# IDENTITY, LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION, INVESTMENT, AND POWER DYNAMICS IN L2 ENGLISH AMONG BURMESE WOMEN REFUGEES

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## ABSTRACT

IDENTITY, LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION, INVESTMENT, AND POWER DYNAMICS IN L2 ENGLISH AMONG BURMESE WOMEN REFUGEES

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The following study investigated the naturalistic L2 English encounters of 5 Burmese women refugees in the United States. Identity, language socialization, investment, and power dynamics were precursory themes used as a framework throughout the investigation. Data were collected from questionnaires, interviews, and language journals over a three month period of time. Following the data collection process, the information was reviewed in a recursive manner in an effort to identify elements of the precursory themes and any other themes that arose. It was found that the participants spoke English primarily while shopping and during medical encounters. These experiences were often negative and shed light on the participant's identity and power dynamics. Language socialization and investment did not appear as themes within the data. The findings of this research may aid educators working with refugee populations in understanding their students' naturalistic L2 experiences which could have implications in the classroom.

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# Introduction

This research aimed to collect data on identity, language socialization, investment, and power dynamics among a group of women refugees. This population is of interest because their purpose for coming to the United States differs from that of many other language learners who are the focus of second language research. Refugees arrive in the L2 setting because they are escaping persecution or violence. I hold that this places them in a unique position unlike that of international students or other immigrants who actively planned to come to the United States. Many refugees have little control over their country of asylum and hence are unable to prepare for their arrival in the L2 setting. The United States ranks second among industrialized countries in the number of asylum claims received (UNHCR, 2014, p. 3). In fact, it saw a twenty-five percent increase in claims in 2012 alone (UNHCR, 2014, p.3). From January to April of 2014, 32,833 refugees have been resettled in the U.S. This number emphasizes the growing importance of asylum seekers among the ESL population. Of these claims, refugees from Chin State, Burma account for 30,453 asylum seekers out of the 97,713 who have settled in the U.S. since 2001. In the first four months of 2014, Michigan has received 24 refugees from Burma. This is the sixth highest intake of Burmese asylum seekers so far this year, after Texas, Oklahoma, Georgia, Indiana, and Maryland (Department of State: Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Office of Admissions Refugee Processing Center, 2014). Furthermore, Burmese ranks seventh among the languages spoken by refugee arrivals from 2008-2013 in the U.S. (Department of State: Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, Office of Admissions - Refugee Processing Center, 2013).

Because of this population's background, refugees' identity, language socialization process, investment in the L2, and the power structures that are at play around them may differ from that of other L2 learners and are worth investigating. Furthermore, the elements used to guide this investigation were taken from Norton (2013) in which fruitful information was found among immigrant women, one of whom was a refugee. The constructs of identity, language socialization, investment, and power dynamics will be discussed and defined, followed by additional research that is particularly relevant to the present study.

# Chapter 1 Literature Review

## Identity

Refugees are often faced with the task of creating and maintaining one or more language identities. Perhaps, they will subvert the mainstream culture by maintaining only their L1 identity. Maybe they will choose to abandon their L1 identity in favor of their L2. More commonly, they may decide to maintain multiple language identities that are representative of their L1 and their L2 (Norton, 2000). This is consistent with postructuralist thinking as opposed to the previous thought that identity is fixed (Peirce, 1995). Furthermore, refugees could be classified as transnationals, whose identity is not contained by geographical borders. This transnational identity, which includes language, can sometimes be leveraged as a positive resource (Wei & Hua, 2013). Two definitions of identity that hold particular relevance to the current study are as follows:

> A dynamic and shifting nexus of multiple subject positions, or identity options, such as mother… (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004, as cited in Duff, p.35, 2012).
>
> How a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future (Norton, 2000, as cited in Duff, p.5, 2012 ).

The refugee women within this study gave particular importance to their identity as mothers which is a type of identity mentioned in Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) definition. The women also made frequent references to their past, present and future identities, as will be discussed later, which is a crucial element in Norton's (2000) definition of identity.

Identity is large and complex. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) provide a framework through which to analyze identity. Within the framework, the term "intersubjectivity" is used in lieu of

identity (493). This emphasizes the fact that identity exists relationally. In other words, it is contextualized and situated. The interlocutor responds to the speaker and vice versa. In this way, identity is co-constructed. The framework attempts to transcend a dichotomous view of identity by creating continua between opposite terms. Relative to the current study are the continua between "authentification" versus "denaturalization" and "authorization" versus "illegitimation" (p. 494). These terms are meant to capture how episodes of interaction are not binary, but instead move back and forth between these constructs.

In an effort to illustrate trajectory and social identification, Wortham and Rhodes (2013) used the metaphor of chords. Just as a chord is made up of multiple notes, so is identity created by multiple factors. One note can be a part of multiple chords. Events can affect a person in multiple ways. This metaphor highlights that identity is contextualized and situated in time and location. It also makes clear the point that certain episodes need to be analyzed relationally from different perspectives as their influence on identity construction can be multiple as opposed to singular.

**Ethnic and National Identity**

Also of importance is ethnic identity which plays a role in the formation or limitation of L2 identity. An L1 speaker's views of the L2 ethnic group is a factor in L2 proficiency (Trofimovich, Turuševa, and Gatbonton, 2013). Trofimovich et. al. (2013) collected surveys regarding language spoken and ethnic identity from Latvian speakers who were Russian. Ethnic identity was defined as the "subjective experience" an individual has, including the emotional aspects, as a member of a certain ethnic group (Trofimovich et. al., 2013, p.563). They found

that the ethnic identity held by the speaker played a role to some degree in the language that they chose to speak.

The ethnic identity of Southeast Asian American (SEA) youth was discussed in Lam's (2009) review of Reyes' (2008) book. SEAs are physically unrecognizable to many Americans. When considering Asian immigrants in the U.S., many Americans might think of Chinese or Japanese ethnicities (p. 300). The fact that SEAs are unrecognizable is highly relevant to their identity in that it categorizes them as the "other Asian" (p. 300). This label is marginalizing and may contribute to the proliferation of stereotypes. This may make the authentication and authorization of their identity unattainable. Powerfully, Reyes asked "how their culture [can] be valued if people [can] not recognize it" (Reyes, 2008, p.143 as cited in Lam, 2009). While the participants in the current study are not youth, they are adults from Southeast Asia who are now residing in the U.S. It was anticipated that ethnic identity would be an important component in the data that were collected.

**Social Identity**

Social identity is another aspect that is demonstrated in Liang's (2012) study in which language ideologies were used to shape social identities, which sometimes became a part of investment and the language socialization process. Social identity is an individual's identity as it exists in various social contexts. This could be a learners' identity in multiple situations such as at school or in the workplace Just like other aspects of identity, social identity is situated and may be multiple. In Liang (2012), ESL learners who were speakers of Spanish utilized one language over another in certain situations in order to propel a certain social identity. For example, the learners felt that using English and learning English were important for the

workplace and for being in the USA as a whole. They felt that speaking Spanish was important when speaking to parents or other Spanish speaking immigrants. Furthermore, the learners felt that maintaining both languages in California was advantageous when entering the job market in that particular location. For the refugees in the present study, the formation of multiple social identities was limited because of language proficiency.

**Researcher Identity**

In addition to dialogues about learners' identities, research has discussed the importance of, and included information about, the researcher's identity in collecting data (DeCosta, 2010; Norton & Early, 2011; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Reflexivity is important on the part of the researcher. Researchers need to admit potential bias in qualitative research, which was explained well in Norton and Toohey (2011) in which Ramanathan (2005) was referenced for her claim that researchers should question what is "present" or "absent"; "visible" or "invisible" in their data. This type of self-analysis can be achieved through multiple methods. For example, De Costa (2010) kept a research journal of his own thoughts that aided him in being transparent about his own influence over the data collection process and the data collection process' influence over him. During the course of that research he found three researcher identities which he had filled: "outsider or insider," "researcher as resource," and "researcher as befriender" (p. 524). Norton and Early (2011), laid a framework for others in their field to follow when presenting research. They pointed out the following as key principles that can be used to analyze researcher identity: reflexivity, dialogic engagement, situated nature of programs and practice, responsiveness to learners, and praxis. Related to this is the need to consider the problems of studying the other versus studying one's own (Lee & Simon-Maeda, 2006).These studies are

relevant to my research in that I needed to reflect on how my presence influenced the interviews that I conducted. I needed to consider how I was perceived by the participants and the ideas that I brought into the research. Furthermore, I needed to consider the power structures in the dialogues and if any sort of hierarchy existed in the minds of those involved. While taking into account research and participant identity, I also looked for incidents of language socialization.

**Language Socialization**

Language socialization was defined by Duff (2011) as "a process by which non-native speakers of a language, or people returning to a language they may have once understood or spoken but have since lost proficiency in, seek competence in the language and, typically, membership and the ability to participate in the practices of communities in which the language is spoken" (p. 564). This definition is consistent with a shift that started in the 1990s in the current immigration and socialization research. The movement has called for scholars to look at the assimilation process as dynamic and variable. Language socialization takes into account the context, the communities of practice, the learners' past and present proficiency, and the learners' participation and membership in the communities or lack thereof. Depending on what parts of the culture are adopted, an immigrant's adjustment to a new country may be positive or negative (Baquedano-Lopez & Figueroa, 2011). Identity is certainly a part of this assimilation process because one's cultural practices influence who one is. During the assimilation process individuals are gaining, changing, or losing cultural practices. Hence, throughout these experiences language learners are constantly negotiating their identity (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000). This is not surprising if one considers Norton's (1997) concept of investment which holds that learners will only continue to put energy into language learning if the outcome meets their

expectations. If the results are unsatisfactory, the learners will not continue investing energy in that context. When language learners receive positive feedback in their L2 use, they may be more likely to develop that identity because it has been validated and vice versa.

Speaking specifically about language socialization, Duff (2011, 2012) points out that many immigrants are often referred to by their original nationality despite having become Americans. If one listens to public dialogue today, first or second generation Americans are often referred to by multiple nationalities, such as Italian-American. This can reinforce the use and preservation of the L1 identity because the immigrant does not feel fully accepted into the L2 community as was seen in Liang's (2012) study in which ideas of nationalism sometimes became a part of investment and identity as discussed earlier. Labeling a person with a national identity and then defining that identity by a language creates boundaries. Not only is this related to language socialization, it is connected to insider and outsider identities. Additionally, it is connected to power in that labeling is often done by a person or group who has the control.

Friedman (2010) reviews the role of the ESL classroom in the language socialization process. Immigrants may find that they are positioned as the "other" by the teacher, when in fact the teacher believes asking questions about a student's country is promoting multiculturalism. Additionally, ESL classrooms that teach material for the U.S. citizenship test may be inadvertently reinforcing the idea that in order to identify as American, a person must speak English (Griswold, 2007, as cited in Friedman 2010). While these studies were based in the ESL classroom, they are telling about what immigrant learners may experience outside of the classroom. Cultural and linguistic ideologies are manifested in the ESL classroom, but exist in naturalistic settings as well (Friedman, 2010). If in fact the language socialization process

equates language proficiency with national or ethnic identity, then one's ability to create or maintain membership in a community is severally limited.

Southeast Asian immigrants were studied in the Australian school system by Lotherington (2003). The Australian school system thought that they were promoting multiliteracy/multilingualism by providing Asian language classes in school. However, the socialization process that was occurring within the school, equated English with literacy and being Caucasian with being Australian. It was anticipated that the participants in the present study may have been socialized in a similar way through their naturalistic L2 encounters, where being literate meant speaking English and being American meant being Caucasian. This may have influenced how they self –indentified as well as their investment in the language.

Furthermore, some scholars have separated the L2 from what they term the C2 or second culture. This can be seen in the research of Marx (2002) who studied accent as it relates to identity. Marx (2002) stressed that ultimate attainment of native-like accent is rare. Instead she argues that there needs to be reconciliation on the part of the learner between the L1/C1 and L2/C2 in order to fully participate in either culture. Culhane (2004) also used L1/C1 and L2/C2 to describe second language learners' attitudes toward acculturation and their motivation. While the distinction allows for a different perspective in analysis, it cannot be denied that language identity is inextricably linked to ethnic identity, both of which are bound together in sociocultural theory. In Ochs and Schieffelin's (2011) explanation of sociocultural theory, the point is made that L2 learners need to understand and learn how to manipulate the C2 rules that inform a dialogue. Without being able to do so, the L2 learner will be unable to identify fully with the L2 community. This also ties into the idea of power dynamics in that taking control of a

conversation can legitimize one's identity. Overall, the language socialization process can influence a learner's reasons for investment in the target language.

**Investment**

The concept of investment in an L2 takes into account the learners' expectations, identity, and the society around them (Norton, 1997). It is a dynamic structure that is influenced by the interplay among these multiple factors. Investment was used to explain the experiences of adult immigrant women in the workplace by Peirce (1993) in her longitudinal study. It was described with a fiscal analogy likening the language learning experience to that of investing money, where the investor is hoping to make a profit. For example, if learners are attending ESL class on a regular basis and do not see the improvement, the learners might stop attending ESL class. Likewise, if learners are seeing the improvement that was anticipated, then they will continue attending ESL class. The concept of investment can also be applied to individual conversations and settings. For example, if a learner attempts to ask a question and the communication is unsuccessful, they may decide not to try again.

Peirce (1993) conducted a year-long study on five immigrant women. She used journals, interviews, and questionnaires to collect data about the women's naturalistic language learning experiences. She found the context and duration that the women spoke English was related to identity and power relations. She also noted that the women's naturalistic L2 encounters were situational and varied across time and space. The women in her study were at times able to manipulate their identities in order to claim the power in a dialogue. They did this by drawing on certain elements of their identity, such as their role as a mother. Motherhood lends itself to some natural authority when engaging with younger interlocutors. Hence, even if the learner did not

have full command of the language of power, they were able to minimize their identity as a learner and find power in other aspects of their identity.

The concept of identity was further teased apart by McKay and Wong (1996) who looked at the experience of immigrant middle school students. They stated that investment can fluctuate depending on the L2 skill and its perceived usefulness in developing students' multiple identities. Here a link between investment and identities is being modified by method of communication. If speaking is the primary method of communication for one's identity, then one's investment in speaking will likely be greater than in writing or reading. Likewise, McKay and Wong (1996) found that students who desired academic success and valued their student identity had greater investment in other skill areas of the L2.

Following suit, Skilton-Sylvester (2002) analyzed the investment of four Cambodian women who were enrolled in adult ESL classes. The participants in her study were immigrants who were not currently in the work force and did not have a high level of education in their country of origin. This is very similar to the population that the present study investigates. In particular, Skilton-Sylvester (2002) draws a connection between two of the participants' identities as mothers and their investment in English. As their identities as mothers evolved, so did their desire to invest in learning English.

More recently, Liang (2012) also highlighted a connection between investment and identity among bilingual high school students. The data showed that while the students invested in both their L1 and L2, the students' desire to be American and their concept of nationalism played a role in fueling their L2 investment. In other words if Americans were defined by the

students as people who speak English, then the students tried to meet that criterion. Their investment in learning English was linked to that identity.

In the current study, investment was seen in relation to L2 oral skills as this was the primary method of communication for the participants. While the participants were not bilingual in the sense that they could speak both their native languages and English equally well, they still displayed some desire to be considered American as seen in Liang (2012). Some of the participants might have been planning on taking the U.S. Citizenship Test while others might have taken it already. Still, some participants may opt not to take the test. This study did not aim to expand the definition of investment, but rather add to the understanding of its components within a different population from that in any of the above mentioned studies.

Earlier, Pierce (1995) also commented on how identity can shape investment through the example of "caregiver" Martina from her 1993 study (p. 21). In this study, Martina was a mother and drew on this as a source of authority when speaking with her native speaking landlord. By focusing on her identity as mother instead of a second language speaker, Martina was able to take the power within her dialogue. Her landlord was arguing that Martina's family had broken their lease agreement. As a mother, she knew she was responsible for providing a place to live for her children. Consequently, she engaged in a lengthy conversation with the landlord in order to resolve the issue. Martina most likely would not have done this if she had not had her identity as a mother.

**Power Dynamics**

Akin to the concept of investment is the role of power dynamics which governs L2 learners' interactions in the ESL setting. Norton (1997) claims that L2 learners' identities are

dictated by the power dynamics at play around them. Their L2 encounters can be empowering or likewise leave them feeling powerless which can determine the identities that they are able to embody. Norton (2000) further defines power as "the socially constructed relations among individuals, institutions and communities through which symbolic and material resources in a society are produced, distributed, and validated" (p. 7). This includes verbal exchanges in the L2, which will be the primary focus of this study. Of particular poignancy is Norton's use of the word "validated" which harkens back to Bourdieu (1977) who noted that speech can be, and often is, labeled as legitimate or illegitimate. It is either validated and received by the listener, or dismissed and interrupted. It was anticipated that such instances of acceptance or rejection among L2 learners would be documented in the current study.

There are many factors that affect power within discourse including being a minority within a community and access (Fairclough, 2001). Minorities are often labeled as the 'other'. This sets them apart, distancing them from power structures that include such things as businesses and government institutions, educational opportunities, and popular discourse. If minority language learners do not have access, or easy access, to locations and situations in which the L2 is being spoken, then the amount of L2 input they are receiving is limited. Furthermore without legitimate input, the L2 learner is unlikely to be able to produce output that will be considered legitimate. This access extends beyond metaphorical distance to physical distance. Many minorities reside together in an area that is separate from the majority, with whom the power resides. This is the case with the Burmese women that participated in this study. They are both a minority and residing away from the main business, educational, and governmental zones of the city. It was of interest to see what role this would play in the type of language input and output in which they would engage.

Furthermore, relations of power can manifest in the way learners identify themselves. In Peirce (1995), Martina described herself as "stupid" and "inferior" numerous times throughout journal entries because of a lack of English proficiency (p. 21). It is worth noting that Martina only felt this way when engaging with native English speakers. This implied that Martina saw herself in a position of less power in relation to those who spoke English fluently. If learners label themselves as "inferior" then they have acknowledged and to some degree have accepted this position even if they dislike it. It may be assumed that if a learner enters a conversation with the identity of inferiority, they will be unlikely to hold the power in the dialogue unless they are able to draw upon an alternative identity. This is because identity is relational, situated, and co-constructed. It was anticipated that the learners in the present study may use similar terms in their journal entries that would show the power dynamics as play around them.

**Additional Research**

A relevant study of the Burmese and Burundian refugees was conducted by Nawyn, Gjokaj, Agbenyiga, and Grace (2012) in Michigan. Since that study deals with the same population of refugees who were in very close geographical proximity to the participants in the present study, I will review it in detail. Elements of identity, language socialization, investment, and power dynamics are present within the researchers' findings. However, the purpose for conducting their research was different from that of the present study.

The Nawyn et. al. (2012) study investigated how degrees of linguistic isolation affected the assimilation process of Burmese and Burundian refugees in Lansing and Grand Rapids, MI. The researchers asked the following questions: "What happens to dispersed immigrants before they achieve functional bilingualism, particularly in receiving communities with poor linguistic

resources? What barriers might emerge to their integration, either in the processes that should expose them to English or in their feelings of belonging to and investment in their receiving communities?" (p. 259). There was a total of 36 participants from Burundi and Burma; however, the researchers did not specify how many participants were from each country. They were all adults who had spent a similar amount of time in the U.S., which is why refugees from these two populations were chosen.

The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with each of the participants, interviewed the settlement agencies providing services which included ESL classes, and conducted an additional interview with eight of the Burundian refugees. The participants were selected through the settlement agencies and translators. Special effort was given to recruit participants consisting of a family unit in order to gain an understanding of the dynamics between family members. The data from the interviews was recorded and transcribed with the help of translators. The researchers dealt with multiple languages including Burmese, Kirundi, and Swahili. The transcription data were analyzed using Atlas.ti qualitative software to identify key themes within their research.

The results indicated that linguistic isolation caused anxiety primarily about healthcare and access to other community services. The researchers were surprised to find that obtaining a job did not reduce the participants' anxiety (p. 266). It was not concluded why this was the case. The participants also expressed great displeasure with the resettlement agencies' services, including ESL. They felt that ESL instruction should be provided by a bilingual instructor or that they should at least be able to translate for their fellow students during instruction. There was additional frustration in the fact that they could not express their displeasure with anyone. Sometimes they felt disrespected by the agency and were not able to defend themselves.

The researchers mentioned that Burmese refugees exist primarily in three cities in Michigan. They focused on Lansing and Grand Rapids. My research focuses on the third city, Battle Creek. Similarly, I conducted interviews with the use of a translator who also aided me in identifying the participants for the study. I anticipated similar elements of frustration and isolation since the participants in my study had not achieved "functional bilingualism". While I did not interview a resettlement agency, I anticipated that discussion about a resettlement agency might transpire during interviews with the participants. Additionally, I have made an effort to choose women participants who are the mother of their family unit which is similar to what was done in the above study. Furthermore, some may argue that Battle Creek, where the participants in the present study are residing, is also a linguistically poor and isolated area.

The present study uses identity, language socialization, investment, and power dynamics, as a framework for investigation. It is expected that elements of all three components will be observed since they are so closely entwined. The following questions will be used as a guide: 1.) What kind of naturalistic encounters are the Burmese women having in the L2? 2.) What are the women's reactions to these encounters? 3.) Are investment, power dynamics, and identity themes present within the women's reports of their L2 encounters?

## Chapter 2 Method

### Participants

The participants in this research are five Burmese women from Chin State, Burma currently living in Springfield or Battle Creek, MI. All of their names have been replaced with participant numbers which the women elected to use during the research process in order to protect their identity and personal information. They were asked if they would like to use pseudonyms, but told me that they wanted to use numbers instead. The participants numbered themselves as they saw fit. It was important for me to let the participants have complete control of how they were referred to in the study, because I did not want to take a position of power by labeling them. They range in age from 28-51 and are mothers that have their children residing with them. Their children range in age from 3 to 32. It was important to the study that the women were mothers, because this likely increased the number of roles that the women took upon themselves. For example, they may have talked to teachers at their child's school or taken their children shopping for clothes.

The women in the study all spoke multiple languages or dialects. The L1s of the women varied slightly by local dialects and the official language of Burma. Their reported L1's are as follows: Participant 1 – Burmese, Participant 2 – Falam, Participant 3 – Falam, Participant 4 – Lumbang, and Participant 5 – Hakha. The women also reported speaking other languages as follows: Participant 1 – A little bit of English, Participant 2 – Hakha, Burmese, and Lumbang, Participant 3 – Burmese, Tedim, and Hakha, Participant 4 – Burmese, Falam, and Tlaisun, Participant 5 – Burmese, and Thlantlang. As can be seen, all participants speak Burmese. All

began learning English in school while residing in Burma. They began learning English while in kindergarten except for Participant 5 who began studying English in 5th grade.

Their length of residency ranges from 9 months to 4 years. Participant 1 was a housewife in Burma. Participants 2 and 4 worked as childcare providers in Burma. Participant 4 additionally worked for 6 months while in Malaysia. Participant 3 worked at a restaurant in Malaysia. Participant 5 was a student in Burma. Two of the participants are currently employed. Participant 1 works at a factory. Participant 2 works in childcare. Participant 3 indicated that she is currently seeking employment.

Table 1: Participants' Biographical Information

| Participants | Age | Age of Children | L1 | Other Languages Spoken | Length of Residency | Occupation Prior to the U.S. | Occupation Now |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | 51 | 32, 31, 29, and 26 | Burmese | English | 4 years | Housewife | Factory |
| Participant 2 | 44 | 20, 18, 15, 8 and 2 | Falam | Hakha, Burmese, and Lumbang | 2 years | Childcare | Childcare |
| Participant 3 | 36 | 13, 10, and 3 | Falam | Burmese, Tedim, and Hakha | 2 years | Worked at Restaurant | No Job |
| Participant 4 | 29 | 3 1/2 | Lumbang | Burmese, Falam, and Tlaisun | 9 months | Worked briefly in Malaysia and Childcare | Applying for Jobs |
| Participant 5 | 28 | 4 and 5 | Hakha | Burmese, and Thlantlang | 4 years | Student | Housewife |

As discussed above, identity is situational and contextualized, extending across time and space. As such, it is important to briefly discuss the geographical and political environment from

which these participants came. Chin State is located in North West Burma and borders India. It is geographically distanced from the political center. The residents of Chin State are ethnic minorities. The majority ethnicity in Burma is Burman. From 1852 – 1948 Burma was under British control, and hence English became an important language in business and education (Allot, 1983). Once Burma had gained independence, an effort was made to promote the use of Burmese over English. The government assisted in publishing textbooks and other materials in Burmese in an effort to both unite and spread the language. This unification effort had a special focus on the ethnic border regions of Burma which included Chin State. There was fighting against the Burma Army in the ethnic regions. Hence, the government began to use the Burmese language as a way to control these populations. They trained youth from the various ethnic groups as teachers who would spread the Burmese language to their ethnic populations (p.147). Along with language, the spread of Buddhism was threatening minority Christians and Muslims that lived in the ethnic regions. As can be seen in Table 1, all the participants in the current study spoke Burmese as well as their ethnic language. The women have now entered the United States where once again, they must learn the language of power taught in schools and used in business.

**Researcher Positionality**

I elected to work with this group of women after connecting with their community as a volunteer at the Burma Center in Battle Creek, MI. Over the period of a year, I learned about Burmese culture and the Burmese community within greater Battle Creek. I participated in their cultural events and helped in ESL classes at the Burma Center. I also became a leader of a Burmese youth support group. It is through the personal connections that I have developed that I was able to gain access to the participants in the present study.

As I do not speak Burmese, the help of an interpreter and translator was enlisted. It should be noted that the participants were recruited through the interpreter with whom I have built a friendship. All of the participants knew each other and the interpreter. Some of the participants had met me before as well. This allowed for a comfortable and safe environment during the data collection process.

My positions during the data collection process seemed to be multiple and variable. In one way I was an insider in the community, albeit peripherally. I engaged in some cultural and community events as well as maintained relationships within the Burmese community. However, I was an outsider in that I am an American, native-English speaker, and Caucasian. I was very much studying an ethnic community that I did not belong too. At points during the interviews, participants used pronouns such as "we" and "they". "We" referred to Burmese people and "they" referred to English speaking Americans or white people. While I was the researcher, I had one participant thank me for my project and one participant say that they were praying for me and my paper. I think that this shows that at least some of the participants viewed me not as a distant researcher who was removed from the community, but as a friend. In that way, I felt welcomed into the community. Furthermore, I also filled the role of researcher as educator. On a couple of occasions, the participants asked me about American culture. I was the source of their information and hence was teaching them to some degree. I would even say that there were moments when I indentified as a participant, joining in their conversation and giving my opinion when asked.

Overall it was important for me to reflect on my positionality before, during, and after the research process in order to avoid romanticizing the participants. As Lee & Simon-Maeda (2006)

warned, studying a minority group as a member of the majority can be dangerous. I wanted to avoid promoting hegemonic beliefs and false ideas of liberation.

**Materials**

The data collection occurred in three different formats in an effort to triangulate the data including questionnaires, unstructured interviews, and participant journals. The interviews were conducted with the help of an interpreter due to the English proficiency level of the participants. The questionnaires were translated into the participants' native language and they kept their journals in their native language. It was especially important to allow the participants to keep their journal entries in their native language so that they were able to fully express themselves. The overall format and structure of the materials mirrors that of Peirce (1993). Primary differences between Peirce's research and this study arise from the participants and the length of the research. The participants in Peirce's study were all voluntary immigrants to Canada, save for one refugee. The participants in the present study are all asylum seekers and are from South East Asia which is unlike the origins for Peirce's participants. The present study also took place over the course of three months as opposed to the yearlong study that Peirce conducted.

To start the research, each participant was asked to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire focused on basic biographical information, investment of the participant in the L2, and identity. The questions were taken and modified from Hansen (2006). Some of the information regarding L2 use and investment was collected in a Likert-Scale format, the benefits of which are its flexibility and brevity over other forms of data collection (Dörnyei, 2001). (See Appendix for more information.)

There was a total of four unstructured interviews over a period of three months. The contents of the participants' journal entries were used as a springboard for these interviews. The participants were encouraged to elaborate and reflect further on their recorded L2 encounters. The use of unstructured interviews gives the researcher the freedom that can be vital in exploring unanticipated variables (Dörnyei, 2001). This was crucial for gathering information about the participants' journal entries because each participant had their own perspective and personal experiences that sometimes differed in ways that were not expected. Additionally, the unstructured interviews explored events that the participants did not record in their journals. In this way, the interviews were a combination of new information and additional details about recorded journal entries. They also served as a time for comment on other participants' stories, views, and ideas. This gave insight during the data collection process on what themes may have been developing. It undoubtedly shaped the content of the interviews and journal entries as the study progressed.

Journal entries were utilized similarly to those found in Peirce (1993). Each participant recorded their encounters with native English speakers and their own personal use of English in those situations. The participants had a sheet that they could refer back to while creating their journal entries. The sheet provided information that the participants might have wanted to include in their entries. The sheet was presented as a guideline and not as a set of rules to follow in an effort to keep their journal entries free from restriction, which could have inhibited unexpected themes from arising. (See the Appendix for more information)

**Procedure**

The data collection occurred over a period of three months. The participants met with the researcher and translator at the Burma Center in Battle Creek, MI which provides services to Burmese refugees in the area. On two occasions, the participants also met in the home of the interpreter. Here the participants were given the details of the research along with a question and answer period. They received a consent form written in their L1. It was stressed that the research was focusing on naturalistic L2 encounters and the participants were not being asked to report English use within the classroom. The questionnaire was then given to each participant. The interpreter and the researcher were on hand to answer any questions that the participants had in regard to the questionnaire. Then the participants were given the suggestion sheet to aid them in their journal entries. This was reviewed together with the help of the researcher and interpreter.

Following this, the participants independently kept their journals for a period of three months. Interviews were conducted about every two weeks to go over the content of the journals and whatever other information had arisen. It seems probable that the interviews might have inadvertently influenced the journal entries as the study progressed. However, participants were not explicitly told to alter their journal entries in any way. Three of the interviews occurred at the Burma Center and one interview took place at the interpreter's home. The interviews were audio recorded and interpretation occurred as necessary. Again, the journals were translated into English after the three month period of data collection.

# Chapter 3 Data Analysis and Results

## Data Analysis

All three data sources were looked at in a recursive manner in an effort to identify themes. A theme was considered to be any element that occurred multiple times across all five participants. For example, if all the participants used the same adjective throughout their journals to express emotions, I would consider this a theme. When a theme was found in one data source, the other data sources were reviewed with that theme in mind. A translator was of help during this process. Additionally, the participants decided to highlight sections of their journals that they felt were particularly important. These sections were given special attention by the translator in order to identify any themes that may have been considered important by the participants. Once the data had been sorted into themes, such as reoccurring words and locations of naturalistic L2 encounters, the researcher looked for any information that related to the precursory focus of identity, language socialization, investment, and power dynamics. The results will be discussed below organized by the three research questions.

## Results

1.) What kind of naturalistic encounters are the Burmese women having in the L2?

This question is broad in nature and could include many different components. I will first discuss the trends found within each of the three data sources in regards to location of naturalistic encounters. Following this, the primary types of interlocutors will be addressed including the duration of language use as reported by the participants.

The questionnaire that was completed by the participants indicated that English was being spoken at the grocery store, doctor appointments, and work. Other locations were not specified. The duration or other contextual information was lacking from the questionnaire data. However, all participants indicated on the questionnaires a negative feeling toward the naturalistic L2 encounters that were occurring.

Because the interviews were in group settings and participants often interjected comments back and forth, quantifying the number of times that each topic was mentioned did not seem effective. However, it can be said that across all four interviews, the participants mentioned speaking English at doctor's appointments. Stores, their apartments, and schools were also very common locations for English use that were discussed in the interviews. One predominant factor that connected almost all incidents and contexts in which the participants spoke/encountered English was their children.

The journal entries included many different accounts of naturalistic English encounters. Taking into consideration the frequency with which certain locations were mentioned and the number of participants mentioning the location, three primary types of encounters emerged. Speaking English while shopping was the number one type of naturalistic encounter. This included grocery shopping, clothing shopping, and shopping for other miscellaneous items. Such incidents were mentioned 32 times cumulatively by the five participants. Doctor appointments and other medical encounters were the second most frequent use of English recorded in the journals. These types of encounters were mentioned 18 times cumulatively by the five participants. The third type of English encounter occurred at job employment/placement facilities which was mentioned a total of nine times by four participants.

Overall, shopping and medical encounters were present across all three data sources. These two types of situations are where all participants are engaging in the use of English and are the most common type of situations according to the data. However, there could be other contexts that the participants chose not to report. It may also be important to note that Participant 2 wrote about attending English church sessions 11 times throughout her journal entries. While this was not consistent across the participants in the study, the majority of Burmese within the Battle Creek community attend church on a regular basis. There are Burmese church services, but as was noted by Participant 2, some Burmese do choose to attend church services held in English. This type of English encounter would require more extensive listening and some interaction with other members of the congregation and Sunday school teachers. No other participants described situations in which they were exposed to English for such long durations.

Table 2: Frequency by Location of Naturalistic L2 Encounters Per Participant as Recorded in Journal Entries

| Locations | Participant 1 | Participant 2 | Participant 3 | Participant 4 | Participant 5 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Shopping | 3 | 20 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 32 |
| Medical Encounters | 4 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 18 |
| Job Employment/Placement Facilities | 1 | 4 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 9 |
| Other Service Encounters | 1 | 13 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 16 |
| Phone | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| Letter | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Church | 1 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 |
| Restaurant | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Apartment | 0 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Public Areas | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Work | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| School | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |

As mentioned previously, the questionnaire did not yield any specific information regarding the interlocutors other than the fact that they were Americans. However, the interview data and journals described the majority of interlocutors as being cashiers or sales people that the participants encountered while shopping. Of a similar frequency were the encounters that the participants had with nurses, receptionists, and doctors. Sometimes race or ethnicity was mentioned by the participants. Participant two specifically mentioned talking to American women on multiple occasions as well as African American men and women. Participant 1 and Participant 4 (who became employed at a factory toward the end of the interview sessions) mentioned during the interviews that they spoke with Hispanic coworkers that were speakers of Spanish. In these situations, English was used as the mutual language of communication. Age of interlocutors was only mentioned directly by Participant 2 who wrote in her journal about speaking with an old man and woman at church.

The majority of participants were using English on a daily basis. However, the duration of their English encounters was often very brief. The data indicate that there are several main reasons for this. The first is that the participants had very limited English proficiency which logically would limit the length of any interaction in English. This is demonstrated in an excerpt from a journal entry written by Participant 5:

> I went to Life Span because Pomp (the machine to feed my baby food) was broken and I need a new one. When I got to the office, the receptionist asked me what I needed. I didn't know how to explain, so I showed the broken Pomp and said "Broken". She kept talking to me, but I couldn't reply even a single word as I don't speak English. Because I was able to say “I need a new one", we received a new machine in one week. I feel very embarrassed in front of the receptionist. It is so hard not being able to speak English.

In this excerpt, the participant’s exchange in English was very brief. She only spoke six words. This was not because the participant did not wish to speak more, but because as she says “I don’t

speak English". However, in this situation the communication was successful in that the participant received a new machine.

The second reason that exchanges in English were often brief, or even non-existent, is that the participants felt nervous about communicating in English and were afraid of failure. In the following example Participant 2 had an opportunity to speak English, but decided not to try because of fear.

> I went to Family Fare to buy some medicine- Omeprazole for my stomach. Because of my lack of English, I didn't dare to ask anyone so that I had to find the medicine on my own. Finally I found it. But, I bought the wrong medicine. This happened because I don't speak English and couldn't ask anyone. I know that the salesperson and cashiers are very nice and willing to help. I just don't dare to ask because I am too shy. My problem is that I am always worried before I speak English and while I am speaking English…

In this excerpt, Participant 2 is very direct about why she did not talk to the salesperson. While other participants did not always state the relationship between brevity and fear so explicitly, the theme was present throughout all three data sources and all five participants.

The third reason for shorter dialogues is that the interlocutors did not always seem to understand the participants when they attempted to communicate in English. Likewise, the participants did not always understand the interlocutors. Participant 3 shared this experience:

> I went to Family Health Center to get my medical appointment, but they don't understand what I wanted to say. I tried my best to explain, but they can't understand me at all. At last, I just feel like crying as it didn't work out.

There is no doubt that the participant wished to communicate more. However, the lack of understanding on the part of the interlocutor kept the conversation from progressing.

2.) What are the women's reactions to these encounters?

The reaction to the women's encounters with English was mixed and situational. As could be expected, the women often felt very sad and defeated when their conversations were not

successful. There was also a sense of relief when exchanges in English went well. There are many accounts across all three data sources in which the women's reaction to the English encounters was to study English with more intensity. Avoiding such communication breakdowns seemed to function as motivation for learning English.

Returning to Participant 3's experience at Family Health Center mentioned above, one can see that the unsuccessful exchange resulted in frustration or sadness. Participant 3 elaborated on her reaction to this encounter by writing:

> I feel so much in my heart for not being able to speak English. But, I don't even know how to express that feeling. I want to let other people know how I feel, but I don't know how to and I think it is not even enough to express in writing. It hurts in my heart that I can't speak English. I feel very small and discouraged. There are so many times that I cry because I can't speak English. Because of lack of language, I have to put up with some people who hate, curse, and look down on me.

This description is particularly important because the participant uses words that appear across all participants and all data sources. These words include "small", "discouraged", and "look down on". The fact that these words occur repetitively throughout the data sources indicates that these feelings are a typical reaction for the participants when they are unable to communicate.

On the other end of the spectrum, Participant 4 described her reaction to a successful encounter with English as follows:

> I went shopping with my brother. There are so many people lining up for the cashier. So, I tried to do a self-checkout and lined up for it. When my turn came, I started pressing the button on the computer. It went pretty good. But, the receipt didn't come out and I was looking around. I was tempted to ask the person who was standing at the desk. Then, I wondered if I would be able to understand him if he talked to me. And, I went and asked help with the English I have. It went well. Not so bad. So I feel very relief.

There are very few instances throughout the data in which a participant expresses happiness as a reaction to positive English exposure. The majority of the time the participants express relief, as

in this example, or describe the situation as being “not so bad”. This may imply that the participants usually have a negative mindset before engaging in an English dialogue. Hence, their anticipated outcomes either come to fruition or the participants can relax a bit knowing that the situation was not what they had expected.

The final trend throughout participant reactions to naturalistic L2 encounters is motivation. Participant 5 repeated this sentiment on multiple accounts saying “That's why I really need to learn English. I am thinking in my mind that I will try my best to learn English” and “I just want to go to school and learn English all the time.” Participant 1 said “I need to attend ESL.” Participant 2 said “It is very important for me to study English more.” These are just several examples of many instances throughout the three month period in which participants expressed such motivation in the face of failure. The initial questionnaire confirms these interview and journal findings. The participants were asked to rank how motivated they were to learn English on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very). Participants 1-4 indicated that they were very motivated while Participant 5 chose number 6. Additionally all of the participants indicated on the questionnaire that it was very important for them to be able to communicate effectively with native English speakers.

3.) Are identity, language socialization, investment, and power dynamics themes present within the women’s reports of their L2 encounters?

All four elements were present throughout the three data sources in varying amounts. Identity was the strongest theme and appeared in two forms. The first of these was identity as a mother followed by ethnic/national identity. Power dynamics was also a theme and mostly arose through the participants’ comments on how they believed others saw them and how they saw

themselves. The participants commented on power in relation to ethnic groups more than a particular interlocutor. While language socialization and investment were relevant to some of the interviews and journal entries, their prominence paled in comparison to identity and power dynamics. Hence, the following will primarily discuss the later two elements.

**Identity as Mothers**

The participants strongly identified themselves as mothers throughout the whole data collection process. They felt that their low English proficiency made it very difficult to fulfill their role as a mother, challenging their identity. During the interviews there was extensive dialogue about what it means to be a mother and how the women felt that they were falling short of being a good mother. Participant 5 shared an incident that occurred with her son who is in kindergarten. Her son brought home his homework assignment and wanted his mother to help him. The following exchange then occurred:

> And I said, I don't know, I don't know how to help you, I don't know this stuff. And he said no and he keep coming and grabbing me and I felt really sad because I can't even help with kindergarten homework. So I felt so bad and I felt so sad… So, my son with his age, I'm a hero. He think I can do anything for him. So, he doesn't even know I don't read English or I can't write English, or I can't speak English. So when I cannot help my son, um that's hurt my feeling. Um I know that I I need to help him as a mother. I would love to do it. But because I can't do the English part and when I see that I can't give him what he wants it makes me really sad and uh when he's, you know, away I cried.

As can be seen in the excerpt, Participant 5 believed that being a mother meant helping her son. It also meant fulfilling her child's belief that she is a hero. Her lack of English proficiency kept her from being the mother that she wants to be and was in Burma. Similarly, Participant 4 has a son who is currently in preschool. Her son will come home and ask her the English word for objects, such as a table. Participant 4 is unable to answer him and tells her son that he needs to

ask his teacher. While her son is not as upset about this as Participant 5's son, Participant 4 still feels sad because she is not able to fulfill her son's needs.

Along the same lines, Participant 3 believed that as a mother she has an obligation to protect her children. During the interviews she shared a story about her American neighbors that lived on the floor above her and her family. The oldest of the American boys always bullied her children. He would lock them out of the building and chase after them, making them cry. Participant 3's children would yell for her to help them. However, the American boy continued to bully her children even in her presence. She believed that this is because he knew that she could not speak English. Participant 3 wanted to yell at the American boy and tell him to stop or go and talk to his mother about the situation. However, she was not able to do so because her English proficiency was too low. Consequently, she was not able to fulfill her role as a mother. At this point in the interview, all of the participants said that they felt like they are not good mothers.

During a later interview, Participant 3 discussed her desire to talk to her children's teachers. She believes that being a mother means being involved in and supportive of a child's education. In the following excerpt, she not only refers to herself, but uses the pronoun "we" which may mean mom and dad or be referring to the Burmese community as a whole:

> Participant 3: I would like to go to the school and say Merry Christmas and greeting to the teachers, but because we don't speak English, I don't know how to do the conversation, so I just don't do it. I would love to do it, but it's very disappointing and … I love to say thank you and showing appreciation to the teacher that they've been taking care of my kids at school. But, because of I don't have the language skill I just can't express my feeling. Yeah, sometime make me feel very bad or sad, I know that that is a good thing to say thank you to the teacher. And that way the teacher will notice my kid and they will pay attention so that my kids get more improvement in school. I know that's a good thing to do as supportive as the mother. But, because of the language I can't do it so sometimes it crush down on my heart. Now, our kids know that their parents don't speak English.

> …they are always discouraged and they always look like they have low self-esteem too. Because other parents, American parents, their parents are speaking English. They can communicate with their teacher. They can do, involve a lot of things. But their parents can't do that. They know it. They feel like they don't fit in.
>
> Researcher: So, do your kids ever tell you they feel that way or you just know from observing?
>
> Participant 3: Yeah, they don't express, but by looking at them I can tell by their body language. Sometimes my kids say, mom can you come meet my teachers sometime? You know, talk to them…They say, mom you supposed to help me, but we can't.

From this excerpt it is also clear that Participant 3's children play a role in defining her identity as a mother as well. The children believe that the mother is "supposed to help" them. Yet, she is unable to fulfill this role because of her L2 proficiency. Furthermore, no mother wants her child to have low self-esteem, let alone be the cause of it. Here the mother feels that she is the reason that her kids do not "fit in" at school. This would only serve to perpetuate the participants' feelings that they are bad mothers. Throughout all of these accounts, language proficiency was the critical factor that was shaping the participants' identities as mothers. The relationship between language proficiency and identity as a mother seemed to be negative for these women. All of the women seemed to believe that if they had a greater command of English, their capacity to fill the role of a mother would improve.

**Ethnic and National Identity**

The next type of identity that will be discussed is ethnic and national identity. On the questionnaire the participants were asked if there were any situations in which they sometimes considered themselves to be Burmese, American, or a mixture of both. Four of the participants identified themselves as being Burmese in all situations. However, Participant 5 said "I never think myself as American. But, since I am living in America now, there is a time when I identify myself as a Burmese American." During the first interview, Participant 1 added that she is proud

to be Burmese. When asked if that meant that she wanted to reject American culture and not be considered American, she replied no. She said the reason that she only identifies as Burmese is because of the "language barrier". She used the terms "white people" and "Americans" during this dialogue which perhaps further reinforces the fact that she identifies herself as separate from that community. One may wonder what type of language socialization has occurred to leave the participants with the belief that being American means speaking English or being Caucasian. Participant 1 ended by saying that she "would like to learn the culture of Americans and uh also the language to fit in." The rest of the participants all responded in agreement. This seemed to imply that the women were not self-identifying as Burmese in an act of subverting the mainstream culture which can sometimes occur. Rather, their L2 proficiency has created a barrier that does not allow them to gain access to the American community.

This theme continued to present itself through the continued use of "we" in reference to the Burmese community and "they" to refer to Americans. Participant 3 said that the Burmese are a different ethnicity which means they are a different color and have other physical differences that separate them from Americans. She said that the ethnic identity extends beyond language to physical appearance.

> I don't think I can be myself, or we can be ourselves, around American. Um, because for instance I always tell my kid, if we gonna go outside, always make sure you wear nice clothes properly. You don't go out in your pajamas because we are different color already, different ethnic….So if you stick out already and if you don't wear yourself nicely or you don't behave properly they will even put you lower. So, I always tell my kids when we go outside, we need to wear nice clothes and we need to go clean and neat that way people don't look down on us. So, I feel like yes, we can't be ourselves. We can't just freely act whatever we want. We always need to be careful like what they might talk.

It should be noted here that Battle Creek, MI is primarily a Caucasian and African American community. The Asian and Hispanic populations are among the minority when compared to the

population as a whole. However, the participants seemed to link Americans and Caucasian English speakers together. Every time American was used, it was used to refer to this type of person. On the two occasions that a participant spoke English with an African American, it was specifically mentioned. If Caucasian English speaker is part of how the participants define what it means to be American, one has to wonder if they will ever identify themselves as American. Even if the participants increased their English proficiency, some elements of their physical appearance would not change.

Perhaps of equal importance is the fact that the participants seemed to unite over their struggles. When the term "we" was used to refer to the Burmese community, it was often used when discussing feelings of hardship. For example Participant 4 said "Because we have language barrier, we lost a lot of opportunity." Participant 3 said "So because of the language, we don't have language skill. We feel like we're a fool. We feel that we're stupid. We feel that we're dumb. And we feel like, I feel like we isolate ourselves. We withdraw from the crowd group because we are afraid to be with them you know." And went on to say "Yup, we feel different. We can't be ourselves around people who speak English." One could conclude from these comments that the participants' ethnic identity, being a part of this Burmese community, includes facing hardships caused by L2 proficiency. This raises the question for future research about whether or not Burmese refugees who do not face hardship because they are fluent in English still hold the same ethnic identity as these participants.

**Power Dynamics**

Following the theme of identity is power dynamics. As mentioned previously power was mainly discussed on a macro-scale instead of being discussed in relation to individual encounters

with the L2. On the initial questionnaire, only two participants made mention of unequal power relations. Participant 3 wrote, "Because I don't speak English, I feel like people (Americans) look down on me. My neighbors also look down on me." The phrasal verb "look down on" implies that one group is above another. Here, the group with more power is Americans and her neighbors. It is unclear to what ethnic group the neighbors belong. However, it may be assumed that her neighbors speak English. Similarly, Participant 1 wrote, "Living among Americans, I am looked down upon by some people because I am Burmese. Some look at me with the eyes that tell me how they look down on me." Again, the idea of Americans being superior is repeated. Participant 1, however, identified the reason for this unequal power as her ethnicity. Whereas, Participant 3 linked the unequal power to the fact that she doesn't speak English. In contrast, Participants 2 and 4 wrote that they do not feel discriminated against by Americans. In fact, Participant 4 wrote that "Americans are very understanding and I am happy." In between was Participant 5 who wrote that she feels that she is treated differently, but not in a bad way.

While the questionnaire elicited different responses, the journals and interviews indicated that all participants felt a lack of power and opportunities because of their English proficiency. Participant 4 shared her experience at the doctor's office. The participant was unable to effectively communicate with the doctor and as a result was scheduled for a mental health appointment when she had intended to discuss a faster than normal heartbeat. The appointment was rescheduled with her family doctor two times; on the last occasion, he refused to see her. Participant 4 would have liked to complain and insist that the doctor see her. However, she was not able to, commenting that she had "no power" and "because I don't have the language, I lost the power to say it. So that's how I suffer." In the journals, Participant 3 wrote, "I feel very small and discouraged. There are so many times that I cry because I can't speak English. Because of a

lack of language, I have to put up with some people who hate, curse, and look down on me." Again, the phrase "look down on me" is used which was seen in the questionnaire responses. She also used the word "small". Small is not a term that is typically associated with power. One could argue that the participants' use of small is akin to her feeling powerless. She continued to use this word frequently throughout her journal entries. The same phrase "small and discouraged" was repeated by Participant 1 who wrote "Because of my lack of English, I always feel small and discouraged everywhere I go." Not only can one argue that small indicates a lack of power, but it can also be argued that in order for something to be considered small, something larger must exist. In this situation, English is a necessity in order for the larger more powerful position to be occupied. Participant 1 is forced into a position of less power because she has not mastered enough English.

Likewise, Participant 2 was talking with a receptionist at the health center regarding medical discounts available to her. She was able to understand the receptionist's questions regarding her income, but was unable to understand much else. She described herself as feeling "very discouraged and so small". She then cited the cause of this as being her lack of English proficiency thinking, "If I were in Burma, I would have been able to ask in my language and she would have understood me very well." These same words "small" and discouraged" were also repeated multiple times by Participants 4 and 5. It is worth noting that this feeling of powerlessness does not necessarily have to do with the interlocutor's treatment of the ESL learner. While some participants experienced rude treatment because of their inability to assert power in a given situation, such as Participant 4 in the doctor's office, others feel powerless even when the interlocutor was kind. Participant 5 had such an incident at the bank. She had received a notice letter saying that she had not paid her credit card bill for the last two months. The

following except is from her journal regarding her conversation with the bank manager:

> I showed my bill to the manager and told her in English that I had already paid that bill. Then, she looked into an account and said the bill was for that account. I told her that it was not our account. She said sorry. And, I kept thinking in my head what to say in English. I tried to say something in English but couldn't say it. She said that I could take it easy and tell her what I wanted to say. But, I couldn't say it. So, I told her that I would be back, and I left. I was so embarrassed that I even sweat a lot. I was thinking in my head, "Oh, if it was in Hakha (Chin language), I would have been able to say what I want to say completely. What can I do? This is America now." Because of the language barrier, there are so many situations that I feel so small, discouraged and face many problems.

In this situation, the interlocutor told Participant 5 that she could "take it easy and tell her what [she] wanted to say." Obviously, the manager was being patient with the participant. However, the participant still felt powerless because she was unable to express herself fully. These types of situations were expressed throughout the journals and interviews. The participants often lost money, a type of power, because they were not able to claim the power in a dialogue due to their lack of English proficiency.

**Language Socialization**

The above excepts were illustrative of the two primary themes identity and power dynamics. However, there were two mentions of incidents during interviews and on the questionnaire that related directly to language socialization. Although these incidents were not representative of all participants, I believe they are still worth discussing briefly.

On the survey, Participant 4 wrote that the way she takes care of her children and communicates with her family has changed since moving to the U.S. During the first interview, Participant 4 elaborated on this saying that the way people communicate in the U.S. is very polite and friendly. She has adopted that part of U.S. culture and went on to say that "I try to practice

that even in my family." As for childcare, she explained that parents in Burma often discipline their children through yelling and spanking. In the U.S., Participant 4 has observed that parents often communicate with their children about inappropriate behavior. Time-out is frequently used as a consequence for younger children as opposed to spanking. Since learning about this aspect of U.S. culture, Participant 4 has adopted this practice with her own child. While this change in communication has happened between the members of the participant's family and not native English speakers, it came about because of the participant's observations and interactions with native speakers. As noted by Duff (2011) language socialization includes language competency which I would argue includes cultural practices. Here Participant 4 was in the process of adopting and implementing those cultural practices as a way of gaining language competency.

During the interviews, Participant 3 described her inability to communicate with her childrens' teachers. This was due to her lack of knowledge about this community of practice. She did not know how to appropriately express gratitude to teachers. Participant 3 said that in Burma, parents often bring gifts to teachers such as produce from their garden or livestock. These gestures are made along with the oral expression of gratitude. Since she was unsure of what to say and what type of gift to present to the teachers, the participant chose not to communicate with her childrens' teachers. This incident illustrates the crucial role language socialization plays in becoming a participating member in various communities of practice.

## Chapter 4 Conclusion

Overall, identity and power were the two main themes in the data that were collected. These two constructs interact with one another and are greatly influenced by language proficiency. This was to be expected as was discussed earlier in regard to minorities being labeled as "the other" by those in power (Faircough, 2001). The participants' identities were bound by their ability to speak English. Since they were not able to speak English with much fluency, they were unable to hold positions of power. Feeling powerless meant that they retained a negative self-identity and also were unable to gain access to resources that may have improved their English. This negative self-identity presented itself through the repetition of words like "small," "discouraged," and "looked down on". This is parallel to Martina in Peirce (1995) who referred to herself as "stupid" and inferior" (p.21). It was also present in the participants' reflections on their identity as mothers which was a part of Pavelenko & Blackledge's (2004) definition of identity (as cited in Duff, p. 35, 2012). Motherhood seemed to be a source of struggle as well as fuel for the women's investment in English as was seen in Skilton-Sylvester (2002) discussed earlier.

The lack of English proficiency forced the women to be dependent upon others. Often, they had to rely on their children or other family members in order to communicate. This dependency created by a lack of English skills did not just extend to translation. It extended to resources ---be it financial or physical support. This is very reminiscent of Norton's (2000) definition of power in which she notes the "symbolic and material resources in a society" (p. 7). Government programs, monetary discounts, or other goods were sometimes received and utilized by the participants. While this is not something to be embarrassed about, it is unfortunately sometimes stereotyped by people within their community. While it is true that people in the

participants' population sometimes benefit from government aid, one must ask why. I think that the information in this study gives an insight into the difficulty of being self-sufficient when one has not mastered the language used in business and education. It also teaches the community that perhaps spending money on English education would be more sustainable than only investing in various aid programs.

While it must be acknowledged that this study focused on only a small group of individuals whose personal experiences are not representative of all refugees, there are certain parts of the human experience which are universal. As such, perhaps the data yielded will allow educators to imagine what kind of situations their refugee students are experiencing. It may also encourage teachers who work with this population to learn about and value their students' experiences. In doing so, class lessons could be tailored to the specific needs of the students and may create a more open learning environment. For example, the curriculum could be broken up into units such as shopping or doctor visits. Students with expertise in an area can be a source of knowledge in the classroom, and their contributions can be used to build the curriculum. Perhaps a more functional approach versus a structuralist approach to ESL classes would benefit this type of population in that certain functions could be identified and applied immediately in situations where the ESL learners are encountering English. Instead of focusing on grammar points or tenses, the class could focus on chunks and language used in naturalistic English encounters that the students are having.

It should also be acknowledged that the data presented here are solely the women's account of their language learning experiences. It is the information that they chose to share and their perceptions of it. Perhaps using journals could have affected the type of information the women chose to share. The data seemed to yield stories that were negative experiences. This

may be the nature of journal writing in that people often write about things that are either exciting or frustrating. Perhaps more neutral experiences existed, but were not recorded. Additionally, an interpreter and translator were used throughout the whole process. While they are both professionals, some authenticity could have been lost in the translation of the data.

The women's accounts of their naturalistic L2 encounters add another layer and perspective to the current dialogue surrounding the topics of identity, language socialization, investment, and power dynamics in an L2. The participant size is small, but the information gathered from the participants' perspective is detailed. Such information would be nearly impossible to collect from a large participant group. This study also provides ecological validity that a different approach to this topic might lack.

While this study was telling of the women's language learning experiences, it focused mainly on identity as mother. This was a large part of the data collected. Future studies could analyze other aspects of identity not discussed here. Negativity was prevalent in the women's accounts. Future researchers could conduct research over a longer period of time and may find a more balanced account. Also, the data did not account for their family members' perspectives. Future research could investigate the same constructs as the present study, but from the perspectives of the children. Many times the children translated for their mothers if they were able to do so. This role undoubtedly influenced their identity and overall language learning experience. Additionally, the husbands were rarely mentioned by the married participants across all data sets. Future research could investigate their identity as fathers which may yield as much data as the women's identity as mothers. It would also provide a more balanced view of the Burmese community as a whole. From a broader perspective, research could also be done on the Burmese community's identity in relation to the C2/L2 community. It would be interesting to

investigate how the Burmese community is labeled by the English speaking community members or vice versa.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

**Questionaire**

I. Biographical Information

1.) Name: _____

2.) Age: _____

3.) Phone Number: _____

4.) How long have you been in the United States? _____

5.) What was your occupation before coming to the U.S.?

_____

6.) What is your occupation now? _____

II. Language Background

1.) At what age did you start learning English? _____

2.) Did you study English in Burma? _____ If so, did you study it in school? _____

3.) What is/are your native language(s)? _____

4.) Do you speak any other languages? _____

III. Opinions

1.) In what situations do you feel different when you speak English than when you speak your native language? Please explain?

_____

_____

_____

_____

2.) Do you feel that it is easy or hard to learn English? Why?

_____

_____

_____

_____

3.) Do you think people treat you differently because you are not a native speaker of English? If so, how?

_____

_____

_____

_____

4.) Have you adopted any parts of American culture since you have been in the U.S.?

_____

_____

_____

_____

5.) Do you feel like it is important to learn English? Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

_____

6.) Are their situations in which you consider yourself to be Burmese, American, or a mixture of both? Please explain:

_____

_____

_____

_____

For the next two questions, please circle the number that best represents your feelings.

How motivated are you to learn English?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(Not at all) (Very)

How important is it to you to be able to communicate effectively with native English speakers?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

(Not at all) (Very)

**Thank you for your participation!**

## APPENDIX B

**Journal Suggestion Sheet**

For the next three months you will be recording your experiences speaking English with native English speakers. When writing about those moments, you may want to include the following information:

- Who you were speaking with
- What you were talking about
- Where you were speaking English
- How the conversation went
- What you were thinking before, during, or after the conversation
- How you were feeling before, during, or after the conversation
- What could have made the conversation better

This is just a list of suggestions. Feel free to write about other things that are not on the list that are important to you.

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