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Bilingual Refugee-Background Student Resilience, Meta-Linguistic Awareness, and Pride in Bilingual Skills

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Cover Page Footnote

In this study, we use the term refugee-background students instead of refugee students indicating that "being a refugee" does not narrow their identity to this experience, rather it becomes one segment of their identity (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017).

Introduction

English learners (ELs), who compose around 10% of public-school students in the United States, come to the classrooms from diverse experiential backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Some of them are born in the United States and grow up in homes where a language other than English is spoken, while others are born outside the United States and arrive as immigrants or refugees. Refugees are defined as those who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country (United Nations Refugee Agency, n.d.). Between 2017 to 2020, the number of refugees resettled in the United States were lowered from 50,000 to 12,000 (Monin et al., 2021). In particular, three out of seven refugees who arrived in the United States in 2019 were children under 18 years old (Baugh, 2020), and 34% of them were school-aged (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services, n.d.). Refugee arrivals in Florida, specifically, have been significant. In 2020, 5,409 refugees arrived, mainly from Cuba and Haiti, and became eligible for refugee services. Almost 10% of these refugees were school-aged children (Florida Department of Children and Families, n.d.). These numbers mirror the most frequent languages other than English spoken in Florida homes (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Refugee-background learners face multiple challenges (e.g., emotional, educational, linguistic, financial) as they settle in a new country (Butcher & Townsend, 2006; Cho et al., 2019; Cone et al., 2014). However, they have also assets, including knowledge of multiple languages and cultures, a multicultural identity, and determination for success, which support their transition (Hos, 2020; Karam et al., 2020; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017; Thorstensson, 2013). For example, 17 to 18-year-old refugee-background students from Burma/Myanmar positioned themselves as valuable members of the new local community, rather than members

who are helpless and taking from the community (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). Several studies indicated that education and language learning are perceived by refugees as essential steps toward a better future. Specifically, mastering the language of the new country contributes significantly to the resilience of refugee-background students (Ameen & Cinkara, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed learning for many students by turning in-person education into virtual instruction and learning with no preparation time. In general, online learning impacted ELs more severely by limiting opportunities for social learning, interpersonal communication, and informal socialization with peers and teachers (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020; Sayer & Braun, 2020). The involuntary and impromptu online learning during the pandemic placed another layer of difficulties on refugee-background students, who were learning English while settling in a new country.

It is the interest of both the refugee-background students and their new community or country to ensure that the educational and language learning opportunities are optimal for their linguistic development and their ability to serve as contributing members. For educators and community professionals, it is important to hear the voices of refugee-background students to understand their experiences, needs, assets, and strength on which teachers can build language instruction both in traditional and virtual environments. This article reports the findings of a phenomenological study, in which seven refugee-background young adult students from Cuba and Haiti shared their experiences with learning English and reflected on themselves as English learners in Florida.

To understand the language learning experiences of young adult refugee-background students as they acquire English both in the traditional classroom and in the virtual environment during the pandemic, we aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of emergent bilingual refugee-background students from Cuba and Haiti with learning English in in-person and virtual learning environments?
2. What perceptions do refugee-background students from Cuba and Haiti have of themselves as English learners?

Literature Background

This study is situated in Transnational Migration Theory (Upegui-Hernandez, 2014) and acknowledges the intentional use and interaction of learners' languages via Cummins' Transfer Theory (1981, 2017), the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (Herdina & Jessner, 2002), and translanguaging pedagogical practices (García, 2009; García & Wei, 2015; Williams, 2002), which served as foundation to interpret refugee-background students' learning experiences and their self-perception as language learners before and during the pandemic. In addition, this section provides an overview of research on refugee-background students' educational experiences and the impacts of the unexpected change to learning language virtually on their academic performance due to the pandemic.

Strategic Use of Both Languages for Academic Achievement

Transnational Migration Theory expounds the complexity of the immigrant experience. Immigrants' maintenance and building of cross-border relationships, coupled with recognition of the psychological realities of migrants, which include social, physical, economic, or ideological connections, provide an elaboration of the adult migrant experience (Upegui-Hernandez, 2014). The theory provides a holistic structure to view the continuity of the migrant experience, rather than a more fragmented before/after-migration perspective (Upegui-Hernandez, 2012), including maintaining cross-border connections with family and friends and visiting and sending money. Through their experiences, migrants are in a unique position to view and understand the world,

potentially resulting in a more critical view of social injustice, power, and privilege (Upegui-Hernandez, 2010, 2014). The continuity and complexity of the immigrant experience, as delineated in Transnational Migration Theory, was considered as a framework that could extend to refugee-background students' perceptions of themselves and their identities as bilingual language learners. In addition, linguistic identity forms a part of the migration experience. The incorporation of new languages alongside the heritage language showcases a multilingual aptitude and desire for a better life and quality education, thus developing a multicultural and multilingual identity while adjusting to a new culture, helping others, contributing to community progress, and supporting those remaining in the home country (Buxton et al., 2009; Cone et al., 2014; Thorstensson, 2013).

Connections and interdependence between the heritage and new language are well established and inform classroom practice. Cummins' Transfer Theory (1981, 2017), supported by research (e.g., Cummins, 2001; Dressler & Kamil, 2006; Genesee et al., 2006), emphasized the development of proficiency and academic achievement in a new language through strategic use of both languages. As a complement, the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (Herdina & Jessner, 2002) and the Dynamic Systems Theory, as applied to second language acquisition research (de Bot et al., 2007), underscore the transformation of the psycholinguistic system of multilinguals as the language system of each language affects the development of each individual language and the language system as a whole.

Subsequently, the concept of translanguaging underlines the use of linguistic features of both languages for communication (García, 2009). Multilingual students utilize and develop their languages through profound cognitive engagement with all of their languages, naturally developing deep academic understanding along with strong linguistic development in all

languages, even strengthening the weaker of the languages (García & Wei, 2015; Williams, 2002). According to Cummins (2017), these constructs acknowledge that the complexity of the interactions of the languages of multilinguals and can improve language and literacy development. These concepts and theories are considered here as a lens through which to examine whether critical knowledge in the field of language acquisition is apparent in refugee-background student perceptions and experiences learning English.

Young Adult Refugee-Background Students' Educational Experiences

Many young adult refugee-background language learners can experience a variety of challenges that may affect learning in the new country. The educational experience of refugee-background students is influenced by a need for social-emotional support, their responsibilities outside of school, and a limited knowledge of the U.S. educational system coupled with a drive to pursue and reach goals (McBrien, 2005; Newcomer et al., 2021). Often, the supportive framework needed to ensure success for students is not accessible to them. Transitioning and adjusting can be more difficult when their experiences are not validated or addressed by schools (Hos, 2020). Outside of school, refugee-background students often have important responsibilities related to family involvement, work/financial requirements, and other home responsibilities, which can interfere with their education and put them at a disadvantage (Hos, 2020). These responsibilities intertwine with student and family values of community connection, home culture, heritage language, and incorporation of developing English (Buxton et al., 2009). Despite these challenges, many refugee-background students report having goals and aspirations, but few demonstrate critical knowledge about the US educational system or educational pathways, which often stems from a lack of support within the school environment (Buxton et al., 2009; Cone et al., 2014; Hos, 2020).

Learning of the language of the new country is essential; however, it is a daunting task for refugee-background students when they arrive in the United States during secondary school. They are expected to learn the grade-level subject area knowledge when they lack the knowledge of the English language (Sugarman, 2017). Supporting their learning English is instrumental for their successful participation in academic instruction. Diverse approaches, such as culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), a transnational curriculum (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017), opportunities for code-switching and translanguaging (García, 2009), and individualized learning (Hardy & Grootenboer, 2013), contribute to successful language learning. In particular, Newcomer et al. (2021) proposed that effective teachers of refugee students infused the following features in their instruction: fostering cross-cultural understanding, using effective scaffolding techniques including modeling and contextualizing, encouraging students to share about their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and encouraging the use of heritage language in the classroom interactions.

Acquiring a New Language Remotely Due to COVID-19

The transition to online learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic revealed factors that affected ELs to a greater extent than other learners. ELs faced new challenges completing schoolwork with the need to adapt to courses using an online delivery method, which may partly be the reason for the decrease in class participation. Additionally, the transition to online learning also affected students' levels of social interaction and mental health. ELs cited a decrease in in-person interaction as a source of lowered emotional state (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020). With decreased social interaction, a key aspect of language acquisition (e.g., Krashen, 1987; Krashen & Terrell, 1998; Li & Jeong, 2020; Lytle & Kuhl, 2017), ELs in online classes felt "stuck inside" with limited opportunities for assistance and missed out on differentiated learning opportunities

through oral instruction (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020; Sayer & Braun, 2020; Symons & Ponzlo, 2019). The lack of technology use, learning support, and social interaction were some of the factors that contributed to educational difficulties for English learners.

Responsibilities at home increased the COVID-19 pandemic, which contributed to the less optimal leaning environment. Family financial instability due to pandemic created stress and anxiety as English learners tried to support themselves or their family (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020; Sayer & Braun, 2020). Additionally, students expressed concern regarding the "finances, social and mental stability, physical health, and travel restrictions confronting their distant families" (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020, p. 3) as well as worries related to their immediate families. These concerns, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, added additional obstacles to the educational success for refugee-background students.

Language anxiety can affect a learner's perception of their abilities and can be incapacitating. It can be exacerbated during remote learning (Russell, 2020). To meaningfully overcome language anxiety, remote learners must be inclined to set aside time to learn and keep on pace, know when to seek help, and be willing to learn in spite of physical and psychological distance (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2020). As with the other learning factors discussed, language anxiety presented as a greater obstacle during remote learning in the COVID-19 pandemic than during more typical learning environments.

The overview of the selected theories and literature indicated that refugee-background students faced an increased multi-tiered challenge as they learned a new language in a virtual environment while settling down in a new country. Although research with refugee-background students from diverse countries is ample, recent studies with students from Cuba and Haiti are scarce. The voices of refugee-background students from these Caribbean countries are important,

because their diverse experience within the home country and in resettlement likely impact their learning experiences, strengths, and needs.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenology approach (Moustakas, 1994) with the purpose of exploring bilingual refugee-background young adult students' lived experiences with learning English as a new language in traditional and remote learning environments during the pandemic. Through two in-depth, semistructured interviews with each participant, the phenomenon of English language learning was studied as they were making meaning of it (Patton, 2002).

Context of the Study

The study focusing on refugee-background students' learning experiences took place in Southwest Florida. Although recently the number of refugees declined nationwide, the refugee programs in Florida receive approximately 5,000 refugees annually, mainly from Cuba and Haiti. Most Cubans reunite with family in Miami, which is also where most Haitian refugees settle (Florida Department of Children and Families, n.d.). Between 2014 and 2018, 38,000 Cubans resettled in Southwest Florida where the study took place. Most of the Cuban refugees (61%) indicated that they had limited English proficiency (Blizzard & Batalova, 2020). During the same period, 19,000 Haitian refugees settled in Southwest Florida. Approximately 45% of Haitian refugees lack English proficiency (Olsen-Medina & Batalova, 2020). Upon being granted special immigration status, both Cubans and Haitians become eligible for refugee benefits and services (Florida Department of Children and Families, n.d.).

Participants

Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants for this study. Participants were young adult refugee-background students who (a) received services at a local faith-based refugee agency assisting refugee families in the resettlement process and (b) attended high school or recently left high school and attended an adult education (GED) program. All participants identified themselves as ELs. The study included seven participants (i.e., four male, three female). Except for one Haitian student, all participants were from Cuba, and their ages ranged from 16 to 22 years old. Their time in the United States ranged from 10 months to 6 years.

Table 1

Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Years in United States	Country	Schooling
Santiago	22	male	4 years 6 months	Cuba	GED program
Ivan	18	male	2 years	Cuba	GED program
Jorge	16	male	3 years	Cuba	high school
Akeem	18	female	6 years	Haiti	high school
Luis	18	male	10 months	Cuba	high school
Blanca	19	female	2 years 6 months	Cuba	high school
Camila	17	female	1 year 7 months	Cuba	high school

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered in October 2020 via the teleconferencing program Zoom. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed of their right to stop their participation at any time. Participants were interviewed in their language of preference. The interviews with Luis and Blanca were conducted with a Spanish-English translator from the agency, while other participants selected English. Interviews were conducted using a semistructured interview

protocol. The first interview included 15 open-ended questions to gain information about the participants' experiences with learning a new language, in general. In the second interview, 11 open-ended questions targeted their experiences with acquiring English in traditional in-person learning and in virtual environment due to COVID-19. The interviews lasted no longer than 20 to 30 minutes each, and field notes were taken during the interviews. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, all identifiers of the participants were deleted from the data, and each participant received a pseudonym (see Table 1).

Interview transcripts were analyzed for recurrent themes. We used an inductive content analysis approach that allowed for structured organization, condensing, and discovery of overarching themes emerging from the interviews (Patton, 2002), followed by focused coding to sort, synthesize, desegregate, and organize the data (Charmaz, 2006). In this process, we individually analyzed the responses to create categories for coding and to identify patterns and connections in the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), reviewed the emerging themes, and discussed them to determine consistency of interpretation. Together, we categorized and grouped themes to create thick, rich descriptions of responses, and each researcher's individual, initial themes were analyzed to ensure fidelity and inclusion. Through utilizing multiple data sources, including interviews, field notes, and in-depth analysis techniques, we addressed trustworthiness and issues of credibility, which is the accuracy of the findings as they relate to the interpretation of the participants' experience (Creswell, 2007).

Findings

Interview responses indicated that, although participants recognized the challenges both in traditional and virtual learning situations, they presented themselves as resilient, proactive and proud emerging bilingual students who had awareness of language development processes. Their

discourses reflected a strong determination to success rather than focusing on challenges and difficulties. Three themes emerged from the interviews: (a) resilient and proactive learners with metalinguistic awareness, (b) pride in bilingual skills and determination, and (c) tutors' and teachers' roles.

Resilient and Proactive Language Learners with Metalinguistic Awareness

Participants recognized their own learning needs, challenges, and strengths, and exhibited determination amid their challenges. As resilient and proactive learners, they demonstrated metalinguistic awareness in their reflections on challenges and resources in their learning to reach their educational goals.

Awareness of Linguistic Challenges. Participants experienced linguistic challenges that were social-emotional, including issues with speaking and interacting with others, and educational, including English language acquisition issues. Some participants expressed that they lacked English-speaking friends, so they had limited opportunities to practice oral English skills. All participants said that they feared speaking in front of others because of the fast pace at which native speakers would speak to them. Ivan said, "Sometimes I feel bad trying to say something in class, because I know I do not know exactly how to explain what I want to say in English, and it can get frustrating." Another student explained that speaking was more difficult than other aspects of language, including literacy.

Participants expressed awareness of their educational challenges, including those that came with their drive to acquire English to succeed. Participants wanted to do well in school but had difficulty understanding the teacher's instruction in English. Jorge expressed, "I always want to do good in school, but when you do not understand what they are trying to tell you to do, it is hard to do a good job. I had to start learning English like a little kid." Many participants

recognized that in these classroom situations, support in their heritage language would help them learn in English, though this support was missing. Moreover, for none of the participants was the heritage language or culture included in the classroom, although they said they did not feel disrespected by this. Appropriate inclusion and support via the heritage language has long been established as an effective component of instruction and learning to develop English-language proficiency (e.g., Cummins, 1981, 2001, 2017; de Bot et al., 2007; Dressler & Kamil, 2006; García, 2009; García & Wei, 2015; Genesee et al., 2006; Williams, 2002). Yet, these instructional practices did not compose part of the participants' experiences.

With virtual learning during the pandemic, these challenges became more pronounced for the participants. They expressed that they had no extra help for understanding instruction, they had to work harder to get help and explanations, there was more stress, and some had insufficient technology. Illustrating this dilemma, Jorge said,

> I like learning in the classroom in-person more than learning online. It is better for me to have the teacher there to ask questions and to let them know I do not understand. When I learn online I feel like I am more working alone and need to wait for my tutor to help me and we only work together two days a week so sometimes that is hard.

Ivan explained that using technology in English increased the level of challenge, because not only instruction was in English, but the computer was as well. He stated, "…I studied on the computer…, but it's different all in English…. You have to sit on the Internet…[and] understand the content and the laptop, too." Some participants said that their English language acquisition was not supported in the virtual learning environment at all. Camilla expressed that her teachers did not know how to help her during virtual instruction. These discourses indicated that the

challenges were multiplied during the pandemic because of the lack of social interaction and support in the virtual activities.

Resourcefulness. Participants recognized that becoming bilingual requires time, effort, going out of one's comfort zone, and is more effective when communicating with native speakers. For example, Ivan explained the necessity of persistence in acquiring a new language and the process of acquiring a new language, connecting perceptions to and building on the concept of continuity and complexity of the migrant experience (Upegui-Hernandez, 2012) and said,

> Today, tomorrow, and another day, I have to learn, I have to improve, I have to study a lot with my English. Again, again, again… This is how to learn another language. Speaking a lot during the day and the next and the next.

Participants explained the process of developing fluency emphasizing the importance of using many resources. They explained, in lay terms, that they used strategies known to be effective in language acquisition, including context-embedded learning (Cummins, 1981). They used different ways to learn English, such as they watched TV or movies in English with subtitles in English or in the heritage language; listened to English songs; took advantage of communicating with co-workers, friends, family, teachers, and tutors; used body language; read and listened to audio books simultaneously; listened and self-repeated "until it sticks with me" (Luis); used technology (i.e., computer programs, Google translate, YouTube) and dictionaries; translated texts; worked with tutors; and benefitted from translations from teacher or classmates.

As resourceful learners, participants found their own help with learning English, especially when learning remotely. With less help from teachers and paraprofessionals, participants became more independent in their learning and looked for other peers who could aid

with studying and translating and family members. During the pandemic, peer support became essential in the virtual environment when teachers were not always available.

Students also recognized the value of immersive practice and looked for opportunities to practice English, including with coworkers and customers. Santiago, recognizing linguistic awareness and the need for interactions, said,

> English is not the same thing as Spanish. You know, you read and what you read is the same that what you say. But in English, it's not. In English, you need to hear, to hear the words before, you know, so you know how to, to uh say it.

Extensive practice while taking classes online was especially important for participants, since the social aspect of language acquisition was lacking in remote environment as well as with the restricted social distancing.

Pride and Determination for Becoming Bilingual. Participants took pride in their English skills and in being bilingual. They recognized the importance of being bilingual to have more opportunities in the future, supporting the theoretical basis regarding the continuity of the migrant experience (Upegui-Hernandez, 2012), and they were able to overcome difficulties such bias and prejudice that they experienced at school and in the community.

Some participants talked about the importance of being bilingual and that bilingualism was better for their future. For example, Santiago recognized the good feeling one gets when proficiency develops: "I feel like I'm getting it [English]. I feel like…like…like once you…you get it…uh, *you can be like fish in the water*." He also gave some advice to the interviewers and said, "You gonna learn two languages and you know two is better than one…. it's gonna be really good and you gonna even for your career." Participants perceived that their teachers thought that being bilingual was important for school, although none provided evidence. On the

contrary, some participants experienced ridicule at school and work, including blame from native English speakers for their lower English proficiency, being laughed at by classmates, and a prohibition to speak the heritage language, providing additional evidence of educators' lack of implementation of the knowledge base from the field of language acquisition (e.g., Cummins, 1981, 2001, 2017; de Bot et al., 2007; Dressler & Kamil, 2006; García, 2009; García & Wei, 2015; Genesee et al., 2006; Williams, 2002).). They also recognized that it takes individual fortitude to communicate in a new language. For instance, Camila shared that her teacher prohibited the use of the heritage language in the classroom, even when she used Spanish to get help from another Spanish speaking student to understand the task. Another participant shared her difficulties communicating with native English-speakers, and she also experienced that people were resistant about her Spanish, "I have crossed people who aren't nice about me speaking Spanish only, but I ignore them." Ultimately, she showed determination with not taking these comments personally. In addition, Santiago shared his experience with his boss making negative comments on his English skills at work:

> So [my boss] was like, 'No, your English awful.' Okay, I'm doing what I can, you know? … I didn't pay attention to the negative words, 'cause you pay attention to those negative words, uh, it doesn't help at all. Now, …how can those negative…comments help you out is…turn it into a positive. So, he think I'm bad. I'm gonna do it better.

Experiences of biases, negative attitudes and prejudice about their Spanish skills and their limited English skills did not seem to inhibit participants' determination to succeed with their education, whether in high school or in GED programs. They seemed to either ignore or turn negative comments into positive ones, which further exemplified their resiliency as they worked toward their goals of becoming bilingual speakers, demonstrating their ability to bypass the

prevalent power and privilege connection (Upegui-Hernandez, 2014) with language to look toward their bilingual future.

Tutors' and Teachers' Roles in Language Learning. Some participants worked with tutors that were arranged through the community agency or paraprofessionals in school, which they found instrumental to academic success. Tutors and paraprofessionals provided much-needed support for understanding assignments in class and homework as well as helping with knowing how to submit assignments in remote learning. Blanca explained that her tutor was essential to her understanding homework, because on her own she would not be able to understand the directions. Camila also explained that the paraprofessional crucial yet inaccessible:

> When I began in tenth grade they would have [a paraprofessional] with me in case I had any questions or confusion, so I could ask her right away. It's not very often that she is there, though.

Because of the helpful role of language professional in the learning process, participants provided many recommendations for teachers. These recommendations exhibited participants' awareness of effective instructional practices as well as the process of second language acquisition. As mentioned above, these students exhibited strong metalinguistic awareness as they reflected on the language acquisition process. Students said that they need teachers' patience and support as they try to understand and express themselves in English. Recommendations included a slower pace of instruction, giving reminders, privately checking for understanding, allowing extra time, understanding that language acquisition takes time teachers, providing extra practice in English and heritage language support, allowing time for questions in class and help after school, and help from peers and tutors. Luis expressed that

teachers should understand the fear that English learners have when trying to speak English and the importance of patience from the teachers, and said,

> [Teachers] need to understand that [English learners] get very nervous when it comes time for them to speak in English. And [teachers] need to learn to not get so frustrated so easily with them, because they really don't know. But [it] doesn't help when they get frustrated with them, and they just need to be more patient.

In addition, teachers can address the pace of instruction and the need for reminders given privately. For example, Akeem from Haiti recommended that teachers should check with English learners one-on-one after class for comprehension or for additional assistance due to individual pace of learning for each student. In addition, bilingual peer support should be allowed in the classroom, which recognizes the interconnectedness of languages in the language acquisition process (Cummins, 1981, 2001, 2017; de Bot et al., 2007; García, 2009; García & Wei, 2015; Williams, 2002), according to Blanca:

> [Teachers] should all just use the people around her like her peers that speak Spanish and English more, if they need help with understanding what she is trying to say or with expressing to her what they are trying to say.

Overall, participants appreciated the help and assistance from teachers. However, often the help did not meet their needs. Therefore, from their point of view, they also provided recommendations which were aligned with evidence-based practices in the field of language learning.

Discussion

In this study, we explored experiences with learning English of refugee-background young adult students who came from Cuba and Haiti and studied English in Southwest Florida

before and during the pandemic, and their self-perception as language learners. The findings indicated that the participants, were resilient, proactive and motivated language learners who verbalized their educational experience and language identity with clarity. The dominant narrative about refugee-background students often lacks the discourse of their strengths, resilient behavior and future-oriented stance of life (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018). The findings of this study contradict the perception of refugee-background students as needy, skill-less burdens and/or victims, as they are often portrayed in the media without any evidence (Buiano & Ferriss, 2019). These findings are aligned with a new line of research on the interconnection of resilience and language learning, focusing on what they have rather than what they lack (Nguyen et al., 2015; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017).

The participants positioned themselves as capable and driven language learners who were aware of their accomplishments and challenges as well. In spite of their linguistic difficulties, they recognized that the knowledge of the English language was instrumental for a better future including their personal and professional life, and for their acculturation in the United States, supporting them on the continuum of their migration experience in their new country (e.g., Transnational Migration Theory; Upegui-Hernandez, 2012, 2014). Ultimately, they associated English with positive feelings. In addition, they were proud of bilingual language skills (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018) despite the lack of access to pedagogy utilizing their heritage language to support their academic achievement in English despite predominant theories and concepts in new language and bilingual education, such as the Transfer Theory (Cummins, 1981, 2017) and translanguaging (García, 2009; García & Wei, 2015; Williams, 2002). Similarly, Ameen and Cinkara (2018) noted that language knowledge in the new country contributes to resilience, and

eventually, it has the potential to generate many positive effects on refugees' lives in the new country (Buxton et al., 2009; Cone et al., 2014; Thorstensson, 2013).

These young adults in the study demonstrated meta-linguistic awareness when reflecting on their own learning. They described their effective language learning strategies, which were aligned with evidence-based research in second language learning (e.g., context-embedded, social interactions; Bialystok, 2015; Cummins, 2000, Krashen, 1988; Mason & Krashen, 2019). They also noted that, in their independent learning, their bilingual language skills were utilized in both content and language learning, thus unconsciously highlighting on the importance of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2015) and the dynamic nature of bilingualism (Herdina & Jessner, 2002). Thus, it could be argued that these students were *interlingual* and *intercultural* learners. They also provided examples of the heritage language and culture being ignored in the classroom with no opportunity for translanguaging (García & Wei, 2015; Williams, 2002) or the infusion of their heritage language to enhance their academic achievement in English (Cummins, 1981, 2017; de Bot et al., 2007; Herdina & Jessner, 2002). This finding is consistent with numerous studies regarding the lack of acknowledgement of the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2013) and avoidance of using the students' heritage language in the classroom (Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Szecsi et al., 2015).

In terms of their learning virtually due to the pandemic, these participants felt that they became more independent learners regardless of its challenges, including limited availability of teachers, the use of computers in English, and the decreased exposure to communication in English. To mitigate these issues, they hoped for scaffolding and support from teachers and tutors to enable them to become successful students and ultimately to better adapt in the new country (Karam et al., 2020). Furthermore, the participants demonstrated critical awareness

about the optimal ways for learning both in traditional and virtual environment, including reaching out for clarification and more practice, through which they negated the need for the politics of rescue (Rose, 1993). On the other hand, they proudly built on their experiences and skills from their native country and those gained due to the migration experience (Upegui-Hernandez, 2012, 2014).

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the asset discourse (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017) through shedding light on the intellectual, linguistic, psychological and strategic skills and resources and assets that refugee-background students from Cuba and Haiti possess and utilize in their personal lives and in their educational endeavors as well. This was even prevalent during the unexpected and involuntary participation in virtual learning during the pandemic. Their proactive stance and determination to succeed and to overcome challenges in language learning are in opposition to the deficit view, which is often espoused about them and this counter-narrative must be heard and built on by educators and service providers.

Recommendations and Conclusions

In this study, due to the limited number of participants, we did not intend to offer generalizable findings. We argue that a higher number of refugee-background participants might add additional perspectives on learning English; however, it would not challenge the existence of the views based on these participants (Ernest, 2001). The following recommendations for educational professionals working with refugee-background students were drawn from the findings:

1. Recognition by teachers of the motivation, perseverance, and proactive approach of refugee-background students, and build the curriculum and instruction on these strengths,

2. Attention by teachers to the students' voices as they reflect on their language learning processes and verbalize their meta-linguistic awareness and adjust the instruction to respond effectively to their needs in the language learning process,
3. Individualized instruction from teachers and tutors with opportunities for extended speaking and listening, both in-person and online, with well-targeted scaffolding that is based on the teacher's good understanding of the language learning process,
4. Creation of in-person and remote environments in which: (a) the heritage language and culture are appreciated and systematically infused in the instruction, and (b) bullying and belittling is not tolerated in a bias-free environment.
5. Increase in tutoring services from community agencies to supplement these students' language learning process.

Future studies might examine refugee-background students' language learning experiences who fled from countries other than Cuba and Haiti, and experience challenges due to their status and natural and human disasters, as the pandemic. Presumably, the prior experiences in the native country and/or the refugee camps and the opportunities in the new country might generate additional perspectives on their perceptions on language learning and of themselves of learners.

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