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"It's Practically a Must": Neoliberal Reasons for Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

This qualitative study analyzes the reasons of college students for learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Costa Rica and the reasons of high school students for learning German as a foreign language (GFL) in the US. It asks to what extent the learners' reasons align with or deviate from neoliberal discourses that commodify foreign languages. The analysis of 27 interviews in a US high school and 17 interviews in a Costa Rican university revealed how language and context mattered: GFL learners used German for identity building and connecting to their heritage, whereas EFL learners felt pressure to learn English in order to survive on the competitive job market. The GFL learners' ability to deviate from neoliberal language learning motivations is interpreted as a privilege that derives from their linguistic and social status. The authors call for a common effort to broaden the spectrum of FL learning motivations for the benefit of more successful and more equitable language learning experiences.

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1. Introduction

Why do students choose to learn a particular foreign language (FL)? Learners' motivations are not random or coincidental but shaped by power dynamics and ideologies in their environment. This study analyzes the neoliberal discourses that drive students' decision to engage in the learning of a foreign language.

For the purposes of this paper, neoliberalism is understood as an ideology within language education that views language as a commodity and promotes the idea that FL learning is connected to the acquisition of wealth, social status, and professionalism. Although the literature has indexed neoliberalism in policy making (Basu, 2004) program planning and design (Guilherme, 2007), performance evaluation (Olssen & Peters, 2005), and learning outcome measurement (Kubota, 2011), there is a gap in the field's understanding of how neoliberal discourses affect FL learners' motivations. Non-utilitarian or non-neoliberal reasons for language learning have received attention in the past decades through research within the area of learner identities. Although this might seem like a new development, research on learner motivations has recognized identity-related motivations since its beginnings. For example, in Markwardt's (1948) foundational study, one out of five reasons for language learning was 'to be a cultivated person' and thus related to identity construction. More recently, several important studies have pointed to the close connections between identity work and additional language learning. For example, the concepts of 'Ideal L2 selves' and 'Ought-to L2 Selves' (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005) as well as 'international posture' (Yashima, 2009) and investment (Norton, 2000) all underline the notion that success in language learning is related to learners' abilities to imagine and construct new identities, part of which is the language being acquired. We have learned from this work that fostering a wide variety of learner motivations, especially those that are rooted in learner identities, is important for effective and sustainable language learning endeavors.

Against this backdrop, it becomes critical to examine which motivations FL learners draw on in different contexts and which ideologies, beliefs, and social pressures shape these motivations. This study searches for these intersections through analyses of motivation discourses that surface in one English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in Costa Rica and one German as a foreign language (GFL) classroom in the US. Analyzing learner motivations in these different environments highlights the particular power structures and ideologies that are at play in different contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Stories and Counter-stories of Neoliberalism in Education

Neoliberalism has proliferated and quickly become an organizing principle of social life in many of today's societies. The pervasiveness of the idea that the so-called free market should be at the core of human activity and freed from state regulation has been widely documented (Block & Cameron, 2002; Block, Gray & Holborow, 2012; Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Hill & Kumar, 2009; Ross & Gibson, 2007). In fact, as Holborow (2012) explains: "[i]n less than a generation, neoliberal principles have spread across every continent and become so integral to public and private life that thinking outside its parameters is almost unthinkable" (p. 14). Ironically, it is precisely its popularity that makes a neoliberal worldview difficult to identify or challenge as it "disguises itself in the mask of universalism" (Holborow, 2012, pp. 29-30).

As Giroux (2004) ascertains, "[n]eo-liberalism has become one of the most pervasive and dangerous ideologies of the twenty-first century" (p. 495). In this article, we illustrate its pervasiveness in FL education.

Within the language education arena, neoliberal discourses often surface as ideologies and processes that promote the commodification of language. The entry of neoliberal ideals into the education sphere has caused language programs and departments to be shaped to meet the demands of the corporate sector; so much so that decisions as to which languages should be taught and for what purposes have escaped the hands of many teachers and students and are instead driven by profit-oriented principles of marketing experts.

Heller and Duchêne (2012) describe the move from language as an expression of 'pride', which describes a sense of belonging and having the power of a legitimate citizen, towards one of 'profit', i.e., economic and material gains. Although Duchêne and Heller (2012) emphasize that profit standpoints may exist alongside and interact with those of pride, the dominance of neoliberalism has been observed to disparage or suppress non-neoliberal motivations for learning, so that, as Grant (2009) puts it, "something as innocent as delight in learning ... can only confront the neoliberal as a challenge or threat, something to commodify, to turn from an intrinsic good into a saleable good" (p. xii). In other words, in a neoliberal climate, aesthetic reasons for learning such as 'delight' are frequently translated into economic categories.

Neoliberal ideologies have penetrated FL learning contexts in ways that consolidate powerful languages in their dominant positions, the most prominent example being English, which has become synonymous with economic growth and prosperity in many places (Holborow, 2012). Numerous non-English dominant countries have turned their attention towards the teaching of English as a FL in the hope of facilitating their access to the economic mobility and prosperity that the free market mindset promises (Block et al., 2012). As we explore neoliberal motivations for FL learning across two contexts - Costa Rica and the US - we situate ourselves within a tradition of stories in education that have promoted and/or challenged neoliberal discourses.

2.1.1. Stories of Neoliberalism in Education

The impact of neoliberalism on many areas of education is widely documented at the policy level (Hursh, 2007), in the realm of teacher education (Sleeter, 2008), as well as in various geographical contexts (e.g., Chile: Yusa, 2012; South Korea: Oh, 2011; Germany and the UK: Pritchard, 2011; USA: Aggarwal, 2012; Uruguay: Canale, 2015; Mexico: Sayer, 2015; Philippines and Puerto Rico: Hsu, 2015). Prior work in language education has further illustrated how neoliberal ideologies have promoted English being taught more and earlier (Sayer, 2015) and seeped into language and content classrooms (López, 2015).

A particularly poignant analysis of the power of English was carried out by Park (2010) in his study of 'success stories of English language learning' from Korea. He examined the 'English frenzy' that had been observed in the country since the mid-1990s, during which the government and the corporate sector identified English as a critical resource for Korea's competitiveness in the global economy. With demands for English at schools and universities, English curricula were revised to focus on communicative competence and immersion programs were created. Despite such positive developments, Park points to many problematic ones as the status of English rose from a symbol of power to an inherent part of an idealized identity. In Park's (2010, p. 27) words, "the entire English frenzy, is not so much about mere preparedness for employment or pure linguistic attainment as it is about living up to the vision of what constitutes the ideal human subject".

The harmfulness of neoliberal motives in FL education was also demonstrated by Fallas Escobar, Ennser-Kananen, and Bigelow (2016), who found the notion of learning English for individual and national economic advancement to be pervasive in policies, curricula, advertisements, and course materials from a university EFL program in Costa Rica. Similarly, Guerrero (2010) criticized the *National Bilingualism Project* in Colombia as an initiative to strengthen the symbolic power of English as the one and only tool for academic and economic success and the naive assumption that the spread of English will solve the country's social, cultural, political, and economic problems.

This documented rise of neoliberal motives for FL learning strengthens powerful languages in their dominant positions as they align most closely with neoliberal motivations. The strengthened status and prestige of powerful languages, in turn, makes them attractive for FL learners and further suppresses other motivations for foreign language learning, such as aesthetic or cultural ones. As the next section shows, this dangerous dynamic can (although not easily) be interrupted.

2.1.2. Counter Stories: Challenging Neoliberal Motivations and Discourses in Education

Although escaping this cycle has been described as a near-impossible endeavor, work exists that has highlighted resistance to neoliberal discourses.

On the education policy level, Hill's (2008) edited volume *Contesting Neoliberal Education* provides collected evidence from the UK, Haiti, Brazil, and Latin America that resistance to neoliberal education policies and ideologies is possible. Classroom-based work that analyzes such trends is less common.

One example of a study which examines neoliberal discourses in an intensive English program is Chun's (2008) multimodal discourse analysis of textbooks and websites with a focus on EAP (English for academic purposes) in the US. The analysis revealed a dominance of neoliberal discourses, which the author, an instructor in the teacher education program, countered with intervention units about emotional intelligence and caring capitalism. In these units, he encouraged students to deconstruct the two concepts and problematize the neoliberal ideologies behind them.

Likewise, Costigan (2013) encouraged his participants, beginning teachers in an English Language Arts (ELA) program in the United States, to critically examine neoliberal discourses in their environment in his 7-year long ethnography with 456 beginning urban teachers. His participants soon understood that the paradigm of testability and accountability "is not focused on shaping critical and original thinkers in the service of democracy … [but rather] focuses on generating workers who have acquired the standardized skills and sanctioned types of information necessary to compete in the global economy" (pp. 118-119). His data demonstrates how his participants' shift from a neoliberal curriculum towards an aesthetic approach to teaching ELA led to greater student engagement, deeper understanding, increased sensitivity for social justice issues, better test results, and even some level of legitimation of the aesthetic approach through administrators who had earlier mandated a test preparation curriculum. Costigan (2013) underlines the complexities of this process, especially for emerging teachers who cannot rely on status, experience, or tenure.

Interventions like Chun's (2008) and Costigan's (2013) are valuable examples of students contesting neoliberal discourses in English language education contexts, and although rarely, have been found to happen in foreign language contexts. For example, Kubota's 2011 study with adult learners of EFL in two Japanese cities uncovers the profit-driven policies of the local testing and test preparation industry and critically analyzes education "reforms" that promote the beliefs that English proficiency is necessary to participate in a global economy and enhances economic competitiveness, economic gain, and social mobility. Kubota's (2011) participants tell stories of learning English for social purposes (e.g., to unwind, make friends, or find a partner) and professional aspirations, which challenge the logic of neoliberalism and linguistic instrumentalism that connects English learning directly with economic benefits. This logic problematically ignores the interaction of gender, race, age, and other factors with professional success that Kubota's (2011) data brings to the fore.

As we learn from prior work that teachers as well as students can challenge neoliberal discourses, we need to ask what facilitates such a critical stance in FL contexts. Thus, the research questions that frame our analyses of students' reasons for learning English in Costa Rica and German in the United States are the following:

1. What are students' reasons for studying EFL and GFL?
2. To what extent do these reasons align with or deviate from neoliberal discourses that commodify English and German?
3. How is students' alignment with/ deviation from neoliberal discourses different across the Costa Rican/EFL and the US/GFL contexts?

3. Methodology

Data from this study come from two contexts: a German FL high school classroom in the United States, and an English FL college classroom in Costa Rica. In many ways, these classrooms differ greatly, which might be considered a limitation of the study: They are in different geographical and cultural locations, embedded in different linguistic and historical contexts, and are associated with different social status, political power, and educational purposes. However, we believe a dialogue between them is fruitful because they share some characteristics that are crucial to consider in an exploration of FL education and neoliberalism:

(1) In both contexts, policies and practices are increasingly put in place that follow the logic of the 'free market', such as curriculum design, advertisement, and student motivation. Thus, in both contexts, language learners are exposed to neoliberal arguments when choosing a FL to learn.
(2) Both contexts are characterized by an asymmetry of linguistic power: Powerful languages and less powerful languages exist in the same space and are often forced into a competitive relationship.
(3) In both contexts, individuals can make or have made choices. Although the space to freely make decisions is very limited in some situations, in both settings the participants have chosen to learn one particular FL over others.

Of course, analyzing such different settings has some important limitations.

We cannot and do not intend to draw comparisons across parallel settings in order to make generalizable statements. Rather, we explore what discourses, challenges, and forms of resistance exist and do not exist across contexts in which neoliberal arguments gain momentum. We believe that looking across these two different contexts can be helpful in beginning to notice and question what we consider normal, natural, or necessary and how our gaze, sometimes problematically, adapts to a particular environment. Resisting this adaptation while also recognizing the different premises in each context, we ask what our data can teach us about how neoliberalism affects motivations for FL learning.

One part of our data stems from a suburban high school in the Midwest, which we refer to as "Clearwater high school". Given the variety of languages the students could choose from (Spanish, French, German, Mandarin, and American Sign Language), we anticipated interesting motivations for students' FL learning to surface, which made Clearwater high school an attractive research site. Johanna Ennser-Kananen interviewed twenty-seven sophomore students of German in their 4th and 5th year were interviewed both formally and informally (e.g., during in-class conversations) throughout the course of one semester. Questions were semi-structured and open-ended and revolved around language learning motivations, experiences, practices, and preferences. All the interviews were transcribed and coded according to different motivations for FL learning. Examples of these initial codes are 'being unique', 'German heritage', and 'making money'. In a second step, the initial codes were merged into five larger themes that recurred throughout the data (pedagogical/ practical, aesthetic/cultural, social identity, family/heritage, and career).

Christian Fallas Escobar is an instructor of EFL courses at Universidad Metropolitana (UM) (a pseudonym), a large public institution in Costa Rica. He interviewed a group of 17 freshmen students in an oral communication class (ages 18 to 21) of the EFL program at UM, which is particularly popular among people who work in or prepare to work in administration, economics, physical therapy, and international affairs, in addition to majoring in EFL.

Each interview lasted about 20 minutes and revolved around reasons for studying EFL and post-graduation plans and aspirations. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and examined for recurring patterns, which were later collapsed into overarching themes such as 'professional advancement', 'monetary gain', and 'communication' in response to research questions 1 and 2.

4. Findings and Discussion

As we looked for themes that illustrated neoliberal discourses in both data sets, we identified the absence (US) and dominance (Costa Rica) of neoliberal arguments as well as identity building (US) versus following obligations (Costa Rica) as most salient ones.

4.1. Absence and Dominance of Neoliberal Motivations

An important finding was an absence of neoliberal motivations for learning German at Clearwater high school, which were prominent in the data from the English learners at UM. Although these findings can partly be explained by the different contexts the data come from, we believe that their bluntness and intentionality are noteworthy and surprising. We defined 'neoliberal motivations for FL

learning' as motivations for learning a FL that were strictly tied to professional advancement or the accumulation of material wealth or power. We believe that these discourses are simultaneously a cause and an effect of a neoliberal ideology, which, as Block et al. (2012) explain, puts the market before individuals in all aspects of human activity.

As Table 1 shows, we identified 5 major types of motivations in the discourses of high school students learning German in a US context:

Table 1
Motivations for Learning German

Pedagogical/ practical (7)	*Part of it was that uh Spanish classes are always really full and I wanted to have a smaller class than uh 400 people* [laughs]. [Interview with Katie, October 2012]
Aesthetic/ cultural (2)	*My father has this CD, from uh Einsturzen Neubauten* [Einstürzende Neubauten] *or something like that. I've, I've always wanted to – that music got me interested in German, so my goal is to understand what they're singing.* [In-class conversation with Adam, November 2012]
Social/ identity (8)	*I took German because it's special and I am special. Everyone is taking Spanish, it's kinda boring.* [In-class conversation with Patsy, November 2012]
Family/ heritage (15)	*I took German because my family is part German, like, on my dad's side, there's a lot of German, and that's why I wanted to learn.* [Interview with Matthew, December 2012]
Career (2)	*I chose German because it's an international business language and I uhm after like the* [unintel.] *military I wanna get into business so uhm I figured German would be the better language to choose because of the international business market.* [Interview with Marc, October 2012]

The Clearwater students' reasons for choosing German ranged from practical and aesthetic to reasons of building identities and relationships and connecting to familial histories and heritage. To a certain degree, these data confirm reasons for FL learning that have been introduced in prior work, such as a travel orientation (Clément & Kruidenier, 1983) and the goal of speaking an exclusive language (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). However, what is striking about the Clearwater sophomores' answers is the absence of arguments that are derived from neoliberal ideologies: Only two students mentioned professional advancement as a reason for choosing German, and only one of them described "language as an acquirable technical skill and marketable commodity" (Heller, 2002, p. 47). This student, whom we call Marc, explained that his goal was to "get into business", while another one, George, mentioned participating in a study abroad program as his goal, which we interpreted as career orientation. Even Marc, the only one who made a clear and direct connection between learning German and his professional goals, did not elaborate on this connection in the interview. When Johanna asked him what kind of business he was thinking of doing, he said

> *I have no idea to tell you the honest truth. Uhm I'm talking with people from the airforce academy uhm so maybe go in as a lieutenant which would be nice and also they got a business school and law in there. So uhm good choice.*
> [Interview with Marc, October 2012]

Even though one other student, Laura, also vaguely considered materialistic or professional reasons, they did not seem to be decisive factors for her, as the following quote illustrates:

> *I wanted to do Chinese because uhm like I guess America is like working with China more often now so I wanted to learn Chinese*

> *too but then I decided to stick with German since I had already started it.* [Interview with Laura, October 2012]

Laura was obviously familiar with the argument of Mandarin being a powerful language in today's economic landscape, where the United States and China entertain close business relations. Nevertheless, practical reasons were more important to her than the hope for professional advancement and financial benefits that are often associated with learning Mandarin in the US.

Overall, the students' discourses did not seem to follow a neoliberal agenda of a deregulated market that dictates language choice and determines the value of linguistic resources, as, for example, described by Heller (2002). Rather, practical arguments characterized the students' motivations for learning German, such as smaller class sizes or having an exclusive code and cultural/aesthetic reasons, like trying to understand the lyrics of a German pop band.

The Clearwater students' motivation discourses are in stark contrast to those of the Costa Rican college students. As shown in Table 2, the large part of students' motivations for majoring in English is based on the idea that proficiency in English is connected to professional advancement and the accumulation of status, opportunities, and power. As Table 2 shows, we identified several reasons that the seventeen first-year students from Universidad Metropolitana in Costa Rica brought up in their justification for their choice to major in EFL:

Table 2
Motivations for Learning EFL and Number of Responses

Access to better-paid or international jobs Necessity/ a must in current job market Mandatory L2	17
No English = no job Competitive advantage/job promotion	6
English is a lingua franca Access to US American culture Access to other countries Tool to communicate with foreigners A means of communication Tool for studying overseas	5
Contacts around the world and traveling Bombarded with English since school Language of a power house Language of transnational corporations Tool for profit making, economic freedom and professional development Access to a market/business Access to multiple opportunities	4
Complement to profession/ Plan B	3
Tool for international communication Tool to accomplish other goals (traveling)	2
Asset prioritized over technical skills	1

All participants in the Metropolitana English classroom described English as a tool that would grant them access to hypothetical opportunities such as international or well-paid jobs, scholarships to pursue further studies in their chosen fields, or access to literature and other resources for professional development.

One student, a sociology major, admitted that studying English was his plan B, in case he did not find a job as a sociologist. Similarly, another participant claimed that speaking English might land him a job at a call center, which would allow him to afford the costs of what he really wanted to study. These cases illustrate the great hope students had in their study of English: Proficiency in English, they

trusted, would act as a springboard into professional careers with stable and high incomes, as a safety net if other plans failed. When the students attributed to English the power to affect their personal, professional, and academic lives in such profound ways, they implicitly drew on neoliberal ideologies that position English as they key to wealth, job security, power, and social prestige.

In her analysis of foreign language education in Japan, Kubota (2002, p. 20) noted an equivalent of foreign language and international communication with English and explained that such a discourse "legitimates the global spread of English as natural, neutral and beneficial … and a discourse of colonialism that elevates English to the status of 'marvelous tongue'". Even though the Costa Rican participants might not consciously choose to pursue neoliberal goals through their studies, their assigning of seemingly limitless power to the English language, its elevation to a 'marvelous tongue', bears striking resemblance to the 'English frenzy' described by Park (2010) and reinforces a cycle of neoliberal ideas, which becomes almost impenetrable for alternative motivations, languages, or professional choices.

4.2. Building Identities and Following Obligations

When comparing foreign language learners' motivation discourse at Universidad Metropolitana and Clearwater high school, we found that while the students from Clearwater associated German with building identities and uncovering their heritage, at UM, English learners saw their studies of English as an obligation.

At Clearwater, most participants related their decision to learn German with constructing their desired identities. For instance, the second most common reason for learning German the students mentioned was to do something 'unique' or 'special'. This sometimes included avoiding Spanish, the most commonly chosen foreign language at the school, which students described as mainstream, whereas choosing German was what students perceived as setting themselves apart from the majority. Typical reasons they gave for their choice included:

1. *German is a lot cooler than the one everyone takes, Spanish … 'cause everyone takes Spanish.* (Interview with Susan, November 2012)
2. *I took German because it's special and I am special. Everyone is taking Spanish, it's kinda boring.* (In-class interview with Patsy, November 2012)
3. *I didn't want to learn Spanish, which would have been the obvious thing to do, like everybody.* (Interview with Jessie, November 2012)
4. *I feel like it's kind of natural, if you don't really care, you just take Spanish.* (Interview with Sandra, November 2012)

While all these statements illustrate that Spanish was associated with following the mainstream, Sandra went so far as to describe her peers as uninvested in or indifferent about foreign language learning and thus positioned learning German in contrast to this as an original, deliberate, and committed choice. In previous work (Ennser-Kananen, 2012), high school students' negative attitudes towards Spanish have been found to be linked to associations of Spanish with poverty and unauthorized immigration into the US. Although in the present study, such discourses did not surface, they might, under the surface, add to some students' desire to distance themselves from the language. What is more evident here is that, through their statements, students claimed particular identities that they enacted through their motivations: those of unique and judicious students who are committed to foreign language learning and stand out from a crowd that is less interested, less invested, and more ordinary.

Even though constructing an identity of uniqueness was important for the Clearwater sophomores, the most common reason students mentioned for choosing to learn German was heritage. More precisely, 15 students talked about their German roots that they aimed to reconnect with. For example:

> *I chose German because I have German heritage so I thought it'd be kinda cool to learn German … I think my grandpa was like 100% German.* (Interview with Lisa, October 2012)

> *Why I chose German is because it's a big part of our family's history so … my dad's*

side of the family is originally German. (Interview with Jason, October 2012)

My family is German ... my dad is like almost full German he is like 50% Irish 50% German and he came apparently his great great grandfather or something came here from Germany and they like changed his name and everything and they have like a family crest from Germany or something uhm yeah. (Interview with Christopher, November 2012)

These excerpts show that students commonly positioned themselves at the end of a line of Germans, whose German-ness was often expressed in percentages. Explicating family history and German heritage often took up a considerable part of the interview, which supports the argument that it was critical for the students to root their own identities in their familial history and connect that history with their reasons for learning German. Interestingly, none of them confirmed having reached their goal of connecting to the family heritage or being able to communicate with German-speaking family members, as the following excerpts show:

Johanna: So do you feel like you are already connecting to your family more because you already speak a little bit?
Luke: Uhm, well, what? Uhm no, not really, we've never been able to communicate with them or go over to Germany and visit them. Actually, I'm not sure, I think we have more relatives in Switzerland and Austria than we do in Germany, but –
(Interview with Luke, October 2012)

Maria: Well, uh, my sister took German too so, uh, we wanted to speak to each other in a different language so that our siblings wouldn't understand. Cause it's just me and her, yeah. [*Maria had six brothers and one sister.*]
Johanna: That's great.
Maria: Yeah just me and her, us girls, and we just talk.
Johanna: Can you?
Maria: Uhm, you mean like talk, can we talk? Well, sometimes, she, well, she isn't majoring in German this year, so it's kinda not working for her.
(Interview with Maria, October 2012)

The gap between the students' reported reason for choosing German and the reality of not reaching their goal was noteworthy in two ways: First, not a single student shared a 'success story', which raises broader questions about the reasons why students' goals for FL learning were not met by their FL experience. Second, none of the students seemed irritated or disturbed by this, but rather by Johanna's question itself, as their hesitation markers (e.g., "well, uh") and clarification requests indicate (e.g., "Uhm, you mean like talk, can we talk?"). In other cases, the German heritage was difficult to describe or locate within the students' families:

Matthew: I took German because my family is part German like on my dad's side there's a lot of German and that's why I wanted to learn.
Johanna: Yeah? Do you know any more specific things about that?
Matthew: No specifics like when they came here, but I just know there is a lot of it, but that's it, I dunno.
(Interview with Matthew, December 2012)

Although Matthew did not seem to know any details about his German relatives, he named them as a reason for studying German. Thus, rather than for everyday use, his motivation to learn German might be fueled by a desire to construct familial and individual identities of Germanness.

Overall, even though the dominance of the 'heritage reason' for learning German was salient, the Clearwater sophomores did not give the impression of wanting to pursue it or, in some cases, of knowing a lot about their familial connections to German. One explanation for this is that their intention was not so much to define and pursue a realistic goal for their language learning, but rather to assert and construct their German heritage and identity within the interview situation (and beyond).

At the Universidad Metropolitana in Costa Rica, however, students had a very different conception of FL learning. Every single one of the Costa Rican participants made a direct connection between their English studies and making a career or improving their financial standing. Typical answers to the question whether they would recommend learning English to other students were:

1. *Of course, it's practically 'a must'; they must do it.* (Interview with Viviana, June 2014)

2. *I think that [English] is an important tool. Everybody is talking about how English is important for life ...* (Interview with Manuel, June 2014)

3. *English is very important, now practically for any job, you have to speak two languages and English is practically a second language here [Costa Rica].* (Interview with Susan, June 2014)

4. *Yes, of course, now everybody should speak English because now everybody must speak two languages. In fact, you fall behind if you only speak Spanish and English.* (Interview with Tina, June 2014)

5. *Because it is a language that one needs to know nowadays. Society, I don't know, the truth is that English is now used for everything, it's like everyone wants you to speak English.* (Interview with Nina, June 2014)

These extracts from our data illustrate a discourse that characterizes learning English as an obligation rather than a choice. Although some of these young adults mentioned study-abroad opportunities, travel, and cross-cultural communication as personal goals that motivate them to engage in their studies of English, by far the most frequently recurring themes in their responses were their concern for survival in a job market and their aspirations to afford better standards of living. The discourse of learning English as an obligation is especially salient in the accounts of Nana and Wendolin, who made a direct connection between their learning of English and the well-being of their families:

> *Above all, what I want is to complete the EFL program to start working to help my family because our family is big. And so, I chose English to have a certificate that will allow me to work anywhere English is needed.* (Interview with Nana, June 2014)

> *Well, I have many friends who speak English, that's partially why I'm motivated, because they have a good job. And I don't know, I want to do it [learn English] for my family because right now only my dad is working and my brother has an incurable disease and so he cannot help at all, and so I'm the one who has to contribute economically.* (Interview with Wendolin, June 2014)

For the Universidad Metropolitana EFL learners, English represented not only, or no longer, a professional asset, but rather a requirement in the job market that had become an unquestioned and non-negotiable skill for those who do not want to 'fall behind'. Even though they did not specify the meaning of 'survival' versus 'falling behind', their discourses illustrate the pressure these EFL learners feel as they choose to study English. Nana's and Wendolin's situation adds another layer of obligations, namely familial ones. As they tied their EFL studies to their family's income and their sibling's health, it is obvious that their language learning goals are not a matter of identity building or lofty academic dreams: They are, quite literally, a matter of survival.

In all, while some of the UM participants' motivations to study English were, in effect, based on a variety of orientations, including travel, knowledge, and friendship (Clément & Kruidenier, 1983), interest in foreign cultures (Dörnyei, 1990), and international posture (Yashima, 2009), what prevailed were the prosperity, social mobility, and professional orientations disseminated by neoliberal discourses. Alarmingly, all of the Metropolitana students saw themselves as having no choice but to learn English in order to reach their professional goals or even just get a job that would support them and their families.

What struck us about these stories is not that they reveal that neoliberal ideologies have commodified English and removed from the

equation the aesthetic, intellectual, and culturally enriching experience that FL learning could potentially be. As much as we find these neoliberal discourses problematic, given prior work that documents the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in educational contexts, we were not entirely surprised to find them in the UM students' discourses. What surprised us was the extent and intentionality with which that happened. Even if we take into consideration that many university students, because of their age and exposure to career-related discourses, tend to feel more pressure to make job-market-friendly choices, in other words, even considering the expected differences between the two contexts, the extent to which the UM participants in this study saw English as a sine-qua-non for personal, academic, and professional success and wellbeing was surprising.

With their unquestioned investment in the 'marvelous tongue' of English, the UM learners put their professional, personal, and familial trajectories in the hands of the global enterprise of EFL education, which fuels a vicious cycle of individuals who depend on and trust in the promise of English as a powerful commodity, and the EFL industry benefitting from and feeding into this dependence. While the Metropolitana participants experience themselves as commodities on the job market, where their value is assessed in market-friendly terms, their (experienced) dependence on English is an integral part of the EFL education industry: As dependent, committed, and reliable customers of EFL products, they do not have the privilege to resist neoliberal FL learning discourses, nor a powerful ally who is able and willing to disrupt the vicious cycle.

4.3. Who Can Resist Neoliberalism?

The absence of neoliberal arguments in the Clearwater German students' statements compared to the Metropolitana EFL students' statements is striking. It would be tempting to ascribe this to the comparably low social and economic pressures of high school students as compared to college students. However, in another study (2016, in press), in which Fallas Escobar ventured into critical discussions with senior EFL majors at a Costa Rican University about the spread and need for English in Latin America, it was found that neoliberal pressures exist also for high school students. For example, one student, Mercedes, shared her and experience of choosing English over French despite her personal preferences for the French language and teacher.

> *It [the English instructor] was a bad professor and I knew that I was not going to learn anything, and even though I knew that, I chose English because it was more important.* (Merdeces, group discussion #1)

Mercedes' statement provides further evidence for the pressure Costa Rican students face as they make choices about FL learning, which seem to be less encumbering for high school students in the US context.

Overall, our data illustrate how students in different contexts are affected (or not) by neoliberal discourses. A possible interpretation for the dominance of practical, aesthetic, social, identity-related, and familial reasons in the Clearwater students' statements is the students' linguistic background: Except for one Hmong-speaking young woman, Maria, they were all L1 English speakers. Based on this data, we thus argue that the privilege of these FL learners was the marketability of their language skills. With English as their L1, they had access to a powerful linguistic resource, and enjoyed the luxury of choosing to learn a FL for more varied reasons than the Costa Rican students. Although their choices, too, may be informed by a neoliberal agenda they are not exposed to the same pressures of having to learn a language in order to have access to jobs and social mobility. A token of this freedom is their choice to not study Spanish, a language that is available and common in their school but which students sometimes associate with unauthorized immigration and economic underdevelopment Ennser-Kananen, 2012). As much as these high school students claim to study German for practical, identity-related, and aesthetic reasons, their confessions of little or no success lead us to conclude that for them the symbolic prestige of studying German and reaffirming their German-ness is enough, and more important than actually being successful at reconnecting with their heritage.

The FL learners from UM chose to study English in an atmosphere of pressure to achieve a high level of English proficiency. In a context where transnational corporations have changed the job market landscape, their reasons for learning English might seem easy to predict, however, the absoluteness of their statements and the connections to familial responsibilities deserve our attention. When learning English turns into a non-negotiable that equals access to jobs or familial health, we need to critically examine the dominance of neoliberal thought in these stories as well as the available spaces for resistance against neoliberal ideologies.

Of course, in the light of examples of improved lives attributed to speaking English, it would be arrogant of us to minimize or contradict this experience, particularly because we all speak English as an integral part of our careers and lives. Recognition of this puts us in a double bind. While we benefit from English on the one hand, we wish on the other hand that students from Universidad Metropolitana would choose to learn English for reasons other than aligning with a globalized Costa Rican economy. This double bind forces us to consider our role in this process: What are ways in which we can teach and learn English and all foreign languages ethically? How can we as privileged speakers of multiple languages promote alternative motivations for FL learning and alternative languages to learn? We wonder, for example, what it would be like if Costa Rican students could choose to learn a language because they liked how it sounded, or because their ancestors spoke it. We also wonder what it would be like if students felt the urgency we described to learn endangered language of the land where they live because it might help heal their communities.

5. Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, the extent to which FL learners align their FL learning motivations with a neoliberal agenda or other orientations are highly contextual and power-based. This is why resistance to neoliberal discourses cannot be left solely in the responsibility of individuals, especially in context where economic, familial, but also colonial pressures are at play that severely limit the spaces of critique and resistance. Researchers, curriculum writers, administrators, teachers, teacher educators, and students alike must come together to devise, practice, and promote a FL education based on the critique of neoliberalism and the inclusion of a variety of motivations. Tenets of youth culture (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002), humanizing pedagogy (Del Carmen Salazár, 2013), learner agency/identity (Duff, 2011), and social justice (Motha, 2014; Osborn, 2006) can be important tools in doing this work. It is our contention that if we can uncover ways of developing and implementing such an approach to FL education, we will be able to educate students who study more languages beyond those society has deemed powerful. Our hope is further that with a broader spectrum of FL learning motivations, our students will persist in their language learning longer and reach higher levels of proficiency, and that, ultimately, globalization will come to signify more than the marketplace, but a way of being in the world that is multiple, hybridized, changing, adventuresome, and trusting of those who are different.

Our analyses demonstrate the importance of locating and analyzing neoliberal ideologies in language education across contexts. We see our implications not as capstones of a process but rather as guiding points that emerged from our studies and will move the process of critiquing and resisting neoliberalism along. We call on researchers, curriculum writers, administrators, educators, and students to join efforts in opening spaces for FL learning that are driven by imagination, identity, aesthetics, youth culture, heritage, and other dimensions of life for a revised ecology of FL education.

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