Immigrant pathways to the language classroom are manifold. Some may have arrived in their new homeland as children and now need additional training to enhance the quality of their language. Others may have come later in life with some rudimentary exposure to their second language, but with an educational degree, a career in their native country and the presence of learning skills and strategies they entail. Still others might have come without much prior schooling and are now building their strength in their second language from the ground up.

Teaching in a large, urban English as a Second Language (ESL) programme in Southern California, I see all these types of students. These learners have mastered enough English to survive, but still come back to school to study, filling up our evening ESL classes after long hours at work, some still in their nursing scrubs and checked restaurant kitchen trousers. What drives them? What makes them commit to the challenges of learning despite, or on top of, the pressures of earning a living, taking care of children and elderly parents, and supporting extended families in their countries of origin? Why are they in my class?

Social context of motivation for language learning

To fully understand the social framework of adult language learning, we have to reach across the disciplinary boundaries into the fields of behavioural and educational psychology as well as sociology.

Research in educational psychology postulates that adults’ engagement in learning activities is tied directly to their view of themselves and their place
in the society. Due to important physical and psychological developments in adult life, factors that have direct bearing on adult learning include: possession of reasons for learning, the adult concept of the self, timing of learning experience to life events, need for application of knowledge to real-life situations, and the internal origin of the desire to learn (Knowles, 1990). Motivation, here, is the impulse, the energy that under the right circumstances may translate into an effort to learn. Adult education is fundamentally a choice and, thus, my preferred definition of motivation is: ‘the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid, and the degree of effort they will exert in that respect’ (Keller, 1983: 389).

Adult participation in learning may arise from a variety of reasons originating in their social lives. To identify and classify those reasons, in one well-known research project, an Education Participation Scale (a 40-item interview instrument) was administered to more than 12,000 participants around the world (Bolshier & Collins, 1983). Based on the participants’ responses, the researchers proposed six fundamental psychosocial motivational orientations guiding adult participation in educational activities:

- **cognitive interest** (enjoyment of learning for its own sake);
- **community service** (advancement of one’s family and community);
- **external expectations** (participation due to a requirement, professional or otherwise);
- **professional advancement** (employment/career-oriented reasons);
- **social contact** (interest in group activities and relationship-building);
- **social stimulation** (education as an escape from boredom or frustration).

From the behavioural psychology standpoint, motivation, like other learning-associated behaviours, is an expression of two general tendencies: to master and to belong (Jones, 1968; MacKeracher, 1989). The tendency to master moves a person to achieve the central, powerful status in his/her social context, to organise it and control his/her actions and interactions within it ‘in order to enhance survival and self-esteem’ (MacKeracher, 1989: 191). Being informed and skilled reduces the uncertainty of new experiences and assures the individual's identity and integrity. The tendency to belong moves the individual to join a social unit in order to enhance security and the sense of connectedness with others. This sense of connection is desired both at the temporal (past and future) and social levels, as in successful interpersonal relationships and inclusion in activities and membership in self-selected groups.

This notion clearly applies to immigrant language learners, who as newcomers standing outside of the dominant language society have to make an effort to **master** their social situation, in part by acquiring the language that allows them to access power in the L2 society, and to integrate into it, that is, to **belong**.