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Social and Cultural Adaptations and Mechanisms for Cultural Maintenance Among English Language Learners at the English Language Programs of The University of Pennsylvania

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Social and Cultural Adaptations and Mechanisms for Cultural Maintenance among English Language Learners at the English Language Programs of The University of Pennsylvania

A Senior Thesis in Anthropology

By

Carianne Swanson

Thesis advisor: Dr. Melvyn Hammarberg
March 25, 2002
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Introduction:

In her book, "The Vulnerable Observer", Ruth Behar states an imaginary reply to a question asked of her by her aunt. The question begs to know if she learns anything about others by reading cultural essays and her imagined reply goes like this; "Only insofar as you are willing to view them from the perspective of an anthropologist who has come to know others by knowing herself and who has come to know herself by knowing others" (33). That statement still rings true in my heart and head with the exact same force of emotion that it left on me after my first reading of this book almost three years ago. For me, that is anthropology. A type of social research that allows for the pursuit of a knowledge that, in the end, brings us to a deeper awareness of ourselves and our place in the world.

I am an asker of questions. Every day, it seems, I am developing new questions that require answers. I am an inquisitive being that not only wants to understand her world but needs to understand it as well. I am a person that uses her own experiences to understand those of others and this compassionate lens through which I view the world has helped me to become a more sensitive researcher.

In my life, when I have observed others' behavior and wondered why they do what they do and how they do it I have never been content to merely accept the reason that, "they're just different", as a substantial and comprehensive explanation as to why my fellow humans act the way they do. I strongly believe that it is for this reason that I have been compelled to study anthropology. I am constantly and consistently seeking to know and to understand why other people behave the way they do and I want to relate that behavior to factors that include gender, personality, and most important, culture.

In May of 2000 I began working as a program assistant at the English Language Programs here at the University of Pennsylvania. It has been my extreme pleasure to
serve this department in the capacity of helping the students adapt to the changes they experience upon arrival in the United States. The ELP – as it is more commonly known – is a specialized department within the College of General Studies that teaches English as a second language to students from all across the world. Arguably, the ELP is the most diverse department on campus boasting enrollments from countries such as Uzbekistan, Ghana, France, and the Ukraine and regions such as Asia and South America (the two largest).

Almost immediately upon arrival at the ELP, I began taking note of the way in which the students interacted with each other and the staff. What interested me most was the different ways in which the students reacted to others from different countries than their own. Since that time, almost two years ago, I have been systematically noting in my head and on countless sheets of notebook paper my observations (an activity that I refer to as “taking inventory”) in the hopes that one day I would have an opportunity to explore my perceptions and my thoughts and convert those observations into an anthropological work. This study is the result of these countless hours of passive and intensive observation.

My goals for this research were to develop and therefore bring about a more comprehensive and compassionate understanding of what happens to the personal, social, and cultural concepts of identity of the students as they become part of the backdrop of the American culture as learners of the English language. I wanted to study the ways in which they adapt to the changes they experience and what shape (however extreme or even non-existent) these adaptations take. Moreover, I wanted to explore the measures taken by the students in their efforts to maintain cultural identity and their process of social and cultural adaptation.

This study was a project that I felt that I was uniquely qualified for not merely because I work for the ELP or because I am a student of anthropology, but because I am someone who has herself studied in a foreign country. I personally can sympathize with the confusion and frustration felt upon arrival as well as the fear and the
excitement that the experience of living and studying in another country brings. As I stated above, my own experiences have provided me with a more compassionate stance which made my perspective more humanistic than it might have otherwise been and I believe that this aspect of my personality was felt strongly by the students with whom I conducted interviews.

My time in this project has been an effort to study the trajectory of the students' adaptation to life in the United States and the challenges that living and studying in a foreign country can bring as well as the joys and experiences that await them. This final, written work is the product of my desire to bring to myself and to others in my life a better understanding of what it means to adapt to and understand another culture and way of living.
The Emergence of an idea and the formation of the research model:

Who are we? How do we identify ourselves to ourselves? How do we identify ourselves in relation to others around us? Most importantly, how does this sense of self or personal identity change under varying circumstances? Are these changes necessary to adaptation... to survival or is survival maintained through the intentional preservation of cultural identification?

Anthony Wallace has defined identity as, "...any image, or set of images, conscious or unconscious, which an individual has of himself" (Wallace: 65). Indeed, identity is a multi-faceted part of every one of us. We all maintain various forms of identity (sets of images per Wallace) such as individual, cultural, and social. These identities, which form our perceptions as well as conceptions of the world and our place in it are subject to change when the individual is thrust into a new environment and must find ways to survive. The subjects of this research are the students of the ELP and the ways in which they must confront their own identities and find ways to adapt and survive the changes that they face. Survival is seen in two settings. The tenacious maintenance of one's cultural self by various means that will be discussed below, and by the reconstruction of identity in order to fit in with the new social and cultural climates that they find themselves a part of.

Why study the (requisite) reconstruction of identity (or lack thereof) among ELP students? During my tenure with the English Language Programs I have been privileged to work with and get to know people from all over the world. As I mentioned above, it seems that from the second that I began working for the ELP, I was observing the students and their interactions not only with each other but with the staff and instructors as well. I have been silently shaping in my mind's eye a study that would allow me a way to explore this fragile and necessary interaction and its effects upon the identities of the students that have come here to study.
My first observation with the students was in regard to the experience of their first day in the Program and then again on the last day. How they had changed! I took root here and from then on the concept of change in one's perception of him/her self became the overarching theme for this work. Other aspects that I have explored include what I have chosen to call "language cliques" which is merely the natural tendency of students who share a native language (not necessarily a country) to stick together and find ways to preserve a sense of individual and cultural identity (linguistic, social, and emotional sameness of being). This is not to say that all students stick to their own language group. Many students are intrigued by the possibility of making friends with others from different cultural backgrounds. Sometimes this is an immediate goal and sometimes it is one that evolves over time and exposure to foreign cultures.

A key element in the interview process was that I was able to draw upon experience in order to understand why the students were feeling and behaving as they were. It also allowed for the development of better and more pointed questions in an effort to get the desired responses from my consultants.

Interviews were conducted in as informal a setting as possible because I believed very strongly that it was important that my consultants know that this research was being conducted by a student of anthropology and not a staff member of the ELP. It was important that they knew that this data was not being collected for ELP use and that their responses would not be shared with any of the ELP staff as well as the fact that I could not discuss the ELP structure and organization with the students. The goal here after all was to study the students of the ELP and not the ELP itself as that would be a completely different ethnographic enterprise.

To achieve my interview goals I wanted to ensure that the students knew immediately the scope of this project and my personal views about my research interests. This eased tensions in many if not all of my interview sessions thus allowing
for and ultimately creating a more conversational rather than interrogative interviewing atmosphere.

Interviews were conducted over the span of two study sessions, Fall 1 and Fall 2, 2001 and included current students as well as two that had previously left the ELP and are now students in graduate programs here at the University. Sessions are approximately 8 weeks long and it was necessary in my opinion to repeat the interview process in two sessions in order to gain as wide a picture as possible. It also gave me more data in order to draw comparisons and seek out contrasts among the students at the ELP.

I wanted to ensure that my interviews were not biased to one session so I tried to interview as many students as were willing to sit down with me. I was seeking to interview a variety of student types and as such, the interviews were conducted with as diverse a population as possible in order to achieve a more true sample of who the students are and the ways in which they have experienced the ELP and the United States. In total, I was able to conduct 8 separate interviews with students from countries such as Korea, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Japan, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia.

Although I designed what I considered to be a good set of interview questions I found that students often wanted to digress onto other topics. One of these digressions was in regard to the events of September 11th. Because I wanted them to be open with me, I allowed for them to discuss their feelings about these tragic events. Although it did not support my thesis subject matter, I believe that the attacks the United States altered the way the students perceived our country and themselves within its context (it was now a potentially dangerous place) as well as the ELP in general and many stated that they had wanted to return home.

One of our students lost his sister in the attacks and immediately left the Program. Because a few of my consultants knew him, they wanted to talk about him during our interviews. This was unexpected in the first few interviews but became a theme in the course of the process of collecting interview data. I chose not to develop
questions specifically about the attacks because I wanted the students to bring it up naturally if they felt comfortable discussing it rather than asking a pointed or specific question that they did not really want to answer or that seemed artificial in sincerity. In the end, I still believe that this was the right decision and the discussions about September 11th were more candid and spontaneous making it more comfortable for both the students and myself.

In my analysis of the interview and observation data I began to notice trends in behavior (both cultural and otherwise) which was a positive finding because this was something that I was hoping to uncover in the analytical process. This final paper hopes to present the findings of this research as it relates to the goals set forth in this project: to study the ways in which the students of the ELP strive to excel in the Program by way of their cultural and social identity. It is also an examination of the ways in which the students attempt to maintain cultural identity and unity in an effort to survive in their new environment.
Mapping the ELP:

**Organizational Structure**

Located in the basement of Bennett Hall on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania you will find the headquarters of the English Language Programs (ELP). The goals of the department have been loosely stated above but I would like to take this opportunity to go into some detail as to what the ELP is and what it does.

The ELP is designed, as a school within the College of General Studies under the umbrella of the University, to teach the English language to students from all over the world. Classes are non credit and although the goal is to assist students in improving language skills, courses are designed to teach subjects which might be of practical use or interest. These course subjects include courses on business in America, writing in English, literature, acting, and the movies. This provides interest as well as function in the academic setting.

Describing the organizational structure of the ELP is a challenge in and of itself (see chart next page). At the top of the ladder is the director, Dr. Kristine Billmyer. She is assisted in her job by three assistant directors; Dr. Thomas Adams (finance, budgets, and special programs), Dr. Mary Ann Julian (curriculum design and instruction), and Ms. Nora Lewis (marketing). Without these four important people, the ELP would not run as the well oiled it is considered to be.

From the directors it becomes a little confusing. The next group in line is the coordinators which, like the directors, have specialized tasks within the structure of the department. Sharon Bode is the coordinator of the Intensive Program under which the majority of our students are enrolled. Sharon works with Mary Ann in an effort to ensure that the classes are designed to best meet the needs of the students. She also is
English Language Programs at the University of Pennsylvania

Intensive Program Administrative Structure
responsible for any class changes requested by students, level evaluation and placement, and she is the first person to receive student grade reports. And, although she is not Super Woman, she adds one more hat to her collection. Sharon is also a teacher in the Intensive Program.

Hilary Bonta is the coordinator of student services. She, like Sharon, also teaches in addition to her many duties as the designer of ELP organized social activities, the overseer of Conversation Partners, coordinator of certain Special Programs (under the direction of Tom Adams), fields all levels of student concerns, and recruits Program Assistants (Penn student workers) to work at the ELP. Hilary is an extremely busy woman and despite the challenges of her position, she is one of those rare individuals that never allows it to affect her nearly flawless compassion. One time there was a student that for one reason or another had not applied for any type of housing and arrived here literally homeless. Hilary made a quick phone call to her husband and they became a host family.

The third most important coordinator in regard to this study is Mika Okawa. Mika is the coordinator of the Student Center which serves as the student lounge at the ELP. Mika is herself a foreign student. The difference here being that Mika, while she is inherently Japanese, speaks flawless English as she was educated in an international, English only grammar and secondary school in Yokohama. She is a doctoral student here at Penn in the Graduate School of Education.

It is within the small four walls of the Student Center (SC) that students can grab a cup of coffee, check their mail boxes for important ELP information such as renewal registration forms and bills, check their email, or just hang out. On Wednesdays Mika tries to have an in-house social activity such as poetry writing or making Valentines and on Fridays she rents videos and shows them to create a “Thank God It’s Friday” atmosphere. Mika also works to organize activities that allow students to get involved in the Penn community such as poetry readings or volunteering at a retirement home or day care center. She is also the editor of Voices, the once a session magazine that
features the writings of students. Mika’s is often the face they seek out the most to assist them in solving problems.

Although she enjoys developing activities and events that will help the students become active in the Penn and surrounding communities, there are times when Mika herself becomes bombarded with the ever growing list of demands and questions placed upon her by the students. She confesses that it is a draining job and that sometimes it can be overwhelming:

I try very hard to get them [students] involved in community work and writing because I believe it assists them in their integration processes but in the end, it is up to them to participate...if you know what I mean. It can be so draining sometimes. They [students] begin to depend on me for every little need and direction. There are many of them that can’t even get through one day without some question to me personally. My job is to be a social facilitator but sometimes I feel more like a concierge in a big hotel and I am at their service. I mean, they even ask me how to change a light bulb in their dorm room! I mean, it just gets out of control. I try to be nice but pretty soon they take advantage. Many of our students live in my suite [at International House] and they have even taken to knocking on my door. It never ends. I’m a doctoral student, I have a life too. But, in the end, this is my job.

Next in line after coordinators are the instructors who teach for the ELP. These are the individuals charged with the responsibility of teaching the students to improve their English in the context of course subject matter. They are the people who the students of the ELP have the most contact with and as a result, the formation of attachment on the student’s part is not uncommon. The ELP is also supported by various other staff members such as the Main Office administrative staff and Program Assistants who assist coordinators, directors, and others with the task of maintaining the department in its many operations.

The Intensive Program

There are many different kinds of programs within the ELP but it is the Intensive Program (IP) that draws the majority of students and as such, it is the students of the IP that are the focus of this research. The goals of the IP are to teach foreign students English as a second language through an academic curriculum designed to offer them
topics that are both practical and of personal interest. It also allows for assisting
students in improving their linguistic abilities in order to take the TOEFL exam and
apply for study to programs offered by American universities. Indeed, many of the
students that come to the IP are here to become fluent enough to gain admittance to an
American graduate degree program. Although it is not a stated goal of the ELP, the
Program also serves students from abroad who have already gained admittance to an
American university (often Penn) as they seek to brush up on their English or hone
their skills before beginning their study here in the United States.

The IP draws students from nearly every part of the world however the bulk of
the students come from Asia and Latin America. From Asia, the largest group in
attendance is from Korea and from Latin America; Columbia is the current largest
contributor of students wanting to study in the United States. After closely studying
enrollment statistics over the past three sessions (Fall 1, Fall 2, and Spring 1) these
numbers have not varied much indicating that this enrollment trend is not changing
any time soon. In fact, due to recent global events, obtaining visas has become a
privilege that few regions of the world may obtain. Many countries in the Middle East,
Africa, and Eastern Europe have been affected by the problems related to terrorism
making Asian and Latin American populations at the ELP even larger. This causes a
decrease in diversity in the Program and this feeling is perceived by the students as well
as the department staff.

As stated above, the IP is a program of study that is comprised of 8 week
sessions. Within the Program, students are broken down into ability levels which are
determined by a placement exam that is given upon their day of arrival. There are 8
levels of study within the IP. Level 100 is a nearly absolute beginner with little or no
English ability. Classes for these students are dictated by the IP coordinators and
consist of two courses which focus on listening and speaking, and reading and writing.
From there in ascending fashion one can work (one level per 8 week session) towards
the advanced level, 800, before leaving their study at the ELP.
Once a student has achieved intermediate status (usually level 500) they have one core class which is a required class and with this they now have the option of choosing two or three elective courses which allow them to study subjects of their choosing from the courses offered. Once at the advanced level, all courses are elective as the student now is attempting to fine tune his or her language skills and utilize those skills in the real world. Some students opt to only study for one session or two. These students are those which place at intermediate or advanced levels after the placement exam.

At the end of the session, students are given a grade for each course completed and although these courses are non credit; the grades are often reported to the students' supervisors in their home countries, to their home universities, and to potential American university programs. Grades are also a sort of barometer in gauging the students' ability to pass to the next level of study. Also, at the end of the session, if a student has satisfactorily passed all of his or her courses they are awarded a certificate of completion. Again, this certificate is a sign of completion of the session but for many students, copies of these certificates are required by the student's employer back in the home country as proof of satisfactory completion and progress. A student that has not completed his or her course work for even one course can and many times will be denied a certificate.

Also at the end of every session the ELP offers, free of charge, the chance for the students to take the Institutional TOEFL exam. Although not the official version of the TOEFL, the test offers students the opportunity to see where they would score if they were to take the exam at the time and also which areas they are achieving success in as well as where they would need to improve and focus their study for the next session or the future.
The ELP as Social Facilitator

At the beginning of each IP session the ELP holds activities that fall under the heading of "Orientation Week" which is held the week before classes begin. The goal of Orientation Week is to assist the new students in the assimilation into the Program and on a lesser level to life at Penn and in Philadelphia. Although this is a time to prepare for the academics that are soon to begin, the activities of Orientation Week also offer students ample opportunity to meet with the administrative and instructional staff as well as the other students in an informal setting as a means of making them feel comfortable.

The first day of Orientation Week is when students check in, take placement exams and are introduced to the Student Center where they are offered coffee, tea, and donuts as a welcome to the ELP. Later on this first day, the students attend the Orientation welcome meeting which is hosted by the Director along with the coordinators. During this meeting, the Director offers her welcome and introduction as she tries to make the students feel at home by hosting an informal information session. Also in attendance is the Penn Office of International Programs (OIP) which delivers important information in regard to maintaining legal status and how to file important paperwork with the OIP. After the Orientation meeting, those students who scored at the intermediate level on their placement exams will be offered the chance to sign up for their elective classes.

Day two of Orientation Week offers students the chance to meet with representatives from local area banks so that, if they desire, they can open accounts. This provides the students with a safe place to keep their money and also allows them to learn how to bank in the United States. It builds a sense of belonging as well as responsibility. This same day, students will receive their tuition bills which must be paid by the next day in order to receive their class schedules. During the afternoon, if they choose to participate, students are offered a campus tour to assist them in familiarizing themselves with the Penn campus and its resources. Finally, the second
day is capped off with a housing orientation which is conducted by the ELP's two housing facilities, the Sheraton University City and International House.

Day three usually falls on a Friday. This is the day that students probably enjoy most. They have had a few days to get used to their new surroundings and are now aware of the basic mechanics of the Program. On this day, students attend Cultural Awareness activities. These sessions last about two hours and are designed to help them adapt to the many different faces and cultures with which they will be studying, living, and learning over the next 8 weeks. These sessions attempt to address cultural differences and offer ways in which the students can overcome some of their preconceived notions of others. It is hoped that this will help avoid any conflicts between cultural groups but it is not a guarantee. Most students I spoke with thought that this was a good idea because many of them had no previous close contact with people from other countries.

Also on day three students are treated to a pizza party. Here they can get a free lunch and mingle with fellow students as well as staff and instructors. It is a great way to get them to mix and form new friendships. It also allows them to see the instructors in a social setting which provides a level of comfort. This is often helpful for students who are accustomed to a more formal teacher/student relationship. The pizza party eases them into the more casual setting offered by the ELP. Finally, at the end of the day they receive their class schedules and sign up for social activities.

Social activities sign up is a major event during Orientation Week. Early in the week students receive a flyer that tells them which activities are being offered and the prices. Activities include trips to local shopping malls so that they can purchase new clothing or household items. Other offerings include day trips to New York and Washington D.C., weekend trips to Boston and Niagara Falls, baseball games, basketball games, square dancing, and tours of Amish country. These outings offer students the opportunity to go places they want to visit and feel that they are not ready to explore independently. It is also another way to make contact and build friendships.
Students that I interviewed only had one complaint, they wanted there to be more activities and they wanted them to be offered continuously throughout the session.

Orientation Week succeeds in laying the foundation for their time at the ELP. It serves as not only a practical guide to adaptation but provides an ice breaker for the students who often arrive here confused and frightened, unsure of what is required of them and what challenges they will face. This is the ELP's part in the adaptation process and although it is only about a week long, it makes a tremendous impact in the students' lives and offers great assistance in their assimilation processes.

**Letting Go**

Although the ELP structures Orientation Week as a combination welcome wagon and ice breaker, the fact remains that the IP students are all adults. Once classes begin, the students are for the most part on their own. Anything that they failed to grasp in their first week of orientation, they must now seek out on their own. If they did not go on a guided campus tour and they need to know where the library is, they must seek it out. Situations like this put the student in the position of having to make contact with the outside world and sometimes this brings about great anxiety. Missing the Orientation meeting on the first day means not getting an Orientation packet and now the student must seek out guides to transportation and shopping. All of these difficulties are now largely the responsibility of the student as the ELP lets go and takes on its main objective; that of teaching English as a second language. As I will discuss in the following section, the challenges of daily life bring about the adaptive actions taken to ensure individual survival.
Features of Daily Life in Philadelphia (the challenges of living in America):

Students are here to study English as a second language and this requires serious effort on their parts to ensure that their own as well as the Program's goals are met. Classes meet daily with the exception of Wednesday mornings. Students are offered a variety of courses that not only teach them ways to improve their language skills but allow them to study topics of interest to them such as business, acting, or literature. The average student studies approximately 20 hours per week as is required to maintain legal visa status within the United States. The majority of the students are enrolled in 3-4 courses depending upon their individual level of ability.

While study is a big part of daily life for the students it is not the only thing that they do during their time as part of the ELP. A big part of coming to the United States to study as opposed to studying English in their home countries is to experience and be a part of American (English speaking) culture. This of course is an exciting aspect to life here but it is also something that brings them great challenges and maddening frustrations as they try to figure out what living in the U.S. requires. The Program does not hold hands. Students are given basic information about the area but other than that they are on their own, many of them for the first time in their lives.

One of the biggest challenges is just being able to communicate with the ELP staff and to a larger extent, the outside world. This can become a source of great frustration for some students as they try to do simple daily activities such as grocery shopping or using public transportation. One student, a Korean girl at the intermediate level, told me of how she got lost while taking the bus one day because she was too afraid to ask the driver where her stop was. Instead of ending up at her desired destination, the Gallery shopping mall, she wound up somewhere on Penn's Landing and did not know how to get back to her homestay house. After several hours of wandering in fear she remembered that she had the telephone number of her homestay
family in her wallet. She called them and they came to rescue her. The experience left her petrified of Philadelphia public transportation and now she takes a taxi every where she goes.

Some of the students elect to rent their own apartments while studying at the ELP. While the department does not object to students doing this, it does present them (students) with additional challenges to adaptation that the ELP cannot and will not assist them with. The tasks of setting up a home on one's own which include obtaining telephone and other utility services can provide a new kind of difficulty in the attempt to simply live their daily lives. Students have come in to ask office staff to call the phone company and set up their service because they don't feel confident in their language skills to do it themselves. Because staff are not allowed to assist them, students are forced to take or: the responsibility themselves and this can either be a positive or a negative thing depending upon the individual student involved.

One of the positive experiences is seen in Oscar, a student from Venezuela, who moved into his own apartment during the Fall 2 session. He went for nearly a month without a telephone because he simply did not understand how to order such service. Finally, he came into the main office at the ELP and asked one of the assistants how to get phone service. The assistant felt bad for him so she told him who he had to call and what he would need. He then asked “Who pays for this?” Of course; she had to tell him that since he is living in his own housing the payment of the bill is his responsibility. He finally accepted that and he is proud to say he has his own telephone now.

A very obvious challenge to overcome when you live in a foreign country is food. For many of the students, the food they find in Philadelphia is unappealing and it is not surprising to see many of them not eating simply because they do not like what is available. To combat the lack of desirable food options, many of the students group together for “cooking parties.” This is where students of similar cultural and geographical backgrounds gather in one or the other’s apartment or other living area and cook foods like they might find at home. During my research I found that this
happens primarily among the Asian students although it is not uncommon among the Latin Americans. It is non-existent with students from European, Middle Eastern, or African countries.

While the challenges discussed above are difficult to endure they are not the less easy to live with and in time the students learn to get by in their new environments just as well as anyone else living on their own for the first time. Still, there is one problem of adaptation that not only causes students great concern and frustration but sadness and anger as well. It is the one challenge in their time at the ELP that causes them to withdraw into their own cultural groups thereby inhibiting contact with Americans. This is the problem (perceived or otherwise) of not being accepted by the Penn community and the American public in general.

Many, if not the majority, of ELP students come to America because they think that being in the United States, in a high status private university setting, and in a big metropolitan city will provide them with ample opportunity to learn and more importantly use English. Many want to assimilate into the Penn student population, make friends, and build connections with American students. ELP tries to aid in this process by offering a sub-program called “Conversation Partners” which matches up ELP students with Penn students who are learning a foreign language. In other words, if someone is studying Spanish here at Penn he or she could request a conversation partner from the ELP. This conversation partner would, of course, be a native Spanish speaker who is studying at the ELP.

The goal of this sub-program is for the students to assist each other in improving language ability and fluency. It is also a good way to make friends with American students and vice versa for Penn students. Where this program fails is in respect to the ELP students that are from countries that do not have a complimentary language department on the Penn campus. For example, students from Uzbekistan would find it very difficult to locate a conversation partner.
Although it is the sincerest interest on the part of the ELP to provide conversation partners, not all of the students will be so lucky and this leaves many of them feeling left out and marginalized. When they try to converse naturally with Penn students, some feel that they are unwelcome. One student, Korean male at intermediate level, told me;

*I feel like the Penn student...they don't want us here...like we are stupid because we don't speak good English. I thought it would be different when I come here but it is not and so I just stay with other Korea student or in my room to study.*

A challenge that is unique to the Asian student population at the ELP is the concept of class participation. Asian students often remarked that the biggest problem for them was the expectation of class participation in their courses. Although some of them knew that American universities operate on a more participatory level, many did not think that they would actually have to contribute to class discussions and assumed that the ELP would understand that it was not acceptable where they come from to speak in class or to offer one’s opinion. Unfortunately, the teachers feel that this barrier must be broken and there is a constant effort to integrate the Asian students into classroom conversation.

Latin American and European students did not face this challenge and in one interview, Oscar told me;

*I don't know why but it feels like we (non-Asian students) are more pressure to understand them and the way that they are in the class. I don't think this is fair to us and when there is group work to do and you have an Asian as a partner and he won't participate it is very hard to do your work because there is this person and he don't want to speak up or say something. I know it is not right but I get very frustrated when this happens and so now I try not to work with them, the Asians.*

Latin American students as a whole are very active in the classroom, at times dominating discussions, and this forces some of the teachers to avoid calling on them or to call on an especially quiet Asian student to encourage the entire class to participate in the activity for the day. Understandably, this presents a frustration for the teachers and the students and disturbs the flow of the classroom environment.
While I have discussed the major challenges that were uncovered in this research, other more minor challenges (though no less important to the individual) included homesickness (many students leave significant others, spouses, and children behind to study) and a feeling that they are seeing the expected level of improvement in their language skills that they had initially desired.

Issues that students face in the classroom are either adapted to or ignored completely. In conversation with one of the teachers, she mentioned that sometimes they refuse to become active participants and it affects their grade and as a result the teacher has to deny the student their certificate of completion. For many students this is a major failure and the thought of going home and facing their parents or even employers with poor grades and missing certificates is an embarrassment. For many students, their employers back in their home countries are paying for their education in the Program. Returning home without acceptable grades or a certificate can bring about serious ramifications back at the work place. Yoichiro, a male student from Japan, told me that;

*If I don't bring a certificate to my employer in Tokyo, it will be negative for me there. I could lose the job or not get a promotion. Also, I might have to pay back the employer for the tuition for my two sessions at ELP...so...I...have to do well and get certificate...it is very hard in my country to find jobs, there is much competition and I am not the youngest man wanting work.*

Because of the need to present successful study in the Program, the students who are denied good marks and certification sometimes become quite angry with the ELP and their instructors. This demonstrates a potential failure in both the understanding on the part of the student as to what is required and the instructor for not trying to exhibit a little more cultural sensitivity. In these cases both sides end up losing but it is ultimately the students that are blamed for lack of adaptation to the "American classroom."
Research summary and analysis:

I began this project out of mere and nagging curiosity. I have been working for the English Language Programs for almost two years and over the course of my tenure in the department I had come to notice certain types of behavior and activity among the students. These behaviors vary in degree but there is an overarching pattern at work here. This pattern is nearly predictable, as I have found from nearly continuous and conscientious observation and through the interview process.

The transition from an unsure foreign student to a confident speaker of the English language is one that is full of challenges and requires that one find ways to adapt to life in the United States no matter how long the student is here whether it is for one session or for years to come. The role of the ELP in assisting in this transition is at first that of a caretaker that assists the students in acclimating to their new environment. From there it takes a more academic stance and works to educate the student in English proficiency so that the individual may function adequately in the American academic climate. If successful, the student obtains a rubric for American university life and adapts. The ELP has been able to foster metamorphosis in that the student is now able to speak, write, and express thought and opinion in the English speaking academic setting. But this is the ELP’s goal and on this point, according to the majority of the students, they are excelling beautifully. However, the ELP is not responsible for the adaptations that the students must navigate through in regard to personal survival.

ELP students come from a variety of cultural and personal backgrounds to study English as a second language in the United States but language acquisition and fluency are not the only skills students must develop. Students must learn to survive living in the United States and in this area; the ELP is not the responsible party. The process of learning to live on one’s own in a foreign country is something that the students learn
independently and from each other. The major focus of this research is in the processes of adaptation and assimilation and what forms these adaptations take, in other words, how do the students learn the skills of everyday life and how do they cope with the challenges that this type of learning can bring. Also, what measures are pursued in an effort to maintain cultural identity. In this regard, it has not gone unnoticed that certain types of social groupings (linguistic, social, or cultural) always seem to occur.

David G. Mandelbaum writes that; “Adaptation is a built in process, because every person must, in the course of his life, alter some of his established patterns of behavior to cope with new conditions” (181). This means that each of us, when faced with changes in our daily lives, automatically attempt to adapt to the new aspects of living. If this fails, the individual fails in adapting and this can lead to failure. In my research, I set out to explore the issues of adaptation as I perceived them to exist among the students of the English Language Programs. At first, it was the differences that I observed in them from the day they arrived for Orientation until the final days of study that made me want to trace the path of change that they experienced. From there began the process of identifying patterns in their behavior that could lead to the design of a research question and model that would tell me what it all meant to their sense of cultural identity.

When I researched this project I was, of course, looking for a way to prove my theory that the students must have some way of maintaining their sense of self while in a foreign country and speaking a foreign language in which they were not proficient. What was discovered is that the students’ ways of adapting were two-fold; they wanted to maintain that sense of culture and home in an effort to maintain personal homeostasis and at the same time fit in with the American environment. This, in time, became the new focus for this research which was to discover the ways in which they attempted/succeeded/or failed in these endeavors.

It is an amazing thing to travel to another country for a short vacation but it is quite another to go there to live and even more so to study in an academic setting.
Because of this, sometimes, the thrill of leaving home for new experiences abroad can also be a time of extreme stress and fear. When students arrived at the ELP many of them were wide eyed and a little intimidated. It was a thing of great difficulty to just answer the question: “What is your family name?” This is an indicator of lack of confidence and the shock of being plunked down in the middle of a new country with many new faces and all with the added pressure of having to communicate in a foreign language.

The students are encouraged to socialize with each other over their time in the program and the ELP initiates this process by offering guided social activities such as trips to NBA basketball games, New York City, and the Franklin Mills Shopping Mall. During Orientation Week the department holds a pizza party for new students and the expectation here is that the students will come and enjoy a free lunch and take the opportunity to socialize with the department staff and the instructors. In this way, an attempt is made to welcome the students to their new “home” away from home and make them feel like they are part of something warm and friendly. It is hoped that this will ease some of the extreme culture shock that many of them feel.

Again, to quote Mandelbaum; “Each person changes his ways in order to maintain continuity, whether of group participation or social expectation or self-image or simply survival” (181). During the course of their time in the IP, students begin to form social groups. The general pattern is that new groups will start to form in about one or two weeks. Around this time, it became apparent that certain students were always together. Most of the groups that were observed were linguistically based. Membership was not related to being part of the same class or proficiency level, and in many cases group members did not even share interests whether professional or personal, it was merely that they shared a native language. The concept of safety in numbers can be seen here in a little more abstract sense. The feeling of security that the students receive as part of a cultural group allows them to handle the changes in their external environments.
While it is not unusual for cultures to mix and form groups, it is more likely that students stick together in an effort to deflect some of the aloneness and uniqueness they feel while living in the United States. I believe that this is something that is done out of a need to preserve and maintain a sense of their personal cultural selves. One group that I worked with consisted of students from South America; from countries such as Columbia, Venezuela, Peru, and Argentina. This group has an especially tight bond and its members spend all of their weekends together. Jorge, one group member as well as its obvious leader, has his own apartment so they all often gather at his place for what he calls "the cooking parties" and prepare foods like they would eat if they were at home. They also rent videos and go dancing at Salsa clubs.

There is no English spoken when they are together. In this way, they all feel that they are maintaining a piece of home. Eliana, a student from Columbia, told me that:

_Here...with these people I am like at home in Baranquilla where my family and my friends and we all are together laughing and sharing each other. Having friends from home...well...you know, from South America, is very like being at home. We cook, we drink, and we talk about where we are from. No...we never speak in English because all day we have to and this is a ...you ...well, a break, a relax from ELP. When class is done, I don't want to think about it but I do make it serious to study. I try because I want to live in America and study and to work. I miss Columbia but this people, these people...sorry...help me to smile when I am sad for home. But! I must tell to you that I am not doing myself a favor, you know, to be here because really I only speak English at ELP._

The drawback as Eliana puts it and as some of the group's other members also feel is that by socializing only with people from the same country or that speak the same language is that they rarely use English and this hurts their ability as well as creates more distance between them and others in the Program. Oscar, a student from Venezuela, told me that he feels that it causes him to be deterred from his reasons for study in the IP, which are to become an active member of American society and attend graduate school at an American university.

While building connections with those who share language or geography might be useful ways to avert homesickness and preserve cultural identity these types of activities can hinder the growth of the individual students in their pursuit of better
language skills or for entering the American university system. It limits the expansion of their cultural framework to include the perspectives of people who are different from by virtue of their country of origin. Still, I am forced to believe that for psychological reasons, these bonds with others that they feel comfortable or at home with are healthy in allowing the students to maintain a level of social comfort that brings a welcome relief from the everyday pressures of living in America.

The ways in which the IP students maintain cultural identities are important but so too are the ways in which they try to fit in and become more “American.” This is something that the Asian students go to great trouble and great expense to achieve. After interviewing several of the Japanese students I was told that in Japan it is very popular to have the right look and this did not change for them upon arrival. They wanted to look like American girls and here they could dress how they wanted without the scorn of their parents. One student told me:

*In where I live, in Japan, I cannot dress like I want and it is very sad because there is expect to dress like nice girl or something, there is...you have to...be like all people you know and my mother would not like these clothes I have.*

The girls from Japan were very open about the pressures that they feel at home to fit in and appear proper. If you are from a wealthy family, there is an overwhelming expectation to portray yourself as if you were representing your entire family. One theme about the Asian girls that I uncovered was that many of them felt that by coming to the United States to study English they would be able to live as free souls for a little while before taking on the roles of more serious adults. One Japanese male student that was here for a while (six sessions) loved to go dancing. While here studying he bragged of visiting almost every “cool dance spot” in Philadelphia. He died his hair blue and pierced his nose, ears, and tongue. The day finally came when Shinsuke left to go back to Japan and to everyone’s shock and amazement he walked into the main office looking like the tanker’s son that he was. He told me that it was time to go home and
be a “respectable Japanese son.” He was set to work for his father’s bank in Tokyo and that his time here allowed him to live a little bit before his serious life began.

This need to leave their home country to be individuals before taking on the awesome responsibility of their arranged adult lives is something that many of the Asian students felt compelled to do. This could be likened to what Erik Erikson referred to as “psychosocial moratoria” (119) which he marks as a time in one’s life, “during which a lasting pattern of ‘inner identity’ is scheduled for relative completion (119).” This would mean that prior to settling into one’s adult identity and the role in which he will play in his world, there is a necessary gap of time that allows for the sowing of wild oats or in other terms, consolidating the experiences of youth or young adulthood as to be able to become a more health adult. I believe this to be especially relevant for the Asian students at the ELP.

This pattern is not only seen among Japanese students, Korean students also come for similar reasons. Byungwook, a male student from Korea, told me that:

*Most Korean students come to ELP in the middle of university. Korean men usually take an ELP course after finished military services and Korean women usually visit United States to study English before they become juniors in universities. They need break to invest for themselves in the middle of university because it’s very difficult to find jobs if already graduated from universities in Korea, so they are very afraid to graduate.*

So then, it is easy to see that the need to be free from the constraints of societal and familial obligation is necessary to becoming active members of their societies.

While I could sit here and say that the Asian (more often Japanese) imperative to alter one’s looks and clothing, even hair style and way of speaking is something that is done to be more “American”, it is not simply for this reason. In the Japanese cases, the [Japanese] culture is rearing its head in the context of the American society. The Japanese students here are behaving the way their social identity has taught them to behave. Coming from a collectivist society which subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) dictates that one become part of the whole and not exhibit individuality, these students
are merely doing just that, fitting in. It is an effort to become more "American" and at
the same, all the while, they are behaving completely Japanese.

Through analysis it has become very clear that the behavior of the students is
one that requires certain changes to the way in which they go through the business of
living and in many respects alters their identities in order to do well in this new
environment. What has become more interesting is that the changes to identity are
seen mainly in the course of the class time period. The bigger challenge to adapt here is
seen in the Asian students as they are faced with a very different classroom behavior
model. Here, class participation is encouraged which means that they have to overcome
the hurdles placed in front of them by years of education in a system that seriously
frowns upon individuality and such participation considering it disrespectful.

The ways in which the students maintain their cultural identities exist outside of
the classroom as they try to make a life for themselves here. Perhaps this is one way of
showing how powerful our cultural identities are and how deeply they penetrate our
lives. I believe that this research has shown that the basic concepts about who we are
and our places in the world, as well as our cosmologies are extremely important to our
sense of self and security.

The striving that I witnessed in the students at the ELP to maintain that sense of
comfort and security revolved around the need to keep control of their cultural identity
while taking on new roles as students in an American university. I strongly believe that
this cultural self, for lack of a better term, is something that ultimately shapes who we
are and how we see ourselves in relation to others. Nothing can make this more
obvious than living in a foreign country because it is then that we come to the full
realization of where we come from and how others see us. By seeking bonds with
others who share cultural/linguistic backgrounds, we reduce the stress that adaptation
brings and find a common ground on which to seek refuge and get a sense of that
which makes us feel safe – home.
Conclusions:

This paper is the result of my curiosity about how the students of the English Language Programs reconfigure their cultural identities in order to adapt to their new academic and social climate. Along with the changes that the students make in order to carry on a life while here in the United States is the need to maintain a sense of who they are and where they come from. This is exhibited in the formation of social groupings with students who share cultural background and the need of these groups to partake in activities that remind them of home and that bond them under a linguistic umbrella.

Why is my research important? Because in the climate that we all currently live in, we are losing our cultural identity to globalization and the unification of certain world regions (for example Europe) a process which makes it appear that our sense of cultural uniqueness is fading and being replaced by a global oneness which while it might make the world more economically sound (and I am no expert on this) it threatens all that makes us, as diverse cultures, unique.

Along with the mad dash to globalization which threatens individual cultures, there is the growing problem that is terrorism. The acts of September 11th did not only discolor the perceptions of the American lens but for everyone who desires a peaceful life on this planet. After the attacks, our small group of Saudi Arabian students was telephoned by their embassy in Washington D.C. and told to stay in their rooms and not attend classes. This implied that just being a person of Middle Eastern origin was to be threatened by the American people. While I do not deny that there are many people who would like to do them harm, these young men are not here to cause problems, they merely want to study English for their own reasons. Because of the events of September 11, their cultural identities were now the source of fear and judgment (perceived or real).
It is my hope that in this paper I have been able to, in some small way, bring forward the need for us to better understand the ways in which we are all forced to take note of our cultural identity in a foreign situation. We all sit securely in our personal worlds never thinking for a minute how very different we are when held against the ways of another country or part of the world. When we are put into a situation like the students at the ELP we immediately realize just how different (culturally) we are. It is then that we are challenged to conform and adapt or to maintain some way to hold on to our uniqueness in the given situation.

Future research in this area would be helpful in creating a climate of understanding of others from different places in the world. The challenge of attempting an understanding of the other is not an easy one. To be able to look at people from other cultures (like the students of the IP) and see that they are trying to function in an environment that holds no familiarity whatsoever for them and to appreciate the tremendous effort that they are showing in just being here from day to day is a gift.

In future research one might explore the psychological basis for the desire to study abroad in an effort to better understand what drives us to cross distant borders and extract ourselves from the safety of our home turf for the opportunity to find out what we are truly made of. It is from a distance that we are able to look back and see who we are and where we come from. Most of all, to teach us how to respect others that come from places we only visit vicariously through our television and movie theater screens.
Works Consulted

Behar, Ruth


Erikson, Erik H.


Mandelbaum, David G.


Wallace, Anthony F.C.

APPENDIX A

Partial List of Interview Questions for Senior Thesis

1. Can you tell me your name and what country you come from...and, if you are comfortable your age?

2. How many sessions have you studied in the ELP?

3. Can you tell me some of the reasons (most important) why you decided to study English in the United States?

4. And, why you chose Penn as opposed to other English language programs here or in other countries?

5. Please tell me a little about the expectations you had before you came to the Program? To Pennsylvania? To the United States? [First visit here?] What did you think this experience would be like for you? Were there any concerns? Were you excited?

6. Did you/ do you have any specific (special) goals for your study here?

7. How would you say your expectations have been met (happened the way you wanted them to) or how maybe, if at all, they have been different, good, bad...etc?

8. A lot of students find it hard to come to a new country, maybe even scary. To help deal with that, they sometimes find ways to adapt – change – to make the experience more fun, interesting. Do you feel that you have any ways of adapting to your new experiences here?

9. What has been the easiest or best part of your experience here? You’re hardest?

10. Have you made many friends here? Are these new friendships with people from your home country or from other countries?

11. If new friendships with “foreigners” how have they changed you, your concepts...?

12. Do you feel that you have changed as a person since you came to the ELP? In what ways? If NO, then how have you maintained yourself as you were when you came?

13. In what ways do you keep your cultural identity? Anything special that you do that helps you feel connected to your home?

14. [depending on how student is feeling] What are some of the emotions that you have felt since you came to the ELP and the U.S? Homesick? Excited? Happy? Anything!

15. Overall, will (if any) the changes in your personality since you started at ELP stay with you when you leave? How have they helped you to grow as a person? Have all changes been good? Explain.
APPENDIX B

Sample Interview

**Interview excerpt:** Oscar Barragan Linares, Venezuelan male

1. Can you tell me your name and what country you come from...and, if you are comfortable your age?

   *I am from Venezuela, a town called Barquisimeto but...eh...I was born here because my father was a student at the Thomas Jefferson medical school. I can tell you my age, I am just turn 22 years*

2. How many sessions have you studied in the ELP?

   *I just arrive in September so now is my first session at ELP program.*

3. Can you tell me some of the reasons (most important) why you decided to study English in the United States?

   *Well, because this is the country of my birth and I have my...este...my god parents here very close. My dad, he study here...at Jefferson...so I want to come here and know this city. Also, I want to take my master's degree in the U.S and so I chose to come here.*

4. And, why you chose Penn as opposed to other English language programs here or in other countries?

   *Because, the reason before, I was born here and I have been to Philadelphia and Penn is of course a very good school.*

5. Please tell me a little about the expectations you had before you came to the Program? To Pennsylvania? To the United States? (First visit here?) What did you think this experience would be like for you? Were there any concerns? Were you excited?

   *I have to tell you something, I was so excited to come here...really! I want to improve my English and take the TOEFL so that I can apply to graduate school. This is my only reason. I wanted to take the master's here—in philosophy—and begin a life here in the United States. I have had the experience I planned, I mean...I am doing very well, of course, but it is all how I planned. I am not disappointed.*

6. Did you/ do you have any specific (special) goals for your study here?

   *Just like I said, to take the master's degree in the U.S. I want that my English is better...the best...before I start to study my graduate program.*

7. How would you say your expectations have been met (happened the way you wanted them to) or how maybe, if at all, they have been different, good, bad...etc?

   *They have been met because I feel; I believe that the opportunity here is very good to study. You can do very well if you try. My*
teachers...everyone...has been so good to me and tolerating my questions. There are very compassionate people in the ELP, very understanding and always so good to me. I cannot complain on this point.

8. A lot of students find it hard to come to a new country, maybe even scary. To help deal with that, they sometimes find ways to adapt – change – to make the experience more fun, interesting. Do you feel that you have any ways of adapting to your new experiences here?

I just like people. I talk to everyone if they seem interesting. I am not a party guy, I like my books and to write my silly things but seriously I don’t have a way to protect myself. All parts of this experience are interesting to me. Of course, I have had to learn many things about how to live here. I have never live on my own and now I have this apartment and this is strange...I had to learn how to take care of myself. Little things...how to use the washing machine is funny. I guess I had to change because before I come here my mother did these things so it is an experience of growing...becoming an adult and a student in a foreign country.

9. What has been the easiest or best part of your experience here? The hardest?

It is not to say one thing is the best or easiest. It is that I like it all; I like this city and the people I meet. I really enjoy finding out what people think. Ok, if I have to say...the best is being on my own, to be finally on my own. This is the best but you will laugh because it is also my answer for what is very hard too. I have no idea about these small things of living. Can you imagine that I did not know what to buy to wash a plate or to clean the shower? I had to figure it by myself...this has been a very special experience...you cannot imagine it! It is like...I don’t know...like...everything you buy needs something else to buy...but...as I tell you; it has been a very positive thing.

10. Have you made many friends here? Are these new friendships with people from your home country or from other countries?

I am bad; I have only friends from South America. It was not my intention but it just happened this way. I try to be friends with some Asians but they are very different, it is nothing personal you see but I just don’t understand them very well. Believe me it is nothing personal. I want to understand but it is very difficult. I don’t know...My friends are from my own country or a friend from Chile or Columbia and there is a guy from Argentina who is ok.

11. If new friendships with “foreigners” how have they changed you, your concepts...?

Well, no friendships but...from conversation I have learned they are not so quiet as I thought. I cannot say.

12. Do you feel that you have changed as a person since you came to the ELP? In what ways? If NO, then how have you maintained yourself as you were when you came?

I have definitely become more adult. I am a man more now than in Barquisemeto. I am living on my own, buying my own food, burning my
own food... (laughs)... I am not better or worse; I just know more how to live. I am still very Venezuelan! You have to imagine, I prefer this city to my own... this is true... only because there is nothing for me at home. I am still this way maybe because I have not really made American friends or something like that. My only friends are also South American so we hang out and speak only in Spanish... cook food from home... we are not becoming very American right? Maybe when I begin a job some place this will change.

13. In what ways do you keep your cultural identity? Anything special that you do that helps you feel connected to your home?

With the guys, we cook food from Venezuela and it is like I am home. Also I talk to my home like three times a week and in December my father will come here for three weeks to visit. I am still close to friends at home and this makes me feel like I am not so far from them.

14. (depending on how student is feeling) What are some of the emotions that you have felt since you came to the ELP and the U.S.? Homesick? Excited? Happy? Anything!

I have had days of... melancholia, (melancholy), so bad that I cry. Not very macho is it? (laughs). I am not sure about the homesick; I don’t have it. Of course, I miss my family and I love them but it is better that I am here now because this is what I want for me. There are some days where I feel very alone and maybe I go to the market and ask some question and they speak to fast and I become afraid, or my toilette goes crazy and I don’t know the name of this thing I need to fix it... I can’t ask for it... it’s very hard. Right now, I cannot find a job. It is not about the money, it is about being productive and this gives me stress.

15. Overall, will (if any) the changes in your personality since you started at ELP stay with you when you leave? How have they helped you to grow as a person? Have all changes been good? Explain.

I don’t plan to leave very soon, by that day I will be very different and I am very sure that I will be change forever. I am more mature... in these days I have learned so much about life... such simple things but they teach me a lot of stuff. Change is good but it gives some pain. When you look back or from another side of it, it is all a good thing and you can grow if you have the right way to see it.

**Interview excerpts only, not a full transcript.**