Engagement and Educational Equity: Ukrainian Refugees' Experiences in the Community College Second Language Writing Classroom

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Abstract: With an overwhelming increase in refugees around the world (UNHCR, 2023) and a growing number of immigrant students in higher education (Batalova & Feldblum, 2023), the need for enhancing refugees' engagement, and subsequently, ensuring educational equity, becomes even more urgent. In U.S. community colleges, classrooms are a key site of engagement; since students have multiple responsibilities at home and work, they therefore have limited opportunities to engage with their college community outside of class time (Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019). While prior studies have focused broadly on student engagement in the classroom, there remains little research on the engagement of refugee English learners (RELs) in community college classrooms (Leo, 2021). In this qualitative multiple-case study, we explore how refugees engage in our English as a Second Language (ESL) writing classrooms at a large, urban community college and how faculty can better bolster engagement and ensure educational equity. The following three research questions guided our inquiry: (1) How do RELs in second language (L2) community college writing classrooms define engagement? (2) What is RELs' engagement in L2 community college writing classrooms? (3) How do faculty support RELs' engagement and ensure educational equity in the writing classroom? Our findings reveal that RELs connect engagement with motivation, community, and participation in class. As multilingual writers, RELs feel most engaged when they are in a supportive classroom community, assignments are relevant to their interests, and they have ample opportunities to interact with classmates. Overall, asset-based pedagogies are most effective in enhancing engagement and educational equity.
Keywords: Educational equity, engagement, refugees, English learners, writing, community college

With an overwhelming increase in refugees around the world (UNHCR, 2023), a growing number of immigrant students in higher education (Batalova & Feldblum, 2023), and ongoing efforts to provide refugees with educational opportunities in community colleges and beyond, the

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need for enhancing refugees' engagement in education, and subsequently ensuring educational equity, becomes even more urgent. There have been multiple attempts to define engagement, with definitions that predominantly show its complexity and multiple dimensions, such as behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic (Kuh, 2009; Oga-Baldwin, 2019), and calls to further explore and define the term (Reinders & Nakamura, 2022). Educational equity has similarly been defined, discussed, and extensively researched, but there are often contrasting definitions that focus on outcomes, experiences, and levels of educational growth (Levinson et al., 2022). As we consider the intersection of engagement and equity, we utilize the definition of equity in education provided by the National Equity Project, where each student "receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential" (National Equity Project, n.d.). Additionally, we use the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (2023) distinction between "vertical" and "horizontal" equity in education (OECD, 2023, p. 27), noting that "horizontal equity considers the overall fair provision of resources to each part of the school system," (p. 27) and "vertical equity involves providing disadvantaged groups of students or schools with additional resources based on their needs" (p. 27). In this article, we use the concept of "vertical equity" in education to explore how best to support the unique needs of refugee English learners (RELs) in community college. If RELs are to have equal learning opportunities in higher education contexts, we argue that they must be offered additional support so that they are fully engaged in learning. Without these crucial moments for engagement, students cannot have access to an equitable education.

In U.S. community colleges, classrooms are a key site of engagement; since students have multiple responsibilities at home and work, they therefore have limited opportunities to engage with their college community outside of class time (Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019). Refugees, defined here as individuals who cannot return to their country of origin or nationality because of persecution, economic hardships, natural disasters, wars, and other issues (Ratini, 2019; Ward & Batalova, 2023; Zetter, 2019), face additional obstacles to engage in the classroom, such as disrupted schooling, loss of loved ones, and severe financial difficulties (Joyce et al., 2010). While studies have focused broadly on student engagement in the classroom, there remains little research on the engagement of RELs and how engagement can ensure greater educational equity in community college classrooms.

Within the United States, and New York specifically, the need to focus on RELs is especially critical–the U.S. has historically resettled more refugees per year than other countries, and after Texas and California, New York received the most refugee arrivals in the U.S. between 2012 and 2022 (Ward & Batalova, 2023). Most recently, the number of Ukrainian refugees entering the U.S.–and New York State–has skyrocketed because of Russia's invasion of and war with Ukraine. In 2023, Ukraine was one of the top seven countries sending refugees to New York (Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, 2023), and many Ukrainian refugees arriving in New York have enrolled in English language programs offered through community-based organizations and community colleges. Community colleges, in particular, provide a crucial higher education access point for newly arrived students, and the open-admissions policies, close proximity to students' homes, and low cost facilitate access and enrollment. For this reason, RELs more commonly attend community colleges rather than four-year schools (Kanno, 2018).

Upon entry to community colleges, RELs are most commonly placed in English as a second language (ESL) reading and writing courses to help develop their English language proficiency. And while RELs share many common characteristics with other English learners in their courses, they are tasked with not only the linguistic requirements within the course, but also they have "unique needs related to forced migration–mainly the trauma associated with war and displacement, interrupted schooling or work-related development, and poverty, among others"

(Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016, p. 87). Understanding the ways in which this population of RELs engages in these courses–which are typically offered in the student's first semester of school–augments our collective understanding of how theories of engagement intersect with educational equity, thus providing lessons on how to best support RELs as they embark upon their higher education journey in the U.S.

Theoretical Framework

The Ecological Perspective

Because of the complexity of the concepts of engagement and equity in education, RELs' unique life paths and needs, as well as a wide range of various factors impacting RELs' educational experiences in second language (L2) community college writing classes, we chose to employ an ecological perspective by van Lier (2004) as the theoretical framework in this study. It was important for us to choose a theoretical lens that is holistic and situated, enabling us to consider all actions, activities, and processes in our L2 community college writing classes as well as RELs' and our own perspectives and experiences as situated in the context or the environment (used interchangeably in the rest of the article).

According to the ecological perspective, all agents are active–they notice and perceive affordances (i.e., opportunities in the environment), assess them, and, if relevant, choose to act on them accordingly which, in turn, leads to the changes in the environment (Leo et al., 2022). This allowed us to investigate RELs' perceptions and interpretations of affordances as well as their experiences or actions, including engagement, in L2 community college writing classrooms. Given the unique needs of the REL population, the ecological perspective also allows for the consideration of how various factors have an influence on the environment and the agents. Therefore, the ecological perspective allowed us to explore our participants' perceptions of engagement, their experiences of engaging in L2 community college writing classrooms, and the faculty's role in supporting RELs' engagement and ensuring educational equity in the environment of the writing classroom and beyond.

Literature Review

Engagement in the Second Language Writing Classroom

Bond et al. (2020) offer a succinct definition for student engagement in that it encompasses the energy and effort that students put forth in a learning community, and relationships, classroom activities, and the learning environment can all impact student engagement. Therefore, when students are more engaged in their educational community, they will have more expansive opportunities for learning. In the post-pandemic higher education context, engagement has been increasingly used as a means to explore students' retention and success in both two- and four-year colleges, and understanding how students engage in community colleges, more specifically, has been a primary focus of recent research in higher education since there has been a precipitous drop in student enrollment and retention at community colleges since 2020 (Bulman & Fairlie, 2022).

Within the classroom context, there are a variety of factors that can impact engagement, including pedagogy, a student's sense of classroom community, and a student's motivation within the class. O'Shea argues that engagement does not exist on its own–instead it is a dynamic process involving the student and the institution, including faculty members (O'Shea, 2024). The role of

faculty has been a primary focus within the engagement literature, and Lancaster and Lundberg (2019) found that "students' sense that faculty were available, helpful, and sympathetic made the strongest contribution to all three types of learning tested in this model…" (p. 149). The authors conclude by recommending increased faculty availability to students which will in turn increase the engagement of students in community college.

In the L2 classroom, there has been limited research related to engagement (Almon, 2015; Li et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2022; Zhou & Hiver, 2022), with no studies to date focusing specifically on the engagement of RELs in the community college writing classroom. Several studies have explored how faculty may impact engagement because they serve to either motivate (or de-motivate) students within the L2 writing classroom (Yu et al., 2020), and additional research has concluded that engagement in classrooms is dependent on the students' linguistic status (Harklau, 2000; Hartman et al., 2021) and L2 writing self-efficacy (Zhou et al., 2022). However, the engagement of English learners (ELs), including RELs, has not been a focus in the literature (Almon, 2015). Without a more thorough understanding of how RELs engage in the classroom, we cannot begin to address equity and subsequently support students' learning.

RELs' Engagement, Trauma-Informed Pedagogy, and Equity

The intersection between the literature on engagement and equity reminds us to view RELs as individuals with diverse histories and backgrounds and to approach students' capabilities with an asset-based approach to learning. O'Shea (2024) argues that "…engagement should be considered in terms of fluidity in its process, which may see students engaging in diverse ways and at varying levels" (p. 5). O'Shea further posits that engagement is an individual process that cannot be explored without an understanding of a student's "biography" (p. 5), and "…the ways in which students from equity groups may have different, but equally valid, ways of negotiating engagement, again highlighting the need to firmly reject 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to this concept (p. 5). Engagement, therefore, should not be viewed as a uniform process among all students, even if they have the shared refugee experience.

Additionally, students' identities as refugees must be viewed as an asset, rather than a detriment. Often refugees are assumed to have suffered trauma and to have reduced coping mechanisms or resilience, and as a result, teachers may develop a deficit perspective of students' learning (Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016). This is deeply problematic since Bauer et al. (2021) argue that RELs are more engaged when their identities are re-framed as an asset. The authors argue that "…by its very nature, refugees' identity constitutes a source of strength and resilience and can empower them to pursue existing opportunities and make progress in their lives" (p. 1897). In fact, many RELs are highly motivated and draw on all of the resources available to them within the college (Hirano, 2014), thus contributing to greater engagement and success in the classroom.

Since both learning and engagement are impacted by trauma and post-traumatic stress, the classroom environment, and perhaps most significantly, the relationships between students and their teachers are a critical piece of trauma-informed pedagogy in the L2 classroom (Wilson et al., 2024). Hirano (2014) argues that RELs are most successful when they have a supportive environment in which to learn and found that the support of a dedicated academic advisor, faculty member, or peer mentor was crucial in ensuring RELs' success in their first year of school. In Wilson et al.'s study of students in a university-based ESL program who had previously experienced trauma, the authors found that "participants also reported that when they had a 'connection' with teachers–rather than simply a transactional relationship–the learning environment was more positive" (p. 2077). The importance of a caring relationship between

students and teachers is also emphasized in Hos's (2016) study of Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) in a newcomer classroom in a secondary school. Hos notes that "a caring teacher would create a classroom for students established on mutual trust, where students can express their ideas without being judged and where they can interact with each other respectfully" (p. 485). Thus, creating an environment where students feel their voices are valued is critical to RELs' sense of belonging in the classroom.

Ogilvie & Fuller (2016) further emphasize that the ESL classroom plays an important role for RELs; if the classroom is a safe and caring environment, it will "support learners through the resettlement process and in forging a future characterized by hope" (p. 87). Ward (2020), in her study of refugee and asylum-seeking youth in the U.S., emphasizes the important connection between belonging and self-efficacy for RELs, arguing that "beyond just accessing educational minimum standards by receiving placement in a classroom, displaced young people must feel included in classroom spaces to allow for flourishing in an academic space and therein to promote equitable processes" (p. 328). Hos (2016) echoes this point, arguing that a caring environment also shows that students have their own "valuable experiences and the ability to contribute to a positive environment of the classroom" (p. 485). Therefore, trauma-informed pedagogical practices remind educators to not only consider their own role in the classroom, but to also draw on and respect the experiences and knowledge that students bring to the classroom. Without this sense of inclusion, support, and belonging in the classroom, RELs will feel disengaged, resulting in an inequitable educational experience for this growing population of learners.

Research Questions

Given the intersection between engagement and educational equity and the growing number of RELs in community college classrooms in the U.S., we sought to understand how faculty can encourage engagement in the L2 writing classroom and subsequently ensure educational equity. The following research questions guided our exploration:

1. How do RELs in L2 community college writing classrooms define engagement?
2. What is RELs' engagement in L2 community college writing classrooms?
3. How do faculty support RELs' engagement and ensure educational equity in the L2 writing classroom?

These questions help us gain a more in-depth understanding of how RELs understand what it means to engage in the L2 writing classroom, how the unique experiences of RELs influence their engagement, and the ways in which L2 writing faculty–and faculty across college campuses–can support RELs' engagement to ensure equity in the classroom. We argue that equity cannot be achieved without engagement on the part of students, and faculty play a crucial role in supporting students throughout this process.

Methodology

Based on the research questions, this research developed as a multiple case study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Our three cases of RELs were bound by place (L2 community college writing courses) and time (Fall 2023 - Spring 2024 semesters). The multiple-case methodology also aligned with O'Shea's (2024) argument that every REL's case is different because of their diverse paths and experiences. It allowed for a thorough and in-depth investigation of RELs' perceptions of and experiences with engagement in L2 community college writing courses and faculty's support of their engagement and educational equity in the writing classroom as a process, developing over

time during data collection and beyond (e.g., RELs' recollection of their experiences in their home countries).

Context

The data collection took place at Urban Community College (UCC) which is part of a large university in the northeastern part of the U.S. Most students in the college come from low socio-economic and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Many rely on financial aid and are the first generation to study in and/or graduate from college. Our three participants were students in the advanced intensive integrated skills course that emphasizes academic writing and critical reading for ESL students. The course is designed to help students master and apply a full range of college-level reading and writing skills in English and is a prerequisite for the English Composition course as well as many other content courses. The students met face-to-face for 6 hours every week (3 classes, each about 2 hours long). Two participants (Yana and Denys) took the course in Fall 2023 while Kateryna took it in Spring 2024. To note, we use pseudonyms for the participants' names and the name of the college to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

Participants

We purposefully sampled three of our advanced intensive L2 community college reading and writing courses and invited all students to volunteer and sign the consent to participate in the study on students' engagement in L2 community college writing courses. We explained that participation in the study would have no influence on the students' grades and that the students could withdraw from the study at any point during or after the semester. We also emphasized that our main goal is to learn more about engagement, help our students at UCC, and inform others on how to enhance engagement and equity in L2 community college reading and writing courses. We also pointed out that all the data would be kept secure, and the identity of the participants would be confidential. After collecting consent forms, we selected three students who reported that they were refugees from Ukraine in the U.S. We chose to focus on the refugees from Ukraine due to the sharp increase of this population in the U.S. and because one of the authors of this article is Ukrainian which afforded a deeper analysis of data due to similarities in cultural and linguistic backgrounds. We acknowledge that further studies should focus on refugees from other countries.

Our participants, Yana, Denys, and Kateryna were 18-20 years old. They finished high school in Ukraine and were in their first semester of studies at Urban Community College. Yana majored in business management, Denys majored in computer science, and Kateryna majored in digital marketing. Despite taking their classes in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) since the 2nd grade, the participants acknowledged their gaps in language proficiency. During interviews, Yana and Denys shared that they had limited experience using English, especially to communicate with others. Yana also reported that she needed more practice in reading in EFL. Denys said that he needed to overcome difficulties with speaking in English. Unlike Yana and Denys, Kateryna attended a bilingual Ukrainian-English school, and her proficiency in English was higher than the other two participants. Nevertheless, she shared that she did not enjoy reading English literature and writing about it in essays. She preferred studying mathematics instead.

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected data during Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 semesters (August 2023-May 2024). Data collection sources were interviews, observations, researchers' journals, and artifacts (Creswell & Poth, 2017). We conducted one individual semi-structured interview (about half an hour long) with every participant in the first half of the semester (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). We also observed our participants' engagement, participation, and performance throughout the semester. We recorded our reflections on the observations in the researchers' journals and audio-recorded some classes that directly targeted the topic of engagement (e.g., whole-group discussion of the concept). We also collected all artifacts (i.e., all materials and participants' submissions) that were relevant to our research questions. Throughout data collection, we were constantly aware of our roles as researchers and instructors and made sure our students knew that their decision of participation and the resulting data had no influence on their progress in class. This extended to the other stages of the study, including data analysis.

We analyzed data at the end of Spring 2024 semester. The data analysis was inductive and collaborative in nature (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and consisted of three stages: (a) data preparation, (b) within-case data analysis, and (c) cross-case analysis of data (Stake, 2006). First, we organized our data and transcribed all audio recordings of interviews and observations, focusing on their content (Janesick, 2011). Afterwards, we both individually focused on our cases one at a time for within-case analysis. We read and re-read data, color-coded units of data that were relevant to our research questions (e.g., "clear explanations" and "interesting topics"), mainly focusing on how our participants perceived and experienced engagement in our L2 community college writing classes as well as what role faculty played in RELs' engagement and educational equity in the context of the writing classroom and beyond. Notably, due to the employment of the ecological perspective, we also considered and coded various factors (individual and contextual), such as "motivation" and "community support." Further, we organized the codes under the categories. For example, the codes "individual feedback" and "individual attention" were grouped under the category of "scaffolding." We further revisited all codes and categories for overarching themes. For the cross-case analysis stage, we explored differences and similarities in the codes, categories, and themes among cases, evaluated their quality in terms of support from the data, and finalized them for writing a report on the study.

Collaboration played an important role in the data analysis of this study. After working on the within-case analysis individually, we met and discussed the units we selected as well as codes, categories, and themes we developed. Similarly, we met to discuss the results of and some discrepancies in our data analysis at the cross-case data analysis stage. The nature of qualitative data analysis is subjective (Ryan & Bernard, 2003); however, the triangulation of data collection and data analysis, rich description, and in-depth observations of our participants as students in our own courses enhanced trustworthiness of our findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). We were also constantly aware of our positionalities as qualitative researchers, scholars with expertise in L2 writing, and language educators with many years of teaching experience which played a role at all stages of conducting this study.

Findings

Definitions of Engagement

The term "engagement" is a buzz word at institutions of higher education across the United States; faculty are continually asked to develop programs and initiatives that will increase student engagement, particularly at community colleges, where retention is an ongoing challenge. However, despite the prevalence of discourse around engagement among administrators and faculty, students are less familiar with what it means to "engage" in learning. In an effort to answer Research Question 1, "How do RELs in L2 community college writing classrooms define engagement?", we asked students to define engagement. Their first response was that it was related to marriage; after explaining that we were referring to engagement in the classroom, responses ranged from a complete lack of understanding to definitions that predominantly focused on its connection to interest.

When asked to define engagement, Yana described it as "Obligation, maybe…" She further explained her engagement in classes at UCC accordingly: "I wanted to study English, ESL more because I need more experience and more writing experience and knowledge. So I'm not engagement in this. I love it." Here Yana shows that she has an incorrect understanding of the meaning of engagement, associating the word negatively, as though being engaged is equal to being obligated to learn.

Denys and Kateryna, on the other hand, both defined engagement as relating to interest. Denys defined engagement as "interested about something," and Kateryna described engagement as "being actually interested in the process, being dedicated to the process, actually wanting to learn new information, wanting to understand it, to participate actively. So just to be interested in what's going on in the class." Although Kateryna focuses on "interest," her response also demonstrates that she has a more nuanced understanding of the term and its relationship to dedication, motivation, and participation. She also described how engagement could not be forced, explaining, "I believe if somebody forces me to do something, it just, I would do that because somebody is forcing me, not because I'm interested. So it wouldn't be that sincere engagement. It's gonna be like forced engagement." For Kateryna, to be completely engaged, a student must have intrinsic motivation or interest–without that internal pull towards a specific aspect of learning, engagement won't be as authentic.

Individual and Community Factors Impacting RELs' Engagement

Beyond simply defining engagement, our second research question, "What is RELs' engagement in L2 community college writing classrooms?" was designed to explore how RELs engage in the L2 community college writing classroom and the ways in which this can help us understand equitable classroom practices. When participants were asked to discuss how they engage in the L2 writing classroom, they focused on two thematic areas which often overlapped: individual differences in interest and motivation and the importance of community.

Role of Individual Differences

When sharing their thoughts on engagement, all three participants discussed the importance of individual feelings like self-improvement, interest or focus, and motivation. Yana felt that she was truly engaged in class when she was making mistakes: "Because English is my second

language, so I can't be 100% right. And when I make mistakes, I know that I am doing my best and I'm getting better than I was. And that's why I like it." Kateryna also touched on this idea of self-improvement and motivation, explaining that an interest in the material in the writing class helped improve her engagement, and she also recognized the importance of learning for her future, explaining that, "I want to study and I want to learn more. And then there's some information that I didn't know before. So it's interesting for me to learn some of the information for the future." She also emphasized that engagement is specific to the individual student, despite shared backgrounds as RELs: "I think it depends upon the person. If a person actually wants and has a motivation to study, he'll be engaged." Denys further discussed the importance of individual differences in student engagement. He explained that group tasks could sometimes be challenging for him because "it's harder to have focused for this because I'm introvert and this a little bit hard for me because I like to be on myself. And so doing on myself. So that's because I can't be fully engagement for this task, group task." As much as Denys appreciated the community in the classroom, he also stressed how individual differences like learning styles and personality could influence engagement.

Personality differences were just one aspect of how students engaged; the participants also discussed outside challenges and how these impacted engagement in the classroom. Stress, health-related issues, and housing are all common among community college students, but they are even more prevalent among RELs. Kateryna, for example, acknowledged the often overwhelming factors that students face outside the classroom and explained how this affects engagement:

> I would say whenever I feel that I'm too tired, like there was a lot going on
> in my life and just want to rest, so like I don't have any desire to study, so
> like I wouldn't be really engaged…Yeah, but maybe it's like some stuff
> that is going on in my life, maybe like some kind of problems not connected
> with the school. So like there are a lot of factors.

Denys explained that health issues were the ones that most affected his ability to engage in class; he explained that when he has "head pain," he feels it's most challenging to be fully engaged in his classwork, and subsequently, this influences his engagement while in class. Yana focused on necessities like housing as a factor that could potentially interfere with engagement. When asked about any challenges outside of school that might impact her engagement in class, she replied, "...my living space because I'm looking for a new apartment. So it's not can influence to my engagement in class, but a little bit." For Yana, she didn't feel that the outside stress related to housing tremendously impacted her engagement in class, but she also discussed taking advantage of UCC resources like the food pantry and housing offices, explaining how these services have "helped a lot." This sense of community support–both throughout UCC and within the L2 writing classroom–was important for all students.

Sense of College Community

Once Yana understood the definition of engagement, she said that she was engaged in her classes at UCC because "I woke up every morning and I'm happy because I'm going to the college. I'm going to the campus." For Yana, the college community imbued within her a sense of happiness and security, and these positive emotions followed her to the writing classroom. She explained, "I love to participate in class. And I love to make new friends, new connections, network." This sense of community both in the broader college community and within the writing class made Yana want to engage in her studies. Similarly, a feeling of comfort and community was crucial to Denys' engagement. When asked what helped him to be engaged in class, he responded "feel comfortable,"

elaborating that factors like "comfortable seating," "comfortable tables," and "interesting people" all contributed to his sense of engagement in the writing classroom. Kateryna also spoke about her classmates as being an integral part of her engagement. As an REL, she felt that what helped her was being in a community with non-native speakers:

> For me, the actual thing that helps is that I also studied with non-native speakers, so I know that we are on the same level here, you know? So like, and I just feel more confident in English between non-native speakers, because I have an accent obviously and I wouldn't say that I'm very fluent in English. So there are some words that I'm not using the right way, but I'm not scared to speak and talk because I know that all of those people are basically also non-native speakers. So like it's okay to do mistakes because I think I would feel not as confident knowing that I am the only one who came from a different country.

Kateryna felt a sense of security and confidence because all of her classmates, while not RELs, were also ELs. She could freely make mistakes and communicate with her peers in English, and this encouraged her engagement in the classroom. This sense of community within the class was only enhanced by her experiences with her professors. Without their support, engagement–and equitable learning–would not be possible.

Instructional Practices, Engagement, and Educational Equity

Our participants' perceptions of their engagement in the L2 community college writing classroom, our observations and reflections as instructors of the course, as well as artifacts provided us with the data to answer Research Question 3, "How do faculty support RELs' engagement and ensure educational equity in the L2 community college writing classroom?". Overall, our participants pointed to four faculty's instructional practices that enhanced RELs' engagement and ensured equity. They ranged from choosing materials and topics to scaffolding and supporting RELs.

Selecting Relevant and Interesting Authentic Materials and Topics

Two participants (Denys and Kateryna) reported that the faculty's choice of instructional materials and topics made a significant difference in terms of their engagement in L2 writing classes. During the interview, Denys shared that the professor's choice of topics for the free writing activities in his L2 writing course ensured his engagement because it made him think and write a lot. For the free writing activities, the students were given various prompts that would activate their prior funds of knowledge (i.e., their knowledge obtained through their personal and cultural practices; Moll et al., 1992) and were asked to write for 10-15 minutes non-stop, focusing only on sharing their thoughts and not worrying about organization, grammar, vocabulary, etc. Denys appreciated the topics for free writing activities and pointed out that the professor's choice of the activity and interesting topics/prompts made him engaged.

Kateryna also emphasized the role of the topics and materials in her engagement. She specifically talked about the value of grammar instruction in L2 because it was important for her life as a refugee in the U.S. During the interview, she said,

> All of the information just interesting for me so I want to study and I want to learn more. And then there's some information that I didn't know before. So it's interesting for me to learn some of the information for the future. I

wouldn't say it's relevant to my digital marketing major field, but I would
say it's relevant to basically me being in the United States because with me,
I don't know any grammar. Like I just, I know how to say it, but I have no
idea why I'm saying that. So whenever, for example, we were learning
about the past participle and like past, present, perfect, blah, blah, blah.
And I learned the rules. Now I actually know when and how to use it. And
then whenever I'm speaking to somebody or I'm writing a text, I
immediately memorize our class and what Professor told us to do. So now
like I can be, how do you call it, literacy, right? Literate, yeah. Yes, I can
be literate in my speech and in my writing.

Thus, Kateryna shared that interesting materials, relevant for her future, as well as grammar
instruction, enhanced her engagement, filled her gaps in grammar proficiency, and contributed to
her literacy development in L2.

Providing Clear, Explicit Explanations

In addition to the choice of instructional materials and topics, Denys and Kateryna
highlighted the role of their professor's explanations in their engagement in the L2 community
college classroom. When, during the interview, the participants were asked about what had helped
them engage, Denys replied "You clearly explained the question," and Kateryna said, "the way you
give us the information with some real-life examples, so you are making those structures like
parallels to real life." While this finding is applicable to any L2 student, it is important to consider
various ways to make explanations clear and provide examples that are relevant to RELs' life
outside of the classroom.

Offering Abundant Opportunities for Practice

Our three participants emphasized the importance of practice for their engagement in L2
writing community college classes. Kateryna, for example, shared that though she did not like
writing, she was engaged in the course because the professor was "giving us a lot of practice. So
basically, all of us are working and we are making some practice." When asked to elaborate, she
said,

So once you give us a rule, we're immediately doing some tasks regarding
the rule. And then, for example, the active reading or some other stuff. So
you are telling us about the material, and then we are practicing the
material. So it actually helps a lot because without practice, I am more than
sure that I wouldn't be able to memorize most of our classes. But because
we spend a lot of time practicing, I would say memorize most of the
materials that you were given in the class.

Thus, for Kateryna, a professor who provided abundant opportunities for practice translated into
being engaged in the L2 writing course and improving her grammar and writing in L2.

Kateryna also emphasized and elaborated on the immediacy of practice and its importance.
She said: "… we need to practice right afterwards just to know how the rules apply in real life. And
then I would just say, you immediately know when a person wants to teach you something because
he loves his job or when a person just does his job because he needs to." Denys echoed her and
said: "If it's good teachers, you get interest about this. You can really learn a lot. But if teacher
doesn't interest that and maybe have a good question, practice and so on, it is really hard to learn."

Interestingly, both participants evaluated their instructors' motivation to teach based on their examples related to real life and opportunities for practice and acknowledged that it influenced their engagement and development of writing in L2.

Scaffolding and Supporting

All participants valued scaffolding, individual feedback and attention, and support provided by their instructor. In one of her free writing submissions, Yana shared her life story of being a refugee in the U.S. During the interview, she commented on receiving the individual feedback: "I was really glad when I shared my story and you replied about my life story. And you replied on the paper. And it was so... And I was so happy that people understand me. And it's really encouraged me." It was important for Yana to write about her journey as an REL, to receive individual feedback, and feel that she is understood.

Similarly, Kateryna talked about professors' willingness to support a student and provide help as essential for her engagement and development of L2 writing. She said, "The important thing is knowing that the professor actually wants to help you." When reflecting further during the interview, she also talked about how calling on students who tend to be shy and participate less facilitates their engagement. She stated, "I think in that way, it actually also helps keep them engaged whenever they see that they are actually not only as a part of a class, but they're actually an individual and you're giving your attention to them." She also stated, "if I'm missing the attention, like if I'm working, working, working and nobody's praising me, telling how good I am, not giving me attention, it would discourage me."

Receiving individual feedback and attention was related to RELs' need to be heard, valued, and supported. During the interview, Kateryna shared her thoughts about supporting RELs,

> Every person grieves in a different way... I wouldn't say there's like universal formula, but I think that for every person, it's important to know that he's actually needed, and he can be listened, like he can be heard. So, I would say just to listen to them and then if you understand that they need any help, to offer your help or to offer any other people's help, like therapist or somebody else. Or if you see that a person is depressed, just to show him that he's actually needed and he's like not worthwhile, but just valued, you know? Yeah.

Kateryna also elaborated about the link between the impact of trauma related to being a refugee and engagement. She said,

> If a person feels good about himself, he would be engaged more than a person who feels bad about himself. Because I think whenever you have some moral problems or like problems that you're dealing in real life, it just can distract you from your engagement and basically all of your study in general.

Kateryna and Yana had time and help to heal after their traumatic experiences, according to their interview data and artifacts. They both chose to share their stories for this research and focused on the progress they are making in the U.S. All three participants showed the need for individual scaffolding, feedback, attention, and support.

Overall, our participants agreed that the faculty played a crucial role in their engagement as RELs in L2 writing community college courses. They stated that the faculty's choice of instructional materials, topics, and activities made a difference because of RELs' need to find them relevant and applicable to their prior funds of knowledge or out-of-classroom experiences and life.

Faculty's clear and explicit explanations as well as offering various opportunities for practice afforded their engagement and enhanced their development of L2 writing and grammar. Finally, individual scaffolding and support were essential for RELs' ability to engage and make progress. Such aspects of these instructional practices as relevant to RELs' funds of knowledge and experiences as well as individual approaches ensured educational equity for RELs.

Discussion

Conversations about engagement in higher education are a critical piece of ensuring equitable practices in education. In order for students to develop their "full academic and social potential" (National Equity Project, n.d.), certain groups of students might need additional support and resources. Providing this support for students must first begin with shared definitions; rather than assuming that students–and faculty–know what it means to engage in learning or to develop equitable practices in the classroom, administrators must first work alongside the college community to define these terms.

When asked to define engagement, it was immediately clear that students were unaware of what it meant to engage in learning. One could attribute this to the students' developing proficiency in English, but the likelihood is that many students, regardless of their linguistic backgrounds, would struggle to define engagement in learning. To enhance students' engagement, then, colleges must work collectively with students and faculty to share and refine definitions. We argue that it is essential to include the voices of refugees and other under researched student populations to ensure the comprehensive and holistic view and definition of engagement as well as to support equity in our classrooms. Only then can we truly understand how students are engaged in the process of developing academic reading and writing skills in the L2 writing classroom and in the process of learning at the broader college level.

As Kateryna, Denys, and Yana discussed their engagement in the L2 writing classroom, the themes of individual differences in interest and motivation as well as the importance of community emerged. All three students felt that there wasn't only one way to engage in the classroom, and they emphasized the importance of a person's motivation in the class as a key piece of engagement. Kateryna felt that, even when she was making mistakes, she was moving towards her goal of improving in reading and writing. She also recognized that she was building skills that would help her be more successful in the future, and this only further motivated her to engage in class. Our three participants were highly motivated, and this finding supports the argument for viewing identities of refugees as an asset, not as a deficit (Bauer et al., 2021; Hirano, 2014; Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016). We contribute to this approach by showing how RELs engaged in L2 community college writing courses, made connections regarding how to use their knowledge, and transferred them to out-of-classroom contexts in order to be successful.

However, as our participants acknowledged, RELs' motivation and engagement can be ensured only when they receive essential and unique support from their educational community. In turn, "vertical" educational equity (OECD, 2023, p. 27) cannot be achieved without this additional support. RELs' traumatic experiences and stress may be a major obstacle on their educational and professional paths. For many community college students, concerns related to health, housing, and food present daily challenges and interfere with students' abilities to meet their basic needs, clearly impacting how they engage in the classroom. Kateryna and Denys referenced problems that did not relate to school, including health issues, whereas Yana struggled with housing issues. As we consider how RELs engage differently from other students, colleges must recognize that the refugee experience carries an additional load of stress and trauma for students and find ways in

which they can support students both personally and academically. However, colleges also must be careful not to view the experience of RELs as a deficit to their learning; rather, faculty and administrators should draw on students' resilience and understand that their diverse experiences are an asset in the classroom and to the college community.

Additionally, as the ecological perspective states, context and affordances matter (van Lier, 2004), and this is reflected in our findings. The college community, in particular, played a critical role in our refugee participants' sense of comfort. While Denys and Kateryna focused on the dynamics and relationships within the classroom, Yana felt a general sense of comfort and happiness when she entered the college campus. Without this broader sense of community, the students felt that they would not be as engaged in the classroom. This finding aligns with the previous research on the importance of ensuring RELs' inclusion, sense of belonging, and supportive environment at the micro level (ESL classrooms; Ogilvie & Fuller, 2016) and macro levels (departments, colleges, universities, and beyond; Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Hirano, 2014; Ward, 2020). Our qualitative inquiry also allowed us to contribute to the prior research by recording data on RELs' feelings (i.e., happiness, gratitude, comfort, and joy) associated with belonging to the college and L2 writing classroom communities.

Notably, as in the studies by Hirano (2014) and Yu et al. (2023), a key part of the college community were the faculty, and the RELs spoke at length about the importance of faculty in encouraging engagement in the classroom. Both Denys and Kateryna felt that the professor's choice of materials enhanced their engagement because they were interesting and relevant to their lives, and Kateryna emphasized that the focus on specific skills in which she needed to improve, like the development of grammar, fostered her engagement. As a newly arrived REL, developing greater facility with the English language was a priority for Kateryna, and class lessons and materials which moved her closer to this goal motivated her to engage in class. Additionally, an abundance of opportunities for practice –as well as clear instructions– helped all three students feel engaged in the classroom.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially for RELs, Kateryna, Denys, and Yana all emphasized the importance of the professor's support of their learning and recognition that they had distinct needs and areas for development. When Yana shared her experience as a refugee, the professor's personal response to her writing made a tremendous impact; and although both the professor and Yana shared a cultural and linguistic background, faculty from all backgrounds could incorporate a more personalized approach to feedback that helps a student feel seen and heard. Kateryna also felt that calling on students who might not feel inclined to participate can enhance their engagement; these students are not only part of the class, but they are also individuals with valuable and diverse experiences. She emphasized how although RELs have varying experiences, all students will be engaged if faculty listen, provide help when needed, and offer words of encouragement. Thus, our findings support the previous studies (Hirano, 2014; Hos, 2014; Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019; Wilson et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2020), elaborate on and highlight the essential role of faculty's support of RELs, as well as show its necessity for ensuring equity in L2 community college writing classes.

Conclusion

This study investigated RELs' perceptions of and experiences in terms of engagement as well as faculty's role in RELs' engagement and educational equity in L2 community college writing classes. We acknowledge the need for more studies with participants from other

backgrounds than Ukrainian, with quantitative inquiry into the matter, and with further insight into various levels of support RELs need in L2 writing classroom and community college contexts.

Our findings show that to ensure equitable practices in the L2 writing classroom, RELs must first be engaged in learning, and two key ways in which faculty can support RELs' engagement is to take an asset-based approach to pedagogy and to view students as individuals with distinct lived experiences and needs, even if they share a common linguistic or cultural background and have been forcibly displaced. The multilingual writers in this study felt most engaged when they were in a supportive classroom community, assignments were relevant to their interests, and they had ample opportunities to interact with classmates. To further support RELs, colleges might consider creating specific programs for refugee students and, as Hirano (2014) found, assigning a dedicated peer or faculty advisor. Additionally, faculty development which focuses on how asset-based pedagogy can increase student engagement–and subsequently, educational equity–would go a long way to enhance RELs' learning experiences in the classroom. If all faculty recognize that asset-based pedagogies are most effective and equitable in enhancing the engagement of adult RELs, students will thrive in the classroom.

Additionally, an increased focus on trauma-informed practices in the college classroom would greatly benefit RELs' engagement in learning. Creating–and modeling–a caring environment where faculty listen to their students and students listen to one another will allow students to engage more completely in the classroom (Hos, 2016). In fact, as Wilson et al. (2024) found, there is great importance in "ESL teachers being attuned to their students, that is, having the ability to understand and respond to student needs" (p. 2083). Responding to students' needs might include flexibility with assignments and instructional practices (Hos, 2016) to allow for a diversity of learning styles, including differentiating instruction to meet RELs' needs.

Understanding that RELs, like all students in the college community, have diverse experiences and needs for support brings colleges a step closer to ensuring educational equity. Providing students with questionnaires where they can share their strengths and areas for development will help faculty understand how they can better support students. Additionally, while faculty cannot always provide the necessary help to students who have experienced trauma and displacement, they can refer students to appropriate resources within the college community. Once we offer this additional support for RELs, we begin to approach equitable practices in higher education.

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