

2020

## Descriptive Case Study of the Perceptions of International Students in an Intensive English Program Featuring Mandated Interactions with Fluent English Speakers

Sonia R. Velazquez  
University of North Florida, n01313654@unf.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), and the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

---

### Suggested Citation

Velazquez, Sonia R., "Descriptive Case Study of the Perceptions of International Students in an Intensive English Program Featuring Mandated Interactions with Fluent English Speakers" (2020). *UNF Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. 969.

<https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/etd/969>

This Doctoral Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at UNF Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNF Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UNF Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [Digital Projects](#).

© 2020 All Rights Reserved

Descriptive Case Study of the Perceptions of International Students in an Intensive English

Program Featuring Mandated Interactions with Fluent English Speakers

by

Sonia Velazquez

A Dissertation submitted to the Department of Leadership,

School Counseling & Sport Management

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES

July, 2020

Unpublished work © Sonia Velazquez

This dissertation is titled Descriptive Case Study of the Perceptions of International Students in an Intensive English Program Featuring Mandated Interactions with Fluent English Speakers

---

Dr. Amanda Pascale, Committee Chair

---

---

Dr. Megan Forbes, Committee Member 1

---

---

Dr. David Hoppey, Committee Member 2

---

---

Dr. Matthew Ohlson, Committee Member 3

---

## DEDICATION

*I would like to dedicate this work to my husband and children, Felipe, Chloe, and Lucas. They have watched me throughout my doctorate journey, and I feel incredibly supported and inspired by them. I could not be more blessed by my amazing family.*

*I would also like to dedicate this to Gabriel Velazquez, whose wisdom and example uplift and embolden so many like myself to persevere and find focus. My sincerest gratitude for all your encouragement and faith.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my supportive and helpful committee members for being so encouraging and accessible throughout this dissertation process. My sincerest gratitude to Dr. Amanda Pascale for offering to lead as the Chair of my dissertation committee and for offering to guide my vision as it had been described during our conversations throughout my doctorate coursework. Throughout so much of the work and effort I put into this study, Dr. Pascale made sure to keep in contact, answer any questions, and offer tremendously helpful feedback. The knowledge I learned from the study's Methodologist, Dr. David Hoppey, was necessary for developing an appropriate research design that would thoroughly explore my research questions. Dr. Hoppey was also readily available for whatever questions or ideas I presented for this study. I would like to acknowledge the support and guidance of Dr. Megan Forbes, the study's Specialist. As an educational leader in the field of Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Dr. Forbes was able to answer questions and make distinctions between different types of Intensive English Programs (IEPs) and accreditation processes. Dr. Forbes lent her expertise and time spent working with international students and faculty members within an IEP to help me fully understand how the Cultural Immersion Program (CIP) at the ELI came to be and what the goals have been for the international students enrolled in listening and speaking classes. Finally, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Matthew Ohlson, whose advice and leadership example throughout my doctorate coursework was helpful and directly beneficial to understanding the importance of exploring implications for educational leadership.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Soonhyang Kim, my cognate-area professor, who invested her time and effort into transforming my work, pushing me to publish, and encouraging professional development opportunities within the field of TESOL. My continued experience and training within the field of TESOL has benefitted my understanding of the practices currently in place for English as an Additional Language (EAL) students.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my friends and family members who encouraged me in this undertaking to always look forward and do my best. My husband, Felipe, has probably learned more about the field of TESOL and Educational Leadership than he ever imagined he would. His help and his calm attitude were extremely helpful in organizing and carrying out the logistics of study time and family life. I would like to thank my parents and my husband's parents for the help and love that they offered throughout my coursework and dissertation research.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
<b>Abstract</b> .....	viii
<b>Chapter I: Introduction</b> .....	9
Terminology.....	10
Problem Statement.....	11
Purpose Statement.....	11
Research Questions.....	12
Overview of Theoretical Framework.....	13
Overview of Methodology.....	14
Significance of the Research.....	14
Chapter Summary .....	15
<b>Chapter II: Review of Literature</b> .....	16
Introduction.....	16
Theoretical Framework.....	19
<i>Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis</i> .....	19
<i>Interaction Hypothesis</i> .....	20
<i>Noticing Hypothesis</i> .....	21
Related Literature .....	21
<i>Interactions between EAL Students and Fluent English Speakers</i> .....	21
<i>The Importance of Colloquial English</i> .....	26
Chapter Summary .....	27
<b>Chapter III: Methods</b> .....	28
Introduction.....	28
Research Questions.....	29
Site & Participant Selection.....	29
<i>Site Background</i> .....	29
<i>Participant Selection</i> .....	31

Table 1 .....	32
Data Collection .....	33
Data Analysis .....	35
Trustworthiness/Credibility .....	37
<i>Member Checks</i> .....	39
Chapter Summary .....	40
<b>Chapter IV: Findings</b> .....	42
Introduction.....	42
Positionality Statement .....	44
Research Questions.....	45
Findings .....	45
<i>4.1 LA Sessions are Described as Socially Enriching and Beneficial for Practice Speaking English</i> .....	47
<i>4.2 Incorporating Interactions with LAs during LA Sessions as a Learning Approach within an IEP Curricula Facilitates Learning</i> .....	62
<i>4.3 Working with LAs is Important for Learning and Practicing English</i> .....	74
Conclusion .....	75
<b>Chapter V: Discussion</b> .....	77
Introduction.....	77
Discussion of Findings.....	78
<i>LA Sessions are Socially Enriching and Beneficial for Developing Speaking Skills</i> .....	79
<i>Incorporating LAs and LA Sessions as a Learning Approach within an IEP Curricula Facilitates Learning</i> .....	82
<i>LA Sessions are Perceived as Important by International Students</i> .....	84
Implications .....	85
Future Research .....	89
Concluding Remarks.....	89
References.....	91
Appendix A.....	95
Appendix B .....	97
Appendix C .....	99



### **Abstract**

The purpose of this descriptive case study is to inform educational leaders working in Intensive English Programs (IEPs) and in Higher Education about the perspectives of international students enrolled in English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes at the English Language Institute (ELI) at the University of Florida (UF). The ELI at UF offers a unique language program that incorporates interactions between the enrolled EAL students and local fluent English speaking university students, hired as Language Assistants (LAs), as a required part of the curricular structure of the ELI's Listening and Speaking courses for enrolled students at all proficiency levels within the program. Literature in the field of TESOL promotes the learning approach of combining formalized classroom language instruction with opportunities for informal interactions between language learners and fluent speakers of the target language. This descriptive case study investigated the perceptions of international students who were at the time or had recently been enrolled in a listening and speaking course at the ELI at UF. The goal of the researcher was to understand the experiences of the EAL students and learn if the EAL students perceived any potential impacts from interacting regularly with LAs as a required component of their listening and speaking course(s).

## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Intensive English Programs (IEPs) are full-time educational programs that provide English language instruction to adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) students who are studying abroad in the United States (Reese & Helm, 2020). International EAL students study at IEPs in universities and colleges throughout the US in order to develop and practice using their English language abilities. International students studying in IEPs should receive expert instruction that prepares them for their academic endeavors in the US. IEPs could also incorporate methods that help their student population acclimate to the culture and the social norms that exist in areas around colleges and universities throughout the nation. The goal for many international students studying in IEPs is to be able to converse with the fluent English speakers in the surrounding area in both formal academic settings and casual social settings. The programmatic/curricular structure in place at an IEP should provide appropriate support that will prepare international students to adjust to life in a new country, the educational system, intercultural learning, and interactions with domestic students (Andrade, 2006). For the purpose of this descriptive case study, one bounded IEP at the University of Florida (UF), the English Language Institution (ELI), was chosen to research the perceptions and opinions of the international students who were either enrolled at the time of the study or had been recently enrolled in listening and speaking classes, which include Language Assistant (LA) Sessions. UF gave permission (Appendix C) for the following descriptive case study to be conducted in accordance with the plan to investigate this specific IEP as an individual and bounded program.

While all IEPs provide courses to develop language skills such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and grammatical skills, the majority do not implement curricula that

incorporate scheduled interactions with fluent English speakers for the purpose of developing colloquial English skills. It is for this reason that this study will investigate one particular IEP, the ELI, which incorporates mandated interactions with LAs, who are fluent English speaking UF students, as a required component of the listening and speaking course curricula. LA Sessions are combined on the course schedule attached with ELI Listening and Speaking courses for the adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) students enrolled at all proficiency levels at the ELI. The programmatic structure in place at the ELI at UF is an example that educational leaders can use when adapting their IEPs or considering new curriculum approaches for language development for adult EAL students. When international students are making selections between IEPs they wish to apply to in the United States, educational leaders will want to provide and promote a programmatic structure that benefits the international student population. The program in place at the ELI at UF requires regularly scheduled interactions between its enrolled EAL students with two fluent English-speaking university students. There are implications for what educational leaders can do with knowledge about what international students perceive as important for their language development process.

### **Terminology**

EAL students are learning the English language as an additional language. English is not their native or first language (L1). This acronym was chosen instead of other common acronyms for this student population such as English as a Second Language (ESL), English Language Learners (ELLs), or English Learners (ELs) because English as an Additional Language is a more accurate description of the students who were selected as participants for this descriptive case study.

**Problem Statement**

Adult EAL students who feel confident using a new language, or specifically the target language that they are learning, will be more highly motivated to interact with other native speakers of that language (MacIntyre, 1999). Educational leaders working at IEPs can implement more opportunities for their student population to speak English and obtain practice interacting with native English speakers in social contexts by incorporating the interactions into the IEP course curriculum. The amount of time an adult EAL student is provided opportunities to interact with native English speakers can influence their levels of language anxiety (MacIntyre, 1999). This is important for educational leaders to consider because, as MacIntyre (1999) asserts, the presence of language anxiety for language learners has a consistent “negative correlation with second language achievement and with the perception of second language proficiency” (p. 41). If innovative techniques to incorporate mandated interactions between adult EAL students and native English speakers can influence how adult EAL students feel about their use of the target language, this type of programmatic structure could help adult EAL students meet their goals regarding interacting socially with native English speakers. The more interaction that international students have with native English-speaking American students, the easier their ability to socially adjust to their new environment (Andrade, 2006).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this descriptive case study is to investigate the perceptions of international students enrolled in listening and speaking courses at the ELI at UF. The type of programmatic design and structure currently in place at the ELI incorporates mandated interactions with fluent English speakers, LAs, as a required part of the listening and speaking

course curriculum for the adult EAL students enrolled at the ELI at all proficiency levels. The adult EAL students enrolled at the ELI at UF spend one hour each Monday through Thursday working with a qualified faculty member who teaches the Listening and Speaking course, and then the international students spend another hour of the course time interacting with two LAs. During the LA sessions, the international students gather in an informal environment (typically in an outside courtyard) and participate in discussions, games, and activities that are proctored by the LAs. The perceptions held by the EAL students at the ELI are a valuable contribution to the overall knowledge of how students traveling from various countries and cultures respond and perceive their experiences interacting with fluent English Speakers as a required component of the listening and speaking course. Additionally, the expressed self-perceived impacts of these interactions is a large component of the study because how the international students categorize their time interacting with their LAs is important for obtaining a perspective of what international students value during their time studying English at an IEP. Educational leaders from other IEPs can use the information from this descriptive case study to see how the adult EAL students enrolled at the ELI at UF described their experiences working with LAs as a required part of the course curriculum. This research study will investigate the following research questions:

### **Research Questions**

1. How do international students describe their experience(s) interacting with Language Assistants at regular intervals as a part of their course curriculum?

2. From the perspective of the adult international students, what are the perceived impacts of interacting with Language Assistants during weekly classes as a part of their Listening/Speaking course requirement?

### **Overview of Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that guides this study is based on literature which describes the importance of utilizing face-to-face interactions to build language proficiency. The framework is based on Krashen's (1981) Theory of Second Language Acquisition and Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis. Krashen (1981) and Long (1996) state that naturally occurring face-to-face communication, which typically happens outside of a structured formal classroom setting, is beneficial for developing language abilities for individuals who are learning an additional language. When regularly occurring, interactions are paired alongside formal instruction, they both contribute to second language proficiency (Krashen, 1976). The acquisition of a language that takes place during interactions in real time is as crucial a component for language development as the time spent learning about and practicing the language through instructional processes provided in a formal classroom setting.

There is literature available regarding how adult EAL students perceived their interactions with fluent English speakers during voluntary programs. Volunteering for opportunities to interact with fluent English speakers outside of the formal EAL classroom was reported as producing benefits for both developing language proficiency and building confidence using the target language (Lee, 2016; Lee & Song 2009; Miller, Berkey, & Griffin, 2015; Riley & Douglas, 2017; Suh, Wasanasomsithi, Short, & Majid, 1999). Currently, the ELI at UF is the only IEP that offers interactions with fluent English speakers as a mandated part of the program

curricula. Other IEPs only currently offer voluntary programs such as meetings with a conversation partner or participating in volunteer activities for additional interactions with fluent English speakers. There is a gap in literature regarding acquiring the perceptions of adult EAL students enrolled in an Intensive English Program where interacting with fluent English speakers outside the EAL classroom is a required part of the program curriculum.

### **Overview of Methodology**

Using a constructivist lens, the researcher created a descriptive case study with the ELI at UF as the bounded system of the case study. Purposive sampling was used in order to select approximately 12 – 16 participants that had been enrolled at the time of the study or within the three years previous to that in a listening and speaking course at the ELI. The researcher conducted one in-depth interview with each participant and observed the enrolled participants during their sessions with their LAs. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data were analyzed using open and axial coding in order to create the overall themes of the findings. In an effort to promote trustworthiness and credibility of the study design, the researcher triangulated amongst separate data sources, used detailed and thick description to convey meaning throughout the analysis, conducted member checks, and used external audits through the collaborated efforts of a dissertation committee.

### **Significance of the Research**

Investigating the perceptions of adult EAL students studying internationally at the ELI at UF can help inform administrators and educational leaders in other IEPs about how the practices that are put in place at UF are being perceived by the international adult EAL student population. Educational leaders in IEPs will want to know the perspectives of international students who

were enrolled in this type of program. While there is already literature that shows how voluntary conversation partner programs in IEPs can benefit adult EAL students, there is little research on the effects of an involuntary program where international students interact with fluent English speakers as part of their IEP course curriculum. It is the intention of the researcher to fill this gap in research and learn about the experiences of the international students in this bounded IEP program.

### **Chapter Summary**

In order to help inform educational leaders in IEPs about how to support and prepare international adult EAL students as they adjust to life studying in the United States, this study investigated the perceptions of international students who were enrolled at the time of the study or had been within three years from that time at the ELI at UF. The participants from this program described their perceptions about what it was like to learn to use English working regularly with an LA. The program structure at the ELI differs from other IEPs because it mandates interactions with fluent English speakers as part of the listening and speaking course curriculum. The theories and related literature on this topic suggest that incorporating interaction as an adjoining curricular component alongside formal language instruction is beneficial for adult EAL students because it provides necessary practice and develops confidence using the language through regular exposure to authentic conversations in real time.



## Chapter II: Review of Literature

### Introduction

Adult international students from non-English speaking countries enroll in Intensive English Programs (IEPs) in the United States in order to develop their English proficiency skills. These students, who are learning English as an additional language, are labeled as English as an Additional Language (EAL) students. They travel abroad to the United States on student visas and enroll in the EAL classes that are provided by IEPs. The IEPs, which can be independent organizations under contract with colleges and universities, stand-alone institutions, non-profit schools, or international schools (Commission on English Language Program Accreditation, 2019), will offer instruction for developing reading, writing, grammatical, listening, and speaking skills in English. According to the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA) (2019), each IEP must present and adhere to a mission statement of the organization's goals. The CEA Standard's (2019) state:

The mission statement must be clearly written in terms easily understood by students, staff, and the public. It must be available to current and prospective students or their sponsors and to prospective and current employees through materials such as student recruitment literature, employee handbooks, and informational documents. Because the mission statement forms the basis for all decisions affecting the program or institution, the statement must be evaluated and updated periodically to reflect new or revised goals, activities, policies, or shifts in the focus of its educational programs or services. (p. 7)

A common goal among IEPs in university and college settings is to help prepare EAL students obtain the language skills needed in order to be successful in a graduate or undergraduate study program at a predominately English-speaking university.

Literature has shown that international students studying in the United States as EAL students have reported struggling to converse with the local fluent English speakers to varying degrees. (Lee, 2016; MacIntyre, 1999; Sherry, Thomas, & Wing Hong, 2010). The purpose of this study is to investigate a possible program initiative that current IEPs can implement to help adequately prepare adult EAL students to converse with fluent English speakers in both casual and academic settings. Accessing opportunities for informal contact is an important factor in second language learning (Spada, 1986). EAL students who enroll in an IEP could benefit from a Listening and Speaking curriculum which mandates regular weekly interactions with fluent English speakers throughout each academic semester. Combining formal classroom instruction with requirements to meet informally outside of the classroom to converse in the target language, English, or, specifically, requiring EAL students to engage recurrently in colloquial English conversations with hired fluent English speakers can be beneficial for the language development of adult EAL students (Van den Branden, 2007). The commonly occurring standard for most IEPs is to provide a formalized curriculum covering the language areas of reading, writing, grammar, listening, speaking, and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) preparation at various English proficiency levels. The opportunities that adult EAL students will have for informal conversations with fluent English speakers outside their EAL classroom will typically occur at the discretion and/or capability of the adult EAL student. Living in the United States, where English is the dominant native language, adult EAL students will engage in

conversations with fluent English speakers at regular intervals for the purposes of everyday living; however, these instances may be minimal depending on how frequently the EAL student engages in encounters with local English speakers and how long the conversations generally last.

Another option that adult EAL students have to interact with fluent English speakers outside of their EAL class instructors is to voluntarily sign up to receive a conversation partner, who is a fluent English speaker who has also volunteered to assist in providing conversations in English to an international student throughout a specified amount of time. Currently, there is literature available regarding the experiences of international EAL students who have spent time interacting with fluent English speakers as part of voluntary programs offered by various IEPs. While this information conveys the impacts and benefits of participating in voluntary programs where EAL students can opt to have a conversation partner, limited knowledge exists on the impacts of interacting with fluent English speakers as a regularly scheduled and mandated component of an IEP course curriculum. Mandated interactions with fluent English speakers as a part of the IEP course curriculum is not a common practice among IEPs in the United States.

The purpose of this literature review is to present a rationale for why incorporating interactions with fluent English speakers as part of EAL course curricula for IEPs can benefit the language learning experience for adult EAL students. This literature review explores Krashen's (1981) Theory of Second Language Acquisition, Long's (1996) Interaction hypothesis, Schmidt's (1990) Noticing hypothesis, information about the importance of learning colloquial English, and the reported effects from studies where international students interacted with fluent English speakers in addition with their EAL program curriculum.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis***

In Krashen's (1981) Theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the Acquisition-Learning hypothesis explains the difference between learning and acquiring a second language (Schütz, 2007). In the learned system, formal instruction is given in order for conscious learning about the knowledge of the language (e.g. grammar rules, sentence structure) to take place (Schütz, 2007). This knowledge exchange typically occurs in a classroom where activities are organized according to the presentation of language rules, and teacher feedback is provided (Pica, 1983). However, in the acquired system, the language learner engages in meaningful interactions, or natural communication, in order for language acquisition to occur (Schütz, 2007). In naturalistic settings outside of a formal classroom setup, the formal rules of the language are not emphasized. Instead, the focus of the learning experience is based on the communication of meaning (Pica, 1983). The back-and-forth that occurs during conversations with fluent speakers allows EAL student to instantaneously process what they absorb through language input as well as what they produce through their language output. The process of acquiring a language in a "natural" environment outside the classroom "resembles the natural way young children learn their first language" (Van den Branden, 1999, p.161). Cummins (2001) expands on this phenomenon of the innate ability to develop playground language in what he refers to as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). EAL students develop their BICS through informal interactions with peers during everyday activities. Informal environments can be beneficial because they can provide necessary language input for EAL students and help them understand how to operate the language (Krashen, 1976; Spada, 1985). Krashen (1976) states "both formal

and informal linguistic environments contribute to second language proficiency but do so in different ways" (p. 167). The combination of both formal instruction and informal encounters with fluent English speakers creates an optimal learning environment where students can build their language skills and practice what they are learning in real-time.

### ***Interaction Hypothesis***

Long's (1996) Interaction hypothesis also explains how face-to-face interactions promote language acquisition. When an interaction takes place, there are two processes occurring at the same time: language intake and language production. Each speaker will convey and receive messages using what they know about the language in order to negotiate for meaning. One speaker will relay a message that will be interpreted for its meaning by the other speaker. Then, the other speaker will formulate a response that will be deciphered in-turn. Long (1996) asserts that this process of negotiating for meaning "facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (pp. 451-452). Therefore, in-person interactions can promote language comprehension (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Long, 1996; Loschky, 1994; Pica, Young, Doughty, 1987). Long's (1996) Interaction hypothesis and Krashen's (1981) Acquisition-Learning hypothesis lay the foundation for why integrating conversations with fluent English speakers alongside formal EAL instruction would be beneficial for the overall development of language acquisition for adult EAL students. If adult EAL students are provided with regularly scheduled interactions with fluent English speakers, they have an opportunity to transfer what they have learned in their formal classes to functional language use during everyday interactions with fluent English speakers (Van den Branden, 2007).

### ***Noticing Hypothesis***

Richard Schmidt's (1990) Noticing hypothesis is the hypothesis that language learning does not take place for adult language learners unless the language learner pays attention to (notices) what they are learning about the language. The importance of this hypothesis is that while interactions are a critical part of language learning for adult EAL students, it should be combined with formalized instruction that can deconstruct the language input to which the adult EAL students are being exposed to during their daily interactions. Some of the language learning that occurs during interactions may be implicit (unaware) and take place due to self-instruction; however, explicit learning and form-focused instruction provide the focused attention and higher level awareness that is required when learning a language (Schmidt, 1990). An over-reliance on implicit learning, such as through interactions alone, can lead to failure in obtaining native-like norms of grammatical accuracy (Schmidt, 1990). Therefore, it is important to consider the combination of both interactive learning approaches that can be incorporated alongside explicit language instruction.

### **Related Literature**

#### ***Interactions between EAL Students and Fluent English Speakers***

In an effort to connect international students with fluent English speakers, many IEP programs offer to assist adult EAL students in finding a fluent English-speaking conversation partner that they can interact with outside of their EAL classes. Literature has shown that meeting regularly with conversation partners has helped adult EAL students to feel more comfortable and confident using the target language (Lee, 2016; Lee & Song, 2009; Miller, Berkey, & Griffin, 2015; Riley & Douglas, 2017; Suh, Wasanasomsithi, Short, & Majid, 1999).

Engkent (1986), Lee and Song (2009), Miller, Berkey, and Griffin (2015), Riley and Douglas (2017), Lee (2016), and Suh, Wasanasomsithi, Short, and Majid (1999) are example researchers who have investigated the experiences of adult EAL students who interacted with fluent English speakers outside of their EAL courses.

Lee (2016) investigated international students, or International Conversation Partners (ICPs) who were partnered with fluent English speakers, or American Conversation Partners (ACPs), for the purpose of conversing in English. According to Lee and Song (2009), informal interactions with native speakers is a recommended means for improving communication skills. Based on this recommendation, Lee (2016) created a study to investigate what benefits the international students and the American students perceived as a result from their informal English conversations. The ICPs reported that the informal conversations between the ACPs and ICPs helped the ICPs to practice speaking English, adjust to American students' fast speaking speed, and learn more about how to use proper vocabulary and expressions in real-life contexts (Lee, 2016). Lee (2016) also reported that the relationships built between the ICPs and ACPs "enabled international students' personal problems and questions to bubble to the surface so that they could get support and help from their American conversation partners" (p. 25). The adult EAL students in Lee's (2016) study reported that the setting that was created "for informal English conversations with American students played an important role in helping them to speak English freely and confidently" (p. 24). The American students in the study reported that the main benefit for them was the cultural exchange (Lee, 2016). The ACPs were able to share about their own culture and learn about their ICPs' cultures and lifestyles. All of the students who were interviewed in the Lee's study (2016) reported positive effects on their linguistic and cultural

education. The meetings with the ACPs were important and helpful for the ICPs because they were able to “practice their oral English, to establish friendships, and to adjust to American academic environments and life in the US” (Lee, 2016, p. 29).

In Lee and Song's (2009) study, adult EAL students participated in a one-on-one English conversation program with native English speakers. Lee and Song (2009) wanted to investigate how the EAL students perceived the one-on-one conversation program, how those perceptions were affected by the duration of their participation, which language skills were reported to have improved as a result of the program, and the relationship between the students' perceptions of the program and their perceived improvement in English. The results of the study indicated that the longer the participants participated in the one-on-one English conversation program, the more relaxed and comfortable they felt with their program tutor (Lee & Song, 2009). Regarding their improvement of their language skills, the participants reported that the one-on-one English program had improved their speaking, listening, and vocabulary skills. Finally, Lee and Song (2009) reported “the perceptions of ‘self-confidence’, ‘sharing cultures and experiences’, ‘relaxed atmosphere’, and ‘understanding of spoken English’ are significantly related to the students’ perceived improvement in both speaking and listening skills” (pp. 42 – 43). Overall, the implication of Lee and Song’s (2009) study was that the one-on-one conversation method should be recommended as an effective instructional means for helping EAL students build their confidence and oral communication skills.

Miller, Berkey, and Griffin (2015) conducted a phenomenological study where adult EAL students received explicit language instruction in a formal classroom environment and were also provided opportunities for interactions with native English speakers as part of a service-



learning experience. The adult EAL students participated in community service as part of a reflective strategy that was created to enrich EAL student learning experiences and teach civic responsibility (Miller, Berkey, & Griffin, 2015). Miller, Berkey, and Griffin (2015) investigated how the service-learning program prepared the EAL students for success in their degree programs. Data were collected through student journals, evaluations, and blogs. According to Miller, Berkey, and Griffin (2015), the reflections made by the EAL students showed that they perceived “a complementary English-language-learning methodology” for the EAL students. The participants’ experiences working in the service-learning component gave them a sense of confidence when interacting with native English speakers based on their increasing mastery of the language. The participants gave individual responses explaining how their English skills were improved based on the service-learning experience. Overall, Miller, Berkey, and Griffin (2015) stated that “the transition of confidence, flexibility, and even humor accompanying his/her [EAL student's] evolving English fluency over the course of the semester of service-learning can be dramatic” (pp. 341- 342). The continual practice using the language and interacting with native English speakers outside of the EAL classroom setting developed the participants’ fluency and confidence using the language (Miller, Berkey, and Griffin, 2015).

In Riley and Douglas’ (2017) study, 10 adult immigrant learners who were enrolled in English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes volunteered to work at a campus restaurant called The Multicultural Café. The purpose of the café was to provide the adult EAL students with an opportunity to interact with fluent English speakers. In this qualitative case study, Riley and Douglas (2017) collected data regarding the perceived impacts of volunteering at The Multicultural Café. They reported that “one of the most evident impacts of the Multicultural Café

service learning experience to emerge from the data was the opportunities it afforded for interactions between the participants and their customers as well as between the participants themselves” (Riley & Douglas, 2017, p. 33). The participants reported the benefits and challenges of interacting with customers at the café. The benefits included learning about the language from the customers, perceived improvements to English abilities, and learned social norms. The challenges included anxiety over using the café phone, not understanding customers’ orders, and working the cash register. Overall, Riley and Douglas (2017) reported that the volunteering at the Multicultural Café enhanced the participants abilities to interact with the local English speakers in the college community. Riley and Douglas (2017) recommended the service-learning component as an addition to formal English instruction in order to provide adult immigrants practice using English outside of the classroom setting and in order to create relationships within the community.

Suh, Wasanasomsithi, Short, Majid (1999) conducted a study looking at the impact of out-of-class learning experiences on an adult EAL student's conversation skills. The researchers interviewed eight adult EAL students enrolled in an IEP. The participants were asked if they felt that conversing with a conversation partner improved their English conversation skills. Suh, Wasanasomsithi, Short, and Majid (1999) reported that "almost all participants perceived conversation to be an important leisure activity for improving English conversation skills" (p. 14). In their interview responses, participants stated that they felt their listening skills had improved and they felt more comfortable understanding American English after meeting with a conversation partner.

In another example, Grover, Miller, Swearingen, and Wood (2014) conducted a study where they investigated how EAL students utilized self-directed learning practices, such as finding and meeting with a conversation partner, outside of the formal classroom setting. While Grover, Miller, Swearingen, and Wood (2014) reported that the EAL students who engaged in interactions in English showed increased comfort levels in real-world situations outside of the classroom, the resources that were made available for self-directed learning practices were being used infrequently. This means that although the interactions that took place with fluent English speakers were helpful, because the practices were self-directed, many of the participants opted out of opportunities that could develop their language abilities.

### ***The Importance of Colloquial English***

Engkent (1986) states that learning colloquial English helps adult EAL students understand the way the English language works and what can be expected of it. Incorporating a focus on developing colloquial English skills helps to improve adult EAL student comprehension and increases their self-confidence with the language (Engkent, 1986). Ulichny (1996) asserts that adult EAL students need to be provided with opportunities to produce language that is used in out-of-class encounters. While it is common for IEPs to encourage their EAL students to seek out self-directed learning opportunities or to join conversation partners/groups outside of class as a method of enhancing their conversation skills with fluent English speakers, taking initiative to practice English outside of class and/or meeting with an informal conversation partner/group is not a mandatory part of an IEP curriculum. Practicing outside of class and/or interacting regularly with a fluent English speaker can be largely avoided by adult EAL students who are not interested or do not feel comfortable reaching out for opportunities on their own (Sherry,

Thomas, & Wing Hong, 2010). Unfortunately, the end result for these students is that they do not regularly engage in conversations with fluent English speakers and they are not actively trying to develop their conversational abilities outside the formal classroom setting. Incorporating opportunities to interact with fluent English speakers as a mandated part of an IEP course curriculum would help these students obtain practice building their conversation skills and transferring what they are learning in their EAL courses into real-time conversations with fluent English speakers.

### **Chapter Summary**

This Background and Related Literature section shows why pairing formal language instruction with mandated opportunities for interaction within an IEP EAL program curricula could benefit the language development and conversational skills for adult EAL students. So far, the only literature available regarding the combination of the classroom instruction and informal interactions outside of class has been about adult EAL students who participated in one-on-one English conversation programs or who interacted with fluent English speakers during regularly planned events such as community service and volunteer opportunities. The results of these studies showed that the participants who were interacting with fluent English speakers in addition to receiving formal instruction reported increased comfort levels and self-confidence when using the target language. The goal for this descriptive case study is to investigate the perceptions of adult EAL students in regard to their mandated and regularly scheduled interactions with fluent English speakers.

## Chapter III: Methods

### Introduction

In order to ascertain the perspectives and experiences of the participants in this descriptive case study, an inductive approach was used from a social constructivist perspective. The applied methodology for a constructivist perspective is to utilize naturalistic qualitative research methods for data collection and analysis (Hatch, 2002). This descriptive case study provides an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The bounded system is the Cultural Immersion Program (CIP) at the English Language Institute (ELI), which is the Intensive English Program (IEP) at the University of Florida (UF). The participants for the study were adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) students who were currently or recently enrolled in a listening and speaking class at the ELI at the time of the study. The participants described their sessions with their two Language Assistants (LAs). At the time of this descriptive case study, the ELI is the only IEP to utilize interactions with LAs during LA sessions as a mandated component of the program curricula for enrolled EAL students at all proficiency levels. The ELI stands apart as an IEP and was purposefully selected for this study because of its unique language program curriculum.

The purpose of a constructivist perspective is to investigate "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.24). In order to obtain in-depth responses from the participants, the researcher recruited 13 currently enrolled students in-person at the ELI and three former ELI students via social media post and conducted one in-person in-depth interview with each of them. The data from the adult EAL students were collected and interpreted over the

course of one semester. The EAL students who volunteered to participate in the study were given a questionnaire and interviewed using the same questions from the questionnaire. The researcher conducted observations of LA sessions, and took notes comparing the information that was collected from the participants with actual occurrences observed during LA sessions. This study design was framed in order to help answer the following Research Questions:

### **Research Questions**

1. How do international students describe their experience(s) interacting with Language Assistants at regular intervals as a part of their course curriculum?
2. From the perspective of the adult international students, what are the perceived impacts of interacting with Language Assistants during weekly classes as a part of their Listening/Speaking course requirement?

### **Site & Participant Selection**

#### *Site Background*

The ELI at UF is the only IEP in the state of Florida, and possibly the entire United States, that utilizes a CIP. In 1998, the ELI documented its transition to incorporate a CIP and stated that the purpose of the program was “to improve on ways to totally immerse ELI students in English and U.S. culture.” (English Language Institute, 1998). During the initial phases, LAs were called Interaction Leaders, and the sessions were optional for ELI students. Then, in 2000 the ELI implemented schedule changes and incorporated interactions with the Interaction Leaders, or now called Listening/Speaking Assistants, as a mandatory part and the Practice Hour component of the Listening and Speaking course curriculum. The new program structure allowed

the ELI students to interact socially with American peers during their class time and learn beneficial skills for being successful in informal or social situations.

The ELI at UF is accredited through university accreditation, or through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), and through the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA). International students enrolled at the ELI are studying in the United States on F1 visas. During the time of this descriptive case study, the international EAL students enrolled in Listening and Speaking courses were required to meet every Monday through Thursday throughout the semester for one hour each day with two fluent English-speaking UF students, their LAs, in an informal or casual location around the UF campus. During these sessions, the LAs led activities, games, and discussion topics that were designed in order to give the adult EAL students exposure to US culture and the English language (English Language Institute, 1998).

The LA sessions are a mandatory part of the listening and speaking course curriculum for the ELI students who are enrolled at all proficiency levels at the ELI. The ELI has six proficiency levels: Levels 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, and 60. ELI students who are enrolled in the higher levels have indicated a higher level of English proficiency through assessments of language skill areas (i.e. reading, writing, listening, and speaking). The LAs receive training on how to create and carry-out interactive games, activities, debates, and discussions with the students; however, while the LAs could be considered for hire based on their scholarly interest in areas such as Linguistics and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), the LAs are not certified to teach EAL courses, and they do not conduct formal class assignments as part of the listening and speaking course requirements. The class size for the LA sessions is typically between 10-15

students. Each week, the LAs meet with the listening and speaking course faculty member to talk about the students enrolled in the listening and speaking course. The LAs report the attendance of the students. For the international students, attendance to the LA sessions is required to pass the listening and speaking course. The LAs may also present questions and/or concerns regarding the students and relay anecdotes about situations that occurred during their LA sessions.

Utilizing LAs as a part of the listening and speaking course curriculum is the focus for this descriptive case study because of its unique approach to learning for adult EAL students.

### ***Participant Selection***

First, purposive sampling was used for this descriptive case study. The participants were either currently enrolled in a listening and speaking class or they were a former ELI student who had been enrolled in a listening and speaking course within three years of the study. The researcher visited the listening and speaking classes for three different proficiency levels: one beginner level, one intermediate level, and one advanced level. The reason for choosing varying proficiency levels was to identify potential themes that may cut across proficiency levels in regard to what it's like to interact with the LAs; and, also to include the voices of beginner level students who are interested to contribute their experiences, but may have more trouble constructing their meaning into complex English sentences.

Once potential respondents indicated their interest in participating in the study, the researcher used Heterogeneity Sampling strategies in order to select greater variation between the participants (Patton, 2015). The researcher selected and contacted each of the interested participants and tried to select a sample that would evenly distribute participation between the ages, genders, national identities, and English proficiency levels available.



The following is a table listing the diverse aspects of the participants from the study:

**Table 1**

*Participant Selection*

Participants	Gender	National Identity	Proficiency level	Age Range
16	Male: 9	Saudi Arabia: 7	Beginner Level: 3	19 - 36
	Female: 7	Colombia: 3	Intermediate Level: 5	
		South Korea: 3	Advanced Level: 5	
		China: 1	Former ELI Student: 3	
		Ecuador: 1		
		India: 1		

The researcher was able to collect the perspectives of 13 international students who were currently enrolled at the ELI: Five advanced-level, five intermediate-level, and three beginner-level. The researcher also recruited participants who were previously enrolled in listening and speaking courses at the ELI within the past three years. These participants were recruited via social media posts. The researcher felt that it was important to include the perspectives of former ELI students in this study because recent former ELI students may see their experiences working with LAs in a different way after having completed the program. Respondents from this group were selected using heterogeneity sampling strategies to promote diversity among the participants.

## **Data Collection**

Creswell (2007) asserts that qualitative researchers use open-ended interview questions in order to allow research participants to share multiple perspectives. The data collected for this descriptive case study came from the written and verbal responses to the study questionnaire (Appendix A). The questions on the questionnaire were the same questions used during the audio-recorded interview. The interviews were one-on-one, in-depth and semi-structured, which helped give the participants an opportunity to describe and discuss things most pertinent to their individual experience. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to use follow-up questions when necessary for situations when and if the participant was uncertain about what to say or where to start. Hatch (2002) states that interviewers “generate questions during the interview in response to informants’ responses, the social contexts being discussed, and the degree of rapport established” (p. 23). At the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained to the participants that they would begin by discussing the six questions on the questionnaire, and afterwards the participant would write out their written responses to the questions. Because the participants were EAL students, the researcher needed to prepare for if the participants did not fully understand the meaning of the interview questions. The semi-structured interview approach helped provide the international students with the chance to select the concepts they were most comfortable opening up about. Students explained their responses to each of the questions during each interview. The researcher offered the assistance of Google Translate for each participant in hopes that if the participant was unsure about the question, they could use the translation and try to genuinely understand the concepts being asked in the six questions. The researcher initiated a procedure during each interview to review and verbally

confirm the spoken responses of the participants in order to check for clarity throughout the interview. These checks were important for maintaining the focus of the interview and for allowing the participant to feel heard and understood throughout each question response. Additionally, the researcher took notes during each of the interviews in order to help clarify any misheard responses and to begin the initial processes for open coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, the purpose of collecting both written and verbal responses to the six interview questions was to be able to verify if the information matched between the two methods of communication.

In addition to obtaining the experiences of the international students through interviews, the researcher also visited multiple LA sessions to conduct observations of what occurred during those sessions. These observations helped to inform the descriptive aspect of the case study. Fully describing the setting and the experiences of the LA sessions helped inform the bounded system of the study. In addition, comparing the responses of the participants with the actual interactions observed in their LA sessions added to the credibility of the participant statements. During the observations, the researcher collected field notes regarding the interactions and behaviors that took place during the LA sessions. A code-sheet was used, and the researcher recorded the physical setting, the number of international students in the session, the session announcements and activities, the overall amount of one-on-one and group interaction time with the LAs, and the level of interaction that took place between the LAs with both the international students enrolled in the class as well as the interviewed participants. The researcher had little to no involvement with the participants during the observations. Hatch (2002) stated that the very presence of a researcher makes natural context unnatural; therefore, it was the goal of the researcher to be as unobtrusive and objective as possible during the observations.

If there was any miscommunication between the participants and the researcher, the last method of data collection for the study was to conduct a series of member checks. Member checks are also called respondent validation (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Each participant was emailed the emerging findings from the study. They were invited to respond if they wanted to change their initial response or if they wanted to add any additional information. This was done as a final means of avoiding any potential misinterpretations that may have happened during data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed. The researcher's background as an EAL Instructor was helpful in deciphering the accents of the participants during both the interview and the process of typing the transcriptions. In addition, using the written notes taken during the interviews and the verbal reutterances made by the researcher on the audio-taped recordings was helpful for transcribing the interviews. The first step of data analysis was to check if the responses written on the questionnaires matched the responses stated in the transcriptions. For analyzing purposes, the researcher decided that the only questionnaires and interview responses that could be used for data analysis would be ones that matched in both forms.

Once all the information in the transcriptions and questionnaires was evaluated for possible misinterpretations and/or inconsistencies within the responses, the researcher began coding all the data using open coding and placing direct quotes from the participants into categories. Open coding, as a form of analysis, is useful for creating detailed descriptions for case studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In order to form categories and themes, the researcher

used open coding to group codes together via the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). Throughout analysis, the researcher continued to reintegrate theoretical notions based on the comparisons made between various participants and the overlap in participant responses. (Glaser, 1965). Glaser (1965) states that the constant comparative method is designed to aid analysts in generating a theory that is integrated, consistent, plausible, and close to the data. In order to do this, the researcher used the analytical coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and created categories and subcategories for each of the 16 individual transcripts. Then, the researcher compared the categories and subcategories created between each of the participant interviews. While coding the data, the researcher focused on themes and insights related to the research questions of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The organization of the overall themes that emerged from the data could not be established until after thoroughly comparing the overlapping categories and subcategories that formed across all 16 transcripts.

While organizing and comparing the responses of all the participants, the researcher was open to uncovering potentially new domains or existing ones that still needed modification (Hatch, 2002). The researcher reviewed and noted overlapping codes and categories between the transcripts and compared the written responses of the questionnaires between participants. As the written responses and categories from the transcripts were compared, any common patterns that emerged amongst the considerable variation of the participant sample (Patton, 2015) was recorded as a theme or a point of interest for the findings section of the study. The number of participants who made similar comments or descriptions to express how they feel about interacting with LAs was documented along with the overlapping self-perceived reasons for those feelings.

During the analysis of the observations, the researcher reviewed the field notes and made comparisons between what occurred during the observations and what the participants had expressed during their interviews. The researcher used the overlapping information taken from the interviewees about the LA sessions with the notes taken during observations to create a description of what happens during a typical LA session. This understanding and description of the setting, structure, and the interactions that take place during the LA sessions helps inform which specific aspects the participants perceive as important and beneficial to their language learning experience. Using a constructivist lens, the researcher was able to investigate the types of qualities and opportunities an international student values and responds well to in an IEP.

### **Trustworthiness/Credibility**

A noticeable limitation for this descriptive case study is the potential for misunderstandings between the researcher and the participants based on differences in language backgrounds. Speaking a different native language from the selected participants created a form of language barrier that could have resulted in potentially skewed interpretations both on the side of the participants and how they perceived the interview questions and by the researcher in the way the researcher interpreted the participants' responses. To prevent this, the researcher attempted to minimize the possibilities for misinterpretations by implementing triangulation strategies throughout data collection.

Creswell (2007) recommends procedures such as triangulating amongst separate data sources, writing with detailed and thick description, and taking the narrative back to participants through member checking as effective validation strategies. In order to promote dependability, the researcher triangulated the data sources by comparing the responses from the questionnaires,

the interviews, and the observations. The researcher had considered the language barriers that can occur when working with EAL students could cause a potential limitation for the data collection process; therefore, the researcher implemented multiple methods to ensure the participants understood the meaning of the interview/questionnaire questions and that their responses were interpreted correctly by the researcher to the best of ability. The researcher offered to access Google Translate and also allowed the participants to use their own translation device(s) if they requested in order to better comprehend the questions on the questionnaire. During the interviews, when the participants had trouble thinking of how to say what they wanted to say, the researcher would try to ask the question using more simplified language techniques such as using phrases that include simple sentence structures and vocabulary that is appropriate for a lower level EAL student. The researcher also used synonyms and/or synonymous phrases throughout the interviews to clarify if the information stated by the student was interpreted correctly.

The researcher aided in the transferability of the findings by using rich, thick description that detailed the context of the descriptive case study (Patton, 2002). Because the experiences of the participants in the study may be transferable to other adult EAL students in IEPs, the more specific and detailed the descriptions of the encounters with the participants, the more likely the information can be applicable for modifications in other IEPs. The purpose of the observations was to observe the full context of what is experienced during the LA session and to better understand the perceptions that were revealed by the participants. Observing the location and the social interactions that took place during the LA sessions allowed the researcher to better

understand the descriptions made by the participants in the study and the authentic meanings of their questionnaire and interview responses.

The third method for developing trustworthiness was to do a member check (Creswell, 2007). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that member checks are important for ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of the participants. At the end of each interview, the researcher asked if the participant gave their permission to be contacted by e-mail with a summary of the emerging findings of the study. Out of the participants who indicated yes, the researcher chose one from each proficiency level and emailed them with the initial results of the study. Each participant who was emailed was asked to read the initial findings based on the six questions from the interview. They were asked to respond via email or virtual appointment if they wanted to share any additional feedback or if they wanted to change something that they had said the day of the interview.

### ***Member Checks***

At the conclusion of data analysis, the researcher created a list of initial findings and sub-themes to send to a portion of the study participants for potential comments and/or feedback. Participants were made aware that they could be contacted and that they were not required to respond with feedback if they did not want to. One respondent replied to the initial findings stating this additional comment. He/She said:

I just have one comment that I hope would be helpful for you. I would personally not chose happiness as the main feeling I had when I took my LA classes. I would call it more like excitement, a feeling of curiosity for what was going to happen each day in the



classroom. So, although I reckon that happiness was present, it wasn't the most salient feeling in my case. (message from participant to researcher)

The respondent who replied to the email wanted his/her description of the LA sessions to be clear. Coming from a constructivist perspective, this feedback helped to provide more clarity into the perceptions of international students studying in IEPs in the United States.

The final method of verification for this descriptive case study was the use of external audits and collaboration with a dissertation committee to help ensure that the collected data matched the reported results. By working with a dissertation committee, the researcher was able to fully construct a descriptive case study exploring the perceptions of international students who interacted with LAs as a required part of the ELI program curricula. The committee oversaw the planned and implemented methods of the researcher and provided helpful feedback and guidance throughout data analysis and the reporting of findings.

### **Chapter Summary**

The CIP layout and the listening and speaking course structure at the ELI are the distinguishing factors of the ELI that make its program unique from other IEPs. The purpose of this research study is to learn about the perceptions and preferences of the international students who chose to study at UF's IEP, the ELI. The ELI uses a program curriculum that incorporates mandated interactions with LAs as a part of the Listening and Speaking course curriculum. The researcher recruited 16 participants who were currently or had recently been enrolled in a listening and speaking course at the ELI and interviewed each about their experiences interacting with LAs as a required component of their coursework. In this descriptive case study, the researcher observed LA class sessions and conducted one in-depth interview with each of the

adult EAL students. The researcher collected the verbal and written responses of six in-depth interview questions. This was done in order to learn about the perspectives of the EAL students and how they perceived their required interactions with the LAs. Furthermore, the participants' responses to the interview questions revealed some of their overlapping perceptions of the impacts they perceived as being part of using LAs as a learning technique at the ELI. The written responses and interview transcripts were combined, and the researcher created themes that related to answering the overall research questions of this descriptive case study. The researcher implemented multiple measures to ensure validity and trustworthiness within the study. Selecting the methodology of the study was part of a collaboration process of a dissertation committee to create an appropriate design and meaningful instrumentation for this descriptive case study.

## Chapter IV: Findings

### Introduction

In this descriptive case study, 16 international students currently or recently enrolled at the English Language Institute (ELI) at the University of Florida (UF) provided verbal and written responses to interview and questionnaire questions about their experiences interacting with Language Assistants (LAs) as a required part of their Listening and Speaking course curriculum. The findings for this descriptive case study were constructed and organized by combining and analyzing the collected data from the participant interviews, questionnaire responses, and the researcher's observations notes. This was done in order to generate overall themes about the perceptions of ELI students who had interacted with Language Assistants (LAs) within the bounded system of this descriptive case study, to provide a clear image of the programmatic structure that is in place at the ELI at UF, and to show how this programmatic structure within the ELI organization at UF is a singularly unique experience for international students who want to study abroad and learn English in the United States.

The primary goals of the researcher were to gather the perceptions of the international students enrolled as English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, who were either enrolled at the time in a listening and speaking course or had been within the previous three years, and learn about how EAL students perceived their interactions with their LAs every Monday through Thursday of the semester. The ELI at UF is the only institution, thus far, that incorporates weekly group interactions with two LAs, who are fluent English-speaking university students, as a required part of the program course curricula. This type of program structure aligns with Krashen's Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis which explains why, when

learning a language, it is important to obtain both formal language instruction in the classroom setting along with informal practice using authentic conversations that take place in real time outside the formal classroom (Schütz, 2007). In the listening and speaking classes at the ELI, the LAs lead sessions of approximately 10 – 15 international students for a roughly one-hour long session in an informal setting; the sessions usually take place at designated benches or tables outside throughout the campus. The LAs proctor activities, games, and tasks that allow the EAL students to converse together in English. The LAs provide the EAL students with an opportunity to interact with each other and to utilize the LAs who, as fluent English-speakers, can quickly and effectively provide helpful feedback about how to converse in English. The researcher of this study worked at the ELI at UF as an LA for six semesters in the 2000's. Many of the details listed in this study regarding the organization of LA Session locations, potential session conversation objectives for LAs, and the potential LA interactions that take place during weekday and weekend activities, came from the researcher's background knowledge and experiences regularly conversing with the enrolled international students at the ELI.

In order to learn the opinions of international students regarding their LA sessions, the researcher conducted one in-depth audio-recorded interview and obtained the written responses for each of the six questions listed on the Interview Questionnaire (Appendix A or B) from each of the 16 participants. The researcher analyzed and compared the data from both the written responses and the interview transcripts. There was a vast range of written and verbal responses from the 16 participants in the study; therefore, the researcher organized the responses of the participants based on the most common themes and patterns that came from overlaps in verbal and written responses between the participants. The 16 interviewed participants were given

pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. The pseudonyms were chosen based on the neutrality of their American-sounding origins. No personal identifiers, cultural background, or native language may be inferred based on the name selected for each participant. The pseudonyms are as follows: Ken, Brian, Marion, Joshua, Danielle, Jennifer, Victoria, Logan, Shea, Camden, Tiffany, Samantha, Taylor, Tristan, Cody, and Landon. Tristan, Cody, and Landon are the three former ELI students whose responses are based on reflections from their previous time being enrolled at the ELI. In order to fully understand the parameters and details of the LA sessions, the researcher conducted observations of LA sessions to experience what was currently taking place before, during, and after LA sessions and additionally to triangulate if what the participants stated occurred during their LA sessions was similar to what was observed by the researcher.

### **Positionality Statement**

The findings for this descriptive case study are reported through the lens of the researcher, who has a heightened understanding of the dynamics of the LA session experience after working as an LA during the 2000's and who is a second language learner as well after having spent several years learning to converse in Colombian Spanish. Conversing with international students and then personally experiencing the trials and complexities of learning an additional language transforms the way the collected data is articulated throughout the findings of this descriptive case study. As a language learner, there is general appreciation for being presented with safe and comfortable opportunities to interact and practice being social in a new language. The ELI at UF creates these language learning environments for the benefit of the students; it is done in order to provide practice speaking and to incorporate interactions with

locals who can help welcome newcomers to the United States and impart understandings of the local and national customs. It was the goal of the researcher to illuminate what takes place at the ELI. Some of the general understandings of how things had previously worked at the ELI assisted the researcher when conversing about the ELI with the study participants. The researcher inquired about what the LA sessions meant to the participants and whether the interactions with LAs were depicted as beneficial or valued. In order to do this, the researcher conducted this descriptive case study for the international students who were either currently or had recently been enrolled in listening and speaking courses at the ELI at UF. The study aims to answer the following two researcher questions:

### **Research Questions**

1. How do international students describe their experience(s) interacting with Language Assistants at regular intervals as a part of their course curriculum?
2. From the perspective of the adult international students, what are the perceived impacts of interacting with Language Assistants during weekly classes as a part of the Listening/Speaking course requirement?

### **Findings**

The findings of this descriptive case study were organized into themes. In order to help the participants describe their LA sessions, the researcher utilized responses from questions #1 and #2 of the Interview Questionnaire (Appendix A or B) to acquire an in-depth picture of what the sessions were like for each of the participants. Overlapping terminology and descriptions amongst participant responses were given open codes that were eventually combined with others to form sub-themes. The combination of sub-themes resulted in overarching main themes about

the perceptions presented in the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Question #1 asked the participants to describe their overall experience(s) interacting with LAs four times per week as a requirement for their Listening/Speaking course. Because the interviews were semi-structured, many of the interview questions included follow-up questions which asked the participants to further elaborate about their general opinions and descriptions. The researcher investigated how the participants described their general emotions about their LA sessions by asking them to identify the typical emotion they experienced at the beginning of their LA sessions. The responses collected from the participants to question #1 were used to obtain an overall idea of how the participants perceived their experiences interacting with their LAs throughout their weekly course schedule.

Responses to Question #2 provided the researcher with information about the personal preferences of each of the participants regarding if they felt the LA sessions were a valuable use of time. In order to help the participants explore what, if any, types of impacts they perceived would follow based on their interactions with their LAs during LA sessions, questions #3, #4, and #5 of the Interview Questionnaire (Appendix A or Appendix B) asked the participants to list any self-perceived benefits and/or challenges they experienced during their LA sessions. The researcher asked the participants to explain if and how they think their experience learning English might be different had they enrolled in an IEP that did not include LA Sessions as a required part of their Listening and Speaking course curriculum. Additionally, the researcher asked what, if any, were the potential impacts for the future the participants felt could occur due to the practice they received speaking English regularly with their LAs. The combination of information received from the responses to these three questions allowed the researcher to

explore and identify some ways that interactions between LAs and international students during LA sessions had potentially created positive and/or negative impacts for the participants' ability to converse or socialize using the English language in daily life activities. The researcher attempted to maintain a neutral perspective acknowledging that LA sessions could have both potential benefits as well as difficulties or challenges for the adult EAL students. The last interview question, Question #6, was used to collect information that participants may have felt needed to be included, was not mentioned, or needed additional recognition. The overall findings that were ascertained from the responses to each of the six interview questions were combined for all 16 participants.

Using the overlapping participant responses that were collected both in writing and verbally, the researcher was able to use the collected data to develop and describe themes that emerged related to the research questions for this descriptive case study. Three themes were identified, (a) LA Sessions are Described as Socially Enriching and Beneficial for Practice Speaking English, (b) Incorporating Interactions with LAs during LA Sessions as a Learning Approach within an IEP Curricula Facilitates Learning, and (c) LA Sessions are Perceived as Important by International Students. These themes are explored in more detail here.

#### ***4.1 LA Sessions are Described as Socially Enriching and Beneficial for Practice Speaking English***

Theme 4.1 shows how the participants visualize their time spent with their LAs as a beneficial use of time and enjoyable to boot. This overall theme was separated into three sub-themes which form the overall meaning of how the participants described their regularly scheduled interactions with their LAs. The three sub-themes are that LA sessions provide an



enriching atmosphere where students can practice using their English-speaking skills, LAs are friendly and converse with the international students as friends would, and that LA sessions are perceived as a fun and exciting time. Therefore, because the participants felt comfortable and were encouraged to converse, the overall experience was described as pleasant and helpful.

**LA Sessions Provide Beneficial Practice.** Multiple participants stated or wrote that the practice they received almost daily with their LAs was helpful and important for developing their listening and speaking abilities. Ken stated, “you can practice English and you have activity every day” (line 202) when describing his LA sessions. Marion stated in her interview that “the Language Assistant is active...this good practice for me” (lines 70 – 75). Joshua reported in response to question #1:

It’s important to participate in every class with the LA because it’s the best way to improve your English. They listen to you and give you a lot of advices about American culture. The new vocabulary in each class are useful in all the contexts. (questionnaire response)

Jennifer stated in her interview that “LA teacher improve my English” (line 126), and Victoria expressed that she “can talk with LAs” (line 42) and they teach her “how to speak and what is wrong in their [the international students’] sentence” (line 43). Logan was another participant who stated the LA sessions had “activities and speaking all the time...This, I think, is more helpful” (line 15 - 16). Shea stated in her interview:

Also, think I like this class because they ask to talk or like have a conversation, like everyday conversation. And they ask to practice English. Yeah, I think this is the best part. They ask to practice English. (lines 28 – 30)

Camden wrote on his questionnaire in response to question #1 that he thinks the LA sessions are “important opportunity to practice and develop my [his] L/S [Listening and Speaking] skills” (questionnaire response), and he also mentioned in his interview that the practice he received in his LA sessions felt like he was receiving “the chance to know a different level of language” (line 9).

Tiffany talked about the routine organization that the LAs exhibited during their sessions. This was something that the researcher also noted during the observations of the LA sessions. Tiffany explained that typically during her LA sessions:

We’ll have a topic every day and they the LAs give us a sheet with sentences or word phrases we’ll need. We’ll be divided into pairs or groups and then have a short presentation to the whole class. (questionnaire response)

Tiffany also mentioned that she was not “very used to speaking a lot of people” (line 53) but that “everyone will do this” (line 54) and that makes it “normal practice” (line 54). Tristan stated that during his practice he was able to “learn about the small details that made me [him] more confident about my [his] English skills to talk in public such as stores, restaurant, etc” (questionnaire response).

Cody was another participant who indicated that his time with his LAs had given him “something very interesting every day and truly motivated us [the international students] to learn the language” (questionnaire response). Cody stated in his interview response that he thought “that class was very useful” (line 108) and that the LAs could help students “solve many questions that you [they] would have in the other classes and...were probably not so confident to ask your [their] professor” (lines 110 – 112). Finally, Landon also stated that the LA sessions

improved his “English skills and help increase confidence in English” (questionnaire response). He also stated very eloquently in response to question #1 that his experience in the LA sessions was “enriching when it comes to the language, itself, when it comes to the slang terms, and when it comes to feeling like I am not studying English, I’m living it” (lines 12 – 14).

Throughout their responses to questions #3, #4, and #5, the majority of the participants indicated that the area of their English development that progressed the most through their interactions with LAs was in their speaking and/or conversational skills. Joshua responded to question #3 in his interview stating that after working with his LAs, he was now “more comfortable to explain my [his] ideas in English and talk in English with someone” (line 111). Shea also responded to question #3 in her interview stating, “The benefits... I can practice my English” (line 110). Jennifer stated in response to question #4 that “LA teacher improve my speaking English” (line 126), and Victoria also reported in response to question #4 how important her LA sessions were for developing her English speaking skills as well. She stated, “...in LA class, I can talk a lot and they fix my sentences. So, that's a really good thing. So, maybe the LA is not in the ELI, I feel a little bit more difficult to speak (lines 91 – 93). Camden explained in his response to question #4, “Because this class, as I said, there is more chance to practice listening and speaking. If there is no LA class, I think I will lose so many opportunities to practice” (lines 85 – 86). The participants continued to identify the concepts they felt made their interactions with their LAs so important for their own language growth and development.

The participants provided examples of the areas of their language skills that they felt were being developed through their speaking practice with their LAs. Some participants identified that the practice they received during LA sessions helped to develop their English

vocabulary. Brian stated in response to question #3 that he felt the games he played during his LA sessions helped him to “practice new vocabulary” (line 127). Logan also mentioned the development of vocabulary in his response to question #3. He stated, “I did, like they gave me a paper that is vocabulary words, and they say, try to buy it to the other classmate. And I use the vocabulary they gave it to me and it help” (lines 118 – 119). Danielle also stated in her response to question #3 that “the benefits are...as I said, some vocabulary, how to use it” (line 109).

Samantha stated in her responses to question #3 that:

They are patient to come forward and try anything. We are usually get to class. They have some phrasal and some words that they use. And that’s sometimes really helpful and interesting. And yeah, yeah, I think it’s great. And actually the LA classes, we have to talk more than other classes. That’s actually the benefit. (lines 110 – 113)

Other students discussed the benefits they perceived from their enhanced speaking skills. Tiffany stated proudly in response to question #4 that she thought “after this class, I think it is very good. Necessary. Because I never did a debate in English before” (lines 137 – 138). Taylor stated in regard to question #3 that “what it’s helping us [international students] achieve is trying to sound less foreign” (lines 169 – 170). Tristan explained in his response to question # 4 that “it [the LA sessions] helped me a lot to improve my English. Like I wouldn’t do this without Language Assistant. Because teacher, they will not talk to the same way Language Assistant talk to you” (lines 387 – 389). The participants of the study seemed aware that their speaking abilities were developing based on the regular amount of practice they received interacting with their LAs.

Other benefits that participants stated were the self-reported progressions of their English-speaking abilities and the self-reported improved ability to learn to speak in English

quickly. Cody wrote in response to question #3 that “The main benefit is that, in my opinion, there's no other way to learn informal spoken English at the fast pace we did” (questionnaire response). Brian wrote in response to question #4 that if there were no LAs in the listening and speaking class, “maybe the learn is a little slow, because LA is a big tool for the student” (questionnaire response). He also stated specifically in his interview that he prefers his LA sessions to his other classes “because you learn more fast” (line 48). Joshua stated in his interview in response to question #4:

I couldn't improve my English there so fast like I doing here because it's like I say to you in the first part of this interview, is not enough just practice with the academic goals. You need to practice your English in a real environment. So, that's the thing the LA class have. So, you really need to really, to practice your informal English, too because everyone here talk with you in informal English.” (lines 125 - 129)

Marion stated in response to question #3 that the LA sessions were “...more important strategy for learn with active or games. This more faster or fastly” (lines 88 – 89). Regarding rate of learning, Cody wrote in his response to question #4:

I don't think there's other way to learn informal English as fast as I did with the LAs. This experience allows you to be immerse in the language and the culture with the guidance of a native speaker, who gives you many tools to be used in your daily social life. Of course it is possible to learn all of this language and social skills in other ways, but I don't think you would accomplish that at a fast pace without the assistance of the LAs.

The overall amount of practice the participants identified, the content explored through the introduction activities and explanations about vocabulary words in various

discussion/game/presentation topics during group tasks, the rate of absorption of the information, and the consistency of the regularly scheduled interactions all helped to uncover which aspects of the LAs' efforts and the overall LA sessions helped the international students to feel like their speaking abilities had been enhanced through their interactions.

The observations conducted by the researcher also confirmed the information provided in this first sub-theme. According to the researcher's observation notes, the LA sessions were gathering of two LAs and approximately 10 – 12 international students. The LAs began their session by marking attendance, making announcements about upcoming events at the ELI, and encouraging the students to participate in the weekday and upcoming weekend activities. After covering the introductory announcements, the LAs in the observed sessions began their initial session activities and introduced key vocabulary the students would be using for the activity. Many of the observed sessions included handouts with words, phrases, visuals, and sometimes charts listed for students to keep. During one observed activity, the LAs started their activity by splitting the whole group into two smaller groups. One LA each sat with a group and started a discussion using open-ended questions about what expressions/phrases the students had heard that they believed to be common in the United States. The students began reciting various expressions and idioms they had heard, and each was given time to participate and contribute an idea. After each of the groups settled, both LAs presented a short list of common expressions and phrases the students might hear in their common day-to-day activities around UF. The LAs talked about each one and asked if any of the students had heard or used them before. The semantics, or the meanings associated with the words and phrases, were discussed in both groups.

At the conclusion of the warm-up activity, the students were asked to move on to a new activity, a partner activity where they created a news headline about something going on in the world currently. One person in each pair held the others phone and recorded a video of the student talking about something going on. The LAs recommended trying to use some of the common expressions/phrases they had just talked about during the warm-up activity. The participation of the students during the LA sessions was not formally required, and the LAs did not give grades for any of their session activities. The students in the observed sessions did not appear to be forced to talk. When students indicated that they did not want to speak, the LA leading the activity typically nodded and moved on with the activity. Students who acted shy sometimes shook their heads or said very little when they were called on to participate. The observed LAs showed a genuine thoughtfulness for the contributions of the students. Each LA had their own style of leading the group conversation, but all showed signs of empathy and enthusiasm for the topic that showed in their mannerisms and the way they spoke to the international students.

The LAs also seemed conscientious about their rate of speech during the sessions. When speaking to the whole group, many of the LAs would use especially clear intonation when stating words and phrases. They would also routinely check for confirmation of comprehension about what was being said during the LA session. One of the helpful learning techniques the researcher noted during the sessions was the LAs' choices for partner pairings during partner activities. When small groups or partners were necessary for an activity, the LAs would combine students who did not share a common language outside of English. This technique forced the partners in the activity to use English. Another technique that was noted during the observations was when

an LA asked their group of international students if a certain type of behavior was common back in their countries of origin. By asking the international students to talk about something familiar to their country, culture, and/or experience, the students were given an opportunity to express themselves and a topic of interest for them in the target language, English. Because the students were being asked to open up about topics they knew well, there was more likelihood that they would feel motivated to use as much of the target language as they could to explain their ideas. By asking the students to relate a topic back to their own lived experiences, the LAs were giving the students an effective technique to help them develop their English-speaking abilities.

**LAs are Considered Friends.** Another sub-theme that emerged from the overlapping of participant responses was the description of LAs as friends in the lives of the participants. Ken responded to question #1 stating that the LAs are “very friendly and make you feel fluent” (questionnaire response). He stated in his interview that “now I [he] have like a friend” (line 47) and that the LAs “feel like friends American” (line 344). Jennifer stated in her interview “When I graduate and leave, I will more close to LAs and still maybe we connect, contact apart” (lines 143 – 144) which the researcher interpreted to mean that she hopes for continued friendship with her LAs even after completion of the program. Jennifer also stated that she believed her experiences with her LAs would help her “make a foreigner friend more easily” (lines 146).

Victoria responded to question #1 stating, “My LA is like my friend, not real teacher. So I feel really comfortable to talk with my LA” (questionnaire response). She also stated in her interview that “the LA is like a friend, and we can contact with them, so it make me feel like friendly. So, it’s not like a class” (lines 13 – 14). Logan wrote on his questionnaire for question #1 “I feel we are friends and I feel comfortable with them and happy” (questionnaire response).



He also stated in his interview that “LAs are like my [his] friends because they are close to me [him], especially like the age” (line 8). Shea also stated in her questionnaire response that “It is like a regular class but more relax and fun. We can practice our English and make friendship” (questionnaire response). Regarding her LAs, Shea stated “I think all of them are different, but they make feel us like a friends because they are a very young people” (lines 26 – 27).

Tiffany stated in her interview that the LAs “are very kind and really like friend to you” (line 110) , and Samantha also said “I feel we became a friends now” (line 151). Tristan, a former ELI student, reported that he had continued his friendship with his LA. He stated, “I feel like now she’s not friend anymore...She’s family” (lines 181 – 182). Landon, another former ELI student, also stated that LA sessions were “a friendship environment” (line 545). He also added that the feeling of friendship helped and made the LA session feel like “a safe environment” (line 550) that prepared him for “the uncertain environment” (line 551).

The researcher noted during multiple LA session observations that the international students appeared relaxed and happy during the observed LA sessions. Throughout the observations, whenever students were uncertain of how to say something or when someone wanted to ask a question, the LAs were receptive to the students and tried to help them convey what they wanted to say. In one example observation, the LAs both listened to the input from the student and when they showed they were uncertain what was being said, they both tried to guide the student towards saying aloud what they wanted to say using clarification questions, repeating what was heard, and using synonyms in order to try to understand the verbal message from the student. The overall body posture of the students observed was comfortable and interested. The

researcher noted many occasions of laughter throughout the observation notes from various LA sessions.

The LAs spent the beginning and end of each LA session promoting participation in the weekday and weekend activities organized by the ELI Cultural Immersion Program (CIP). The concept of friendships between the international students and LAs align with the level of enthusiasm noted when the LAs and international students discussed who would be attending which activities together during the sessions. The weekday and weekend activities occurred during the afternoon/evening time each weekday and weekend throughout the semester. During these optional out-of-class activities, the international students were provided an opportunity to meet with LAs and other students from the ELI and talk, play games or sports, or engage in other social activities. The ELI would also organize weekend activities for the enrolled international students. The LAs were invited to join along with the international students in their out-of-class activities in order to provide and create additional opportunities for interactions and conversations between the enrolled ELI students and the LAs. Because the students had already become accustomed to interacting with their LAs and developing a friendship during their LA sessions, it was possible that the EAL students enrolled at the ELI felt comfortable attending out-of-class events where they could interact with their LAs and other fluent English speakers. The CIP encouraged the LAs to attend these out-of-class activities and talk alongside the international students while enjoying the many of the surrounding area's entertaining, social, recreational or educational events with the international students. The students could also sign up to perform local volunteer work on certain weekends, and the LAs would be encouraged to attend these activities as well. These are all examples of ways that the CIP would try to

coordinate as much interaction time as possible between the international students and the LAs and other fluent English speakers in the area as well. It appeared by the way the LAs talked about the activities during the observations that many of the LAs enjoy attending these activities and have built a rapport with the international students in the class.

**LA Sessions are Fun and Exciting.** Another sub-theme that emerged from the data was the overall appreciation for interactions with LAs as both fun and exciting experiences for the majority of the participants. Marion responded to question #1 writing, “I love it...Useful for me because not boring and attractive each day” (questionnaire response). Danielle stated in her interview in response to #2 that she thought the LA session was fun “because no homework, nothing, just how you order, how you go when you go to the hospital...” (lines 98 – 99). Jennifer wrote in her response to question #1 “I like LA class because they make me comfortable and happy. It seems like play time, not a class. And it helps me improve my speaking skill by talking each other.” (questionnaire response). During her interview, Jennifer stated in response to question #4 that “LA is pleasure for me and interesting experience” (lines 100 – 101).

Victoria stated in her response to question #1 “I feel really good. Especially, my favorite class is LA” (line 10). During her interview, she described the LA session stating, “This class, LA class, has a lot of activities, like doing some games...so it’s more active and it feel me more energy.” (lines 55 – 56). Logan stated that the LA Sessions felt “like hanging out” (line 51). Regarding the activities with the LAs, Shea stated, “I feel always, they always have a warm-up they ask to play or fun activity, every day. This activity or this warm-up is like relaxed” (lines 66 – 67). Tiffany also implied a relaxed environment as she described her LA sessions as “calm” (line 97).

Samantha explained that for international students, the LAs could be described as: They are the first person we [international students] met, like American. So, they are really nice to us. They encourage us to talk with them and it's very happy to start speaking. And I think, yeah, every something they bring some words and phrases, some things for us." (lines 196 – 199)

Tristan described his interactions with his LAs as “really a good experience and I [he] really enjoyed talking to them” (line 27). Tristan also described his LA sessions as “fun” (line 35). Landon described the LA sessions as “exciting” and “fun” (questionnaire response) and stated in his interview that he would describe his experience interacting with LAs as “positive, fun, challenging in a good way” (line 16). He noted toward the end of his interview that he was impressed with the CIP because he expressed that “to make it [the LA session] look casual and everyday, it's not easy...” (lines 451 – 452).

The researcher asked the participants question #2 on the Interview Questionnaire (Appendix A or B) in order to gauge if/how much the participants viewed their LA session time as a valuable part of their daily course schedule. The purpose of this question was to understand the participants' perception of how they would spend their language course time if they had a choice. The researcher was interested to know if there was something about the LA session that would make the students want to spend more time doing it, or if perhaps international students did not want more time. This choice was meant to reveal the preferences of the participants regarding how much time they felt was an appropriate amount of time to interact with their LAs. Would they prefer more time with their LAs, the same amount, or less time? The overall opinion

of the participants was favorable for wanting to spend just as much if not more time with their LAs in the LA sessions.

Multiple participants indicated that they enjoyed and appreciated the time spent with the LAs. The findings indicated that there were many participant responses that overlapped regarding keeping LA sessions at the very least the same amount of time or to even increase the time spent for LA sessions. Ken stated in both his questionnaire and his interview that he wanted more time. Brian wrote in his questionnaire response “More time because the spend time with the LA is very little” (questionnaire response). Marion explained in her response to question #2 “More time because practices and speaking” (questionnaire response).

Jennifer’s written response to question #2 was, “More or same amount of time. Compare with other class, LA class is not stressful for me and I can feel relax. Sometimes I need more time to talk with them” (questionnaire response). She also stated in her interview “Because compare with other class, I feel time goes fast in LA class. Sometimes, we go over time and so I wanted more time” (lines 46 – 47). Victoria was another participant who also indicated “More time” (questionnaire response) and stated in her interview, “I want more than one hour” (line 40). Tiffany stated in her interview “I think it’s better to have more time” (line 82). As a former student, Cody responded to question #2 stating:

I would have liked more time. I think that Fridays should also have classes with the LAs because I could feel that three days between Thursday and Monday made us stop the learning process for a long time. (questionnaire response)

Landon stated firmly in his interview “More time, for sure” (line 124) and justified that he knew he wanted more time because he made sure to “keep seeing these LAs after classes, hang out on the weekends...Definitely more time. Of course” (lines 126 – 128).

In regard to keeping the amount of class time the way it currently was, Joshua stated that because there are other types of meetings outside of class with LAs such as “Monday Mixer, Soccer Tuesday, Volleyball Wednesday, Thursday (change every week) Café Friday” (questionnaire response), the amount of time a student can practice interacting with their LAs is theirs to decide. Therefore, Joshua felt “it’s the right time” (line 51). Logan also stated that “one hour is very good” (line 63). Shea wrote for her response to question #2 “I think keep the same amount of time because it is perfect for the activities that they make and we don’t feel bored” (questionnaire response). Additionally, Camden also stated that “the time is perfect for me” (line 40).

The responses from the participants regarding their satisfaction with the amount of time currently allotted for LA sessions showed that many of the participants in this study valued and enjoyed the time that they spent interacting with their LAs during their LA sessions. This third sub-theme focuses on the many perceptions that were shared by the participants indicating that LA sessions were considered worthwhile and enjoyable. Based on these findings, the overall theme that LAs provide a beneficial and engaging atmosphere to practice conversing in English is clearer and more credible based the many favorable responses from the study participants from varying countries and cultures. The reasons for why the sessions were considered to be valuable by the participants are further presented within the second theme of this descriptive case study, which attempts to explore and expand upon Research Question #2, the participants’ perceptions

of potential any impacts that may be associated with regular interactions with LAs during LA sessions.

#### ***4.2 Incorporating Interactions with LAs during LA Sessions as a Learning Approach within an IEP Curricula Facilitates Learning***

Theme 4.2 of the findings was formed based on the analysis of the verbal and written responses of the participants. The participants self-reported impacts they identified as being possible due to their regularly scheduled interactions with their LAs. When the participants were asked to identify any potential impacts from their LA session experiences, such as any self-perceived benefits and/or self-perceived challenges that arose due to the required nature of the LAs sessions, many participants stated individual, unique, and/or personal impressions for why the curricular structure in place at the ELI was beneficial or difficult for them.

Due to the open-ended nature of the question, there were some participant responses that did not overlap with any other participant responses. For instance, one participant indicated that he/she wanted more assistance with and knowledge about resume writing skills and help with how to apply to graduate degree and internship programs specific to his/her academic area of interest. He/She felt the time spent with the LAs should have been used for working towards the career goals of the students and less on the social components of the language. However, there were no other participants in the study who reported that they wanted to spend their LA session time working on career development aspects. This individualistic response was, therefore, not documented as part of a finding for this study because it stood alone as a solitary statement. Another example of a challenge a participant reported that did not appear again was a statement about how the participant felt that his/her speaking skills were more advanced than what was

being talked and learned about during the LA sessions. This participant did not feel that the LA sessions were necessary for himself/herself. One other example of a solitary response regarding the challenges of interacting with LAs during LA sessions was from a participant who stated he/she was only in the United States for a very short period of time and that he/she wished that more time could have been spent studying academic vocabulary independently than being required to participate in LA sessions. An example of a benefit that was not shared by other respondents was from a participant who felt that the perceived collaboration between the LAs and the ELI listening and speaking faculty supported the learning of the students because what was being taught in the class was in-turn expanded upon during LA sessions. This seemed beneficial to this participant because it felt like additional and individualized tutoring on the content being learned in the language classroom. Each of these statements were analyzed throughout data analysis; however, because no other participants' opinions overlapped with these individual perceptions, these responses were not utilized in the formation of the sub-themes for Theme 4.2.

The self-perceived impacts that overlapped between participant responses were related to the knowledge that was learned from the LAs, such as concepts about the English language, the social norms of the surrounding area, and knowledge about local and national cultures. Theme 4.2 includes three sub-themes that help to inform how interacting with LAs as a learning approach facilitates the learning of the ELI students. The most common words and phrases throughout the written responses and interview transcriptions were combined to form these sub-themes. Based on participant responses, the sub-themes for 4.2 are that LAs were able to help the participants develop an understanding of the national culture of the United States and the local



culture on the UF campus, the LAs were able to help the participants learn how to socialize and talk to new people in the United States, and finally the LA sessions allowed the participants to explore the relational components that existed between the students with each other and with the LAs.

The researcher combined, analyzed, and coded the written and verbal responses of the participants looking to discover the most common ideas that emerged regarding any self-perceived beneficial and/or challenging impacts when interacting regularly with LAs as a requirement of the ELI course curriculum. The three sub-themes that were used to form Theme 4.2, which is that using interactions with LAs during LA sessions as an approach to language learning facilitates the learning of adult EAL students, were that LAs and LA sessions have the potential to improve the language learning experiences and speaking capabilities of adult EAL students. Due to the regular proximity to fluent English speakers who have experiential knowledge about the surrounding culture, the LAs were able to help the EAL students in their sessions to develop an understanding of the national culture of the United States and the local culture on UF campus, how to socialize and talk to new people in the United States, and how to use class time to connect and explore the relational components that exist between the students with each other and with the LAs.

The first two sub-themes mainly focus on the self-perceived beneficial impacts of LA sessions. The participants reported that their LAs provided them with opportunities to develop their speaking skills and experience and learn about the national culture in the United States, the campus culture living near the UF campus, and common social norms for interacting with Americans in the United States. The amount of time that the ELI students were able to spend

talking about the English language and interacting in real-time with the LAs increased their knowledge about how to effectively socialize and converse with fluent English speakers in the area. The third sub-theme reveals a potentially negative impact that was mentioned by a few of the participants regarding their LA sessions. There were many participants in this descriptive case study who considered their LA sessions to be challenging when the other students in the session or the LAs themselves were uninterested or behaved immaturity during the LA session time. The three sub-themes combined create the overall idea that one of the major self-perceived impacts of the LA sessions is that it is a place where student experience a great deal of learning.

**Developing an Understanding of the National and Local Cultures that Exist in the United States.** Learning about cultures, experiencing and talking about the cultures that exist in the United States, and experiencing the campus culture at UF were listed by multiple participants as a beneficial impact of interacting with LAs during regular LA sessions. Depending on their language proficiency level, some participants were able to go into greater detail in their descriptions about what it means to them to understand the complicated components and social customs that exist within a culture. Tiffany clarified in her interview that because her LAs “help you [her] understand why it [a possible topic of conversation] is forbidden or why it’s not a good topic” (lines 167 – 168), they are really helping her to “understand culture” (line 170).

Samantha’s response to a follow-up question asking what she learned in her LA sessions was, “Yes, yes. Actually, countries, culture...” (lines 133 – 134). However, other participants who were enrolled in higher proficiency level courses, such as Taylor, were able to provide more descriptive and complex responses. Taylor stated in response to question #1 that his LAs provided him with knowledge about the culture in the United States. He stated he learned, “Stuff

that we can use in our workplace. Stuff that we can use to get out of sticky situations” (lines 77 – 78). Cody explained his take on learning about the culture as:

Yeah, not only those expression and those things, but also...society codes in America.

Like, how to behave in certain situations. That’s something that you don’t expect to learn in an English course. Because you go just to learn the language, right?” (lines 149 – 151)

Tristan wrote in response to question #3, “I learned a lot from them English, culture”

(questionnaire response). He expanded on that in his interview response to question #4 by stating:

Like, I wouldn’t experience all of these culture things. Like, I wouldn’t experience for example Thanksgiving. I wouldn’t experience like home-coming or I wouldn’t

experience – Like I would hear about them, but especially like in Gainesville, they make a big deal of them. All of these little things, and it’s really great because before I came to the US, I didn’t know about all of this celebration. (lines 337 – 345)

Landon also indicated in his response to question #3 that interacting with his LAs gave him “an insight to the culture, or first-hand insight or information about the culture” (lines 210 – 211).

There were many references made to the learning of common slang and idioms in the English language. The students felt that learning the slang and idioms of the language gave them a cultural understanding of how Americans spoke and what they like to say and hear. Cody stated in his interview that his LAs helped students “to learn idioms, slang, and even cultural things from American, that otherwise we wouldn’t be able to get form anywhere else” (lines 21 – 22). Camden reported on his questionnaire for question #3, “More practice and help for the L/S skills to get to know more about the English idioms and slang” (questionnaire response).

Camden seemed particularly interested in learning slang and idioms with his LAs because as explained in his interview:

Actually, I think one of the benefits from the LA class is learning some slang, some idioms, more than if I don't have. I, you know, there is like different ages of languages.

So, the LAs are the young age languages. (lines 92 – 94)

Victoria stated this as well in a similar way in her response to question #3. She stated, “I can learn about slang or idiom, I can learn about culture of US or university, I can learn about my generation things” (questionnaire response). During her interview, Victoria stated in response to question #1, “But the LA class, we learn about the culture or slang or idioms. So, that is really useful in my US life” (lines 28 – 29). She was very enthusiastic in her response about the topic of culture. In her response to question #6, she stated:

...they're around my age, so I learned about culture, not the academic thing. I can learn culture, accent, or idiom, something like that. It's really helpful to me and I really want to learn about that, like UF culture, or US university student culture. So, I really like my LAs. (lines 138 – 141)

The cultural knowledge they learned during their LAs sessions seemed important to many of the participants of the study. The explanations and guidance from the LAs regarding the way people in the United States are accustomed to behaving and interacting together was well-regarded and appreciated by many of the participants.

**Developing an Understanding of How to Socialize and Talk to New People in the United States.** While analyzing the responses of the participants, one beneficial impact was noted specifically for the different types of acknowledgments it received. Multiple participants

reported that a perceived beneficial impact of interacting with LAs during LA sessions was the increased opportunity to socialize and interact more with fluent speakers of the English language. For some participants such as Tristan, who stated in response to question #5, "...I feel like I improved, like, talking to people through my Language Assistant" (lines 496 – 497), interacting with LAs improved his perceived future abilities to meet new people and interact comfortably in English. For other participants, the increased opportunities for socializing sub-theme was explained as being able to make new friends and understand what is being said in new social settings. Samantha wrote in her response to question #4 that the LAs are "not a teacher, more like friends..." (questionnaire response). She also stated in her interview response to question #4 that, "If we don't have LAs it's really hard to make plans with that many UF students" (lines 151 – 152). Joshua stated in his interview response to question #5:

Well, maybe if I'm more in this culture, I can make a new friends, a new job, or a new – like make my major here or something like that. I really think that impact, the impact to me, I will look and I will understand all the things that the people say to me. So...It's going to be very great for me. (lines 179 – 182)

Joshua also wrote on his questionnaire for question #5, "The communication with others is crucial because you need to get ideas for then you can explain your ideas. The skills that I receive each day are going to be notice with other people try to talk with me" (questionnaire response). Jennifer also described her concept of opportunities for socializing as being able to make friends and contact people in the future. She wrote on her questionnaire for question #5, "Maybe we can be friends, so we can contact them in the future. It will be helpful using English

when I come back to \_\_ (native country) \_\_” (questionnaire response). She also stated in her interview in response to question #3 that:

I think the benefit is I can speak English more, and I can talk with foreigner because I make a friend. Make a foreigner friend is very difficult for me, but LA can be a friend.

(lines 54 – 55)

She also stated in response to question #5 “And in the future, I can make a foreigner friend more easily” (line 146). She also wrote in her response to question #5, “Make American friends and understand them...” (questionnaire response). She spoke about the weekday and weekend activities outside of the LA sessions. She stated in her interview response to question #4:

...I think yeah maybe another benefit, the LAs like may ask to go to the activities. They like are not forced, but they are very motivation or patient with the activities. They make us to go to the activities and if we go there, the activities, the LAs go with us. (lines 184 – 186)

Shea’s response to question #5 was that a future impact of having interacted with her LAs would be, “Maybe like how to make a friend” (line 211).

This sub-theme is conceptualized not only as the ability to make new friends, but also in the way the participants indicated that they could feel understood and understand individuals in the United States. Tristan wrote for question #5, “My listening and speaking skills were improved very well where I would feel so comfortable to listen and talk with native speaker without worrying of understanding me or me understanding them” (questionnaire response). In addition to developing socialization skills in a new country, Landon stated in his response to question #4 what the LAs offer that is so valuable to him:

...Those people don't like to be spoke to this way. This person, you shouldn't say this word. In class, it's just the formal part. But, for example, small talk, the idea of small talk, or the idea of these small activities...They give you an insight of – For example, the personal space and all that. These everyday activities that you would never think of. You, know like when you move to a new country. They're like, there, they don't like this. There, they hate this. But, the LA class, they explain why. Or, at least they do “Look, Americans don't like this”. So, you don't take it personally. You don't feel isolated.

(lines 486 – 492)

Each participant who touched on the importance of being able to socialize in order to make friends or being able to interact socially with people throughout normal day-to-day activities stated that they saw a connection between the practice they received with their LAs and their perceived abilities to communicate using English in social settings.

**Using the Class Time to Connect and Explore the Relational Components that Exist Between the Students with Each Other and with the LAs.** Interview Questions #3, #4, and #5 presented the participants with the opportunity to explain any self-perceived challenging impacts, or difficulties, of interacting with LAs during LA sessions. One overlapping concept amongst the participants was how shyness could be a challenge for international students studying at the ELI. Interacting with LAs is something the students in listening and speaking classes at the ELI are required to do, and as such, students who are normally shy may find this approach to language development more challenging. Ken, Jennifer, Marion, Shea, Tristan, and Landon all stated in their interviews that they considered themselves to be shy. Joshua stated in response to #3 that “...maybe I saw in the class some people is shy for talking English” (lines 67 – 68). He further

stated that he is not personally a shy person, but he recognized how interacting with LAs could be challenging for those who are. While shyness was a commonality amongst multiple participant responses, it was regularly explained as an understandable trait that could affect many international students, especially if they were new and not accustomed to this type of curricular structure in their listening and speaking class.

Another overlapping response amongst participants as a potentially challenging impact of interacting with LAs was that the work ethic, participation level, and attitudes of the other international students in the class and the LAs themselves could negatively impact the entire LA session experience for the participants. Any inappropriate or insensitive behaviors of the other international students in the class and/or the LAs leading the LA sessions had the potential to cause challenges for participants. The participants who mentioned this type of challenge provided examples of behaviors they witnessed that had made the LA Sessions more difficult for them. One of the challenges the participants talked about was how a lack of participation or interaction from the other classmates could cause the participants to feel bored or uninspired to talk. Shea stated in her interview that she thought maybe “some of the classmates doesn’t like...” (line 44) the LA session. She stated that “They [the other international students] don’t like the class, I think, but they need to stay there, and they make the class a little stressful or negative feelings” (lines 44 – 50). Joshua stated this idea similarly in his response stating:

So sometimes I feel bad because I want to participate a lot, but if someone don’t participate, the activity is for everybody. So, if someone doesn’t want to participate maybe the activity gets lost sometimes. (lines 55 – 61)



He reported this response as well in his written response to question #3 where he writes that a potential challenge of interacting with LAs during LA sessions is that some “classmates don’t want to participate in the activities that the Language Assistant prepare every week” (questionnaire response). Some participants mentioned self-perceived standards for how the other classmates should behave during LA sessions. Taylor felt that if his classmates didn’t take the LA sessions seriously enough, and it made the experience “less enriching” (questionnaire response). For Tristan, who had been enrolled at the ELI for several semesters, his experiences interacting with his peers had been challenging during a semester when a large portion of his classmates all spoke the same native language. He stated in his interview that during one semester at the ELI he “had one class all Spanish speakers, and I was like, ‘Oh no. I don’t understand anything’” (line 147 – 148). Tristan’s opinion about LA sessions was that every semester was different, and the dynamic of the LA session could be more or less fun depending on the behaviors of the peers and the LAs as well. Tristan described in his interview:

Like it’s depend [sic] on which semester are you at, and your classmate. Are they like really participating? And the Language Assistant themselves. I feel like these three aspects, it’s really important. I would do more. Like, my last semester was like my classmate, they made the classes really interesting and fun. (lines 129 – 133)

The other overlap in participant responses came from the challenges that can occur based on the behaviors of the LAs themselves during the LA sessions.

Just as the participants had indicated that the behaviors of their classmates could make LA sessions more difficult or less enriching, the behaviors of the LAs had a similar potential impact as well. Taylor wrote in his response to question #3, “Non-serious LA: Not that great”

(questionnaire response). Taylor was very satisfied with his current LA. He described his LA saying, “He’s more practical. He knows what goes on in the streets and how to help – how we need to communicate” (lines 19 – 20). Shea stated that her LA Sessions “very depend on the LAs” (line 283). She explained that the efforts of the LAs are “very important because it make us feel motivate for the rest of the class” (line 286). Cody identified in his written response to question #3 that he thought being an LA required a certain level of “group management” (questionnaire response) skills. He wrote that LAs should have training “to control so diverse groups and know when to show their authority in the classroom, because sometimes the behavior of few students can affect the learning of most students” (questionnaire response). Landon also referred to this concept as well in his written response to #3. Landon wrote, “Challenges: some LAs don’t have the skills to involve everyone or explain the purpose of an activity” (questionnaire response). He described this idea as well in his interview response stating, “The other thing would be if an LA is not as qualified or if they don’t have the people experience. They don’t know how to make a different groups people...be engaged” (lines 49 - 51). Tristan also listed potential challenges such as “cultural differences, misunderstanding in some circumstances, age difference” (questionnaire response) in his written response to question #3.

Therefore, the exposure to regular practice interacting with LAs is beneficial for learning about English and provides opportunities to learn about local and national cultural norms, normal social practices in the United States, and societal customs as long as it is done in accordance to the standards that are in place at the CIP. The LAs receive training from the CIP on how to create a safe and inclusive environment within the LA session for students from all countries and language backgrounds. The LAs are also provided guidance on how to mediate conversations

and debates and trained to select intriguing and interesting topics for discussions. When issues arise between students in a class, the faculty and staff at the ELI are responsible for addressing and alleviating those situations. The main focus for Theme 4.2 is the potential that resides in this programmatic structure for learning about conversing in English for adult EAL students studying in IEPs in the United States. As long as the LA sessions are overseen and handled with professionalism and courtesy, the prospects for learning are evident.

#### ***4.3 Working with LAs is Important for Learning and Practicing English***

The last theme in the findings from this descriptive case study came from the last question on the Interview Questionnaire (Appendix A or B). Question #6 was created as an open-ended question that gives the participants an opportunity to add any additional comments that they might have had about their LAs and LA sessions at the end of the interview. Throughout the responses to this question, multiple participants indicated that they felt this type of program structure was important for learning a new language; therefore, the final theme that emerged during data analysis was that the LA sessions were considered by some of the participants to be an important part of learning to speak and converse in an additional language. Marion wrote in her response to question #6, “LA are important for me, especially beginner level, gives a break from school/classes” (questionnaire response). She also mentioned it in her interview response when she stated, “this very important especially especially especially in the beginner level, and this improve for my language and for practice” (lines 172 – 173). Victoria wrote in her written response to question #6 that “every program like ELI need language assistant because their really helpful to international students” (questionnaire response). Camden stated in his interview response, “I think for me it’s a new idea to study in an institution like the ELI because this class,

once I tried it, I think it's important" (lines 133 – 134). Tristan also felt that the LAs and the LA Sessions were "really important" (line 413). He stated in response to question #6, "...if my English experience, like on a scale. I would put it 30% from just the school and 70% from the Language Assistants" (lines 413 – 414). Landon also made mention of the importance of LA sessions when he wrote, "I believe the program should be implemented in every university" (questionnaire response). During data analysis, the researcher was intrigued to see the overlap in similar responses from the international students on a question that was intentionally fully open to any additional comments or feedback. The researcher felt this information should be included in the findings due to the frequency of overlapping responses to this open-ended question.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the overall description of the bounded system for this descriptive case study is that, for the participating international students, LA sessions are casual encounters where international students interact with LAs in order to practice speaking English and learn about the language and culture through the use of discussion-based activities that cover various topics such as vocabulary, academic expectations, culture, and general open topics where students may ask questions that relate to their experiences using the English language. Using activities such as games, debates, roleplaying scenarios, presentations, etc, the LAs lead the sessions and also interact with the ELI student population during weekday and weekend activities. The findings from the interviews are just so that EAL students in this bounded system describe their LAs and their LA sessions as practical, friendly, fun, and valued, and see the potential impacts of their regularly scheduled interactions with LAs as beneficial for their development of English conversation skills. Interacting with LAs is also perceived as effective for learning about the

culture of the United States on both a national and local level and for building socialization skills, especially when the LAs overseeing the LA sessions and the other classmates are thoughtful and participant. Finally, multiple participants in the study reported, after being asked to provide any additional comments at the conclusion of the interview, that they felt that working with LAs was an important part of their language education.

## Chapter V: Discussion

### Introduction

Learning a language requires vast amounts of practice and effort. The English Language Institute (ELI) at the University of Florida (UF) is the bounded system of this descriptive case study. The ELI is different from other Intensive English Programs (IEPs) because the language program at the ELI mandates that the enrolled adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) students practice conversing with fluent English speakers, called Language Assistants (LAs), four times per week as a required component of the Listening and Speaking course curricula at all language proficiency levels. The LAs are UF students who are hired by the Cultural Immersion Program (CIP) at the ELI and are trained to provide topics for discussions and proctor activities and games during LA sessions from Monday through Thursday of each week during the second hour of the ELI Listening and Speaking class time.

This discussion first addresses the themes that emerged from the findings of this descriptive case study and then explains how these themes inform how this type of language learning approach is experienced from the perspective of the adult EAL students who studied at the ELI. The connections that the EAL students make with their LAs are described as opportunities to practice English speaking skills and furthermore develop an understanding of what young people in the United States typically talk about and what is considered important and socially appropriate behavior within the local and national cultures in the United States. The type of learning experience offered at the ELI at UF was considered valuable by multiple participants in this descriptive case study.

Learning about and exploring the perceptions of the participants was crucial in order to understand what the participants considered important for their language skills both academically and socially. In this discussion, the following three themes from the findings are discussed, (a) LA Sessions are Socially Enriching and Beneficial for Developing English Speaking Skills, (b) Incorporating Interactions with LAs during LA Sessions as a Learning Approach within an IEP Curricula Facilitates Learning, and (c) LA Sessions are Described as Important by International Students. In addition to the discussion about the discovered themes from this descriptive case study, the researcher also suggests implications related to educational leadership for using the findings of this study to consider programmatic modifications in other IEPs. Findings from this descriptive case study suggest that incorporating LAs into a listening and speaking course curriculum presents opportunities for the enrolled adult EAL students who want to practice speaking colloquial English at regularly scheduled intervals with a fluent English speaker during real-time conversations.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The purpose for exploring the perceptions of international students enrolled at the ELI at UF was to explore the general opinions of the adult EAL students within this specific bounded system, to learn about how the EAL students experienced their LA sessions, and to discover what EAL students perceived as being important or challenging in their LA sessions. Based on the findings from the study, the approach to learning that is being implemented through the CIP at the ELI at UF enhances the students' learning experience. Each participant reported in some way that the exposure to the authentic language and regular interactions that took place in real-time with the LAs developed their ability to speak English and converse with other English

speakers. Some participants listed benefits of the LA sessions such as the cultural knowledge that was shared about how young people speak in English on the UF campus, or how much fun it was to practice English outside with the LAs as a break from class during the school day, or the friendships that were formed between the adult EAL students and the LAs and the impact that had on making other new American friends. Multiple participants discussed how they understood the national and local cultures and social norms of the United States more comprehensively based on their interactions with their LAs during LA sessions. Many of the participants made statements about how they self-perceived an improvement in their language acquisition and conversation skills. Much of the information gathered from the participants aligns with the academic literature on the topic of second language acquisition.

### ***LA Sessions are Socially Enriching and Beneficial for Developing Speaking Skills***

When learning to converse in a new language, informal interactions with fluent and/or native speakers of that language are “recommended as a means to improve communicative skills in both academic and nonacademic English learning environments (Lee, 2016, p. 16). In this descriptive case study, Ken, Marion, Joshua, Jennifer, Logan, Shea, Camden, Tiffany, Tristan, Cody, and Landon all described in some form that they felt that working with LAs was helpful for them in improving their English-speaking skills. This is not surprising because research has been available for decades that shows that “intake environments” (Krashen, 1976), or settings and interactions where language learners are able to absorb language input, such as listening or reading, that is comprehensible and provided in an informal or natural happenstance way with one or more fluent speakers of the language, are quite beneficial for language learning for adult EAL students (Krashen, 1976). Krashen (1976) clarifies that the informal environments he



references for adult EAL students “must be intensive and involve the learner directly in order to be effective” (p. 165). According to the participants’ descriptions and the researcher observation notes, during the LA sessions, each of the EAL students in the class was asked to participate directly in the discussions and activities of the LA session. Each session was also organized to cover a topic related to speaking and conversing in English; therefore, the adult EAL students enrolled in listening and speaking classes at the ELI are receiving regular and strategic practice using English with their peers and LAs.

Additionally, the LAs were described as engaging, fun, and easy to approach. In the researcher observation notes, the researcher listed some of the techniques the LAs used to adjust their speech to be more comprehensible for the EAL students in the sessions. These techniques could also be inferred as a possible reason for why the participants in the study indicated that their practice interacting with the LAs was so effective in developing their speaking skills. Long (1985) asserts that when fluent English speakers make speech adjustments while addressing adult EAL students, this process facilitates language comprehension for the adult EAL students. The speech adjustments Long (1985) references are such things as using less complex syntax (sentence structure), using rephrasing or restatements to describe an idea, and using “slightly clearer articulation that typically accompanies slower speech” (p. 382). The efforts made by the LAs during the sessions seemed to provide an accurate representation of an informal environment conducive for directly addressing topics and activities that can help build English vocabulary and communication skills.

Riley and Douglas (2017) studied adult EAL students who were enrolled in an EAL program in a Canadian university. The international students learning English in this study were

given the opportunity to volunteer at the campus' Multicultural Café. The participants in Riley and Douglas' (2016) study reported that based on their regular interactions with the customers at the Multicultural Cafe, who were local fluent English speakers, the participants were able to practice conversing with fluent speakers regularly and they reported that this helped them to build their listening and speaking skills. Some of the perceptions reported by the participants in Riley and Douglas' (2016) study were like the perceptions made by the participants in this descriptive case study. Some examples include reporting that increased time interacting with fluent English speakers helped the participants to understand fluent English speakers' rate of speech better, provided more opportunities to make friends, and helped the participants to better understand the surrounding culture. One of the main differences between Riley and Douglas' (2016) study with this descriptive case study is that LA sessions at the ELI at UF are not voluntary for the enrolled EAL students at the ELI. Yet, even as these interactions are required, the participants still seemed to generally appreciate the knowledge and practice they obtained during their interactions with their LAs.

Many participants described elements of fun during their LA sessions. Multiple participants, specifically Ken, Jennifer, Victoria, Logan, Shea, Tiffany, Tristan, and Landon, stated that their time with their LAs felt like time with friends. This concept combined with statements made by Marion, Danielle, Jennifer, Victoria, Logan, Shea, Samantha, Tristan, and Landon that LA sessions were considered fun and exciting adds to an overall depiction of LA sessions as an enjoyable experience where learning is combined with having a good time. In regard to adult education, Lucardie (2014) conducted a study on the impact of fun and enjoyment on adult learning. Lucardie (2014) reported that, "having fun and enjoying the experience was a

strong motivator for most adult learners and impacted on their learning outcomes” (p. 444). In addition, Lucardie (2014) also stated that when adults have a sense of belonging and connection, they are motivated to participate and try out new ideas. Because the LA sessions are structured to be informal and the LAs do not meet formally with the students like the ELI faculty members, there is a level of amity between the LAs and the EAL students which may contribute to why the majority of the participants reported feeling happy and excited as their emotion of choice to describe their LA sessions. Furthermore, the extra amount of time that LAs meet with international students outside of the LA sessions during ELI weekday and weekend activities could be another possible reason for why the participants expressed that the LAs are friends.

***Incorporating LAs and LA Sessions as a Learning Approach within an IEP Curricula Facilitates Learning***

Incorporating LA Sessions into a listening and speaking course curriculum as an approach to language learning elicits multiple types of learning experiences about the English language and the surrounding culture. Part of the informality of LA sessions is that the students are invited and encouraged to divulge aspects of their life and experiences in the United States, as an EAL student, so the LAs might then use and create activities or discussions where they can provide assistance and alleviate possible confusions for the students in their session. These types of sessions help the EAL students to better understand, identify, or potentially resolve daily obligations, requirements, or confusions that may have occurred due to language barriers throughout everyday tasks and situations in the United States. The resourcefulness of the LAs was mentioned by participants in regard to learning about more than just the English language. Learning about the culture of the United States and the expectations and traditions of the local

community was described by Tiffany, Samantha, Taylor, Cody, Tristan, and Landon as an area of learning that was both valued and appreciated. Understanding the social norms and learning phrases that are used by younger generations enrolled in college courses was perceived as important information that the participants would be able to use to make friends and talk to acquaintances in the future.

These findings about the perceptions of international students studying abroad in the United States and learning first-hand about the culture are supported by Lee and Song (2009) who reported that for adult EAL students, being able to build cultural competence and understand and communicate in English during regular daily activities was considered to be of high importance. The LAs use the LA sessions to provide opportunities for practice in real-time conversing through games and activities that build upon the cultural knowledge of the surrounding areas where the EAL students live. Camden, Victoria, and Cody described the helpfulness of learning English slang and idioms and stated their recognition of how practical that knowledge was for them while living in the United States.

Another aspect of learning that was mentioned by the participants was how the behaviors of the LAs and the other students in the session could both positively or negatively impact the participation level, the overall learning, and the enjoyment of the EAL students in the session. Shea, Joshua, Taylor, and Tristan mentioned that if the other peers in the LA session did not participate in the activities, the session lost a good deal of its' value. Similarly, Taylor, Shea, Tristan, Cody, and Landon also mentioned the importance of a skilled LA who can come up with creative new ideas and concepts for LA session discussions/activities and can manage the group of EAL students to ensure that everyone receives an opportunity to practice during the session.

The CIP trains the LAs when they are hired, and the LAs are supervised by the CIP coordinator who visits and evaluates the LA sessions routinely throughout the semester. The LAs are held to a specific set of standards regarding professionalism and cultural awareness. This would be a necessary component to enact when creating or incorporating this type of programmatic structure into an IEP course curriculum.

### ***LA Sessions are Perceived as Important by International Students***

For the last theme of this descriptive study, the researcher was interested in the overlapping responses about the importance of including LAs as a learning approach for international EAL students. These responses were made at the conclusion of the interview when the participants were asked if they might have any additional comments beyond the ones they had made while answering the other five questionnaire questions. Multiple participants used the final question to express how learning with fluent English speakers seemed like a crucial part of language instruction for any IEP. Marion mentioned how important she felt the LA sessions were for her and anyone who is studying English at a low proficiency level. Victoria responded saying that all international students could benefit from a program like the ELI. Camden reported that he wasn't aware of how important the LA sessions at the ELI were until experiencing it. He stated "...once I tried it, I think it's important" (line 134). This view was shared as well by Tristan, and Landon, who wrote he thought the program at the ELI should be "implemented in every university" (questionnaire response). Based on these responses, it seems that multiple participants could have sensed the importance of what Krashen (1976) refers to as the "language acquisition device" (p. 167) which operates when language input is provided in an informal environment.

## **Implications**

Educational leaders working in IEPs throughout the United States, who are considering modifying their current IEP curricular or programmatic structure should consider bringing local fluent English speakers into the listening and speaking classrooms for regularly scheduled group interaction sessions with the EAL students. If the type of program currently in place at the ELI at UF were implemented into other IEPs, more international students could have increased chances to develop an enhanced understanding of the English language using the information shared through the imbedded knowledge and lived cultural daily-practices of the LAs. The type of language program in place within the CIP at the ELI could potentially be very well received by international students in other IEPs; this reasoning is based on how the participants in this descriptive case study reported that they enjoyed and benefited from the regularly scheduled interactions that took place during their LA sessions. A common opinion amongst the participants was that they enjoyed and valued meeting in an informal setting and interacting with fluent English speakers about various topics and learning about the English language and different cultural and social norms that exist in the United States.

Currently, a common practice that is in place at many IEPs in the United States is to organize and promote opportunities for the EAL students to volunteer and meet a Conversation Partner. There is literature that shows that typically international students who worked with Conversation Partners benefited from the experience in terms of language practice and development (Gaines, 2015; Grover, Miller, Swearingen, & Wood, 2014; Lee, 2016; Poreba, 2010). The ELI at UF also includes a Conversation Partner program where the enrolled EAL students can be partnered with a local fluent English speaker to practice interacting colloquially

and to learn about the English language and the local campus culture. While Conversation Partners can be helpful for providing language input, there are some limitations that participants in Lee's (2015) study talked about. Lee stated:

University-run English conversation partner programs offer a convenient framework for these processes [making American friends and practicing English in non-academic contexts], especially for American students interested in TESOL, but they can also frustrate students who seek different outcomes from their respective conversation partners. An international student, for instance, may expect detailed attention to grammar and syntax while her American partner may be more interested in wide-ranging conversations about customs and culture (Lee, 2016, p. 15).

With Conversation Partners, the EAL students schedule the meeting times and dates with the Conversation Partner. One of the things that makes the CIP so effective is that all of the sessions for interactions between international EAL students and fluent English-speaking university students are organized and scheduled within the ELI. The students are not expected to arrange their own times or locations for meetups with fluent English speakers. The LA sessions are implanted within the ELI course schedule. Additionally, the LAs are trained and work together with the ELI faculty who teach the listening and speaking classes to make sure that the students are following a general plan to help them with what they are learning in their class and what they may be experiencing in their daily lives. As fluent English speakers, the LAs have the capability to discuss and explain commonly known linguistic rules or patterns that exist in the English language and simultaneously provide games and activities that can help the EAL students develop their speaking skills and other language structures. So, working with LAs means the

EAL students receive a consistent amount of practice with a fluent English speaker who is friendly, helpful, and in communication with the EAL students' listening and speaking teacher.

Another main difference between Conversation Partners and LAs is that LA sessions are required for all students who enroll in a listening and speaking course at the ELI. Because meetings with Conversation Partners are dependent on similar schedules and overlapping free time to meet outside of class, many opportunities fall through or students who volunteered lose interest or motivation to meet with their Conversation Partner. The mandated aspect of the LA sessions keeps the EAL students in constant contact with their LAs throughout the entirety of each semester.

From an educational leadership standpoint, there is potential to implement this type of a language learning program in more IEPs. It is the goal of the researcher to use the information from this descriptive case study to provide a voice for how international EAL students perceive their experiences with LAs at the ELI at UF and to report whether participants conveyed finding value in the type of curricular structure that is offered there. The ELI at UF and other IEPs that choose to implement this type of programmatic structure are being presented with an opportunity to make themselves stand out competitively and offer something that makes them unique and appreciated from the perspectives of adult EAL students. Sharing the findings of this descriptive case study is important for educational leadership because it sheds light on the authentic perceptions of the adult EAL student participants who personally experienced the program in place at the ELI at UF and identifies what makes this program structure preferable for language learning.



The CEA Standards (2019) state under Program Development, Planning, and Review Standard 2, that each IEP program that is accredited by the CEA should “regularly review and revise its program components” (p. 5). Within an opportunity for revision, the leadership in place at an IEP could persuade their institution to pursue new objectives (Gardner, 1990). The new objectives for IEPs should incorporate scheduled time within the program curriculum for interactions between the adult EAL students enrolled in their program and local fluent English speakers who are hired and trained by the IEP in order to provide helpful and explanatory assistance time to interact and practice conversing in English. In the future, the types of interactions that are mandated in the curriculum at the ELI at UF may begin to appear in more and more institutions. Furthermore, educational leaders in IEPs could utilize the LA session requirement as a featured program component that can market to international students who are looking to study English abroad in the United States and meet local fluent English speakers. Increased rates in enrollment could help to boost the overall revenue of IEPs and thus make them more competitive as specialized programs which feature a programmatic structure that international students will find appealing and effective.

Another area that the findings from this study could apply to is the creation of new program curriculum ideas for IEPs. Faculty who are interested in creating new EAL programs may be interesting in developing a CIP within their IEP which can incorporate LAs or a similar type of job position into the program curriculum that is already in place. This type of program could also lead to additional research on the experiences of both the adult EAL students as well as the fluent English speakers who proctor interaction sessions.

## **Future Research**

More research is needed about the different types of programmatic structures that are currently in place in IEPs in the United States and the varying degrees that the IEPs attempt to connect their student population with opportunities for interactions with fluent English speakers. More research is also needed to assess the overall importance and necessity of implementing interactions with fluent English speakers as a required part of the Listening and Speaking course curricula for the purposes of developing English speaking and conversational skills. The focus of this descriptive case study was to ascertain the experiences and opinions of the adult EAL students at the ELI at UF. However, this study could also provide a basis for a longitudinal study that addresses the developing proficiency levels of the enrolled EAL students in comparison with an IEP that does not use LAs as a required part of their programmatic structure.

Additionally, there is also little to no research available about the experiences of fluent English speaking LAs who are hired to proctor the LA sessions. In regard to building empathy and communication skills, it could be beneficial to learn about the experiences of LAs and what they may report as self-perceived impacts from leading LA sessions while studying at UF. What could be possible implications for the area of study or line of work they choose at the conclusion of their university degree program? It could be that the curricular strategies in place at the ELI provide benefits for both groups of UF students in separate ways.

## **Concluding Remarks**

This descriptive case study helps to deepen the understanding of the perceptions of international students who study abroad in IEPs in the United States. The programs that international students decide to apply to should offer learning approaches that benefit their

language needs. Interacting regularly with LAs provides beneficial impacts such as engaging in regular conversations about English vocabulary with examples and games in an informal setting, being provided with directional input on social customs and norms in the area, and being welcomed into the surrounding campus culture as a member of the community. Studies have shown that international students consistently appreciate the knowledge learned from interacting with local fluent English speakers when the opportunities were offered by the language programs as a voluntary component. In this descriptive case study, where interactions with fluent English speakers were required, the participants still showed a consistent appreciation for the knowledge and practice they obtained through their interactions with LAs. Discussing with the participants about the combination of language instruction with almost daily opportunities to interact with fluent English speakers uncovered themes regarding what the participants in the study appreciated specifically about their experiences interacting with LAs and how they felt those interactions benefited their developing speaking and conversation skills.

## References

- Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International education*, 5(2), 131-154.
- Commission on English Language Program Accreditation. (Jan, 2019). *CEA Standards for English Language Programs and Institutions*. Retrieved from:  
[https://cea-accredit.org/images/2019\\_doc\\_and\\_handbooks/2019\\_CEA\\_Standards.pdf](https://cea-accredit.org/images/2019_doc_and_handbooks/2019_CEA_Standards.pdf)
- Creswell, J. W. (2007) *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Cummins, J., Baker, C., & Hornberger, N. H. (Eds.). (2001). *An introductory reader to the writings of Jim Cummins* (Vol. 29). Multilingual Matters.
- Engkent, P. (1986). Real people don't talk like books: teaching colloquial English. *TESL Canada Journal*, 3, 225-234.
- English Language Institute. (1998) *Changes in the Cultural Immersion Program*. Gainesville, FL: The English Language Institute.
- Gaines, I. (2015). Increasing Confidence and English Use outside the ESL/IEP Classroom for Lower-Level Learners. *ORTESOL Journal*, 32, 56-67.
- Gardner, J. W. (1990). The Nature of Leadership. The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership (pp. 28-39). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gass, S. M., & Varonis, E. M. (1994). Input, interaction, and second language production. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 16(03), 283-302.

- Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social problems*, 12(4), 436-445.
- Grover, K. S., Miller, M. T., Swearingen, B., & Wood, N. (2014). An examination of the self-directed learning practices of ESL adult language learners. *MPAEA Journal Of Adult Education*, 43(2), 12-19.
- Hatch, J. A. (2002) *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Krashen, S. D. (1976). Formal and informal linguistic environments in language acquisition and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 10(2), 157-168.
- Krashen, S. D. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford University Press.
- Lee, E. (2016). International and American Students' Perceptions of Informal English Conversations. *Journal Of International Students*, 6(1), 14-34.
- Lee, E. J., & Song, H. (2009). A study of L2 learners' perceived efficacy of one-on-one English conversation with native speakers. *Foreign Languages Education*, 16(1), 29-52.
- Long, M. H. (1985). Input and second language acquisition theory. *Input in second language acquisition*, 377-393.
- Long, M. H. (1996). The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition. *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, 2(2), 413-468.
- Lucardie, D. (2014). The impact of fun and enjoyment on adult's learning. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 142, 439-446.

- MacIntyre, P. D. (1999). Language anxiety: A review of the research for language teachers. *Affect in foreign language and second language learning: A practical guide to creating a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere*, 24, 24-43.
- Merriam, S. B. & Tisdell, E. J. (2016) *Qualitative research :a guide to design and implementation*. (4th Edition). San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, J., Berkey, B., & Griffin, F. (2015). International students in American pathway programs: Learning English and culture through service-learning. *Journal of International Students*, 5(4), 334-352.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publishing.
- Pica, T. (1983). Adult acquisition of English as a second language under different conditions of exposure. *Language Learning*, 33(4), 465-497.
- Pica, T., Young, R., & Doughty, C. (1987). The impact of interaction on comprehension. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(4), 737-758.
- Poreba, J. (2010). Negotiation strategies in short-term two-way conversation partnerships: their use and usefulness. *CATESOL Journal*, 21(1), 103-124.
- Reese. S. P., Helms, R. M. (2020). *Intensive English programs questions and considerations*. The American Council on Education: Washington, D.C. Retrieved from: <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Intensive-English-Programs-Questions-and-Considerations.pdf>

- Riley, T., & Douglas, S. R. (2016). The multicultural café: enhancing authentic interaction for adult English language learners through service learning. *TESL Canada Journal*, 34(11), 25-50.
- Schmidt, R. W. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning<sup>1</sup>. *Applied linguistics*, 11(2), 129-158.
- Schmidt, R. (2012). Attention, awareness, and individual differences in language learning. *Perspectives on individual characteristics and foreign language education*, 6, 27.
- Schütz, R. (2007). Stephen Krashen's theory of second language acquisition. *English made in Brazil*, 2(2), 2007.
- Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Wing Hong, C. (2010). International students: a vulnerable student population. *Higher Education*, 60(1), 33-46.
- Suh, J. S., Wasanasomsithi, P., Short, S., & Majid, N. A. (1999). Out of class learning experiences and students' perceptions of their impact on English conversation skills. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED433715.pdf>
- Ulichny, P. (1996). Performed conversations in an ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(4), 739-764.
- Van den Branden, K. (2007). Second language education: Practice in perfect learning conditions. *Practice in a second language: Perspectives from applied linguistics and cognitive psychology*, 161-179.

## Appendix A

**ELI Listening/Speaking Student Questionnaire**

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ (Male or Female)

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_

Fluent Language(s): \_\_\_\_\_

- *Please read through each interview question carefully.*
- *At the end of the interview, please write your answers below each question.*

1. Describe what it is like for you to interact (talk) with a Language Assistant four times per week as a requirement for your English Language Institute Listening/Speaking class?

2. If you could change the amount of time you spend working with the Language Assistants, would you request **MORE** time, **LESS** time, or keep the **SAME AMOUNT** of time to interact with them? Please explain why.

3. What, if any, are the **benefits** and **challenges** of working with a Language Assistant as part of your class schedule?



4. What kind of experience do you think you would have learning English at a university if the Language Assistants were NOT part of the English Language Institute Listening/Speaking classes?

5. What type of impact, if any, do you think your experiences with your Language Assistant will have on your language skills in the future?

6. Do you have any other comments you would like to make about working with Language Assistants as a part of your Listening/Speaking classes?

## Appendix B

**ELI Listening/Speaking Former Student Questionnaire**

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ (Male or Female)

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_

Fluent Language(s): \_\_\_\_\_

- *Please read through each interview question carefully.*
- *At the end of the interview, please write your answers below each question.*

1. Describe your experiences interacting (talking) with a Language Assistant four times per week as a requirement for your English Language Institute Listening/Speaking class?

2. If you could have changed the amount of time you spent working with the Language Assistants, would you have wanted **MORE** time, **LESS** time, or the **SAME AMOUNT** of time to interact with them? Please explain why.

3. What, if any, were the **benefits** and **challenges** of working with a Language Assistant as part of your class schedule?

4. What kind of experience do you think you would have had learning English at a university if the Language Assistants were NOT part of the English Language Institute Listening/Speaking classes?

5. What type of impact, if any, did you think your experiences interacting with your Language Assistant had on your current language skills?

6. Do you have any other comments you would like to make about working with Language Assistants as a part of your Listening/Speaking classes during your time at the ELI?

## Appendix C

### **IRB Documentation**

Email from: The Director of Research Operations and Services at the University of Florida

Date: November 18, 2019

“I have confirmed that UF is not engaged in the research based on the information you have provided and therefore UF IRB approval is not required. I have also confirmed with the department that they are ok with you conducting the research with their students and alumni. As a result you may proceed with your research at UF.”