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The Role of English in Kyrgyz Immigrants' Acculturation Processes in the United States

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THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN KYRGYZ IMMIGRANTS' ACCULTURATION
PROCESSES IN THE UNITED STATES

Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Doctor of Philosophy

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This study explores Kyrgyz immigrants' English language learning experiences and how those experiences affected their acculturation processes in the United States. Since adult immigrant learners' second language acquisition mingles with the social and cultural aspects of their lives, it was important to explore Kyrgyz participants' English language learning processes in various social contexts in order to understand how these contexts affected immigrants' abilities to learn the target language and culture. Participant observation and narrative interviews suggested that attaining some degree of English language competence was a critical factor in Kyrgyz immigrants' economic, social, and cultural adjustments.

Overall, the results of the study generally confirmed results of previous studies about the functional roles of the target language in immigrants' acculturation processes; however, this study shows that, due to their often higher educational and professional qualifications and cultural backgrounds, Kyrgyz immigrants' English language learning experiences can involve especially unique and complex processes. As highly educated professionals in Kyrgyzstan, this group of immigrants found that knowing English was integral to their abilities to access and utilize the human capital they had previously earned. Therefore, the target language had tremendous symbolic power throughout their

acculturation processes. Although economic incentives played a role in immigrants' English language learning, this study revealed that the most important function of language acquisition was in facilitating intercultural frames of reference and mediating cultural perspectives.

The results of this research calls attention to the importance of these kinds of social and cultural issues for ESL curricula. It also provides information to relevant institutions and organizations that could assist policy making in both immigration and education.

I hope that this research might also identify the needs and expectations of professional immigrants and seek ways to better facilitate immigrant language acquisition. Ultimately, this study begins to identify concrete ways for both immigrants and host countries to make acculturative processes smoother and more effective.