to recall the time of their studies, reflect on the circumstances, and then convey to me their lived experiences, mostly in a narrative format.

The research methodology best suited for my project was phenomenology. Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences and the discovery of the essence of a phenomenon. Max Van Manen (1997) conceptualizes phenomenology as follows: “the description of the experimental meanings we live as we live them,” “the human scientific study of phenomena,” “the attentive practice of thoughtfulness,” “a search for what it means to be human,” and “a poetizing activity” (pp. 8-13). Poetizing because as poetry, phenomenological research does not ask for a conclusion or a summary of the study. It captures the original voice of the participants and speaks the topic rather than merely “speaking of it” (Van Manen, p. 13). For the purpose of authenticity and credibility, I intended to keep my participants visible in my thesis.

Biography, ethnography, case study, and grounded theory as methodologies did not suit my research interest, but each contributed practices that I believed beneficial to my
data collection and analysis. Phenomenology, as a research methodology, was inclusive of certain important approaches found in the above methodologies. For example, from the biography, it borrowed the intent to explore the life of a person; from grounded theory, it employed the inductive process of extracting theory out of the data (Moustakas, 1994); from case study, it adopted in-depth study and analysis concepts; and from ethnography, it implemented the reflexivity and interpretative research approaches. My aim was to explore my participants' learning experiences, to extract some theory from those experiences, to concurrently unravel my data, and finally, to interpret my findings. The result was a phenomenological narrative inquiry.

Phenomenology as a methodology enabled me to examine my participants' as well as my own personal experiences of learning English. I used heuristic and hermeneutic frameworks, discovered meanings through my interpretations, and explained the essence of the experience(s). I evoked understandings through writing and telling stories. Van Manen (1997) points out that "responsive-reflective writing is the very activity of doing phenomenology" (p. 132). This meant that I did not predetermine what I wanted to find out but rather was "presuppositionless" and discovered what a particular phenomenon meant as it was experienced (Becker, 1992, p. 42; Van Manen, 1997, p. 29). Van Manen explains that the phenomenological inquiry is "the interpretative examination of lived experience, ... a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive" (p. 39). In essence, I storied the lives of my participants in a particular situation, time, and place. This involved listening, reading, writing, interpreting, reconstructing, and retelling while creating yet another narrative through my own narration.
Richardson (1990) explains that "narrative is both a mode of reasoning and a mode of representation. People can apprehend the world narratively and people can tell about the world narratively" (p. 21). Therefore, having had narrative phenomenology as a framework for methodology, I interpreted my participants' experiences and, using the narrative method, I expressed these meanings in writing.

I engaged in narrative styles of writing (autobiography, ethnography, and anecdote) in spoken (face-to-face interviews) or written (journaling) formats (Carter, 1993). Lea Na, Nora, and Vera submitted written stories, but Armine, Kaori, and Pat agreed to interviews only. Narrative writing enhanced my data collection and learning process, for writing informs what I know, how I know, what I think I do not know, and what I must know. Writing revealed the internal and external forces that influenced my knowing. Writing was a "dynamic, creative process," as well as a "method of inquiry," and "discovery" (Richardson, 1994, p. 517). For example, in the process of writing my proposal, I inquired and acquired information about phenomenology, discovered its meaning and function, and, as a result, refined my intended research hypothesis to reflect the phenomenological thinking. Not only did I want to examine the experiences of learning English as an adult, but I also wanted to unravel the reason why I wished to examine this experience. What was compelling me to unravel the essence of learning English? I was able to evoke dialectic reasoning through writing and "self-dialogue" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 16).

Phenomenological writing is the process and not the product of the research. Van Manen (1997) elucidates the relationship between methodology and method: "The object of human science research is essentially a linguistic project. ... To do research in a phenomenological sense is ... always a bringing to speech of something. And this ... is
most commonly a writing activity” (pp. 32, 125). To substantiate his argument, Van Manen cites an interview with then 70-year-old Jean-Paul Sartre, who shared his perception of himself after losing his sight: “I still think but because writing has become impossible for me, the real activity of thought has in some way been repressed. ... The essential moment ... to my life ... was that of writing itself” (p. 126). For Sartre and Van Manen, not only is writing a method of narrating, but it is also a method of thinking, discovering, inquiring, and learning.

Writing and rewriting transformed my participants’ and my lived experiences into textual expressions, and the text became “a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 36). Reflexive, because as a participant, I had the insider’s insight into the learning experiences, hence (inter)subjective. It was through critical reflection that I remembered past events and related to them with my participants’ and to various authors’ experiences, thus grasping and capturing the essence of learning English. As Van Manen, and before him, Bateson (1989) suggest, I engaged in responsive and reflective writing styles and responded to new discoveries, reflected on available interpretations, and rewrote a new narrative. For example, when I interviewed my last participant, she related that she used silence as a defence mechanism. I had not considered silence from that perspective. Arminé’s comment intrigued me and triggered further research. Subsequently, I engaged in critical reflection and dialectic reasoning and surprised myself with the discovery of a new interpretation, which led to rewriting and adding a valuable section to my thesis. I practiced the quadruple R: Reflexivity, Reflectivity, Responsiveness, and Rewriting.
The Participants and Ethical Considerations

By the end of my Research Theory class, I had decided that I was going to conduct a narrative phenomenological research and explore personal stories of a few women, including myself. My first step was to pay particular attention to those who fit my own profile—middle age, mother, English as the other language, passionate about learning, and loves challenges. In every class, I befriended classmates, and at the same time I kept in touch with a few acquaintances outside the university. When I completed all my course work, I took a few months to read and contemplate how to approach participants. I first met with the least likely participant to run a pilot test and practice my recruitment approach. She declined on the basis that she did not have time, she was not interested in my topic, and did not think that my research was focused. I learned a great deal from that meeting, such as how to intrigue, approach, and sustain interest in my topic. I wrote an abstract (see Appendix B) to hand out and decided that in the future I would talk about Carol Shields and Marjorie Anderson’s (2003) Dropped Threads 2—as I was greatly influenced by the book and had a vision of one day publishing my own compilation of stories. I bought several copies and planned to give them to my participants so that they would have examples of reflective and responsive short stories.

When I enrolled in the Proposal course, I submitted an application to the Senate Research Ethics Board at Brock University in order to obtain permission to conduct research with human participants. I received approval on June 22, 2004, file # 03-399 (see Appendix C). Accordingly, I had promised the anonymity of my participants and confidentiality of data (all names are pseudonyms; I refer to regions instead of specific countries). My consent form warned my participants that reflective thinking may trigger memories of suppressed incidents in their lives and ensured freedom of withdrawing from
participation at any time (see Appendix D). I conducted the interviews with great compassion, empathy, sensitivity, and respect. I paid equal attention to all that I heard. I used participants’ words when retelling their stories. However, with their consent, on occasions I edited sentences for better readability. I continue to keep in touch and express gratitude for their participation (see Appendix E).

**Participant Profiles**

I was auditing Dr. Latimer’s class, *The Reflective Practitioner*, for the purpose of learning more about reflectivity and getting to know her, as she had just agreed to supervise my thesis. Coincidently, Lea Na was enrolled in that same course. I had met her in a previous class and we occasionally emailed each other. When I asked her to be a participant, she agreed but said that her workload was heavy and that she might not have time to write for me. Upon consultation with Dr. Latimer, I asked Lea Na to write some of her weekly reflective journaling assignments around the topic of learning English and that way, when she completed the course, she would pass on some of her journals as she considered them appropriate for my research. She did.

Lea Na is a mother of two teenagers. She is an international student and hopes to complete her M.Ed. program this year. The second time we met for a formal interview, Lea Na, on her initiative, had invited two of her friends, who agreed that I could use their stories in my thesis. Kaori and Vera are also international students in the M.Ed. program. Kaori is a mother of two young children. Vera, on the other hand, is single. All 3 women are from the Far East and are teachers on sabbatical for 2 years, intending to return and teach English.

I met Nora through my daughter, who had assisted her in the production of a play. Nora was enthusiastic about my topic and agreed to participate and contribute to my
thesis. She is an actor and an art teacher. She has three children, now in their early 20s. Like me, she was born in the Middle East, but when the region became politically unstable, she left with her family. Nora loved the book, *Dropped Threads 2*, and I believe that she was inspired by it. Nora wrote her own stories and emailed them to me. The two of us also had three face-to-face interviews at different times—twice in her house and once at mine.

Pat and I had met in another M.Ed. course. She teaches at a reputable college. She came to Canada about 30 years ago from Eastern Europe. She is a daughter, sister, mother, wife, teacher, and student all at the same time. Pat agreed to interviews but did not want to write her own stories. She said that she had enough writing to do for her own courses and did not particularly like to write. We met at her office three times and had an hour-long discussion each time.

Arminé, a full-time artist and a mother, is a friend of Nora. When Nora and I were discussing how in the future we could put together our stories in a screenplay format, she mentioned that Arminé's story would bring another perspective. That was an organic method of finding a participant. Jennifer Mason (2002) explains that "an organic practice ... is something which grows and develops throughout the research process, in ways that are crucially related to the emerging shape of the research project" (p. 127). Without a doubt, my field data grew from the fertile soil of our personal experiences—themes and new concepts surfaced from each of our interactions.

I did not involve male participants in my research because I believed that that would have changed the dynamic of the group and would have obliged me to engage in gender comparative issues, which were beyond the scope of this project. Furthermore, as a woman, I did not feel qualified to extract the essence of male experiences of learning.
Data Collection

I convened with each of my participants face-to-face and explained the nature of my research, the methodology and methods I was employing, and the purpose of documenting stories. I also pointed out that reflective thinking would enhance their critical thinking and creative writing skills. Then I asked them to read the consent form I had prepared and to sign it if they were in agreement with the conditions. For Arminé, Kaori, Pat, and Vera, I crossed out the agreement to write stories and replaced it with telling stories. I promised that I would share my interpretations of the stories with them and seek their approval. I explained that I was open to any information they might submit in any format but that their stories should be related to learning. They also agreed to have the interviews recorded (my recorder was a very small, unobtrusive gadget, which, once I placed down, I avoided directing attention to it). I had a pad and a pen on the table, which I used to write down words to remind me to ask particular clarifying questions or to talk about them in the future. I avoided prying for intimate information. My questions were mainly worded as “what happened” instead of “why did it happen,” as I did not want to intrude more than I had to (S. J. Butler, 1997). My goal was to provide a comfortable space for my participants to express themselves freely, to be present listening to what they had to say, and to be attentive to what they did not say. Furthermore, as a very private person myself, I wanted to feel comfortable as well and not seek “a voyeuristic access to deeply private life stories” (Lewis, 1993, p. 9). I was alertly responsive and sensitively inquisitive (Moustakas, 1990; Soltis, 2001).

I shared with my participants some of my stories, which was an indirect approach to stimulate conversation and reassure them that I had had a similar experience, although in doing so, I risked influencing their choices of recollecting and reconstructing their stories.
Kathy Carter (1993) points out that personal stories “are told for a purpose” and that stories “are not merely raw data ... but products of a fundamentally interpretive process that is shaped by the moralistic impulses of the author and by narrative forces or requirements” (pp. 8, 9). I was mindful not to direct the interview but to let my participants take the conversation where they wanted. This questioning process was inductive and responsive (S. J. Butler, 1997). However, I did ask open-ended questions such as when and where they started learning English, what were the circumstances, and who else was involved in the process.

I had read in Carol Becker (1992) that

a good research question evokes memories of events that have been lived through rather than thoughts about the phenomenon. ... The researcher must be resourcefully responsive without leading, join the other person’s life-world without intruding, be personably goal oriented, and be flexibly focused. (pp. 38, 41)

I must admit that I came across Becker’s passage after my first interview with Nora; subsequently, I revised my questions and worded them so as to evoke memories of events rather than thoughts (see Appendix F). After that, I was more successful in triggering memories of events in my participants and myself.

After each interview, I wrote my observations in my journal and then, within a few days, I transcribed the tape-recorded interview. I printed all pages, highlighted key words and expressions, wrote comments on the margins, and attempted to construct an initial interpretation. I emailed my participants thanking them for the interviews or the written stories and asked for further reflection on certain subjects and/or that they think about new topics that arose from previous conversations to discuss in the future. For example, when Nora wrote about remembering her mother’s words that “education is the key to
success.” I replied as follows: “Why do you think your mother believed this, for in her days there were many successful people who had very little or no education?” In response, Nora told me another story that she remembered and that her mother “truly believed that EDUCATION IS ENLIGHTENMENT!” Often, I wrote back to my participants saying: “You mentioned such and such. Do you have a specific story to shed light on that issue? I remember an incident that happened to me when I did this and that ...” (see Appendix G). I was following Clark Moustakas’s (1990) advice that in heuristic investigations, verification is enhanced by returning to the research participants, sharing with them the meanings and essences of the phenomenon as derived from reflection on and analysis of ... the material, and seeking their assessment for comprehensiveness and accuracy. (pp. 18, 19)

Not only was I present for my participants, but they in turn were there and present for me—we listened attentively. Carolyn Heilbrun (1988) encourages women to share their experiences because she believes that “their private and often painful experience ... will enable them to achieve a true description of the world, and to free and encourage one another” (p. 68). She also urges to “share the wonderful energy of work in the public sphere” (p. 108). Our shared experiences encouraged us as Heilbrun had suggested, and our stories triggered each other’s memories just as Aida Hurtado (1996) has said: “knowledge is participatory and collective” (p. 386).

**Unravelling the Data**

I did not analyze the data; instead, I unravelled the experiences. I was not interested in analyzing learning behaviours but rather in extracting reasons for learning from personal stories. I approached this practice of constructing meaning in terms of uncovering or unravelling and not scrutinizing or analyzing.
During the time I collected my field data, from July 2004 to April 2005, I researched the common themes or the interesting concepts that were arising from my participants' and my personal experiences. I accumulated a vast annotated bibliography that helped me unravel, interpret, and support my field data. My basic tools were writing for discovery and hermeneutics for interpretation (Huff, 1999; Moustakas, 1994; Richardson, 1994; Van Manen, 1997).

I chronicled the major events in my life on one large piece of paper. This chart illustrated five columns where I had stated my age, the event, description of the event, people involved, and the impact of the event. I read and reread the chart, and every time I noticed yet another word or expression that required further writing and unravelling. Often, when I rewrote the events in more detail, I remembered anecdotes and people's voices. The chart was full of "Aha!" and "Yes!" moments, and the process of preparing it was like braiding a long string.

I created an Excel chart showing my participants' and my stories at a glance. I summarized the experiences and/or described them with a few words. I colour-coded the text font and sorted them in themes, such as language, hardship, silence, challenge, and so forth. This exercise enabled me to link the common themes. When I was writing Chapter Three and Chapter Four, the Excel sheets assisted me in keeping track of what I had already written about and what had remained for discussion.

It is through writing heuristically that I was able to uncover motivations for my need to learn English that went beyond functional necessity. Decades later, when I relived my experiences and started thinking/writing with a hermeneutical and phenomenological approach, I discovered new meanings in my past actions and was confident and willing to articulate them. Writing in English had been a challenge for me,
but narrative writing was not only honing my writing skills but was also enabling me to think critically. I found my own words in Anaïs Nin’s (1974):

We write to heighten our own awareness of life, we write to lure and enchant and console others. ... We write to taste life twice, in the moment, and in retrospection.

... We write to be able to transcend our life, to reach beyond it. We write to teach ourselves to speak with others, to record the journey into the labyrinth, we write to expand our world. (p. 149)

I wrote to think critically.

Different styles of writing improved my skills of reflecting, responding, and rewriting, which were the ways I accumulated and unravelled my data. Writing anecdotes was useful to relive unique moments in my life. Unravelling the events rendered their elusive meanings comprehensible. For example, if I had not captured my experiences in text, I would not have understood that playing baseball was an integral part of learning English.

The journal entries reminded me of certain events that I had otherwise forgotten. Similarly, old photographs triggered memories. Pictures inspired new thoughts, and artwork illustrated new worldviews. Even though journaling is a vital research tool, I must acknowledge that self-censorship in autobiographical writing can be a limiting factor, especially when journaling for a purpose or for an audience (Lewis, 1993; Randall & Kenyon, 2001; Sharkey, 2004). I trust that my participants and I were open and frank when we journaled.

The use of metaphor was an attempt to bring creativity into my writing. At the same time, I was able to understand the phenomenon of writing in terms of a challenge, the process of researching in terms of braiding a string, the concept of learning in terms of
playing in a playground, and the entire process of this project in terms of polishing a crystal. These images were meaningful in my unique discourse of learning; therefore, they assisted me in conveying my thoughts creatively.

Metaphors also helped me understand the process of data interpretation. For example, I visualized how my mother made a colourful string—each braid strengthened the next braid and at the same time added to its length. In this same way, I unravelled meanings from my data: each piece of information revealed an insight which led to another, and another. Lorri Neilsen (1998) uses another metaphor and describes interpretation as “an ecological process, a project of integrating and furthering sustainable growth” (p. 175). Both metaphors illustrate that interpretation is a dynamic process: growing, taking shape, and thus nurturing the research data.

To facilitate hermeneutic interpretations, I consulted supplementary literature and research conducted on women’s personal experiences, I followed my thesis supervisor’s and committee members’ suggestions, and I drew on my own life experience, personal epistemology, and critical thinking. I wrote a few paragraphs about epistemology and hermeneutics, for that was how I thoroughly comprehended new concepts: Epistemology is the study of how knowledge is gained or the ways of knowing. Its study dates back to Plato (427-347 B.C.), who defined epistemology as simply the awareness of “ideas and forms” (cited in Heylighen, 1993, p. 1). Kant (1724-1804), on the other hand, explained that epistemology is the “metaphysical knowledge lying beyond experience” and “a system of categories” consisting of “concepts of reflections” (cited in Baird & Kaufmann, 1997, pp. 85-88, 830, 864). Terminologies that are more contemporary are: logical positivism, where knowledge is the outcome of scientific evidence (Creswell, 2003); “hermeneutics,” in which meaning is derived from interpretative conclusions (Van
Manen, 1997); critical theory, where context and circumstances are the focus of knowledge (Brookfield, 1990). And finally, a very different understanding of epistemology is the concept of "memetics, that knowledge can be transmitted from one source to another" (Heylighen, p. 4). Here, the knowledge is more important than its source because the source might disappear while knowledge lingers on for as long as it is retained by some sources and beliefs.

Hermeneutics is the art of reading and interpreting a text. It is the understanding of the intended meaning of the text. The practice began as the interpretation of Biblical texts. Hermeneutic interpretation involves both author and audience—one must recognize why the text was written and who the targeted readers are. Moustakas (1994) explains:

Interpretation unmasks what is hidden behind the objective phenomena. ...

Interpretation is not an isolated activity. ... The reflective-interpretative process includes not only a description of the experience as it appears in consciousness but also an analysis and astute interpretation of the underlying conditions, historically and aesthetically, that account for the experience. (pp. 9, 10)

Writing My Thesis

I began the process of writing this thesis in April 2004 when I recorded past events in my journal and designed my life chart. I tried to maintain an ongoing autobiographical writing routine. I wrote more formally when I prepared my Ethics application and then essayed my proposal.

Writing is my challenge. It takes a long time to compose my thoughts, to find courage, to allocate a specific time, and to actually sit down and write. Perhaps that is why I chose writing as a method: to be challenged and to overcome the challenge. I have a subconscious ritual that I follow before I begin writing. I must make numerous trips to
the library and bring as many books as I can possibly carry in my special cloth bags. I must read and annotate, read and annotate until my eyes are red and my wrist is aching. I must organize all my materials in binders and label them in a logical order, which by the way may appear logical only to me. I then must use my yellow papers and my fountain pen to outline what I intend to write—again, it is my kind of outline, that to anyone else would appear a distorted mess. I must do some sewing. I must walk in and around the house with my teacup in one hand, a pencil in the other, and a Post-it pad in my pocket. I must attend to my plants and flowers in the house. I must make myself a cup of strong Turkish coffee and sit by the window to drink it. And when I feel that my cup of knowledge is overflowing, then and only then can I sit down and type away. This process could take days, or weeks, even months. Some people call this “incubation” or “percolation” time (Goldberg, 2002); others label it as “pure procrastination.” I call it simply “prep” time.

To my surprise, I discovered that I am not alone in this ritualistic bizarreness of commencing to write. Neilsen (1998) shares her experience:

My love affair with words, like any love affair, is fraught with tension and passion. To begin writing, I do a dance I have …: I read, I tidy the house, I ponder, flirt with an approach and then, with a shrug, abandon it, pore over books and papers and leave them open on the floor, the desk, the bed. … I move across many floors of understanding, shadow-dancing with many theories, until the gestures, the nuances of these ideas become part of me, part of how my mind moves into words and the life they carry. … To write, I must wade into a textual ocean and disappear in order to appear. (pp. 180, 181)

I feel much better; I am not the only one with writing rituals.
Credibility

This thesis is not a replication of anyone else's research; however, it is influenced by Bateson's (1989) ethnographic book, *Composing a Life*, where she discusses the improvised lives of five women. When I was overwhelmed with my field data and I did not know how to organize it, I turned to Bateson for guidance. Her coherent and intuitive narrative helped me focus on specific themes in my stories and restory them for my readers. For me, Bateson's work supports the credibility of narrative research, and hence I strived to follow her style of writing.

My thesis does not provide a formula for someone else to be able to duplicate my research. In fact, even I would not be able to duplicate my own work, for narrative research is contextual, temporal, and spatial (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I strongly believe that had I conducted this research at another time or if I were to undertake it in the future, the outcome would have been and would definitely be quite different, because life circumstances change, mindsets evolve, and new knowledge surfaces every day. For example:

*Pat was very distracted during our third interview because she had misplaced her keys and was worried about how to get home, etc. She was not able to concentrate. I think my presence added further stress to her situation. I suggested that we reschedule our meeting, but she felt that we should proceed, as she might not have time later that week. Needless to say, our discussion would have been quite different if Pat had not lost her keys that day.* (personal story: Pat's Lost Keys)

Perhaps this is a trivial example, but that is my point. Life is not predictable, and often little incidents alter the course of one's life. Therefore, in its uniqueness in time, place, and context, my thesis cannot be tested for research validity in the traditional practice that
seeks triangulation, generalizability, and replicability (Creswell, 2003). However, I hope that this thesis resonates trustworthiness and credibility when my readers find their stories in mine and their words in these pages. Coincidently, I find my thoughts in Becker’s (1992): “Because phenomenological investigations result in descriptive summaries of what something is, they evoke the reader’s similar and different experiences of the phenomenon and, through this resonation, convey a validness of the findings” (p. 48).

I certainly had doubts about the authenticity and creditability of my own research. I have written in my journal: How could personal experiences render my thesis authentic? Who’s going to believe that what I’ve written is credible? My trepidations somewhat dissipated at my Proposal Oral Defence:

*When I expressed my disappointment about not being able to extract many more stories from my participants even though I had shared some of my stories to inspire them, Dr. Alice Schutz, one of my committee members, said: “Why aren’t they forthcoming? That’s a good question. But you said something that was really interesting to me and that’s the notion of sharing and your writing a story. Perhaps you’re starting the discussion with something which happened to you. When I was a ..., I had this ... I’ll give you my story.” Dr. Schutz told us her story.* (journal entry, January 10, 2005: Oral Defence)

The benefit from that conversation was not only the sound advice I received on how to probe skilfully; it was also my realization that if I could evoke stories in my audience, then my research might be considered credible.

In my quest for knowledge, I did not seek a truth or one particular way of understanding the phenomenon of learning English as an adult. I did not guide my research rigidly, but rather let the research itself guide me. I was open to all perspectives,
any emerging themes, and any daunting ambiguity. I engaged in several research methods (phenomenology, writing, interviewing) and a few writing styles (journaling, autobiography, anecdotes, metaphors), all of which enhanced my skills of observing, listening, unravelling, and interpreting. Richardson (1994) came to my rescue (Oh! I love these serendipitous learning moments): “In postmodernist mixed-genre texts, we do not triangulate; we crystallize. We recognize that there are far more than ‘three sides’ from which to approach the world” (p. 522). Just like crystals that shine from different angles and under different lights or “reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions,” my research methods and writing styles provided a variety of interpretations and understandings of my topic; therefore, my constructed text for this particular thesis validated itself (Richardson, p. 522). My phenomenological narrative research, expressed in a variety of methods and writing styles, provided a reflective, creative, evocative, unique, and powerful narrative like a finely cut, lapped, and polished crystal—itself a metaphor of the entire process.

Assumptions and Limitations

I did not start my data collection with a blank sheet. I had certain expectations and even assumptions. I expected to hear extensive stories about difficulties in cultural integration, about struggles with multilingualism, about incidental or serendipitous learning, and resistance to life changes. To my surprise, my participants and I embraced challenges and self-directed our lives with positive attitudes and great courage. Interruptions did not deter us but rather provided us with other outlets to achieve our goals and fulfill our dreams.

I assumed that my participants would welcome the chance of improving their critical thinking and writing skills and be glad to write away their experiences for me. I
assumed that they would take guidance from the compilation of short stories, *Dropped Threads 2*, by Shields and Anderson (2003) and thus compose their own stories. I believe the book inspired Nora, as she mentioned that she enjoyed reading it. On the other hand, Pat said: "*This book is written by professional writers. I cannot write like them*" (interview, November 16, 2004).

I was apprehensive about my participants’ full engagement in my research. I was particularly concerned about Lea Na, Kaori, and Vera, who were newcomers to Canada. I was uneasy not only with their ability to express themselves fluently in English, but also with their worldviews and cultural orientations towards research. Teaching and learning in their countries of origin may have been very different (Sauvé, 2000); therefore, I worried that they might experience conflicting feelings and opinions about phenomenological research. I thought that perhaps they were not accustomed to questioning authorities and thus might not have developed critical and responsive-reflective writing skills. However, instead of sabotaging it, these shortcomings or different opinions added interesting insights to my research. This was the organic growth of my data, or what Neilsen (1998) calls the

naturalistic inquiries [that] focus upon the multiple realities, like the layers of an onion, nest within or complement one another. Each layer provides a different perspective of reality, and none can be considered more “true” than any other. Phenomena do not converge into a single “truth”, but diverge into many forms, multiple “truths.” (p. 55)

In other words, my assumptions and expected limitations took my research into deeper levels and steered it into other directions. I embraced the heuristic nature of narrative research and peeled off more layers of meaning than I had anticipated.
I was disappointed that I was unable to find participants who would all engage in reflective and responsive writing. Only 3 out of 6 participants (excluding myself) wrote their own experiences. I consider this a limitation because I am convinced that I would have received many more stories had they pushed their talents further. I console myself here with Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly’s (2000) observation that research participants “are people in all their complexity. They are people living storied lives on storied landscapes” (p. 145). I must also remember that “stories and the telling of them are always partial, always selective, always open to interrogation” (Neilsen, 1998, p. 98).

Regardless, I continue asking myself: Did I create a safe space for my participants? I would like to believe that I did. Four of my participants said that they felt comfortable talking to me. I now regret not conducting interviews with Pat outside her college because she may have had more stories to tell. Perhaps her environment was not a safe place to express herself freely (Soltis, 2001). Or maybe it was not appropriate to ask her about her early days of learning in a space where she is the teacher and not the learner.

A more personal limitation I experienced was health and age related. For the best part of my life, I have worked behind a desk, drawing, drafting, and computing. Therefore, I have developed carpal tunnel syndrome and suffer from lower back and neck pains. I can no longer sit and work more than an hour at a time. This meant that I had to interrupt my writing, stand up, and walk around.

Not too long ago, I decided to alternate my working position. I placed my monitor and keyboard on an elevated table and put my notes on a wicker box on top of my desk. It worked well. My husband walked in and, noticing my unusual set-up, said: “I give you an ‘E’ for effort.” “Why not an ‘E’ for excellence?” I replied. “I would have built something better,” he gloated. “OK, my peacock ....” My
response gave rise to a lengthy discussion about feminism and then consultation on how to improve my workspace. (personal story: The Elevated Table)

This story reveals two thoughts: first, a physical limitation that interrupts my writing and second, unexpected interruptions, which lead to more interruptions.

When working on my thesis, I did not dwell on the discomforts and the interruptions I constantly experienced. But now, I cannot help but wonder about the effects of these distractions on my thinking and productivity. Then again, I forget the complexity of trying to maintain a harmonious life. I join Neilsen (1998) and say: "And in the middle is life" (p. 168).

**Conclusion**

This thesis is my subjective expression—a personal narrative. The research methodology and methods I employed reflect my interests and the epistemology available to me through my tacit and explicit knowledge. My participants and I observe through our own lenses, see according to our own unique point of reference, and understand our world based on our personal narratives. I believe that knowledge is constructed subjectively, temporally, and spatially.

Narrative phenomenology, both as method and methodology, enabled me to explore the lived experiences of 7 women, including myself, and grasp the essence of the phenomenon of learning English as an adult. I used the interviewing and writing methods to collect data. I unravelled my field data through responsive writing and reflective interpretation while my focus remained heuristic and hermeneutical; heuristic because through the process of data collection and unravelling, I discovered new meanings in our lived experiences; hermeneutical, because my reflections and understanding were always interpretative.
My participants’ voices are audible in this thesis, as I have quoted their stories in their own words; however, I remain the author, as I reconstructed and interpreted the stories for the purpose of completing my research. This narrative inquiry is Arminé’s, Lea Na’s, Kaori’s, Nora’s, Pat’s, Vera’s, and Arpi’s stories lived and stories told.

Afterthought

I really enjoyed writing this chapter, as it reacquainted me with those who have heart and with whom I sat and learned to braid a colourful string. What surprised me was the process of writing and its power of discovery and meaning reconstruction. There I was, at the end of my data collection, feeling disappointed that I did not have enough to write about; in reality I was handed a basket full of colourful threads; all I had to do was sort them out and plan what to make with them. Fortunately, when I started writing and unravelling my data, voices as well as silences overfilled my cup of knowledge, poured out of my brain, into my fingers, and onto my computer screen, filling these pages. I thank you all, participants, mentors, editors, authors, proofreaders, strangers, friends, electronic gadgets, and loved ones.

Finally, as I have not yet formally introduced myself, this is who I am: Mother of Ani and Matthew, ages 29 and 17, wife of Daved, daughter to Sonia and Stephan, sister to three brothers, niece to five aunts/uncles, the oldest of 21 cousins, house manager, caretaker of 27 African violets, three Christmas cacti, one ever-blooming geranium, two shamrocks, ..., a freelance graphic designer, a part-time teacher, and a lifelong student.

*It was an autumn morning. She was dressed and ready for her first day of school.*

*The moment she had been dreaming about. It took her a little longer but the experiences she had along the path to get to this point can be equivocated with several degrees, degrees in the study of life. Her husband took a photo of her*
standing proudly with her daughter. Neither the daughter nor her husband understood the weight and intensity of that moment. I am beginning to understand now. I remember thinking to myself this is kind of embarrassing and why is she making such a big deal anyway. Will I be proud to introduce her as my Mom? I bet no one is lucky enough to share this experience with their Mother. We sat side by side in a grand lecture hall and out came Dr. Doba Goodman. Mom soaked in every word. Everything meant something – almost elucidating a life, reverberating an experience. For me, it went in one ear and out the other. She attempted to study with me and to discuss concepts but I would have none of it. I said that I could do it on my own. Needless to say she kicked my ass in the course. (may you be rewarded, dear Mom). I am proud of you. You are my inspiration. Your experience will inspire the many women who envision Canada as the land where they can follow their dreams and be all that they have dreamt of being.

– Your daughter, Ani, April 2005 (a reflection: Mom’s First Day of School)
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

I had little choice but to follow life where it took me.

– Mary Catherine Bateson, 1989, p. 32

Where Am I Now?

"I've lived the gift of 53 years, what should I do with it?" I wrote this in my journal, July 2004, at the end of my last M.Ed. course. Since then, I have immersed myself in research and writing. However, often my mind has wandered into my future:

I was annotating Carolyn Heilbrun's (1988) Writing A Woman's Life, and quoting her: "We must begin to tell the truth, in groups, to one another. Modern feminism began that way, and we have lost, through shame or fear of ridicule, that important collective phenomenon. ... There will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and the stories of men" (p. 45), when I could not ignore the image that flashed in front of my eyes: a group of female students sitting at a circular table and talking. I envisioned my own Hone-Your-Skills Centre, where I was mentoring a group of students and assisting them in their writing projects, their difficulty in time management, their progress in critical thinking and reflection, their inquiries about idioms, their frustrations of linguistic miscommunications. I was encouraging them to persist and to raise their voices. My vision disappeared as I recalled a real incident, a whisper:

At the end of the meeting, Lea Na, Kaori, Vera, and I stood in front of the library doors saying our goodbyes. I reached to hug, remembering that in our conversation earlier they had mentioned that coming from another culture, they are not sure when to hug, kiss, or shake hands. Hugging Kaori softly, I said: "This is how I would say bye or greet a new friend." As I was letting my arms go, she
hugged me tightly and whispered, “thank you” in my ear. (personal story: A Vision; interview, November 26, 2004: The Hug and the Whisper)

I remember now that I experienced a moment of gratification at being able to teach something and reap its reward. I felt that I was at a perfect place, a fascinating place. I was in my playground, interconnecting, learning, creating a safe place, and teaching.

What Does Learning English Mean to Us?

Learning English is my passion. Like any passion, it has its moments of despair, its moments of excitement and disappointment, its moments of fun and frustration, its moments of gratification and disillusionment. Learning is like playing in the playground—skinned knees and pure joy.

Learning English guided my footsteps onto unexpected paths and into unpredictable places such as lecture halls and boardrooms. There, I met mentors and friends who influenced my thoughts and provided camaraderie. We shared personal experiences and discovered that learning binds us intellectually. Nora expressed that she has a passion for learning; Pat said that she loves learning new things; Arminé stated that learning is her life; Vera realized that she will learn until she dies; Kaori was convinced that she must learn because she is a teacher; and Lea Na admitted that the more she learned, the more she felt satisfied with her life. These statements compelled me to search for the essence of learning, which was rooted in our need to learn English. Intrigued, I probed and evoked our memories of learning moments. Our stories unpacked the challenges and implications of learning a new language in our adult years.

In this concluding chapter, I look back on my thesis and, one last time, unravel more meaning from my narrative. I recollect my participants’ and my experiences and reflect on my interpretation. I search for further insight into the significance of our
In this thesis, the past intersected with the present and created a space where my life and the lives of my participants interconnected. Our shared experiences merged and storied a new narrative—a narrative of women’s improvised and empowered lives. The foundation of this thesis was the lived, relived, retold, reexamined, and reinterpreted stories. This was an inquiry into the personal experiences of 7 women who, in their learning journey, demonstrated flexibility, creativity, persistence, and courage. Their stories revealed that they were motivated by their dreams and aspirations, their inner voices, and their passion for learning. Arminé, Kaori, Lea Na, Nora, Pat, Vera, and I learned to be self-directed and guided our steps into the academe. We were independent learners; even though social and political forces such as marriage, childbirth, war, emigration, divorce, relocation, and family obligations interrupted our lives, we improvised and persisted in our learning quest. Despite the silences imposed by patriarchal rules, inequities, and discriminations, with courage we raised our voices and carved new identities for ourselves. Learning English presented linguistic and communicative challenges: We were confused, frustrated, silenced, but at the same time empowered with a new communication tool that afforded us access to higher education and higher paying jobs. We continued our learning journey. We did not disappoint Virginia Woolf and whisk away in the background.

What compelled us to learn English and to attain higher education was the passion to improve our intellect and model lifelong learning as well as compassionate teaching. I
journaled the following after teaching an ESL class: "Teaching is gratifying at those moments when the students' eyes sparkle and they say: "Oh, oh, Yes" (November 20, 2001). Similarly, Nora once said: "When I see the shine in their eyes that says, 'Oh, I got it,' that's the joy of teaching. I have to be behind books, help and share my knowledge, and at the same time, learn from them" (interview, December 3, 2004: Sparkling Eyes). We are passionate teachers and learners.

Inserting yet another story in my conclusion demonstrates that stories are partial and narrative research is dynamic; for it is an organic process always growing.

**The So What**

*It is the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for living.*


**A Life of Learning and Teaching**

My participants' voices and mine contribute to the collective knowledge of women. This new knowledge may fill the lack of personal stories of learning English as adults in academic literature. Our recollected experiences are unique and tell a new story: Arminé, Kaori, Lea Na, Nora, Pat, Vera, and I are not intimidated by insensitive and discriminatory remarks any longer; we are now more confident as we continue to attain English language proficiency. At the same time, we are fortunate to have supportive families who help us in our moments of despair. We want to help other women in their frustrating moments, and thus we encourage the education community to work with all mature learners, not only with sensitivity but also with compassion.

Our persistence in continuing our education, even when we are middle-aged, demonstrates the importance we place on education. We model lives of accumulating
intellectual rather than material wealth. We hope that our self-confidence, gained through learning English and attaining higher education, will enable us to teach our students the power of the intellect in building a peaceful world. We wish to demonstrate, especially to our female readers, that the interrupted lives of women may evolve into improvised and empowered lives.

More Theory

Reading and rereading of my participants' recollected stories triggered memories of incidents from my own past. When I wrote down our experiences, I unravelled meanings that I would not have discovered had I not engaged in reflective-responsive thinking and writing. Similarly, when I reconstructed my participants' experiences reflexively, I uncovered underlying meanings not only in their but also in my stories. This writing process illustrated to me that narrative phenomenology and heuristic and hermeneutic research practices facilitate the extracting of the essence of the researched phenomena.

This thesis also confirms several of the adult learning models. Our stories revealed that we are definitely self-directed learners, have gathered a mass of experiences, are able to adjust our learning needs to our changing social roles, are seeking practical and applicable knowledge, and are introvertly motivated (Knowles & al., 1998; MacKeracher, 1996; Merriam, 2001; Mezirow, 1991). We add to this model the persistent and courageous adult learner whose life's discontinuities do not deter her but rather guide her to improvise and pursue learning.

Our tireless persistence in learning was our way of raising consciousness of the oppressions, inequities, and discriminations that exist in our society (hooks, 1994; Tisdell, 1998; Weiler, 1988). We refused to compromise our opinions about dominations or imposed silences and confronted our spouses, professors, and employers courageously
(Abbey, 1999; Bateson, 1989; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). We embraced diversity and spoke up against discriminations (Heilbrun, 1988; Lewis, 1993; Thompson, 2001). We believed that challenges, large or small, are conquered with small, persistent strides. Therefore, we reaffirm the feminist pedagogy that women’s way of learning is subjective, fluid, improvisational, and always within context (Bateson, 1989; Belenky et al., 1986).

**More Learning and Inquiry**

I was somewhat disappointed that not all of my participants engaged in reflective-responsive writing. I remain curious and wonder what our field data would have revealed if we all wrote heuristically. However, when Arminé, Kaori, and Pat agreed to interviews only, I was forced to hone my listening skill and transcribing talent. Furthermore, I learned to read their body language and hear the untold stories. I learned to be present.

I would welcome the opportunity to probe further the concepts of persistence, courage, and the power of inner voices and dreams as compelling motivators for learning. Each of these topics warrants further research and storying in order to understand the essence of their dynamic presence in adult learners.

The scope of my thesis did not permit me to include participants from additional backgrounds, such as women who have not learned English in a formal setting. I hope, in the future, to have the chance to compile more stories of women and unravel the compelling forces of learning not only English but learning in general. I believe that every woman has a unique story and a unique message (Randall & Kenyon, 2001); thus, I would feel a great loss if they remained untold. I invite other researchers to use narrative phenomenology in their research projects in order to establish a collective force advocating narrative inquiry and writing methodologies.
The Now What

For me, the most important element of researching was the human dynamic—working with my participants. They helped me to remember my own stories and uncover meanings in ambiguous moments of my learning. They assisted me in developing reflective and responsive thinking and writing skills. Furthermore, I successfully faced my challenge of writing and discovered that I could express myself in a mixed genre: narrative, autobiographical, anecdotal, and academic writing. This was an eclectic writing style—like a crystal with many sides that reflect brilliant lights in all directions.

My recollected and relived stories inform what has gone before and assist me to plan my future (Lewis, 1993; McAdams, 1993; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). As a result, I will continue my journey in the academe and perhaps even find a full-time career in teaching. With insights from my research, I will assist my students and accelerate their progress in learning. I will encourage them to draw strength from their own learning experiences, dreams, and inner voices. I will be aware of their life interruptions and their need to improvise and persist. I will cheer their accomplishments and press them to excel. With my stories, I will motivate them to raise their own voices. I enjoyed my journey of writing this thesis because I found caring hearts along the way; I in turn want to become one of those hearts and mentor my students with compassion.

I introduced my thesis with a quote from Mary Catherine Bateson (1994, p. 9): “Living and learning are everywhere.” As promised, I did find learning in every stage of my life. I now pause and confess with Bateson (1989): “I had little choice but to follow life where it took me” (p. 32). I had no choice but to learn.
The poem below is a segue to my future learning path:

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

– Mary Oliver, 1992, p. 110
References


Appendix A

English as a Global Language

When even the largest English-speaking nation, the United States of America, turns out to have only about 20 per cent of the world's English speakers, it is plain that no one can now claim sole ownership. This is probably the best way of defining a genuinely global language, in fact: that its usage is not restricted by countries or by governing bodies.

— Crystal, 1997, p. 130

This appendix explores the notion that the seduction for learning English is not its linguistic merits but rather its economic utility and sociopolitical prestige.

Multilingualism and bilingualism are not new phenomena. Historically, the Romans implemented formal schooling throughout their empire where all students, regardless of their first language, learned Latin (Lessow-Hurley, 2000). Centuries of colonialism, migration, and trade have spread Spanish, French, Portuguese, Cantonese, English, and numerous other languages throughout the world. During the 19th century, “British political imperialism had sent English around the globe, so that it was a language 'on which the sun never sets’” (Crystal, 2003, p. 10). Since the end of the cold war, “this world presence is maintained and promoted, almost single-handedly, through the economic supremacy of the new American superpower. And the language behind the US dollar is English” (Crystal, 2003, p. 10). Presently, the power of the English language is exercised in boardrooms, lecture rooms, and conference halls around the world. International trade, peace talks, diplomatic negotiations, and education conventions are all conducted primarily in English (World Trade Summits and Middle East peace negotiations are just a few examples).

The worldwide expansion of the English language has played a significant role in globalization (see Figure 1, adapted from Crystal, 2003, p. 70). The British Empire, the
industrial revolution, two world wars, United States's economic and military might, satellite and wireless communications, international education programs, and Hollywood/Disney films and music have placed the English language at the forefront of all other languages. Native English speakers are becoming "minority stakeholders" in their own language as English continues to spread as the global language (Singh et al., 2002, p. 72).

![Figure 1. A representation showing the branches of British and American English.](image)

Globalization refers to the economic, sociopolitical, and cultural interconnectedness of the nations and peoples of the world (Edwards & Usher, 2000). There has never been a greater demand to learn English than there is now. "No language has ever exercised so much international influence as English. ... Eighty percent of the world's electronically stored information is currently in English" (Crystal, 2000, pp. 70, 105). For example, it is easier for a Russian-language speaker to download the works of Dostoevsky translated into English than it is for him/her to get the original in his own language (Crystal, 1997).

In India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Singapore, Malawi, and over 50 other territories, English is part of the country's institutions and plays an important second language role (Kachru
& Nelson, 1996). There are more speakers of English as a second language than there are of first language speakers in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Kachru & Nelson, 1996). Speakers of English as a foreign language in countries that recognize and use English as an international language, such as China, Japan, Indonesia, Korea, Greece, Poland, and increasing numbers of other nations, are twice as many as second language speakers (Crystal, 2003). Crystal estimates that "more than half the world's population will be 'competent' in English by the year 2050" (p. 61). Figure 2, adapted from Crystal's three circles of English, illustrates the large number of English speakers in the world.

Figure 2. The three circles of English.

English is now the "lingua franca (a common language used by speakers of different language backgrounds) ... of international commerce, science and technology, Western culture and pop entertainment, [and] is perceived as all-powerful and as a ticket to upward mobility" (Sridhar, 1996, p. 54). The prevailing information and communication technologies conducted predominantly in English such as the Internet (MSN, Google), television (CNN), and radio (BBC), link global communities, economies, politics, and
education. Anyone wanting to fully benefit from the new knowledge wealth must learn
English. Anyone wanting to contribute to this medium (download/upload, software/hardware) must know English because the English-speaking world is the
dominant producer as well as the largest consumer of information technologies (Crystal, 2003). As a result, most of Africa, Asia, and South America have adopted English as their
language of commerce, thus using it as “a utility language” (Kachru & Nelson, 1996, p. 77). For this reason, English language teaching has become a lucrative business globally, generating billions of dollars—China alone claims to spend $12.4 billion a year (Flavell, 2003). In 2000, there were over 1 billion people in the world learning English as an auxiliary language, which is no longer solely the possession of the descendants of the
British Empire but its “ownership is a global one … [and] its usage is not restricted by
countries or by governing bodies” (Crystal, 2003, p. 141). The political reality is that
“English is the Superpower Language” of the world (Haden Elgin, 2000, p. 194).

Even though the influences of the English language and its culture extend
throughout the world, its users are also influencing the language itself. English is adapted
and modified to local uses and particular needs such as creoles and vernacular Englishes
(Haden Elgin, 2000; Kachru & Nelson, 1996; Nichols, 1996). In all circumstances, individuals express themselves in their own unique ways, reflecting their identity that is
carved out from the norms and expectations of their societies, which in turn are the products of their cultures (Bonvillain, 2000; Lee & Sheared, 2002; Saville-Troike, 1996). Through cultural contact, English, “in its many multicultural incarnations,” is now
“experiencing multiculturalism” (Kachru & Nelson, 1996, p. 95). The seduction for
learning English is not its linguistic merits but rather its economic and sociocultural prestige.
New Englishes

English is a “pluricentric” language—that is, there are numerous identifiable differences concerning its lexicon, syntax, intonation—and there is more than one “subtype” of the language (Kachru & Nelson, 1996, pp. 71, 73). Canadian English, American English, Caribbean English, Euro-English, South Asian English, etc. are “characterized by identifiable differences vis-à-vis other dialects, in pronunciation, lexical choice or usage, grammar, and so on” (Kachru & Nelson, p. 72). In “language-contact situations,” dialects or, in this case, “types of English” emerge (Kachru & Nelson, pp. 72-73). For example, the British and American English dialects have significant lexical, grammatical, and of course, cultural differences. The term “tabling” means to put an item on the table for current discussion in British and Canadian English but almost the exact opposite in American English according to the Collins concise dictionary and thesaurus. The British say “bahth” and the North-Americans say “bath”; one spells “labour” and the other “labor,” and so forth. These varieties of Englishes echo the differences between nations and their cultures.

English is transformed and adapted to many local uses. Entrepreneurs, politicians, educators, and students use English as a commodity and, eventually, modify it to suit their needs. Kachru and Nelson (1996) explain that even in countries where English is the primary language, people have developed their own “dialect” or “variety” of Englishes as part of their cultural identities (p. 73). This “acculturation” or adaptation gives the new language a new function, a national identity, and most important, “a meaning system appropriate to the new situation and context” (Kachru, 1992, pp. 305, 317; Saville-Troike, 1996). For example, one might understand the headlines of The New York Times, The London Times, The Times of India, and Singapore’s The Straits Times...
(all published in English) but may not comprehend the essence of the articles, as they are written in their local vocabulary and context (Kachru & Nelson, 1996). To illustrate, Kachru and Nelson provide the following example from The Times of India: “Karachi, Jan. 5: Goods worth more than Rs one crore were gutted when a major fire broke out in a godown in Raheedabad SITE area this morning, fire brigade source said …” (p. 75). This passage may be “intelligible” at its lexical level or even “comprehensible” or meaningful to a degree, but it is not “interpretable” to people outside India or even outside Karachi because they will not apprehend “the meaning behind the utterance” (Kachru & Nelson, pp. 93, 94). Another example is from The Sunday Times: “Singapore, April 26, 1981: Indian Muslims are bumiputras” (Kachru, p. 309). Even though there may be an appropriate English word or expression available to the speakers, they prefer using terms from their first language in an attempt to “nativize” the second language and “give a new Asian identity” (Kachru, p. 317). Terms such as Rs (Indian currency), crore (unit of 10 million), gutted (destroyed from inside out), godown (warehouse) can only be understood if one is familiar with the dialect and its culture.

An example of an English dialect that evolved from creole is African American Vernacular English. Its divergence is an assertion of a unique social identity, a strong Black cultural presence, and a testimony of resistance. Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe writes:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message. ... He should aim at fashioning out an English, which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. ... But it will have to be a new
English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (cited in Crystal, 1997, p. 136)

In turn, Salmon Rushdie states:

People who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it. Assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its front. (cited in Crystal, 1997, pp. 135, 136)

The “oral and vernacular Englishes” (OVE) in Asia are testimony to the use of English as a utility language whereby speakers appropriate the vocabulary and use it according to their own interpretations (Crystal, 2001, p. 2). OVE is a mixture of English and a local language or varieties of local languages that incorporate English “pop” or commercial phrases; for example, Denglish is a combination of Deutsche and English (Bernstein, 2004, p. 1), Konglish is a mixture of Korean and American slang, Singlish is Singaporean English, Chinglish is Chinese English, Japlish is Japanese English, and there are “hundreds of others” (Crystal, pp. 2-3). The following phrase is in Singlish: "That person is very havoc, always out late every night" (Crystal, p. 3). Here the word *havoc* is used as an adjective and means wild and uncontrollable (Crystal). In Konglish one might say “good morning” as such: “You and I have to love long long. It is I get to road to you cleared face” (Crystal, p. 2). Lea Na, an international graduate student at a Canadian university, remembers hearing a conversation between two young women in Korea:

*MS: Why don't we go shopping? It's Friday!*

*YH: Sounds great. By the way, do you want to buy something or just for eye shopping (browsing, window shopping)?
MS: Humm, I will get a Y-shirt (V neck), and a few running shirt (under suit) for my husband. My son needs a jumper (windbreaker) too. What about you?

YH: I am looking for a one-piece (dress) for tomorrow night party, and a Belly T-shirt (tank-top) for my daughter.

Cashier: Do you wanna vinylbag (plastic bag) or paper bag?

MS: I am thirsty, would you like to drink something?

YH: Sure, I would like to drink cider (7-up).

MS: Can I get a coffee with prim (coffee whitener) and sugar?

MS: I gotta go, I had my electronic range (microwave oven) repaired. It doesn't work all of sudden since last night.

YH: Me too, I need to be hurry, I don't want to miss golden time (prime time on TV). I love to see the drama (soap opera). Talents (TV stars) on the drama are gorgeous! (email correspondence, April 24, 2005: Konglish)

Netglish is yet another variation, where words and expressions are often abbreviated for “texting” on chat lines or mobile phones. For example: THX or TX or THKS (for thanks), 2B or not 2B, 4ever, what hav u been doin (Anderson, 2003). The language of the Internet is an international language—an international colloquial English (ICE) borrowing large numbers of words from English. Crystal (2001) observes that “English, as the leading language of the internet, is already changing with increasing speed” and that “the vocabulary of ICE is increasing at the rate of at least 5,000 new words every year” (p. 4). These varieties of Englishes are new hybrid forms of the English language. According to Professor Eugene Eoyang of Lingnan University in Hong Kong, “ICE has the potential to evolve into a World Language. … Konglish, meanwhile, might develop into a new national language, just as English, German and French developed in the
middle ages from a mixture of Latin and local languages” (cited in Crystal, p. 4). In fact, English is not a pure language but an amalgam of Norse, Saxon, Gaelic, Norman, Latin, French, Arabic, and German languages (Singh et al., 2002).

As more nations adopt English as their national second language or their international business language, hybrid or joint programs between universities have developed where knowledge is exchanged, thus diversifying and expanding the global information pool. Stuart Hall asserts that globalization is “the long movement towards the break-up of homogenous cultures … the beginning of hybridity, the mutual crossings, and the opening up of internal spaces” (cited in Yon, 1999, p. 93). For example, Brock University has a joint project among Aga Khan University, Pakistan, The European Commission, The Canadian International Development Agency, and the United Nations Development Program, in professional development of teachers—a Master of Education program conducted in English (Wheeler, 2000).

As noted earlier, the number of people who speak English as a second or as a foreign language is far greater than those who speak English as their first language. Thus, the ownership of English is now global. This also means that the “English language has already grown to be independent of any form of social control”—that is, no specific culture can claim English as its own (Crystal, 1997, p. 139). Speakers of English as a second or foreign language continue to alter the language to suit their particular needs, amalgamating their native linguistic and cultural body of knowledge with the English language and culture and transforming it into a multicultural language and even creating new regional dialects of English—new Englishes.

As is evident above, English is a communication tool used for different reasons in different parts of the world. Multilingualism is a valuable resource in developing different
insights and allowing for a better understanding of our complex society; therefore, a common language such as English is essential for interactions and international relationships. Learning English as a second or as a foreign language affords new opportunities and diversified outlooks.

**Conclusion**

English language and culture dominate global commerce, politics, entertainment, and education, thus enticing millions of people to learn the language. English is a symbol of modernization and an avenue to higher education because it is the language of information technology and its knowledge economy. When English is used as a global medium of communication, it increases interaction between nations and provides a space for social and personal growth. Multilingualism is a valuable asset for a fulfilled life. Proficiency in English means new lifestyles, opportunities for transnational mobility, and a valuable investment in education, jobs, travel, and entertainment. However, as a necessity and a commodity, English is adapted and suited to the needs of its speakers.

As more nations continue to interconnect, linguistic and cultural diversities multiply. Global trade is not only in goods and services but also in cultural traditions and language. Throughout history, the English language has undergone significant changes as other languages have influenced its grammar and extended its vocabulary. Speakers of English as a second or foreign language continue to reshape the language and develop new dialects and varieties. The English language in its many incarnations is the vehicle of cross-cultural communications; therefore, linguistic variations, such as new Englishes, are part of our multicultural and global characteristic of a pluralistic society.
Appendix B

Research Proposal Abstract

Purpose and rationale of proposed research

My research explores the experiences of learning English as a second/foreign language and as an adult. I do not seek to focus on any particular aspect of learning English but rather, I propose to examine my participants’ experiences in learning the language in a broader context and aim to document the moments they recall in their journey of learning a new language.

Reflecting on my own experiences, I acknowledge that learning English as an adult presents challenges and results in lifelong implications. As I continue to learn English, I realize that every learner’s experience is unique and, when reflected upon, each experience is a valuable source of knowledge used in constructing meanings and forging new identities. I believe that lived stories serve as learning models; therefore, it is worthwhile to capture and document them.

Sequential description of the methodology to be used in this study

I seek to examine the essence of learning English. I hope to discover what the particular phenomenon of learning English means as it was experienced. I will conduct narrative phenomenology research with heuristic (discovery) and hermeneutical (interpretative) approaches, using the reflective writing method to gather data.

I will meet with my participants (four female adults) to explain my project, to share with them some of my stories of learning English, to answer their questions, and to allow them the chance to make suggestions. I will share my own stories that demonstrate writing styles such as autobiography, journaling, and anecdotal. I will ask my participants to revisit their learning moments and write down their own experiences in any format they are comfortable with, as many as they want, and over the period of 3 months. Within that time, I will keep in touch via email, sharing more of my stories with them, responding to their inquiries, and collecting their writings. I will discuss my interpretations with each of my participants separately and seek approval. Finally, I will devise a conceptual framework and incorporate the stories within the body of my thesis. Before submittal, I will ask my participants to read my completed thesis and approve the sections that pertain to them. I will then make the necessary revisions.
Appendix C
Research Ethics Board Consent Letter

Brock University

Senate Research Ethics Board  Extensions 3943/3035, Room AS 302

DATE:  June 22, 2004
FROM:  Joe Engemann, Chair
Senate Research Ethics Board (REB)

TO:  Milree Latimer, Education
Arpi Panossian-Muttart

FILE:  03-399 Panossian-Muttart

TITLE:  English Language Learning Challenges & Implications for the Immigrant Women

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

DECISION:  Accepted as Clarified

This project has been approved for the period of June 22, 2004 to April 30, 2005 subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The approval may be extended upon request. The study may now proceed.

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB. The Board must approve any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to www.BrockU.CA/researchservices/forms.html to complete the appropriate form REB-03 (2001) Request for Clearance of a Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects, with the exception of undergraduate projects, upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form REB-02 (2001) Continuing Review/Final Report is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.
Appendix D

Informed Consent Letter

M.Ed. candidate: Arpi Panossian-Muttart, arpin@sympatico.ca 416.497.0031
Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario 905.688.5550
Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Milree Latimer, milree@cogeco.ca 905.844.2909
Research Ethics Chair: Dr. Joe Engemann, reb@brocku.ca 905-688-5550

Consent Letter

This is a written consent letter for the thesis research project entitled “English Language Learning: Challenges and Implications for the Immigrant Woman” that we have discussed in person. The anticipated time of data collecting is November, December 2004, and January 2005. This project has been reviewed and has received approval from the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (File #03-399). I would ask that you read this letter carefully, and sign in the place indicated if you are satisfied that you understand your role and any possible implications for you in participating in this research. As well, Deborah VanOosten, Research Ethics Officer at Brock University, is available to speak with you about research participants’ rights through the Office of Research Services at 905-688-5550 ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

As we have discussed, this research will involve you in a three-month process of writing and or telling stories of learning English as a second/foreign language. Because using narrative methods have the potential to reveal levels of self to prospective readers, it is up to you to choose what information you share as data and also how you choose to write/tell your account for level of anonymity. Please be aware that reflective thinking may trigger your memory of incidences that you have suppressed. On the other hand, the exercise of writing personal stories will enhance your reflective thinking and critical writing skills, serving as a tool for self-development. Furthermore, the exercise will enable you to clearly see the learning paths you have taken and may help you to make informed decisions in your future learning endeavours. Also, once published as an M.Ed. Thesis, these stories may provide encouragement, hope, and empowerment to other women in similar situations.

Your stories may take the form of chronicles and may include drawings, poems, letters, or other documents as you wish. It is advisable that you keep a copy of all your submitted materials. The information shared will be kept confidential; pseudonyms will be used and names of places will not be mentioned. The results of this research will be published in my Master of Education thesis and submitted to the Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario.

It is understood that you were invited to participate in this study because you indicated your interest in doing so. However, if for any reason you wish to withdraw, you are free to do so.

If you wish to be a participant in this study, please formalize your involvement by signing below.

Name:

Date:

Signature:
Appendix E

Appreciation Letter

M.Ed. candidate: Arpi Panossian-Muttart, arpim@sympatico.ca 416.497.0031
Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario 905.688.5550
Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Milree Latimer, milree@cogeco.ca 905.844.2909
Research Ethics Chair: Dr. Joe Engemann, reb@brocku.ca 905-688-5550

Appreciation Letter

Dear X,

I greatly appreciate your participation in my thesis research project entitled “Learning English language as adults: A narrative of women’s improvised and empowered lives” at Brock University (File #03-399). You took part in documenting and sharing stories of your accomplishments, struggles, challenges, and implications of learning English as an adult. Certainly, when published, these experiences will provide encouragement, hope, and empowerment to other women in similar situations.

Without your hard work, writing skills, and sincere participation, my thesis would not have been as informed, as rich with knowledge, and as credible.

Together, we discovered that learning English has empowered us and made us independent individuals.

I thank you again and hope to remain in touch throughout our journey of learning.

Please note that the result of this research will be published in an M.Ed. thesis format at Brock University in April 2005 and I will personally bring you a copy. A copy of my thesis will be shelved at the Instructional Resource Centre, Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, 905.688.5550 ext. 3357.

Sincerely,

Arpi Panossian-Muttart
Appendix F

Sample Interview Questions

Open-ended questions:

× Why learn English?

× What are the challenges of learning English as an adult?

× What are the implications of learning a new language?

× What does it mean to be multilingual?

× What are the benefits of knowing English?

Questions to evoke experiences and not only thoughts:

× When and where did you start learning English?

× What were the circumstances when you were learning English?

× Who was or were involved in your learning journey and how?

× What were the obstacles of learning English?

× How did you overcome the obstacles of learning English?

× What were the changes you had to adapt to?

× Did learning English empower you and how?

× How did you benefit from speaking English?

× How would you describe the English language?

(See Carol Becker, 1992; Sydney James Butler, 1997)
Appendix G

Sample Correspondence

On 2-Nov-04, at 8:46 AM, Arpi Panossian-Muttart wrote:

Hi Nora,

I thank you again for sharing your experiences with me. I acknowledge that recollecting stories from our past is not always easy or pleasant. But please keep in mind that "The past empowers the present" (Mary Bateson, 1989, p. 34 in Composing a Life).

You have given me some very good material to work with. However, I would like to probe further and ask questions. Did you want to proceed with an interview or continue writing?

Please see my notes below in your text.

Regards, Arpi

---------------------------------------------
I admired my mother's survival skills and her hard efforts. As I matured, I came to understand that she did what she could to keep us all together. She worked very hard cleaning other people's houses. Her main dream was to see us grow with good education. She valued and considered that education was the key to success.

[Arpi] Why do you think your mother believed this, for in her days there were many successful people who had very little or no education?

I think my mom's dream was to get higher education, but unfortunately as a child she didn't even complete elementary school. Her dad had to pull her out of school and sent her to work in factories at such an early age. Since then, she had worked putting herself in jobs that required hard labour that not only consumed her, but also emotionally and mentally annoyed her. I guess she had no choice. She had to do whatever she was told to do. The sad part was that she was well aware of her intelligence and capabilities and if she had given the chance of going to school, she would have been the first in her class. She also, believed in herself. She was determined that nothing in the world would stop her from reading books. I remember each and every night she read books after books sometimes till early mornings. It didn't matter that she hadn't slept all night, but her passion of reading books meant the world! ... I truly believe that she believes that EDUCATION IS ENLIGHTENMENT!

[Arpi] It seems that you believed your mother's advice regarding the importance of education. Why do you think that is? Is there a story there?

---------------------------------------------
I asked myself many times the same questions; what kind of job would pay me decent money when I hardly spoke the language and how would Canadians react to my broken English or accent? Unfortunately, the answers to my questions were not very encouraging so I decided to go back to school and get to know the system better.

[Arpi] Why did you have to go back to school? Many immigrants manage to have a comfortable life without going to school. I have cousins who became very rich without even speaking English very well.

For me, going back to school was not an issue, but it created a big problem in our marriage. Unfortunately, he was getting upset each and every time he saw me studying ...