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LEARNING ENGLISH IN A
MIDWESTERN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL:
A CASE STUDY OF AN ELL VIETNAMESE STUDENT

presented by

Yanan Fan

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of the requirements for the

__Doctoral__   degree in   _____Teacher Education_____

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LEARNING ENGLISH IN A MIDWESTERN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL:
A CASE STUDY OF AN ELL VIETNAMESE STUDENT

By

Yanan Fan

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Teacher Education

2006

# ABSTRACT

## LEARNING ENGLISH IN A MIDWESTERN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY OF AN ELL VIETNAMESE STUDENT

By

Yanan Fan

The goal of this ethnographic case study is to examine what it means to learn English within the sociocultural contexts of a mid-sized Midwestern urban high school, focusing on a Vietnamese teenager. The data set consists of fieldnotes from key educational sites; interviews of students, teachers, and a first language aide; and collected artifacts (e.g., photocopies of student's written work, class handouts and syllabi, audio-taped interactions of the student in classrooms, visual images of sites, and site documents). Based on an inductive analysis of the data set, I asserted that the student's learning experiences are embedded in and influenced by the sociopolitical assumptions of a larger educational system that defines second-language learning. The student was lost in the institution's inconsistent vision of literacy while negotiating expectations and opportunities for participation in varied classrooms with little support and resources. In the meantime, the student's language proficiency, immigrant history, ethnicity, race, gender, and the model minority rhetoric all figure into her identity formation in the peer self-segregation of her school. This study extends the understanding of the complexities of second language learning, of the challenges adolescent immigrant students face in secondary schools, and of the cultural construction of the model minority rhetoric. It also contributes to the methodological discussion on conducting ethnographical studies by offering a reflection of the researcher's own negotiation of her relationship with the participants, considering issues of membership, reciprocity, and power.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# LIST OF TABLES

# LIST OF FIGURES

# CHAPTER 1
# INTRODUCTION

> [Many] argue that children should quickly be "taught" English or claim that they as young children "learned" English easily. What is not very clear is exactly what the public understands by the terms *to teach* and *to learn* English.
>
> -- Guadelupe Valdès (2001, p.12)

Ninth grader Thao and I are sitting together at a table in the school library chatting about English. At the age of 15, Thao is much taller than her Vietnamese female peers. Her straight dark hair is tied neatly behind and it is long enough to reach her waist. Thao does not smile much, but when we talk, she looks into my eyes and listens. She immigrated to the Midwestern city of Maple Creek from Vietnam in 1999. Two years later, I left China and became a graduate student at Michigan State. I am telling Thao about my frustration at not being able to understand a variety of Englishes, for example, the African American Vernacular English, a dominant language used at Linton, an urban high school.

Yanan: But I don't understand some of their words, like "Yo!" YOU[1] taught me that. But there are many other words I don't understand.

Thao: Because you Chinese.

Yanan: But you speak Vietnamese. You understand [African American Vernacular English]?

Thao: Because like, I learn USA in Vietnam. A lot USA stuff. And I come here already know English. I hang out with black people. I have friends black stuff. No white people. Black!

Thao not only pointed out the need to learn "a lot USA stuff", but also emphasized the importance of "hanging out" with friends – a socialization process that she believed gave her an edge over me in understanding variation in English. For Thao,

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[1] See Appendix for conventions used in the presentation of transcripts.

English was always linked to the contexts of "USA" and "black stuff", along with her involvement or participation in these contexts. Thao wisely informed me of a theoretical base for my exploration into learning English as a second language in the US. This study took a close look at Thao in her first year of high school in order to understand her learning and participation as contextualized cultural practices in the postindustrial Midwest.

## Statement of Problem

As the immigrant population grows each year[2] and as a fast growing number of English language learners (ELLs) enter into America's urban classrooms, the ELLs' experiences in schools and their academic progress have provoked heated discussions as to the ways of educating a more ethnically and racially heterogeneous student population and of responding to the rise of cultural, social, and demographic diversities in schools. English literacy education of immigrant adolescents has become a crucial issue for educators, policy makers, and the society at large (e.g., Genesee, 1994; Adger, 1996; Lucas, 1997; Crawford, 1998), yet research that examines secondary-level immigrant students in mainstream context is disappointedly scarce (Faltis, 1999). Although it may be easier for teenage ELL students than it is for younger students to learn English as L2 with the support of their L1 (Krashen, 1997), for example, to acquire morphology and syntax (Valdès, 2001), the greatest challenge facing immigrant adolescents is how to

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[2] Changes in immigration laws from 1965 to 1990 contributed to increased migration from abroad and generated greater diversity among the newcomers. By March 2002, the Census bureau estimated that 32.5 million people were foreign-born. The drastic change in this foreign-born population between 1970 and 2002 includes a decrease in Europe-born U.S. residents from 62 percent to 15 percent and an increase in Asia-born U.S. residents from 9 percent to 25 percent. The largest foreign born resident group is Latin Americans (especially central Latin Americans), who also witness a population increase from 19 percent to 52 percent in the United States (Census 2000).

master English as medium of communication in school, while at the same time, learning academic subject areas (Faltis & Wolfe, 1999; Duff, 2001). In terms of the time span of learning a second language, it may take as long as five to nine years for secondary age ELL students to obtain native-like English-speaking levels (Collier, 1989). This timeline becomes even tighter when these ELL students are also supposed to make progress in various subject areas while learning academic Englishes – the vocabulary and discourses that match the disciplinary subjects. Therefore, secondary school age students have, indeed, much less time but greater challenges than do elementary age students in meeting all the academic and language requirements for graduation, postsecondary education, or workplace competition (Chips, 1993; Adger & Peyton, 1999).

The students' challenges are more critical and complicated when we take a closer look at the process of learning in secondary school as situated practices within the social, cultural, and political contexts of schooling, language education, and immigrant education. For example, the compartmental nature of secondary school instruction (Harklau, 1999) may not provide consistent and supportive language learning contexts for ELL students, who are mainstreamed into regular classes but in need of quality native language instruction to facilitate decoding the language (Crawford, 1998) and to support participation in actually using the new language in practices in school. Moreover, the challenges can be overwhelming when mastering academic content in L2 is combined with other social challenges. These challenges include making a transition to young adulthood, balancing the values treasured in home cultures and in the new cultures (Lucas and Katz, 1996), and developing a sense of self and others within the institution (Harklau, 2000) and with peers (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Gunderson, 2000).

Literacy practices among ELL students are all the more pertinent in the postindustrial Midwest, a region that can be contextually different than other parts of the country. First, the Midwest is presumably homogeneous when compared with the coastal states, such as California and New York, where immigrant populations from all over the world gathered and settled centuries ago. For example, the history of Chinese immigrant communities in San Francisco, California can be dated back to the nineteenth century during the Gold Rush years (Chen, 2000), whereas the first group of Southeastern refugees arrived almost a hundred years later in the Midwestern city where this study took place. However, the Midwest has been undergoing a fast population change over the past decades. According to Census 2000, the largest percentage increase of Spanish speakers was in the Midwest, and Asian and Pacific Island-language speakers increased most rapidly in this region as well (U. S. Census Bureau, 2003). The changing demographics in the Midwest urges concerted research efforts to understand the experiences of the immigrant youth in this geographical region that has witnessed drastic growth of diversity for the past decades.

As a result, the Midwest contexts are less familiar and under-investigated. Scholarly work that examines English language and literacy development among ELL school children in this region is rare. Existing studies of ELL literacy took place primarily in the coastal states (e.g., Moll, 1992; Harklau, 1994; Faltis & Wolfe, 1999; Valdès, 2001) where the researchers have situated their work in the long cultural history of experiences of tightly organized immigrant communities in these regions. For instance, these experiences have been marked along the legal history of the rise (especially after

the Supreme Court case, *Lau v. Nichols*, 1974[3]) and the waves of decline (e.g.,

California's pass of Proposition 227[4] as one of those waves) of bilingual education in the

state of California and in the whole country as well[5]. In the Midwest, however, little has

been done to understand what everyday literacy practices are like for ELL students and

their teachers. Researchers must turn to ethnography (Hancock, 2001) to understand the

students' perspectives and to explore the challenges and sources of support they have in

literacy practices.

## Nature and Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to examine what it means to learn English

within the complex sociocultural contexts of a mid-sized Midwestern urban high school,

focusing on Thao, a Vietnamese teenager. The study was grounded in a sociocultural

perspective; it examines learning English as a second language as a social practice in

which students negotiate cultural and language borderlines while crossing them with

available resources. Rather than discovering the best practices, I explored the complex

process of language learning while Thao, as a social being, interacted, employed, and

interpreted language opportunities in various school settings. Given the population

changes across the United States and a lack of attention to the literacy education of

secondary-level immigrant students in Midwestern programs, this study attempted to

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[3] In *Lau v. Nichols,* a Chinese parent took the school board of San Francisco to court, arguing that the school program did not cater to the needs of non English speaking children. The Supreme Court unanimously ruled in favor of the Chinese parent.
[4] Proposition 227, otherwise known as the Unz initiative, passed by California voters in 1998, required that parents initiate the process by which their children were enrolled in bilingual education classes, thereby taking away the schools' ability to place students in bilingual classes as they saw fit. Furthermore, it limited students' placement in bilingual classrooms for a length of two years. A controversial law, it has sparked and continues to draw debates over the language and educational needs of ELL students (Shea, 2001, p. 4)
[5] See Crawford (1995) and Paulston (1981) for detailed history of bilingual education in the US.

build on sociocultural theories of learning and literacy and to extend the conversation into areas of second language learning as situated in a Midwestern urban school context.

## Research Questions

The overall research question of this study was, what did learning English mean as it was socially enacted by diverse participants within Thao's world in the context of Linton, her high school. I focused on four groups of sub-questions in order to understand the sociocultural complexities of learning.

The first group dealt with the contextual conditions in which Thao's learning took place. I asked:

a.) How did broader contexts – both national and local policy levels - impact local institutional practices and available resources?

b.) How did multiple layers of institutional practices and resources influence Thao's experiences of language learning? These layers entail the nature, form, and values of the local available programs for ELL students like Thao.

The second group of sub-questions focused on the everyday pedagogical practices in the mainstream classrooms that Thao attended. I asked:

c.) What were the expectations and demands of literacy and learners in these classrooms?

d.) What kind of institutional support was available for Thao to participate in varied writing practices?

e.) What were the academic challenges Thao faced in the classrooms?

f.) How did Thao cope with these challenges?

The third group investigated the process of Thao's identity negotiation in learning English. I asked:

g.) How did Thao's identity negotiation unfold?

h.) What did it mean to be an "English language learner," "a good student," "a good Vietnamese girl" as such identity rhetoric was often expected of Thao by varied participants?

i.) In what manner did identity negotiation reflect or create opportunities for Thao to participate and interact in socially organized activities? (e.g. Did and how did Thao use cultural stereotypes/assumptions to her advantage?; How did Thao understand the language of power?; What strategies did she use to access the language of power?)

The last group of questions aimed at the methodological considerations in conducting and writing up this ethnographic case study. I asked:

j.) In what manner did power play out in the research itself (e.g. participants' varied use of English in the study)?

k.) What was the impact of my relationship with varied study participants on their expressions, actions, perspectives on the issues under study?

## Literature Review

This study was built on the sociocultural conception that language learning is constructed by individuals and communities in socially organized practices, and that language is the symbolic tool people use when they participate in these situated cultural practices and activities. For 9th grader Thao, these symbolic tools included her speech in both written and spoken forms, as well as the paralinguistic features of her speech, such

as her tones, stresses, and her use of body languages. As the "tool of tools"[6], language (both Thao's L1, Vietnamese and L2, English) organized and channeled her feeling and served as both the intra and interpersonal means[7] of her social participation. That is, languages mediated Thao's learning as it happened in the social interactions between herself and people around her, and then languages facilitated her appropriation of meaning with the resources available to her. In short, from a sociocultural perspective, as people go through the activities of their daily lives – through the interactional situations and events – they simultaneously negotiate their social role vis-à-vis other people, their understanding of how the world works, and of how language itself works (Dyson, 1997).

The sociocultural frame is jointly informed by cultural psychology (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Cole, 1996; Bruner, 1996) and the ethnography of communication (e.g., Gumperz, 1971; Hymes, 1972; 1974; 1982; Szwed, 1981; Heath, 1982; Saville-Troike, 1989), both having their roots back in the 1970s when North America began to witness a growing diversity and ethnical and racial heterogeneous student populations (Moll, 2001). The cultural-historical theory of cultural activity and symbol development by Russian psychologist Vygotsky has inspired educational researchers since the publication of *Minds in Society* (1978). Among all Vygotsky's ideas, two were particularly influential to this study. First, participation is at the heart of Vygotskian notion of cultural activity. For Vygotsky, learning takes place through culturally appropriate participation in activities. Vygotsky proposed the *interpsychological plane* and *the intrapsychological plane* to theorize the dynamics that occur between and within individuals as they participate in activities. That is,

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[6] I borrow the phrase "tool of tools" from Cole, 1996, p.108.
[7] The interpsychological plane and the intrapsychological plane in the learning process, as proposed by Vygotsky (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000).

participation not only involves people using past experience to anticipate recurrent actions, but also involves them understanding the norms of the activities and the roles of themselves in relation to other participants. Second, according to Vygotsky, people's use of symbolic tools to communicate is fundamental to human development. Speech is one of the key tools to mediate relations between participants and to regulate their emotions. People, tools, and cultural construction of tools and artifacts are therefore inseparable. Vygotsky also accentuates the significance of language and its role in enabling communication and in internalizing communication through *inner speech.*

The interest in the Vygotskian theory of learning was strengthened by its use within the ethnography of communication. The ethnography of communication was developed by Dell Hymes and other researchers in the early 70s. Ethnography of communication is an anthropological approach that examines the interplay of social structures and language use. Hymes (1974, 1994) advocates using *event,* rather than sentence, as the unit of analysis in the study of relations between people. He argues that "it is not linguistics, but ethnography, not language, but communication, which must provide the frame of reference within which the place of language in culture and society is to be assessed" (1994, p. 11). Therefore, within the social matrix of language learning, a child is not only acquiring a system of grammar, but also the use of the language and ways to assess the purposes, places, participants, and channels of communication in a communicative event. This dual process also provides the child with an opportunity to build up attitudes and beliefs regarding the elements (topic, speakers, purpose, channel, etc.) in the event. Hymes states that language acquisition resides in the child's communicative competence, the "ability to participate in its society as not only a

speaking, but also a communicating member" (Hymes, 1974, p. 75).

Thus, as in Vygotskian theory, learning happens through participation in cultural activity. This becomes very relevant for second language learning and teaching[8]. The classroom, for Hymes, is organized in a series of social events where participants may come from all different backgrounds and have their own personal histories. Ethnography of communication is welcomed in ESL research as it enables researchers to take a closer look at:

> sociocultural processes in language learning, how institutional and societal pressures are played out in moment-to-moment classroom interaction, and how to gain a more holistic perspective on teacher-student interactions to aid teacher training and improve practice. (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 575)

The sociocultural view of the situatedness of language learning also requires critical lenses to examine the power relations in people's use of language. Bakhtin's (1986) philosophy of language, namely the dialogic nature of language, complements the sociocultural landscape in that it highlights the complex world where class, race, ethnicity, and cultural traditions are situated in the cultural practices of speech and texts (see Dyson, 1997). Power relations also exist in the broader institutional and sociopolitical contexts where embedded ideologies, beliefs, and values are reproduced in local social practices (New London Group, 1996; Barton, 2000; Norton, 2000; Street, 2000; Hawkins, 2004).

Using the sociocultural framework, researchers have been trying to investigate the nature of learning and teaching in the contexts of school and community. For example, in her milestone multi-case, muti-site ethnography on connections between

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[8] See Moll (2001) on connection between Vygotskian theory and ethnography of communication.

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school and home literacy, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) describes in great detail the interactions of the townspeople in Roadville, Trackton and Midtown, each having unique socioeconomic and ethnic demographics. Heath demonstrates that literacy is more than the ability to read and wirte and that literacy practices are learned through a child's culture in which social activities, religious activities, family roles, and community's sense of power relations and language codes all play a part. Therefore, as Heath argues, children arrive at school with a set of skills and beliefs about language and these skills and beliefs are not always respected in school. Heath suggests that if schools and teachers want to expand students' literacy, they will need to reassess their expectations for literacy in the classroom and learn to draw upon resources from children's lives.

Through her ethnography of verbal interactions between students and teacher on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in central Oregon, Susan Philips (1972) develops the notion of *participation structure* to describe the conditions for speech use in classroom settings and she demonstrates that students are more comfortable and willing to interact in classroom situations where conditions for verbal interaction are similar to those in their community social settings. Therefore, Philips cautions that teachers should consider the social conditions that enable students' verbal participation and ways to respect students taking the initiative to speak in class. Courtney Cazden (1988) uses *IRE* (teacher Initiation, student Response, and teacher Evaluation, see Mehan, 1979) to describe the "default pattern" of the interaction which constantly puts students on the spot, creates social distance, and provokes discussions about power and imposition as enacted in the classroom. Classroom interactions, according to Cazden, are reflections of school as a social organization of participation. School is also a place of enacted human relations

and a place of power distribution and imposition.

Ethnographic studies have also reached beyond the wall of schools. In a joint effort to study language practices among linguistically marginalized immigrants in Great Britain, a group of researchers and educators (Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000) carried out projects that investigated various macro social factors, such as specific historical processes[9], the development of a post-colonial order, international labor migration, the movement of refugees, minority rights movements, and global changes of a social and political nature. Among them, for example, Mark Sebba (Chapter 9, Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000) discusses the social and ideological dynamics in the orthographic practices of Creole writers who produce a hybrid text that is neither recognized by conventions of Standard English orthography, nor by those of Creole. The theme, also shared among other studies in the volume, is that the acquisition and use of language and literacies are inevitably tied to the uneven power relations between ethnolinguistic groups.

**Participating in Contextualized Practices**

A sociocultural perspective on language acquisition emphasizes not only the macro political climate of language education, but also the micro contexts of learning and pedagogical practices. In North America, researchers have been examining various contexts in English learning among immigrant and ELL students (Saville-Troike, 1989; Spolsky, 1990; Kramsch, 1995; Hancock, 2001). These contexts range from broad educational movements and policies to particular situations in classroom, community, or home (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Moll & Whitmore, 1993; Valdès, 2001). Indeed, as the literature shows, all layers of contexts interact and intertwine with each other. From

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[9] For example, Saxena traces the religio-political history of South Asian Muslims to understand their language practices in West London (Martin-Jones, 2000, pp. 275-299).

English over the world to English taught in inner-city high school classrooms, the world of English as both a global language and a local language deserves our attention if we are to understand the cultural and political implications of what it means to learn English as a second/foreign language.

Situating English in broader ideological backgrounds, Pennycook (1995) points out the danger of not problematizing a broad range of social, historical, cultural, and political relationships behind the language. For Pennycook, English as an international language is "a language of imperialism and of particular class interests" (p. 39). He quotes a compelling study conducted by Tollefson (1995) on Southeast Asian refugees' English learning experiences in the United States. The findings showed that many English language programs failed to serve as communities for language socialization, proficiency, and adaptation. Instead, the programs limited English language resources and opportunities and designated refugee immigrants to low-paying jobs. At the same time, the dominant English-speaking American society seemed to have little interest in learning from, or even knowing of, the languages and cultures of the immigrants (Tollefson, 1995). The author maintains that immigrant ELLs were tracked to finally fill in the social, economic, and political hierarchy.

At the 4th International Conference on Language and Development, Tollefson (1999) continued to use observations of Southeast Asian immigrant students' language development to discuss the impact of the notion of Standard English on their learning. He argued that the Standard English ideology often failed to recognize the sociocultural experiences of their learning English. For instance, some Vietnamese immigrants picked up a hybrid Vietnamese English produced among the native Vietnamese of the

community. In city neighborhoods where immigrant population mingled with African American population, school age Vietnamese students were powerfully influenced by the African American culture – African American Vernacular English (AAVE), hip hop, and language through other media. Consequently, Tollefson observed that many Vietnamese students acquired the AAVE, an equally well-developed language, more naturally, yet the language was not recognized and encouraged by the official school discourse. Standard English ideology carried political agendas and it missed the communicative, situated nature of second language learning (Tollefson, 1999).

In an ethnographic study of the lives and experiences of four Mexican middle school students, Guadalupe Valdez (2001) examines both the policy and the instructional dilemmas in English language education of immigrant children in California. Setting up her study against the context of California's ban of bilingual education in the 1990s, Valdez analyzed students' use of oral and written languages and the nature of their participation in various programs, classrooms, and communities. She documented how access to English and to academic content was denied by the same institutional structures that were designed to help immigrant students, and how students become frustrated and choose to not learn in such contexts.

In her three-and-a-half-year ethnographic case studies of second language learning in high school, Linda Harklau (1994) investigated the effects of tracking on four Chinese ESL students at a large suburban, racially and linguistically diverse northern California high school. She asserted that tracking left many ELL students in low-track mainstream programs, which placed the students in less favorable positions in terms of their learning.

The case study conducted by Gitlin and his colleagues (2003) unravels "how schooling shapes identity formation, opportunity structures, and educational success" (p. 93) outside the classroom in a middle school that had many ELL students from Mexico, former Yugoslavia, and other countries. The authors argue that the institutional practices appeared to include the ELL students within the school wall, but in fact excluded the students by limiting their opportunities for participation. This contradiction, according to Gitlin et al., was influenced by discourses and contexts not only from within the school, but also from the local White community surrounding the school. Specifically, the authors found that what motivated the immigrant students in the middle school and their parents (e.g., family ties, safety concerns, and wish for economic and academic opportunities) was different from what motivated the school and the local White community surrounding the school (e.g., the concerns of local business and fear of violence). The authors conclude that this discrepancy confined immigrant students to the margin of school life.

A sociocultural perspective on language acquisition also emphasizes that language development and social growth go hand-in-hand in micro contexts. Cultural psychologists believe that people learn as they participate in everyday sociocultural activities (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991, Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). They critique transmission models of learning often promoted in schools that assume that teachers are sole disseminators of knowledge and that students are empty vessels. Among them, Barbra Rogoff (1990) maintains that social interactions between caregivers and children are essential in children's learning and development. These interactions, as Rogoff contends, are part of a process called *guided participation* in

ongoing cultural activities in which children "observe and participate with others in culturally organized practices" (p. 16), actions that are "repeated, shared with others in a social group, and invested with normative expectations and with meanings or significances that go beyond the immediate goals of the action" (Miller & Goodnow, 1995, p. 7).

In working with immigrant students, Johnson (1994) asserts that classroom activities should create opportunities to interact in various *participation structures* (Philips, 1972) in order to encourage students' actively drawing on their cultural and personal experiences and their linking language with context. Johnson recommends ways of grouping in an effort to promote second language and literacy development. For example, teachers can set up compatible pair (e.g., a native speaker and an ELL student; or two students of different proficiency levels) to encourage ELL students to use their second language with English native speakers. To ensure better participation, Johnson also recommends that teachers find the "underground curriculum" (Dyson, 1989) by doing ethnographic research on learners' language performance. In a word, students should be given multiple opportunities to practice with peers and to build their understanding and to apply their language and knowledge while participating in schooling (Walqui, 2000).

## Negotiating Self and Others

The sociocultural view of learning involves the whole person and that person's relationships to the activity and to others (Bakhtin, 1986). During this process, identities are also constructed as learning implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by the web of relations among participants. As a newcomer moves

towards full participation in practice, s/he begins to shoulder more and broader responsibilities within the community with her/his growing knowledge and skills to tackle difficult tasks, but more significantly, s/he gets an increasing sense of identity as a "master practitioner" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.111). In addition, identity is "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, p. 5).

As a result, identities are always "fluid, changing, and multiple" (Hawkins, 2004, p. 18) in the power structure of language, race, and class. People draw on the language and literacy resources available to them as they take on different identities in different aspects of their lives. Research on identity and second language learning demonstrates that the negotiation is very complex (Young, 1996, Ricento, 2005). For instance, Lam (2000) investigated identity in a Chinese student's practice in a new literacy dimension of computer network. Lam argues that the student developed a textual identity in the process of trying to understand how texts are composed and used to represent and reposition identity in networked computer media. Hawkins' (2004) account explicitly describes this trajectory:

> The socially situated identities participants in social interaction take on at any given time are a complex integration of their diverse sociocultural experience, the sociocultural experiences of others in the interaction, the structure and flow of language, participation and negotiation in the interaction, and the larger cultural and institutional setting within which the interactions take place.    (p.18)

Identity is a site of struggles that reflect a variety of social situations. This is especially pertinent to ELL students, because their sociocultural experiences in school are accompanied by conflicts between marginalization and belonging and between maintaining their cultural identities and assimilation (Nieto, 2000, 2002). In a study of seven bilingual Puerto Rican college students, Zavala (in Nieto, 2000) explores the nature of racial and ethnic identity development and the role language plays in their search for ethnic identity. Whereas the use of Spanish is a way to express their ethnic pride, English in their student lives is more of a marker showing the beliefs and values of the dominant culture. Language differences, together with negative social stereotypes and marked physical features, increase the complexity of identity formation among these Puerto Rican youngsters. In American public schools, students who were born in another country, or come from homes in which English is not spoken, are forced to give up their national identities and home language to be accepted into the academic and mainstream world. Laurie Olsen's (1997) ethnography of immigrant students' life in a typical high school community reveals the tension where language is used to Americanize the marginalized students and at the same time, to deny their full participation. Olsen points out the fundamental issues of value in the process of "Americanizing" newcomers – the values of education in this country, the meaning of diversity, the relations between race and language, and the understanding of democracy. Using year-long ethnographic case studies following three U.S. immigrants who were Turkish, Vietnamese, and Vietnamese Cantonese respectively in their last year of secondary school and first year in a 2-year community college, Harklau (2000) contrasts how prevalent institutional images, which the author calls representations, interpret what it means to be an English language learner

in these two settings. Harklau argues that stereotypical identities are created and recreated in particular social contexts and her ethnographic data shows the students' various identities in class curricula and spoken and written interactions. Contending that the institutional images of ESL student identities are appropriated and recreated by students and educators in one context and resisted by students in another, Harklau suggests that representations of students and of their backgrounds, experiences, and needs not only inform curriculum but also generate significant consequences for students' identities and attitudes toward classroom learning.

Identities also come together with agency. Hawkins (2004) contends that a sociocultural perspective also examines ways in which individuals "exercise their agency in forming and reforming their identities" (p. 15). For example, McKay and Wong (1996) argue that in the crossroads of identities, people are both positioned by relations of power and resistant to that positioning, "and may even set up a counter discourse which positions in a powerful rather than marginalized subject position" (p. 579). This argument is based on their two-year ethnographic study of adolescent Chinese immigrant students in California, with Foucaultian notion of discourse[10] to examine students' negotiation of identities and the connections of discourse and power in the language learning setting. Others tend to link the complicated mix of familial, cultural, and political factors in schools and classrooms to curriculum and pedagogy to promote language learning (Faltis & Wolfe, 1999; Verplaetse, 2000; Genishi, 2002). In short, language learning is always situated in a certain context, and it is the context that allows insights into the cultural and

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[10] A Foucaultian sense of discourse refers to "a set of historically grounded statements that exhibit regularities in presuppositions, thematic choices, values, etc,; that delimit what can be said about something, by whom, when, where, and how; and that are underwritten by some form of institutional authority." (McKay & Wong, 1996, p. 579)

social dynamic of learning.

Another informative perspective to look at identity and human agency within structural constrains is the notion of *cultural production* (Levinson & Holland, 1996), which views schools as complex sites where people "actively confront the ideological and material conditions presented by schooling" (p. 14). Douglas Foley (1996) argues, in his ethnography on the cultural production of "silent Indian" in school, that as the white racist discourse presents Mesquakis youth as always silent and non-participatory in an Iowa high school, Mesquakis students produce their own version of the "silent Indian" by making it a situational speech style against the white world. Therefore, Foley contends that producing the "silent Indian" never escapes the larger "ideological struggle between whites and Indians over cultural representations" (p. 81). Similarly, Meador (2005) demonstrates how the cultural production of the good student figures into opportunities for participation for some Mexican immigrant female students in a southwest middle school. Whereas these students are not regarded as either popular or athletic according to the cultural ideal of the good student defined in the local school, they interpret their ethnicity and use home language and English in different ways to respond to many layers of oppression imposed on them in terms of language proficiency, achievement, gender, class, and ethnicity. Meador writes that schools are sites where varied cultural representations are negotiated and contested.

## Conceptual Tools

Guided by the sociocultural persepctive, I view *literacy*, usually in plural forms (Hornberger, 2000), as a particular tool that is taught through and learned within particular kinds of practices in and out of school. In a way, literacy is situated in social

practices "deeply associated with identity and social position" (Street, 2000, p. 23).

A *language learner* is an active consumer of language, be it a written language or an oral language, a first language or a second language. A language learner is also an active consumer of available "funds of knowledge" in shared practices participated by members of cultural communities such as a class or a family (Gonzalez, 2005). A language learner also develops values and a sense of belonging and *identity* within the communities during the process.

I use *learning*, rather than acquisition, to mean the student's experience in learning English as a second language and as a medium for socializing and learning subject matter content in school contexts. Learning happens in cultural practices –

> "actions that are repeated, shared with others in a social group, and invested with normative expectations and with meanings or significances that go beyond the immediate goals of the action. (Miller and Goodnow, 1995, p. 6)

Without ignoring major research areas of second language acquisition (SLA) (e.g., the characteristics of the language produced by learners, the linguistic environment, and process of second language acquisition), my notion of learning further suggests "conscious knowledge gained through teaching (though not necessarily from someone officially designated a teacher) or certain life experiences that trigger conscious reflection" (Gee, 1996, p. 138). Thus, this definition allows sociocultural and sociopolitical analysis of SLA. To be exact, second language learning takes place in culturally organized and ideologically charged *contexts* of school and society; therefore, second language learning entails social dynamics and processes as L2 learners understand themselves and the world and negotiate *power* relations through participating, or not participating, in school activities, and through gaining the available resources and access

to survive and thrive in school.

## Overview of Chapters

In this chapter, I discussed the nature of this study and situated the study within the demographic, sociopolitical, and research contexts of ELL literacy experiences. In Chapter Two, I lay out the methodology of the study. I introduce Thao's city, school, and classes, as well as herself and other participants. I also detail the data collection process and analysis procedures. The findings are organized into four chapters. Chapter Three situates the many layers of institutional organizations and practices at Thao's high school in the broader contexts of language education policy. In Chapter Four, I illustrate how Thao interpreted the instructional expectations and how she grappled with various institutional support to participate in the literacy practices in mainstream classrooms. I examine Thao's negotiations of opportunities for interaction and of her identities within her unofficial peer world in Chapter Five. Before I wrap up the study, I insert a methodological note in Chapter Six, in which I reflect on conducting this ethnographic case study and on negotiating my researcher roles and complex relationships over time with Thao and Mrs. My, Thao's Vietnamese language aide. In the final chapter, I reiterate the findings, examine fundamental theoretical issues relevant to this study, and explore the implications for the educational literature and for classroom practice.

# CHAPTER 2
## ON THE CASE[11]: METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Tuesday. It is another gray morning. Before more snow falls on the city, early birds and school buses fill the streets. Out of the university campus and across the railway trails, I drive through several city neighborhoods to Linton High School to meet Mrs. My, a Vietnamese language aide working there. The school is in the southern part of the city, where small businesses and residential areas mingle together. I pass by a dollar store, two gas stations, and a dairy store. When the roads become narrower, bumpier, and noisier, I know I am not far from the school parking lot.

Congestion is not unusual. In their Chevy, Dodge, or Oldsmobile, parents wait on the one way parkway to drop their kids at the main entrance. Older kids who drive to school are less patient to get to the lot. School buses ship in hundreds of students from the neighborhoods. Many teenagers are seen walking in twos and threes to school. The last several minutes before the first hour bell feel forever. Outside the building, horns and loud music from the cars add some temporary liveliness to the humid and cold morning air. Inside, students finish up breakfast in the cafeteria, stroll to their first hour classroom with buddies, or gather by their lockers waiting for the security officers to yell "Move it! Move it!"

After all, the hallway belongs to the students – boys and girls in different skin colors and costumes. In large crowds, they occupy the main lobby, the stairs by the main entrance and some intersections which join the classroom wing with the gym and the auditorium. They chat, tease each other, argue, push and shove, sing, and dance. There are sporadic fights, of which the security officers soon take care.

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[11] The phrase is borrowed from Dyson & Genishi (2005).

Posters are everywhere, making a grand background of the morning drama. Many of them are from the school encouraging students to learn, praising those in the honor roll, and promoting school pride (e.g., "Believe and succeed!", "Write more, learn more!"); the rest are students' postings informing everyone of some upcoming fundraising, sports, or community activities. They are fun to read on my way to Mrs. My's office. After saying hi to a couple of students I run across in the hallway – most of them Hmong and Vietnamese students I have seen at the Asian Students Association (ASA)[12] meetings, I'm at the door to Mrs. My's office.

Mrs. My and I have known each other for more than a year. I was first introduced to her by a senior Linton English teacher with whom I had worked in a university teacher preparation program. From then on, whenever I went to Linton to observe classes with field instructors, I dropped by to chat with Mrs. My. She has been a great resource person to me, an international student who is interested in language education of immigrant students in a local school like Linton.

I knock then enter the office. The noise in the hallway makes it difficult for me to hear any response from inside the office. I first pass Mrs. Gutierrez's empty space. Mrs. Gutierrez is a Spanish language aide who shares the same office with Mrs. My. She works at a different high school on Tuesdays. Mrs. My's desk is close to a small window at the other end of the room. Behind two file cabinets, Mrs. My sits at her desk, smiling in my direction. Beside her is a young girl who looks at me at first, then turns to look out of the window quickly. Her name is Thao, a freshman in Linton. She later becomes my main informant in my study.

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[12] A Pseudonym for this student activity group.

## What Can We Know Through Research?

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.    (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3)

There have long been epistemological discussions on how people access knowledge and whether there is truth (or a single truth, in some cases) embedded in the lenses used to look at the world. In order to seek a better understanding of the beliefs and experiences of my participants, the assumption undergriding this study is that I am not discovering (nor is it my attempt to discover) the truth and the universal in people's life; instead, I make constant decisions about "how to angle [my] vision on places overflowing with potential stories of human experience" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 2). My participants will inevitably join me in constructing and creating meaning through our interactions and relationship.

My dissertation project is an ethnographic case study. The purpose is to understand many layers of institutional and pedagogical practices that influenced Thao's experiences of learning English as a classroom medium and as the subject matter, and as the symbolic tool in learning and socializing (Dyson, 1989). I aim to examine what it means to learn English as a social practice in which Thao, as a social being, employed and interpreted language opportunities in various school settings and with varied participants, negotiate cultural and language borderlines while crossing them with available resources.

Given my theoretical take on the nature and purpose of my research, the ways in which this study was carried out were rather cyclical than linear (Guthrie, 1992). That is, I entered the field with a general question regarding the grand phenomena of second language learning (e.g., I started with the question: What is the nature of learning English as a second language in this particular site?). It was then the data that led me to some initial observations. More informed and specific research questions were derived from these on-going reflections, and so were new directions of inquiry along the way. The issues of power and ethics were also crucial to and inseparable from the overall process and discussions. They also added to the critical orientation of my inquiry. To be exact, every step involved in the study, with my shaping of the findings in particular, required me to reflect on my roles, biases, and relationships with the participants by asking questions such as whose voice I was representing, whose study it was, who benefited from the study, and whether anyone was exploited in one way or another? Did I achieve "multivocality" (Canagarajah, 2005, p. 945) by including multiple perspectives and voices of varied informants? In short, this study reflects not only how I interpreted what I was shown and told, but why I interpreted in certain ways and what the consequences that can be drawn from this particular interpretation.

The overall research question (as detailed in Chapter One) was, what did learning English mean as it was socially enacted by diverse participants within Thao's world in the context of Linton, her high school? I further focused on four sub-areas - the contextual conditions, pedagogical practices, and the student's identity negotiations - in order to understand the sociocultural complexities of learning English. In addition, I also

explore how I negotiated researcher-participant relationship in conducting the study and how this negotiation impacted on the findings of the study.

# Method

## The City

Each time I was in Mrs. My's office, I couldn't help but look out of the window. Out there and blurred in the morning grayness was downtown Maple Creek's landmark – three sky-high smokestacks from an automobile plant, sparkling day and night.

Mrs. My, Thao, and their families lived in a mid-sized Midwestern industrial city of Maple Creek with a shrinking yet increasingly diverse population of 120,000. For example, the majority of the children in the local schools are children of color. According to the district Annual Report (2004-2005), about 36 percent of students are white, 42 percent African American, 16 percent Latino, and 5 percent Asian.

One of the nation's largest car corporations has several manufacturing plants and assembly lines around the greater Maple Creek area, providing employment to a large working class population for more than a century. Joined by railways, the plants are scattered in the downtown and western parts of the city. New car models of all kinds are often displayed in front of some plants. There is also a theme park where regular automobile shows and other local gatherings are held. Whenever there is a parade, there are cars participating – cars that come right out of Maple Creek's factories. Nowadays, the American car industry faces severe market challenges from overseas. Some plants have to be shut down and workers laid off as the auto company's strategy to compensate for their sales deficits. Many Maple Creek residents are descendents of emigrants from the South and immigrants across the Mexican border, who were attracted by the increasing job opportunities when the Midwest's automobile industry was in its heyday.

However, the city has lost over 8,000 people for the past two decades; furthermore, thousands of workers have lost their jobs since 2003 because of the standstill of the city's major industry. The chain effects of this regional and national economic failure have reached every corner of the city and the lives of its residents. Budget cuts have gradually become taken-for-granted in infrastructure, social welfare, and most importantly, public education. As many school buildings were closed and K-12 teachers laid off, more people are driven away from the city.

During recent decades, Maple Creek has witnessed a new wave of incoming populations. Because of a large refugee settlement agency and the city's need to replace its population, it started to resettle political refugees from many parts of the world by offering them cheap housing and entry-level jobs. Southeast Asian refugees, the largest Asian group, were among the first groups that came to the greater Maple Creek area[13], which includes the city and a couple of neighboring townships. They are mostly Vietnamese and Hmong refugees (from Laos and Cambodia); they fled Vietnam and were allowed to come to the United States under the Ronald Reagan Administration because they helped the U.S. in the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975. Between 1978 and 1980, Maple Creek received its initial Vietnamese and Hmong refugees. Until the early 90's the city continued to accept relatives of these permanently settled refugees who came to the U.S. to join their families (Fong, 1998).

The Southeast Asian refugees were followed by refugees from Cuba, the former Yugoslavia (civil war in 1999), and civil-war haunted African countries, such as Sudan, Somalia, and Nigeria. The most recent refugees are Turks from the western part of

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[13] Golembiewski, C. (2003, March 16). Maple Creek's changing face. *Maple Creek State Journal,* p. 1A, 8A.

Russia. Most refugees escaped their governments' political persecution or their countries' civil wars. By 2005, Maple Creek was home to more than 13,000 refugees from 32 countries[14].

Concurrently, as Maple Creek hosts one of the state's major universities, a growing number of international students and businesses come to join the local diverse population. Each year, thousands of students from all over the world enroll in undergraduate and graduate programs in East Maple Creek University. In all, the city's many changing faces reveal that it has never been so diverse as it is today.

**The School**

Linton was first built in the late 1950s on 60 acres of land in southwest Maple Creek. It has a history dating back to the mid 1800 when Linton started in a barn[15] before it became part of the public school district. The school grew as it tried to cater to rising populations and increasing demand for education over the centuries. The contemporary Linton is a building complex surrounded by a football stadium, a baseball and soccer field, tennis courts and parking lots. Most classrooms are in a three-story building. To its north are the gym area and an indoor basketball stadium. To its south are the administration, two auditoriums, and some individual classrooms. Hallways connect all the structures together, making the complex a sprawling giant in Southwest Maple Creek, an area with a high concentration of tract housing built in the 1950s[16].

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[14] Range, S. (2005, March 29). Combining cultures: Living in U.S. makes holding on to heritage a challenge. Maple Creek State Journal. Retrieved on May 5, 2005, online at: http://www.maplecreekstatejournal.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2005503290338&template=pr intart.

[15] School history obtained from the school's website, May 2003.

[16] Murray, S. (2005, February 2). Real estate agents report a home sales slump for 2004. *Maple Creek State Journal.* p. 6D. According to Murray, average list price of Maple Creek is $98,663; Maple Creek suburbs $212,137; outlying areas $170,773.

Linton is like a concert. In the auditorium area, the school's mariachi band

practices their violins and guitars and saxophones after regular school hours. Juniors and

seniors in the Theater Department are rehearsing Shakespeare "a Mid-Summer's Night

Dreams" on stage. In the gym, basketball players gather for the after school training.

They are surrounded by sports fans who cheer them up to defend their state championship

title in the new season. Out in the field, football players are having their training and the

marching band is getting ready for a home coming event.

The "skaters" show off their daring skills of flying up and down the rails and

slopes designed for handicap access a few footsteps away from one of the gates of the

building. While the "prep kids" hang out in the lobby, the "Goth" kids meet under an old

maple tree outside by the parking lot. Many find a library a great place to spend time

outside classrooms; others prefer sitting in the hallway. In the main lobby, the school's

Viking T-shirts are popular fundraising goods, so are the pizza and Chinese egg rolls.

As one of the city's three public high schools, Linton serves some 1,700 ninth

through twelfth graders from its ethnically diverse neighborhoods, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Linton Student Ethnicity Breakdown**[17]

| Ethnicity | Number of students | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 88 | 5.8% |
| Latino | 170 | 11.2% |
| Native American | 7 | 0.4% |
| White | 668 | 44.0% |
| Black | 586 | 38.6% |

There are mixed feelings towards Linton among the students I chatted with. Some love

the school's ethnic and cultural diversity; others resent the feeling that they are stuck in

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[17] Source obtained from Linton's Counseling Center, May 2004.

an inner city school full of violence, drugs, and drop-outs. Some claim to have friends of different races; others believe segregation is still the norm.

Linton faces challenges as most urban schools do in terms of students' academic performance. According to School Evaluation Services of the State Department of Education, Linton has the lowest graduation rate (64%) and highest dropout rate (9.9%) among the three district urban schools during the 2001-2002 school year. The state test passing rate of Linton is 28% out of a participation rate of 40%. The No Child Left Behind mandate put Linton on the spot again with its 2004 evaluation that says Linton did not make adequate yearly progress for the second year in a row[18]. Table 2 compares Linton with the two other urban schools (Urban 2 and Urban 3), as well as with a nearby suburban school, serving a middle and upper-middle class white community.

**Table 2.   Comparison of School Performances[19]**

| Performance Index | *Linton* | Urban 2 | Urban 3 | Suburban |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| State Tests Passing Rate | *27.7%* | 46.5% | 38.7% | 82.9% |
| State Tests Participation Rate | *39.6%* | 64.8% | 66.7% | 88.9% |
| Graduation Rate | *64.3%* | 75.5% | 75.7% | 97.5% |
| Dropout Rate | *9.9%* | 7.6% | 6.5% | 0.6% |

**The People**

In front of me is Thao, a 15-year-old Vietnamese girl in her pink stretching running suit and high heel leather shoes. Her dark long hair is tied from behind, leaving her big silver circle earrings easy to spot. When Mrs. My introduces me to her, Thao looks at me

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[18] Vela, S. & Grasha, K. (2004, November 5). Seven area high schools miss U.S. standard. *Maple Creek State Journal*, p. 1A, p. 8A.
[19] Data obtained from School Evaluation Services at http://ses.standardandpoors.com, September 2004.

briefly, says a gentle "Hi", then grabs and opens her dark pink purse on the table as if searching for something.

Four years ago, Thao came to the United States to reunite with her parents who had arrived in the United States 10 years earlier. She shares some of the common experiences many immigrant teenagers have. For example, she did not speak English when she first arrived; therefore, she has gone through a long period of frustration and isolation in school. Thanks to one of her middle school teachers and many classmates at a magnet middle school, she gradually started using the language. By now Thao has fewer problems understanding and communicating with others. At the same time, as she proceeds to high school, she faces challenges in acquiring academic English and mastering some subjects, such as math and science. The freshman year can be stressful and it is definitely a tough transition for her in terms of language learning and life experience. What happens in her school life in the first high school year is, at the same time, of great importance to me. As a researcher, I become a witness to her experience.

It took a long way for me to meet Thao eventually. In my initial design, I planed to work with at least a handful of recent immigrant students. Having done my pilot study at Linton the year before, I gradually became familiar with Vietnamese and Hmong students and staff members (i.e. librarians and main office secretaries). I attended the Asian student weekly meetings back in the time of my pilot study. In order to get my dissertation project going, I got the permission from the principal and the teacher in charge of the ASA activities to formally introduce myself and my project. For many ASA members, I was not only a legitimate member because I am Chinese, but also I am a student from overseas who wanted to understand high school life of Asian students in

their new country. The students kindly accepted me and offered their stories, experiences, and feelings of learning in school. Ten students, spreading out across all four grade levels, showed their interest in participating my study and half of them gave me their parents' consent signatures right away. Unfortunately, nine of them were born in the United States and the other one moved to the United States with her parents at the age of three. Although English is their second language, the process through which and contexts in which they learned and used English in school may be very different from those of recent teenage immigrants, who are my main interest. Still, I appreciated their interest and included them to inform me of their contextualized experience of schooling, learning, and socializing.

Concurrently with my attending the ASA meetings, I visited Mrs. My on either a Tuesday or a Thursday when she had her office hours at Linton. Similar to the ASA situation, Mrs. My and I have known each other from my pilot when my major informant, a Vietnamese senior student introduced me to Mrs. My. I had also heard about Mrs. My from mainstream classroom teachers who advised my method class students in their rooms. Mrs. My and I started to know more about each other through our causal conversations in her office. By the time I designed my dissertation project, Mrs. My became my major liaison to hook me up with potential Vietnamese freshmen students. At the end of Spring Semester 2003, Mrs. My offered me a list of students who were going to be Linton's freshmen in Fall Semester 2004. They were three boys and one girl, all been in the U.S. for about 4 years.

When school started in September 2004, things changed. The three boys, who had given Mrs. My oral consent when she approached them in their last years of middle

school, changed their mind and withdrew. They asked Mrs. My to tell me that they were too busy and too anxious to participate and that they were overwhelmed as freshmen. Thao turned out to be the only willing participant at Linton. I have also explored research possibilities at another nearby urban high school with the help of a fellow graduate student who teaches science there; however, the pool of students there was even smaller and participants were difficult to find.

Although a case of one student was far from my previous ideal design of a group of recent immigrants, examining the case of one student was still beneficial and it entailed knowing the entire school to some extent, "because more than one theoretical notion may be guiding an analysis, confirmation, fuller specification, and contradiction all may result from one case study" (Vaughan cited in Stake, 2000, p. 448). Thao had a history shared with members of her community (e.g., Vietnamese peers, language aide in school, and family) who had their own interpretations of schooling and learning English. She had regular interlocutors who speak English, or Vietnamese, or both. These people varied in age group and in relations with Thao. For example, in school, Thao went to seven different mainstream English speaking teachers. She interacted with Mrs. My in both languages. She spoke English when talking to the school librarian, her peers, and counselor. She also had former good-friend classmates in other schools. She even had a couple of semi-imaginary boyfriends to whom she wrote secret love poems in English and messenger buddies back in Vietnam who sent her Vietnamese greetings.

With that said, potential stories of many other people involved in this case help angle my vision and offer a rich repertoire of perspectives. Therefore, several people also took part in the study. First, four teachers agreed to participate. They taught 9th grade

English, Algebra, Biology, and Science Fiction respectively. Although all of them happened to be in their middle age years, these teachers had different genders, ethnic origins, and teaching backgrounds. The focal teacher, Mrs. Turner, had taught English at Linton for nine years. She is a White woman always in T-shirts, jeans, and sandals. Her room was always open to students who dropped by to finish their lunch, borrow the place for group meetings, read books from the shelf, or just have a chat with whoever was in the room. Just as Mrs. Turner attended to her students, she showed great interest in my study and tried to get me involved in Thao's work in class whenever possible. From time to time, she updated me with her observations of Thao and her progress. She played an active and significant role in my study.

In working with all these teachers, I was able to get a spectrum of experiences and comments concerning their student Thao and the various social and political layers in their classroom practices (e.g. the teachers' relationship with the student, their assumptions of Thao's learning English, and their ways of teaching under the influence from the district, etc.). I also invited Dr. Norman, who had founded and taught Linton's ESL program for almost 20 years to participate in this study. Although Thao did not enroll in the ESL class, Dr. Norman's perspective also contributed to the frameworks for interpretation, making Thao's mainstream class experience more vivid and dynamic.

Second, two part-time language aides at the high school participated, as well. Mrs. My, an immigrant to this country 20 years ago from Vietnam, had been working in the School District for the past 12 years. During the time I conducted my project, Mrs. My worked at Linton two days per week and at a nearby middle school the rest of the week. When she first came to the United States in her late 30s, Mrs. My could hardly

speak any English. Through hard work and persistent efforts, she learned English in various work places and finally got a job in the School District. She taught middle school math in Vietnam, so she was happy to be back in school helping younger Vietnamese students. Mrs. My's experiences in helping with students' content area learning and her relationship with classroom teachers provided crucial information for me to understand Thao, who was the most frequent visitor to Mrs. My's office. The Spanish language aide, Mrs. Gutierrez, worked in the same office with Mrs. My. In her late 40s, Mrs. Gutierrez was laid-off from her former elementary school, but was later hired by the district as part-time language aide. She added her comments on the ESL program in general to the grand picture of the school's ESL policy.

Third, I interviewed many Linton High students with different backgrounds. Two senior students were extremely helpful in terms of their high school experiences and observations of peer socializations. Both of them were in the position of having extended social circles through their leadership in ASA and yet their different cultural heritage (one Hong; the other Vietnamese) and gender (one male; the other female) offered different perspective of learning at Linton. I also talked with many students at the ASA meeting. Our brief chats also happened along the hallway and in the students' cafeteria. To start these chats, I usually introduced myself briefly, then invited them to teach me, an international student, something about the school and about their lives as students. The students I talked with were generally nice and willing to share their ideas. Nonetheless, I had regrets. Because of lack of consent from their parents, I was not able to interview Thao's peers, Mary, Taysha, and Nelson, who sat together with Thao and had more interaction with her than anyone else in the 9th Grade English class.

Last, I listened to Thao's counselor, Mr. Pierre, as he was responsible for designing Thao's course plan and assessing her overall progress. Mr. Pierre was an immigrant from a Caribbean country 25 years ago. He offered me not only an official interpretation of Thao's academic performance from marking period reports and statistics, but also his personal comments on Thao's learning English as a second language.

## Researcher Role

The study integrated my own understanding, beliefs, and values as an English learner, an educational researcher and a native Chinese. English was a totally foreign language to me when I had my first English class at around 12 years old in middle school in Beijing, China. The various kinds of challenges in learning English that I had to go through especially in high school triggered the initial questions: Does the student learn English through grammar and tests as I did in high school? How does the student practice spoken English? Does the student learn English well because of the native speakers of English around her all day long? A pilot study I did with a senior male immigrant student during the 2003-2004 academic year has helped reshape my initial question. I started to focus more on the social factors that interact with the student's learning process, as I gradually saw him negotiating with various resources in his social world as he learned English in school. Understanding Thao and her learning is, in a way, unraveling my own journey as a language learner and instructor. This study provided me with further opportunities to explore the possibility of language learning as the learning of critical strategies that allowed speakers of other languages access to the language of power (Delpit, 1988). In addition, I recognized that my role as a graduate student and an

inevitably intrusive researcher at the site impacted Thao and other informants as they

reacted to my observation, questions, or even casual talk in subtle ways. Last, the fact

that I am from China, the country that has so much historical connection and contact with

Thao's home country, Vietnam, has put me in a more complicated position, which may

have impacted the way Thao responded to my questions, for instance, on her family and

their immigration background. I will discuss how I negotiated the relationships with my

participants and how I understood and handled the complexities informed, namely, by

varied interrelated social factors, among them culture, social status, race, age, gender,

family and nationality. I believe that when the study is based on mutual respect, trust, and

understanding, the process will be informative and constructive to all involved.

**Data Collection**

Meeting and knowing Thao is part of purposefully drawing together information

about "the configuration of time and space, of people, and of activity in their physical

sites" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p.19). I collected resources about Linton and the district

from newspaper clippings, census information, and school documents (e.g. student

handbook, class syllabi, counseling handouts, student yearbooks). Digital artifacts -

basically visual images of Linton's classrooms, hallways, hallway posters, library, and

student activities - were also saved. These materials create contexts and content for me to

analyze the dynamics of second language learning in complex classroom practices.

From the middle of fall semester 2004, I visited Thao two to three times a week

till the end of the year (I took a maternity leave of 7 weeks in April and May). I used to

bring a voice recorder, a notebook, and a note pad with me for each visit. In classrooms, I

paid attention to the physical environment, the mood of communications, and the

channels the classes used for interaction (Hymes, 1994). I also tried as much as I could to quickly jot down anything – words in both English and Chinese, pictures, symbols, seating maps – that might remind me of these properties, all the while keeping poised. In a busy day when there was too much for me to write down, I talked to my recorder in the school parking lot before getting home to type up what had happened. When necessary, I audiotaped Thao's interaction with others. I have had permissions from almost all the key informants in the project[20]. Voices of other students in the tapes were treated as providing context for Thao's verbal and nonverbal interactions.

These quick notes, which later were constructed into fieldnotes, helped document my observations of general interactional structures and routine activities and depicted who said what to whom in what situation for what purposes in recurrent communication events (Hymes, 1994). The audio data supplemented my fieldnotes in that it documented Thao's speech and the paralinguistic features of volume, stress, pitch, intonation, and even pauses, also key elements in describing her learning.

I followed Thao through several instructional units in most of her classes – Algebra, Biology, and World Geography, 9th grade English, Science Fiction[21], though I spent more time with Thao in the last two classes due to the convenience (i.e., scheduling[22]) and focuses of the classes. My observer role varied from classroom to

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[20] Mrs. My, the Vietnamese language aide, declined being audiotaped in interviews and daily interactions with Thao. Her preference was fully respected.

[21] In order to carry out the project, I processed procedures required by the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS). I later received consent from Thao and her parents, Vietnamese language aide, Thao's counselor, Linton's ESL instructor, Thao's 9th grade English teacher, Science Fiction teacher, Algebra teacher, Biology teacher, Geography teacher, Linton's Principal, and the District (through the Principal). The only course that was excluded was Japanese because of its different instructional focus.

[22] During the year of my data collection, I also co-taught a teacher preparation course as a graduate assistant. My TE class met on Mondays and Wednesdays, which left me the other three

classroom. I had a more active role as a participant observer (Erickson, 1986) in 9th English and Science Fiction because the teachers were more flexible and willing to have me interact and help with Thao's work in one way or another. In other classes, I was just an observer, sitting at a remote spot away from everyone, due to the seating arrangement and comfort levels of the teachers.

Observations and fieldnotes also covered the time when Thao was not necessarily in classrooms. There were quite a few occasions that Thao went to the school library during and/or in between class time. She also spent a lot of time with Mrs. My in her office when Mrs. My had her office hours two days per week. In addition, I sometimes came across Thao in the hallway during lunch hour, while she was waiting, alone, for her 4th hour teacher to open the classroom door. In sum, my fieldnotes included descriptions of and reflections on what happened to Thao wherever she was in the school building in order to capture what people did, what languages they used, and what opportunities Thao had to learn English.

The other major data source is interview transcripts. I conducted several informal one-on-one interviews with Thao and other participants. Rather than seeking the right answers, questions were more open-ended, inviting my interviewees to describe their experiences, explain their perspectives, and comment on some particular events that had occurred during the study. In talking with Thao, I searched for her personal information about learning experiences and family background; her opinions on issues concerning learning English in various situations and subject matters, and her

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weekdays for fieldwork. Linton had a mixture of block and regular schedule. Thao's classes were arranged in a way that morning visits became more relevant (e.g., English classes were in the mornings). As a result, I met Thao on Tuesday and Thursday mornings in English and Science Fiction, Friday mornings in Algebra, English, and World Geography.

explanations of her work, participation, strategies in learning English. Among the four

prolonged interviews (around 1 hour), emphases were different. The first one was a

getting-to-know-you conversation in which I did not give Thao a list of specific

questions; instead, by asking questions such as "What is it like in a high school?", "Tell

me more about your classes," I gave Thao space to choose the topic she would like to talk

more about. The first interview was like a rehearsal because Thao was role playing an

interviewee as if she were interviewed on media. She used a high pitch of voice and her

intonation went dramatically high and down. She sounded far from her usual way of

talking. It seemed to be a fun start for Thao. From the second interview, Thao and I

gradually came to know more about each other. More interesting issues emerged from

field observation. And she lost her interest in playing the interviewee. We then sat

together for more specific and probing questions about Thao's participation in some

events (i.e., writing book reviews, choosing romance books over other genres for pastime

reading). Throughout the interview process, the use of English as a medium in our

conversation was an important issue because it impacted on the way in which Thao and I

positioned ourselves in the conversation and the way any question was asked and then

answered. I will discuss this point more fully in Chapter Six which is my methodological

reflections on this study.

Most of Thao's teachers were interviewed for their perspectives on working with

Thao and ESL students in general. The topics also covered the teachers' experience in

working at Linton and their teaching philosophy. The teachers also offered their

comments on policy issues in the School District. An interview with Thao's counselor

gave me a sense of what the institution would say about Thao's performance. The

counselor's knowledge about Thao came from the grade reports and Thao's middle

school record, and when he commented on Thao's studies, he also revealed his own

experience and belief in learning English as a second language as well as his conceptions

of Asian students as a whole at Linton. All the interviews mentioned above offered

multiple viewpoints within the school's context, which allowed me to understand Thao

and her experience from a sociocultural perspective. By the end of June when I

completed my data collection, I had on my desk over 200 pages of typed fieldnotes and

interview transcripts, photocopies of Thao's class work (e.g., written assignments, essays,

and class notes), class syllabi, handouts, and assessments, census information on Maple

Creek's socioeconomic status and reports on the country's language use and

English-speaking ability issued by the US Census Bureau, a fat folder of school

information, including maps of Linton's attendance area, maps of the building and

classrooms, district bilingual allocations over the past four years, the school's overall

academic performance summaries, the school's ethnicity breakdown, the district pacing

guide, Linton student handbooks, excerpts from the school's Yearbook. Electronic data

included digital pictures of the school's physical settings, websites that Thao often

browsed, email correspondence between Thao and me.

## Data Analysis

In order to make sense of the raw data, I kept in mind my overall research

question, that is, what is it like for Thao, an ELL immigrant student, to learn English as a

subject matter and medium of instruction at Linton, a Midwestern urban high school.

With the question in mind, I read the fieldnotes line by line multiple times and asking

what is happening in terms of learning English at Linton. My fieldnotes and interview

transcripts were all typed out and paginated with a wide margin on the right for the use of coding. The content page section contained a brief summary of fieldnotes by the day. In a table, information was arranged chronologically under "field note entry number," "date and time," "place," "participants," "events," "artifacts" (written documents, class handouts, newspaper clippings, email, holiday cards, etc.), "brief observer comments," and "page numbers." I put this section at the beginning of the field note pages and used it as an index to locate details in the field notes.

In order to organize the content page section, I put preliminary coding categories first on each page of my data. This process gave me an overview of what I had had in my data and what kinds of events that had happened in a variety of settings and over certain period of time. By settings, I mean the physical situations of classrooms and Mrs. My's office, where I observed and documented Thao's interactions with her teachers, peers, and myself. After I read the whole data set for a few more times, I was ready to select events as my units of analysis. My definition of events, to be exact, language events, is based on Hymes (1974) and inspired by Dyson & Genishi (2005). I argued that language events are characterized and organized by particular relations among participants who share anticipated interactions on particular topics and in certain keys to achieve particular purposes. In short, language events are activities organized by way of using language with diverse kinds of participants, with whom Thao constructs her schooling experience.

In this inductive process, I noticed some events contained typical interactional patterns and routines for each setting, especially in mainstream classrooms. These patterns and routines were characterized by the specific setting, participants, channel of communication, mood, etc. (Hymes, 1994). For example, typical in Thao's World

Geography class was the event in which students sat in individual desks all facing the teacher who lectured without much physical movement to the student part of the room. The communication started from the teacher's oral presentation to the silent students without much expectation of questions from the students. It ended with a dictation and students' written products of the dictation.

After I located these events, I looked across situations, settings, and events in order to develop thematic data analysis categories. Then, I named them and wrote them down directly by the text. The preliminary coding categories that I put previously were replaced, merged, or made as sub-categories of the thematic categories. For instance, the preliminary coding categories included, if not limited to, Thao's appearance, grades, self-esteem, socialization, love story, connection to African American culture, home, identity, Vietnamese language as L1, race, gender, English as L2 (and Japanese as L3, Chinese L4), popular youth culture, reading opportunities, writing opportunities, participation structures, "the pass," "the good student," writing, group work, school curriculum, opportunities for language learning, opportunities for interaction. As more inductive analysis was carried out, these initial coding descriptors then merged with each other or split into more detailed descriptors. For example, "the pass" became a sub-category of institutional resources and support; "reading opportunities" and "writing opportunities" became sub-categories of both "pedagogical practices" and "identity and socialization"; "gender" and "ethnicity" fed into categories such as "identity and socialization" and "researcher-participant relationships" (See Table 3).

Finally, while still concentrating on reading my fieldnotes and organizing the coding categories, I selected key events for close study. These episodes were either

representative of the routine practices, or theoretically rich in unraveling the dynamics of the case. They provided space in which I could use data from multiple sources, including those that were out directly related to these classroom episodes (e.g., comments from interview transcripts that informed the events and practices examined). A diversity of kinds of data and of perspectives on the data provided me with contrasting yet complementary views of the nature of Thao's participation in social practices of learning English in school.

**Table 3. Evolving Coding Categories and Their Sub-Categories**

| Sample Major Coding Categories | Institutional Resources and Support | Pedagogical Practices | Identity and Socialization | Researcher-Participant Relationship |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sample Sub-categories | Demographics; Language policy; Language program; Expectations of ELL; ESL; Model minority rhetoric; Second language support; etc. | Participation structures; Roles of teachers; Roles of students; Role of Thao; Literacy; Learner; Reading expectations; Writing expectations; Grades; Reading resources; Writing resources; Curriculum; Opportunity for interaction; etc. | Race; Gender; Ethnicity; Peer culture; Model minority rhetoric; Opportunity for interaction; Reading opportunities; Writing opportunities; "Good student"; etc. | Gender; Age; Ethnicity; Cultural heritages; Power; Reciprocity; Membership Time; etc. |

Based on this inductive analytic work, I tentatively developed possible assertions and refined them by studying the relevant data and also by deliberately search for disconfirming evidence to "test the evidentiary warrant for an assertion" (Erickson, 1986,

p. 146). It was a process of developing, articulating, testing, rephrasing, and retesting assertions. I also tried to bring a critical perspective to bear on the data by examining the institutional and stereotypical expectations that were imposed on learning and teaching, and also the possible space for both Thao and the teachers to actively use the power of language to negotiate learning.

In the following four finding chapters, I first discuss how the broader contexts, namely on the state and national levels, impacted on the institutional practices of the school in educating ELL students like Thao and the language resources available to Thao. I then examine the nature of the official classroom practices in which Thao directly interacted and negotiated with the institutional assumptions and expectations of literacy and of the English language learners. I then explore Thao's unofficial world in which she was fighting to negotiate her identities and trying to grab opportunities to be a good Vietnamese girl. Finally, I include reflections of my dynamic relationships developed with my participants over time, especially with two Vietnamese participants, Thao and another key informant, Mrs. My. This methodological discussion supplements the research method itself. It also becomes an integral part of my findings in this ethnographic case study.

# CHAPTER 3
## GRAPPLING WITH LANGUAGE SUPPORT IN CONTEXTS

At around 9:45 on a Friday morning, Mrs. Turner, the English teacher, was setting up a scene for students to create some dialogues on paper. Thao began to fidget and turned to look at the clock more frequently, as her peers were settling down with the new writing assignment. Tossed in her hand was a small piece of paper the size of a hand palm. Thao waved to the teacher and finally was noticed. Mrs. Turner came to Thao's desk, read Thao's piece of paper, and then nodded to her. In the middle of the class session, Thao dashed out the classroom with her 9th English folder and strode to Mrs. My's office.

The piece of paper Thao showed Mrs. Turner was a pass signed by Mrs. My, the Vietnamese aide, to release her from regular classes for private tutoring on subject matter contents in Vietnamese. The pass was effective only two days a week when Mrs. My worked at Linton. "I like Tuesday and Friday! I go to Mrs. Thanh's (Mrs. My's first name as many Vietnamese students would call her)!" Thao's voice rose and there was a slice of smile on her cheeks. Thao's pass was just a small piece of paper; however, embedded in this pass, are many layers of institutional complexity that were informed by the ideologies of language education and learning and that were figured into classroom practices. Through this pass, it is also crucial to examine what language resources were actually available to ELL students like Thao.

In this chapter, I answer the following two questions: How did broader (state, national) contexts impact the institutional practices and Thao's learning? And how did the many layers of institutional practices and resources influence Thao's experiences of language learning? I first introduce the macro policy shifts in the local and the national

with regards to second language education, as well as their impact on the social

organizations within the educational system in Thao's Midwestern city. I then consider

the nature, form, and values of the programs available at her high school, Linton.

Through these programs, I discuss the underlying assumptions of what language

education was and about who Thao was as a learner.

### The Macro: Shifting Policies in Educating Newcomers

From time to time, Thao was nostalgic when recalling her middle school years

before becoming a freshman at Linton. Four years ago, when she came to the U.S. to

reunite with her parents who had arrived a few years earlier, she went to a magnet middle

school that had a very diverse student population. In an environment in which many

students were recent immigrants, Thao had an unforgettable transition and she was

thankful that many teachers helped her with English.

> I have a lot friend over there. It's Maria, Marlene ( ). And my favorite teacher is
> Ms. Nelly and my principal is Mr. Davidson. And he's so nice. And I have a lot
> friend over there, and we'll do a lot subject like science and my favorite teacher
> in science is Ms. Moore and she always help me when I come here I don't
> speak English. She help me like three year. She very nice and sometimes she
> mean too because some people some noise. She's my best teacher forever. She
> always help me when I need help. And now I know English because she help
> me.                                    (Thao interview transcripts)

The school, with which I was very familiar since I had been a reading tutor

volunteer there, grew out of an extracurricular ESL program designed to respond to

Maple Creek's increasing diversity. Its mission was to promote respect and understanding

towards various ethnicities and languages while helping students learn English and

subject matters. Based on my observations, English language teaching and learning were

viewed as involving the active participation of teachers and students in enhancing

understanding of each other's home languages and life experiences. Mrs. Gutierrez, a

former teacher and now the Linton's Spanish interpreter, recalled the liveliness of the school:

> We have kids from all over the world attend this building. We all thought it was working great, because they have Spanish teachers working with Spanish kids. Someone that spoke Hmong, someone that spoke Vietnamese.
> (Mrs. Gutierrez interview transcripts)

Unfortunately, one year after Thao's graduation, her beloved middle school was closed due to the district's new budget cuts. The school was among the five downtown buildings that were closed so that the district could save "a minimum of $500,000 a year"[23]. The budget gap resulted from the declining national and regional economy. As Maple Creek Superintendent pointed out, school district enrollment had decreased steadily as the automobile companies shut down local assembly plants and laid off thousands Maple Creek workers. The Maple Creek School District, which suffered most from such losses and yet had little federal support, had to solve the budget problem through reconfiguring its buildings and personnel to maintain its daily operations. ELL middle school age students, many of them recent immigrants like Thao, were (re)located to other nearby inner city schools. They were either put to one-class ESL programs, or left to sink or swim in regular mainstream classes. As for the teachers, some of them were laid off; some, such as Thao's favorite former teachers, Ms. Nelly and Mrs. Moore, left the district for good. Those who kept their jobs, like Garcia who had had a lot of experience working with migrant and immigrant families, were deeply concerned about the conditions and demands of their new tasks.

> ...in the last couple of years what they've [the district] done is that they let them [magnet school students] all go to the home school. And now, it's like, we have an ESL program, like what I'm in, and they ship us out and they send us

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[23] Vela, S. (2004, December 10). Five Maple Creek Schools could close. *Maple Creek State Journal*, p. 1A.

out to these buildings, so some of us have four schools; some of us have two schools; some have five schools. But what can you do? I mean, I feel like when I come here I was playing catch-up, you know, what are they learning today? And they do this part and then when I come back again. It's like ok, did you finish what you did? Oh, yeah, we're done with that! I said now what do we do? So it's like I'm not giving them 100% help that I know I can give them. I'm spread out too thin, and because of lack of funds again. I'm not here [at Linton] full time.                    (Mrs. Gutierrez interview transcripts)

The change in the social organization of Maple Creek School District, namely the closing of the magnet school and the relegation of the language staff to peripheral emergency calls, reflected the nationwide ideology of language education towards children with different home languages. The Unz initiative and the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) represent that ideology. At the turn of the 21st century in California, Ron Unz's proposal to ban bilingual education was passed. Thus, bilingual and multilingual school children are deprived of the opportunity to consult their bilingual teachers and to draw upon their home language resources while learning in school (Faltis & Wolfe, 1999). This English-Only initiative, together with a wave of standardization, has been exerting great impact on bilingual education and English education all over the country. The underlying political implication is that language education serves as a tool to assimilate minorities and to maintain the social, economic, and political status quo. Other languages are marginalized or treated as potential threats. Likewise, the ELL students are viewed not as active participants who bring "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez, et al. 2005) from their first languages and home to the socially organized learning activities; instead, they are believed to be aliens going to school to learn what they lacked.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act further pushed the narrower view of language education and English language learners by relocating resources to the business of writing, administering, and assessing standardized tests towards more "standard"

English, leaving districts fewer federal funds to maintain programs for language minority students. Financial support from the local state was scarce as well. Because of de-industralization, there was a flight from the city schools and from the city thus a decreasing the tax base. In Thao's state, there was not even a single program that claimed to help high school English learners with academic English. Maple Creek School District had two isolated so-called bilingual/ESL classes in two schools; however, as I will explain in the sections to come, the classes were far from organized, informed, and supported. Even though Thao's former magnet school had been well-known for its commitment to educating diverse children, it was not able to avoid being closed five years after it first opened.

The domino effects of the English-Only ideology and the district's tighter-than-ever funding capacity reached every corner of the district schools as well. At Linton, the available resource programs looked encouraging at first sight: There was an ESL class, a Help Desk, and a university student volunteer program. However, in the following sections, I consider the institutional assumptions towards the target student population of these programs, and towards learning English as a second language at Linton. I argue that all programs fell short of providing adequate guidance and means to language learning, which complicated Thao's learning.

### The Micro: Mainstreaming the ELL

### The ESL Class: Serving the "Beginners"

For Thao, taking the ESL class was a shameful label. Despite her language need, Thao did not enroll in Linton's ESL class, believing that she was not one of those who were not able to understand or speak any English. "They don't know English. *They* go

ESL," Thao commented. She saw many "ESL" students at Mrs. My's office which she shared with the Spanish interpreter, Mrs. Garcia. Thao knew that they came from Cuba with no English at all. She already sensed the institutional notion that "ESL" denoted something special and above all, slow.

The ESL teacher, Dr. Norman classified his students as "beginner level", though they were as diverse as could be. The class was mostly Hispanic, predominantly Cuban with a few Mexican students. The rest of the class, as Dr. Norman added, was made up of young men and women from Somali and Bosnia (former Yugoslavia), Haiti, Somalia, and Nigeria. A middle-aged white English teacher who was, as in his own words, "in the twilight of his career", Dr. Norman had been teaching at Linton's ESL since 1981 after he obtained a Master's degree in TESOL. Technically, he created Linton's ESL when language demands of thousands of incoming immigrant students with limited English communication skills began to emerge.

> [The school] simply looks at their English language skills. If they are recent immigrants with just the minimum skills, then I usually get them in my class. This transitional program was one way to circumvent failure.
> (Dr. Norman interview transcripts)

Therefore, according to Dr. Norman, students were recruited based on the length of time they had been in the country as an immigrant and their linguistic command of English. Little attention was given to students' literacy practices in their social life. For the past two decades, the class has been designed for the "beginner level" ESL students who could not communicate fully regarding their daily needs and who had difficulty reading any English texts and understanding fluent, spoken English.

> So for this typical ESL, … For the student who's very basic, they need everything. They need vocabulary. They need grammar structure. They need a whole list of approaches that help determine what kind of language is appropriate in what situation.     (Dr. Norman interview transcripts)

Seeing that many ESL students were judged to be too "basic", to quote Dr. Norman, the decision to not enroll, as the Vietnamese aide, Mrs. My, explained, was by no means an individual decision. According to Mrs. My, some of her students voiced their unwillingness to take ESL class. For one thing, they tried not to associate themselves with "beginners" English learners, because they could at least use functional English in daily life. For the other, because "beginner level" or "zero English" carried the negative connotation of being incapable and deficient in both language and intelligence, students took it shameful to be seen in the basement ESL classroom while most students were upstairs taking regular classes.

Dr. Norman was concerned that "intermediate" students like Thao may not benefit from the ESL class because the program focused on and cycled around the word and sentence levels, together with grammar and mechanics. He also referenced Thao's Vietnamese ethnicity when estimating her English and her needs, confirming that at least his ESL classroom was not the right place for Thao.

> So for many of the Vietnamese students, that's the issue right there [when writing becomes problematic to them]. What they need is a writing class, but one that's more geared towards ESL students rather than a regular program English student. (Dr. Norman interview transcripts)

In Linton's ESL context, learning a second language tended to be defined narrowly as language acquisition in which there are specific steps to follow and content to be learned (i.e., in the order of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and from mechanics to words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs). Similarly, there are particular benchmarks to evaluate and categorize learners, for instance, into the "beginner", "intermediate", and "advanced" levels. Based on a criterion on one's ability to understand every-day functional English, the general institutional assumptions of Thao's

performance in academic English categorized her as "intermediate" or non-ESL. Furthermore, according to both a school counselor and Mrs. My, Vietnamese students as a whole tended to be more proficient in English than many other ethnic groups (e.g., Cuban, Mexican, African, or Eastern Europeans) who came with zero English. Even though Thao arrived just five years ago speaking no English, she was still projected to as one of the no-problem Vietnamese students who had fewer basic English language problems than her ELL peers from other countries.

An ordinary class should further illustrate how the ESL class worked on students' "mastery of sentence patterns… [and] the formation of a habit" (Zamel, 1976 cited in Rodby, 1992, p.7). On a typical Tuesday morning, students sat in rows and columns facing the board. After a silent 30 minute newspaper reading routine, Dr. Norman started the regular grammar reviews. As usual, he was carefully dressed and well groomed. His perfectly-ironed trousers and white shirt, his tie in dark solemn colors, and his clear and stern voice brought an air of authority to the class.

> Our review activity is looking at the tense, looking at how to ask questions. Somebody says "it's very easy", but some of them are a little more challenging. So pay particular attention to the activity today. That's what I ask you to do.

Dr. Norman gave four examples that led to four different grammar exercises for the worksheet time. One required using abbreviated forms to give both positive and negative answers. For example, after Dr. Norman read the question "did Rachel help her sister yesterday?" a Sudanese boy was called upon. "Yes, she did," the student answered in a low voice. "Who can answer this question by raising his hand?" Dr. Norman called another student to give a negative answer. "No, she didn't," a Mexican girl answered. "Good! Remember you should write a comma after *Yes* or *No*. Without this comma, you

have a double negative." Most students were looking at Dr. Norman without making any sound. Pattern drills followed. These exercises included substituting parts in sentences, for instance, by changing the tense. "Sheila went to the grocery store yesterday." Dr. Norman read the sentence on board loudly and clearly, "You can put it into 'Sheila WILL go to the grocery store tomorrow. Or Sheila IS GOING TO go to the grocery store tomorrow." He quickly jotted down the two sentences on the board. A black boy was shouting out answers to the next example and was immediately cut off by Dr. Norman. "Uh! Please raise your hands. You don't remember? What is it?" Dr. Norman pointed to the big posters of bullet-pointed classroom rules. "Three here!" ("Always raise your hand if any question") Just blurt things out from your big old mouth?" Some students giggled and there was a slice of smile on Dr. Norman's face, too. He called Muhammad instead, "Alright, Muhammad! I don't want a question, I want a statement!"

Ten minutes later, a four-page assignment of similar exercises were given to the students to finish in the time remained. "This is all good practice. This is all reviews of things we learned in class." Dr. Norman's voice echoed in the room. Towards "good practice", Dr. Norman preferred all forms of repetition. For example, mechanical writing without composition would enhance language learning. Therefore, grammar drill exercises for basic vocabulary recognition, sentence formation, and tense were the most common writing tasks in ESL class.

> I think it's especially helpful for younger students to write a little bit every day, even just copying sentences. It's good to hone up their penmanship. Having them re-read the sentences a few times. Those kinds of things are helpful because it enhances their writing and reinforces what they have just read because they have that hands-on experience with it.   (Dr. Norman interview transcripts)

Literacy in Linton's ESL class equaled the behaviorist notion of language

acquisition (See Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995, Valdès, 2001), which emphasizes the relatively static meaning of the linguistic components to be memorized and studied as building blocks. As a result, classroom practices were organized overwhelmingly around repetitive grammar, word, and sentence patterns. The students, who were labeled solely by their linguistic knowledge of English, were assumed to be passive receivers of information, rules, and knowledge from teacher, the authority. Classroom participation was one-way and teacher-led without any leeway for meaning making. Such a class, though designed to transition ELL students to mainstream classrooms, would fall short of providing Thao with nurturing opportunities to use and produce English in socially organized interactions. In addition, the institutional assumptions of ESL learners as empty heads lacking English linguistic input and ability to use English properly stigmatized Thao and drove her away. She ended up having to feel her way into the mainstream.

**Temporary Resources: Existing Only In Name**

ELL Students like Thao could find other helpful venues to seek language support at Linton, as some staff members and participating teachers suggested. Many of these institutional resources originated from the counseling center which had both staff members who could speak languages other than English and two volunteer programs for ESL students – an after-school Help Desk and a volunteer network tied to the nearby university's college of education. Learning English and being an English learner were perceived as a minor problem, easily fixed just by people's kindheartedness. As it turned out, such vague assumption resulted in confusion as to what and how to help and who were able to help. Thus, the resources were loosely organized, temporary, and superficial. The institutional assumptions towards the Vietnamese students as a no-problem group

also reverberated.

The language personnel basically referred to counselor Pierre, a middle-aged Haitian immigrant whose first language was French. Dr. Norman remembered having his French speaking students from Africa consult with Mr. Pierre when need arose. However, Mr. Pierre's help was limited to the French speaking students and was above all brief because "his real function is to be a counselor," said Dr. Norman. Mr. Pierre agreed that due to his responsibilities to schedule students' classes and resolving discipline problems in the whole 9th grade, he rarely had time to make regular contact with the ELL students, let alone commitment. Little did he know about ways to assist students to learn English. "I don't speak perfect English myself." Pierre sounded serious.

Mr. Pierre was in favor of total immersion as a means for ELL students to acquire English in a timely manner. Going over Thao's grades in the first marking period, Mr. Pierre was satisfied with Thao's overall performance. Even though Thao had one A, two Cs, two Ds, and an E, Mr. Pierre believed that Thao's GPA was well above a passing grade of 1.0; therefore, she was "doing fine" and there was no need to worry about her academic progress.

> ... [T]he kids are pretty young, uh, between 14 and 17 years old. So most of the kids have the ability to learn English as their second language pretty quick. And after two or three months, they started being immersed into the culture and then get some English speaking ability. That allowed the teacher of ESL, uh, to be released to be teaching something else. You know, so therefore, these kids can move off to a good situation in regular class.
> (Mr. Pierre interview transcripts)

The second resource was two volunteer programs sponsored by Linton's counseling center. The first group of tutors was from the nearby university. They were usually paired up by the students' counselors and they met their tutees in the after school hours on a regular basis. Dr. Norman suggested Thao should be working with college

students who were able to write good essays themselves so that they could teach Thao to write from smaller pieces, such as paragraphs, to longer essays. In Dr. Norman's opinion, the key for Thao to improve was time, native speaker feedback, and repetitions, despite the fact that these native speakers might not know how to teach writing and that the mainstream teachers might lack time and energy to take care of Thao's writing. My excitement to meet the college volunteers was quickly dismissed after learning from a young female white counselor that Linton had not had them for almost two semesters. The school used to recruit volunteers through an Upward Bound Program; however, during my project, not enough people showed up. On the record was only one male English speaking student who was willing to coach baseball.

The last resort seemed to the after-school Help Desk, which focused on helping students with their assignments. There was no specific information as to who exactly these tutors or teachers were, but students could stop by the cafeteria to check if someone was there who might help. The Help Desk turned out to be empty each time I waited there during the after school hours when Thao had long gone home in her school bus.

From first sight, the language and academic support for ELL students at Linton looked encouraging, especially when these institutional resources appeared to be well-known among staff and ESL personnel. Unfortunately, Thao, as an ELL learner, had no access to such information. Furthermore, these resources were either too personal and limited to be counted as effective support, like in the case of Mr. Pierre, the French speaking counselor, or heavily dependent on the availability of volunteers in the two other help programs. In short, the resources had official names yet lack of official organization and management. It was difficult to trace what kind of literacy support these

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programs were supposed to offer to ELL students, how learning English as a second language at Linton was understood in relation to mastering subject matter contents, and who was capable of giving students effective feedback towards their academic English. One thing was obvious: the support came from people's goodwill to help by using their native languages, with English in particular; yet without strong institutional and theoretical guidance, such support was doomed to become a lip service.

## Pass to the Language Aide: Solving All Problems?

Taking the role of a bilingual teacher, Mrs. My, the Vietnamese aide at Linton, became all the more legitimate language support for Thao. Hired by the school district and working part-time at Linton, Mrs. My was regarded as the panacea to all Thao's problems because of My's bilingual advantage and former teaching experiences. Mrs. My equated language learning and learning subject matters, because the two processes happened at the same time and because her students often had difficulty decoding the technical language. Mrs. My saw Thao as a learner who was weak in subject areas, especially math and science. Her learning of academic English would be as natural as her picking up spoken English, as Mrs. My projected. My's understanding of her responsibility and strength in tutoring Thao was also influenced by her own immigrant background and English practices. Shown in the scene at the beginning of this chapter, Mrs. My was given considerable power to pull Thao out of any class, yet would her pass and the tutoring sessions offer Thao strong language support?

Mrs. My's office at Linton is a twenty-square meters room connected to a regular sized classroom which held Linton's special education program. The office stood at the crossroad of hallways in all direction. The student cafeteria, the stairs, the staff

elevator, the bathrooms, and access to the building gate could all be seen from Mrs. My's office door. Except for the special education classroom, Mrs. My's office was away from all general classes, which were in the quieter classroom wing to the east. There was no official sign at the door. If looking closely, one could see a piece of paper as small as a sticky note with handwriting. "Mrs. My, office hour, Tuesday and Friday".

Mrs. My shared the office with Mrs. Garcia. Two bookshelves and a big piece of brown cardboard divided the room into two areas. They had a telephone that only received internal calls. Mrs. Garcia's space was close to the door and Mrs. My's other half had a window with a view of an enclosed backyard with a few picnic chairs. Two long tables and Mrs. My's own desk took up the most space in her area. On one table, there were two old-generation computers that were linked to the Internet; on the other table, there were two Algebra textbooks for the 9th and 10th grades, the daily Maple Creek State Journal, and a chess board. Vietnamese-English dictionaries, books in Vietnamese, and English short stories were piled on Mrs. My's desk. On the wall behind her chair were a school calendar, block schedules, teachers' rooms and schedules, and a few drawings by students.

Twenty years ago at the age of forty, Mrs. My immigrated to the U.S. with her husband and four children. Before being able to work in the American schools, she walked to several part-time job sites everyday to earn some money and practice English. A former high school math teacher in Vietnam, Mrs. My was eager to go back to school and work with students. Ten years after she settled in Maple Creek, she was finally hired by the school district's English Language Learner Program as a language aide, or an "interpreter" as school staff would call her, as the need for home language resource staff

rose with the growing number of nonnative English-speaking students.

Originally a liaison between schools and the Vietnamese families, Mrs. My soon found herself tutoring students who dropped by with questions about their classes. She told me that her former teaching experiences, her knowledge of the subjects, and her first language became precious resources for her students to improve their understanding of school subject matters. The district, as a response, validated Mrs. My's efforts, even though she was not a certified teacher in the U.S. According to Mrs. My, the district needed a language aide so much that they would hire anyone who was willing.

Over the years, the district had not provided any professional development opportunities to support Mrs. My's job working with ELL learners in the multilingual, multicultural school settings. However, Mrs. My, together with her colleagues (e.g., Spanish aide Mrs. Garcia), was given much heavier work loads in the past several years when the district was continuously tightening the budget and laying off teachers. The need for language support personnel, however, grew enormously with incoming students with diverse language, ethnic, and sociocultural backgrounds. Despite the low morale and rumors among aides that the whole ELL program might be the next to be cut, Mrs. My dutifully commuted between the two schools at which she worked - Linton High and a nearby middle school, tutoring at least twenty recent Vietnamese immigrant students from grade 6 through 12.

Mrs. My decided to tutor Thao in private sessions after a discussion with the counselor soon after Thao started high school. The criteria for students to receive Mrs. My's tutoring, though not in any explicitly written form, were based on the length of time a student had been in the U.S., grade reports, and evaluations of the student's overall

performance made by the student' middle school teachers. Although I was not able to observe the tutoring sessions (I will elaborate more in Chapter 6 on the possible reasons), Mrs. My expressed her worries about Thao's sliding math and science scores, but insisted that it was because Thao was "too careless" and "lazy to remember all the information". Mrs. My refused to make connections to Thao's English because she believed Thao who assured her she had no problems in any classes but math and science.

In the mainstream classrooms, almost all the teachers pointed out that Thao's English was the key to her schooling. For example, Mr. Skokie, the math teacher, stressed that "it was all about language" in his class. The biology teacher, Mrs. Evans asserted that it was Thao's language barrier that made her "not getting it kind of thing" and constrained Thao socially as well. At the beginning of the year, the teachers were uniformly positive about the fact that Thao had accessed to first language support provided by Mrs. My. On one occasion during her class, Mrs. Turner asked if I would like to take Thao to Mrs. My's office to finish reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*[24], believing Thao would have a more comfortable and nurturing learning environment there. Mrs. Evans, the science teacher, shared similar feelings towards Mrs. My's job as the language aide. Having been teaching at Linton for more than 10 years, Mrs. Evans was thankful that she had Mrs. My to rely on.

> [S]ince we get so many students with ESL, it seems to me they were just looking for Hispanic, Asians, for anybody who could help them. There're others who are hired, like Mrs. My. I don't know of any. Those are the folks we need in this situation - in a city school. This is not, you know, rural country. In a bigger city school like this, we ARE a melting pot. We need those people desperately. I can't tell you how many times I have to run down to another Hispanic teacher to say, "Okay, I've got to talk to a parent to help me out." Or sometimes I need help with the students. "We're not communicating! Can you help me out?" Those people are cold!   (Mrs.

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[24] Lee, H. (1960) *To kill a mockingbird.* Philadelphia: Lippincott.

Evans interview transcripts)

However, doubts about the pass emerged after the first marking period. Thao was the first to complain that she almost failed Biology because the teacher ignored Mrs. My's pass. "She [Mrs. Evans] asked why go to My. I said Mrs. My help me." Thao sat up and raised her voice when we chatted in library. "But she didn't let me go and she gave me E. That class is stupid!" Thao poured out her grievances. The incident was confirmed and clarified by Mrs. Evans, saying that she did not want Thao to miss an important biology lesson that was going to appear in a test the following day. My. Mrs. Evans was disappointed that Thao refused to do any lab work after she rejected her request to leave while the class was still in session. Mrs. Evans understood Thao's need to work with her language aide, but was puzzled why Thao was so eager to purposefully skip a review session designed to help her through a test.

Mr. Skokie reacted to the pass more dramatically. The middle-aged white teacher who taught a wide range of courses from algebra to world literature was all smiling until I consulted him about Thao's progress. Although he made it clear that his work schedule was heavily booked with student portfolios, tests, and his own master's studies, Skokie still sounded unusually impatient and negative. On a Friday morning, I arrived at Linton early to catch Thao in her algebra class. Unfortunately, I did not see Thao in class. When I approached Mr. Skokie at the end of the hour to ask if he knew where Thao was, Skokie told me Thao "went to the helper". As I asked if he meant the Vietnamese interpreter, he suddenly grew tense. He no longer smiled and his eyes shifted away from me. To my surprise, Skokie said that he had not even heard of this Vietnamese interpreter. "I'd love to meet her, if there is one." Mr. Skokie did not like to see Thao skipping at least half of

class time every day to go to "the helper". "She [Thao] never turned in any assignment and she's not doing well!" Mr. Skokie's voice was low but firm, as if making an accusation. He admitted that he could have said no to Thao's request with the pass, but he did not do that partly because he was not sure where Thao went and what she did.

In 9th Grade English, Mrs. Turner had her worry towards Thao's frequent withdrawal from the class as well, though recognizing Thao's efforts to read to her group members.

> ... She has tried more recently is she gets out of class and get to Mrs. My's office, which makes me wonder why. Because she's trying to doubt herself? Because she doesn't have the book? You know, for her that would be an easier thing, you know? Or is it just she's trying to use the opportunity? Because I think it's important for her to have Mrs. My's support. I LOVE Mrs. My, but is she [Thao] using it?    (Mrs. Turner interview transcripts)

Mrs. Turner's worry was reinforced by Thao's quarterly test result which showed only three correct answers out of 45 questions on the reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird,* punctuations, and literary terms such as genre, plot structure, and point of view. Mrs. Turner did not grade Thao's five-paragraph essay outline because it was way off the topic and the requirement.

However, teachers had little idea what kind of support Mrs. My was giving to Thao and how she helped Thao with English. Unfortunately, no teachers had tried to talk to Mrs. My directly to share information. As Mrs. Turner, the English teacher, commented, part of the reason was that she was not sure if going to meet Mrs. My and pointing out what Thao should be working on would be appropriate and polite. Therefore, Mrs. My's office was regarded not only as another classroom in school - private and self-contained (Jackson, 1990), but also as a space with different cultural norms that teachers would rather appreciate from a distance.

A communication channel seemed to be missing here between Mrs. My and Thao's mainstream teachers. As a part-time staff dispatched by the district, Mrs. My once conveyed her preference to not contact the teachers because they would be too busy to be bothered. Beside, no one ever visited her the other way round. In addition, a few tutoring hours per week would pass quickly when the work was simply going over the math and biology questions with Thao. There was no time left for anything else.

Still, Mrs. My would write Thao a pass upon her request. The condition was that Thao must finish the class' required assignment first. The pass turned out to have won Thao precious time out of the classrooms. During these periods, Mrs. My helped her review her math and biology problems. However, Thao lost many hours in classes to participate in learning activities, such as reading and writing in 9th English. Thao did manage to finish the English assignment quickly; but as to be discussed in the next section, the challenge to read and write in the English classroom was by no means easy to face.

## Summary

To summarize, the institutional support available at Linton to ELL students like Thao mirrored the wider social context of educational policy and politics towards language minorities. Guided by prevailing cultural assimilation in educating immigrant students, the institutional assumptions tended to dichotomize language learning into either an ESL or a mainstream. Support programs were either dealing with the basics beyond contexts and meanings or focusing on subject matter content with no preparation for students' varied language backgrounds. In other words, the division of ESL/mainstream did not consider students' literacy development in multiple languages

and the means and environments to support language learning; instead, it was based solely on the psycholinguistic criteria of whether or not an ELL student was able to use functional English in daily interaction. Thao was expected to acquire the language on her own as she was immersed in the mainstream curriculum.

Furthermore, Thao was not viewed as an individual learner with her social worlds. Oftentimes, she was represented as one of the Vietnamese students who shared the features of the "model minority" (Lee, 1996). For instance, she was believed to be doing well both with her English and in the mainstream, because "Vietnamese students are always on the top", as counselor, Mr. Pierre, commented, in comparison with other language minorities (e.g., Latino, African, or African American students). Such an essentialized view of who Thao is as a learner ignored her challenges and needs and created excuses when there was a lack of institutional support.

The role of the Vietnamese aide, in a way, reinforced the assumptions and relieved much of the burden from the institution side. Even though the first language aide could have played a more important role in Thao's learning, too many expectations were placed on her to save Thao. What Mrs. My had to face was endless subject matter problems, limited time working with Thao, scarce support to her own professional development in English and teaching, and isolation from teachers who also played a role in Thao's learning.

In the following chapter, I go with Thao into her mainstream classrooms. I examine how the institutional notions of literacy and of the English language learner like Thao figured into everyday pedagogical practices within the micro context of Linton.

# CHAPTER 4
## LOST IN THE INSTITUTION:
## LEARNING TO WRITE IN THE MAINSTREAM

"Look! I got 10, 10, so many 10!" Tina pointed to several sheets of paper spread in front of us when we met in Mrs. My's office one morning in October. On the table were her assignments, class notes, homework graded and returned by her teachers. "That's grea:t!" I congratulated Thao, browsing through these potentially informative written materials at the same time. As I was going to take a close look at some particular pages, Thao, to my surprise, ordered me forcefully, "Now, you can go and copy!" She knew that I would be happy to photocopy anything she shared with me, but this was the first time she offered without me asking for her permission first. We were supposed go to her English class together in a few minutes, so I quickly gathered the scattering paper. "Oh, they're maps! Which class is this?" I couldn't help asking. "Geography," Thao answered briefly. "Hey, we do China next week", she informed me, thinking I would be interested. "Really? OK! Um, what about this cat face?" I pointed to another page with a red stamp on it, a sketched smiling cat face. "Scien[ce] fiction. We watch movies. Scare movies." The bell rang, releasing students into the hallway. "Gotta go!" Thao rushed out with a purple folder and the novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird* in hand, leaving me, Mrs. My, and those assignment sheets behind.

The written works Thao shared with me that day were mainly from her Science Fiction class, an elective course in Language Arts with its nick name -"Sci-Fi" used by the teacher, Mr. Richards. Other written work came from World Geography taught by Mr. Irving. Unlike Mr. Irving who used a 10 point scale grading system, Mr. Richards liked to reward students with stamps. The more stamps they got throughout the semester, the

higher their grades. The usual geography assignments were fill-in-the-blank exercises on specific topics of the day, for example, Confucius and his philosophy, Southern Asia, Latin America, etc. Students would get full grade if they filled out the outline sheets Mr. Irving designed for each class session. The Sci-fi written assignments varied. There were charts to be filled on fictional characters in movies or novels that Mr. Richards asked students to watch or read; there were also short questions and movie summaries.

As the geography and sci-fi photocopies grew into a big pile not long after my project started, written materials from Thao's English class were still scarce. As Thao explained later, she couldn't give me those assignments because they were always drafts and not ready to share. Her teacher, Mrs. Turner, asked the class to revise their writing multiple times before submitting the final version, so the good-to-copy assignments with final scores did not come as frequently as those from the two previously mentioned classes. In addition, Thao didn't think that she should let me photocopy those with only teacher comments but no grade. In her opinion, those were not ready, either. There were many different kinds of writings Thao did in her English class. From a glimpse of her purple folder for her 9th English class, I saw reading journals, free writes, and class notes.

Thao allowed me to photocopy these materials later, but it is more important to note here that based on her teachers' feedback and ways of grading, Thao had her own interpretation and criteria of what counted as a written product and when it counted as a legitimate text to be shared with me. For Thao, a written product could be a variety of things she wrote inside (e.g. class assignments) and outside classrooms (e.g., poems, emails, and picture diaries), which I would categorize as the official and the unofficial respectively. Different from the unofficial writings that Thao would offer to share with

me, she was not ready to share the official writings until it had a *grade*, or a grade equivalent, such as a cat face stamp.

As the institution posed assumptions of ELL students like Thao through its supporting programs, curricula, and instructions, Thao had her own responses and interpretations of what was required and expected and how to go about that. In this chapter, I examine the contextual academic challenges Thao faced in the mainstream classrooms as she grappled with different institutional support to participate in varied writing practices. I consider the particular practices Thao experienced in her mainstream classrooms – World Geography, Science Fiction, and English. I discuss their expectations and demands by examining the instructional objectives and expectations, the required written work, and the participation structures. I also examine how Thao, as a learner, coped with these expectations and demands. I argue that her practices in the mainstream classrooms reflected different interpretations of literacy and of language learners. Though trying to participate in classroom practices, Thao ended up not getting coherent and consistent support towards her English which served as both the subject and the medium of instruction.

## In Mainstream Classes: Coping With Different Expectations

### "Write Down What I Say!": Forced Participation in Controlled Dictation

On a day like many others in World Geography, a required course for all 9th graders, Mr. Irving, a white middle-aged male teacher, was calling students' attention after passing out several worksheets. "Now, on the sheet, write down what I say. And if you want a grade, better find your pencil!" He was ready to read out answers to questions on the class handout. For the first half an hour in this 90-minute long class, Mr. Irving

69

read some passages about Confucius, the Chinese philosopher who lived in 500 B.C., from a textbook. He sometimes switched to his personal experiences of living a quiet and harmonic life in the woods in the northern part of the state. For the second half of class, Mr. Irving was going to assign some written work about Confucius.

Thao sat in the middle of the rows and columns of desks. She still did not know the boys and girls sitting around her although it had been almost a month since the first Geography class. The textbook was open in front of her. Also lying on the table was a booklet of supplementary handouts. Thao and twenty other freshmen were frequently urged by Mr. Irving to take down words and sentences he repeated as he read and explained these words and sentences line by line. Today, after Mr. Irving read aloud Confucian sayings, for example, that "[a] man with clever words and an ingratiating appearance is seldom a man of humanity," he asked the class to write down "watch out people" as a paraphrase. "That's what Confucius meant." Mr. Irving confirmed.

There were four more pages of exercises with a variety of questions, such as matching meanings with Confucius proverbs, listing Confucius's unique ways of teaching, and writing briefly about Confucius's ideas. Thao flipped through the pages as if counting the exercises yet to come. Her pencil needed to be sharpened after the first five minutes of intense note-taking with Mr. Irving. Sometimes, she underlined a particular phrase, or a sentence; sometimes, she wrote a word or two by a particular paragraph; other times, Mr. Irving read answers aloud and asked the students to copy into the blank area on the worksheet. As he reminded everyone from time to time, if they worked hard and wrote down everything he said, they would get good grades.

Thao gave up the idea of sharpening her pencil. Instead, she took out a colored

pen from her purse and tried to catch up. She already missed three lines under

"Miscellaneous Confucius" (see Figure 1). The original teacher handout Thao and her

classmates were working on looked something like this:

**Figure 1. World Geography Class Handout on Confucius**

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

I.   Confucianism-
            a.
            b.
            c.
            d.
            e.
            f.
  A. Five Relationship-
  B. Confucius aka K'ung Futzu (551 BC-479 BC)-
            a.
            b.
            c.
            d.
            e.
            f.
  C. Miscellaneous Confucius-
            a. Mandate of Heaven-
            b. Heaven-
            c. Filial piety-
            d. "analects"-
            e. Mencius-
              *
            f.
  D. Mao Zedung-
            a.
            b.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Mr. Irving, for example, read the first heading "Confucianism", then told

students to write "traditional China" in the space after that heading. Thao had tried to

follow the teacher who was moving from one line to the next fairly quickly. Given the

speed of the teacher's speech and limited time to finish each line, Thao's final

handwritten note showed how much she was able to catch by the end of this marathon

dictation which lasted approximately half an hour. There were many words that Thao did not spell right even though Mr. Irving repeated them. Thao's handwriting became more and more loose and unrecognizable as the exercise reached its end (see Figure 2).

A week later, Thao proudly passed me this page as well as other handouts and worksheets from the same day in World Geography so that I could photocopy. She received a grade of "120" for that day's work, which was like an A, as Thao explained.

This worksheet writing practice was fairly typical in World Geography, the objective of which, as reflected in such a daily routine, was to cover the required subject-area content through mechanical writing without composing (Applebee, 1981). Personal experiences and the development of writing skills were not emphasized. The teacher assumed a role as the authority of content area knowledge, disseminating concepts and information without negotiation and challenge from the students. Expectations towards students as a whole were to follow the teacher's directions and to receive the information by finishing a certain quantity of writing assignment, namely, filling in the blanks with less than a sentence and transcribing the information the teacher dictated. In the participation structure[25] in which the teacher dominated most of the interactions, students were a generic group responding mostly through physically "doing" the steps. It was a rare case that students spoke up or asked a question, because the teacher had made it clear that students would be required to make up for their work during lunch or after school hours if they failed to finish the copying in class. Therefore, Thao, with her peers, became passive participants having no opportunity to socialize and interact with one another over the writing activities.

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[25] This structure fits in the first type of participation structure in Philips (1972).

**Figure 2. Thao's Confucius Written Assignment**

I. Confucianism – Traditional China
   a. Intended to foster harmony in nature and between people
   b. System of epticop real religious cocern with organist
   c. Understanding of univers start under standing regula
   d. Believe nature is a dynamic change senses ing
   e. Seek harmony within a cyflekdy.
   f. Study by scholar is not alway follow by the leader.

A. Five Relationships – 1. I deal goverment proper behavior. 2.

B. Confucius aka K'ung Fitzu (551 BC - 479 BC) – Most influential person in china history.
   a. Teacher was n.v.ry
   b. He did not created collect that them
   c. He born trouble and his
   d. Virbo is a central family die when he was three
   e. He talk and school
   f. 3 thousand student in his life real community state, country

C. Miscellaneous Confucius –

   a. Mandate of Heaven –

   b. Heaven –

   c. filial piety –

   d. "Analects" – the book

   e. Mencius – He live a hundred year later when the Confuses and wrote the dialect die is broke no
   * ...
   f. confuses writing the economic body

D. Mao Zedung – Is a leader of China
   a. He try fudexcjoy coom from 1949 to 1975
   b. About 30 million Ching people die for him

73

## "Just Write Something...": Fake Participation in Writing for Tokens

Mr. Richards, the science fiction teacher, suddenly raised his voice after the bell rang. "If you were about to die, what would go through your mind?" Some students seemed to hear him and turned in his direction. Before the class burst into questions, jokes, or unpredictable comments, Mr. Richards went on with his request. "In honor of Halloween, the annual celebration of death, I just want to know and I want you to write about it, and I have a short movie. I want you to write half a page. Right now!" Not too many students picked up their pens.

It was a chilly and cloudy Friday morning before Halloween. Mr. Richards, a white English teacher with a tall but slim figure, wore a purple and orange tie with many pumpkins on it. The classroom he shared with another science fiction teacher appeared darker even in a late morning hour. The shades in the room were always down for the convenience of watching movies. Students sat individually in rows and columns in two groups divided by an aisle in the middle of the room. Mr. Richards placed an easy chair and a sofa by his overhead projector in front of the room. Students could sit there if they would. Thao was one of the six girls in the class. An African American girl sat in a row ahead of her and three white girls were behind, but they did not have any interaction with Thao. On the other side of the aisle, another African American girl sat close to the classroom door. The rest of the area was taken by 16 boys, half of them black. White and Latino divided the other half.

Thao was playing with her lip gloss when she suddenly heard Mr. Richard saying that he would stamp their writing. She quickly took out a blank sheet from her folder. After the date and name, Thao turned to me. "What the question?" she asked. A

feet away, I was trying to recall, "If you were about to die, what would go through your mind?" Thao asked me to repeat several times until she had the complete question on the sheet. She also signaled me to sit closer to her.

While I remained silent and continued with my own notes, Thao took me as her listener, telling me that she would think of her mom and dad. I realized that Thao seemed to be waiting for my response, so I brought up a question, "brothers and sisters?" Thao gave me an immediate and firm "No". "Friends?" "No!" She appeared to be ready to write her paragraph. After a minute or two, Thao let me read the half page handwriting, so I became her reader.

If you about to die what is go true your mind.      10/29/04 Thao

> I will think that I will
> never see my family and
> mine mind is my dad and
> my mom and two little brother,
> little sister, and another mine
> mind is my family in my
> country I will never see them
> again.

The classroom was not quiet. Jeffery, a white student sitting under the television monitor, was telling about his neighbor who died just a few days before. Other boys joined him to share more stories about someone's death, for example, in Iraq. Thao put her finished paper aside, took out a little mirror from her purse, and checked her hair and lips. As Jeffery announced loudly to class that he would never go to Iraq to get himself killed, Mr. Richards finished a conversation with a school clerk at the door and came back to calm down Jeffery. He reminded everyone that he was going to stamp their writings.

Richards' words caught Thao's attention. She stopped her personal grooming at

once and placed her story at the center of the desk and waited for her turn. Mr. Richards was patrolling around the room. "You guys didn't take your notes, uh? It's called 'I-don't-care-about-my-grades', uh?" Before he reached Thao, no one on Thao's side of the room had anything on paper. Mr. Richards changed his tone upon seeing Thao's half page. "Thank God we have someone pushing you to do the right thing!" Mr. Richards stamped a little violin on the paper right away without even reading the content. After watching Richards roaming away to check the rest of the students, Thao turned to me with a proud smile. She showed me the little violin stamp, as well as 7 other stamps she had received. "I got A if I have more!" Thao was hopeful.

This free-write exercise, either before a movie or after, is representative of this elective course. The goal, as Mr. Richards stated in the syllabus, was to help students enjoy science fiction and appreciate life, and get a grade as well. Mr. Richard created some activities that students could use for personal and imaginative writings. As shown in the previous vignette, students were expected to write *something* as an answer to a fairly personal question set up by Mr. Richards, who did not limit students to particular genres and formats. He seemed just to wait for some informal comments from the students on a holiday that was close. The participation structure, therefore, was loose. Some students such as Thao and the African American students sitting around her were working independently, as it appeared, while others were not necessarily participating in the action of writing. Instead, they started or joined verbal interactions with peers on a variety of topics, including life and death and Halloween. Most of them were white boys sitting in a corner. Mr. Richards interrupted their conversations openly (e.g., that someone should have concentrated on the writing, or that someone should be careful of their language),

while reminding everyone that he would check their work soon. Unfortunately, this loosely controlled writing activity that could have created many opportunities for students to write was reduced to an easy token exchange. As long as there were words on paper, a student would get a token with the exchange value for a better final grade. Thao earned her stamp by dutifully brainstorming [luckily with me as her partner] and later writing it up; however, the meaning of writing to share personal and imaginative ideas was dismissed in this activity. Neither did she receive constructive feedback towards her writing. Some common features shared by most second language learners showed up in Thao's writing, such as limited vocabulary and syntax, as well as features of her spoken English (e.g., the overuse of "and").

The other kind of free writing was informational analyses of or persuasive arguments on the movies shown in class. Similarly, writing took place in a loose structure where students worked by themselves. The expectation of the students, as Thao understood, was to write something for a stamp. However, with more controlled topics and genres, Thao's challenge in language became all the more evident. Thao wrote the following passage to respond to the statement, by agreeing or disagreeing with this statement: "E.T.[26] is about love, the one power in the universe that can not be controlled."

> I think is a scare movied
> because ET is a human
> come to Earth down in the city
> and Elliot a little boy found
> ET and be friend with him
> one day Elliot was lot and
> his mom was so worry
> and call the police and Elliot was

---

[26] Spielberg, S. (Director). (1982). *E.T. The extra-terrestrial* [Motion picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.

come back home with his eye
is all red, his mom ask him
what happen he be quite it run
to his room a next day ET was
is in the water and die Elliot
brother was take the bike and
find ET and take ET to his
house and tell his mom what
in the room, his mom was
hold the and walk to
the room and she drop her
coffe down and her kids
to get out because she
scare of that monster, Elliot
was cry and say live me
I want ET if ET die and
Elliot is die and the flower
growing up and ET is not
die because is a magic
ET Alive in the End that movies,
Elliot was so happy and they
family was let ET go back
to Earch.

Instead of stating a position, Thao wrote a sketchy summary to describe what happens in the movie. It caught many detailed episodes such as the dramatic reaction of the little boy's mother upon seeing the sick E.T. Thao also incorporated dialogues to depict how anxious the little boy was when the E.T. appeared dying. However, Thao needed help with vocabulary, syntax, grammar, and organization. Above all, she needed support to go through the whole process of reading, understand the questions and writing the response that was relevant. Mr. Richards' feedback was nothing but a stamp – no other comment or suggestion. For her, the stamps were symbols of good work and teacher recognition. As shown previously, because participating in the class' writing activities meant working on one's own, Thao had no one to consult with in terms of the question. If I were with her in the class, she would ask me and talk to me about the topic.

It happened several times when I was in the room observing her work; however, I was far from being a regular partner. Due to lack of teacher's support and a community of peers working together, Thao developed coping strategies of never missing any writing assignments and always using summaries to reply to whatever type of question. She thought it was successful because her stamps were accumulating quickly.

"You know, she's really, you know, doing ( ) You ( ), but in the end ( )" Mr. Richards was aware of Thao's English challenges, but he did not articulate them. Before I ever saw Thao's first stamp, Mr. Richards already expressed, if not explicitly, his concern and dilemma in grading Thao's work.

> I think I told you I was in Korea. You know. She's [Thao] taking a process so much more, you know, than [pause. Richards did not finish the sentence] It turns that it's just sheer language and anything else.   I'm sure she'll be ( ) whatever she can get from this sci-fi class, but I tried not to be ( ), um, not ( ) one dimensional in terms of, in terms of how I grade kids. And every once in a while I get lazy in my mind and I start just go this (He grabs his grade book, opens it, and points to the numbers and dates inside), and then this, then it becomes reality. Then, I said "wait a minute! I'm an English teacher. What's wrong with me?" and I would look at the kid again and I would say okay, but ( ).                                  (Mr. Richards interview transcripts)

Mr. Richards did not finish, but I could well see the struggle he had in terms of making sure that students whose first language is not English, such as Thao, would not be judged totally by their work in a language they are still learning, and that they at least did something to fulfill classroom requirements. Such a sympathetic way to see Thao as a learner also came from his experiences of linguistic and cultural shock in being in a different country. Therefore, for Richards, instead of a harsh reality to discourage Thao to continue to learn more, his class should be a friendly, enjoyable, and safe place for her to know some "popular literature and to compare other people's artistic response to life with our own experiences to develop an appreciation of our own lives as well as the sanctity of

those of other's around us."[27]  Yet, Thao's specific need in language was not listed as a priority for both Richard and Thao to work on, even though it was obvious for the teacher through a fleeting glimpse of Thao's writing. Still, Mr. Richards was satisfied seeing Thao participating by actually writing something for each assignment, while many native English speakers failed to do. The participation itself appeared to be worth a stamp as a reward.

The other reason Mr. Richards gave for his stamp policy was that he believed that the counseling office purposely sent special education students to his room. Mr. Richards told me that it was because they knew that he was more tolerant of the kids and that he would not "get bent out of shape" if something happened. More seriously, he also believed that the nature of his science fiction class left space for the counselors to cram students who need some "easy" classes. For this temporary elective that was not even listed in the curriculum, Mr. Richards explained that it was "supposed to be fun and then kids go up and succeed in maybe some other more traditional settings".

Along the semester, Thao kept getting stamps in the Sci-Fi class. For her, Sci-Fi class "IS easy" and she could manage it, because, "you watch movie and you write about it". The stamp mattered most to Thao. Regardless of the demanding questions, Thao did not hesitate to just write on. She knew that as long as she wrote something (usually summaries of what she saw and read), she would get the stamps. The following written sample produced in the middle of the semester reveals how Thao dealt with Mr. Richards's questions which she did not seem to understand at all, and how she produced something after all to collect a stamp.

Mr. Richards had two questions for the day:

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[27] From Mr. Richards' syllabus.

1) Compare your answer with the two fairy tales (that Mr. Richards had discussed in class). Do the castles in the fairy tales represent the same thing?

2) What, if anything, does this have to do with our three themes[28]?

Thao began answering the first question using her usual "I think ..." starter.

> I think that the fairy tales is very good
> stories about the castle and how
> they do it and the stories is so
> scare and alot monster in there
> and some part same thing
> like alot stuff in the castle.

Thao did not offer a comparison, even though she tried to borrow "I think" as if it were an opinion. The other place that showed her effort was her mentioning the word "castles", because it was in the original question. Soon, Thao resumed her usual sketchy summary with some of her emotional reactions. For Question Two, she numbered her "themes" and filled them with generalized reports of the story.

> (1)    Two door is blue, red you need
>        to choose one door that you want
>        goin to help Sarah little brother.
> (2)    The kind don't let Sarah go no were
>        he tell Sarah that she only have is
>        hour to find his little brother in the
>        castle.
> (3)    Sarah don't scare nothing and she
>        need to find her little brother
>        she not find him, she so sad because
>        she love her little brother.

She got a stamp for finishing this exercise, as well. By the end of the semester, Mr. Richards originally pictured win-win situation had to be a lose-lose. On the one hand, unlike the high motivation Mr. Richards may have expected his students to have, Thao

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[28] According to the course syllabus, the three themes are creating life, ruling the world, and living forever.

was so tired of writing the summaries that she could not hide her boredom in class. She told me in a short conversation that Science Fiction was an easy but boring movie class. On the other hand, Mr. Richards revealed his frustration in grading Thao's final exam. "Her answer doesn't make sense!" Mr. Richards seemed to discover it for the first time. Indeed, imagine what Thao would respond to the following final exam questions, having been used to writing summaries.

Final Exam Questions:

(1) What is the reason for science fiction/fantasy and how are they different?

(2) What's real and what's not real?

(3) What would happen if you took the blue and red pill together[29]?

Here is what Thao wrote for the exam:

I think that the common idea of charaters is very cool when you watch all the movie in this class, when she the dragon heart is so freaking, ever body was so scare only one man wan't to kill the dragon heart but after all they be friend together, and he look up sky she the zodiac of dragon heart that mean the dragon come from there.

The kid of movie navigator is very scare and all those kids live in a town and so cold then one day they found a place can go to a pretty and cool place they really happy, the boy was so happy and he need to help his country when the bell ring but when you image the boy climb up to the church is like he fail dow, but is not his little friend help him when they touch the bell ring every body in his place hear the bell ring they was so happy and smile.

The kid of the lion King is was so scare too and so cool the white witch is so mean she want to kill everybody, but one day a little girl find a place is out of a different place and she see a man look like a animal but he a nice guy he tell her to come in his house and have some tea and she really like his house. Then after that her brother find out that place then he she the white witch and she just lie to him that you wan't same food and he say yes than he need to promise with a witch take his sister and brother come home...

There were three natural paragraphs; however, none of them answered the questions. Thao was immersed in several movies or stories she knew. That reminded me

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[29] The third question was based on a movie students watched on the exam day.

of her first introduction of what the Science Fiction class was like - "You watch movie and you write something!"

In sum, Thao's participation in Science Fiction illustrated her reliance on summary writing with relatively limited vocabulary and syntax features common in those learning English. Even though such participation appeared to satisfy the expectation of students to finish the writing assignments, such participation lost its point of learning through meaningful interactions through texts. Not only had Thao received no comments from the teacher or peers about the content of her writings, her language challenges were also left untended. Out of his sympathy towards Thao as a learner who was dealing with a very difficult process across the cultural and language boundaries, Mr. Richards, a cheerleader but never a coach, awarded Thao grade tokens - an empty encouragement, which resulted in some unintended consequences. For one thing, the lowered expectations of Thao's learning did not benefit her. When the goal became collecting tokens, doing class work was all about accumulating in quantity rather than improving its quality. Moreover, without any feedback on her writing, Thao learned to believe, as reviewed in an informal chat about the assignments, that she was doing the right thing.

## Guided Participation?: Drafting, Conferencing, and Revising

As discussed in the previous sections, the nature of class assignments and participation in World Geography and Science Fiction did not offer Thao much space and opportunity to work collaboratively with teachers and peers on both the content and the language. Since Thao was only expected to complete a certain quantity of work, she tried to accomplish it despite the fact that she was all by herself in class. The full grades she received for such work, though without any teachers' comments, reinforced her

interpretation of a successful way to tackle discipline areas. It became more the more

confusing and difficult for Thao to tackle writing assignments in the English classroom

where finishing up work meant more than obtaining a check mark on the teacher's grade

book. Thao felt her way into the 9th English class where Mrs. Turner emphasized

organizing ideas in the process of drafting, conferencing, and revising. Thao did not have

as many full grades as she planned for each mini assignment. The expectation towards

student work, in Mrs. Turner's words, is higher quality in writing.

> ... what we're trying to do is we grade them in the quality of their work, but
> we give them credit for turning it in because the hardest part was having the
> kids coming in if they're not used to turning their work in. They're starting to
> get in, let's say, the story, working on quality. So they don't just turned their
> drafts in, you know, do it more intensely.
>
> (Mrs. Turner interview transcripts)

Thao also experienced new ways of participation different from those in World

Geography and Science Fiction. She pointed out many times in our conversations her

disadvantage of not knowing what the teacher was asking and how to say or respond to

many things. Though eager to adopt her "successful" experiences (e.g., to cooperate by

always turning in work, on time and always copying teachers' notes on the board) getting

many full grades in the other two classes, Thao was helpless and left wondering why it

was so difficult to do so in English. I will illustrate how Thao participated in two

representative and related episodes of writing practices in 9th English.

*Episode 1: Book review.* The "Wreath Book Review" project was an extension

of a routine reading journal activity, a part of the creative writing unit earlier in the year.

As required by Mrs. Turner, students needed to follow three steps to make the final

writing products. They should first draft a review of a book (e.g., short story, novel,

poetry, etc.) they chose, then meet the teacher for an editing session regarding their drafts,

and finally print the revised reviews on a tag and hang them to a wreath as Mrs. Turner's room decoration. Revisions were essential to writing a good review and to getting a good grade as well, according to Mrs. Turner in a lecture before the one-on-one meetings with students. She quickly went through two review samples regarding the format and content with the class.

One early November morning, it was Thao's turn to sit with Turner to discuss her book review while other students were working independently on their own reviews and waiting for their turns. She prepared a draft which physically met the requirement: information of the novel was listed on the top of the page (e.g., book title, genre, publisher, number of pages, ISBN, reviewer's name and school, length of review, and a brief review), followed by a review paragraph. Table 4 illustrates the conference.

The conversation captured Thao's interactions with the teacher during the book review conference. The conference itself as a channel for interaction between the teacher and the student was unique in the English class in comparison with those in World Geography and Science Fiction. As reflected in the conversation, Mrs. Turner, playing roles as an expert and a consultant, tried to achieve her goal of helping Thao, a novice writer, clarify her writing in learning to write the genre of book reviews. In addition, Mrs. Turner was also the primary reader and the evaluator of Thao's final writing product. Other possible audience of the book wreath project (who, according to Mrs. Turner, could be all kinds of visitors to Mrs. Turner's room, such as students from other hours) served more as an imaginary than a concrete community sharing the reviewers' work. The participation structure was one in which participation was required and private between individuals, such as between students and a teacher (Philips, 1972).

**Table 4. The Teacher-Student One-on-one Conference on the Book Review Project**

| Conversations between Thao and Mrs. Turner | | Thao's draft (95 words) as Thao and Turner read it | Turner's corrections (italicized) | Researcher Notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Turner | Thao | | | |
| OK. (looks at the draft) This is the book review. (tries to read the draft, but soon turns to Thao) Could you read this to me? | (reads aloud, but not clearly) That's what Jess thought his summer would be all about everything was falling into a place with ... | That's what Jess thought his summer would be all about everything was falling into a place with Reed, but a tragic accident at the beach has driven them apart. | | Turner explained later that she had observed that Thao tended to participate in activities which could involve reading texts aloud. By asking Thao to read hers, Turner planned to get Thao involved in this activity. |
| Into place with Reed. | (continues, but gets stuck in pronunciation) But a trac ... | | | |
| tragic? | Yeah. ... (continues) accident at the beach has driven them apart. | | | |
| OK. (reads the first sentence again) That was Jess said this summer would be ... What would it be all about? Why you say that? | (frowns and hesitates) Like, he thought it would ... (pauses and speechless) | | | Thao was able to manage Turner's first series of probing questions, briefly. |
| He though it would what? | Have fun with family, but accident. | | | |
| Ur, something else happened? | (sounds unsure) yeah... | | | |

**Table 4. (cont'd).**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (smiles) OK. Jess thought, OK, what do we do? Jess thought, this summer would be ..(waits Thao to say something) | (silent, smiles to Turner) | | Thao did not respond to this open question, but immediately answered a Yes/No question |
| ... uh, about having fun with friends? | | | |
| That's what you said? | (responds positively, sounding relieved) Mm! | | |
| It's okay. Here you go. (makes corrections on Thao's draft).. having fun with friends. OK. If you do it that way, it makes complete sentence. (reads the corrected sentence) Jess thought this summer would be all about having fun with friends. Everything was falling into place with Reed, but a tragic accident happened in the beach has driven them apart. OK? | Um. (smiles) But I don't know how to say... (listens and watches Turner making corrections and nods) Mm. | [Added a paragraph mark] Jess thought [Deleted: That's what] his summer would be (Deleted: all) about [Added: having fun with friends] [Deleted: and. Capitalized: E] and. Capitalized: E] having fun with friends. Everything was falling into [Deleted: a] place with Reed, but a tragic accident at the beach has driven them apart [Added: punctuation]. | Thao revealed her problem. Turner was supportive. She offers a much longer and complete scenario which Thao accepted right away. |
| (continues reading Thao's second paragraph) Jess hang out with... (stops and browses the rest of the paragraph) Oh, you start going into a lo::ng summary into it. OK, don't you think this will be enough information to make someone read the book? | | | |
| You don't think? You think you need to add this next part in so someone will want to read the book? Because to me it is like something that tells me 'Oh, this is gonna be fine, everything's gonna be cool. | (no response. smiles) | | Turner noticed Thao wrote a summary rather than the required book review. |

**Table 4. (cont'd).**

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Then suddenly something tragic happened'. But what happened? You don't want to give them too much, because giving them too much, they won't read the book. OK? (continues reading) Now, Jess... (turns to Thao) Can you read this to me? | Now Jess she was hangout with her friends, Andy and Paula. And Paula is in love with Jess, and she thought ... like ... | Now Jess she was hangout with her friend Andy and Paula is in love with Jess and she thought that being a lifeguard was tough, but hiding the true feelings not even tougher. | | *Thao did not have time to react to Turner's long comments.* |
| Lifeguard | (repeats) lifeguard, but hiding the truth .... | | [Deleted: Now jess she was hangout with her friend Andy and] Paula is in love with Jess and she thought that being a lifeguard was tough, but hiding the true feelings [Deleted: not. Added: is] is even tougher. | |
| Oh, hiding her feelings? | Mm. | | | |
| (crosses out a line and writes "is" on draft) hiding the true feeling, but even tougher. OK, so you think that needs to be there too? So not only it's a scary book, but it's also about emotions. | | | | *Thao reacted quickly to a choice offered by Turner.* |
| Alright. OK. Now Jess ... (reads to herself and frowns as if confused) Jess is a girl? | Mm. | | | |
| Reed is a boy? | Mm. | | | *Among a variety of questions, Thao was able to pick up the Yes/No ones more easily. Her answer was brief and with no elaboration.* |
| OK. Then Jess hanging out with her friend, Andy. Andy is a boy or a girl? | Mm. | | | |
| OK. Paula is in love with Jess. So Paula | Boy. | | | |

**Table 4. (cont'd).**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| loves Jess? | Mm. | | |
| Jess loves Reed? | Mm. | | |
| Ok. I'm getting it. Alright! So, do we need this part about Jess hanging out with their friend, Andy? | Mm. | | |
| (stops following Thao) We don't need that. But we, you need, OK, Paula is in love with Jess.    She thought being a lifeguard is tough, but hiding the true feeling is even tougher. Oh, here we go. I got it now! Yeah!! (cheers) | (smiles but silent)… | | *Turner stopped her clarifying questions and found time flew away. She hurried to move away from the plot.* |
| And Paula knows something is up and she wants Jess out of (tries to figure out what Thao wrote). She wants Jess out of the picture? You read this to me? | Out of the picture, and he don't want it because he's he's like … Reed so much, and he was messed up, and he don't want her picture … (unclear speech) | Paula knows something's up and she wants Jess out of picture and was completely and she won't stop until she gets Reed all to | |
| O:::ka:::y (slowly and hesitantly) a:::nd continue reading. | and she want … to get Reed … of … matter what is …. | | *When Thao took longer turns, she was reading the text instead of articulating her ideas.* |
| OK, I'm going back to here. OK. Paula wants Jess, right? But and she won't stop | (unclear speech) | | |

**Table 4. (cont'd).**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| until she gets Reed all to herself? Who wants Reed? | herself matter what it takes or who gets hurt. | *Turner's way of raising a set of questions in this activity. Yet, Thao only answered the very last one.* |
| Jess is the girl who wants Reed. Paula is the girl who wants Jess. Alright, got it. Until she gets Reed for herself. So, Jess wants Reed for herself no matter what it takes him to get her. OK, I'm getting that. Do we need this part? OK. Oh, how could we put this so we can say, like what I said, I have to keep ... Do they kill Paula? | *(answers immediately, sounding firm)* Jess. | |
| *(opens her mouth and looks startled)* O::::h, are you serious? | *(nods without words)* | *More plot clarification.* |
| Rea::lly? Oh, My goodness!!! OK. So Paula knows something is up, so she doesn't want Jess out of the picture. | *(nods repeatedly)* While I was reading this story, I was crying. | *Here Thao suddenly spoke out. It was about her experience.* |
| Because out of picture means she wants to put away Jess... OK? Here we go. She wants Paula. Paula knows something is up because Jess won't stop until she gets Reed all to herself no matter what it takes to get him. Now we've got that whole *(writes on Thao's draft)* ... | No. | *Turner explained a phrase which she thought Thao misunderstood.* |
| OK. Now what I need to know in this next paragraph. This is all in one paragraph, OK? We need to know you | *(watches Turner write)* | *Turner revised Thao's passage.* |

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**Table 4. (cont'd).**

| Transcript | Student action | Edits | Commentary |
|---|---|---|---|
| opinion of the book. How do you like it? Did you like it? What part did you like? Remember we have to do theme and audience. OK? So what's your opinion? What made it good book? | *(silent but looks at Mrs. Turner as if not knowing what to respond)....* | Paula knows something's up [Deleted: and she wants less out of picture and. Added: because] because [Deleted: was completely and she won't stop until] she gets Reed all to herself [Added: no] – no matter what it takes or who gets hurt. | *Facing Turner's multiple questions and explanations, Thao listened instead of answering.* |
| I'll put the question here so that you don't feel you're put on the spot. You can go through to think about it. *(writes down words "Opinion" on Thao's draft)* [a student who heard their conversation commented that the story can be made into a soap opera. Thao and Turner both laughed.] *(to Thao and the other student)* Yeah, there seems to be a twist around a lot. *(turns to Thao)* Think about what makes it good. OK? The theme. What is it about? Is it about friendship? Is it about, you know, getting what you want, at the cost of whatever? OK. So think about the theme. And the audience. Teenagers? Little kids? | | | *She seemed to be waiting for a question that she could respond. Turner took Thao's silence as an indication of being put on the spot. So, Turner did not continue asking Thao to articulate her opinions.* |
| OK. Adults? Will adults like it too? | Teenager. | [Added: Opinion] | |
| No, just teenagers? OK, so then you'll say, this is a great book. Teenagers will enjoy. A mystery. So then let's see. Let's come to | *(shakes head firmly without words)* | [Added: Theme, Audience, What made this good?] | |

**Table 4. (cont'd).**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| a more specific genre. What would you call, uh, probably a mystery? Or murder? | (nods) | Summer's End [Deleted: Fiction. Added: mystery] | *Thao sounded firm and sure when responding to certain questions (most of the time Yes/No questions). .* |
| OK. Mystery. I think so. And there you go. What I want you to do is you go and you work on it and kind of finish off this. You know your opinion. You know the book. What do you think it talks about? Then when you come tomorrow, you can do the little card thing and finish up. Don't lose it though because it worth 10 points. | Mm. | mystery Todd Strasser, 1993. 261 pages ISBN 0-590-46967-3 reviewed by Thao van, Linton High School, Maple Creek, Midwest State | *Turner handwrote all corrections and reminders for further revision (e.g., expressing the reviewer's opinion).* |

In addition to a purpose of "assess the knowledge acquired by each individual student" (Phillips, 1972, p.307), the conference could have the potential to provide "guided participation" for Thao's learning, which, as Rogoff (1990) writes involves

> In the collaborative processes of (1) building bridges from children's present understanding and skills to reach new understanding and skills, and (2) arranging and structuring children's participation in activities, with dynamic shifts over development in children's responsibilities. Children use social resources for guidance – both support and challenge – in assuming increasingly skilled roles in the activities of their community. (p. 8)

However, Thao's role, structured in the conference, was not given adequate guidance in writing because of a lack of shared understanding and focus, or a lack of "intersubjectivity" (Rogoff, 1990, p. 8), between Thao and her teacher. On the one hand, Thao's skills in and understanding of writing a book review were influenced and informed partly by the positive feedback from the other two classes. Interpreting and adopting the strategies of learning to writing as following teachers' direction and using summaries to respond to writing tasks, Thao expected to get similar affirming feedback from Mrs. Turner. During the conference, Thao waited for confirmation and/or correction cues from the teacher, while patiently going over the clarification questions with Turner. Thao believed she had what she wanted – a better way to tell the story, parts of which she found difficult to explain in English, along with the sections Mrs. Turner reminded her of adding (e.g., her opinion of the book).

Thao told me after the conference that she would submit a cleaner copy with Mrs. Turner's suggestion. As shown in Figure 3, Thao gave a total and uncritical acceptance to the teacher's corrections and editing. Moreover, rather than incorporating the missing features (e.g., opinion, audience, and theme of the book) into the final review, as Turner advised, Thao listed them as bullet points as if in a fill-in-the-blanks exercise.

**Figure 3. Thao's Final Book Review Assignment in the 9th Grade English**

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------
SUMMERS END
mystery
Todd Strasser, 1993.
261 pages
ISBN 0-590-46967-3
reviewed by Thao van, Linton HiGH School, [name of state], Maple Creek.

Jess thought this summer would be about having fun with friends. Everything was falling into place with Reed, but a tragic accident at the beach has driven them apart.

Paula is in love with Jess and she thought that being a lifeguards was tough, but hiding the true feelings in even tougher.

Paula knows something s up because Jess want to gets Reed all to herself-no matter what it takes or who get hurt...

Opinion – this made it good because is like motion book when you read and some part is make you sad and like the book tell you what happen.

Audience – This book is for teenager to read because is about friendship and alot different stuff in the book when you read, and think was it is about and is fun.

Theme – All this story is about boyfriend and girlfriend and a little friendship and they talk about love and summer time.
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

For Mrs. Turner, she expected to work with Thao on the content by probing

Thao's decision of including or excluding book information, the relevance of the

information, the relationships among characters, and the appropriate genre. The

conference was assumed to focus on the organizations and clarity of ideas rather than the

basic grammatical and syntactical problems. Starting with the *why* questions, Mrs. Turner

soon found herself shifting to the *what* questions, and finally to more *Yes/No* questions.

Most conference time was dedicated to clarifying the plots and reorganizing the language.

Feeling that Thao may have been put on the spot with so many questions posted on her,

Mrs. Turner hurried to end the session. Unfortunately, the corrections she made for Thao all over her writing (e.g., major changes of sentences, word choice, and expressions) did not involve much of Thao's active learning. Moreover, her reminder that Thao should finish in time for 10 points happened to have reinforced Thao's misconception of writing for a grade.

After this conference, Thao carefully put Mrs. Turner's corrections in her folder while humming a cheerful tune and making faces at me as I asked why she was suddenly happy. "I'm done with my assignment!" Thao cleaned up her folder and was ready to go. "How was it? I mean, you and Mrs. Turner?" I asked. "Very good!" she was positive about her work.

*Episode 2: Five-paragraph outline.* Thao's English class had a new focus on the five-paragraph essays in the spring semester, which was geared towards the approaching annual exam season, according to Mrs. Turner. And more frequently, the class was given chunks of time for individual writing assignment. One morning during the individual work time, Thao and her neighbor, a white young man called Nelson who shared a big desk with Thao, were listening to Mrs. Turner as she recapped an earlier lecture of which Thao and Nelson missed a part. The other member sitting at the same desk was Mary, a white girl. She was busy writing her assignment when Mrs. Turner insisted that Thao and Nelson need her review to be able to complete the assignment of the day – a five-paragraph essay outline.

> We're writing a reflective essay on the whole process of writing that short story for publication [using the five-paragraph outline]. Students wrote an entire page, talking about what they thought about the assignment, how they fit, what they ran into, what they liked, what they didn't like. It's a reflection on the whole process. [It is] unlike what they learned about themselves. OK?

Thao and Nelson nodded slightly. Mrs. Turner continued.

So once they did that, the next step we did is what we went through... on their writing that they did, I had them circle ... For an essay, you have to have paragraphs. An essay should have a minimum of three paragraphs. Quite often in high school, we teach you to write five paragraph essays, but that's not the case. You need an intro, an introduction, a body and a conclusion, which have been what we have talked about for the past since Christmas. OK? ( ) What I had them [Thao and Nelson's classmates] do is circle all the different topics that they had in their paper. Some say they sound that they have three different paragraphs or four different paragraphs they can write about. (takes Mary's "bubble sheet") Once she had these four circles, we looked at this yesterday. We talked about how to start an introduction and how not to. If you start with an introduction like "Hi my name is... this is my paper", that's wrong. I know your name and I know this paper because I assigned it. (stops to remind some students to be on task, then turns back to Thao and Nelson) I apologize. (continues explaining) Thesis statement is one sentence. It is the main focus of the whole paper. (draws lines between A, B, C and thesis on the sample worksheet, shown in figure 4. Asks the two students) You see that as well? (continues) I'm asking you to do is look at your paper. What is your thesis statement? What can be your supporting sentences? Make sense? If not, let me know.

Mrs. Turner left them a sample outline (see Figure 4) and walked to other tables.

The teacher's quick update did not seem to clarify very much for Thao and Nelson.

Neither of them had their previous writing assignments as reference. While Nelson

continued to ask Mary, who sat beside him, for what the assignment was exactly, Thao

quickly started writing her outline. The sample appeared to give her ideas. Her thesis

statement, instead of relating to the assigned topic – reflections of a writing experience,

was similar to the one offered in the sample outline.

"I say I like go the mall," Thao informed me. Thao continued to put the phrase

"long drive" as her first supporting idea and "limited parking" the second. Both ideas

were offered in the sample as well. As a response to Thao, I asked why she liked to go to

the mall.

**Figure 4. Sample Outline of Five-Paragraph Essay**[30]

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Title: <u>The Hazards of Moviegoing</u>

I. <u>Introduction</u>
  A. Introductory statement
  B. Thesis statement: <u>I like watching movies but I prefer watching them</u>
    <u>at home.</u>

II. <u>Body</u>
  A. First Supporting Idea (Topic Sentence): <u>just getting to the theater</u>
    <u>presents difficulties</u>
    1. <u>bad weather</u>
    2. <u>long drive and limited parking space</u>
    3. <u>long waiting to buy ticket</u>
  B. Second Supporting Idea (Topic Sentence): <u>facing the problems of the</u>
    <u>theater itself</u>
    1. <u>old theater's problems such as smelly carpet, worn-out seat,</u>
     <u>etc</u>
    2. <u>new theater's problems such as smaller size, noise from next</u>
     <u>movie theater, etc</u>
    3. <u>both floors will be rubber-like dirty at the end of the movie</u>
  C. Third Supporting Idea (Topic Sentence): <u>Some of the patrons are</u>
    <u>annoying</u>
    1. <u>bad behavior such as running, talking loud, etc</u>
    2. <u>human noise and disturbance</u>

III. <u>Conclusion</u>
  A. Closing statement
  B. Restate thesis: <u>I prefer to watch movies at home where it is</u>
    <u>comfortable, clean and safe.</u>

---

Thao: Because I ( ). (bites her thumb) Cloth pretty and fun!

Yanan: Because it's fun?

Thao: Say again?

Yanan: You said it's fun.

(Nelson, Thao's neighbor, overhears our conversation and turns to suggest that Thao write about the topic on a paragraph)

Yanan: (to Thao) I guess I can. You can say three fun things in a paragraph. (to Nelson) That's her topic, anyway.

Thao: (immediately follows me) It's fun to go to mall. Uh, a lot stuff pretty. A

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[30] Mrs. Turner borrowed this outline sample from a website
(http://depts.gallaudet.edu/EnglishWorks/writing/fiveparagraph.html).

lot clothes pretty! (Nelson turns around to Mary) And I buy clothes.

Yanan:    (to Thao) What else?

Thao:     I like the food. The food is delicious. (quickly writes it down) The problem is noisy and sound. (signals Mary to pass her completed outline. A few seconds later, all of a sudden) I'll COPY this!

Thao noticed that Mary used many conjunction words such as "furthermore" and "however" in her outline. She remembered having a list of such words, too.

Thao:     (to Mary, holds the conjunction sheet titled 'Common Transitional Words or Phrases and Their Uses') Oh, you can use this? You can use this?

(Mary responds positively.)

Thao:     O:h! Why not you TELL me?

(Mary said she thought Thao had known already)

Thao:     No, I did not!

(Mary says Mrs. Turner was talking about it before students were asked to work on their outlines).

Thao:     No! (asks Mary again) We can use this?

(Mary responds positively.)

Thao:     OK. (jokingly) I hate you!

(Mary smiles. Thao turns back to me, holding the transitional words list)

Thao:     We can do this!

(Mary reminds Thao that she should think about the words, and then add the idea. She points to her writing to show how she did that briefly.)

Thao:     OK.

Thao read the sample sentences on the conjunction words sheet and was looking for things she could use. She wanted to copy some sentences to her outline as well. She

gave me one example:

> Thao: I like go the mall. Somewhat later, I go into the mall. Then, second one is ( ).
>
> Yanan: What do you mean?
>
> Thao: Look! SHE had it in here (points to Mary's outline)
>
> (Mary disagrees, saying she had her words and ideas as well)
>
> Thao: Yeah! Yeah.

Thao soon discarded her mall topic and started a new one - "I like reading romance books". She quickly put two phrases on the following lines - "learn new things" and "love story". Thao threw away the paper before she came up with the third idea. When the bell rang, Thao ran out immediately without submitting any outline. Thao could say a lot about her reading books. In an interview not long before this outline incident, she shared her experiences as a reader.

> I love to read romance book because that's so sad. I love sad books and sometime I cry because the book, like, talk about sad story. And ( ). they talk about love. And I like action book too because I love have people action and they do stuff and really cool. And I love to watch movie action. I watch a lot movie, love, romance, stuff. I really love reading that romance and action ( ). Sometime I [read before I] go sleep, and I read at school at lunchtime. I read a lot book. When I get home, like boring, take a book out, read and then go sleep. I have a lot book at home ( ). You know rif? R-I-F? For free? The book for free? In my school when I was 6 grade, the book for free. You can choose any book you want. Your teacher choose one student again and you can have one book again. Then you can have two. If your teacher don't tell you, you get one more, you don't get one more ( ). Like, people they have free book they don't want. They don't want it. You come and you choose. They put the book on a table. You can choose any book you want. Love, romance, cartoon ( ), whatever. ( ) I have ( ). I think I have 20 romance book.        (Thao's interview transcripts)

Like many sessions on test-based writing throughout the spring semester, this episode captures the participation which was characterized by the teacher's lecturing to the students and asking them to learn to write individually. In presenting a compositional

problem, in this case, writing a coherent essay outline, the teacher introduced the writing genre and its format using many hardcopy samples. The teacher expected the students to be able to go through a compositional process of finding a topic based on their previous writing experience, coming up with three or four supporting ideas and one theme, and avoiding personal narratives in the outline. Unfortunately, Thao did not have the same sense of what the problem was and what the goal of the writing activity was as the teacher. For her, the problem of writing was just to produce what the teacher wanted. She chose to imitate the sample outline as opposed to using it to solve the compositional problem of brainstorming and organizing ideas under a theme.

The teacher withdrew without suggesting possible participatory roles that Thao, Nelson, and Mary could play to help each other. From my observation, the three had the potential to work productively together. Mary was efficient with her work and willing to share and help most of the time, but she did not initiate interactions often. Nelson was often seen as sleepy and tired, but he never detached himself from Mary and Thao, on occasion, offering a range of responses from cheerful jokes to serious engagement with coursework. Thao was never too shy to push the group to finish work on time; nor was her too shy to ask for help. The three of them did not choose to sit together at a table, nor did Mrs. Turner arrange their seating; yet they could take specific roles in helping each other if guided correctly. As shown from the episode, without appropriate pedagogical support of participation in small groups, Thao's interactions with the other two, especially Mary, were spontaneous and sporadic. The information and experience concerning writing an outline were never fully shared and explored. The writing practice was structured as individual work; therefore, even though there was a condition for Thao to

work collaboratively with peers, the lack of a common goal made it more difficult for Thao to learn from and with her peers.

For Thao, in order to complete the assignment, she was particularly paying attention to what she could draw from the available resources, but her efforts did not pay off. First, Thao used her personal experiences, such as going to the mall and reading romance books. Second, she was actively engaged in (most of the time initiating) conversations while brainstorming. Thao assigned me the role of her company who listened to and helped clarify her ideas. She also checked with Mary, who was closer to the center of the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978), for update and support. However, these resources were limited because they were not an integral part of an overall participation. Without much scaffolding, all Thao looked for was confined to parts to be assembled into a final writing product. The participation structure felt short of providing an environment for her to elaborate and adopt on her own experience (e.g., with reading romances and shopping) and generate ideas for her outline.

## Summary

Thao entered an ecosystem (Hawkins, 2004) in schools where her participation was inevitably influenced by institutional contexts, practices, and assumptions. Within this system, Thao wandered across classroom practices that reflected varied beliefs in learning and the learner, and negotiated the available resources that were ideologically charged, and looked for opportunities to join the interactions to survive and thrive. However, she ended up standing at the crossroad puzzling about the discrepancy between her consistent efforts and the inconsistent expectations of various classes. Her unique needs as an ELL learner in learning English and subject areas were not

adequately addressed across institutional contexts. She was lost in a vacuum of institutional and pedagogical support and that complicated her language learning experiences. There are several social and pedagogical factors that matter in making the student lost in an institution.

In this chapter, I argue that different reading and writing expectations across academic classes sent Thao mixed messages as to what academic English is like and how to master it. Without an enhanced vocabulary and fundamental knowledge in writing academic English, Thao tried to make sense of learning to write from her teachers' feedback and grading, which varied a great deal towards her written work. For instance, for two almost identical essays on the same topic, with the same structure and organization, she received both a top grade and a failing grade from two different classes that focused on academic writing. Pedagogically, with varied degrees of emphases on quantity and quality of students' work, the mainstream curriculum classes did not provide consistent language feedback and instruction for this ELL student. Unfortunately, she ended up being left alone measuring and puzzling about the different rewards and punishments for her work and stuck in a kind of writing judged far from proficient at her high school grade level. Many potential teachable moments to help her understand and learn the function and complexity of academic English (e.g., to distinguish academic genres from casual personal sketches, and to address different audiences by using different tones) passed without much pedagogical attention.

This chapter is also an extension of the previous chapter, which focuses on the available institutional language resources for ELL students and the institutional assumption of these students. The two chapters cover the different layers of institutional

practices - from the national level language ideology to the classroom level pedagogy - of educating Thao. I contend that isolated support programs, language aide, and mainstream teachers have failed to jointly sustain Thao in her transition. Often, Thao was in such a situation that different programs and personnel expected each other to cure her language problems, particularly with writing, though they were being well meaning.

Therefore, in Thao's official world in school, she was fighting alone to understand and interpret the academic challenges. In the chapter ahead, I enter into Thao's unofficial peer world where she negotiated her identities while learning and using English in and out of classroom.

# CHAPTER 5
## A LONELY SOCIAL WORLD:
## LOOKING FOR SELF AND OPPORTUNITY FOR INTERACTION

Thao is ready to ask Taysha the answer to a reading question. Taysha sits with Thao, Mary, and Nelson's group today. Mrs. Turner has assigned each group to find sentences that support six themes in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960). One of the themes is "justice and injustice". The room is soon noisy with group work. At Thao's table, Mary is busy writing. Nelson is taking a nap. Taysha seems available but she is curious about me as I sit nearby taking notes. Before Taysha starts a conversation with me, Thao calls upon Taysha, in a playful tone.

> Thao: Like, Yo! Give me some! Justice and injustice. Is that fair?

> Taysha frowns and says she does not know what Thao means. Thao gives another choice.

> Thao: Not fair? (*her tone rising*)

> Mary jumps in, confirming Thao is right but the definition is for one of the two words

> Thao: That one? Injustice? (*Mary nods. Thao does not seem to get Mary's idea. She starts over with Taysha*) Yo! GIVE me some! GIVE me some! Justice... and injustice ( ).

> Taysha is talking to an African American girl. She does not respond to Thao. Thao calls Mrs. Turner who is too far away and busy to notice her voice in the noisy room.

> Thao: (*calls Mrs. Turner who is far away and busy working with other groups*) Ms. Turner! (*then turns to Mary who sits opposite her at the other end of the station*) COME ON! YO!

> Mary looks up and answers in her peaceful and soft voice that does not carry far enough to Thao.

> Thao: WHAT? Say again!

> Mary reads a sentence from the novel. "The Radleys are known to be bad people."

Thao: Ra, what? How to spell?

Mary repeats the sentence again, but she does not spell Bradley. Thao writes down the sentence on the blank sheet of paper and asks Mary to find a sentence for the next theme, "classism." She then turns to Taysha.

Thao: Hey, you! Give me some! Come on! Give me justice or injustice! Taysha declines, saying she does not know much about Thao's question.

Thao: (*insists but smiles as if joking*) Come on, TAYSHA!!!!!

This vignette illustrates Thao's learning practices, in which her official classroom world and her unofficial peer world overlapped. Thao was trying to make use of the space and time given in the official world by reaching out to interact with her English-speaking peers. Her purpose was to finish the task within the given time required by Mrs. Turner, as a good student would do. The language used (i.e., "Yo"), the mood and channel of communication in the above interaction caught a snap of her personal interaction with peers like Mary and Taysha in the official classroom situation. In this vignette, Thao dragged Mary and Taysha into a conversation. The two girls responded, but with limited information to share with Thao for the group work project. The two did not seem to be interested even though Thao persisted. I asked her if Mary, Nelson, and Taysha, who usually sat with her as a group, were ever Thao's friends. Thao said no in a definite tone. "Nobody. I mean Nobody!"

As I step from her official world to the unofficial world, I ask what Thao's unofficial world was like? How did she interact with peers? How did she appropriate English while interacting with them? In the proceeding chapter, I discussed the opportunities for Thao's participation in her official world in which she negotiated the institutional expectations and assumptions of what literacy is and who a learner is in

mainstream classrooms. The nature of the opportunities for Thao to read and write was structured, in part, by the institutional perceptions of the kind of person she could be within class and by teachers' definition of "a good Asian student". Yet the notion of "a good Asian student" as well as the institutional and pedagogical practices in Thao's schooling did not help her English, or her academic English, let alone her achievement.

In this chapter, I look at Thao's learning in her unofficial world of schoolmates and classmates, Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese. Here, the nature of the opportunities for Thao to interact with others was influenced by Thao's negotiations of identities against the extended official identification of her in terms of language, race, gender, cultural heritage, ethnicity, and the good Asian student rhetoric. To guide my analytical path, I find Levinson and Holland's (1996) concept of "cultural production" helpful because it enables me to look both at the ideological conditions and the learner's confrontation with these conditions.

> Cultural productions [...] provide a direction for understanding how human agency operates under powerful structural constraints. Through the production of cultural forms, created within the structural constraints of sites such as schools, subjectivities form and agency develops. These are the processes we seek to evoke with our phrase, "the cultural production of the educated person." Indeed, the very ambiguity of the phrase operates to index the dialectic of structure and agency. For while the educated person is culturally produced in definite sites, the educated person also culturally produces cultural forms.
> (Levinson and Holland, 1996, p.14)

Thus, I ask how Thao negotiated her identities while grabbing opportunities to interact with people using both her languages, English and Vietnamese. What were people's conceptions of her being a Vietnamese female student in Linton's context? And what opportunities were created for Thao to interact with peers in and out of the

classroom as others' identification of her and her own understanding of herself were played out?

### "A Good Popular Vietnamese Girl"

Thao was well aware of the institutional expectations of her as "a good student", or "a good citizen". These were to follow the rules and do the work.

> You listen to your teacher and do the homework and do what the teacher tell to do. Be a great student ( ). I do my work and talk and do a lot stuff ( ).
> (Thao, interview transcripts)

Indeed, Thao was trying to fulfill the classroom tasks by decoding and following teachers' requirement. For example, she was the only student in her biology class who remembered to bring in nutrition facts labels cut directly from cereal boxes to earn an additional 5 points. In English class, especially during group work, Thao often appeared anxious about whether her group would finish the task in a given amount of time. And as discussed previously, Thao made sure that she got all the stamps from the Science Fiction teacher.

Thao, in fact, believed she was a good student from Day One. In a morning during the second month of my data collection, Thao gave me a photograph of her. It was her freshmen yearbook picture. She tied her long straight hair into a knot. Her silver hoop earrings shined. She wore a short sleeved stretchy sweater with black, red, white stripes and a wide collar band that well revealed her neck and collarbone. Thao looked more mature than her actual age. She held up her head and her smiles natural and confident. "Look at back!" Thao urged me. On the back of the picture were a few words Thao handwrote:

> To: Yanan Fan
> From: Thao Your best student!

As giving me her photograph suggests, Thao was not merely seeking good grades. She was seeking friendship and recognition. Moreover, she wanted to be a good popular Vietnamese girl who had many friends. Through actively drawing upon teen's culture and trying to socialize across the racial boundaries, Thao displayed her confidence and courage to be who she was. Her version of "a good popular Vietnamese girl" challenged not only the stereotypical assumptions of Asian students from the dominant school discourse represented by the counselor and mainstream teachers, but also the cultural expectations shared by people around her. Yet, as Linton came all new to Thao, the dynamics of peer world, which were unanticipated by Thao, complicated the negotiations of her social and cultural identities and impacted on the opportunities to learn through interaction and production with others.

## The Black Appeal: Embracing Youth Culture

Each time Thao talked about her schooling, she remembered to mention her middle school buddies, Marcy and Marlene, two African American young women. They used to do group projects with Thao even though Thao was not able to speak much English. Their friendship and constant interactions with Thao helped her social and cultural transition in this new country. "We do a project about English. Like, you do project you can u[se] any word you want, and to do a project and five picture like that," Thao explained a project that March and Marlene helped her put together. She told me she was upset that she could not go to the same high school and that she had lost all contact with her friends.

Thao's experience at her former middle school, where she experienced students as much more integrated than segregated, drew her closer to the new African American

youth culture rather than her home culture, thus influencing her socializing choices in high school. Thao tried to reach out to African American peers who appealed to her. Even before she became acquainted with the African American students at Linton, she expressed her preference in a class survey to urban Hip Hop culture represented by musicians such as Usher and Nelly or in movies such as "You Got Served"[31]. Although Linton was still new in her first year, Thao believed she was "cool" because she was familiar with its dominant African American youth culture and there was a sense of belonging there. Such cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), though not recognized by the institutional discourse, gave Thao much hope for her high school years. Thao once showed me her "diary", a collection of all contemporary popular black singers and song lyrics. Television channels of Black Entertainment TV (BET) and Music TV (MTV) were also her favorite, giving her new updates of the trend.

As Thao embraced the youth culture introduced by her best friends, she was also open to a wide range of youth literacy resources, if not in the official classroom. As Thao was growing into a young woman, she also fell in love with Lurlene McDaniel's fiction for teenagers and classic or contemporary love poem collections as she explored her emerging feelings of love and friendship in her freshman year.

Once outside the counselor's office, Thao and I were waiting for Mr. Pierre who was going to rearrange Thao's class schedule. Thao showed me the lyrics of "Miss You", her favorite song sung by the late R&B black singer, Aaliyah. It was a song of love and friendship and it reminded her of her middle school friends, as Thao told me; then she hummed the song for me. On another occasion, Thao wrote a love poem in Science

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[31] Stokes, C. (Director). (2004). *You got served* [Motion picture]. USA: Screen Gems. Thao liked the movie because it was about teenagers of diverse ethnic backgrounds in a street dance

Fiction while others were watching a movie. "It's your. You can take it," Thao

generously gave it to me as I was trying to copy the poem. It was her version of a famous

biblical text from Corinthians[32]s:

> Love is patient
>
> Love is kind
>
> Love is not jealous
>
> Love is not insist
>
> Love is bear all thing
>
> Love is believe all thing
>
> Love is hope all thing
>
> Love is never ends ...

Sharing songs, poems, and even love stories alone with me was infrequent. Thao

was trying to join the social world of her black peers and to seek a sense of membership

in this social circle and opportunities to interact with friends. Hoping she would find

more Marcies and Marlenes at Linton, Thao reached out to black peers. However, she

was not fully aware of the kinds of opportunity for interaction that were allowed, or

prohibited, by the invisible cultural and racial borderlines assumed by her teachers and

peers.

**Limited interaction: Segregation from African American peers.** Mrs. Evans,

the science teacher, caught Thao joining a group of African American boys to play a

game in her lab during lunch hour.

> One time she was in, there were some guys from a different class. African
> American guys. She [Thao] did what she was supposed to do and she went
> back to the hall. And she started playing with a group of girls. I don't even
> notice where they were. When she came in, they were playing the "he-said-she-
> said girlfriend/boyfriend" thing. You know, "he thinks you're cute, or she

competition.
[32] From 1 Corinthians 13:4, New Testament.

110

thinks you're cute". The guys are doing that and I'm thinking Thao is not into this. Next thing I know Thao is right at the door and she's saying "you!" She calls Marcos over and she says, "What's that guy's name?" and Marcos goes, "Which guy? The guy with the blue collar or the guy with a baseball shirt?" She tells him and he says "That's ( ). I forgot. I think it's Ken." Thao said [to Marcos] "You can tell him I like him." Thao's in it! She was just right in it with these guys insulting her and she's just playing the game right along with them. The people I used to work with before, the Asians are very proper. Not formal. You know. They have some formality to them. I'm thinking Thao is getting insulted by these guys, but she's right in there with them. Oka:y. She grew up that way. (Mrs. Evans interview transcripts)

Shown from the teacher's comments, instead of leaving the guys alone with their games, Thao surprisingly initiated a new line and played the game with them. Thao's participation in peer interactions was judged by her teacher against the assumption of her identity as a female Asian student and thus by the appropriateness of the activities she could participate in. The enactment of such assumptions excluded Thao's opportunities to interact especially with boys across racial groups. Thao was projected as one of the Asian students who should never be involved in some insulting games like the one mentioned in the transcript. Mrs. Evans sounded concerned when talking about Thao's unique way of growing up. Thao's behavior was beyond her imagination of an Asian girl.

Students, especially those in senior grades, had a similar take on the limited possibility of interacting and socializing across the lines of race and gender at Linton. I chatted with three young African American women I shared a lunch table with in the student cafeteria one day. After they told me that there were many good students at Linton, they admitted that they never socialized with students from other racial groups, nor did they see many cross the line. Hong, a Hmong honor student and an active

member of the Asian Student Association (ASA)[33], suggested that making friends with all walks of people benefited one's learning.

> I heard that the kids at Linton, a lot of them are open-minded. They don't really care you can't speak English that well. They'll still show you around, so they'll always like they'll help you out. Most people here, they don't really care about like race, or gender, or if you can speak the language very clear. They're kind of people who would walk by you and say ( ). They laugh at you or stuff. Those are the ignorant people. You know, they're the ones that are always helpful.

In the meantime, Hong stated that students were always seen hanging out with their own people. The best way to see this clear division was to walk along the hallway and to see who was being with whom in different places.

> You'll see the different groups at lunch, though. Usually you'll see all the preps (mostly white) will hang out in front of the mirror. You know the big wall in front of the school right there? [Remember] the wall that separates where the vending machines are and where the chairs are, the benches? The preps usually hang out somewhere around there. Usually like towards the end of lunch when they all come back. The Goths are down there, like, if you go towards the auditorium. You know that section. That's where the Goths are and all the skaters are.

Hong identified himself as a "prep kid" who "dress[ed] kind of casual, kind of clean" and who had no problem with "a lot of people"; however, he pointed out that for many, the racial line was there. For example, he confirmed that Asian students would stay in the library during lunch hour while the black students gathered near the main entrance or the gymnasium and Latino and white students scattered outside the building or near the auditorium.

The student segregation outside the classroom left Thao little opportunity for interaction with African American peers. Still, she tried to socialize with some female black students in class (e.g., English and Science Fiction) where they had opportunities to talk during group work time. In the 9th Grade English, Thao often chatted with Taysha

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[33] A pseudonym for the Asian student activity group.

who often sat in Thao, Nelson, and Mary's table. Thao and Taysha talked about clothes, perfume, and boyfriends. For Thao, Taysha was a friend who listened and who appeared to accept Thao as a member in her social circle. Although, due to the setting of the group work, their conversations were always short and spontaneous, as in the following one. Once in between two writing activities in the English class, Thao and Taysha were talking about an African American boy they both knew.

> Taysha bragged that the boy hugged her the day before. She wore a proud smile as if she was a winner.
>
> Thao: I don't care. We're not talking no more.
>
> Taysha asked why.
>
> Thao: Because he mad at me.
>
> Taysha was more curious about what Thao had done to make the boy mad.
>
> Thao: Nothing. Nothing. Something. Nothing (smiles).
>
> Taysha sounded she did not believe Thao.
>
> Thao: He talk no more.
>
> Taysha assumed Thao would be crying because the boy did not talk to Thao anymore.
>
> Thao: No.
>
> Taysha took out her perfume and sprayed around her neck.
>
> Thao: Can I have some? (takes the bottle from Taysha) Thank you!

In this brief conversation about teenage love, Thao appeared engaged and confident. In contrast with other opportunities she had to interact with teachers and students in English (e.g., the student-teacher conference in the 9th Grade English class discussed in the previous chapter), her responses in this conversation were relatively in

quick pace and lacked hesitation. She demonstrated the fluency and ease of interaction

and an urge of sharing her story with Taysha, someone with whom Thao wanted to

socialize and relate as a teenage urban girl. Unfortunately, such conversation did not

happen very often. Outside of the classroom, Taysha stayed with her African American

friends, a social network which did not include others like Thao. The students' self

segregation made it more difficult for Thao to participate in any positive interaction with

African American students she desired to associate with. Instead, Thao was involved in

many face-to-face hostile confrontations with some African American girls, who accused

Thao of stealing their boyfriends. In early spring, Thao told me a typical incident.

Yanan:    Anything happened these days?

Thao:    I don't know. Nothing happened. People talk about me. I don't care. A girl want to fight me. That girl ( ). She said she want to fight me tonight. I said okay.

Yanan:    Which girl?

Thao:    I don't know about that girl's name.

Yanan:    Your classmate?

Thao:    Yeah. [S]he say (grabs my clothes to demonstrate her position in the fight) [S] he grab me like this. And [s]he say "girl, I heard you talk about me and you mess with my man." I say ( ).

Yanan:    Did you? Did you talk about her?

Thao:    No. [S]he's just like me because her boyfriend was mess with me. I don't like him, though. I say "girl!" She will do thing like this (grabs my collar). I say "you better get your hand on [off] my shoulder. What the hell you want?" and she say "I heard it somebody tell me that you mess up with my boyfriend." Then I say "You HEARD that? Ooh, I didn't know that. If you heard that, why don't you tell your boyfriend don't mess with me because I don't like him. He like me. If he don't like you, then why he like me ..." And she want to fight. She said "What you want now?" She call me bitch. You know what mean bitch? She said "you know if you mess with my man, you know what happen." I say "What happen?" She said she got to do something. I said "Go! Go and do it! Do it!" And she was scare. I still yell at her

before we go to bus. If you want to ( ) my ass tomorrow, go ( )! She's not saying something. She said "Sorry!" She better tell me that she says "sorry." She's not tell sorry. That's bullshit to me. ( ) I said "Just find some station home ..."

Yanan:   So you take the same bus home?

Thao:    Yeah. That girl said crazy stuff.

Compared with Thao's enthusiasm to interact and socialize, her target group was far from welcoming. In terms of interracial relations, Hong's response represented a perspective from Asian students themselves. Hong was chair of Linton's Asian Students Association. Over the years, he had observed his peers, especially female peers reaching beyond their own groups (e.g., Hmong and Vietnamese). However, he was not optimistic about such border crossing.

> Here at Linton, it's [interracial relations] not that common. Usually the Asian people stay with Asian people. But then there're, like, just a few people who do that. They don't care, but their parents care. Oh, I think it depends on the people you like and the people you hang out with ( ), but I don't think it's real common [for example, for a Vietnamese girl to date a black guy]. (Hong interview transcripts)

## A Student With No Friends: Rejecting, and Being Rejected by Asian Peers

I come across Thao a few times in the hallway of Linton's classroom wing during lunch hour. We meet outside Thao's 4th hour class on the third floor ten to twenty minutes before the bell. Most students hang out with others on the first floor student cafeteria, gym, or the main entrance. The third floor classroom wing is the quietest place. Some students come here to check their lockers. When I spot Thao, she is sitting on the floor and leaning against a classroom door that is no longer used as a door. She holds her backpack to her chest as if it were a soft cushion. Mrs. My is not in her office today, so

Thao spends the long lunch hour in this quiet corner. She signals me to sit by her. I am

curious who she interacts with during recess when she can not go to Mrs. My's office.

Yanan:      When do you hang out with friends?

Thao:       I play with nobody.

Yanan:      No?

Thao:       No, I don't have no friend in this school.

Yanan:      But what do you do during break, lunch hour and so forth?

Thao:       I walk around the building.

Yanan:      Um. I see Vietnamese and Hmong students get together.

Thao:       I go to Amy. She's half Vietnamese.

Yanan:      Do I know Amy? Is she your friend?

Thao:       No. I don't have no friend.

Yanan:      But do you feel lonely?

Thao:       Yeah. I don't care.

Unfortunately, Amy remained a mysterious friend who never showed up

throughout the year. The sharp contrast was that there were a considerable number of

Asian students in the building and that students could also meet Asian students at the

ASA regular meetings that occurred every other week. What was happening, or not

happening, in Thao's social world? Why did her connections to her own peers seem to be

absent? What kinds of opportunity for interaction were available to Thao, then?

For many, Linton's Vietnamese and Hmong students all belonged, or were

referred, to their group identity of "the Asians". For example, teachers and counselors in

the proceeding chapter generalized and imposed group characteristics of all Asian

students in their comments on Thao's individual progress. However, the dynamics within the group problematized the construction of the seemingly harmonious group character. They further complicated Thao's opportunity to interact with people while using languages. Her cultural identity as a Vietnamese girl was at the same time contested and challenged. There are two layers of peer world complexities within Linton's Asian student group – segregation between Vietnamese students and Hmong students and segregation among Vietnamese students themselves based on immigrant experiences.

It is important to note that as a relatively new immigrant to the country and a new high school student, the complexities of Linton's peer world appeared unanticipated by Thao. As shown previously, Thao did not expect her African American peers to reject her participation as friends. Similarly in the following sections, the peer world seemed unanticipated within the institutional category of "Asian". For this reason, I rely on more experienced students to gain insight into "racial" complexities of peer life at Linton.

**A divide from within: Hmong and Vietnamese.** Senior Vietnamese student Tram was an active member of Linton's ASA. She sat down with me in a late spring morning and shared her high school experiences. One observation she discussed was that Linton's Vietnamese students and Hmong students had a history of segregation due to historical reasons.

> Here at Linton, it's kind of segregating. While the punky kids hang out in one area; the Vietnamese hang out in one area; and Hmong hang out in one area. Actually there's a big segregation between Vietnamese kids and Hmong kids here. I used to date a Hmong guy and I was Vietnamese. And that was like the most horrible thing for his family and the most horrible thing for my family and along with my friends. The Vietnamese people looked down on me. (Tram interview transcripts)

Tram was sorry that the divide between Vietnamese and Hmong found its roots back in history, in a war that involved forces from many countries (e.g., the US, China, Vietnam), a war that had driven many Vietnamese and Hmong families away from their home lands.

> ... [A]ccording to their [Hmong] culture, it goes back to history when Vietnam took over the Hmong people's land. I read about it and it's not necessarily that the Hmong people choose to blame on the Vietnamese people. I was interested because I always think white people hated me because of my heritage. Anyway, they think our ancestors took their land. So I read about it, the French, the British, the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans. And actually one of their [Hmong] generals, I think his name is Paul, let the Vietnamese Communists into their own country. Technically their own people betrayed them. But somehow most of the Hmong kids they don't know that. Their parents just don't like Vietnamese people. (Tram interview transcripts)

Speaking from his Hmong heritage, Hong confirmed that the segregation was caused by historical and political experiences of the Vietnamese and the Hmong. He contended that the folklore history passed down from older generations had resulted in meaningless fights and hatred in younger generations in their new country, especially before the turn of the 21$^{st}$ century.

> If you rewind like probably six or eight years ago, they [Vietnamese and Hmong students at Linton] really didn't get along. They got into a lot of fights. It's kind of weird to see ( ), say, "why are Asian people beating up Asian people?" I guess, they are just those who like to fight. They were always there. The wall between Hmong and Vietnamese people. But now, it's kind of broken down, like, we don't care anymore. Like we're all Asian, so we're just gonna accept that fact. I think a lot of them used to hate each other because of their parents, coz the parents will always be like "Oh, well, they're Vietnamese and we fought a war against them." The whole Vietnam War. That was Hmong people fighting the Vietnamese people and the US was fighting also because the US, they don't want communist. Because of that conflict. That's why so many Hmong people moved over here to the US and so many Vietnamese moved here too. That's because of that conflict. Our parents still say that. Some old people they'll say "Oh don't go out with Vietnamese girl", you know because of all the stuff. Both families won't agree. I think it's mainly because of that conflict too. That's why back then Hmong and Vietnamese don't like each other. (Hong interview transcripts)

Different from Tram, Hong was more hopeful for the improvement of the relationship between the two groups of students as he believed that new generations should look forward. As an activist, he worked hard to organize students from both sides together through the student association.

> Now, it's just become accepted that we're Hmong [and] they're Vietnamese. There's really no conflict between us. Why are we fighting against each other when it happened so long ago? You know. I think the love-hate relationship between different groups. It's not the individual you like or hate. That's really the ( ) just the political leaders who set it out to be like that. (Hong interview transcripts)

Despite that many Vietnamese students joined the ASA which was composed predominantly of Hmong students and which also included some Latino, white, and black students, Thao did not join in ASA. Still clinging to goal of making friends with African American peers, Thao showed little interest in socializing with Hmong students. In Thao's third hour English class, she had four Hmong classmates, two boys and two girls, who were always together as if they were a team. They seldom talked or had other interactions with Thao in class throughout the year. Thao could only think of one Hmong girl, who she described as a "nice person" rather than a "friend". They took the same school bus home and greeted occasionally during the school year. Although Thao did not specify the reason that she never considered socializing with Hmong students, comments from Hong, Tram, and other ASA members about the historical influence on the daily lives of both peoples may have impacted on Thao's choice of friends in some delicate ways.

As reflected from multiple voices of Vietnamese and Hmong senior students about the historical and sociocultural tensions between the two peoples, dynamics within

the "Asians" problematized the manipulative classification of race. As the institution continued to address Asian students as a whole, Thao and her Vietnamese and Hmong peers were all trying to identify themselves by their own ethnicity, either Vietnamese or Hmong, not the racial term, Asian. How Thao and her peers understood who they were also complicated their sociocultural experiences of interacting in socially organized activities. If segregation was an implicit norm between the two student groups, fewer opportunities for interaction were to be available for both. For Thao who has only been in the country for four years and who learned through interactions with peers such as the Hmong students, this was not good news, especially when her Hmong peers could serve as what Lave and Wenger (1991) called "old timers". Indeed, most of them were born and had had their schooling in the US; at the same time, they had a family culture that was close to the one Thao came from. Therefore, they could be the active and experienced "teachers" for new immigrants like Thao. Unfortunately, opportunities for Thao to interact with her Hmong peers were scarce.

**Further away: Divisions within Vietnamese themselves.** Reaching out to Vietnamese peers seemed to be more difficult for Thao than to Hmong or African American peers. Among the Vietnamese people Thao knew at Linton, she relied solely on Mrs. My. Her office was Thao's harbor away from the storms of mainstream classroom challenge and isolation from other students. "Ms. My and you are my friend. I only have two friend," Thao once said to me. In addition to tutoring math and science, Mrs. My was a company and above all a listener, as Thao explained. Thao was comfortable to use Vietnamese with Mrs. My when she revealed her puzzles and anxieties in studies and boyfriend fantasies. For Mrs. My, Thao was a kid that needed a

lot of discipline. Mrs. My listened when Thao complained that certain classroom work was "stupid" or "boring", but Mrs. My was firm and authoritative when trying to correct Thao's impolite comments and to reinforce the right attitude and manners in classroom.

Thao's Vietnamese peers seemed missing in her world. According to Mrs. My, communication barriers between Thao and other Vietnamese students may have prevented both sides from approaching each other. Mrs. My revealed that it was not difficult to imagine that Thao would be isolated from other Vietnamese students because she had to speak Vietnamese while learning English. However, most Vietnamese at Linton had been in the country for so long that they either forgot Vietnamese or chose to only use English in school. As a language aide working primarily with new Vietnamese immigrant students, Mrs. My observed a consistent lack of interaction between those who still relied on Vietnamese language and those who were more fluent in English at Linton.

In addition to Mrs. My's looking at language as the sole cause of isolation, senior Vietnamese student Tram added another complex identity issue of shame and membership within the Vietnamese group. She shared with me a demeaning phrase – "fresh off the boat" (FOB) - made for the new Vietnamese immigrants by those not so new. Tram revealed that many of her Vietnamese friends looked down upon the new immigrants and took it as a shame to socialize with them.

> Yeah. Actually, a few girls I hang out with. They came here 3 or 4 years ago. They are very nice people. I hang out with them because I think they keep their culture. But the kids who are like me asked me like "Why you're hanging out with FOB people?" They're like "That's so: uncool!" Well, I don't think there's anything wrong with that. They're a lot nicer than the kids who have been here for a while. They get criticized a lot especially by Vietnamese people. I don't think a girl will ever date a guy who just came here simply because he's an FOB and he's an alien.          (Tram interview transcripts)

Although Tram claimed she was more willing to hang out with new Vietnamese immigrant students, she said that these students were somehow difficult to approach because of their lack of cultural capital in English proficiency and of social capital in being able to reach out to the right people.

> I know those people are very droughty people. Like, they can't speak ( ). Yeah, they want to hang out with certain people who are like them, who can not speak English very well. I think it makes them feel more comfortable. But with me, that's like the worst thing you can do. You should hang out with people who know how to speak and know how to read and write correctly.

Tram implied that students like Thao should find native speakers of English to practice and to socialize. In doing so, they would be accepted more easily and quickly by their "own" Vietnamese peers.

The other factor that may have contributed to Thao's isolation from her Vietnamese peers is their racial profiling. Speaking from experience, Thao believed that it was very likely that students like Thao would be classified by her "own people" because of her difference. "They [Vietnamese students] threw racist comments about my hair, clothes, and everything," Tram recalled her first two years at Linton.

Mrs. My was disappointed when seeing many Vietnamese boys, including new immigrants, leaving her office upon Thao's arrival. The boys told Mrs. My that Thao did not appeal to them because she was too much into African American students and because her "attitude" did not make her a good Vietnamese girl. Mrs. My did not welcome the Vietnamese boys' comments, but she worried more that Thao would gradually lose a sense of her own culture and become marginalized in her Vietnamese community in school.

Thao's outspoken attitude in favor of others' culture and against own culture could lead to prejudice against her from the Vietnamese peers. As Tram described, such marginalizing happened to her at Linton.

> There's girls [who are very much into black stuff and black guys] here. They're very much isolated. Like one time, we went to win a ball. We saw that Vietnamese girl. She hung out with an African American guy. The Vietnamese girls went like "Oh my God, that's SICK!" and "That's horrible!" (Tram interview transcripts)

The alienation and discrimination from her Vietnamese peers shut off any chance for Thao to interact with and learn from her Vietnamese peers. They shared national history, ancestors, and home languages, yet they were separated by contextualized sociocultural boundaries of social capital (e.g., student network), cultural capital (e.g., language and knowledge of schooling in the US) (Bourdieu, 1986), and construction of self identities and group identities (e.g., "FOBs" or non-"FOBs"). Thao's English, instead of serving a tool for interaction, was rather evaluated as the cause of her isolation from her Vietnamese peers. Mrs. My's efforts to help Thao establish a stable and nurturing peer circle did not seem to pay off, partly because Mrs. My tended to fix Thao's behavior. In her first year, Thao was unable to find a social circle of friends who listened and understood the way the world was for her and the way her world was.

### "I'm Proud Who I Am!"

Compared with her peers, Thao was quite tall for her age even without her high-heeled shoes. She had a strong build and large bones, which became a constant teasing topic among her cousins because their argument was that big girls were stupid. Once during an information interview in the library, Thao spotted a picture book on a nearby

shelf. The book was *The Song of Mulan*[34], a translation of an ancient Chinese poem about a girl who disguises herself as a man, joins the army in her father's place, and fights against the invaders for 12 years. Instead of resuming our interview conversation, Thao offered to read the book aloud to me. She told me that she found herself in Mulan, because she was as strong, smart, and pretty as Mulan. In fiction, Mulan bravely challenged the traditional view of young women who were supposed to be around the house all their lives. In reality, Thao challenged the "good Vietnamese girl" image defined by the institution and by her cultural background. She dared to venture to explore the youth world that appealed to her, even though it was perceived as taboo by many and the cost was isolation.

> Like, I hang out with black people. I have friends black stuff. My mom say why you hang out with black people. I say because I say any friend black, white, Chinese. Whatever they come from, they still human. So I have any friend I want. I want to go to my friend. And they [parents] say "No!" They say "You better go to Linton. I say "No!" I want to say something bad, but I can't. I so mad. I want to go with my friend. She [refers to her mother] don't let me. I so mad! I say any friend will be friend - Chinese, Hmong. Whatever they come from, it's not like they're animal stuff. I'm so tired, man. I wish I can 15 or 17. Then I can get a car and go somewhere. (Thao interview transcripts)

While trying to seek friends, Thao was aware of the racial profiling from her peers, including the black peers of her own ethnic identity. As she was walking along the racial, cultural, and ethnic borderlines, she was critiquing other people's conception of her identity and trying to maintaining her multiple identities she defined.

> Thao: I heard people talk about me ( ) I walking pass them.
>
> Yanan: Um. What did they say? Did you hear it?
>
> Thao: They say, Asian, China.

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[34] Lee, J. M. (1995). *The song of Mulan*. Asheville, NC: Front Street.

Yanan: They call you Asian?

Thao: They call China the most.

Yanan: They think you're a Chinese girl?

Thao: Yeah. Anytime they see people like Asian, they always tell China.

They always think.

Yanan: Why?

Thao: I don't know. I say, "I'm not China. I'm not whatever, or Asian.
I'm proud what I am. And you better be quiet. If you talk about me,
you look at yourself first, because when you go this school, you should
learn ... or talk about someone."

Yanan: Who are they?

Thao: Who knows. Stupid people.

Yanan: Your classmates?

Thao: Some people like Black, white.

Yanan: Like the students here, like outside. Everywhere?

Thao: Yeah. They always talk.

Yanan: But you don't care?

Thao: Yeah.

Within structural expectations of being a good student, a Vietnamese, and a

female student and against the unanticipated peer segregation and profiling, Thao held

her head up and navigated the ways of schooling alone. In social institution of school, as

students and teachers produce their versions of peer culture, Thao had her own unique

version which was based on her previous sociocultural experience of peer culture and her

personal preference of friends. Thao's negotiation of identities and membership to her

favorite peer group, in a way, is a response to the institutional assumptions informed by

race, gender, and cultural assumptions and expectations. Her "different" ways of conducting herself as an active consumer of popular youth culture and a brave cultural border-crosser challenged the stereotypes held by various members in school. Unfortunately, in the process of learning who she is through participating, or not participating, in varied peer group in and out of classroom, Thao was unable to access enough resources (e.g., opportunities to use English in social practices with peers) and support from the institution to understand the rules of the game.

## Summary

Identity negotiation is an integral part of language learning. This negotiating process is contingent upon the opportunities that are available for a learner to participate in a community of learners. In other word, participating, or not participating, in interactions in different social situations gives a person the sense of where she belongs and who she connects with. In addition, the dialogic nature of identity construction is cultural production that reveals the contradictions and complexities of learning in school. In this chapter, I looked at Thao's learning mainly in her unofficial peer world in school. I aimed to link her identity negotiations to the structural expectations of her role as a learner in order to explore the available opportunities for her to interact with peers.

As illustrated in this chapter, the nature of the opportunities for Thao to interact with others was influenced by Thao's negotiations of identities against the extended official identification of her in terms of language, race, gender, cultural heritage, ethnicity, immigration history, and the good Asian student rhetoric. Thao's response against roles which were assigned to or assumed of her by Linton's peer culture illustrated the

complexity of learning in the social, political, and cultural contexts of Linton (e.g., the default self segregation among peers and the complicated in-group dynamics).

Drawing from her middle school experiences and resources, Thao did not hesitate to seek membership across racial groups; however, the self-segregation among students at Linton provided Thao with little opportunity for interaction, especially with her African American cohorts. School is where Thao learned to understand the new country, new languages, and new self. The influence of the dominant urban teen culture at school (e.g., the Hip Hop culture) and her constant interaction with her African American friends were significant in her sociocultural experience of learning. Thao looked at herself as an active member, not defined by race, but by her participation in socially organized activities where she and her African American friends shared personal experiences and also social goals to achieve together (e.g., a class project). When Thao carried her cultural resources to Linton, a familiar environment regarding the prevalence of urban youth culture, her opportunity for interaction and her effort to "hang out" with African American students was, however, far from encouraging. Peer self segregation by the skin color was strikingly visible and difficult to break through. Border crossing was perceived as a sporadic venture rather than a norm. Thao was admirable in that despite assumptions regarding social circles by ethnic groups and race, she held on to her belief in socializing with people who appealed to her. Thao managed to reach out and actively sought social activities to participate. Sadly, such participation was difficult especially when student segregation determined the underground rule of the game.

Students' social status, language proficiency, immigrant history, gender and racial profiling became significant factors that impacted Thao's socialization and identity

formation within what the institution assumed as "her own group". The result is that these factors created different forms of segregation, if not racial and not as obvious, which deprived Thao of opportunities to interact with her Hmong or Vietnamese peers. The first form of segregation was between Hmong students and Vietnamese students at Linton. Due to historical conflicts dating back to the Vietnamese War, an implicit boundary had been drawn by the older generations of Hmong and Vietnamese immigrants for their sons and daughters who later met in American high school. Although time is healing up the resentment between the two peoples and although younger generations are less concerned about these historical conflicts, according to Mrs. My, the boundary continues to remind younger generations of where they are from and with whom they are supposed to be socializing.

The second form of segregation was among Vietnamese students themselves. Thao, a new comer not only as a high school student, but as a recent immigrant without much English, tended to be under peers' scrutiny. English language ability and lack of life experience in the US become a division between 1.5 (i.e., immigrants who came during childhood) and $2^{nd}$ generation students and recent immigrants who desperately needed to learn together with the "old timers" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). With limited opportunity to interact with peers in school, Thao was thrown back to her own world of which Mrs. My, her language aide, and I, an interested observer, shared a part. While struggling to understand the institutional assumptions of her academic performance, including language development, Thao was isolated in her unofficial world where peers were everywhere but they were unavailable for Thao. Before I proceed to the conclusion, I consider my own role in these findings.

# CHAPTER 6
## NEGOTIATING RESEARCHER-PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIPS

> There is good news and bad news with the most contemporary of
> formulations. The good news is that the multiple selves – ourselves and our
> respondents – of postmodern inquiries may give rise to more dynamic,
> problematic, open-ended, and complex forms of writing and representation.
> The bad news is that the multiple selves we create and encounter give rise
> to more dynamic, problematic, open-ended, and complex forms of writing
> and representation.                                   (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183)

I still remember the early days when I was "casing the joint" (Dyson & Genishi,

2005, p. 20) at Linton. I wore pants and casual sweaters, for example, a blue fleece

half-zip jacket. Instead of totes that my friends suggested that I should carry, I went with

my backpack. I found readjusting the straps of the totes, which always slid off my

shoulders, quite annoying, even though the bags would distinguish me from a high school

student. I used to sign up my name in the main office first thing when I entered the

building. Instead of walking directly to Mrs. My's office, I sometimes stopped by the

display windows along the hallway, curiously searching for the most recent showcases on

Linton's varsity sports, cultural heritage celebrations, student organization election

campaigns, or new Shakespeare dramas presented by students taking Performing Arts.

Once or twice, I was approached by a security guard who urged me to hurry to my next

class; but most of time, I was unnoticed when I showed up in the library, student cafeteria,

the gym, the hallway, or the parking lot, just like a default member of the community. My

plan was to make myself comfortable and ordinary at the site; however, I was not fully

aware of "the nature and boundaries of [my] role" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 51) until I

started to build relationships with my participants.

Among all the decisions, the one about my outfit was not a difficult one, though

it was definitely not a petty one. As I engaged more regularly in the fieldwork which

lasted approximately over a two year period, there were far more decisions for me to make - from negotiating entry and establishing relationships with potential participants to maintaining and continually negotiating these relationships. My role as a graduate student and a novice researcher trying to understand the life of high school students and their teachers grew more complicated. Not only did I become a part of my own study, but I struggled afterwards in the coding process and the interpretive write-up, juggling with my assertions and my own roles.

This chapter is a reflection on my negotiation of relationships with varied participants during my work as a native Chinese ethnographer conducting a case study of the complexities of learning English as a second language. Because the issue of reflexivity is at the center of any discussion of ethnographic method (Anderson, 1989; Canagarajah, 2005), I illustrate how I myself experienced the relationships and how that figured into my decisions as a researcher. I first describe the social constructions of self and others that figured into the negotiation of relationships (e.g., social status, race, age, gender, cultural heritage, family and nationality). I then reflect on the kind of methodological decisions that responded to these negotiations. I also examine the fluid and dynamic interaction between role relationships and methodological decisions over time.

## The Social Constructions of Self, Others, and Relationships

Researchers' prior experience, training, and commitments influence their stance in writing notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 42). Similarly in my study, my personal background, social status, and cultural heritage impact on the ways in which I position myself in relation to my participants throughout the work (Dyson & Genishi,

2005). The whole process of positioning and negotiating requires conscious and constant examination. Among my relationships with all participants, the ones with the focal student, Thao, and the major liaison, Mrs. My, stand out. In these relationships, I feel the need to ask who I am as a learner and a researcher who received English education in both China and the United States because this particular aspect of my biography influences the participants I chose to work with and the collaboration with them along the way.

## My Personal History

Born in Beijing in the late 1960s, I grew up during China's transition from Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution era to Deng Xiaoping's Open Door era. As the first girl in my working class family, I was given a name that literarily means that I would bring a baby boy to the family. Even though four and a half years later my younger sister arrived, I was still supposed to shoulder great responsibility as a big sister. Like Thao, I cooked, babysat, and ran errands for my parents. In my early schooling, kindergarten was the most memorable grade only because it was a place where I did not have to memorize Chairman Mao's quotations and take tests. My motivation to go to school was the various extracurricular activities (e.g., drawing, track and field, gymnastics, and accordion lessons) and friends. From Grade 7, we had a new course called "English". Each day, the English teacher taught us some funny sounds and strange calligraphy then forced us to remember. I thought I would never be interested in English. Never.

Soon, more "foreigners" showed up outside the school classroom. They were in the imported (but translated) movies, in the TV news, and they were everywhere in the places of interest in Beijing, such as the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, and the

Tiananmen Square. The teacher told us that these foreigners spoke English and that we should learn to communicate with them, but I did not think that I understood them at all, nor did I hear them say anything like "there are three trees in front of the classroom." Luckily, I became interested in reading some English fairy tales that I borrowed from a neighbor who got these children's books from a relative in Singapore. Although I did not know most of the words, it was still fascinating to spot a couple of English words. On another occasion, when I had our annual spring outing to the Great Wall, a friendly foreign lady put a cute toy frog in my hand while smiling and talking to me in English. I did not understand her but I hoped I would be able to thank her in English some day.

Packed with assignments and exams, the workload in middle and high school years were overwhelming. My school was not a *good* school in a sense that a great portion of its graduates could not go to college because of their low pass rate; still, we were given extra work in order to *catch up*. Teachers worked together with us, checking if we worked hard enough. English was all about vocabulary, grammar, and syntax that were isolated from real text. I was lucky to be able to get through and make it to college, but I would never want to recall the days when learning was reduced to rote memorization, pattern drills and test-taking strategies. In college where I was a student then an instructor, I was exposed to more real-life English used in different cultural contexts. English was the medium of instruction and many courses were co-taught by foreign experts. Speaking, listening, reading and writing activities were better combined together to involve more student participation and production. Nonetheless, the development of English literacy was still shadowed by centralized curricula, rote learning, and preparation for grammar-based proficiency tests.

As a language learner then a teacher, I have been reflecting on the meaning of learning a foreign or a second language and the process it involves when a teenager like me learns to write the first alphabet and articulate the first syllable in English with both excitement and puzzlement. I have been recalling all the people who have played a role in my learning – my next-door neighbor who lent me the story book, the foreign lady on the Great Wall, my English teacher who praised me for reciting a pattern drill, my college classmates who got up at 5 am to recite words in the Oxford dictionary, my American teacher who invited me over for ice cream and who asked about my plans for the future, my English major students who were curious about my TOEFL test scores, my American colleague who encouraged me to get a Ph.D in the States.... The list goes on and on. These memories remind me that it is the social and cultural attraction of using the language to interact with more people that have sustained my interest in learning English. I became a graduate student at Michigan State's College of Education after teaching English in China for nine years. In a way to continue my long quest for the meaning of learning a second language, I started focusing on experiences of teenage ELL students who have different target language environment and different challenges in and out of school. At the same time, as a female graduate student from China trying to understand students and teachers in Midwestern United States, I reflect how people's social status, cultural heritage, race, nationality, age, gender, and family figured into the methodological dimension of my project, namely my relationship with my participants.

## Negotiating Self and Others

Concurrently with my investigations into the phenomena of ELL students learning English in mainstream classroom, I was learning my new role as a researcher

and my unique field relationships with Thao and Mrs. My. Examining these relationships "involves enabling conversation across societal lines – of ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, race – that have grown progressively more nuanced, more immediate, and more irregular" (Geertz cited in Kirsch, 1999, p.xv). First, our relationships were built on my given membership in the social, ethnical, and cultural world to which Thao and My belonged; yet this membership was never stable and was always subject to context change. Second, our relationships were complicated by its reciprocal nature (Wade, 1984) when I encountered unanticipated demands that necessitated my role-switching and expectations. Finally, the relationships required critical examination of its underlying power dynamics.

*Membership.* My relationship with Mrs. My and Thao involved negotiations of membership. They kindly accepted me into their social and personal worlds not long after my debut in the building. For many, including the school teachers, my fellow graduate students, and even I myself, working with the two Vietnamese women was a legitimate and practical research plan because of possible cultural connections between us. Indeed, we shared many experiences as women coming from Asia and speaking English as a second language. The national border, at this moment and in this space, tended to be blurred. Institutionally, Mrs. My, Thao, and I were regarded as ethnically one group, or "Asian", in relation to the "White," "African American," "Latino/a," "Native American", etc., who gathered under the same roof at Linton. Because I am a married woman, the gender and emotional dimensions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) could have also led to a close and fast-building relationship. It was not difficult for our conversations to shift to those

shared cultural traditions such as the lunar calendar, the Confucius philosophy in family

and education, and major Chinese/Vietnamese holidays.

Underneath the membership that was constructed through race, cultural

backgrounds, and age and gender, however, were equally prominent factors such as,

nationality, social status, and life experience, factors that made us individual persons. For

instance, Mrs. My implied that most Vietnamese immigrant families started their life at

Maple Creek as political refugees from the Vietnam War. For a student from China, a

country that also played a part in the war, I was consciously cautious about this factor in

my relationship with the Vietnamese participants. Therefore, the membership was fluid,

dynamic, and far from stable. It may help build mutual trust and understanding, but I

would never assume I was able to share the emic perspectives and interpretations

(Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Moreover, "[s]kin color, race, and cultural identity sometimes

facilitate, sometimes complicate, and sometimes erect barriers in fieldwork" (Bodgan &

Biklen, 1998, p.86) through hindering many precious observation opportunities. For

example, Mrs. My and Thao would stop their tutoring sessions to entertain me as I

dropped by the office attempting to catch a tutoring scene. I understood the cultural code

of never neglecting a friend, but it was a pity that many potential data were slipping away

in front of me.

*Reciprocity.* My relationships with Thao and Mrs. My were also constructed by

its reciprocal nature (Wade, 1984) when my roles were partly shaped by their interests

and objectives which arose unexpectedly in varied situations. In other words, as I

assumed my social status as a student and researcher in the study, Thao and Mrs. My

responded with their expectations and assumptions of my social role when my life

interwove with theirs. For example, I frequently experienced role-switching from a tentative note-taker and/or an observer to a peer, a prop, or a pal upon Thao's request. Once in 9th English, Thao was filling out a book recommendation form required by the teacher. She did not understand a line, so she threw me a question while I was copying her writing. "What it mean?" she asked, pointing to the last line of the card, which says "recommended by ___". "They want to know who wrote this recommendation, so you can put your name there if you like," I gave a brief explanation. "Me? Really?" Thao was not sure, but she wrote her name in the blank. Outside the classroom, Thao often dropped me brief messages (e.g. "how are you do you get any better oh you can come at Tuesday because Mrs. My will come back ok i don't what to say i gotta go now bye bye") and reminded me of emailing her as well. I became a virtual friend who was supposed to fill her inbox with new greetings. For Mrs. My, as I shadowed Thao everywhere, I made a good student teacher who could report and monitor Thao's behavior, especially those "inappropriate" ones (e.g., chatting with peers, or not respecting teachers). Mrs. My also urged me to control the time and ask Thao to stay in class if I thought that was necessary. Such "intense sharing" (Lincoln, 2002, p.338) in our relationship was undergirded by mutual trust and it required thorough methodological decisions in terms of my responsibilities as a researcher. For example, I frequently asked myself to gather a sense of the limit. In other words, how do I respect and respond to my participants' demands without sacrificing my own methodological beliefs? The trick here is that oftentimes the intention of the researcher and that of the participants do not go hand in hand to the same, or even similar, direction.

*Power.* The relationships were also highlighted by power dynamics in three ways. First, ethically, roles we took as the researcher and participants respectively tended to complicate our relationships. Just in the way my gender, cultural heritage, social status as a married graduate student and an outsider made it easy for me as a researcher to establish rapport with Mrs. My and Thao and to develop intimacy and collaboration, these social factors could more likely put Mrs. My and Thao in a more vulnerable position (Kirsch, 1999; Weis & Fine, 2000). Even though Mrs. My and Thao have been open to me in terms of their experiences in learning English in their new country, I felt the challenge of avoiding distorting and misinterpreting the information and handling it with in-depth ethical and methodological consideration. Therefore, the relationship was negotiated around the "fine line that separates friendship and friendliness" (Kirsch, 1999, p.30).

Second, power was also played out in our use of English as our second language throughout the case. In responding to my observation, interview questions, and comments, Thao, a recent immigrant teenager who was learning the language without adequate and appropriate support, tended to be more vulnerable in relation to me as a researcher. For instance, for a few times in the interviews when Thao commented on her teachers, friends, or the courses, she used the word "stupid" and appeared indifferent and refused to say more. I could have easily fallen into an evaluative mode instead of being patient enough to try to understand her meaning of *being stupid* in context. Mrs. My, who learned English in her middle age years, declined to be audiotaped in the study. In a sense, not having her transcripts may reduce the risk of misrepresentation because of her wrong

choice of words, as Mrs. My explained. However, that may not prevent the same risk from *my* part when I paraphrased her meaning.

Third, the cultural expectations based on our similar heritage towards age and social status powerfully assigned relationships that more or less determined the kinds of questions I asked and the kinds of data set I was able to collect. More advanced in age and teaching experience both in Vietnam and in the US, Mrs. My assumed a role of a respectable senior who had the right to order and advice. Thao, a young girl who needed guidance both socially and academically, according to Mrs. My, was in a lower position from where she was supposed to show total respect and obedience to Mrs. My. My position fell right in between first based on age. I was also supposed to submit to Mrs. My because I relied on her to negotiate the field entry and project design. In addition, because of my education and English language ability, I was assigned by Mrs. My the role of Thao's teacher. Unlike the challenges of the researcher authority (Kirsch, 1999; Weis & Fine, 2000), the delicate and cultural-oriented power dynamic in our relationships contested my decision-making throughout the study.

## Methodological Decisions

My relationships with Mrs. My and Thao were constructed through my fluid membership in their social world, constant negotiations of their demands for my unexpected roles, and power dynamics that may affect the "noncoercive, mutually rewarding relationship" (Erickson, 1986, p.142). The complicated nature of such relationships requires conscious decision-making in research methodology.

## On Membership

Ladson-Billing (2000) writes that membership in a specific racial or ethnic group does not imply her natural acquisition of emic knowledge of that community (p. 266). Therefore, clearly informing Mrs. My and Thao about the purpose of my study through dialogues and actions helped better balance my relationships that could be easily blurred by membership. Entry to the site for me was a process of negotiating the membership and my researcher role. I started knowing Mrs. My a year before my dissertation project when I was conducting a pilot study at Linton with a Vietnamese senior student. The student invited me to his social circles – student club, Taekwando class, and Mrs. My's office. As my pilot study went on, Mrs. My had chances to observe me as a student researcher and to talk with me in the office when students were all gone to their class. Our conversations covered a variety of topics, such as history of the two countries, living and making a living at Maple Creek, learning functional English in the earlier years, and traveling all over the United States. When I transitioned to designing my dissertation project, Mrs. My had not only had preliminary observations of what I did on site, but also had known me as a student friend. We had more discussions later on as to my beliefs and methods in conducting research, and my focus on second language learning processes, and my researcher role. I explicitly articulated my concern that some Vietnamese students and their parents may not want to accept me because of my nationality because of the war history shared by the two countries. Using my pilot study as an example and abiding by the necessary procedure, I explained how I was going to protect the student's privacy and respect their choice to answer or not answer my

questions. My openness won me the trust from Mrs. My who helped me look for possible candidates and from Thao and her family who agreed to participate.

## On Reciprocity

As Mrs. My and Thao expected me to play a part, beyond an observer, in their worlds, specific methodological decisions were made on the spot. More importantly, these decisions also involved communications and negotiations. In Thao's case, when she requested my help with her learning and to some degree socializing, I would respond positively and take the role of a "student teacher" she assigned to me. For example, oftentimes in English class, Thao turned to me for help with her writing assignment. Once in the computer lab where Mrs. Turner asked students to type up and edit a short story assignment, I asked several clarification questions to help Thao elaborate on her description. Thao also asked for my suggestions of words and ideas in writing. While paying attention not to give her the answer, I tried to encourage her to brainstorm first, and then offer words that may fit her idea. I did not help Thao with all her questions, but I noticed that Thao appeared more into the task we both worked on. By actively playing the role that benefited Thao in one way or another, I made a moral decision as well. I rejected the role other times when Thao's request became irrelevant. For instance, in Science Fiction class, instead of watching the movie or listening to the lecture, Thao would start a conversation and ask me to teach her a few Chinese characters or to take her out of classroom for an interview. I would signal that it was not appropriate for me to do that in a class situation. In Mrs. My's case, I chose to talk directly about my dilemma of being an observer and a controlling teacher of Thao in the classroom. Correcting Thao's behaviors in class not only violated my ethical promise to Thao, but also confronted my

non-judgmental and non-evaluative stance in the study, as I told Mrs. My. She seemed to understand my position and stopped pushing. In a way, reciprocal relations established between the researcher and the participants require communication, understanding, and mutual realistic expectations.

## On Power

It is never simple when it comes to making ethical decisions. The power-laden relationship between the researcher and participants is always on-going and dynamic, making the task of protecting the participant, who is more vulnerable, more demanding of the researcher and more difficult for the institutional human subject review boards to regulate through a medical-model (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Instead of trying to fix many unexpected situations, I wrote reflection memos to record my process of going with the flow. Because I do not speak or read Vietnamese, the ways in which English was used in communication (e.g., among the three non-native speakers – me, Thao, and Mrs. My; between native speakers and the three of us respectively) should be examined. For example, the questions I often asked of myself are: When Thao does not articulate her ideas clearly, was I possibly evaluating her English? Was I trying to understand her through other means (e.g., contexts of the conversation; paralinguistic features)? Was I possibly taking advantage of her English by throwing her ambiguous or confusing questions? Was I looking for other ways to communicate? Did I gather data that can speak for Thao in some way?

Respecting my participants meant having the patience to wait until they were equally interested in talking with me, working the way they preferred, and inviting them to examine and make decisions in the study. For instance, during the four formal

interviews and a few casual conversations, I used simple spoken language in my open-ended questions to leave Thao enough time and space to open up layers of meanings. Then, I followed up with single ideas Thao offered and probed a little deeper. The topics ended up being all over the place, but they were significant in that they gave Thao a feeling of control because she decided which questions she would like to talk about more. The topics, though segmented initially because of their open-ended nature, still helped unfold many sides of her social life. From time to time, I asked Thao's feedback on whether I correctly understood what she had told me. These confirmations ranged from facts (e.g., the number of cousins she has and their relations) to opinions (e.g., on her choice of making and not making friends, or of completing a writing assignment in certain way). To reconcile the tension between my researcher role and the role of a monitor assigned by Mrs. My, I first openly discussed my stance in being non-intrusive when shadowing Thao in and out of classroom. Further, I turned myself into a resource person with whom Thao could consult regarding her learning and life around it. I was deeply aware of the issue of exploitation of subjects widely discussed in qualitative methodology literature (Erickson, 1986; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Kirsch, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In reality, all my participants were giving rather than taking. Mrs. My's comment was representative. She told me one day that she felt the need to help me move forward to graduation the moment she signed the consent. While I argue for the contribution of the work to the larger society for the long run, I did not hesitate to make my contribution to the local to the best of my capability. I exchanged my ideas and observations in the formal and informal interviews. I asked for their further comments on my initial discussions on my understanding of the various situations. In a

way, I hoped that Thao, Mrs. My, as well as the teachers, could benefit from the conversations, discussions, and stories that I shared with them regarding learning and teaching English in one way or another.

## Over Time

My fluid and dynamic interaction between role relationships and methodological decisions evolved over time. The intimacy grew stronger between me and the two women because of the arrival of my daughter. The notion of family, together with cultural heritage, gender, and age prominently pushed our relationship to a unique situation. I could hear the warning "the greater the intimacy, the greater is the danger" (Weis & Fine, 2000, p.45); and yet I also saw the power of such intimacy in possibly empowering both me and others in our understanding of the meaning of collaboration in this ethnographic work.

My baby girl, Fengyi, has been physically accompanying me throughout my fieldwork, but it was not until November 2004, two months deep in my data collection that I shared the news with Mrs. My and Thao. They were excited and quickly shifted the greetings from "how are you?" to a more specific "how do you feel today?" Our conversations usually began with a baby-related topic with which both Mrs. My and Thao were very familiar. Thao had two little brothers, both of whom were babysat by Thao when their parents were out at work most of the day. Thao always offered me tricks of the trade in looking after little infants. Mrs. My has four children who later brought her three grandchildren; one of them was actually due a few months before Fengyi. We also found out that Mrs. My was exactly my mother's age and I was at the same age as Mrs. My's third daughter who was also pregnant at that time. Moreover, we found out that

Mrs. My and I (and Fengyi, too) were born under the same sign of the zodiac. In addition to these "facts", we also shared many topics regarding parents' responsibilities in family, balancing work and family life, and planning for the future.

Our relationship, as a result, grew more intimate till even after the data collection. I noticed more prolonged and detailed conversations I had with Mrs. My and/or Thao. Mrs. My started to share more sensitive information in terms of Thao's progress (e.g., descriptions of Thao's language test results and the unsatisfying academic performance despite the tutoring efforts). She also allowed me to see the other side of her world where she managed to make a difference at Linton at a senior age and to live with racism and prejudice towards minority language aides. Thao changed her way of addressing me as Ms. Fan to Yanan, which would never be appropriate for a student to call her teacher (of all kinds, including student teacher which was my assumed role to Thao) under both Vietnamese and Chinese culture. Her emails arrived more frequently, reminding me to visit her in her classroom, to tell her if Fengyi was fussy and grumpy, and to drop by her class when I was back to the deskwork. The emotional attachment was mutual. While in the field, I felt I was going to visit my mother and my sister who were ready to listen to my pregnancy worries and project puzzles. At the same time, I became more emotionally involved in Thao's progress especially when her test scores in some classes turned against her. I worried when seeing Thao putting on a considerable amount of weight within a short period of time in spring. And I even wanted to visit her at home. During the write-up, I found myself struggling to separate my fieldnotes, artifacts, and other concrete data from my reflection memos and all the cards and emails Thao sent me from time to time.

Although risks are always there regarding the researcher-participant relationships, I managed to follow the steps of data analysis and inquiry supported by theory. I was trying to respond to their trust and friendship by writing up my research with more ethical and moral responsibility. Indeed, I face many challenges that may lead to attitudes or actions that are against them in one way or another (e.g., the danger of essentializing ELL learners, a particular ethnic group, or in a broader sense, of the teachers and the practices). This is the reason I decided to fully examine my situations in relation to my participants in a separate chapter. In so doing, I aim to define my researcher identity "by the creative tension in the role of member/observer" (Behar, 1996 cited in Angrosino & Perez, 2000, p. 684).

# CHAPTER 7
## CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

When I was back at Linton after giving birth to my daughter Fengyi, it was mid April, a few more weeks to the end of the academic year. My field work would also come to an end. Thao told me she was tired all the time and was desperately looking forward to the summer. She could not get as much sleep as she needed because she had to take care of her toddler brother and sister after school. Thao was less willing to talk about her classes. Except for an "okay", I found it difficult to get her to elaborate more. Instead, Thao became more vocal and emotional when she mentioned her fights with her parents and cousins at home. According to Mrs. My, who had a brief phone conversation with Thao's parents, Thao's father admitted that he and Thao's mother did not know much about Thao's school life and friends; nor were they able to pay more attention to her schooling because of their work schedule and other family issues (e.g., a divorce in the extended family). For Mrs. My, Thao was different from other Vietnamese students she had during her ten years of working in the School District as a language aide. Thao was different because her social circle (e.g., friends) and family environment worked against her learning at school, according to Mrs. My. If necessary, Mrs. My would suggest that Thao take the ESL class to start over. In the English class, Mrs. Turner revealed her concern that Thao was struggling to fit in but that was not successful enough to save herself from her downhill performance. Like Mrs. My, Mrs. Turner predicted that Thao might have bigger troubles in her 10th grade.

In this concluding chapter, I first summarize the findings of the study. I do not have happy stories or best practices to share, but the challenges of learning and teaching adolescent immigrant students are what we need to understand, when we situate second

language learning in contexts. I then link my findings to the grand theoretical discussions in the sociocultural stances of learning and teaching. I focus particularly on the notion of the "cultural production of the educated person" (Levinson & Holland, 1996) and the sociocultural notion of participation when I revisit the literature with my findings. Finally, I explore research and pedagogical implications.

## Summary of Findings

My dissertation project was an ethnographic case study. The purpose was to understand the complexities of learning English as enacted by Thao, a recent Vietnamese immigrant student in a Midwestern urban high school. Seen through Thao's world of learning in school are multiple layers of state-wide and school-wide institutional practices regarding educating ELL students, of classroom-level pedagogical practices in mainstream classrooms, and of peer-level socialization and interaction. These layers did not stand alone; rather, they interrelated with one another and they jointly created the dynamics in which Thao's learning was situated. This study attempted to investigate and understand what happened in Thao's first year in her Midwestern high school (also fifth year in the US) and how Thao, as well as varied participants, participated in the social practices of learning or teaching, or using English in socially organized practices in school.

### Second Language Learning in Broader Contexts

Thao's learning was situated in the sociopolitical landscape of the larger educational system which influenced the learning experiences of millions of ELL students, like Thao, through national and local language education policies. These policies identified the goal of language (and second language) education and language

147

programs, interpreted the meaning of literacy and learning English as a second language among ELL students, and classified ELL learners as they entered into American's classrooms. These policies impacted on the local institutional practices and types of support, resources, and access available to the ELL students.

As reflected through the institutional support at Linton, the school district was far from prepared to serve the needs of language minorities. Guided by prevailing cultural assimilation in educating immigrant students (e.g, the English-only legislation that has impacted the whole nation), the district witnessed a sharp contrast between the demand to educate school children from more diverse backgrounds and the institutional readiness to channel all language, financial, and sociocultural resources into effective support. The district was under the pressure of standardized tests and shrinking budgets over the past years; therefore, second language programs and second language teachers were among the first to go away. The ELL students were left to sink or swim in mainstream classrooms.

Through examining the nature, form, and values of the local available programs for Thao at Linton High, I argue that the support system did not coherently encourage Thao's active participation in the social practices of learning English inside and outside of classrooms. Without a clear vision of what kinds of language help ELL students needed and how to meet their needs, various potentially useful language programs tended to exclude Thao because she was not one of their designated students. For example, the division of ESL/mainstream did not consider students' literacy development in multiple languages and the means and environments to support second language learning; instead, it was based solely on the psycholinguistic criteria of whether or not an ELL student was

able to use functional English in daily interaction. Caught in between the ESL and the mainstream, Thao was expected to acquire the language on her own as she was immersed in the mainstream curriculum. As a result, all attention was directed to Thao's language aide, Mrs. My. Her role as a Vietnamese bilingual tutor relieved much of the burden from the institution side. Unfortunately, it was unrealistic to expect Mrs. My to answer all the questions. Without strong professional support and constant communication with mainstream classroom teachers, Mrs. My worked in isolation and frustration. Her guidance to Thao was limited to subject matters such as math and science and to Thao's discipline problems. Helping Thao with reading and writing in academic English was not the agenda in Mrs. My's two-day work schedule every week. This finding identified a common tension reported in several Canadian studies of secondary-level English language learners: a lack of adequate social, academic, and language support further complicates students' learning in mainstream classroom (Duff, 2005).

It is important to point out the cultural assumptions that Asian students are "always on the top" (to quote Linton's counselor) were still prevalent. They were used to lessen the tension of individual problems and struggles within the group, to legitimize the sole responsibility of the Vietnamese language support personnel, and to create excuses when there was a lack of institutional support.

## Mainstream Practices and Second Language Learning

With limited access to institutional language help outside classroom, Thao was left to sink or swim in mainstream classrooms. As an active learner, Thao tried to negotiate her resources and to figure out how she could cope with reading and writing expectations and responsibilities in each class. Although Thao needed enhanced

vocabulary and fundamental knowledge in writing academic English, she was sensitive to the reading and writing practices and to the kind of participation expectations of varied mainstream contexts in order to get the grade.

However, she was lost in the lack of consistency among the regular teachers in doing what was regarded as appropriate and required participation through oral and written language in these classes. That is, the "compartmental nature of high school instruction" in regular classes tends to divert expectations for "participation structures and literate behaviors, and different levels of academic expectations" (Harklau, 1999, p. 42). What worked in one class did not work in the next. For instance, Thao found out that when she participated in writing practices by submitting summaries of short stories, movies, or even class discussion, the science fiction teacher recognized it as appropriate and rewarded her with participation tokens. As these token later added up to a fairly good grade, Thao learned to believe, though without any teacher comments, that such a way (writing summaries) of participating in writing practices was valued. Nonetheless, as Thao used the same writing strategy to participate in the English class, she was frustrated about why the teacher was not satisfied with her summaries, though she thought she had followed the directions to revise – or to re-copy the summary multiple times.

Thao was not yet aware that the goals of literacy practices in various mainstream classrooms kept shifting in part due to the disciplinary contexts. In Thao's courses, however, there was also a lack of clear and consistent vision of contextual and interactional components necessary for second language learners to gain access to literacy and learning. Although she had more interactions with the 9th Grade English teacher, Mrs. Turner, who occasionally worked with individual students in class, Thao's

interaction with the mainstream teachers was mainly through interpreting the scores they gave her as grades. Without receiving specific advice on her academic English, Thao remained more lost regarding participating in mainstream classroom through oral and written language.

## Second Language Learning and Identity Negotiations

As Thao negotiated her participation in the official mainstream curriculum in order to be a *good student*, she was also responding to the cultural and social expectations of who she was as a legitimate member of varied peer communities in school, the "socially organized environment that offers categories and labels, locating students as participants in schooling" (Meador, 2005, p. 149). In the cultural production of *the good student,* many social factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, English language ability, cultural heritage and stereotypes were all linked to Thao's academic performance and the dynamics generated by Thao and "various worlds and experiences [she] inhabits and which acted on [her]" (Ricento, 2005, p. 895).

For Thao, her identities were mediated by and connected to her participation in a variety of youth culture. To fulfill classroom responsibilities, Thao drew upon the popular youth culture (e.g., songs, movies, poems, and websites) to express her view of the world and her joys and worries as a young adult in her everyday literacy practices. She also sought membership outside the classroom for a sense of belonging to the peer group she preferred to join. For instance, Thao was particularly attached to her African American peers and always wanted to be a cool member. However, Thao was excluded not only by the African American peers, but also by her own Vietnamese peers. The extended official identification of an ELL student regarding language, race, gender, ethnicity, cultural

heritage, and immigrant experience was reinterpreted within peer groups, and these interpretations further impacted on Thao's opportunities to find a welcoming peer group and have relevant interactions with the group members. At Linton, students' self-segregation blocked Thao's border crossing. The complex in-group dynamics of her Asian and Vietnamese peers refused to take her back as well.

It was not a surprise that Thao was isolated by Linton's peer culture which reflected the institutional and societal problems of racial and cultural segregation. Thao's personal efforts to get positive interactions with the young people with whom she wanted to socialize were not supported by the institution. Her isolation from both peers and institutional help further complicated the process of her managing the complexities in an urban high school.

## Theoretical Discussion

### Literacy, Development, and ESL

Literacy is the use of cultural and symbolic tools in a social dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978). In this social dialogue, the cultural tools include not only languages of all kinds, but also drawings, sounds, movements, and gestures. Thao actively appropriated her information and thoughts in these shared forms to get her ideas across (Dyson, 1997). For example, she learned to use African American Vernacular English in her interactions and writings. She drew on her favorite romance books and her own emerging sense of love when telling her own short story. In a little poem she shared with me, Thao sketched a lotus next to the poem to express her peace of mind. And she used her home language, Vietnamese, with her language aide in a variety of interactions.

Indeed, for ELL learners, literacy means far beyond the constructivist concept of separating the four basic language skills – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – as different building blocks. Biliteracy (Hornberger, 2003), which could be considered as a dimension of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981), is a series of dialogized cultural practices aimed to achieve a communicative repertoire among members of the community who seek to share information and resources. Consequently, literacy for ELL students is highly contextualized. First language (L1), joining with other symbolic tools as mediators, can be used to facilitate second language (L2) learning. In addition to the sociocultural view of L1 and L2, ESL requires critical lenses (Reyes & Halcon, 2001). In Thao's school, the provision of the first language support was not integrated into the institution in any meaningful way; therefore, it provided minimum support for Thao to learn English literacies, even though it may have provided her with important cultural and emotional backup

If literacy is the use of cultural tools in social dialogues, literacy development, then, should not be linear as if language elements can be acquired in a certain order. Instead, the development is more multi-dimensional. As Nancy Hornberger (2000) contends, there are many communicative means (e.g., languages, dialects, etc.) in communicative repertoires and these communicative repertoires come from a variety of contexts (e.g., oral to literate, micro to macro). In addition, literacy development follows multiple paths (e.g., receptive to productive, oral to written, etc.) and it is a meaning making process as people also negotiate their identities and social relationship with others.

In L2 learning, development refers to the process and product of a natural combination of situating oneself and using English to function in real language contexts.

Whilst interacting with other members of the classroom community, Thao learned: her relationship to the physical and social world around her; the functions of English by using it across communicative events with others; and the grammatical aspect of English. For instance, as illustrated in the previous chapter, when Thao was actively engaged in an interaction, she was more at ease, confident, and accurate. Thao's appropriation of African American Vernacular culture was realized through practices in which she constructed a sense of self and shared with peers (Miller & Goodnow, 1995). Thao's language is part of her identity, part of the peer culture she identified herself with, and part of her border-crossing venture. The relationship between urban immigrant youth and the impact of African American Vernacular English can not be definitively addressed in this study. Further study is needed to understand the ELLs' appropriation of Englishes (e.g., African American Vernacular English), the transfer of their home languages into the discourses used in school, and their identity negotiation (Huebner & Uyechi, 2004).

In the foreword of the book *Language in the U.S.A.* (Ferguson & Heath, 1981), Hymes points out that "United States is a country rich in many ways, but poor in knowledge of itself with regard to language" (p. v) in that much attention has been given to a single form of English while no one seems to realize the significance of "the full repertoire of a community, the full range of its varieties of language, the variety of purposes for which they are employed, the relations among those purposes" (p. vii).

The current language education policy mandates that immigrant students be taught *the only* correct form of English. The students are looked down upon because of their accented English. The assimilative and centralized attitude implicit in language ideology exerts a great impact on the life of the immigrant students who come with little

English. In Thao's case, the conditions for her learning English were worse when the shame of and prejudice against accented English were from her own Vietnamese peers. Such attitudes may put immigrant students in an unfavorable position in their educational progress, not because their English itself is deficient, but because it is different – different from what is perceived as mainstream middle-class English (Stubbs, 2002). Therefore, it is important to understand the sociocultural experiences of ELL students.

Critical pedagogues argue that learning to read the word is in fact understanding the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), in which teachers and students understand their historical place in the balance of power (Maldonado cited in Reyes & Halcon, 2001). Gender, race, class, and other constructed categories must be considered in the classroom where the dominant value of English clashes with the value of other minority languages. Along this line, it is equally important to note the need for ELL students to "desire the knowledge of the rules and conventions of English" (Canagarajah, 2005, p. 936), because for young adults who do not know academic English, learning the vocabulary and the kinds of ways of producing discourse that match the disciplinary subjects in school will help them participate in literacy practices in and out of classrooms (Delpit, 1988).

**Participating in the Ecological System of Classrooms**

This study is grounded in the sociocultural understanding that learning takes place through learners' participation in practices in the dynamic and complicated ecosystems of school and classroom. Thao revealed to me her world of becoming a bilingual student in her new country and new school, negotiating resources in literacy practices in and out of classroom, and searching for her sense of self in varied communities of participants in school. Her individual experiences were intertwined with those of others around her and

situated within the historical and institutional contexts of Linton. Such experiences and contexts co-exist and interact in dynamic ways, which Margaret Hawkins (2004) describes as an ever-changing process that "shifts with each new move/interaction, and as new organisms enter the environment, as ecological systems do." (p. 21).

Indeed, learning never takes place in a vacuum. Drawn from Thao's experiences at Linton in her freshman year, her literacy practices took place in the interactions between many layers of institution and her efforts to be a good student and to be who she was. Therefore, her learning is highly contextualized and situated. That is, her learning was influenced by the national climates that impacted on the attention and conditions for educating English language learners. It was also influenced by the local capacities to gather resources and set expectations of Thao as a learner. At the same time, Thao reacted to the institutional environments with her own understanding of the expectation and the available strategies to survive school.

It was not a surprise that Thao was lost in the ecosystem of school and classroom. When the system itself did not provide consistent conditions regarding the meaning of literacy and expectations for learners' participation, it did not work for Thao, a new member who needed anything but confusing messages to inform her how to survive. Moreover, the peer world outside the classroom did not offer healthy social interactions for Thao as she was cornered by the various layers of student segregation. These segregations entailed the explicit racial gaps that had long existed in the society across racial groups and the implicit inner group alienation resulting from cultural, historical and political conflicts. The ecosystem was far from friendly to Thao when she was searching for students with whom she could identify. In a diverse urban schooling setting, Thao was

left alone figuring out the rules of the game both academically and socially. The ecosystem did not even have a "fragile balance" (Hawkins, 2004, p. 21) to offer Thao support accordingly.

One important aspect of the support was the opportunity for participation. Lave and Wenger's (1991) model has been useful for interpreting a wide range of L2 learning situations (Morita, 2004). They offer a social practice theory where they contend that learning takes place inside a learner, and that learning itself belongs to a larger process of cultural practice. "Situated learning," according to the authors, takes place under the conditions of legitimate peripheral participation, with "peripheral" suggesting the multiple and varied ways in which a learner or an apprentice can be located in a social practice. Through legitimate peripheral participation, new participants, or apprentices, acquire the skills required in a community of practice by actually engaging in the practices together with expert members. Without being explicitly taught, they move from the periphery of this community to the center, exploring their identities and sharing responsibilities as they transform novices to experts in an active and engaged manner. In their words, learning to participate in the activity is not "merely a condition for membership, but is itself an evolving form of membership" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53).

This leaves us enough space to further investigate the nature of the participation that was available to ELL learners in order to understand the social conditions for their learning in school. The ESL class at Linton did not offer the participation that Lave and Wenger describe. The traditional linguistic principles in teaching English dominated and it did not fully recognize the sociocultural view of language as a tool of participation. As

a result, English is taught as building blocks that lack support from real communication context (Valdès, 2001). The mainstream classroom as a whole did not address the needs of Thao as an English language learner. The societal ideology and institutional stereotypes reflected from the classroom practices tended to block the path Thao struggled to make into the center of the community. The "expert members" who could help Thao transform into an "expert" were hard to find. Outside the classroom, where students may potentially benefit from peer interactions, Thao's participation with African American peers, or Asian peers, or her own Vietnamese community, was not smooth. She was isolated from the social practices of her peer groups. Lack of participation results in difficulties in accessing resources, interaction opportunities, and a sense of membership.

Many ELL students are trapped in ESL programs (e.g., pull-out or ESL track) without any opportunity to participate in *real* or regular classroom contexts (Faltis, 1999; Harklau, 1994). When ELL students are mainstreamed, school officials, teachers, and even parents tend to believe that the students are given the best chance to immerse in real time English with language *experts* around them, namely teachers and English speaking peers (Crawford, 1998). However, the puzzles and struggles Thao and her teachers had raise in-depth questions regarding the nature of participation. For instance, under what circumstances and to what degree is the legitimate peripheral participation really effective in helping the marginalized immigrant students? What is happening around languages used in the interaction by the "new" and "old" members in various communities? What are the roles of English and the student's home language(s) in the power-laden negotiation of participation as "Hegemony over resources for learning and alienation from full participation are inherent in the shaping of the legitimacy and

peripherality of participation in its historical realizations" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 42)?

## Culture

The notion of culture is fundamental to this ethnographic case study of second language learning in school. I argue that culture is made up of interconnected practices informing choice-making. Culture is not scripts. Research on literacy and language development can not avoid this conception because languages, as symbolic tools, are uniquely salient in the human beings' practices of meaning-making and interacting among one another in social contexts (Street, 2001). That is, language learning is intertwined with the cultural production of identity formation and negotiations (Levinson & Holland, 1996).

Thao's participations in the social and cultural practices in school were far more complicated than the cultural difference notion of a mismatch of "patterned ways of behaving, thinking, or feeling, formed over time as an adaptation to specific environmental conditions" (Eisenhart, 2001, p. 211) between school and home. The view of culture and cultural difference (e.g., Heath, 1981) is limited and problematic in that it allows certain characteristics assumed to be shared by a group to determine the children's success or failure in school.

Even though John Ogbu (1978) reconfigures cultural differences with a "cultural frame of reference", his comparison between the history and educational motivation of the "voluntary" recent immigrants and the "involuntary" subordinate minorities still solidifies groups thus again, drawing clear-cut boundaries. Therefore, I would argue that, along his line, culture, instead of a "problem" (both cultural deficit theory and cultural

difference theory would agree upon this stand), can be viewed as an "excuse," which is no better than the former.

This "excuse" is particularly present in this study. Interview transcripts indicated that Tina's progress was always commented in relation to her African American peers and her Asian peers. On the one hand, regardless of her grades, Tina was one of those who were "always on the top" because, to echo her counselor, there were so many African American and Cuban students in her class who could not even get an average GPA of 1.0. On the other hand, as believed by some teachers and staff in the study, Tina would finally conquer English and grow an "excellent student" thanks to her Asian heritage, which should strongly and positively impact her commitment to study.

Such so-called justification will do her more harm than good. For example, pedagogically, Tina's learning was not attended to in a timely manner and with an understanding of the complexities and capacities of institutional support and practices with regard to ELL students, like Tina. Socially, Stacy Lee (1996) asserts that stereotyping not only diminishes varied individual experiences within the group, but also makes Asian students, as a group crowned "model minority", only an invisible, vulnerable but handy tool to oppress other minority groups (e.g., African or Latino Americans). Unfortunately, in an effort to understand more within-group variations, Lee ended up essentializing her Korean American participants as a group who dress expensive and fancy, associate with White students, and keep their distance from other Asian students.

Culture, for me and in this case study, is what is interpreted, negotiated, and constructed through interaction and socialization mediated by languages. In short, culture

responds to certain social conditions and contexts. As explained by Levinson and Holland (1996), such a stance toward culture as produced opens up new lenses to examine human agency within and against structural constraints. In Linton, Thao, like other students, not only faced the local notion of becoming the "educated person", but also was situated within a network of social relations among other students, with parents, teacher, school officials, and staff members. Race, class, ethnicity, generation all played a part in this grand drama of life in school. Various social sites[1] represented different expectations and relations. Thao experienced, interpreted, and negotiated with these expectations and at the same time, produced her own meaningful interpretations of schooling and of using English. My definition of culture awaits refinement; nonetheless, Tina's experiences in the institutional complexities of language policy, pedagogy, and assessment will only strengthen my understanding of culture and language learning, because in her social world, ideas of schooling, family, romance, friends, race, and gender complicate traditional group labels (e.g., as based on her social group and heritage), and so do her language practices and negotiations. I hope that the study is compelling enough for educators to reflect on their understanding of language development for both L1 and L2, as well as the sociocultural implications for teaching and learning in America's more diverse classrooms.

## On the Case

The purpose of this case study is not to represent the world, but to represent case "in a small, naturalistic social unit" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 2), that is, I examined the phenomenon of second language learning through Thao's experiences at Linton. Within

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[1] For example, mainstream classroom vs. ESL class; library vs. cafeteria, Vietnamese language aide's office vs. classroom.

this social unit, Thao and her teachers, peers, and language aide were all trying to make

sense of learning and teaching English as a second language both inside and outside

classrooms; therefore, this study entails important "atypical features, happenings,

relationships, and situations (Stake, 2000, p. 439). Through Thao's daily practices of

schooling, I as researcher learned not only the challenges Thao and her teachers faced in

fulfilling academic expectations, but also invisible layers of contextual meaning which

influential to Thao's participation in varied socially organized activities. By detailed

analysis and description, as well as situating this study in the literature, I aimed to refine

what we know, both theoretically and practically, about ELL adolescents' learning

experiences in high school (e.g., How do they interact with the institutional support and

expectations?; and how do they negotiate identities while learning in school?).

## Limitations of the Study

Although the study left room for many potential informants for participation,

some remained important but beyond the boundaries of the study. I was not able to recruit

them into the study mainly because of the lack of consent. For example, I was not able to

interview Thao's classmates – Mary (white), Nelson (white), and Taysha (black) – who

often sat with Thao as a group and interacted with her in varied ways. I also had to focus

solely within school because Thao's parents were not ready to give me access to Thao's

life outside school.

Second, the scope of the study only allowed me to look at Thao as she

transitioned from middle school to high school; therefore, the long-term implications for

her learning through participating in the social practices and her negotiating resources,

self, and expectations can not be drawn. As more case studies are desirable in the area of

academic language development for mainstreamed English language learners (van Lier, 2005), longitudinal studies will provide more complete descriptions and analyses of what kinds of challenges ELL high school students experience over time, how researchers and teachers conceptualize second language literacy informed by studies, and what interventions may be helpful to better assist student learning.

## Educational Implications

The complexities of Thao's learning indicated that in order to better serve English Language Learners in secondary schools, schools should have a consistent vision of literacy and second language education that "places the responsibility for the education of ELLs on all personnel" (Short, 1999: 112). As illustrated by Thao and other informants, the overdependence on Mrs. My, the Vietnamese language aide, reflected the lack of institutional consistency in the beliefs and strategies of working with the growing diversities among students. It also covered the institutional inability to provide school-wide assistance, regardless if it is from the general curriculum or language-specific programs (e.g., the transitional ESL class, or first language tutoring), or if it is from the English class or other subject areas. The key is how to clarify pedagogical objectives and social values across different learning situations in school (Leung & Franson, 2001). Teaching and learning second language should respect the development process of language learning in its sociocultural contexts where students learn through using the oral and written language as a tool to participate in the cultural practices of schooling. Teaching should also reflect this dialogic and interactional nature of learning. Therefore, language education involves team work – the team work that all school departments and teachers should participate in, the team work that requires collaboration and

communication, and the team work that is done with the ELL students (Adger & Peyton, 1999; Harklau, 1999).

Educating ELL students does not mean lowering the standards. In her Science Fiction class, Thao received easy grades throughout the semester not because of the quality of her work, but because of the teacher's sympathy towards a reality that Thao had to use a language she barely knew to finish the work that was expected of those 'regular' and 'fluent' students. Grades can not help Thao learn the vocabulary and discourse that matches the disciplinary subjects, and neither can sympathy and kindheartedness. Working with ELL students actually raises the bar for schools and teachers to improve pedagogy that actively responds to their students' second language development. For example, Canagarajah (2005) argues that many studies (e.g., Street, 2001) reveal the importance of teachers' listening to the students, as well as the local communities they are from, and seeking channels to bridge the literacy practices treasured by the students and the practices promoted in classroom. In so doing, teachers will also avoid imposing the institutional version of literacy and achieve their "enlightened purpose of empowering" the students (Canagarajah, 2005, p.935). To achieve this goal, teachers should set up clear objectives of teaching both in the subject matter and in the English language that ELL students need to acquire to survive the school discourse. These objectives should also be revealed explicitly to the students so that they understand what is expected of them and how they can actively involve themselves in the learning process.

Every teacher is a language teacher. Classroom instruction is a reflection of teachers' beliefs about English language development. For those who see language as a

linguistic structure and as separate from subject matter content, English should be, and can only be, taught piece by piece in a rigid order of letters, words, and sentences. However, these narrow assumptions do not help ELL learners, because they underestimate three important factors: home language/L1 in students' learning of L2, teachers' more explicit scaffolding, and needs of culturally diverse learners (Reyes, 1992). First, ELL students incorporate elements of L1 and L2 as well as elements that are not a part of either L1 or L2 to create a series of overlapping approximative systems or interlanguages while attempting to communicate. It will be helpful if teachers understand the developmental features of second language learners before they make judgment about the students' ability, motivation, or attitude. Working closely with the community from which the students come and with first language support personnel should also inform teachers' instruction in class.

Second, supported by L1 whenever it is available, L2 instructions should be consider that sociocultural nature of second language learning. That is, learning is not acquiring a set of skills. It occurs in students' participation in socially organized practices. The default discourse patterns of IRE (Mehan, 1979; Cazden, 1988) only encourage structured limited participation. The structured teacher-initiation, student-response, and teacher-evaluation can be problematic for ELL students, due to the lack of opportunities for developing students' communicative competence. In classroom, teachers can create more exploratory and collaborative talk (McCormick & Donato, 2000) for scaffolding. Teachers' comments, gestures, questions are symbolic tools to mediate and assist mental activity (Vygotsky, 1978). They should also be familiar with ways to draw students' attention to a task, simplify task demands, maintain motivation and progress towards

goals, decrease students' stress, and model preferred procedures to achieve the goal (McCormick and Donato, 2000).

Third, it is crucial for every teacher to understand who their students are as learners and where they are from. This bears political implications in classroom instruction. As Brian Street (2001) suggests, before any interventions, "it is necessary to understand the literacy practices that target groups and communities are already engage in" (p. 1). When Thao entered into her mainstream classrooms, she was regarded as one of those Asian students rather than as Thao, a Vietnamese young women influenced by and actively involved in youth culture, an outspoken young women who practiced poems in English and who read romance book, or a caring sister who had her theory of family, child rearing, and her social role at home. Teachers' efforts to link Thao's personal and peer world and her classroom learning will not only prevent superficial and stereotypical judgments, but also inform them of possible interventions in classroom. These interventions are then designed to integrate learning academic English in the practices, in which the students are more apt to engage. This requires a more "permeable curriculum" (Dyson, 1993) that nurtures, rather than separates ELL students from, the literacy practices they are keen to connect to and at the same time, creates teachable moments to help students understand and learn the function and complexity of academic English (e.g., to distinguish academic genres from casual personal sketches, and to address different audiences by using different tones). In addition, teachers should make concerted efforts to help ELL students accumulate experiences in the many areas required for successful participation in mainstream classrooms (Duff, 2001). For example, teachers should involve ELL students in a variety of classroom literacy practices. They need to help the

students to accumulate and make use of their knowledge of "popular North American culture, mass media, and newsworthy events" (p. 103). Teacher should help student learn to articulate their perspectives on cultural and social topics and gradually "enter quick-paced interactions" (p. 103).

Finally, teachers can not make up and carry out the game plan alone. Their pedagogy, teaching materials, assessment tools, and the whole process of conducting teaching should be informed by research and continuous professional development. For example, they need assistance in understanding the kinds of participation for English language learners created by the ways they design and conduct lessons. They need to know how to address the language difficulties their ELL students have while they learn English as a medium and the school subject matter taught through English. They need help in distinguishing the developmental features in the students' English in order to transition them to the mastery of English.

The university teacher education departments shoulder great responsibility to develop rigorous programs that prepare future teachers to address second language learning and development in their classrooms. When we advocate a school-wide vision of language education in secondary classrooms, we need to consider how our teacher preparation programs contribute to this goal. In reality, language issues and diversity are still disjointed topics covered only by a course or two in many teacher education programs. In a prestigious teacher preparation program near Thao's city, second language development and ELL students are not included in the general curricula. If teacher educators themselves do not recognize the significance of addressing language variation

and ELL students' learning of subject matter in school, how can we expect change in thousands of classrooms?

My very last visit to Mrs. My's office was in early May, 2006, when Thao was finishing her second high school year. Thao was upset that her new counselor had sent her to two ESL class sessions to start over from the very basics and that Mrs. My would retire by the end of the semester; however, she tried to ensure me that she would still be my best student even though I could not follow her to the classrooms any more. As we move on to our next phrase of life, I am considering my role as a researcher and a teacher educator and future research directions. Compared with studies that have longer time expanse, this study attempted to only capture Thao's learning on a given period time of one year. More longitudinal studies that accompany ELL students throughout longer periods of time may help us understand the challenges and resources students have over time. Moreover, the vast area of the Midwest is still an underrepresented region despite its growing diverse demographics and cultural integration. Thao's case may be more relevant when it is jointly examined across similar studies in the region. Finally, the goal of understanding the dynamics of learning in local schools is to inform teacher education and to help teacher educators, prospective teachers, and in-service teachers to serve our students. Therefore, studies on teachers' experiences, perspective, and practices of teaching the ELL students should be equally important. Above all, when we look at second language learning as a process of becoming an actual participant in the contextualized social practices, more work needs to be done to understand this *participation* metaphor (John, 2004) as enacted by students and teachers in varied and dynamic contexts.

# APPENDIX

## Conventions Used in the Presentation of Transcripts[1]

( )  Parentheses enclosing text contain notes, usually about contextual and nonverbal information, e.g., (laughs, points at her).

Empty parentheses, on the other hand, indicate unintelligible worlds or phrases.

[ ]  Brackets contain explanatory information inserted into quotations by me, rather than by the speaker.

NO  A capitalized word or phrase indicates increased volume.

N-O  Capitalized letters separated by hyphens indicate that letters were spoken or words were spelled aloud by the speaker.

/n:/  A colon inserted into word or sentence indicates that the sound of the previous letter was elongated.

. . .  Ellipsis points inserted in the middle of a blank line indicate omitted material

Conventional punctuation marks are used to indicate ends or utterances or sentences, usually indicated by slight pauses on the audiotape.

Commas refer to pauses within words or word phrases.

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[1] Conventions adopted from Dyson, 1989, p. 4.

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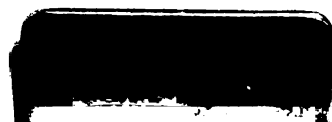
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