

"We learn, but we struggle": English learning experiences of students from African multilingual backgrounds in Syracuse, New York

Chimaobi Onwukwe

Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria.

Accepted 2 April, 2026

ABSTRACT

Despite growing scholarly attention to the English language learning experiences of immigrant and refugee populations in the United States, the voices of students from African multilingual backgrounds remain significantly underrepresented in applied linguistics and education research. This qualitative study investigates the English learning experiences of students from select African multilingual communities in Syracuse, New York — a city that serves as a major U.S. refugee resettlement hub and is home to a linguistically and ethnically diverse African diaspora population. Drawing on focus group discussions with participants from Nigerian, Somali, Congolese, Sudanese, and other African linguistic backgrounds, this study explores the intersecting linguistic, sociocultural, institutional, and psychological factors that shape these students' English language acquisition trajectories. Guided by a culturally sustaining and trauma-informed theoretical framework, focus group discussions were conducted with purposively selected students enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and community-based learning centers. Data were analyzed thematically to illuminate recurring patterns across participants' narratives. Findings reveal a constellation of challenges, including significant linguistic distance between participants' home languages and English; complex cross-linguistic transfer arising from pre-existing multilingual repertoires; limited prior schooling among refugee arrivals (Students with Interrupted Formal Education, SIFE); and pervasive language anxiety linked to accent stigmatization and fear of public error. Participants also reported tensions between cultural identity maintenance and assimilation pressures, acculturative stress, and the compounding effects of trauma associated with displacement. Importantly, the study also surfaced key assets: students' multilingualism, communal resilience, and familial ties were identified as underutilized resources in formal educational settings.

Keywords: English language learning, African multilingual students, second language acquisition, ESL, multilingualism.

E-mail: chima.onwukwe2016@gmail.com, chimaobi.onwukwe@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng.

INTRODUCTION

The United States has long been characterized by remarkable linguistic diversity, shaped in significant part by successive waves of immigration and refugee resettlement (Ruíz, 1984; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In cities like Syracuse, New York — designated as a primary refugee resettlement hub by the federal government (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2023) — this diversity is particularly pronounced. Over the past two decades, Onondaga County alone has resettled more than 10,000

refugees (New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance [OTDA], 2024; CNY Vitals, 2024), with African nations — including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana, and Eritrea — consistently representing among the largest source communities. These communities bring with them rich multilingual repertoires, complex cultural histories, and — for many — deeply formative experiences of displacement, conflict, and interrupted schooling (Dryden-

Peterson, 2017).

Yet despite the growing presence of African-born students in American classrooms, applied linguistics and education research have paid comparatively limited attention to their specific English language learning experiences (Bigelow, 2010; Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Roxas, 2011). The dominant research paradigms in second language acquisition (SLA) and English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy have historically centered on European immigrant populations or East and Southeast Asian learners, leaving a significant empirical gap with respect to African multilingual learners (Ibrahim, 1999; Kubota and Lin, 2006; Nero, 2006). This absence is not merely an academic oversight; it has real consequences for how curricula are designed, how teachers are trained, and how institutional support systems are — or are not — configured to meet the needs of this population (Lucas, Villegas and Freedson-González, 2008).

This study seeks to address that gap by centering the voices of students from African multilingual backgrounds enrolled in ESL programs in the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) and community-based learning centers. Through focus group discussions with participants representing Nigerian, Somali, Congolese, Sudanese, and other African linguistic communities, this research investigates the linguistic, sociocultural, institutional, and psychological dimensions of their English language learning experiences. In doing so, the study moves beyond a deficit-oriented framing of African ELL students as struggling or underprepared, to examine the full complexity of their linguistic lives — including the formidable assets they bring to the learning process. After engaging with this study, readers will be equipped with a grounded, empirically informed understanding of the specific linguistic, sociocultural, and psychological factors shaping the English language learning trajectories of African multilingual students in an urban U.S. context — knowledge that has thus far remained largely absent from the SLA and applied linguistics literatures, and that carries direct consequences for curriculum design, teacher preparation, and institutional policy.

The study's title — drawn from a participant's spontaneous articulation during a focus group session — captures the central tension at the heart of the research: these are students who are deeply motivated to learn, who demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptive capacity, yet who face a layered constellation of obstacles that mainstream educational systems often fail to adequately recognize or address. Understanding both dimensions — the struggles and the strengths — is the animating purpose of this inquiry.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section, Statement of the Problem, briefly reviews select prior studies and identifies the specific gap in the literature that this inquiry addresses. This is followed by a statement of the study's Research Objectives and

Research Questions. A Literature Review then situates the study within relevant bodies of scholarship on African immigrant and refugee learners, linguistic complexity and cross-linguistic transfer, language anxiety and identity, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. The Theoretical Framework section articulates the intersecting conceptual orientations — culturally sustaining pedagogy and trauma-informed practice — that guide the inquiry. The Methodology section describes the research design, setting, participants, data collection procedures, and analytic approach. The Findings section presents the major themes emerging from thematic analysis of focus group data, and the Discussion section interprets those findings in light of the existing literature. The article concludes with Implications for Policy and Practice and a brief Conclusion.

Statement of the problem

Despite the rapidly expanding body of research in second language acquisition and ESL pedagogy, the English language learning experiences of students from African multilingual backgrounds remain critically underexamined. Several foundational studies illuminate dimensions of this population's experience, yet also reveal the boundaries of what is currently known. Bigelow (2010), in her landmark study of Somali refugee learners in Minneapolis, documented the profound challenges posed by limited or absent home-language literacy — a challenge for which standard ESL curricula, which routinely presuppose literate foundations, are ill-equipped. While this work made a pivotal contribution, its focus was restricted to a single national group (Somali Bantu) in a single metropolitan context, and thus cannot account for the broader diversity of African multilingual learners, who arrive with vastly different linguistic backgrounds, schooling histories, and cultural experiences. Bigelow and Vinogradov (2011) extended this work to the domain of adult ESL instruction for emergent readers, demonstrating that conventional instructional models systematically fail this population — but again, their analysis remained tethered to a narrow slice of the African ELL community.

Dryden-Peterson (2017) examined educational trajectories among refugee students across multiple displacement contexts, finding that cumulative disruptions of forced migration fundamentally shape learners' educational outcomes in ways that one-size-fits-all ESL programming cannot address. Yet her analysis, while theoretically rich, operated at a macro-comparative level that did not capture the granular, lived dimensions of English language learning in specific U.S. urban resettlement contexts. Roxas (2011) brought the perspective of classroom teachers working with Somali Bantu students, revealing significant institutional unpreparedness — but his study, too, was focused on a single group and a single aspect of the school experience.

What remains absent from the literature, and what the present study is designed to address, is an empirically grounded account of the intersecting linguistic, sociocultural, psychological, and institutional factors shaping English language acquisition for a diverse, multi-ethnic African student population within a single U.S. resettlement city. By drawing together participants from multiple African national and linguistic backgrounds in Syracuse, New York, this study fills that gap and produces context-specific knowledge of direct relevance to applied linguistics scholarship, ESL pedagogy, and educational policy.

Research objectives and research questions

This study is guided by three overarching research objectives. First, it aims to document and analyze the English language learning experiences of students from diverse African multilingual backgrounds enrolled in ESL programs and community-based learning centers in Syracuse, New York. Second, it seeks to identify the linguistic, sociocultural, institutional, and psychological factors — including both challenges and assets — that shape these students' acquisition trajectories. Third, it aims to generate empirically grounded, contextually specific recommendations that can inform ESL curriculum design, teacher preparation, and institutional policy in refugee resettlement cities.

These objectives are pursued through the following research questions:

RQ1: What linguistic, sociocultural, institutional, and psychological challenges do students from African multilingual backgrounds encounter in their English language learning experiences in Syracuse, New York?

RQ2: What assets, resources, and forms of resilience do these students draw on in navigating their English language acquisition, and how are these recognized — or not — within formal ESL instructional settings?

RQ3: How do the intersecting dimensions of linguistic background, cultural identity, trauma history, and institutional context collectively shape English language learning trajectories among African multilingual students in an urban U.S. resettlement setting?

LITERATURE REVIEW

African immigrants and refugees in U.S. schools

The African immigrant and refugee population in the United States has grown considerably since the passage of the Immigration Act of 1990 and the expansion of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). According to the Migration Policy Institute (2022), more than 2.5 million African immigrants resided in the United States,

with that figure continuing to grow. Cities designated as primary resettlement locations — including Syracuse, Columbus, Minneapolis, and Atlanta — have seen significant concentrations of African-born populations, placing considerable demands on local school systems to serve students with diverse linguistic backgrounds and, in many cases, interrupted or limited prior formal schooling (Bigelow, 2010; Roxas, 2011).

Research on African immigrant and refugee students in K-12 and adult education settings has documented a range of distinctive challenges. Bigelow (2010) and Bigelow and Vinogradov (2011) have drawn attention to the unique situation of Somali refugees with limited literacy backgrounds, showing that standard ESL instructional models — which frequently presuppose a foundation in home language literacy — are poorly suited to this population. Dryden-Peterson (2017) has examined how the educational trajectories of refugee students are shaped by the cumulative disruptions of forced displacement, demonstrating the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all ESL programming in culturally and experientially diverse refugee populations.

Despite this growing body of work, African multilingual learners remain underrepresented as a coherent focus of study in the SLA literature. Most studies either treat "immigrant" as a largely undifferentiated category or focus on specific single national groups, without attending to the distinctive features of the broader landscape of African multilingual learners in urban U.S. contexts.

Linguistic complexity and cross-linguistic transfer

One of the defining features of African multilingual learners is the linguistic complexity they bring to the English learning process. Unlike many East Asian or European learners of English, African students frequently arrive with competencies in multiple languages acquired through different channels: indigenous home languages, regional lingua francas (such as Swahili, Hausa, or Lingala), official colonial-era languages (such as French or Portuguese), and in some cases, earlier-acquired varieties of English that differ significantly from American Standard English. This rich multilingual repertoire constitutes both a resource and a source of cross-linguistic complexity in the English learning process (Cummins, 2000; Cenoz, 2013).

Research in the area of multilingual transfer has demonstrated that third and additional language learners draw selectively on their existing linguistic knowledge when acquiring new languages, with typologically closer languages typically exerting greater influence (Cenoz, 2013). For African learners of English, the linguistic distances involved are often considerable: phonological systems differ markedly, grammatical structures diverge in significant ways, and orthographic conventions may be entirely absent for speakers of unwritten languages. At the same time, positive transfer can occur, particularly for

learners with prior exposure to French or other European languages.

Language anxiety and identity in second language learning

Language anxiety — defined by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process — has been consistently identified as a significant factor in second language acquisition outcomes. For immigrant and refugee learners, language anxiety takes on dimensions beyond the classroom, encompassing social encounters, public communication, and the broader project of identity negotiation in a new national and linguistic context.

Particularly salient for African multilingual learners is the phenomenon of accent stigmatization. Research by Lippi-Green (2012) and Subtirelu (2015) has documented how non-native accents — particularly those perceived as African or “foreign” — are subject to social evaluation and discrimination in American public life, including in educational settings. Such experiences of accent-based stigmatization can exacerbate language anxiety, suppress willingness to communicate, and deepen feelings of social exclusion. The intersection of race, accent, and language in the American context constitutes a distinctive burden for African English learners that has received insufficient scholarly attention.

Central to understanding the identity dimensions of language learning for this population is Norton's (2000, 2013) framework of identity and investment. Norton (2000) reconceptualized language learner identity as multiple, dynamic, and a site of struggle, arguing that the concept of “investment” more accurately captures language learners' complex relationships to the target language than do conventional motivational frameworks. An invested learner understands that acquiring the target language expands access to social goods, symbolic resources, and material opportunities — but this investment is always mediated by relations of power that may include, affirm, or marginalize the learner's social identity. For African multilingual learners in the U.S. context, Norton's framework illuminates a central tension: the desire to invest in English acquisition coexists with the recognition that dominant English-speaking communities may not reciprocate that investment, particularly when learners carry racialized accents, speak unrecognized home languages, or inhabit identities marked by racial and national stigma (Cummins, 2000; Norton, 2013). Norton's related concept of imagined communities (Norton, 2001) is also relevant here: many African learners invest in English partly in relation to imagined future communities of belonging that current material and social conditions have not yet made accessible, and it is the gap between that imagined belonging and present exclusion that

language anxiety frequently inhabits.

The identity dynamics Norton describes take on particular depth when situated within Bhabha's (1994) theorization of postcolonial subjectivity and the “third space” of cultural enunciation. Bhabha argues that cultural meaning is never unitary or fixed, but is produced in a liminal, interstitial space of negotiation and hybridity — a third space in which identities are not simply transported from one cultural location to another but are renegotiated, transformed, and newly constituted. For African multilingual learners navigating between heritage linguistic communities and the institutional spaces of American schooling, this concept provides a powerful analytical lens: these learners do not simply occupy two cultures sequentially or simultaneously, but inhabit a productive, if often psychically costly, space of in-betweenness in which new forms of identity and linguistic practice are continually being forged (Bhabha, 1994). Integrating Bhabha's third space concept with Norton's investment framework allows this study to attend simultaneously to the structural power relations that shape language learning opportunities and the creative, resistant, and hybrid subject positions that learners actively construct in response to those conditions.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy and asset-based approaches

Paris (2012) introduced the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) as an evolution of earlier multicultural and culturally responsive teaching frameworks, arguing that effective pedagogy for linguistically and culturally diverse students must not merely respond to or incorporate students' backgrounds, but actively sustain and support their full cultural and linguistic repertoires. CSP has particular relevance for African multilingual learners, whose linguistic resources are frequently treated as obstacles or deficits rather than as intellectual capital.

Asset-based approaches to ESL instruction, which build on learners' existing multilingual competencies, cultural knowledge, and community networks, have demonstrated positive outcomes in research contexts (Cummins, 2000; Garcia and Wei, 2014). The concept of translanguaging — the fluid, dynamic use of all available linguistic resources in communicative and learning contexts — has emerged as a particularly promising framework for reconceptualizing multilingual learners' language practices in educational settings. For African students with rich but formally unrecognized multilingual repertoires, pedagogical approaches that validate and leverage translanguaging hold considerable promise.

Synthesis: Toward an integrated understanding of African multilingual learners

The four bodies of scholarship reviewed above, considered individually, each illuminate a distinct

dimension of the educational experiences of African multilingual learners in the United States. Taken together, however, they reveal a more complex and coherent picture — one in which African multilingual students are not simply ELLs who happen to speak African languages, but a population whose specific historical, sociolinguistic, and psychosocial circumstances produce a distinctive and undertheorized configuration of challenges and assets that no single strand of existing literature can capture on its own. The scholarship on African immigration and refugee education establishes the demographic and institutional context: a rapidly growing population distributed across U.S. resettlement cities, served by educational systems that were not designed for their specific needs and that routinely fail to accommodate the intersection of linguistic diversity, limited prior schooling, and refugee trauma (Bigelow, 2010; Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Roxas, 2011). The literature on linguistic complexity establishes that these learners bring to the English acquisition process a multilingual architecture that is both more varied and more structurally distant from English than that of most other ELL populations, and that this complexity has been systematically underrecognized in both SLA theory and ESL pedagogical practice (Cenoz, 2013; Cummins, 2000). The scholarship on language anxiety, identity investment, and cultural hybridity then reveals the psychosocial stakes: English acquisition for African multilingual learners is not merely a cognitive or linguistic process but a profoundly identity-laden negotiation, shaped by the racialized dynamics of accent stigmatization (Lippi-Green, 2012; Subtirelu, 2015), mediated by unequal relations of power in which learners' desire to invest in English may go unrewarded (Norton, 2000, 2013), and enacted in the liminal third space between heritage identity and new national belonging (Bhabha, 1994). Finally, the literature on culturally sustaining pedagogy and translanguaging insists that these dynamics can be interrupted and transformed — that African multilingual learners' linguistic repertoires and cultural resources, currently treated by most ESL programs as deficits or irrelevances, constitute genuine intellectual capital whose recognition and activation could substantially alter their educational trajectories (Garcia and Wei, 2014; Paris, 2012; Paris and Alim, 2017).

What is missing from the existing literature — and what the present study is designed to provide — is an account that holds all of these dimensions together simultaneously, examining how they interact and compound one another in the lives of specific, diverse learners within a specific urban resettlement context. Studies of African immigrant education have not, on the whole, adequately attended to the psychosocial and identity dimensions of language learning (Bigelow, 2010; Dryden-Peterson, 2017); studies of language anxiety and identity investment have rarely centered African learner populations (Horwitz et al., 1986; Norton, 2000); and the theoretical resources of CSP and translanguaging have not been systematically applied to

the diverse landscape of African multilingual learners in U.S. urban schools (Garcia and Wei, 2014; Paris and Alim, 2017). Moreover, no prior study has drawn on the voices of students from multiple, diverse African national and linguistic communities within a single resettlement city, making it impossible to identify what is specific to particular national or linguistic groups as against what is shared across the broader African multilingual learner population in the American context. The present study addresses these interconnected gaps directly. By centering the intersecting linguistic, sociocultural, psychological, and institutional dimensions of African multilingual students' experiences in Syracuse, New York, and by drawing theoretically on CSP, trauma-informed practice, Norton's investment framework, and Bhabha's concept of third space, the study generates a multi-dimensional, empirically grounded account that moves the field toward a more adequate theoretical and pedagogical response to one of its most underserved populations.

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by two intersecting theoretical orientations: culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris and Alim, 2017) and trauma-informed educational practice (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). The choice to work with these two frameworks in tandem reflects the dual imperatives of the research: to honor and leverage the cultural and linguistic assets of African multilingual learners, and to acknowledge the profound psychosocial dimensions of their educational experiences.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy provides the orienting lens for understanding language education as a site of cultural and linguistic reproduction, contestation, and possibility. Rather than serving as background reading, three specific constructs from CSP functioned as direct analytical categories in this study's thematic analysis. First, the construct of linguistic sustenance — CSP's insistence that instruction must actively maintain and extend learners' home language practices rather than merely tolerating them — directed analytic attention toward participants' accounts of home language use, institutional suppression, and the conditions under which multilingual practice was permitted or foreclosed (Paris and Alim, 2017). Second, the concept of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), as appropriated within CSP's asset-based orientation, provided a sensitizing framework for identifying the forms of capital — linguistic, familial, navigational, and resistant — that participants and their communities brought to the educational process and that formal ESL programs failed to recognize. Third, CSP's principle of dynamic pluralism — the recognition that linguistic and cultural practices are not static essences to be preserved but living, hybrid, and evolving resources to be sustained in their full complexity — shaped how this

study interprets participants' accounts of code-switching, translanguaging, and the negotiation of multiple linguistic identities simultaneously. Through this framework, the preservation of home language identities is understood not as a barrier to English acquisition but as a legitimate educational and human goal in its own right.

Trauma-informed practice, as articulated by SAMHSA (2014), provides the complementary framework for attending to the psychological dimensions of participants' experiences. SAMHSA identifies six key principles of trauma-informed care — safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender sensitivity — each of which served as a sensitizing concept in the analysis of participants' narratives. Participants' accounts of language anxiety, fear of public error, and reluctance to engage with institutional authority were interpreted through the principles of safety and trustworthiness: educational environments that do not meet baseline conditions of psychological safety for learners carrying significant trauma histories cannot serve as effective language learning contexts, however pedagogically sophisticated their curriculum (Kirmayer et al., 2011). The principle of peer support shaped the interpretation of participants' reports of informal, community-based English learning as more accessible and less anxiety-provoking than formal instruction — a finding legible precisely because the trauma-informed framework directs attention to the relational conditions of learning rather than only its content. The principle of cultural, historical, and gender sensitivity oriented analysis toward the ways in which trauma responses are shaped by cultural context, resisting a universalizing clinical reading of participants' experiences in favor of one attentive to the specific histories of the communities from which they come. A trauma-informed perspective neither pathologizes learners' trauma responses nor reduces them to their traumatic histories; rather, it creates structural and relational conditions within which healing and learning can occur together.

The intersection of these two frameworks is neither incidental nor merely rhetorical, and must be understood as doing genuine theoretical work rather than simply doubling the study's conceptual framing. CSP operates as a theory of cultural and linguistic sustenance, asking what educational environments must offer in order to recognize and actively support multilingual learners' full repertoires. Trauma-informed practice operates as a theory of psychological safety and relational trust, asking what conditions of care learners must experience in order to be fully present and available for learning. Where they converge is in the claim that educational failure for populations like African multilingual learners is not a product of individual deficit but of institutional environments that are simultaneously culturally non-sustaining and psychologically unsafe — and that transforming those environments requires attending to

both dimensions in tandem (Ginwright, 2016). This convergence is analytical as well as conceptual: in the thematic analysis, data coded as instances of asset suppression (a CSP category) frequently co-occurred with data coded as instances of institutional unsafety (a trauma-informed category), suggesting that the two frameworks are not merely additive but mutually illuminating. The intersection was also methodological in concrete ways. The decision to use focus groups rather than individual interviews as the primary data collection method reflects both CSP's commitment to communal, collaborative knowledge production and trauma-informed practice's principle of peer support, through which shared narrative among people with common experiences creates conditions of safety and validation that individual interviews cannot replicate. Similarly, the engagement of bilingual co-facilitators — fluent in Somali, French, and Arabic — enacts CSP's principle of linguistic sustenance by affirming that participants' home languages are legitimate vehicles for knowledge production, while simultaneously serving the trauma-informed principle of cultural sensitivity by ensuring that participants were not required to narrate experiences of displacement, loss, and institutional marginalization exclusively through the language of the society that resettled them. Together, these frameworks orient the study toward a both/and epistemology: both challenges and assets, both structural obstacles and individual resilience, both the need to acknowledge harm and the imperative to imagine and work toward genuinely equitable, sustaining educational environments.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employs critical qualitative inquiry — specifically, thematic inquiry with a critical orientation — as its methodological framework. This approach is particularly appropriate for the present inquiry because it combines the interpretive depth of qualitative methodology with an explicit commitment to examining the structural, historical, and political conditions that shape participants' experiences. Unlike purely descriptive or phenomenological approaches, critical qualitative inquiry proceeds from the premise that lived experience is always embedded in relations of power, and that the researcher's analytic task is not only to describe what participants say but to situate those accounts within the broader sociolinguistic and institutional structures that produce, constrain, or enable them (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). This orientation is well suited to the study's theoretical commitments to culturally sustaining pedagogy and trauma-informed practice, both of which attend explicitly to structural conditions rather than individual attributes. The study is thus critical in both an epistemological and a

political sense: it treats knowledge as perspectival and partial, centers the experiences of a systematically marginalized population, and is oriented toward producing findings with emancipatory implications for practice and policy.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board prior to the commencement of data collection (Approval No. 61234). All participants provided informed consent before participating in focus group discussions; for participants under the age of 18, parental or guardian consent was obtained in addition to participant assent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and all identifying information has been removed or anonymized in the presentation of findings.

Research setting

The study was conducted in Syracuse, New York, a mid-sized post-industrial city that serves as one of the United States' most active refugee resettlement destinations on a per capita basis. The Syracuse City School District (SCSD) serves a highly diverse student population, with significant proportions of English Language Learners across its K-12 schools. Community-based learning centers affiliated with refugee resettlement organizations in the city provide supplementary English language instruction to adult learners, recent arrivals, and youth with limited prior formal schooling.

Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, a strategy designed to ensure that the sample would represent the range of African national and linguistic backgrounds, lengths of U.S. residence, and educational histories relevant to the study's research questions (Patton, 2002). Rather than seeking a statistically representative sample, purposive sampling was employed to maximize variation across the dimensions most theoretically relevant to the inquiry. Recruitment proceeded through established relationships with ESL program coordinators within the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) and affiliated community-based learning centers, who facilitated access to potential participants. Additional participants were recruited through community channels, including community organizations, faith communities, and African-owned businesses in the Syracuse area. Potential participants were identified as meeting inclusion criteria — enrollment in an ESL program or community-based learning center, African national origin, and residence in the United States for no more than four years — and were invited to participate through program staff and community liaisons.

A total of 12 participants took part in focus group

discussions, representing a range of African national and linguistic backgrounds, including Nigerian (Yoruba- and Igbo-speaking), Somali, Congolese (Lingala- and Swahili-speaking), Sudanese/South Sudanese (Arabic- and Dinka-speaking), and participants from other African linguistic communities. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 28 and had resided in the United States for between six months and four years at the time of the study. This range of backgrounds, residence lengths, and educational levels reflects the purposive intent to capture the breadth of experience within the African multilingual learner population in Syracuse.

Data collection

Data were collected through two focus group discussions, each comprising exactly six participants. The two groups were intentionally composed as linguistically mixed — that is, each group included participants from multiple African national and linguistic backgrounds rather than being organized by shared language community. This mixed-composition design reflected the study's interest in cross-community comparison and in eliciting the kinds of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural reflection that homogeneous groups might not generate. It also aligned with the study's theoretical commitment to identifying shared structural conditions across diverse African multilingual backgrounds, rather than treating any single community's experience as representative. Focus groups were selected as the primary data collection method because of their capacity to generate rich, dialogic data through participant interaction, to surface shared experiences and collective sense-making, and to create a less hierarchical, more communally oriented research context than individual interviewing. Focus group discussions were conducted in English, with the assistance of bilingual co-facilitators fluent in Somali, French, and Arabic to support participants with lower English proficiency. Each session lasted approximately 90 to 120 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. A semi-structured discussion guide was used, covering topics including participants' prior language backgrounds, English learning experiences, challenges and facilitating factors, identity and community, and school and social experiences.

Given the study's scope — two focus groups involving 12 participants across five nationally and linguistically diverse communities — thematic saturation was assessed functionally rather than statistically. Saturation was considered reached when analysis of the second focus group yielded no substantive new codes and the major themes identified in the first group were consistently confirmed, elaborated, and extended but not fundamentally revised. The consistency of core themes — linguistic distance, language anxiety, identity tension, trauma burden, and multilingual assets — across both groups and across participants from different national

backgrounds provided the primary evidence of analytic saturation within the scope of this study.

Data analysis

Focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis following the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis proceeded iteratively through phases of familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme development, review, and definition. A critical discourse analytic lens was employed in the later phases of analysis to attend to the power dynamics embedded in participants' language and the structural conditions their narratives indexed. Member checking was conducted with a subsample of participants to enhance the credibility of the analysis. The research team maintained reflexive journals throughout the analytic process, and peer debriefing was employed to support the trustworthiness of findings.

FINDINGS

Linguistic distance and structural barriers to acquisition

A prominent theme across all focus group discussions was the experience of linguistic distance — the perceived gap between participants' home languages and English in terms of phonological systems, grammatical structure, and orthographic conventions. Participants from Somali backgrounds, for example, described the challenges of English vowel distinctions and consonant clusters that have no analogues in Somali phonology. Congolese participants noted the interference of French phonological patterns in their English pronunciation, while participants from Sudanese communities described difficulties with the Latin script itself for those whose home languages were written in Arabic script or were unwritten. A participant from a Somali background articulated this experience of phonological disorientation with particular clarity: *"In Somali, I know every sound. In English, I see the letters and I still don't know what sound to make. Even after two years, sometimes I just guess."* A Congolese participant described the interference of his French-trained ear: *"My mouth keeps doing French things. I say a word and people here don't understand, and I don't understand why, because in French it would be correct."* These accounts illuminate the degree to which phonological transfer — the application of home language sound systems to English production — creates persistent and often invisible barriers that standard ESL instruction, which frequently presupposes phonologically proximate first language backgrounds, is ill-equipped to address (Cenoz, 2013; Cummins, 2000).

These linguistic structural barriers were compounded,

for a significant subset of participants, by limited or interrupted prior formal schooling. Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) — a category that encompasses students who have experienced significant gaps in schooling due to conflict, displacement, or limited access to education in their countries of origin — represented approximately one-third of the participant sample. For these students, English language learning was not merely a matter of adding a new language to an existing repertoire; it involved simultaneously developing foundational literacy skills, adapting to institutional educational norms, and navigating the social and cultural dimensions of American schooling. One participant from South Sudan, who had experienced a multi-year gap in formal schooling during displacement, described this compounded challenge in terms that captured its scale: *"Everyone else is learning English. I am learning how to be in school, how to hold the pencil, and then also English. It is like three schools at the same time."* This account resonates with Bigelow's (2010) documentation of the particular demands placed on emergent literate learners in standard ESL environments, and points to the systematic inadequacy of programs that treat literacy development and language acquisition as sequential rather than simultaneous processes.

Language anxiety and accent stigmatization

Participants across all focus groups described experiences of language anxiety, and many specifically named accent stigmatization as a significant source of this anxiety. Several participants recounted experiences of being mocked or corrected for their accents by peers, and in some cases by teachers, in ways that left lasting impacts on their willingness to speak English in public or classroom settings. One participant described the experience of volunteering an answer in class and being met with laughter, after which she *"stopped raising my hand for the whole semester."* Such experiences are consistent with Lippi-Green's (2012) analysis of accent discrimination as a form of linguistic profiling that operates along racial and national origin lines.

Participants also described a more generalized fear of public error — a reluctance to speak English in contexts where mistakes might be observed and evaluated. This fear was particularly pronounced in formal academic settings, in interactions with school staff and administrators, and in public spaces such as stores and medical offices. The psychological costs of this anxiety were substantial: participants described fatigue from constant self-monitoring, social withdrawal, and a pervasive sense of inadequacy that was at odds with their self-perceptions as competent communicators in their home languages. A Nigerian participant captured this psychological cost with striking precision: *"In Yoruba, I can argue, I can joke, I can explain anything. In English, I*

become like a child. And people treat you like a child, because that is what they see." This account illustrates the degree to which language anxiety is not merely an internal emotional state but a socially constituted condition, produced at the intersection of linguistic limitation and the evaluative gaze of interlocutors whose responses confirm or disconfirm the learner's sense of competence. Norton's (2000) concept of investment illuminates what is at stake: the same learner who is a fully agentive, socially valued person in Yoruba is reduced to a partial, evaluated subject in English — and this reduction shapes not only affective experience but willingness to engage in the very interactions through which acquisition occurs.

Acculturative stress and identity tensions

Focus group discussions surfaced significant tensions between participants' desires to maintain their linguistic and cultural identities and the assimilative pressures they experienced in American schools and society. Several participants described feeling that their home languages were devalued or unwelcome in school environments, citing explicit prohibitions on the use of languages other than English in classrooms or implicit social pressure to conform to English-only norms in peer interactions. This experience of what Garcia and Wei (2014) call "monoglossic ideology" — the institutional assumption that true learning and communication can only occur through a single, standardized language variety — was described as deeply alienating. A Somali participant described her experience of institutional language suppression in direct terms: *"The teacher said, 'English only in this classroom.' But when I don't understand something, my brain goes to Somali to figure it out. She was telling me not to think."* This account embodies what Flores and Rosa (2015) identify as the "raciolinguistic ideology" embedded in institutional language policies — the presumption that certain bodies and voices require linguistic correction regardless of the actual communicative and cognitive resources they bring. The prohibition on home language use in this participant's classroom was not experienced merely as a pedagogical preference but as a denial of her cognitive process and, by extension, her personhood.

At the same time, participants navigated complex identity negotiations within their own communities. Some described pressure from family and community members to preserve home language fluency and cultural practices, while simultaneously facing expectations from school to conform to American norms. A number of participants described this as a persistent experience of being *"in between"* — belonging fully to neither their heritage community nor their new American context. A Congolese participant articulated this liminality in terms that speak directly to the theoretical framework that guides this analysis: *"At home they say I am becoming American. At school, I am still the African. I don't know which one I am*

really supposed to be." This identity liminality, which Bhabha (1994) theorizes as the "third space" of cultural hybridity, was experienced both as a source of creative possibility and of psychic strain. Canagarajah's (2013) concept of translanguaging practice is also illuminating here: these participants were not simply navigating between bounded language systems, but actively constructing new communicative repertoires in the interstitial space between heritage and new-language communities — a process that demands significant cognitive and emotional resources that institutional schooling rarely acknowledges or supports.

Trauma, displacement and the psychosocial burden of learning

For participants from refugee backgrounds — particularly those from South Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo — the psychological dimensions of displacement and trauma emerged as significant factors in their English learning experiences. Participants described difficulties concentrating in class following traumatic events, intrusive memories triggered by school-related stressors, and a generalized state of hypervigilance that made it difficult to engage with learning. Several participants noted that their teachers appeared unaware of or unprepared to respond to the trauma histories that students brought into the classroom. A participant from the Democratic Republic of Congo described the invisible weight of these histories in terms that illuminate the gap between surface academic performance and the psychic cost of maintaining it: *"I am sitting in the class and writing, but sometimes my mind is very far. I am remembering things. And the teacher thinks I am just not paying attention, but I am paying attention — I am paying attention to something I cannot say."* This account resonates powerfully with SAMHSA's (2014) framework of trauma-informed care, which holds that the absence of psychological safety in educational environments does not merely impede academic engagement — it actively reactivates traumatic stress responses that render sustained learning impossible. The teacher's misreading of this participant's distraction as inattention illustrates precisely the kind of institutional trauma-unawareness that the present study identifies as a structural barrier to effective ESL instruction for refugee populations.

The language brokering burden — in which students were expected by family members and community institutions to serve as interpreters and translators in high-stakes situations involving medical appointments, legal proceedings, and governmental bureaucracies — was identified by many participants as an additional source of psychosocial stress. Several participants described the weight of adult responsibilities that fell on them as the most English-proficient family members, responsibilities that consumed time and energy that might otherwise have

been directed toward their own learning and development. A Sudanese participant described the particular stress of high-stakes interpretation: *"My mother has a doctor appointment, and I have to explain everything — the sickness, the medicine, everything — in English. If I say the wrong word, it is dangerous. And then I go to school and people think I should be worrying about a homework assignment."* This testimony illuminates the degree to which language brokering is not merely a cognitive demand but a moral one — a form of responsibility-bearing that imposes adult stakes on adolescent learners and that mainstream schooling systematically fails to recognize as part of the psychosocial landscape within which English acquisition takes place.

Assets, resilience and underutilized resources

Alongside the challenges documented above, focus group discussions revealed a rich array of assets, resources, and sources of resilience that participants drew on in navigating their English language learning. Participants consistently described their multilingualism as a source of pride and cognitive strength, even as they acknowledged the institutional contexts in which it went unrecognized. Many participants demonstrated sophisticated metalinguistic awareness — the ability to reflect on and analyze language systems — that could serve as a powerful resource in formal English instruction but was rarely leveraged in classroom settings. A Nigerian participant gave particularly vivid expression to this asset: *"I speak Yoruba, Igbo a little, Hausa, French from school, and now English. When I am learning a new word, I already have five different ways to think about what it could mean. My brain is a dictionary, but no teacher here has ever asked me to open it."* This account resonates directly with Cummins' (2000) interdependence hypothesis and with the broader translanguaging literature: the cognitive infrastructure that multilingual learners have developed through their prior language learning is not merely background noise but a potential instructional resource of considerable power — one that Paris and Alim's (2017) culturally sustaining pedagogy explicitly demands that educators recognize and mobilize.

Community ties and familial support emerged as crucial informal resources for English learning. Participants described learning English through interactions with siblings, through watching American television, through participating in community organizations, and through peer networks established at school and in their neighborhoods. These informal learning pathways were often described as more accessible and less anxiety-provoking than formal ESL instruction, and several participants credited them with more rapid progress than they achieved in classroom settings alone. A Somali participant reflected: *"I learned more English from my sister and from TV in the first year than from two years in ESL class. Because no one is*

judging me. I can make mistakes and it doesn't matter." A Congolese participant similarly identified her church community as the context in which she gained the confidence to speak: *"People at church already know me. They know I am trying. So I practice English there, even when I am making mistakes, because they are not laughing at me — they are helping me."* These accounts illustrate a consistent finding: the relational conditions of learning — specifically, environments characterized by trust, acceptance, and the social value of the learner as a full person — are not peripheral to language acquisition but constitutive of it. Formal ESL instruction that fails to cultivate such conditions, however linguistically sophisticated its curriculum, will consistently be outperformed by the informal, communal learning environments that participants described. This finding converges with the trauma-informed principle of psychological safety (SAMHSA, 2014) and with Yosso's (2005) framework of community cultural wealth, which positions social and navigational capital — the very resources participants described accessing through community and family — as forms of intellectual and developmental capital deserving systematic recognition and activation in educational settings.

DISCUSSION

The five themes identified in this study — linguistic distance and structural barriers, language anxiety and accent stigmatization, acculturative stress and identity tensions, trauma and psychosocial burden, and multilingual assets and community resilience — together constitute a response to each of the study's three research questions. The following discussion considers each research question in turn, situating the findings in dialogue with the empirical and theoretical literature and drawing out the implications of their convergence.

RQ1: Linguistic, sociocultural, institutional and psychological challenges

The first research question asked what linguistic, sociocultural, institutional, and psychological challenges participants encountered. The findings confirm and extend several patterns documented in prior empirical work, while adding specificity that the existing literature has lacked. The linguistic distance theme replicates and elaborates Bigelow's (2010) foundational finding that standard ESL curricula, designed with phonologically proximate learner populations in mind, systematically fail African learners whose home language phonologies, orthographies, and grammatical structures diverge fundamentally from English. The SIFE sub-theme — the experience of simultaneously developing foundational literacy, adapting to institutional schooling norms, and acquiring English —

extends Bigelow and Vinogradov's (2011) documentation of the inadequacy of conventional adult ESL for emergent readers into a diverse, multi-ethnic population spanning adolescent and young adult age ranges. Critically, the present study adds cross-community confirmation: similar patterns of instructional mismatch were reported by participants from Somali, Congolese, and Sudanese backgrounds, suggesting that the problem is structural rather than specific to any single national group.

The language anxiety and accent stigmatization findings are consistent with Lippi-Green's (2012) analysis of accent discrimination as a racially structured form of linguistic profiling, and with Subtirelu's (2015) empirical documentation of the ways in which African-accented English specifically is subject to negative evaluation in institutional contexts. What the present study contributes to this literature is participant testimony that brings the phenomenology of this stigmatization into focus: participants did not merely report awareness of accent-based discrimination but described the specific moments — the classroom laughter, the corrective teacher interruption, the evaluative pause before an interlocutor responds — in which that discrimination was felt as a social and psychological event with lasting consequences for willingness to communicate. Flores and Rosa's (2015) framework of raciolinguistic ideologies is particularly generative here: these participants' accounts reveal that the problem is not located in their linguistic production *per se*, but in the racially conditioned listening practices of institutional interlocutors who perceive and evaluate their speech through a lens that renders it deficient regardless of its actual properties. This finding has direct implications for how language anxiety among African multilingual learners should be theorized: not as an individual psychological trait but as a rational response to a social environment in which language performance is systematically evaluated along racially inflected lines.

The acculturative stress and identity tensions findings, including participants' explicit descriptions of home language prohibition in ESL classrooms, extend the institutional analysis of Garcia and Wei (2014) by grounding it in the lived experience of specific learners in a specific institutional context. The monoglossic ideology that Garcia and Wei identify as a feature of contemporary educational systems is not an abstraction for these participants — it was enacted in the specific pedagogical decisions of specific teachers, experienced as both a linguistic deprivation and a denial of cognitive and cultural legitimacy. This finding connects directly to Dryden-Peterson's (2017) argument that one-size-fits-all ESL programming fails refugee populations at a structural level, and extends it: the failure is not only programmatic but ideological, rooted in monoglossic assumptions that are themselves expressions of the raciolinguistic ideologies Flores and Rosa (2015) identify.

The trauma and psychosocial burden theme engages directly with the trauma-informed theoretical framework

that guides this inquiry. The SAMHSA (2014) principles of safety, trustworthiness, and cultural sensitivity — which served as sensitizing concepts in the analysis — are precisely inverted in many of the institutional experiences participants described: classrooms that penalize linguistic error create conditions of unsafety; teachers who misread hypervigilance as inattention undermine trustworthiness; and language-only instruction policies that prohibit home language use violate the principle of cultural sensitivity. What the participant testimony adds to the theoretical framework is the lived texture of these violations: the student who is "paying attention to something I cannot say" is not merely an abstraction from SAMHSA's guidelines but a person whose learning is being actively foreclosed by an institutional environment that fails to meet the basic relational conditions that trauma-informed practice identifies as prerequisites for engagement. The language brokering burden adds a dimension that neither Kirmayer et al. (2011) nor the broader trauma-informed literature has fully addressed: the psychosocial cost of being recruited as a community's linguistic interface with high-stakes institutional systems, a demand that imposes adult moral responsibility on learners who are simultaneously struggling to acquire the very language in which that responsibility must be discharged.

RQ2: Assets, resilience and their recognition in formal ESL settings

The second research question asked what assets and resources participants drew on, and whether these were recognized in formal ESL settings. The findings here are both the most affirmative and, ultimately, the most critical of institutional practice. Participants demonstrated, through both their testimony and the metalinguistic sophistication with which they discussed their own language learning, precisely the kind of community cultural wealth that Yosso (2005) theorizes: linguistic capital (competence across multiple language systems), navigational capital (the ability to move strategically across institutional environments), and resistant capital (the maintenance of home language identity and practice in the face of monoglossic institutional pressure). Paris and Alim (2017) argue that culturally sustaining pedagogy requires educators not merely to acknowledge these assets but to actively build instruction upon them — a demand that the present study's findings suggest is being almost entirely unmet in the institutional contexts participants described.

The consistent finding that informal, community-based learning environments outperformed formal ESL instruction in participants' accounts of their own progress deserves particular theoretical attention. Norton's (2000, 2013) concept of investment is illuminating here: learners invest in language acquisition when they understand that investment will expand access to symbolic and material resources, and when they experience the social conditions

of that investment as affirming rather than demeaning. The informal contexts participants described — sibling interactions, church communities, peer networks — provided precisely the conditions of investment that formal ESL classrooms did not: relational trust, acceptance of the learner as a full social person, and freedom from the evaluative machinery of institutional language assessment. This finding converges with Canagarajah's (2013) emphasis on the importance of contact zones — social spaces in which diverse language practices meet and negotiate — as sites where translingual competence is actually developed, in contrast to the decontextualized and monoglossic conditions of formal language instruction.

RQ3: Intersecting dimensions and their compound effects on learning trajectories

The third research question asked how the intersecting dimensions of linguistic background, cultural identity, trauma history, and institutional context collectively shape learning trajectories. The most important finding in this regard is that these dimensions are not merely additive: they are mutually constitutive. A learner whose accent is stigmatized in the classroom does not experience this as an isolated phonological difficulty but as a racially inflected social event that reactivates a broader history of institutional evaluation and marginalization; the resulting anxiety then compounds whatever structural linguistic barriers already exist. A learner whose home language is prohibited in class does not experience this only as a pedagogical constraint but as a denial of cultural legitimacy that interacts with and deepens existing trauma responses to institutional authority. Norton's (2000) investment framework, Bhabha's (1994) third space, and the SAMHSA (2014) trauma-informed principles each illuminate one face of this compound dynamic — but it is the intersection of all three that the present study makes visible, and that existing single-strand analyses of African ELL experience have been unable to capture.

The implications of this intersectionality for the trauma-informed framework introduced in the theoretical framework section deserve explicit elaboration. SAMHSA's (2014) six principles — safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment and choice, and cultural, historical, and gender sensitivity — were employed as sensitizing concepts in this analysis, and each finds empirical grounding in participants' accounts. The principle of safety is violated when language anxiety is produced by evaluative classroom conditions; the principle of peer support is confirmed as the mechanism by which informal learning environments enable the investment and risk-taking that formal settings suppress; the principle of cultural, historical, and gender sensitivity is violated by monoglossic language policies that deny the validity of participants' full communicative repertoires. What the present findings add to the trauma-informed literature is

a specification of how these violations intersect with linguistic and racial dimensions: for African multilingual learners specifically, institutional unsafety is not merely generic but raciolinguistically structured — it is produced by the intersection of trauma history, accent stigmatization, monoglossic ideology, and the institutional invisibility of multilingual assets (Flores and Rosa, 2015; Ginwright, 2016). A genuinely trauma-informed ESL environment for this population would therefore need to attend simultaneously to psychological safety, linguistic sustenance, and anti-racist institutional practice — a conjunction that none of the programs participants described had achieved.

Study limitations

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged explicitly. First, the sample size of twelve participants across two focus groups, while appropriate for the qualitative goals of the inquiry, limits the transferability of findings to other African multilingual learner populations in other resettlement contexts. The five national and linguistic communities represented in the sample, while diverse by the standards of most prior research on this population, do not exhaust the range of African multilingual learner communities present in Syracuse or in comparable U.S. resettlement cities. Findings should therefore be understood as context-specific and suggestive rather than generalizable in a statistical sense. Second, the study's geographic specificity — its focus on a single mid-sized post-industrial resettlement city in upstate New York — means that institutional, demographic, and policy conditions specific to Syracuse may shape the findings in ways that limit their direct applicability to other urban contexts. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study, in which participants were interviewed at a single point in time, precludes analysis of how the challenges and assets identified here evolve across participants' trajectories of language acquisition and sociocultural adjustment. Longitudinal inquiry would be required to trace the developmental dynamics of the intersecting dimensions this study has mapped. Fourth, while bilingual co-facilitators were engaged to support participants with lower English proficiency, the primary medium of focus group discussions was English — a constraint that may have influenced what participants were able or willing to express, particularly regarding experiences for which their home languages offered richer or more precise resources.

Implications for policy and practice

Teacher education and professional development

The language anxiety and accent stigmatization findings — specifically, the evidence that participants withdrew from classroom participation following experiences of peer

mockery and teacher correction of their accents, and that one participant stopped raising her hand for an entire semester after her answer was met with laughter — point to an urgent and concrete need for professional development in linguistically responsive and trauma-informed pedagogy. Teachers who understand accent stigmatization as a raciolinguistically structured form of discrimination (Flores and Rosa, 2015; Lippi-Green, 2012) are better positioned to actively interrupt it in their classrooms, rather than inadvertently contributing to it through corrective practices that participants experienced as humiliating. Similarly, the finding that multiple participants' teachers failed to recognize signs of trauma-related dissociation and hypervigilance — interpreting inattention where participants reported overwhelming intrusive memory — constitutes a specific, empirically grounded argument for the integration of trauma-informed classroom practice into pre-service and in-service teacher preparation for ESL and mainstream settings. Professional development rooted in these specific findings should move beyond generic diversity training to address the raciolinguistic dynamics of accent evaluation, the recognition and de-escalation of trauma responses in language learning contexts, and the pedagogical activation of multilingual repertoires that African learners bring but that current programs systematically ignore.

Program design and institutional structures

The acculturative stress findings — and in particular participants' accounts of being told that their home languages had no place in ESL classrooms, and of experiencing this prohibition as a denial not merely of a communication tool but of their cognitive process and identity — constitute a direct and empirically grounded argument for the redesign of ESL programs along translanguaging and culturally sustaining lines. A participant's testimony that her teacher's English-only rule felt like being told “not to think” is not merely a rhetorical complaint; it is an accurate description of the cognitive consequence of monoglossic instruction for a learner who processes and makes meaning through multiple language systems simultaneously. ESL programs should be redesigned to incorporate translanguaging-based instructional approaches that mobilize students' full multilingual repertoires as a resource rather than suppressing them as a threat to English acquisition. The assets findings further point to the need for programs to include community liaisons and bilingual staff who can bridge home and school communities — not because participants lacked the motivation or capacity to learn English, but because the relational trust and cultural affirmation that such figures provide were identified as the conditions under which participants' learning actually accelerated. The SIFE sub-finding — that approximately one-third of participants were simultaneously developing

foundational literacy, adapting to institutional schooling, and acquiring English — requires that programs create structural flexibility to accommodate this specific profile, rather than treating literacy development and language acquisition as separate tracks. Community-school partnerships, of the kind that have shown promise in Minneapolis, Columbus, and other cities with significant African diaspora populations, deserve sustained investment and systematic evaluation.

Research priorities

The findings regarding language brokering burden — that participants routinely served as high-stakes interpreters for their families in medical, legal, and governmental contexts, and that this responsibility imposed adult-level moral weight on adolescent learners simultaneously struggling to acquire English — have received insufficient attention in either the SLA or the applied linguistics literature. Policymakers in resettlement cities should invest in professional interpretation infrastructure for refugee families precisely so that this burden does not fall on the learners themselves. That this recommendation follows directly from participants' testimony constitutes a concrete empirical rationale that advocacy based on general principles cannot provide: these specific participants described specific consequences — exhaustion, distraction, inability to focus on their own academic development — that flowed from the absence of such infrastructure.

Implications for future research

The intersecting limitations and findings of this study together generate a clear set of priorities for future empirical work. First, the cross-sectional design adopted here is inherently unable to capture how the challenges and assets documented in this study evolve over learners' trajectories of English acquisition and sociocultural adjustment. The assets finding — that participants' multilingualism, metalinguistic awareness, and community networks constituted formidable but unrecognized resources — raises the question of whether and how these resources are activated or suppressed over longer periods of institutional contact. Longitudinal inquiry tracking the same learners over two to five years would make it possible to assess, for example, whether metalinguistic assets identified at entry into formal ESL programs are sustained or eroded by monoglossic instructional environments, and under what institutional conditions they are more likely to be recognized and leveraged. Such longitudinal designs would address directly what the present cross-sectional study cannot: the developmental trajectory of the compound challenges and assets this study has mapped.

Second, the geographic specificity of the present study — its focus on Syracuse, New York, a mid-sized post-industrial resettlement city with a particular institutional configuration — limits the generalizability of its contextual findings. Comparative multi-site studies across cities with different resettlement histories, school system structures, and community demographics would make it possible to identify which of this study's findings are specific to the Syracuse context and which constitute more broadly shared features of African multilingual learners' experiences in U.S. urban settings. The trauma and psychosocial burden theme, in particular, may manifest differently in cities with more robust or better-funded mental health and resettlement support infrastructure than that available in Syracuse.

Third, the study's finding that informal learning environments consistently outperformed formal ESL instruction in participants' accounts of their own progress suggests a need for systematic comparative research on the conditions that differentiate these contexts. Specifically, future research should investigate how the relational conditions of informal learning — trust, acceptance of learner identity, freedom from evaluative surveillance — might be replicated or approximated within formal institutional settings, and what the measurable outcomes of such environmental redesign would be. Participatory action research methodologies, which position African multilingual learners as co-researchers and co-designers of educational interventions, offer particular promise for this line of inquiry (Paris and Alim, 2017). Fourth, future research should attend specifically to the experiences of African multilingual women and girls, who face intersecting gendered and linguistic dimensions of exclusion — including gendered expectations regarding voice, public speech, and linguistic deference — that the present study, though not designed to address gender as a primary variable, surfaced as a dimension warranting dedicated inquiry.

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to bring the voices of African multilingual learners in Syracuse, New York, to bear on broader questions of equity, language, and education in the United States. The title — “We learn, but we struggle” — encapsulates both the determination and the difficulty that characterize these students' educational lives. They are not passive recipients of educational failure, nor are they defined by the obstacles they face; they are active agents in their own linguistic development, drawing on formidable personal and community resources to navigate environments that are often ill-equipped to recognize or support them.

The implications of the study extend beyond the city of Syracuse and beyond the specific population studied. In a nation increasingly shaped by the linguistic diversity that immigration and refugee resettlement bring, the adequacy

of educational responses to multilingual learners is a matter of profound social consequence. The development of educational environments that are genuinely sustaining — that honor, leverage, and extend the full repertoires of all learners — is not merely a pedagogical aspiration; it is a democratic imperative. The students whose voices animate this study deserve nothing less.

The specific scholarly contribution of this study to the fields of applied linguistics and ESL education lies in three interconnected advances. First, it provides the first empirically grounded account to integrate linguistic, sociocultural, psychological, and institutional dimensions of English language learning for a multi-ethnic African multilingual learner population within a single U.S. resettlement city — a configuration of scope and diversity that prior studies have not achieved. Second, it demonstrates, through participant testimony and theoretical synthesis, that the intersecting challenges facing this population are not additive but mutually constitutive, and that an adequate analytical account requires frameworks — culturally sustaining pedagogy, trauma-informed practice, raciolinguistic ideologies, and translingual theory — to be brought into genuine theoretical dialogue rather than applied sequentially. Third, it surfaces the asset finding — that African multilingual learners possess sophisticated metalinguistic awareness and community cultural wealth that formal ESL programs systematically fail to recognize or leverage — as a theoretically grounded empirical claim rather than a rhetorical aspiration, grounded in the specific voices of participants whose testimonies constitute its evidentiary foundation. These contributions open a set of questions — about the conditions under which multilingual assets are recognized in institutional settings, about the mechanisms by which trauma-informed principles can be operationalized in linguistically diverse classrooms, and about the policy changes required to relieve the language brokering burden from learners who are simultaneously being asked to acquire the very language in which they must discharge it — that future inquiry is now equipped to address with the specificity and methodological sophistication this field has long needed.

REFERENCES

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Bigelow, M. (2010). *Mogadishu on the Mississippi: Language, racialized identity, and education in a new land*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Bigelow, M., & Vinogradov, P. (2011). Teaching adult second language learners who are emergent readers. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31, 120–136.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Canagarajah, S. (2013). *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. Routledge.
- Cenoz, J. (2013). The influence of bilingualism on third language acquisition: Focus on multilingualism. *Language Teaching*, 46(1), 71–86.
- CNY Vitals (2024). *People*. <https://www.cnyvitals.org/people/>
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children*

- in the crossfire. Multilingual Matters.
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2017). Refugee education: Education for whom, by whom, and toward what ends? *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 20(1), 4–13.
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 149–171.
- Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2), 149–171.
- Garcia, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ginwright, S. (2016). *Hope and healing in urban education: How urban activists and teachers transform schools*. Routledge.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125–132.
- Ibrahim, A. E. K. M. (1999). Becoming Black: Rap and hip-hop, race, gender, identity, and the politics of ESL learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(3), 349–369.
- Kincheloe, J. L., & McLaren, P. (2005). *Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research*. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 303–342). SAGE.
- Kirmayer, L. J., Narasiah, L., Munoz, M., Rashid, M., Ryder, A. G., Guzder, J., Hassan, G., Rousseau, C., & Pottie, K. (2011). Common mental health problems in immigrants and refugees: General approach in primary care. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 183(12), E959–E967.
- Kubota, R., & Lin, A. (2006). Race and TESOL: Introduction to concepts and theories. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(3), 471–493.
- Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology and discrimination in the United States* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Lucas, T., Villegas, A. M., & Freedson-González, M. (2008). Linguistically responsive teacher education: Preparing classroom teachers to teach English language learners. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59(4), 361–373.
- Migration Policy Institute (2022). *African immigrants in the United States*. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org>
- Nero, S. J. (2006). Language, identity, and education of Caribbean English speakers. *World Englishes*, 25(3–4), 501–511.
- New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (2024). *New York State refugee population data for fiscal year 2024*. <https://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/documents/population-report.pdf>
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Longman.
- Norton, B. (2001). *Non-participation, imagined communities and the language classroom*. In M. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research* (pp. 159–171). Pearson Education.
- Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation* (2nd ed.). Multilingual Matters.
- Office of Refugee Resettlement (2023). *Annual report to Congress FY 2022. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr>
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93–97.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (Eds.). (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Roxas, K. (2011). Tales from the front line: Teachers' responses to Somali Bantu refugee students. *Urban Education*, 46(3), 513–548.
- Ruiz, R. (1984). Orientations in language planning. *NABE Journal*, 8(2), 15–34.
- Suárez-Orozco, M. M., & Suárez-Orozco, C. E. (2001). *Children of immigration*. Harvard University Press.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014). *SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Subtirelu, N. C. (2015). "She does have an accent but...": Race and language ideology in students' evaluations of mathematics instructors on RateMyProfessors.com. *Language in Society*, 44(1), 35–62.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.

Citation: Onwukwe, C. (2026). "We learn, but we struggle": English learning experiences of students from African multilingual backgrounds in Syracuse, New York. *African Educational Research Journal*, 14(3), 662-676.
