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A study of the reading and writing experiences of four Laotian refugee adolescents from one family in an American secondary school

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**A study of the reading and writing experiences of four Laotian
refugee adolescents from one family in an American secondary
school**

Fu, Danling, Ph.D.

University of New Hampshire, 1992

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Ann Arbor, MI 48106

**A STUDY OF THE READING AND WRITING EXPERIENCES
OF FOUR LAOTIAN REFUGEE ADOLESCENTS
FROM ONE FAMILY IN AN AMERICAN SECONDARY SCHOOL**

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

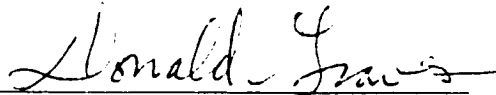
Doctor of Philosophy

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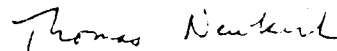
Reading and Writing Instruction

May 1992

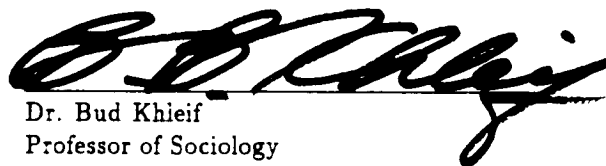
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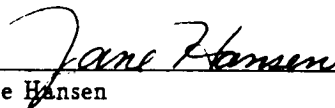
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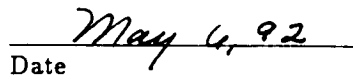
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Date

DEDICATION

To Maryellen Blount, my American mother
Without her, I wouldn't have become what I am today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I don't know how to begin this acknowledgment as what I have become today involves so many people and so many years. Actually I am surprised by my own accomplishment and sometimes still wonder whether this is reality or a dream. I always had a dream: to get on the top of the hill of "knowledge" and to see what is there and to feel what it is like. I never gave up this dream even when I was stripped of education in my early teens, sent to work on a farm, and then to work in an auto-repair factory during the Cultural Revolution in China.

About seven years ago, with the help of Mrs. Maryellen Blount, I came to this country to seek for my dream which I could not pursue in my own country. Four years ago after I completed my master's study in Rhode Island College, I came to join the New Hampshire Reading and Writing Community. As soon as I got here, I realized I made a mistake. In this community, everyone could write very well. They constantly wrote poems, stories, articles and books. Writing was their joy and part of their living. But as an ESL student and a newcomer to the culture, I struggled to understand others and express myself in English. Everyone in this community was an activist in the field of education. They all believed in the "process" approach of reading and writing,

and came for the brilliant ideas of Donald Graves, Thomas Newkirk, Jane Hansen and Donald Murray. But I knew nothing about American education. I never heard of Graves, Newkirk, Hansen and Murray or their "process" concept.

Overwhelmed, humiliated and confused, I sat silently through classes and research meetings for the first few weeks with the fear that soon my ignorance and incapability would be discovered and I would be "deported" from the program with a typical Western polite apology in a firm tone. Slowly my fear evaporated thanks to my warm colleagues and patient professors. In a whispering voice and timid tone, I started to ask questions in classes and at the research meetings. Those questions were: What is "recess"? What is "lunch duty"? What is the basal textbook? My questions moved from information-type to concept-type: Why do you have to be concerned about evaluation? Or to question something that we have little power with: What is the relationship between students' self-evaluation and teaching? ...

No matter what kind of questions I asked, I never sensed a slight hint that I was looked down upon or looked upon as an ignorant person by anyone. My peers and professors patiently answered my questions, enthusiastically discussed them with me and showed great interest in my questions and ideas and in the way I phrased

and expressed them. They were seldom bothered by my accent, nonstandard English expressions and different metaphors and images. Instead they were amused by them and interpreted them as unique, of Oriental beauty and a different perspective. I was surprised by their recognition and discovery of something in me that I never gave any value to and even sometimes felt ashamed of.

It is this recognition that invited me into the literate community which I felt no part of at the beginning, built my confidence as a learner and overcome my fear and feeling as an outsider. Through constant sharing and discussion with my peers and mentors, my timid, uncertain and soft voice has become loud, strong and passionate. In this community, I have grown as a writer with Oriental and Western integrated styles and a thinker with a view combining Marxism and pragmatism. Rather than hindering my research and study, my Chinese cultural and formal academic background became a strength and added a unique perspective to them.

Before I give my thanks to the people who have contributed to the accomplishment of this dissertation, I would like to thank all the people, professors and colleagues, in this community that have included me as one of the group by treating me the same as everyone else, appreciating my difference, and recognizing my intelligence.

They are my professors: Don Graves, Jane Hansen, Tom Newkirk, Pat Sullivan, Grant Cioffi, Bud Khleif, Tom Schram, and Don Murray; and my colleagues: Sue Ducharme, Nancy Herdecker, Kay Whitten, Bonnie Sunstein, Dan Seger, Peg Murray, Ann Vibert, Mary Comstock, Judy Fueyo, Andrea Luna, Cathy Simmons, Cindy Matthews, Peg Voss, Jay Simmons, Tom Romano, Elizabeth Chriseri-Strater, Donna Qualey, JoAnn Curtis, Carol Wilcox and Ralph Fletcher. Everyone of them has helped pave the way for my long and difficult journey. Without them, the journey for the dissertation would have been impossible.

New Hampshire Charitable Fund, Education Department and Graduate School of the University of New Hampshire provided financial support for the research and writing of this study. Thanks also go to Professors Jan Nisbet, Tom Schram and Don Graves for their help and contribution to the search for and procurement of the funds.

I give my deep appreciation to the faculty, students and administrators of "Riverside" Junior and Senior High School for opening their doors to me, sharing their thoughts and information with me and being tolerant of my presence in their rooms and my constant intrusive questions and interviews. Among the teachers, "Jane", "Susan" and "Andy" deserve special credits not only for their letting me use their rooms as a research base but also for their

contribution to data collection, for their establishing and maintaining links between me and their school and for their valuable insights. I consider them as my special partners in this project. Without their help and support, this research would have gone through great difficulty.

Among all the students and people who were involved in the study, I want particularly to thank "Tran", "Paw", "Cham" and "Sy" and their family for opening themselves and their home to me. I know with their cultural background, they had to have made double effort and have had great trust in me before they could open their hearts and home to a stranger. I deeply thank them for their trust in me and their tolerance of my constant intrusive presence and endless questions. I feel I owe them a great deal.

As I come to the point to thank my committee members, I become speechless. Words are not enough to express my gratitude. Everyone of them has contributed in unique ways to the construction of this study. Dr. Khleif's sharp criticism and strong discipline put me right on the track. Dr. Sullivan's theoretical perspective helped me see what I tried to say. Dr. Newkirk's direct and "come to the point" simple comments and suggestions always cleared my confusion and pushed me to another level of thinking. For two years, with her unique listening pedagogy, Dr. Hansen allowed me to search for words and ideas through babbling all the way

to Manchester or in her office. Dr. Schram has been my cane through out my whole journey. He was always available for whatever help I needed. He read drafts and drafts of my writing and gave his responses immediately and in detail. His most constructive input not only provided insight for my study, but reassured me for what I had done and helped me see what I had missed.

My chair, Dr. Graves, deserves a special paragraph. He was involved with every step of my study: finding funds, locating the research setting, contacting proper personnel, data collecting and categorizing, and the dissertation writing. Our long and constant conversations on the phone, over coffee at the Train Station and over lunch at the Bagelry during the past two years contributed to the construction of every piece of the study. He knew when to leave me alone to search for ideas and findings, and when to push, nudge and press me to do more thinking and analysis. He tried hard to help smooth the way for my writing. Not only did he generously offer his time, expertise on research, his intelligence and knowledge, but also his passion for my study and his computer and printer after mine broke down. His help, support and involvement with my study have been "wholistic."

My long journey would have been unendurably lonely and dull without the companionship of my friends. The regular

meetings and with Peg Murray, Bonnie Sunstein and Dan Seger not only stimulated my thinking, helped the organization of my thoughts and sharpened my sensitivity, but also provided "a home" for me to laugh, to whine and to let out my frustration and confusion. My friend Kay Whitten was my companion in this long journey. She supported and helped me not only financially, but intellectually and emotionally. Sue Ducharme was always there to listen, to advise and to guide me for good directions.

My family has sacrificed a lot for my career pursuit. Xiao-di lived a life without a mother for three and a half years, and Fan adopted bachelorhood a long time. Later they uprooted themselves to join me in this country, but still had to put up with a life having a mother and wife mentally absent. Credits should also be given to my father, for his leaving his comfortable home to come here to help me go through my most difficult time and stepping down from his authority position to help his daughter, who, according to our cultural tradition, was supposed to kneel down to serve him instead.

My deep appreciation goes to the Jarvis family: Ed, Yolanda and Tim. During the past three years, they provided and sometimes overprovided anything my family and I needed. They took care of our car, fixed my computer, constantly supplied us with food, clothes, ... anything they

thought we should have, sent Xiao-di to Soccor Camp, invited us for any holidays and vacations... the list is endless. Yolanda spent hours and days editing my three-hundred-page effort. During the last week, she left Ed and Tim at home and simply moved to my apartment to help me full time to get the dissertation out. They are my friends and extended family.

My last thanks go to my American mother, Maryellen Blount. She has made what I have become today possible. She provided me with the opportunity I couldn't have in my own country and gave me a home which I never felt I had. With her constant love, care and support, she has healed my wounds caused by being emotionally rejected at birth, living as an abused daughter at home and being suppressed as a human being in my own country. In short, she has helped me to live a more human life, happier, and freer than the one I was born to. For making all this possible for me today, this dissertation is dedicated to her. She symbolizes America to me.

In summary, I thank America and its people for accepting me as one of them and providing me with a home where I felt comfortable. With their passionate love, warm support, and open mind and intelligence, they have liberated me as a person and educated me as a democratic educator.

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ABSTRACT

A Study of The Reading and Writing Experiences of Four
Laotian Refugee Adolescents From One Family in An American
Secondary School

by

Denling Fu
Unviversity of New Hampshire, May, 1992

This study describes and interprets the reading and writing experiences of four recently arrived Laotian refugee adolescents from one family in an American secondary school. Through four extensive case studies, the study compares and contrasts how these individuals read and write on their own initiative and are taught to read and write at school, and what happens when the school agenda matches and mismatches their learning patterns. This study reveals how school structure re-enforces the marginalization of the ethnic minority students in their school life by ignoring what they know and who they are. With a focus on four minority students, the study calls for rethinking the teaching of literacy for marginalized students.

The data were collected from September, 1990 to June, 1991, using a number of field methods such as participant observation and intensive and extensive interviews as well as non-interactive methods such as textual and transcript

analysis. The research settings were mainly in classrooms at school, in the Laotian community and at the home of my informants. The descriptive narrative of the study presents the learning experiences of four individuals in an American school through their voices and from their perspectives.

The results from this study suggest that school literacy connect with learners' life experiences and their home literacy, and teacher be sensitive to students' needs, their interests and their ways of knowing. In a multicultural society, school should be a place to integrate diverse cultural values of students and prepare the youngsters to work with each other by cultivating in them an appreciation of and a respect for each other's differences. For minority students, especially the newcomers, school should be a place for them to experience the democratic values and learn to join the nation of a pluralistic world.

Chapter One

Introduction

The Purpose of the Study

In this study, I describe and interpret the reading and writing experiences of four Laotian refugee children from one family in an American secondary school. The following questions serve as guidelines for my study:

1. To what extent do English classrooms incorporate the lived experiences of minority students into their literacy activities?
2. What are the learning experiences of limited English-speaking students when they are placed in mainstream classrooms?

My study attempts to show how newly arrived refugee students learn to become part of the American culture through their reading and writing experiences at American schools. Thirty years ago, J. F. Kennedy stated: "We are a nation of immigrants, a nation of nations" (quoted by Graham, 1991). Today, such multicultural features of the American nation is highlighted by the heavy influx of immigrants and refugees. In the past decades, American schools have faced rapid growth and marked changes in the student population. As Virginia Allen states in "Teaching Bilingual and ESL Children":

Recent statistics present a rather startling portrait of the American school population. According to the 1980 United States census, there were at least 2.7 million children aged 5 to 15 years who were living in homes in which languages other than English were usually spoken (Waggoner, 1984). This is a rapidly growing group. The United States is now undergoing a wave of immigrants comparable in numbers to the great flood of immigrants who arrived in this country from 1900 to 1920. The new immigrants are a young group (p. 356).

American schools today, especially in big cities like Los Angeles and New York, are pressed to face not only the rapidly growing number of immigrant children but a population of students whose backgrounds are far removed from the dominant American culture. Demographers estimate that "Four out of five immigrants in the 1980s came from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Counting approximately 500,000 undocumented immigrants, there will be more newcomers in the United States in the 1990s than in any previous decade" (Loth, 1991). Among the recent newcomers are refugees from Southeast Asia and Central America. Over a half million Southeast Asian refugees have emigrated to the United States since 1975. This heavy influx of refugees from Southeast Asia partly accounts for the over six-fold increase of the Asian population from 1970-90 in America.

The Southeast Asian refugee children not only come from cultures which are different from the dominant white-Caucasian European culture of the United States, but often with the traumas caused by war and political turmoil in their home

countries, loss of family and home, separation from all that is familiar, and lack of identity. Most schools are not prepared to deal with this population. "That schools have problems in dealing with these ethnic and linguistic minority students is documented by the high dropout rates" (Allen, 1991). In the following sections, I discuss the studies concerning the issues of immigrant students at American schools.

Studies on Refugee Children in American Schools

The changing face of the population in most schools has drawn great attention not only from researchers of language teaching, but also educational anthropologists. Since 1975, when Southeast Asian refugees first started to immigrate into this country, studies have dealt with issues of resettlement and adjustment of immigrant children in mainstream schools. In the past fifteen years, studies have focused on the bilingual programs and ESL teaching (Gibson, 1987, Smith-Hefner, 1990, Matute-Bianchi, 1986, Walker, 1985, Murphy et als., 1976, Hoffman, 1989), social and psychological adjustment (Harmon, 1979, Caplan et als., 1985, Asher, 1985, Hutnik, 1986, and Williams and Wetermeyer, 1983), home-school discontinuity (Blakely, 1983, Hunter and Nguyen, 1977, Ogbu, 1987 and Trueba et als., 1990), parental influence upon the students' school achievement (Blakely, 1983, Caplan et als.,

1985, Gibson, 1987, Rupp, 1980, and Smith-Hefner, 1990), the effect of cultural discontinuity upon human development (Burford, 1981, Chan, 1981, and Harmon, 1979), and the reshaping of self-concept (Asher, 1985, Matute-Bianchi, 1986, Ogbu, 1987, Skinner and Hendrick, 1979, and Suarez-Orozco, 1987).

Such studies have shown that home cultural values have both facilitated and hindered the adjustment of the refugees to the new cultural environment and their children's adaptation to American schools. The "mythical success" of the Southeast Asian students in schools is attributed to the influence of the Asian dominant culture represented by Confucianism and the motivation of refugees to seize economic and educational opportunities of the new land (Caplan et als., 1989). The explanation of, conversely, the lower achievement among refugee children in schools is attributed to linguistic barriers and illiterate backgrounds (Garcia and Ortiz, 1989, Blakely, 1989, and Wattenmaker and Wilson, 1980).

Rather than looking at the cultural and linguistic differences of minority students that hinder or contribute to their school achievement, this study deals with the issue: To what extent does a school function to incorporate minority students into the mainstream culture? Trueba, Jacobs and Kirton's (1990) case-study of Hmong children in American schools examined the alienation and cultural conflicts faced

at school by the children of a small group of Hmong who settled in La Playa, California. The authors proposed respect and appreciation of minority students' culture and creation of a culturally congruent environment which not only bridges minority students with the mainstream culture, but provides opportunities for those students to achieve school success without losing their personal identities. Based on the same concern Trueba et al. raised, my study attempts to show whether classrooms are social and cultural settings which provide minority students a place to learn and experience the new values and concepts of the mainstream culture while maintaining respect and appreciation for their own values. Their attempts to read and write at school not only reflect academic purposes, but also incorporate them culturally and socially into the American society.

Many studies (Ogbu, 1987, Gibson, 1987, Finnian, 1987) on ethnic issues tend to stereotype minority students. Students' behaviors and personalities are attributed to ethnic characteristics, so that minority students are looked at more as an ethnic species rather than as individual beings. Studies of Southeast Asian refugees (Asher, 1989, Caplan et als., 1985, Chan, 1981, Raizerman and Hendricks, 1988), researched whether surveys or case studies, tend to describe the general patterns of behaviors of the ethnic group. As a result, ethnic students are treated as subjects with one common feature: they are Southeast Asian refugees. No

attention is given to their individual personalities and experiences. Neglect of the complexity and subtlety of human qualities leads to the consequence that many minority students are forced to live up to a certain stereotype.

Many scholars of human development (Vygotsky, 1981, Bruner, 1986, and Gardner, 1983) have pointed out that human beings are culturally and historically constructed. We are not only the products of our genetic inheritance but also are constructed and transformed by our "externalized inheritance" (David Attenborough, 1990), the culture we receive. The personal experience of individuals within the larger culture also serves to shape his or her way of doing and seeing things. Bruner (1986) quotes Amelie Rorty in his Actual Minds Possible Worlds:

We are different entities as we conceive ourselves enlightened by these various views. Our powers of action are different, our relations to one another, our properties and proprieties, our characteristic successes or defeats, our conception of society's proper strictures and freedoms will vary with our conceptions of ourselves as characters, persons, selves, individuals. (p. 40)

Many studies, whether they are on language learning or on cultural adjustment of ethnic minority students, categorize those students as the same subjects and suggest the same kind of treatment in teaching strategies to them. As Virginia Allen states in her recent study (1991):

Children whose home language is not English are often lumped together as LEPs, that is, children of Limited

English Proficiency. Such a label, although it may seem convenient, tends to support the mistaken belief that these children are a group with similar needs and they can be treated in similar ways. However, the single dimension of likeness, the need to acquire the English language as a second language, is a slim one. On the other hand, the differences among these children are many and have great educational significance.

Awareness of individual differences among students will not only help teachers work out appropriate instructional strategies for students, but also help them understand why a certain approach works for some students but not for others, even though they share the same cultural and language backgrounds. My study, which focuses on four Laotian teenagers from one family, looks at the differences as well as the similarities in their individual learning processes. While the similarities reflect their shared cultural and historical background, the differences point to the diversity and complexity of individuals from the same family and culture.

Research on Learning English as a Second Language

With a focus on the learning experiences of four limited English-speaking students, my study draws attention to the teaching and to the learning of English as a second language.

Most research on language learning of students with limited English proficiency has examined the teaching and learning of

those students in settings and programs separate from those of mainstream students in regular classrooms. My study focuses on the learning experience of limited English-speaking students in a mainstream setting. In public schools, whether primary or secondary, programs of teaching English as a second language and bilingual programs serve mainly as transitional programs for limited-English speaking students to be mainstreamed in regular classrooms. According to Allen (1991), in most districts, "[in] English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, [children are] in the regular classroom setting for most of the day, but [are] pulled out of the classroom to receive special instruction in English as a second language" (p.361). Every day at school, ESL students spend most of their time in regular classrooms where they study mainstream curricula and are surrounded by native English-speaking peers. In short, the regular classroom represents the mainstream culture to which they have to adjust in their school life.

During the past two decades, researchers in the field of language arts have attended primarily to second language acquisition and the teaching of English as a Second Language. Few studies have been concerned with the teaching of limited English-speaking students in regular classrooms. Penfield (1987) surveyed regular classroom teachers and found that while many of them thought ESL students should be integrated into regular classrooms, such placements created problems,

because they did not consider themselves competent to integrate the acquisition of English with the learning of curricular content. My study is intended to complement Penfield's in that I describe and interpret reading and writing experiences of ESL students in regular classrooms from their point of view instead of their teachers'. I compare and contrast what they do on their own initiative as readers and writers with what they are required to read and write at school.

To accomplish the aim of this study, I spent one school year observing four refugee students in their ESL rooms, their regular classrooms, the school cafeteria, in various recreational and social settings outside the school, and at their home. In addition to frequent interviews with the students, I had formal and informal conversations with their teachers, their American and Laotian peers and friends, the school administrators, the Laotian community coordinator, their parents and siblings. I collected their writing, worksheets, and drawings throughout the year I conducted my research (1990-91). As a participant-observer-researcher in the school setting, I was, in the eyes of those four students, a tutor at school and a friend outside the school. Chapter Two deals with details of how the research was conducted.

Theoretical Perspectives

My research is an interpretive study. The way I organize, report and interpret my data reveals the perspectives from which I look at the world, though I try to present my data as objectively as possible. There is no neutral way or purely objective approach in any research, as the researcher interprets the world and specific situations through biased eyes and conceptually-bound language. The following sections present the theoretical perspectives that guided my research and directed my interpretation of the data.

1. Formal learning is a process of cultural integration.

Cultural theorists (Trueba, 1990, and Spindler and Spindler, 1987) believe that school should provide students with opportunities to experience cultural diversity. Through learning to read and write, students learn to integrate various cultural values and become members of a multicultural society. Learning how to use language involves both learning the culture and learning how to express intentions in congruence with the culture. Writing and reading are not only practically desirable; they are meant to "modernize" the mind (Bruner, 1986). Freire and Macedo (1987) note that "Literacy and education in general are cultural expressions. You cannot conduct literacy work

outside the world of culture because education in itself is a dimension of culture" (quoted by Trueba, 1990).

Studies done by educational anthropologists (Heath, 1983, Trueba et al., 1990, Macias, 1987, Bidwell and Friedkin, 1988) revealed that the dominant instructional model in American schools tends to neglect students' home linguistic and cultural experience and alienate minority students whose home culture is different from that of the American mainstream. The alienation and conflict minority students face in their school learning can result in their academic failure. Studies have shown (Oakes, 1985, and Macias, 1987) that the majority of students in the low-track level were either from minority or low-income working class families. In his study of Hmong children at school, Trueba (1990) describes those students' general academic progress:

Their knowledge of the English language and/or the subject remained unclear, at the surface of the issues, and clearly inadequate to handle concepts and relationships associated with academic subjects. Their ability to communicate for academic purposes was much lower in comparison with that of their peers (p.102).

Rather than examining their own teaching approach, Trueba stated, many teachers related low achievement of minority students to their being "incompetent, and of limited academic potential, and ... even disabled." Some teachers look at the different linguistic and cultural backgrounds of minority students as the interference or major barriers in their school achievement.

From a sociolinguistic viewpoint, Mehan and Meihls (1986) argue,

[S]chool failure cannot be blamed on the child's linguistic code or cultural background. The source of students' problems in school is not to be found in their language; it is to be found in the organization of the school. The problems that lower class and ethnic children face in school must be viewed as a consequence of institutional arrangements which ensnare children, by not being sensitive to the fact that children display skills differently in different situation (p.123).

Bidwell and Friedkin (1988) criticize the practice of a culturally insensitive and ethnocentric instructional model in American schools, asserting that the neglect of students' home linguistic and cultural experience by teachers reveals "ascriptive biases in educational opportunities and achievement" in American education: "American common schools seemingly transmit these biases, strengthening them in the process" (p.467).

Trueba et al. (1990) stress the creation of a culturally-congruent pedagogical environment and the role of culture in literacy acquisition. They claim that in cultural-congruent settings, children's culture and language are "capitalized," and they are encouraged to "generate text materials based on their own experiences" (p.115). Schools, or classrooms provide opportunities for minority students to learn, understand and experience the mainstream culture without denying their own home cultural values, verbal skills and personal identities. Language teaching, instead of stressing basic skills and the surface structures of

language, becomes an invitation for minority students to join the mainstream culture. Language learning, instead of passing meaningless tests, becomes a process of cultural integration. Schooling means empowerment instead of alienating and humiliating experiences for minority students.

Based on Vygotsky's socially and culturally constructivist viewpoint, Bruner (1986) states:

[M]ost learning in most settings is a communal activity, a sharing of the culture. It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture. It is this that leads me to emphasize not only discovery and invention but the importance of negotiating and sharing--in a word, of joining culture creating as an object of schooling and as an appropriate step en route to becoming a member of the adult society in which one lives out one's life (p. 127).

The central technical concern, Bruner thinks, is how to create in the young an appreciation of the fact that many worlds are possible, "that meaning and reality are created and not discovered, that negotiation is the art of constructing new meaning by which individuals can regulate their relations with each other" (p.149).

2. Knowledge is socially constructed.

Learning happens in the process of interaction and collaboration. This interaction and collaboration involves partnership: students and teachers, the more capable and the less capable (Vygotsky and Bruner), readers and writers

(Rosenblatt and Fish), an individual and his environment (Dewey and Freire). In other words, learning engages more than two parties to act, react and interact. Teaching is not simply to fill students' heads with information or dump them with endless work and tests. Nor is learning passively receiving external information or finishing assignments. Teachers teach and students learn by interacting with one another.

Vygotsky (1978) states that "learning awakens a variety of internal development processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (p.86) By constantly talking or interacting with others around them, children learn to speak, learn to master the rules of language and learn to use the language in an appropriate way at a proper time. Vygotsky defines this developmental process as "first, on the social level and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (p.57) Social interaction is not only the means for a child to receive external information, but a process of internalization, or individualization of external information, and of growing into "the adult society in which he lives out his life" (Bruner, 1986).

In Language and Learning, Britton (1972) holds that language learning began with listening (p.37), while talk is

the means by which "we habitually bring our representations of experience up to date, not necessarily as we encounter actualities, but through recollecting them and interpreting them" (p.19). He stresses that "talk is the most likely means by which students first investigate, explore and organize new fields of interest" (p.166).

Goodlad (1984) found in a survey of 1106 classrooms of thirty-eight schools that in the first to third grade, teaching involves a lot of interaction between teachers and children and among children, while interaction and collaboration grow less and less frequent in the higher grades. In high schools, teaching tends to take the form of lecturing or seat work. Goodlad observed that "on the average, about 75 percent of class time was spent on instruction and that nearly 70 percent of this was "talk" --usually teacher to students" (1984, p.229). Farrell (1991) defines the teacher-talk model as a static instructional model in which "teachers see their central role as that of purveying knowledge to an ostensibly passive audience" (p.64). Freire (1983) terms this model "the banking concept of education":

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communication, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat (p.58).

He claims that "authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication."

3. Knowledge is constructed from experience.

Real communication or interaction happens as one connects with life experience. When a teacher asks a question and students answer it, whether in oral or in written form, it cannot be a real interaction or communication unless it relates to students' life experience. Dewey (1938) has asserted that the basic principle of teaching is to use learners' existing experience as the means to carry them on to "a wider, more refined and better organized environing world" (p.82).

Vygotsky(1978) suggests that learning be "relevant to life" and be meaningful for learners:

...the teaching should be organized in such a way that reading and writing are necessary for something. If they are used only to write official greetings to the staff or whatever the teacher thinks up (and clearly suggests to them), then the exercise will be purely mechanical and may soon bore the child; his activity will not be manifest in his writing and his budding personality will not grow (p.117).

Many studies (Oakes, 1985, Powell, et als., 1985, Shannon, 1988, Goodman and Goodman, 1987, Goodlad, 1984, and Rose, 1989) have shown that at schools, language is taught not for real communication but with focus on fragmented parts;

reading is taught for comprehension of the text itself; and writing is done for mastering certain forms. This kind of learning and teaching not only takes away the communicative function of language, but it contains little value for the present life, doesn't prepare learners to function as literate persons in their future life, and isolates them from knowing each other. It doesn't serve as a means for growth, but as an end in itself. In Dewey's words, any experience that makes no sense of the present life will prevent learners from growth; it is mis- or non-educative; "we always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future" (1938, p.49).

Vygotsky strongly objects to language that is taught in fragmented forms or out of meaningful context. He claims that a word without meaning is an empty symbol. A word is born at the same time with meaning, form, sound and context. It cannot exist without one of them. A word doesn't just present a concept, or a thought, but "lives through it" (Vygotsky, 1978). Bruner (1986) affirms that the language of education is the language of culture acquisition and creating, not of knowledge consumption or knowledge acquisition alone.

Freire (1985) advises us to "read words and read the world." He (1970) denounces the teaching of any topic alien to the existential experience of the students, arguing that

kind of teaching would only produce silence and indifference and "fill" the students with the contents of his [teacher's] narration---contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance" (p.57) Britton (1972) contends that "anyone who succeeded in outlawing talk in the classroom would have outlawed life in the adolescent: the web of human relations must be spun in school as well as out of school" (p.223). He wants teachers to engage students in a full spectrum of language activities--reading, writing, listening and speaking. Moreover, he wants language in the classroom to be used for real purposes, not for "dummy runs": "...[children] must practice language in the sense in which a doctor 'practices' medicine..., and not in the sense in which a juggler 'practices' a new trick before he performs it" (p.172).

My perspective as a researcher

Guided by the theoretical perspectives discussed above, I entered the world of a secondary school by the seacoast in a New England town. I observed not only how students answered the questions to teachers in oral or written form, but what they asked teachers, said to each other, and reflected on in their reading and writing. I didn't just see how they finished their work, or what grades they received, but much their learning helped them understand their past

experience, connect with the present world, and prepare them for the future. Reading their work, I was not just interested in how well they could remember the facts, or write in a standard form, but in the expression of their own voice, ideas and feelings. These questions were constantly on my mind: What did school mean to them? Was it merely a place where they had to be, or a place where they learned to join the mainstream culture and to become masters of themselves and creators of their world?

This dissertation contains nine chapters. In chapter two I detail how I chose the setting and informants, conducted the research and handled the data. Chapter Three provides the background context of my informants: their family and life back in their home country, in their refugee camp and in this country. Chapter Four introduces the four informants and portrays their general situation at school. Chapters Five to Eight are devoted to a case study of each informant--Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy--with a focus on the reading and writing experience of each of these individuals at school. The case-studies are organized thematically rather than chronologically (according to their ages). The case studies of Tran and Paw are to show what kind of readers and writers they actually are and what kind of readers and writers they are taught to be at school. The case studies of Cham and Sy are to demonstrate what kind of readers and writers they are when teaching matches and mismatches their learning

patterns. In Chapter Nine, I present conclusions and implications for the teaching of marginalized students.

Chapter Two

The Research Method

My research seeks to understand how four recently-arrived refugee adolescents learn to read and write in an American secondary school. It describes and interprets the behavior and experiences of four individuals in a particular cultural setting. My study attempts to examine a "piece of culture" in depth (Zaharlick and Green, 1991, p.214), to study individuals in natural settings, and to portray complexities and subtleties of four siblings.

The content of the study determines the method of the research and the form of the presentation of the findings. I realized that I needed an approach that enabled me to observe my informants from different angles, see their world through their eyes, to understand their concepts, practices and beliefs from their perspectives and to share their experience and their world as an insider and outsider. In order not to reduce the people I studied to subjects, I needed a method that respected their feelings, included their voices, and presented their complexity and integrity. The

particular concerns of this study influenced and determined my methodological choice. I chose to do case studies and adopt a descriptive-research method informed by ethnographic techniques. I saw it as the method that would enable me to discover and disclose both basic humanity and the complexity of individuals through participant observation and subsequent "thick description" (Geertz 1973, p.14).

In their discussion of ethnographic research, Zaharlick and Green (1991) present that:

...the ethnographer initially gains access to the setting, but must negotiate and renegotiate access to particular sub-groups (e.g., students, high group readers, teachers in the school, parents, and administrators, among others). Each time the researcher adds a component or elects a new focus within the study, the researcher will need to gain access anew (p.214)

In the next sections, I will describe how I negotiated and renegotiated access to the setting, the informants and the particular "sub-groups" that related to the study, how I played the role as a participant-observant researcher, and how I collected and handled the data.

I learned that in recent years, a good number of Southeast Asian refugee immigrants moved into the southern part of New Hampshire, one of the states known for having the fewest non-Caucasian residents in the country. Being a newcomer to the country myself and a former teacher of English as a second language, I was interested in finding out how the children of those refugee immigrants learned to

read and write in a school with few students and teachers who were not Caucasians. My interest brought me to a small seacoast town (Newshore used as the pseudonym) in southern New Hampshire. I visited the teachers of English as a second language (ESL) in both elementary and high schools of the town and from them learned about the Laotian community and the Laotian students they had. There were over seventy Laotian families in the town, with about seventy Laotian students in both elementary and high schools.

Community context:

Most of the Laotian families lived on Woodland Drive (pseudonym). It was an apartment complex with no lawns and few trees around. The one-floor apartments were exactly the same in terms of the size and color, each set with two small bedrooms, and a tiny living room, a bathroom and a kitchen.

It was originally built for the students of the nearby university. All the apartments were connected into a long, flat building. All the doors and windows faced the parking lot. Each family parked their car right in front of their apartment door. The community set up a basketball backboard and a volleyball net at the side of the parking lot. It was also the playground for the children. During some special occasions, the parking lot would become the place for the community gatherings.

The people knew each other in the community. They were either relatives or fellow workers. Most of the women worked the second shift in a seafood factory and the men in a medical technology company in a nearby town. After work, men often got together drinking and gambling, and women stayed home taking care of children and house work, or sometimes went to a neighbor's home to gossip.

There were some Laotian families in the town that didn't live on Woodland Drive. Some families rented big apartments in town as the two-bedroom apartments there were too small for their big families. A few owned their own houses. Though geographically they were apart from the community, they had very close connections with it. During the weekends or holidays, the adults came to visit and the children came to play in the parking lot. The family of my informants was one of the families who lived outside of Woodland Drive.

The people in the community told me that they had few contacts with the outside world. They knew little about how Americans lived, their town affairs, or their children's education. The town people rarely consulted them anything when they planned the town affairs, or even something related to the community or their children. Physically the Laotian community existed in the town, but politically they didn't belong. Fewer town people knew anything about them. A teacher in town once visited a student there, she was shocked and told her colleagues that "It was a totally

different world. You didn't feel you were in America when you were there. They had nothing, but they would share anything they had with visitors."

The Laotian people started to move into the town during the early 80's. They moved to Riverside because there were job opportunities in the area. One family came, then many more. The community people basically were pleased with the situation that they were left alone as they were seldom harrassed by the residents of the town: " They don't give us the middle finger, they are cold but they leave us alone, we don't have to lock our car and it is still there when we came back." Though their existence had little to do with the town people, the school had to face the immediate reality of their children. The administrators and teachers at the schools were not prepared for the sudden influx of a large population of Laotian students. They quickly hired two part-time tutors without any ESL training background for the students who needed the ESL service, and the special education program director was assigned to also serve as the director for the ESL program. When the ESL teachers heard that I was interested in conducting research with Laotian students in their school, they were delighted as they said, "We really need some help, as we have no experience in dealing with these students."

Gaining Entry and Selecting informants:

After my talk with the ESL teachers both in the elementary and high schools, I decided to focus my study on the older students in junior or senior high school as my study would require the informants to recall their memories of their past experience and express their feelings of their present situation. I thought the older students could do a better job in telling me their past and present experience than the younger students.

I talked with the principal and the director of the ESL program at Riverside Junior & Senior High School about my study in their school, and offered my help as an ESL tutor if they would let me do my study there. Both of them were interested in my study and were especially happy to learn that I could tutor the ESL students while I conducted my research as they were always -short of hands- with the ESL tutors.

There were two ESL part-time tutors, Jane and Andy, and ten students who needed the ESL service in the school. Jane worked until 12:30 pm and Andy left for another job around 11:30 am every day. They had separate rooms and different responsibilities. Jane dealt mainly with reading and writing and Andy took care of science most of the time. They both welcomed me to their rooms and let me work, observe and talk with their students there. Through them, I came to know some English teachers in the school. Among

them, the junior-high English teacher, Susan, expressed the most interest in my research in her room.

After six weeks of observing fourteen Laotian students in ESL rooms and in Susan's English class, I narrowed my focus down on five of them. My major focus was on four students who were all children from one family and came to the United States three years ago: three boys at the ages of 19, 17, and 14, and a girl of 15. Two older boys, Tran and Cham, and the girl, Paw were all in the eleventh grade, and the youngest one, Sy, was in the seventh grade. They attracted my attention because not only were they from one family, which would make the study a lot easier, but also they fit the variations I wanted to cover: male and female, senior and junior high, and learning to read and write in different types of English classes.

Another Laotian student I focused on was a girl, a fourteen-year-old eighth-grader, who had been in this country for eight years. She spoke good English and could read and write well. There were two reasons I chose her as one of my informants. One reason was that I wanted to have a backup in case, for some reason, I lost those four students because of their moving away from the area or the parents' refusal to give me permission to study their children. The other reason was that she represented the type of ESL students who had lived in this country most of their life. By looking at two types of ESL students (ones who have been in this country for

a long time and the ones who recently arrived), I could some compare and contrast the different ESL learning experiences and situations at school.

Regularly I observed these five students in their English classes and spent time working, talking and asking them questions in the ESL rooms. I took field trips and had lunches with them in the cafeteria. I collected every piece of work they did at school. Frequently I conversed with Jane, Andy, Susan and some other teachers my informants had. I attended both faculty or students' meetings that concerned with my informants and other ESL students. Soon in the building I was accepted by the teachers and administrators as a frequent visitor, and looked at as a teacher or tutor by the students. After five months of observing the five students, I concentrated my attention only on four siblings.

Building relationship with my informants:

At school, my informants considered me as another ESL tutor as I helped them with their reading and writing and sometimes I substituted for their ESL teachers when they were absent. The relationship between me and my informants was very business-like at first. They came to me for help with their school work. That was it. I wanted to know them better and let them trust me more, so they would tell me their stories, express their feelings and share their thoughts,

which they seldom did with their teachers. I wanted my relationship with them was more equal than it appeared. I decided to spend some time with them outside the school. I invited them to my home and also expressed my interest in visiting their home.

I found that they seldom couldn't get their work done at school and they had hard time to do it on their own at home. I offered to help them after the school at their home. They were nervous about my visiting, especially the boys. They were not used to having a teacher visit their home, as usually it indicated in their culture that they had some problems at school. But it was hard for them to refuse me directly. The boys gave all kinds of excuses to get me to give up the idea of visiting them at home such as "Our house is too small," "It smells when we cook," "It is too crowded, too noisy, we have too many people in the house." When I asked them to take a message about my visit home to their parents, they told me "My father said no, we are not at home a lot of time." Finally I had a talk with Paw, the girl and asked her what her parents thought of my visit. She told me that her father didn't say no, "it was the boys who didn't want you to come. Once I had so much trouble with my homework, I wanted to call you to help me, but the boys stopped me. I don't know why." I shared my thoughts and concerns with Jane. She encouraged me: "If the parents don't refuse your visit, you should make an appointment to see them

despite the boys' resistance." Through Paw, I made an appointment to meet the mother at a weekend (The father worked on weekends).

They rented an apartment in a duplex house at the end of the street. They were the only Laotian family in the neighborhood. Inside the house it was very clean and quiet. I had a talk with the mother and Paw at their kitchen table. The mother was a very gentle lady, who was very polite, not too shy, and spoke very quietly. She couldn't speak much English but could understand some. She greeted me with a "Hi" in English. I told her that I was a researcher from the university and doing research on how students learned to read and write at their children's school. Their children were my focus in my study. I wanted to come to their home to get to know their children better and help them with their work, too. Paw translated what I said to the mother, she nodded her head with a polite smile and told me "my daughter told me about you. I knew that." She thanked me for my offer to help her children with their school work, didn't ask any questions about my study and showed much interest in my background: a Chinese woman in America. She asked me about my family, my son, my life in this country and my family back in China. She told me that she saw the Tienanmen Massacre on TV last year. "That was terrible," she said that in English. Before I left their home, the mother told me "Come any time at your convenience and bring your son too."

That visit was an ice-breaker. Since then my informants approached me not only as a teacher, but also as a friend. We called and visited each other frequently. When they needed my help, they would come to my home as often as I went to theirs. They invited me to have dinners in their home, and had dinner with me and my son in my place. I took them swimming, to meet my friends and to our Chinese New Year Party. Sometimes we played tennis together. I also joined their Laotian New Year celebration. When they didn't see me for a few days, they would ask about me or call me on the phone. My relationship with them began more as friends than as playing the roles of teacher-student or researcher-informant; this helped me obtain more information than I would have otherwise, and helped me feel I could give back something they needed in exchange for what I gained from them.

Because of our frequent contacts outside of the school, I got to know them better and better. Bit by bit I learned their stories about their past, life in Laos, the refugee camps, their feelings and concerns for their new life in America, and their dreams for the future. They told me about their worries, their frustrations and the joys of their life. I shared mine with them, too. They didn't just see me as a teacher, or a researcher from the university, or an adult, but a friend or a person like them, newly arrived in this country and trying hard to survive in the new land.

Collecting the data:

Following them around:

I spent two or three days a week either in the ESL rooms or in their English classes. I worked with them in the ESL rooms, observed them in the English classes, and interviewed them formally and informally whenever I had a chance. I collected everything they did for their reading and writing. By the middle of the year, I knew pretty well their behavior and experience in the ESL rooms and their English classes. But that was only two or three hours of their daily school life. I wondered how they behaved in other classes or how they interacted with the others outside classrooms. I wanted to have a full picture of their school life. So I decided to follow each of them a week, from the very first thing they attended to the time they left the school.

First I contacted all their classroom teachers with the help of Jane. Except Paw's history teacher who refused anybody's visit to his room, they were all very cooperative. They showed much interest in my study and many immediately shared with me what they thought of their Laotian students.

Then I had to tell my four informants about my plan of following them around. Jane and I both realized that would be hard for them. As teenagers, they were very self-conscious. Being followed by somebody would be a nuisance, as they were already singled out by their difference from others at school.

One day after school, I went to their home and told them about my plan of following them. For a few seconds, they were silent until Paw asked me in a soft voice "Why?" I explained my study to them again and told them that I would observe not only how they studied and behaved in the classrooms, but also how their teachers taught and other students learned. None of them said anything. From their silence I could tell they didn't like the idea but were too polite to refuse me. I turned to Sy, the youngest boy, sitting at the end of the couch across me and said to him that I would start to follow him first. He lowered his head down without giving me any response. I sensed his silent resistance and felt bad that I had to do something against his will. I wished he could have just openly argued with me, then at least I would have had a chance to explain or rationalize my action to him. The fact he obediently let me do things against his will made me feel guilty about my action.

I followed each of them one week. I sat in every class (except Paw's history class) including their study hall, the cafeteria and the meetings they had with their teachers. I could feel that my presence bothered the boys most. They ignored me in the classrooms and escaped very fast after the class. I had a hard time to keep trace of them in the hallways and at lunch time. I sensed their resistance and understood their discomfort with a person following around.

By the week I was to follow Tran, he said to me: "No, no, I don't have any problems, please follow them (his brothers and sister)." I had to reassure him that it was not because they had any problems that I was following them. When I appeared in his class the second day again, He questioned me in an annoying tone: "Why do you still follow me? Why do you just choose my family to study, not others?" I had a long talk with him. I told him that the time and money limited my study to a few students and he happened to be one of them. Before we ended our conversation, he asked me to let him read what I wrote about them. The next day I found out from Jane that Tran told her that some of his classmates teased him saying that I was his girl friend.

While in their classrooms, I tried not to sit next to them, not to look at them constantly, and tried to interact more with the other students in the class than with them. But still it was very noticeable that my informants were my major attention. One talkative junior high student asked me: "You watch Sy?" I responded to him: "Not only him, but everybody." He seemed not hearing what I said and went on: "He is good. I wish I could be like him." I seized the chance and interviewed him.

Unlike the boys, Paw didn't seem mind having me with her in any of her classes. Mostly she was all by herself in the classrooms. When I was in her room, I sat by her, joined her group discussion, walked together to the next class and

had lunch with her in the cafe. She talked with me all the time and was happy to have somebody to chat with. When we had lunch together, somebody asked me whether I was her mother.

Interviews:

I constantly interviewed my four informants. Most were done casually. I asked them questions in the situation. The best time to get my informants to talk about themselves was when I to share my background first. They were very interested in what I said about myself and would tell me their stories. Tran and Paw liked to have private conversations. They could talk deep about themselves. Cham and Sy liked to tell stories, event-kind of stuff. They were quite talkative when a group of people were together, but were nervous when I talked to them on a one-to-one basis. Knowing their personalities, I talked to them at a different time and asked them different questions.

I had one formal interview with each of them near the end of the year. I prepared a long list of questions concerning what they thought of schools in Laos and America, their reading and writing habits, their religion and family activities. The question list was a guideline for the interviews. Usually I would follow-up their talk with more questions based on what they said. The formal talk lasted for about two hours. It was not easy to find such big a chunk of time.

Sy and Cham didn't like to have a one to one formal talk. They tried hard to postpone it and only wanted to do it at the school. But their school time was so fragmented. It took me four days at different time to finish the interview with Cham. But I had no success with Sy at school. Finally I got him at home. Before I started my interview with him, Sy asked me: "What is this for? Is that because I have some problems at school?" I replied: "No, no, I asked everyone of you the same questions. I gather data for my research, but do not do it for the school." After I interviewed Sy, his father asked: "Is Sy in trouble at school?" I tried hard to let him know Sy was okay at school and my interview was only for my research which had little to do with the school. From the worries expressed by Sy and the father, I realized that they were not used to having a teacher-type person come to the house to carry on a serious conversation with them.

I interviewed Paw at her house while she was cooking for the family. At the kitchen, she was cutting meat and chopping vegetables while talking to me, and I was taking notes. Very often she had to wipe her hands to get something for me in her room: the Buddhist book in Lao her mother read, her diary and the books she bought with her own savings. After the talk, she invited me for dinner. At the dinner table, the family asked me a lot of questions about me as if the interview was reversed.

I interviewed Tran at my home as I knew that he would only talk seriously with nobody around. He liked to talk and always wanted to express his thoughts and feelings. He was a very self-conscious person. He knew what he said would be in my writing and might become public. So he was very careful of what he said. Sometimes he would get loose and say something he didn't think he should. Then he would say to me: "Please don't write that down. I don't want others to know this." He was the only one of the four who asked to read my writing after it was done.

Whether in casual talks or formal interviews with my four informants, I never used a tape recorder, because their English was not easy to understand and I had to constantly redefine what they said to me. On the other hand, I didn't want to make them nervous talking to me with a recorder on the side. I even seldom take notes in front to them during my conversations except at the formal interviews, as I found when I kept writing down what they said, they would stop talking. Once Tran found that I was writing down what he said, he leaned to read my notes and asked "Why do you write my words down? Please don't write a story about me. Many people asked me questions, then they wrote stories about us.

Later they published them in the newspapers. I don't like that." I tried not to write anything while they were talking. I quickly jotted down their words when they were not around and recorded everything of the day when I got

home. So most of their talk quoted in the writing was more standard English than they actually used in their speech.

Besides interviewing my four informants, I interviewed other students, both Laotian and American, and their friends, some in the school, some outside of the school. I held a few formal meetings with a group of mainstream students talking about their studies and having Laotian students in the class. The meetings were taped. I also interviewed my informants' classroom teachers, and chatted quite often with their English and social study teachers. They were all willing to share their thoughts about my informants and gave me the copies of the class requirements. Quite often some teachers would offer me some information about the students when they bumped me in the hall or in the teacher's room. Once a while, my constant questioning offended some teachers in the building. The words I heard were: "Why does she constantly question our decisions?" During the year I conducted the research in the school, I contacted many people-- from administrators to janitors. Generally I seldom ran into any harsh resistance from any of them.

Most helpful to me were the ESL teacher, Jane and the junior-high English teacher, Susan. In addition to sharing their thoughts, feelings and teaching curriculum constantly with me, they collected the data about my informants for me when I was not there and made copies of their work and writing. They connected me with other teachers and

introduced me to the school secretaries and administrators. They arranged meetings for me and invited me to the meetings that they thought were related to my study. Jane and I often talked on phone for hours about the school, the students and their learning. Even today, a year after I ended my research there, Jane and I continue to talk as if I were still in the school doing the research. Without the support and help from Jane and Susan, I would not have the volume of data I have today.

A formal interview with the parent:

I also interviewed the family of my informants. I chatted casually with their old brothers and sister while working together with them at their kitchen, riding in the car, or swimming in the pool or on the way to some social gathering. I tried to carry on the same type of conversation with the parents, but I was not successful. I couldn't talk to the mother as she didn't speak much English. When I chatted with the children in the house, the parents were rarely around. In turn, when I tried to talk with the parents, especially the father, the children would leave the room. It seemed the parents and children were not conversational partners in their tradition. The father spoke pretty good English, but he didn't like to talk. Once I tried to have a conversation with him after I had dinner in their house. I went to sit with him in the living room and started to chat with him. We chatted for about five

minutes, the father suddenly stood up and left the room. I was left by myself in front of the TV which was always on. Till today, I didn't know what caused his discomfort that day. I wondered if it was because he wasn't used to chatting with a woman, or because of the questions I asked him, or because he didn't like to talk?

After I failed in trying to carrying on casual conversations with the parents many times, I decided to arrange a formal interview with them. I sent a letter with a question list through Tran to the parents. In the letter, I explained my study and asked for a formal talk for which they would be paid. By sending the question list, I wanted to make sure that they and their children wouldn't be too intimidated by my visit, and also thought the parents would have more time to prepare the talk. By offering pay for our talk, I wanted to make it serious and business-like.

A week later after I sent the letter, I didn't hear anything from the parents. I asked Tran about it and he said that the father took the letter but didn't say anything to him. He promised me to ask his father about the interview. I waited for a few days more and still didn't hear anything from them. I couldn't wait and called Tran at home. He told me that his father didn't want to talk as he didn't remember his education in Laos and had little idea of his children's education in America.

I didn't expect the refusal and felt desperate. I asked to talk to the father on the phone. When the father got on the phone, he told me the same thing as Tran told me, politely. I almost begged him for the interview and said that he only needed to say what he could remember and whatever he said would be very valuable to my study. He was quiet for a few seconds, and then asked how long the talk would be and when I would like to have the interview. I told to him that the talk would be around two hours and I could come any time at their convenience. "If it is okay with you, I can come right now," I stressed it as I was so afraid that he would change his mind if I waited too long. "Okay, you can come here in an hour," the father said to me before he hung up the phone.

I was so thrilled that I could get the interview, but I also felt a certain guilt for my aggressiveness. For a person like Mr. Savang, it seemed that he had no other choice when I pushed him so hard. Over him, I held certain power as a researcher from a university and connected with his children's school. Ingrained with his Lao culture which lays great respect for authority figure, and as a powerless man in this country, he couldn't do anything but accept my request though he tried to avoid doing something that he didn't know much about. When thinking back on my power over this venerable man to get what I wanted, I felt a tremendous guilt. But at that

moment, I had no other choice. I wonder what I would do if Mr. Savang was an aggressive white male.

When I arrived at their house (recently bought), the father was waiting for me outside. He let me to the living room. The children all immediately went outside. The father asked one of the boys to come in to serve us drinks and snacks. The mother didn't join the talk because she had to work that afternoon. We talked for one and a half hours. Obviously the father had prepared for the talk as he didn't get stuck with any of my questions. He appeared tense at the beginning. As our talk went on, he became more and more relaxed. He was most comfortable in expressing his opinions about his present situation, avoided saying much about his past and didn't know much about his children's education either in Laos or in America. After our talk, he showed me his new house and said to me "Call me any time if you have any more questions." I was very grateful for his kind offer. He had opened his door for me and showed his trust in me, which did much to lessen my guilt.

Handling Data:

Handling data involved three major aspects: selecting, analysing and organizing data. The theoretic perspectives I discussed in the "Introduction" chapter served as a lens through which I viewed the world of my informants. Zaharlick and Green stated: "The value of the lens is the degree to

which it permits [the researcher] to see and record the particular aspects of interest" (1991).

With a culturally and socially constructivist perspective, I believe school is a place where children learned to join the culture they belong to. They learn and experience the cultural values through their learning to be literate. In a democratic culture, school is a place where everyone should feel a part and participate in making knowledge more meaningful through interaction and collaboration with others. Learning is to develop learners' full potential as creators of culture and the world.

"Culture" plays an important role in my study. As a researcher imbedded with values and beliefs, I study a group of people in a certain type of culture, which is looked through the lenses of my "culture" and interpreted by the values I carried with me. The word "culture" has broad themes and its understanding is tacit. "The tacit quality of culture gives it much of its force" (Metz, 1987). Culture doesn't just contain abstract propositions. It is a system of meanings which includes values. Values determine how people organize their daily life, how they make sense of their environment, and how they build relationships with others. In summary, culture provides implicit rules for people to view their world and arrange their life.

Mary Haywood Metz states:

Culture grows originally from a group's need to make sense out of the circumstances in which its

memebers find themselves. Once developed, a culture provides a set of shared lenses through which changing experience is interpreted. Changing in the culture of a group already sharing a common culture will be affected by the way in which the existing culture filters the meaning of the group's continuing or new experiences.

My understanding of "culture" not only directed how I viewed the world of my informants but also determined how I selected, organized and analyzed my data.

I selected data while collecting it. I selected what to see, what to listen to and what to keep. When I observed my informants at school, I paid special attention to how they behaved among their peers or in front of teachers. I constantly compared and constricted their behavior with that of the others around them, in different situations, with different people around them. I sought to understand what school and learning meant to them by observing how they learned and how they interacted with others.

When I interviewed my informants, I listened to how they perceived their past and present experiences, how they interpreted the new culture and their position in the new world, and what they expected from their school studies. I sought to understand their values from their best memories of the past, their joy and frustration at the present and the expression of their dreams and wishes.

When I collected their work relating to their reading and writing, I showed special interest in what they said, and how they talked about their work. I sought to find patterns

and relationships between what they did do better and what they had problems with, and between their words and their actions. In other words, I sought to understand them and their situation from their perspectives.

The basic techniques I adopted to organize and analyze the data was to compare and contrast:

- what they dreamed of and what they experienced in the new culture
- what they would like to be and what they had to be in the new culture
- what they thought of themselves as and what others thought of them as
- what they would like to be and what their parents expected them to be
- what they hoped their schooling would prepare them for and what they had to do in school
- what kind of readers and writers they could be and they could not be
- what they could do and couldn't do in school

Through comparison and contrast, I described and interpreted the cultural behavior of my informants from different perspectives and presented their relationship with the new culture which represented by the school they were in.

The data was officially collected from the last week of September, 1990 to the end of the school year, June, 1991. I never stopped collecting data during the year of my writing because of my continuous contact with the four informants, their family and Jane.

All the names either of the places or of the people I mentioned in my writing are pseudonyms for the sake of the protection of the people who were involved in my study. The age of my informants remained a mystery to me. The age they

claimed to be sometimes would not go together with the story they told me. For instance, Tran said that he left his country at the age of eleven at one time, and at other time he released to me that he already graduated from high school before he left Laos. The contradictory information like this related to their age was noticed by Jane and me quite often.

Many studies on Southeast Asian refugee children mention that many of the Southeast Asian refugee families claim their children to be younger than they are as they want their children to be able to go to school in the United States. My four informants might also have fake ages like those children. In my writing, I used the ages they claimed.

The direct speeches of the four informants quoted in the writing were mostly edited versions with some accent intended.

Their talk about themselves and their comments about others around them or on certain issues were mostly combined from the many conversations and interviews I held with them.

The research strategies I presented above demonstrated the process of my negotiating and renegotiating the access to my informants and "sub-groups" (their family, their teachers, and other students). The most important and also the most challenging strategy for an ethnographic researcher is to gain the trust of the informants and people who are involved in the study. My study depended upon a close relationship between me and my informants and with the teachers like Jane and Susan. In order to let them trust me, be willing to offer

me information and cooperate with me, I tried to help them whenever I could, to demonstrate my care for the people I studied and worked with. I didn't want to be a researcher who was only interested in getting information out of people.

I showed my interest in them as people as well as in what they told me. Constantly I shared myself with them as a friend.

As Zaharlick and Green discussed about the ethnographic research, each time I added a component in the study, I needed to "gain access anew," negotiate and renegotiate to get the permission to:

- to visit the school;
- to work and converse with students in the ESL rooms;
- to observe students in classrooms;
- to interview students at school;
- to interview teachers;
- to interview administrators;
- to work closely with my informants;
- to visit the home of my informants;
- to take them to different social places;
- to follow them around at school;
- to interview the people in the Laotian communities;
- to visit the Laotian temple;
- to have formal meetings with students or teachers at school;
- to attend faculty meetings;
- to have a formal interview with the parents of my informants.

Frequently I came across resistance and distrust from my informants and some of the people who were involved in the study, whenever I pushed to move closer to them and get more out of them than they had expected. Each time I had to re-explain the purpose of my research to them and re-build their

confidence in me and my study. I continued to build their trust in me while conducting the research. I have finished my collecting data, but my friendship with my informants, with their family, and with Jane and Susan will last forever.

Chapter Three

The Story of the Savang Family

The story of the Savang family is presented to provide the context for my case studies. It is so easy to treat our case studies as simply objects rather than looking at them as human individuals with thoughts and feelings. Robert Coles (1989) in The Call of Stories advises us, as researchers of human beings, to listen to their (the people we study) stories instead of only diagnosing them in certain scientific terms.

This story reveals the past experiences, the feelings, the dreams and the life in the new culture of my informants.

Knowledge of their past history and their present life will help us understand and interpret their behavior at school. It leads us to see why they had to leave their own country, how much they gave up for their present pursuits, and what kind of adjustments they have to make for their new life. Furthermore, their story will help us see other dimensions of Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy so that we can look at them as four individuals instead of four Laotians.

The Savangs' story also suggests an important aspect of the connective way of learning: learning language and learning to read and write should connect with the learner's

life experience and personal interests. My informants have many stories to tell, but they have few chances to tell their stories in their school experiences. Therefore, they remain strange to others and sometimes, to themselves.

The Savang family came from Laos, a country in Southeast Asia. It is a landlocked country with China on the north, Cambodia on the south, Thailand and Burma on the west and Vietnam on the east. Laos is about the size of the state of Oregon. The economy of Laos is based largely on agriculture, rice being the most important product. There are no railroads, and some of the highways are unusable several months of the year. The Mekong River is the main waterway for transportation. The lack of transportation and communication limits the economic development of the country.

Since the end of the 18th-Century, Laos was mainly ruled by Thailand and France at different periods, and for a short time, by Japan, during World War II. In 1954, it achieved full independence from France. During the Vietnam War, it became a training ground for the U.S. army. The Lao Army and Air Force were trained and sponsored by the United States. They and also their civilians fought with the Americans in the Vietnam War. In order to destroy the Ho Chi Ming Trail and cut off the backroads of the North Vietnamese Army, bombs were dropped in Laos by the US fighters every day during the war. The record shows that three times more

1975-85 Communist Laos	father in a re-education camp	mother at home with three children (Paw and Sy with mother)	six children living with different families (Tran and Cham at two different uncles' houses)
1885-88 Thai and Philippine refugee camps	father and mother with one daughter in one camp		eight children in another camp
1988-89 Massachusetts in USA	Parents with five children in an apartment	two older sisters staying with their sponsor	Tran and Cham in an uncle's house
1989-90 Riverside, New Hampshire	Parents with three children in a small apartment	Paw and Sy staying in a friend's home on Woodland Drive	Tran and Cham and two sisters staying in Massachusetts
1990-91 living in a duplex apartment, Riverside, NH.	Parents and seven children together		two older sister renting an apartment, MA.
1991- having a house of their own, Riverside, NH.	the family living in their new house		two older sisters coming to visit on weekends

Figure 1 The locations and living situation of the Savang family from 1975-present

bombs were dropped on the land of Laos than in Vietnam. During those years, the Lao people, especially those in the northeast areas (mainly Hmongs), couldn't live a normal life and had no peace. Many Laotian refugee children remember nothing of their country but war and bombs. In 1975, Lao Communists took over control of the country. They punished the people who used to work for the Americans and for the old government. The current exodus of refugees from Laos began at that time, as those who resisted communist control escaped the country. The Savang family was among them.

The Savang family has nine children, four girls and five boys and 1990 was the first year in their lives that my four informants could remember living together as a family. From 1975 when the Communists took over the country until 1990, their family had been fragmented (see Figure 1). They moved from Laos to Thailand, to the Philippines, and lastly, to the United States. In the U.S., they moved from house to house until they bought their own.

Their great grandfather was an army officer, "some kind of chief commander," Tran told me. He is still alive, in his nineties in Laos. The grandfather was a business man, who "owned all the fur business in Lao." He made a lot of money by trading with Europeans. "He was so rich, and had so much money. Every night he and my grandmother would count the money, bound the bills together and slept on them." He

built three houses. One of them was for the European business men to stay in. Later on, he became very sick and died before the Communists came.

The father was a pilot who was trained in the United States in the late 60's. Later he became a pilot instructor in the Lao Air Force. The Lao Air Force was sponsored by the United States, and worked for the Americans. The mother owned a clothing store and sold her goods mainly in the open market. When the Communists took over the country in 1975, the father was sent to a reeducation camp, together with the others who worked for the old government and for the Americans. He stayed in the camp for twelve years, and worked very hard there. "After I worked there for those years, there will be no hardship I can't handle any more." That was all he told his children.

During the twelve years in the reeducation camp, the father wasn't allowed to come home and the mother went there to visit him only twice. After the father was taken away, the nine children had to live with different families. They moved to the uncles' and aunts'. Tran and Cham went to live with two different uncles' families in different towns. Paw stayed with the mother as she was too young to go anywhere. Sy was born after the father was taken away, and met him for the first time when he was almost thirteen.

All the children went to school in Laos. According to what they said in public (that is what they told the school

but some of them told me different stories), Tran had seven years, Cham had five years, Paw had three years and Sy had one year of school in Laos. Tran was the only one among the four children who could read and write in Lao. The family was Buddhist. All the Savang boys except Sy had been monks in Laos for a certain period of time in their lives. That was the Lao Buddhist tradition: boys had to be monks for a certain time in their lives in order to grow up.

Between 1983 and 1987, the family escaped to the Thai refugee camps. They escaped there separately. Two older daughters went there first, then two older sons. Cham and Paw escaped together. Tran and Sy went with a group of people. When the father came back from the reeducation camp in 1987, he left Laos with the mother and a daughter as the last group of the family to escape. In the Thai refugee camps, the family was not together. The father and mother and the daughter who left the country with them stayed in one camp, and the rest of the children stayed at a different one. The two camps were miles apart. In the camps, there were buildings with big halls in them. Each family had to buy boards to separate the halls into small rooms. One family had one room. They slept on the floor and cooked in the room. That was why there were a lot of fire accidents in the camps. People who caused the fire would be sent to the camp jail for one or two years as punishment.

There was no electricity and water. They had to walk about a mile away to get water and wash themselves in a lake. Many people didn't bother to wash themselves for months. Many people had diseases in the camps. Long lines of people waited outside the camp clinics to be treated and people died every day. The camps were fenced with iron wires. The refugees were not allowed to leave the place without permission. If they did, they would be put into the camp jail for months---up to a year, or be fined if they could afford to pay. Food was bad and was rationed. The rice had a lot of bugs in it, and canned vegetables were sent by the United Nations. The people who had money could buy some food and vegetables from the local people who brought things to the camps to sell. That was expensive.

Each camp had its own office which hired refugees to work for them. The people who had jobs there could get more food for their families. The Savang's two older daughters had jobs in the camp, so they brought more food to the family. Still it was not enough. Very often the boys would sneak out to catch some fish in the lake. Cham did this most frequently. If they were caught, they would be in trouble. The father also had a job in his camp. He was a translator for the refugees and the English-speaking, camp-service people. He often stayed in hotels with the latter.

The camps had police who were all Thai soldiers. As the Savang children told me, "those soldiers were very mean to us

refugees. They took money away from us, and yelled and punished us for no reasons. They hated us because we caused troubles for their country."

The refugee camps had schools too. The children went to school a couple of hours a day to learn English. The teachers were Laotians, Thais and Americans. There must have been some Christian church services there as the children said that they went to Sunday school and studied the Bible there. "That was how we became Christian in the camp," Cham and Paw told me.

The refugees had to wait at the camps until they were sponsored by the people in the country they would go to. The Savang family stayed in the camps for three years before they had a sponsor from America. Before coming to the United States, the family stayed in the Philippines for seven months, in Tran's words, "to learn how to live in America."

In 1988, the whole family came to the United States. First they settled in a town in Massachusetts, where their sponsor's family was located. A year later, the Savangs' moved to Riverside, New Hampshire, because of job opportunities.

For the first couple of years in the United States, the Savang family couldn't live together due to the small places they rented. Two older daughters lived with the sponsor's family. Tran and Cham stayed with an uncle's family in Massachusetts. When the family moved to Riverside, those

four children didn't come with the family. They stayed where they were until a year later when the family moved into a bigger apartment.

When the Savangs' first came to Riverside, they didn't move onto Woodland Drive, where most of the other Laotian people in town were located, because the apartments there were too small for their family. They rented an apartment not far away from Woodland Drive, but it was not big enough for their family either. They had to send their two youngest children, Paw and Sy, to live with a friend's family on Woodland Drive for a couple of months until they found a bigger place. In 1990, the family moved into an apartment in a duplex house, and all the children except the two older daughters moved back from other people's houses. For the first time since 1975, the family was together and settled as a family.

Though the Savang family didn't live on Woodland Drive, they had a very close relationship with that community. Whenever there were gatherings for holiday celebrations and weddings, the Savangs' would be there. Mr. Savang's former pilot colleagues lived there, so he would often go there to visit them or invite them to his house for drinks and a chat during the holidays and on weekends. Most of the women there were Mrs. Savang's fellow workers in the seafood factory. Woodland was the only place in town where she could visit with friends. The Savang children sometimes went to play sports

with the children there. For them also, that was the only social place besides school. The Savangs' knew everybody and everything happening on Woodland Drive, and would participate in any activities held by the Laotian community.

As with most of the other Laotian people on Woodland Drive, the Savang family members had either factory or low-skill jobs. The father and two older sons worked on an assembly line from 7 am to 7 pm in a medical technology factory in a nearby town. The mother and one daughter worked on the assembly line from 3 pm to 12 am in a seafood factory, twelve miles away from where they lived. They all would work overtime whenever they could. The two older daughters, who lived away, worked as nurse's aides in a hospital and also as house helpers for the sponsor's family as the wife was bedridden. The youngest four children were in Riverside Junior-Senior High School, three in the eleventh and one in the seventh grade level.

In March 1991, they bought a big house in Riverside with the three years accumulated savings of seven family members. The house was beautiful with four bedrooms and four acres of land. The four children in school also tried to work to help buy the house. Tran and Cham worked at their mother's seafood factory after school for a few weeks; Paw went house to house selling cosmetics besides cooking for the family every day after school. Sy was too young to work at the time.

He said that he would try to get a job in the summer. The

father let the children keep 50 percent of their earnings and they gave the other half to the family.

Mr. Savang told me that everybody in their house tried very hard to keep the family going in the new land. When they left their homeland, they left everything behind except what they wore. But they had a dream, a beautiful dream: to search for a better life in America. That helped them endure losing whatever they had: their land, their houses, their people, and their culture---everything they were familiar with. They believed that they could start a new life, a beautiful new life in America--their dream land. But when they got here, they found there were so many things they had to adjust to, even each other as family members.

For the first time since they could remember, my informants have their parents and almost all siblings together. It is not easy for them. Though they work very hard to keep the family together, each has his or her complaints:

Paw:

I don't like my father. He is mean to us, never smiles, always has a stone face. I never talk to him unless I have to. He never talks to us either. I am comfortable with old people or small children, and nervous with others. Sometimes my father yelled at me, I just want to leave. But I am afraid to hurt my mother. My mother said my father changed. He was not like this before he went to reeducation camp. He is brainwashed. But I don't know what he was before. He left home when I was only a baby. I don't like Cham either. He is just like my father, so self-centered.

Cham:

I don't like anybody in my house. I can't get along with any one of them. I don't know, I don't know why, I just don't like anybody.

Tran:

I don't like my mother. I don't know them. I never live with them before. I want to move. I am not used to having so many people in the house. It is too messy. You don't have any minute of yourself. You can't do anything. When you want to read, they walk in and watch TV. My mother yells at me all the time. I have my way to do things, step by step, but she just wants me to do in her way. I can't get along with Cham. He is just like my mom, always thinks of money and wants to make money. I want to go to live with my sisters, to go back to my old school, I like there better. But I don't know, I'll have to see.

Sy:

My parents never talk to me, never discuss about my future. I am too young. They don't talk to me. Sometimes they talk to my brothers and sisters, but not me. They all can discipline me, but I can't do anything to them. They are older, can do anything to me. They said I don't know anything. Yes, I don't know anything. I am too young.

The four school-age children seldom see other members of their family except on the weekends. Every day when they come home, their parents and older siblings are at work. Beside the fact that the family doesn't have much time to talk to each other, spending time just for conversation is not in their tradition. They each know the rules of the house and their own responsibility for the family. As the father said: "I told my children to obey their parents, to respect the old people, to help each other. That is our tradition."

Every day after school, Paw cooks dinner for the family.

The boys take turns doing the dishes and cleaning the house. No bargains. Everybody has to share the housework if he or

she is home. For the school-age children, school and housework are the major things they do every day. They don't have much social life and have fewer friends.

From what they told me, I understand that they miss their life in Laos a lot. What they remember the most is what they can't have at the present. They have recently come to the new culture and can't figure it out, and yet they can no longer live as they used to. It is as if they have stopped at the crossroad. They can't go back to where they came from and don't know which way to take to move on. They are standing there confused.

Tran is a social person. He likes to make friends, to talk, to discuss world affairs and national events. But in the new culture, he has fewer chances to share his thinking. He feels lonely and out of control of his life here:

I was a kind of student leader in Lao school. I had a lot of friends and we did a lot of fun things together. In Laos, we not only learned things from books, but also learned how to help people and the country. We did a lot of good things for the people and the country. That was fun.

But here nothing is certain. I can't say what I want to do, or what I want to be. I don't know what kind of life I want to have. Everything depends on my English. When my English gets good, I can do more things.

Cham is fascinated by all the shiny, noisy and fast moving things of the new culture. He wants to try everything: parties, skating, skiing, bowling, games, swimming, and travel. He will go with anybody if he can try new things. He watches commercials on TV, reads them in the newspapers

and magazines. That is how he learns about the new culture. But he has found he can't afford to do what he wants. He misses what he could do in his home country.

In Laos, I had a lot of friends. We played with the kids all the time. We played soccer, kites, fishing, hunting, and marbles. But here no matter what you do, you have to have money. In Laos, we made our own stuff to play. We made kites with bamboo and paper, made sprint shot with the branches from the trees. We hunted birds with it. We made fish post with some sticks. We played marbles with our fingers. Here you don't make things. You buy things to play. You go to the mall to spend money playing. Here you have to have money to have friends. In Laos, we didn't have to. I want to make money, then I can try things. Here they have so many rules that we don't know. You can't fish here and hunt there, so we don't know what we should do.

Paw is a family-bound person. What she misses most is her great grandma. She doesn't care much about social life, but she wants a person she can trust and be close to. She wants to try new things in the new culture, but she doesn't want to give up her past.

I missed my grandma and my hometown most. She couldn't come with us. She didn't want to come. I was most close to her. We talked all the time. She taught me a lot of things. Before I left, she asked me whether I would continued to be a Buddhist. Yes, I told her I would always be a Buddhist no matter what. Now I am a Buddhist and a Christian. I have double religion. Now she is dead, died a year ago. I am used to the life here now. It was very difficult for me when we first came.

Sy doesn't remember much of his life in Laos as he left the country at a young age. He has a vague memory of the house where he used to live. But there are one or two things he can never forget. He likes to talk about his refugee camp

life. He misses the friends he made there and the things he did together with them that he can't do with the kids here.

I never can forget the New Year's celebration in my home town. We stood at the top of the temple, looking down. There was the Prince's castle beside the temple and by the lake. It was so beautiful. You could see the reflections of the temple and castle down the lake. Wow, I can never forget that. I miss going to the temple with my mother, and miss the New Year celebration with lots of people and games everywhere. I remember my life in the refugee camp. We played with many friends there. Once I made a kite, like this (he drew a kite shaped as a butterfly). It flew so high, very high. I was so happy. Here you can't make it, because there is no bamboo. Kids here don't make things to play, they buy things to play. They spent money to play.

All the members of the Savang family miss their past. Mr. Savang misses the country and his profession; Mrs. Savang misses her houses and her business; the older sons and daughters feel their life is less meaningful here than in Laos.

Father:

I miss my country and flying. I still want to do something with airplanes. I know I have to go to school to have more education. But I have a family to support, so I can't afford to go to school. Someday I wish I could.

Tran:

My mother misses our houses in Laos alot. That is why she wanted to buy our own house so much. She misses her clothes store there too. That's why she still helps my uncle to sell things from his store. She loves to do business. Someday she wants to have her own business in this country.

The second son:

In Laos, we might be doctors, brother engineers, or pilots. We would go to college. But we can't do that here. Now what we do is just a job, not we like it or not, just do it for living. Here we

don't have many friends, work and go home, that's what we do every day. Here we simply survive every day.

As do their school-age children, the parents also have their frustrations in the new culture. The father feels the life here too uncertain and insecure, and the mother is self-conscious of her difference.

Father:

Here the life is better. You can make alot of money and buy everything. But you don't know when you would lose the job. If I lose the job, I can't do anything. In Laos, we wouldn't starve if I didn't have a job. We had our own houses. I could go fish in Mekong River or go hunting. Here if you don't have a job, you have nothing to eat, and no place to stay. You can't do anything.

Paw:

My mother misses being the same as anybody else at home. There she didn't have to worry what she said or how she behaved, nobody would laugh at her. But here she had to be careful about what she said, she did and she wore.

From what they have said I can tell that their life here is not easy for them in many ways. The greatest difficulty living in this country for the father is, "we don't know the rules and regulations of this country."

Take the insurance for example. The book says that if I don't want to stay with the company, I can just discontinue the payment. But when I stopped the payment, the company called me all the time, saying I would be in big trouble. I don't know why, I did according to what the book said. The same as when I rented the apartment. The landlord said that only my family could live there, but he complained that we had too many people lived there, but I told him those were all my children. He said that he would take me to the court. I just don't know how to handle those things. Every time when I do something, I read the manual very carefully. It is not easy for me, take days for me to read something. I have to check words in the dictionary

all the time. Very often I have to take words to ask my friends about them as the dictionary can't help me. But still I got into trouble all the time, I just don't know why.

No matter how much they miss their past, and how much frustration they have had with the new life, they have hopes for their future here. They trust this country, and have dreams for their future life, as the father said:

Here if you work hard, you can have the same life as anybody else. But in my country, things are not good. Only the Communist families can go ahead, have good jobs and good life. Now, it's difficult for us, as we just started our life here. Maybe later, we'll be better. I believe if we work hard, we will be okay. I believe the education will help my children to have better life here. But I can't afford to send them all to college. Education is never late. I asked them to work, save money for their education. I want my children to have the same life as those Americans, having big house, big land and good cars. I want my children to have easy job (white collar jobs) and live a long life.

Like their father, my informants have dreams and wishes. It is those dreams and wishes that give them strength and hope to endure any hardship they have to go through. To reach the future, they put up with the present.

Tran:

I dream to have a house by the water and mountains. If I have a lot of money some day, I would like to go back to my own country, to build a house by the lake. I want to help my country and my people. I want to work in the army like my great grandfather. But I don't know what I really can do. There are so many changes in my life. I can't make any plans, but just wait and see. It depends a lot on my English.

Cham:

I dream to have a big house with a swimming pool at the back yard, to have a convertible car, fancy house and fancy car, that's my dream. After I work

for two or three years, when I have money, I want to visit my country. I don't want to live there, just visit.

Sy:

I dream to have a rich life, just like rich people here, having a lot of money, good cars, houses, everything, big swimming pool in the back yard. I want to be the master of everything. I don't know about my future. If I can learn English good, I want to be an ESL teacher in the refugee camps in Thailand. I want to help the refugee children to learn English. I am too young, I don't really know what I can do in my future.

Unlike the boys, Paw has more realistic plans rather than dreams. She is a down-to-earth person. She has wishes but she is caught between her own wishes and the traditional role in the house.

Paw:

I don't care for money, having a big house or land. I just have a good family, a person who can care for me, and love me. You can have money but that doesn't mean you have happiness no matter where you are. I like a man who is a hard worker, and deserves what he does. I don't care he is rich or not. I want to go to college, to be a nurse. But I don't know I can or not, because of my English. My older brother said that he would pay me to go, and my two older sisters would help me too. But I don't know. My mother doesn't want me to leave the house. They want me to stay home to help them. They are too traditional to let me go away.

Their own stories and words not only tell us their dreams and wishes, their memories and past experience, their worries and frustration, but also their values, their personalities and their sense of self in the new culture. They are seldom heard by others. People know them only as quiet and shy refugee children who speak broken English. They have fewer chances to express themselves at school. "Some of those kids

wouldn't even speak ten words a day at the school," says Jane, their ESL teacher. Once we give them a chance to talk, or take the time to listen to them, we would find them similar to any other youngsters around us: full of ideas and opinions, full of dreams and wishes, and full of the puzzles and uncertainties of the world they live in. Of course, coming to the new culture, they have had a far more challenging life than others of their age. Among all the things in the new culture they had to adjust to, the most challenging one is their life at school.

Chapter Four

At the Edge of the New Culture

It is as if we walk on stage into a play whose enactment is already in progress--a play whose somewhat open plot determines what parts we may play and toward what denouements we may be heading. Others on stage already have a sense of what the play is about, enough of a sense to make negotiation with a newcomer possible (Acts of Meaning, p.34).

---Jerome Brunner

Standing far from the center, Tran, Cham, Paw and Sy, like any newcomers who enter a new world, are wondering, puzzling and trying to figure out what is on the stage. It is so unfamiliar, so different from their old values and world. They are trying to define their positions, the probable parts they might play on this new stage. They can't or don't want to throw away their past, but are trying to find a way to survive as the selves they choose to be in the new environment. One thing they all believe is that if they do well at school, they will make it in the new culture.

One day in February, I took Cham and his older sister, Mei, to swim in the UNH swimming pool. They swam in the lake at the back of their house in Laos all year round, but never used an indoor pool before. This was the first time they had

That was why I had Cham and Mei with me in the swimming pool that day.

Mei's behavior before she jumped into the water exhibits how newcomers first enter the new culture. Before she took action, she observed carefully. On the edge of the water, she tried to figure out what the others were doing and where it was safer for her to be. When she was pretty sure of the new environment, she started to act. She chose the safer place, where there were many children and women. But she did it according to what was appropriate to her: by keeping a T-shirt over her swimming suit in the water. In Lao culture, women and girls are not supposed to expose their bodies too much in public. A school is far more complicated than a swimming pool. Tran, Cham, Paw and Sy have too many customs to figure out, too many sides from which to view life and too many adjustments to make. Like Mei, they remain at the edge so that they may observe and figure out what is going on. But in contrast to Mei, they have no time to wait before they act. They must act and think how to do it at the same time.

Aside from one or two periods a day in the ESL rooms, Tran, Cham, Paw and Sy spend most of their time with other American students in classrooms. Most of the classes they attend are the lowest track, "B level." In the classrooms, they will sit either at the back, in the corner or at the

end of table, invisible and unheard. They demonstrate the following characteristics of marginalization:

- sitting alone, or away from others, or with the people with whom they identify
- seldom initiate any conversations
- rarely join any interaction unless they are called upon
- appear indifferent to others' conversation and interaction, e.g. no expression on their faces or their heads turned away from action or lowered

They all appear the same when they are among their American peers, but once I got to know them, I found that they have distinctive differences among them. I summarize my data from my observations and interviews in the classrooms as the following:

Tran:

He tends to sit in the corner by the quietest student in the class. He never speaks up, seldom interacts with others, only sometimes whispers to his neighbor. But he smiles all the time. When he is teased, he smiles back. When he is called on, he smiles before he gives answers. When he is embarrassed, he smiles with a blush on his face. When he listens to others' chat, he has a smile on his face. But when someone is being teased or laughed at, he never smiles but looks as if he doesn't know what to do. It appears that he doesn't belong to the community as he never joins any conversation or laughs together with the crowd. But as he says, he wishes he could be part of the community, though sometimes he doesn't like the way his peers talk.

Cham:

He likes to have a desk far away from others by himself at the back. He is alert to anything happening in the room. His head is always up when there is some noise in the room. He listens to others talk, though it seems that he can't understand them most of the time. But when he understands, he reacts immediately. For instance, he laughs with the others. He doesn't mind being called on by the teacher, and gives answers

aloud if he is sure of them. He is bold and tries to join the community in his way. The hardest thing for him is to join their conversation as he says "I don't understand what they say." But he really wants to belong, "I wish I could just do like them."

Paw:

She seats herself differently in different classes. In science class, she always sits by herself at the end of the table near the door. In English class, she sits with Carol, her only American friend, who doesn't have any friends in the school. In math class, she is assigned to sit with her group. Paw never looks around, seldom speaks, rarely even whispers to her neighbor. When there is some action in the room, she turns her head away from it. She covers half of her face most of the time and when she has to speak, she covers her mouth and her eyes look down. She ignores any noise or action in the room but concentrates on her own work. Academically she wants to do exactly as her peers, she tries to get "A" in everything. But socially she chooses to be by herself and she says firmly: "I don't want to be like them. I just want to be myself."

Sy:

He appears to be a loner, and always sits by himself in the class: in the front, at the back or in the corner. Even when the class sits in a circle on the floor, he will sit a foot away from others. He lowers his head most of the time, even when he listens to others in the class. Once in a while he raises his head, looks around, then immediately lowers it again. He appears shy, timid and passive. When someone approaches him, he looks from the corner of his eyes without raising his head at first, then if it is somebody he likes, he gives a smile and says "What's up?" or gives "a high five" with his palm. If it is somebody he doesn't like, he remains with his head down and continues what he is doing, ignoring the person. He appears not to care about belonging, but he thinks "I wish I could do everything like them, talk, laugh, and act, just everything, but I don't know how."

They are all on the edge of the new culture, trying to be part of it. Tran associates himself with his peers through

his constant polite smile. Cham wants to try whatever his peers do. Paw is determined to do like the others academically, though she reserves herself socially. Sy has a burning desire to be just like his peers, although he appears to passively wait for opportunities. The similarity and individuality they display is parallel with what Dewey (1938) states: "They fall into general classes, but no two are exactly alike" (p.56). It is important for educators to be sensitive to the individualities of their students, in Dewey's words: "He [educator] must, in addition, have that sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning" (p.39).

How long will they remain at the edge? Will their education help them get acquainted with the new culture and feel part of it? These are the concerns that my study deals with. The next sections give general pictures of each of my four informants. The details of how each individual acts in the classrooms will lead us closer to the answers to these questions.

Tran

Tran is a gentleman, quiet, polite and thoughtful. Once he gets to know and like you, he can be very talkative. He likes to express his opinions on just about everything. But in the classroom, you can hardly see or hear him.

12:50 pm

Tran walks into the biology class five minutes before the class starts. He sits at the end of a table by David. Before he sits down, he gives David a smile. This is the B level biology class. There are nine students, seven boys and two girls. Before the class starts, the students are chatting:

S1: (talking to a student across the room) I saw you on the street last night. Are you a street roamer?

S2: No, I tried to get some pizza.

S1: But I saw you using the pay phone all the time.

.....

Ann walks into the room. David says something to her. Nobody notices them until Ann suddenly yells out at David: "Good for you, I'm going to kick your butt off." Her sudden roar quiets down the room noise for a few seconds. Ann walks angrily to her seat by Lila. David lowers his head and blushes. By his side, Tran has a shocked and tense expression on his face. The others continue their chat again after a short break of a few seconds.

Another student walks into the room. Before he puts his bag at the table by the door, he lets out a loud cry "This table is gross. It has puss on it." He walks to the sink and tries to wet a sponge.

The teacher comes into the room, standing in the front and waiting for the students to settle down. When she sees the student at the sink, she says to him "John, would you please not use that sink?" "I'm going to clean the table, there is some puss on it," he replies. The teacher turns to the class: "We are going to do some pre-tests." The students respond:

Student 1: Oh, no...

Student 2: Wait, let me get my red pen (in a dragging sleepy tone).

Student 3: Can I go to my locker?

The teacher goes through the items in the pre-test one by one. Ken volunteers the most answers. Two or three students yell out their answers once in a while. One student stares absently at nowhere for

the whole time. It seems that he is day dreaming. Tran and David never raise their hands or voices, but are whispering to each other about their work. The pre-test is over.

1:15 pm

The teacher gives out some worksheets. She goes over question by question, and the students take turns to give the answers. One worksheet is done.

1:30 pm

The second set of worksheets are handed to the students. The teacher goes through the same procedure.

1:40 pm

The third set of worksheets are distributed. Ken speaks loudly to the teacher who stands at the front:

Ken: Do we have more worksheets to do after this?

Teacher: I'll see how many we'll have to do.

John: Just dash them on.

Student A: For a few seconds, I will forget them all.

Student B: I forget what I did yesterday.

Ken: I won't.

Student A: What did you do yesterday?

.....

Despite the students' interaction, the teacher goes through the third set of worksheets in the same way as previously. Many students start to yawn loudly. There are only five minutes left, and the teacher lets the students finish the last part on their own. Ken is talking to himself while doing his work: "Does it show what color they are? Oh, yes, they did. It's red." Another student tries to figure out the points he can get "I got three here, I might lose one in that one....I might get a B, that's not too bad." John finishes his work and starts to talk: "I lost everything in my computer last night. I hit the wrong button, it blanked, saying du...du..., then nothing was there any more." Another student joins him "That happened to me once." The teacher smiles at their chat and

participates, "You never know what they will do to you, those computers."

Tran concentrates on his work. Sometimes he turns to his neighbor David asking some questions, then turns right back to his work. Sometimes he raises his head, listening to the others chatting for a few seconds, then lowers his head to his worksheet again. The bell rings. Tran is the last one to put his worksheet into the box on the teacher's desk. The teacher asks him "How are you doing, Tran?" Tran shakes his head and replies with a smile, "I don't know. I am not sure about some parts." He says "See you" to the teacher and leaves the room.

During the whole class period, Tran only talks about the classwork. He whispers to his neighbor about the work, and gives the answers when it is his turn. He appears the most left out when the students are freely interacting with each other, or with the teacher. It is easy for people to think because of his English, he can't join the conversation. Actually there is more to it than just the language, as he says:

I don't like to interrupt teachers. If I have questions I would ask the teacher after the class. I don't like to take time away from the class. Sometimes I wish I could be just like them (his American peers). They know everything of this country. They know how to interact with teachers and other students. If I was born here, I could do just the same as other American students. But I can't. In class, I don't know how to say. I was not born here. I don't know what and how I should say.

In Bruner's term, it is "referring" that Tran doesn't know which prevents him from joining class conversations. By "referring," Bruner (1986) means "it (language) uses cues to the context in which utterances are being made and

triggers presuppositions that situate the referent. Indeed, reference plays upon the shared presuppositions and shared contexts of speakers" (p.65). Tran doesn't belong to the community, partly because of his language deficiencies, but mostly because of the behavior of his peers which conflicts with his values about school and teachers. He faithfully follows the teacher's instruction. The data show that he acts immediately on what he is asked to do in class. But many of his peers start to have conversation when they are asked to work. He is bothered by their behavior.

In Lao school, we just work and study, we don't fool around. Here they talk, make fun of you, talk about others behind their back all the time.

According to his home culture, students shouldn't chat during class time. That is not the appropriate time, nor is it the way he believes he should behave. In his words:

In my culture, men don't do small talk. We only talk about big things, important things. Here people talk too much, fool around.

But it doesn't mean that he doesn't want to have any relationships with Americans. He is hungry for friendship. He wants to know the Americans and the American culture.

It's so difficult to have relationship with Americans. I don't know why, it's just hard. I don't know if they like me or not, or what I should say to them. I wish I could live with an American family to know them, know how they live and how they think. Been here for almost three years, I know nothing, or not much about them at all.

School is the only place for the people like Tran to be among Americans. Most of his classes are at the lowest level, consequently he is only among marginalized students. He perceives these students as typical Americans and generalizes their behavior as the standard for American young people.

Here people tell bad things. I don't want to learn that kind of language from them. I want to learn good English from books. Books don't laugh at me. Here if you don't speak well, they laugh at you. So I don't speak to them. Actually I don't know what they talk about most of the time. I don't understand them, as I never study those words. I can tell from their gestures, and tones. I don't want to learn those bad words. Because if I know them, then they say those words to me, that would bother me. I simply don't know what they talk about. I don't want to learn to say those words.

Tran is placed among the students who are labelled as either school failures or low-motivated learners, in educational terms: marginal learners. Sinclair and Ghory (1987) define marginal learners as "people in difficulty who are reacting to unfavorable school conditions. They are young people making self-defeating efforts to form a stable connection between themselves and the educational setting." Those students tend to release their anger and resistance in rebellious ways. They are one type of American youngsters but not representative of all Americans. Unfortunately for Tran, a newcomer, who knows so little about American people and the culture, that is the most he sees and hears of the world he has come to join. What he learned previously about American society ("America is a rich and democratic country where everybody can do what s/he wants to do and be what s/he

wants to be") made him eager for the American culture, but his experience of the reality day by day makes him resist being part of it. His lack of knowledge of the new culture and his resistance to parts of it keep him on the margin of the marginalized group with whom he is associated.

He thinks that education will help him move ahead: "I know education is important to us. We came to this new country, we need education to help us." His father holds the same belief: "Education can help my children to get good jobs and live like other Americans." With this thought in mind, Tran patiently bends his head to those worksheets flooding in, without complaint and wastes no time. He tries hard to do what he is asked to do, to get good grades, and to finish all the assignments on time.

Tran works constantly in and during other school time. He takes no break, not even time for lunch. Almost every day during lunch time, he sneaks into Andy's ESL room to do his schoolwork. Andy stops work at 11:30 a.m. every day. That is why Tran can hide himself in this room to do his work. According to the school rules, students are not allowed to stay in any rooms during lunch time. Tran knows the rule, but he simply needs the time.

Lunch time is normally the best time for students to associate with each other, but Tran can't afford the time. Most of the time he shuts himself in the room to finish assignments. But do his efforts help him to join the

culture, fulfill his dreams, become what he wants to be in the new world? He thought so when he first came to the United States, but now he doubts it. Although he has studied in an American school for almost three years, he still doesn't speak, read and write English well, no matter how hard he tries. He has begun to doubt his intelligence:

In Lao, we memorized everything. I could remember very well. I just could remember everything. But here I know I am dumb. My trouble is my English. I just couldn't learn it well. I don't know why.

Tran blames himself for his marginality. Bruner(1986) posits:

Language is acquired not in the role of spectator but through use. Being "exposed" to a flow of language is not nearly so important as using it in the midst of "doing." Learning a language, to borrow John Austin's celebrated phrase, is learning "how to do things with words." The child is not learning simply what to say but how, where, to whom, and under what circumstances (75).

Tran is constantly exposed to English, but he has little opportunity to speak it. At school he is either too confused or too busy to speak. He spends all his time working silently and alone on those motionless and soundless worksheets. He previously thought, "If I work hard, I can do well," but working like this for almost three years in the American schools, his progress has disappointed him. He has begun to lose his trust in the type of education he is receiving:

Here what I learn in the school will only help me a little bit for my future. What I learn in the school is only to help me learn how to contact people here, not a lot, only a little bit. Everything I learn now I will forget soon.

He started on the margin and still remains on the margin both socially and academically after three years of hard work in the schools. He has become impatient and frustrated with himself and as his ESL teacher, Jane, says about him:

I am worried about him. He has a low self-image. He told me that he was a very successful student back in Laos, a student leader there. But here he can't do anything well. His English is very poor. I had a hard time understanding him. He is frustrated and seems impatient with himself. He wants to see good results immediately. Since he can't do it, he is very frustrated. Sometimes he comes here, and doesn't concentrate on what I ask him to do, but likes to talk. He talks fast, writes fast, and it's hard to understand him and his writing. I think that is his way to cover his problems, by talking a lot, and shuffling pages all the time. He just can't settle down to study.

When he first came to the United States, he thought confidently: "If I had English, I could do anything." But after three years of hard work in school, he has lost the confidence:

I want everything in life can be in control. But now everything is 50 percent uncertain, actually nothing is certain. I don't know what I can do or what I want to be. It all depends on my English. If my English is good, I can make plans, but now I don't know.

Tran is still trying hard. In isolation he silently bends his head to many worksheets he faces daily. He assumes that the cause of his marginality lies within himself. He expresses no complaints, but works hard. Sinclair and Ghory (1987) assert:

[A]ssumption that the cause of the problems lies only inside the learners is counterproductive because it releases the school from the responsibility for

creating an educational environment that reaches all students. In fact, the reasons for marginality often lie in the lack of quality in the interaction between the learners and the environment.

Paw

Like Tran, his sister Paw studies silently and hard in isolation all the time, but she is more persistent and patient with her work than Tran, because she has very clear goals for her learning: "I want to go to college, to be a nurse." In a detailed description of Paw's English class, we will see where Paw locates herself, how she behaves among her peers, interacts with the teacher, and acts as a student.

9:15 am

Paw walks into the English class, and sits by Carol in the front row. This is a B level English class. The class has eight students. There are five boys and three girls, three of whom are Laotian students.

Paw sits with one hand supporting her head, her eyes looking blankly, waiting for the class to start. She looks tired. By her side, Carol is busy writing words from the vocabulary sheet. The other students are chatting with each other. Once in a while Paw briefly turns her eyes to the students who are chatting happily, then immediately comes back to herself. When those students let out loud laughter, Paw turns her head toward the crowd and gives a faint smile hardly detected as her mouth is mostly covered by her left hand.

9:20 am

The teacher speaks to the class in a firm voice: "I will give you half an hour to check your spelling words and vocabulary. This is study time so no conversation." Paw has her eyes fixed on the desk listening while the teacher is talking. As soon as the teacher ends the instructions, Paw takes out

the vocabulary sheet from a folder and starts to work on it.

Tim, a boy sitting by the window, slams his bag on the desk hard. That makes a very loud noise. The teacher turns her head and looks at him, but says nothing. John has his face in his arms and doesn't move until the teacher calls his attention. Brian yells out "You push too hard!" while staring at the teacher. The teacher ignores him. Mimi and Carol help each other memorize the words on vocabulary sheet. Paw is working by herself.

9:35 am

The teacher stands in the front of the room waiting for the students to get ready for the quiz. Carol and Mimi are still working on their vocabulary. Paw puts the spelling and vocabulary sheets back into the folder and with a pencil in her hand, waits for the test to begin.

The first part of the test is dictation. It is a paragraph from a health magazine. The teacher reads sentence by sentence to the class. She stops when she sees John put his pen down and shake his head. "Where are you, John?" she asks. "Read that sentence with 'confinement' again please?" he asks. The teacher repeats the sentence. She continues. Tim groans aloud with frustration. The teacher stops for him. She repeats the sentence and goes on. Another boy gives a heavy sigh and asks the teacher "What's the word before 'substitute'?" "Prevailing," the teacher answers him. The dictation lasts 25 minutes.

Before the second part of the test, the teacher goes around the class to check how the students are doing with their dictation. Paw raises her hand. When the teacher comes to her, she asks almost in a whisper, her eyes fixed on her paper, "I didn't hear the word before the word dog." "Oh, that's 'prairie'," the teacher tells her. "Thank you," she whispers back.

After the teacher finishes checking everyone's dictation, she gives out the second part of the quiz. It is a multiple choice vocabulary test. While everybody is quietly taking the test, the teacher sits at her desk correcting the work the students have just done. Suddenly Paw's name is called out by the teacher, "Paw, you owe me some work?" "Yes, I was sick," Paw raises her head and immediately lowers it down and answers the teacher

in a very soft voice. After she answers the teacher, Paw gives a deep sigh which can only be heard by someone sitting close to her.

The class is over. One by one, the students walk to the front and leave their work on the teacher's desk. John drags his feet out of the room, his body swinging from side to side. Ryan lets his worksheet fly onto the teacher's desk without even looking at how it landed. Paw remains at her desk working.

After everybody is gone. She stands up and goes to the front. She speaks in a low voice with her eyes looking down, "I'm not done." The teacher looks up at her and says firmly, "You finish it here, then go to the ESL room." Paw goes back to her seat. She has only half of the work done. With her pen, she points to each word on the sheet, murmuring to herself. She stops at one word for a few seconds, then moves to the next and comes back to the previous word again. The teacher notices her and says to her "Paw, do you know those?" Paw has already done those she knows and now the ones left are those she is not sure of. Paw doesn't say anything or raise her head but continues her murmuring, going from unknown to unknown.

Finally, she moves to the last section. She struggles with "confinement" and "confine". She doesn't know the difference between them and can't decide the places for each of them. She writes "confine" first in one blank, and "confinement" in another. Then, thinking that wrong, she erases the two words and changes their places. She doesn't feel that's right either, and she erases them again. Over and over she tries one way and then another and finally, she just puts them down randomly. In that empty room, alone at her seat, Paw struggles silently, with the teacher soundlessly sitting at the front desk correcting the students' work and giving them grades.

It is time for Paw to leave the room. She quickly fills the empty blanks and puts the sheet on the teacher's desk. With a deep sigh, she returns to her seat and packs her things into her bag. She walks out of the room silently with head bent and eyes looking downward.

Soundlessly she walks through the crowd in the hallway with her head bent slightly without looking at anyone. Quietly and unresponsively, she passes by students laughing, yelling, bumping into each other, talking and shouting.

During the fifty minutes of the English class, all Paw spoke were three sentences: one question asking a word in the dictation, one response to the teacher's request, and one sentence to tell the teacher that she didn't finish her work.

The three sentences were all short, and she said them in a voice so soft it was as if the words had a hard time getting out of her throat. Paw didn't speak to any of her classmates, even Carol, sitting next to her, the person she considers her only friend in the school. It seems that she is afraid to be heard and noticed. When she isn't working, one of her hands always covers half of her face, as though she's trying to hide behind it. Not only does she not intend to join any conversation in the room, but she turns her head away from the noise, indicating that she has no part in it. She doesn't like to make any noise in public. In her home culture, as a girl, she is not supposed to talk.

In my culture, girls are not supposed to talk too much, or make any noise. Otherwise, they don't think you are nice. When I was little, I liked to talk a lot. Once my father yelled at me "Nobody likes to hear you, and nobody wants to listen to you!" Since then, I never like to talk.

Not only doesn't she like to be heard in public, but she is also bothered very much by how her peers behave in the class.

She complains:

The least I like about the school is the kids here. Because they don't respect their friends, don't respect their teachers, and newcomers. They tease them, make fun of them and fool around. In Laos, you are not allowed to talk back to the teacher, have to do what they say. If you don't get things done, they would hit you.

Paw was brought up very differently from her American peers. As a girl, she was not supposed to be noticed in public. She is passive and not used to arguing with anybody, especially the authorities:

It's easy for me when the teacher asks me to answer questions instead of me raising hands. When the students have a big argument, especially talk back to the teacher, I don't know what I should do. I am not used to that. I can only be quiet.

Politeness and respect for others are highly valued by her home culture. In the lower level high school classes, she sees the extreme side of the new culture. Like Tran, she generalizes them as "the American kids":

They are yelling, calling names, talking about their boy or girl friends all the time. I am not used to students interrupting teachers in the class, not used to arguing with the teacher, or talk about other things when they should work.

She was determined not to become like them and annoyed by some other Laotian students who imitated their American peers:

I don't want to be like them at all. I seldom speak to them unless I have to. I saw some Lao students who have some American friends. They have to talk and do as their friends do when they are together with them. I don't like that. That's not my way. If that's the case to have friends, I prefer to have none.

Paw doesn't mean that she resents all American young people. She says that she wants to have American friends, but she wants "only to make friends with the people who understand you, care about your feelings and are polite." She has one American friend, Carol, whom she likes very

much. Like Paw, Carol is a loner at the school. Paw sympathizes with her: "She (Carol) was nice, but the others don't like her and pick on her all the time. I don't know why."

Socially, Paw chooses to be on the fringe and refuses to be assimilated, because what she sees of the new culture goes against her values. But academically, she wants to be like her peers. The fact that she is behind most of her peers in class bothers her tremendously. Unlike Tran, she doesn't diagnose herself as being "dumb", but persistently tries, and never gives up. When she has problems with the English assignment, the teacher asks her to do only part of it. She doesn't want to. She not only does the entire assignment but also an "extra bonus" section.

When she had a hard time finishing the U.S. History homework, the teacher suggested that she do only two-thirds of it, promising to give her full credit. But she said no to the teacher. She says: "Then, how can I take the same test with them if I don't do the same exercises with them." She works very hard. Besides cooking dinner for the family every day, she spends all her time doing schoolwork. Very often she works until midnight. She has no free weekend or holiday time and no time for any physical exercise, so she gets sick quite often. Each time her illness drags her further behind. Then she has to work harder. It is not schoolwork that bothers her as much as it is the housework. She says: "I wish

I didn't have so much housework, then I could spend more time on my school work." In school she works every second. She believes that an education will help her to do what she wants and be what she wants.

For three years, she has tried very hard in all the subjects she studied. She says "I don't have too many exciting things in my life. The most exciting thing for me is to get good grades. I want all A's for everything." Every time she takes a test in English, she is the last one to leave the room. She wants to do well. Every day she memorizes the words in the vocabulary book, few of which she has ever heard. She believes that memorizing those words will help her speak English better.

Paw is struggling on the edge and is determined to make it in school. After three years of studying in America, she has made tremendous progress as a literate person. When she first came here she was almost illiterate, both in Lao and in English. Now through hard work, she manages to keep up with eleventh-grade work. Besides English, where she remains at the lowest level, she is either in high or middle ranks in the other subjects. She tries hard to advance in English.

For Paw, the worst part of English lies in speaking it, because that is what she does the least every day. Like Tran, she has little time and few chances to speak English either in school or in life. Talk, as Britton (1972) believes, is

the most likely means by which students first investigate, explore, and organize new fields of interest. Unfortunately, Paw spends all her time with her head lowered working on soundless vocabularies; and still they remain strange to her.

Quite often, she is humiliated with the spelling tests and leaves the classroom dismayed. As a poor English speaker, she continues to struggle on the margin. Though she won't change her mind about going to college, she expresses her worries:

I don't know whether I can get into college because of my English. I'll have to take TOEFL, and I am worried about that test. I am not sure I can do it well in order to get to the college.

The implication of what Paw says in the above is that she doesn't think that she has improved her English as much as she wants. She is most concerned about test. She connects academic achievement with doing well in tests. That is the message she receives in school. You study for tests and are classified by the scores you attain. Frank Smith (1986) in Insult to Intelligence expresses his criticism on the common practice of teaching and learning for tests in American schools. He states that students are the direct victims of this practice: "Often the results of tests can move students out of the 'mainstream'---the term is educational jargon again--into side channels from which they can rarely escape" (p.143). By being put at the bottom level of English, Paw is conscious of her low status at school. She is worried and doesn't know why she when works so hard, she still can't

use the language well enough to achieve her goal: passing tests and going to college.

Cham

Cham, in a lot of ways, appears the same as Tran and Paw in the classroom: quiet, business-like and by himself, but he is very different from them in terms of his personality. He is not shy among strangers, is very active, and tries to seize every chance to have fun. In the following description, we will discover he is not as shy as Paw and is interested in what goes on around him, although like Tran and Paw, he is still separate from the crowd.

11:06 am

This is science class, B level, general science. There are twelve students, five girls and seven boys. Cham walks into the room and seats himself at a table near the door by himself. Other students are all in pairs or in groups chatting. The teacher chats with the students. Cham takes something out of his folder and starts to read it. But he is watching and listening to the others at the same time, too.

Student 1: I went to the dance last night.
Student 2: Did you? Who did you go with?
Student 3: With a guy?
Student 2: Did you go there to find a guy?
Student 4: Probably not only one guy, but two or three.
Student 2: Yeah, then I can have a choice to make.

Everybody in the group laughs. Cham hears them and laughs hard, too. He doesn't seem to understand much of the others' interaction. Very often when the others laugh, he has a puzzled expression on his face, but immediately joins their laughter when he understands them.

11:10 am

The class starts. The teacher walks to Cham, and asks him "Have you made copies of your piece?" Cham shakes his head. The teacher's aide who sits by a boy in a wheelchair comes to take what is in Cham's hand and walks out of the room. Soon she's back with a stack of paper. She gives one piece to Cham and the rest to the teacher. It is current event time. Everyone takes turns sharing the current event he or she has read from newspapers or magazines. One boy talks about the Iraq War. Another one shares his reading about AIDS research.

"I heard that white people are more susceptible to AIDS," a student responds to him. A girl utters "Be careful, that is racist." More discussion on the issue follows. Cham reads his own piece silently while the others talk. He is listening too, but it is hard to tell whether he understands anything as he doesn't show any response in his facial expression. Then comes Cham's turn. The teacher distributes the copies the teacher's aide just made to the class. Cham reads his current event, and everybody has a copy to read. The class is very quiet when he reads. The current event he shares is about a dentist's invention of certain tubes which will prevent dolphins and whales from coming close to the beaches. Cham reads each word slowly and carefully. After his reading, the teacher immediately compliments him: "Good, Cham. I've just learned about this. I didn't know dolphins would come to the beach too. I thought only whales would do that. That's very good. Thank you." Not any response from the students. They are very quiet. When the teacher compliments him, Cham lowers his head, blushes, and says nothing.

11:30 am

Today the teacher talks about the earth, the weather changes on the earth, the distance and the angle of the earth from the sun. He asks three boys to the front to be the sun, the earth, and the moon, and moves them around when he explains the distance and the angle between them. The three boys in the front make faces to the class and one boy exaggerates his movement by falling down flat on the one next to him. The class laughs, and Cham laughs hard too.

11:50 am

Ten minutes before the class is over, the teacher give the assignment to the class: to find an article on science and write about it. He points to a table by the wall "I have some articles there. Go there to see whether there are some you are interested in." Many students stand up and go to the table. Cham leaves his seat and goes to the table too. The table is crowded. Cham stands a foot away, waiting. When two students leave the table, he steps closer to it and flips from one article to another from the stack on the table. Two minutes later, he finds one and takes it back to his seat. He starts to read it. Cham quietly reads by himself at his desk near the door, while the others talk loudly in groups, and from across the desks; some move around from desk to desk.

The class is over. The students chat and laugh on their way out of the room. Cham packs his things into the bag and goes to the teacher who is talking to a student. Next to the teacher, Cham listens to the conversation between the teacher and the student, his body slightly bent over. When the teacher finishes the talk, he turns to Cham and says to him: "Cham, nice job for the current event." Cham doesn't say anything or smile. He gives a piece of paper to the teacher and says to him "This is the paper, can I get it back today?" The teacher takes it and looks at a half page filled with words and says "Is this it?" Cham replies: "Yeah." "Okay, come to me after school." Cham nods his head and leaves the room.

Like Tran and Paw, Cham is quiet in the classroom. He seldom speaks up or interacts with anyone. Physically he sets himself apart from the community. Tran and Paw choose to sit by the students they identify with. Cham always sits by himself away from anyone else. But he listens to the others' conversation and watches what is happening around him. He expresses his reaction openly and seldom tries to hide his feelings.

He is less shy among the crowd and less concerned about what others think of him than Tran and Paw. For instance, Tran and Paw never voluntarily read anything to the class as they are too afraid that no one will understand them and they will appear "dumb" to the others. But Cham is different. In the beginning, the teacher would read the current event Cham prepared because of Cham's strong accent. While not used to speaking up in front of so many people, Cham was not afraid to try something new. After a few weeks, he told the teacher that he wanted to try to read his findings by himself. In order for the class to understand him, he made copies of what he would read for the class. The first time he read his current event to the class, he was very excited. He later told the ESL teacher, Jane, that he was nervous but he "felt good about himself," though he didn't know how much his class understood him. The teacher is the only person in the class who will come to talk to Cham, but no one else does. Like Tran and Paw, Cham appears left out when students interact freely with each other. During these times, he takes out some reading or work to do while the others talk. But his head is often upright to listen and watch his peers. He joins their laughter when he understands them. But he seldom contacts his peers for anything. After a few months of being in the class, I asked him whether he knew any names of his classmates. He shook his head and said "Maybe one or two, those the teachers called the most. Only their first

names, and I am not sure of their last names." Cham has no relationships with his classmates except sitting in the same room with them for class.

He is not a talker. He associates himself with others by doing things with them, rather than sharing thoughts or ideas with them. Unlike Tran, he seldom complains that he has no friends or he is looked down upon by the others in school. He has become friends with a Mexican student in the ESL room, and they often do things together after school. He is very happy for that. Very often he takes Sy to Woodland Drive to play sports with their Laotian friends. Cham enjoys the American school much more than the Lao school. He thinks the former is much more fun than the latter. He states:

I often skipped school in Laos. It was so boring: read, memorize, read, memorize, that was all you do every day. The teachers were not nice. They hit us, yelled at us and punished us hard. I like American schools much better. You can do things here. I like to make things with my hands. They have big gym, computer, and everything. The teachers are nicer. Time passes faster in the school than at home.

The most difficult thing for Cham is interacting with American students. He says that he doesn't know how to interact with them, and is not used to talking to the teacher on an equal level. But he enjoys listening to them and is interested in how they interact with each other. He hopes some day to "just do like them when my English is good." But he will set limits for his personal behavior as he says "the students should obey the teachers. They shouldn't argue with

the teacher, shouldn't interrupt the teacher in the class, that is not good."

He seems more open to the new culture than Tran and Paw though he is still bound by his cultural values in many ways. He says that he could never kiss or hug a girl in public but he wouldn't mind watching the others do it. He even drew a picture of a boy and a girl kissing and hugging each other for a Valentine's Day's assignment in art class. Knowing Tran and Paw, I can imagine that they would be very embarrassed and turn away if they caught some boys or girls kissing or hugging by accident.

Cham is good in sports and in doing things with his hands. He won a \$500, first prize for the "Musical Chairs" game in town and a first prize for the rocket he made as an assignment in science class. From TV, he learns how Americans enjoy their life by: skiing, skating, bowling, swimming, taking trips and playing Nintendo. He wants to try them all.

He is interested in the Wheel of Fortune Game Show on TV and has asked how to get on it. He wants to win a car. He talks about applying for a credit card and renting a car to travel all over the country.

He is unique in the Savang family. His brothers and sister have different opinions about him. Tran sneers at him by saying "He wanted to be somebody that he even didn't know of." Paw sees him as "too self-concerned. Only cares about himself but not others." But Sy enjoys him; "Cham is the

only one among my brothers and sisters who will play games with me or take me out to have fun."

In Cham's eyes, the best parts of the American culture are: taking trips on the weekends, playing games, boating, and going to parties. He dreams of not having to work, having lots of money, a beautiful house and going to parties and having a good time every day. He is influenced by TV, the conversations among his American peers and his favorite reading: People Magazine. When I interviewed him about his understanding of the American people, his answer was:

There is a good part and also a bad part of them. The good part is they help people; the bad part is they were killing, robbing people. I see that on TV every day.

Among the three high school students in the family, Cham has the most difficulties in his studies. He is at the lowest level for every subject. He takes math individually with the teacher, since he can hardly understand anything in the class.

Before he moved down to a lower level of English in the tenth grade, he read or did different assignments from the rest of his class. In science class, he often only writes down the things that the teacher writes on the board, because he can't understand much of what the teacher and other students say.

For his reading and writing assignments, he depends very much on the ESL tutors to help him to get through. But he is patient with himself and seldom gets frustrated or depressed with being behind. His favorite subjects are science and art because he enjoys doing things with his hands. He knows

English is important for him, but he doesn't know how to improve it. He does whatever he is asked and gets every assignment done on time. Still he is behind everyone in the class. When I asked him whether he thought that his studies today would prepare him for his future life in this country, he replied:

Maybe, they said that if you know more, then they pay you more. I don't know what subjects will help me for my future. Maybe English, if I can speak well, and know more English, I can get a good job. I like to study the things that can help me get jobs. I know I want to do some mechanic or electronic jobs. I heard that they pay well. That is why I want to go to the vocational school to study those things.

Unlike Tran and Paw, Cham doesn't have a very clear idea of what courses he needs to take. Tran likes math, and Paw prefers English, but Cham will "take anything that would help me get good jobs." He thinks once he has a job and makes a lot of money, then he can live like other Americans and do whatever he wants to do. Today he works very hard to get through school in the belief that, "With an American high school diploma, I would get a good job." His biggest wish is "to make good money and live like an American, at least 80 percent American."

From what Cham says about the American culture, I believe he means mainly the commercial culture he has learned from TV, soap operas and popular magazines. He thinks that is the American culture, but he has overlooked the democratic values of America: freedom, equality and individuality. They

are the principles this nation was founded on and also the values for which Cham and his family risked their lives in order to come here. Unfortunately, the school provides little opportunity for him to learn and experience these cultural values. Many cultural theorists (Spindler and Spindler, 1987c, Trueba, 1988, and Tharp and Gaillimore, 1989) believe that school activity settings should "become instrumental to the attainment of cultural goals, as well as to the expression of cultural values. School activity settings internalized by teachers as settings that help them (students) attain their goals of power, recognition, status and so forth" (Spindler and Spindler, 1987).

Cham's American schooling neither values his home culture, nor helps him know the world he came to join. His major purpose in staying in school is to "get a high school diploma." One thing he knows that he must learn well is English, as he says "I want to learn conversational English, that's to learn to talk. To learn vocabulary and spell words." He puts a lot of effort on the vocabulary in the vocabulary textbook, but he forgets most of the words very soon and seldom uses them in speaking or writing. Learning decontextual words, is as if he is traveling from unknown to unknown. On the margin, he studies very hard with the dream of "becoming a real American and living like them, at least 80 percent like them," but his concept of being an American doesn't represent the fundamental values of the

nation he has come to join. Unfortunately, his education here in America has little connection with the reality of the new world he wants to be part of.

Sy

Sy, the youngest one of the family, is many ways like his brothers and sister, but appears more passive than they. In the following classroom description, we will see a sharp contrast between his behavior and his peers'.

9:50 am

Sy walks into English class and seats himself at the end of the table near a window. The teacher asks the class to write a book review about the books they are reading and at the same time she gives their mid-term grades to them individually. The teacher stands in front of a long table covered with piles and piles of paper, students' notebooks, and books all over. She is surrounded by a dozen students who are anxious to find out their grades. She explains to one student what grades he got and why he got those grades. He listens to the teacher carefully with his eyes fixed on the piece of paper the teacher holds in her hand. Several eyes look over the teacher's shoulders trying to see what is on the paper and many heads are clustered around the teacher, trying to hear what she says. The students who can't get closer to see or hear, group themselves a foot away from the teacher, chatting, laughing and teasing each other while waiting for their turns. It takes several minutes for the teacher to go through each person's grades for the mid-term. Here is a dialogue between a student and the teacher:

Student: How come I only get 83 points for that?
Teacher: You didn't turn in the homework once.
S: When was that?
T: Let me check my notes. Okay, that's on Jan 19, the homework was discussing the character in your reading.
S: Oh, I was sick. How many points did you take out for that?

T: Ten points.
S: Then what happened to the 7 points I missed?"
T: That's taking out from the work you didn't do that well?
S: (pause)
T: Any questions?
S: I'll have to think about it.
T: Okay, you can come back to me. Next please.

10:10 am

The teacher overhears the talk of a group of students near her. She turns around and snaps:

I don't like to hear you talking about other teachers around me. How do you feel if somebody talks about your friends and colleagues just in front of you? That's not nice.

Her accusation immediately quiets down those students, and also the whole class. Everybody stops what they are doing and looks toward the front. Sy looks up only for one second and returns to his work. The teacher turns back to talk to the student about the grade again. The group who has been accused starts to murmur something again. This time they speak in soft voices that can hardly be heard.

Sy is sitting at his desk all this time writing his book review. He turns the book pages back and forth and jots down some notes from the book. He writes a few sentences on one piece of paper, then puts it aside and starts to write on a new piece of paper. Soon his desk is covered with pieces and pieces of hardly-used paper. Several times he goes to the shelf to get more paper to start over again. From time to time he looks up to the front where the teacher is. There is still a big crowd surrounding the teacher in the front. Some students are playing games on the computers with other students standing at the back watching them. Some are chatting with each other about the grades they just received.

Ryan: What did you get?

Dick: 55.

Ryan: I have one point higher than you.

D: I don't think she is right. A couple of things she didn't figure out right. I should have got more than 55.

R: I missed some classes and didn't turn in our journals.

D: I had a vacation too. I know what I didn't do for my report on... (He lifted the big dictionary from the table and put it down hard)...the Web-ster's In-ter-na-tion-al Dic-tion-a-ry. (He stresses each syllable.)

10:20 am

When there are not many students around the teacher, Sy stands up and goes to the front. He stands to the right of the teacher with his head lowered waiting for his turn. When the teacher finishes talking with one student, she turns to Sy.

T: Okay, Sy, this is what you got. You didn't turn in some of the home work, so I have to give you some zeroes.

S: How many zeroes I have?

T: Here, one, two, three.

S: Okay, thank you.

Sy leaves the teacher immediately for his seat and starts his work again. Dick walks to Sy and asks him: "What did you get Sy?" "67," Sy replies. "Wow, that's much higher than me. I bet you feel pretty good about that," Dick said to him. Sy doesn't say anything or even show any reaction on his face but continues his writing. Dick turns to another boy who finished talking with the teacher.

Ten minutes before the class is over, the teacher still has a few students surrounding her. Most of the students are moving around, a few sitting at their seats talking to each other. Sy puts his pen down and walks to the teacher again. When the teacher turns to him, he shows her what he has done for his book review.

T: See this word, it should be d-i-v-e.

S: d-i-v-e.

T: Right. Did he survive?

S: Yes.

T: Write something about his surviving. (Sy nodded his head, the teacher was reading the rest of the writing.)

T: That's good. (She gave it back to Sy.)

Sy takes his writing back from the teacher and goes back to his seat and works on it again. Two minutes before the class is over, he finishes his book review. He puts it in the folder and takes out his math report, and walks to Dick, who is on the computer "Can you type this for me?" he asks Dick. "For 25 cents a piece, how is that?" Dick says to Sy before he reads the report. After he sees what it is, Dick yells out "Math report! No, I am not going to type this for you." Without saying anything, Sy takes his math report back from Dick and returns to his seat. The bell rings. Sy leaves his seat immediately and practically jumps on one of the computer chairs, which was just vacated a second before. The next period is Sy's study hall time. He uses the whole time typing his math report on the computer.

Sy appears as a loner: sitting alone in the corner and working by himself all the time despite all the movement and noise around him. He does talk to the teacher and his peer (Dick), but compared to his peers; he is so business-like: no kidding, no joking, no arguing or gossiping. Almost every student questions the teacher about the points s/he receives for the work. The teacher expects this. That is why she chooses to talk to each student about his or her work individually. Unlike many of his peers, Sy doesn't argue with the teacher or complain about what he is given by the teacher but simply accepts what he gets. When Dick comes to him trying to carry on a conversation with him about their grades, Sy doesn't show any interest. Sy believes that teachers are authorities, and students "should only obey" but not argue with or complain to them. So in a lot of ways, Sy is left out.

Sy got three zeroes for not doing his homework three times. He knows he is at fault so he accepts what he gets, but he doesn't explain to anybody why he didn't do his homework. Every time when the teacher asks him about it, he says "I forgot" with his head lowered. When I ask him why he sometimes doesn't do his home work, he tells me: sometimes he is not clear about the requirement, sometimes he can't do the work by himself, and sometimes he is too busy to get all the work done.

Sy doesn't like to talk. Being the youngest one in the house, he is only talked to, and can be ordered around by anyone in the house. In his words, "They (the family members) never chat with me, but just ask me to do this or that. I am too young. They don't think I know anything." He is not used to talking about his own opinions. When I ask him some questions, most of his replies are "I don't know." He appreciates the equal relationship between teacher and students in school, and likes the free and loose behavior of his peers. But he doesn't know how to behave like them. He says, "I really like their free interactions. I wish I could be just like them, but I can't, and I don't know how."

Actually he has tried behaving like one of them. His math teacher tells me:

At the beginning of last September, Sy was hanging around with Dick. He didn't behave well at all. He joked, talked, and made fun all the time, acting silly and fooling around. Just like Dick. When I asked him to sit still, he acted in a silly way, and aroused the laughter of the class. He

wanted to have attention from the class. I was very upset and had a serious talk with him, and also separated him from Dick. Since then he is better and better. He has become a serious student.

Seeing how serious, how passive, and how timid and how quiet Sy appears now in the classroom, I can hardly believe that Sy has the history the math teacher tells me. I ask Sy about this. With his head lowered and eyes cast down, he tells me:

I liked Dick before, as he was the only one that came to talk to me. He was funny. I sort of wanted to be like him. But I don't know how. I was silly. Now I won't do it any more. I don't like Dick any more. He picked on me and kicked my butt all the time. I don't like him, he acts silly, not respect others. He had problems almost with all the subjects, but he is smart, he knows almost everything about computer. Now I don't have any friends.

Sy's words parallel with what Bruner (1986) states about construction of self-concept, "people's self-esteem and their self-concept changed in sheer reaction to the kinds of people they found themselves among, and changed even more in response to the positive and negative remarks that people made to them" (p.109) This was the first year Sy was put in a class with students who were his age. In the previous two years of schooling in America, he was among students much younger than he, because of his low English ability. He wanted to be like his peers. He tried to imitate his friend, but his behavior was not approved by the teacher. He withdrew and since then has been careful about each step he

takes. It is as if he tried to stick his head out of his shell, but was shocked back into it again. Now he doesn't know what he should do.

I want to have American friends, but I don't know how. I can't talk like them because of my English. They talk about others behind their back all the time, I can't do that. They fool around, I don't want to be like them. They hang out all the time, I can't do that. I only go out with my brothers.

He lives between the two cultures. It is hard for him to adopt behaviors that are in contrast to the values by which he was raised. He doesn't resist his peers' behaviors as consciously as Tran and Paw do. When I ask him whether he is bothered by his peers' behavior, his answers usually are:

No, I am used to them.
I wish I could do just like them.
That's okay for them, they are Americans.

Observing how Sy behaves among his peers, I find he behaves very much as Mei did before she jumped into the swimming pool. No matter in what situation, Sy starts by being quiet, and by removing himself a few feet away from the crowd, with his head lowered. Slowly he will loosen up a little bit when he finds that he can do just like the others. He will smile, or laugh with the crowd, or give "hi-fives" to the people who come to talk to him. In time, he loosens up more and more and becomes quite active when what he does wins approval and praise from the others. In the case of disapproval, he will withdraw and become quiet just as he is at the onset. Sy's behavior demonstrates how a newcomer

enters a new world: "[he] walk[s] on stage into a play whose enactment is already in progress" (Bruner, 1986, p.35). As a newcomer, Sy has to figure out what role he should play and what position he should be in before he participates.

Sy is mostly passive among his peers and in the classroom. He seldom initiates any conversation with anyone, except to ask or answer questions about school work. He tries to avoid any conflict with anyone, instead he waits for the right moment to interact. When he wants to talk to the teacher, he waits until the teacher is not needed by the others. When he wants to use the computer, he waits until one is available. He rarely speaks in school. He seldom relies on language to negotiate with anyone for things he wants to do, instead he passively waits for the opening.

He works almost every minute in school. Alone, by himself, he tries very hard. For a short book review (seventy-seven words), he works the whole class period, with no talking, in total concentration. The other students spend the same time getting their work done while talking and chatting with their friends. It is not possible for Sy to be like his peers. Sy tries to get his work done at school because he knows he can get help from the teacher and have it checked by her to make sure it is right.

To utilize every moment, Sy works in the cafeteria while the others wait for their lunch, or to be dismissed. He works before class starts while the others are talking or

playing. His peers have different opinions about his business-like manner in school. Some say, "He doesn't like us. He just wants to be by himself." Some state, "I wish I could be just like him. He is so disciplined, and can control himself so well. I wish I could do like him." Some assume, "He might never be able to do his homework at home." His teacher comments, "He is a very focused person. He will get his work done at the time while the others can't." It is not easy for Sy to concentrate for such a long time. By the end of the day, he feels extremely tired. When he gets home after school, the first thing he does is to take a nap.

After three years of hard study in an American school, he has improved a lot as a literate person, although he is still far behind his peers in speaking, reading and writing English. However, he doesn't know what his schooling is for. He doesn't know what his studies will bring him. By the end of the school year, he is not even sure which grade he will go to in the next year. For three years, he has been shifted back and forth between second and sixth grades.

When I ask him what he wants to do after he graduates from school, he shakes his head and says "I don't know. I am too young to think that far. Nobody never asked me, or talked about it in my family. For sure I won't go to college as I can't study." When I ask him what he thinks he is studying for, it takes him a while to understand my question, then he replies "I don't know. I never think of

that. Maybe for English, for me to learn to speak English." Frank Smith (1986) asserts that "Children have difficulty in learning anything that to them seems to have no purpose" (p.27).

Sy impresses me as a person who seldom has a chance to make any decision in his life. He lives his life tentatively and waits passively to be led somewhere, but he doesn't know where. Since birth, his life has been so uncertain that he was never sure what would happen the next day. He is the same way in his studies. He is surrounded by the unknown, and doesn't know what he should do next. His first response to any questions is "I don't know" before he starts to find the real answers. Unlike his brothers and sister, Sy has many years to go before he graduates from high school. I wonder if he will become a more confident person as he continues through future years of learning in the school of the new culture.

Reflection

Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy are all quietly on the edge of events working, observing, and learning to be part of this culture. In the eyes of others, they are alike: the Laotians, the refugees, the students who can't speak much English. They are silent, obedient, and hard workers. That is what most of their peers and teachers see about them.

They appear so similar that often people forget that they are also individuals despite their common ethnic qualities and manners. Each one of them works on the edge trying to define his/her position on the new stage.

Tran cares the most about his self-image. He wants very much to know the Americans, to have American friends, to be able to do "great things" in the new culture. In his words "What I want to know about them (the Americans) the most is what is on their mind, and what they think of me." He is frustrated with his present situation--alienated from the culture and wants to establish himself in the new world.

Paw is a down-to-earth person. She sets practical goals for herself and persistently strives to reach them. She has faith in her education and believes that it will help her to be and do what she wants in her life. To her, nothing is more exciting than getting good grades.

Cham is an adventurer. He is not afraid to try anything new and exciting. His goal is to get a diploma, to get a job--a "man's job," to make money, then to experience "the best part" of the culture. The thing he knows very well about this world is, "you have to have money before you can do anything."

Sy doesn't have a clear goal for his life yet. In his words "I am too young, and I don't think of that right now. Maybe in two or three years, I would have an idea of what I wanted to be." So far he doesn't know what he wants to be and what he can. Now he has one desire, a strong desire and

that is to "be just like them (his American peers), to do everything like them."

For three years in America, these four teenagers have led a very isolated life. They haven't felt a part of school life and don't know how to become a part of it. Because they speak broken English and know little about the new culture--the context of the language, socially and academically--they are separated from others at school. As Khleif (1978) states "language becomes, by definition, the chief marker of boundaries." Awareness of the situation of the students on the boundary not only enables us to help them integrate into the mainstream culture, it also helps us understand ourselves. Khleif posits: "An ingroup cannot be understood apart from an outgroup; both are interlocked into a unity of opposition; one cannot be understood except in terms of the other."

On the last day of the school year, all the students gather in the cafeteria to have a school assembly. The students group themselves by each table, on either side of which are squeezed at least a dozen students. The hall is filled with sounds of loud laughing, talking, clapping, teasing and yelling. At the far back on the left, Paw, Carol and Lila, a Laotian girl sit quietly at a table. Paw sits in her usual way, her head resting on one of her hands and her eyes staring blankly. In the middle at the back, Sy and a Laotian boy are on a bench by themselves. Sy moves

his head from side to side, attracted by the loudest noise from the crowd. At the far back row on the right are three boys: Tran, Cham and a handicapped student in a wheelchair.

Tran sits there with a constant smile on his face. Cham sits with his body upright craning his head, trying to see what is going on at the front.

This is the end of their three years in American schools. Leaning on the door at the back of the hall observing each of them, I think to myself: one more year remains for Tran, Cham and Paw to be in the high school. So far none of them is sure what they will do after that. I wonder if one more year of high school education will help them to feel more comfortable in the new culture, or will the new culture remain strange to them. Will they change when they have high school diplomas? Will each additional year of study build some confidence for Sy? How soon will he figure out his position in this world? Officially that is also the last day of my research at their school. The picture of their being on the edge of the new culture, wondering, puzzling and trying to make sense of what was going on around them will remain in my memory forever.

Chapter Five

Tran

Tran likes to tell stories. The first time I met him, he told me that his name, Tran, meant a funny boy. When he was little, he walked in a very funny way, that was how he got his name. Among my four informants, he is the only one that can read and write in Lao and he remembers the most about his schooling in Laos:

We learned history, math, geography, and Lao in the school. We memorized all the time. Among all the subjects, the math and poetry were the most difficult ones. You get one credit for each of other courses you take, but you can get three credits for math or poetry courses. I took both of them, as I liked challenge.

What he remembered the most was not what he memorized at school but what he learned at the Buddhist temple where he was a monk for seven months:

That was when I was five, I was a monk in the temple for seven months. In the temple, we studied Buddhism, the Lao history, such as how the country became as what it was today. We read a lot of legends in the Lao culture. I learned that about a hundred years ago, Lao was a much bigger country. The god sent to the Lao a white elephant to help and protect the Lao people and country. But the Thai people and Vietnamese fought with the Lao people for the elephant. They took it away from us. Since then our country became smaller and weaker. We learned a lot of stories like that. Every day we got up between four to five to read.

Later on, when we became better acquainted, he told me a secret:

Actually I already graduated from high school in Laos, and I had a high school diploma. Nobody knew this at the school here. I grew up with my uncle and aunt and they were both teachers. So they taught me how to read and write when I was only three. By the time I went to school, I knew everything, so I skipped some grades. I was the youngest among all the high school graduates that year.

Tran told me that his main purpose for attending high school again in America was to learn English. He and his family knew that English would be most important for his success in this country. But ironically among the four school children of the family, he was the only one who didn't take any English courses during the year I was doing research in their school. Seeing the difficulty he had in speaking, reading and writing in English, I couldn't understand why he didn't take English or how he could get away with it in the school. I asked Jane, one of the ESL teachers, about this matter. She told me that Tran really resisted taking English and insisted on having two high level math courses. After Tran failed geometry "due to his language inability" according to his math teacher, Jane regretted the decision. She stated:

We shouldn't have listened to him and let him do that (refuse to take the English course). We thought that if we gave him two ESL periods a day, that would cover his English learning, but it turned out

we were bogged down by his classroom work because of all the help he needed.

I interviewed Tran several times about this. He said:

I don't like English course, as you always have to write those book reports. I don't like to write those book reports. You read, then you have to write book reports, always like this. I hate to write those book reports. I want to learn English, to learn conversational English. I want to speak good and learn more words, not that kind of English in the English class. I know my English is not good. I want to improve my English. But I don't think that English class can make my English any better than I take other courses. In other courses, not only I learn English, but other subjects too. I took English in the past two years, now I want to learn something more important.

Tran had three reasons for not taking the English course:

1. he didn't like to write book reports;
2. he thought the English course couldn't improve his English as he wished;
3. he would rather learn English while studying other subjects than learning it as a subject itself.

Tran's words express clearly that he was disappointed by the English courses he took earlier and thought they were a waste of time. He preferred to connect his language learning with other subjects.

In the past two decades, many language theorists (Britton, 1970, 1971, Rubin, 1985, MacLure, 1988, Barnes, 1980, and Pinnell and Jaggar, 1991) have advocated "All teachers should be language teachers" (Pinnell and Jaggar, 1991). They argue:

[S]tudents in elementary and in secondary schools should be involved in settings and circumstances across the curriculum that regularly require them to actively learn by talking (Pinnell and Jaggar, p. 711) [C]ommunication skills and functions of language can be developed within any subject matter area...(Rubin, 1985).

However, besides English teachers, few teachers think that their teaching has anything to do with language learning. Holding the same conventional view, I asked Tran how he could learn to read and write English well if he didn't study English. Disagreeing with my conventional point, he answered me in a loud and definite voice:

Of course I read and write. I read and write all the time. I read math, science and do homework with it, that's reading and writing. I live with reading and writing. It should be in here (pointing at his head).

In this sense, he did constantly read and write. He read the textbooks every day and did the exercises in them. He read for the assignments and wrote monthly book reports. He also had reading and writing assignments to do from the ESL rooms. He was busy all the time and never had enough time for the "reading" and "writing" he was assigned. In the next sections, I am going to present in depth how he was taught to read and write at the school, and what he might develop as a reader and a writer.

Reading

Tran liked to read about "great people, real people and real life. I want to learn how they became that great and what they did in their life." But he didn't have time to read what he liked; he was too busy reading for school assignments. Reading textbooks was his everyday reading, a priority of all the readings he had to do. Second on the list was the outside reading for his classroom assignments. Last came his reading for ESL work.

"I can't read."

The most difficult reading for Tran was his monthly science report: the assignment from the biology class. He had to choose an article on science to read and then write a book report on it each month. This was the reading with which Tran needed the most help from the ESL teacher. At first he would wait until the weekend before the report was due, then he would start to work on it. Because he had so much difficulty with the reading, he couldn't do it quickly on his own. Jane decided to start to work with him on the report two weeks ahead of the due date. Usually it would take him at least a week to do the reading, with Jane's help, and another week to write out the report.

Each time, they would go to the library to look for some articles on science. Once they found three articles. From

them, Tran chose one about drugs. Jane wished he had chosen one from the other two: either the one about pets, or the one about population. Jane told me that "it seems he tends to choose more difficult ones to read. But it's his choice, I can't do anything. I'm afraid that if I told him it was too difficult for him, he would feel insulted." Later on Tran told me why he chose to read the article on drugs:

I wanted to know how to grow opium. In my country, there were a lot of opium farms, but I never knew how they do it. But later I found this article is not about growing drugs, but how to stop drugs coming to this country. It is too late. I just have to do it.

This shows a discrepancy between what Tran would choose to read and what the teacher desired him to read. He chose his reading according to what he wanted to know, while the teacher wanted him to choose what he could handle linguistically. There was a dilemma in Tran's reading. Literate in his first (Lao) language, he was interested in more sophisticated issues and things than his limited second language could handle. Because there were so many new words, reading every paragraph was like cutting beef with a dull knife. He simply couldn't afford the time he needed to do the reading he desired. He had too much of the assigned work to do every day. Very often he started with the reading he was interested in, but because of its language difficulty, he ended up switching to topics whose language he could handle

but whose content he was not interested in, as he would say:
"that is for small children."

A thirty-five-minute transcript of his reading the drug article reveals the difficulties he came across in his reading. The following is part of the transcript:

.....

J: ... What's "substantially" mean?

T:(giving an embarrassing smile) You see I haven't read it. I don't know... a lot of words in here. So when I go home, I can't do it.

J: That's why I said to you "Keep a list of words you don't understand. You can't tell what it means from the rest of the sentence, bring it in, because if I don't know what words you can't understand I can't expect you to read it. In other words, if you don't bring the words in, you're not going to understand the article.

T:

J: Some words you can just figure out what they mean from the rest of the sentence, but some words you can't

T:

J: Like this one, it's a hard one.

T: Substan...oh... does it mean "Stand something"?

J: No, "Substantially" means....

T: "Stand by!"

J: (Laugh) No, good guess though. ... Why do you think it's "stand by"?

T: Because "for substan...", does it mean...something that they want to set up? ... I don't know what that mean.

J: In this sentence, "Substantially" refers to "how much drugs have been brought down into the United States. Quite a bit.

T: Does that mean to slow down?

J: The import of drugs into the United States has been slowed down, quite a bit. Substantially means a solid amount.

T: Okay.

J: How would you give it back to me? What does the "substantially" mean?

T: Does that m.... I'm lost.

J: Okay, "substantially" refers to "how much something has happened." If something has happened in a substantially amount, it's a good amount.

DL: A lot.

J: A lot of something. So there is a lot less drugs imported into the United States. Because the US has been giving money to spray the crops. So the crops are not growing....Why has this been successful in Mexico? Why has the Unites States been workig with the Mexicans?

T: Mexican ...(reading the article) Oh, this part again. I don't know this word.

J: Recognize. If I recognize you, I know you by seeing you.

T: Okay, does it mean...?

J: The government understands something...

T: I see.

.....

Obviously this shows that Tran gets sidetracked in his reading because of the many words he doesn't know. Jane ends up spending most of the time explaining individual words instead of the content. The transcript shows that in a thirty-five minute period, over thirty minutes were spent on the explanation of individual words, and only three or four

minutes on the content of the paragraphs. Jane spent seven minutes explaining the word, "substantially".

Seeing how he was reading with Jane, I can understand Tran's difficulties reading the article on his own, and why he disliked reading. He chose to read what he was interested in. But it turned out to be so difficult that he could hardly move on from one paragraph to another without stopping many times. When I researched in a fourth-grade classroom, the teacher said to her children "When you choose a book to read, open a page, if you find five words you don't know on that page, that means it is too challenging for you. You should choose another one." Tran stumbled on at least five words in each paragraph. Reading each paragraph was a challenge for him. In this kind of reading, Tran has no control as a reader.

Seeing Tran's problems in reading, it is easy for us to think that because he doesn't have enough vocabulary, he can't do sophisticated reading. Goodman and Goodman (1978) studied children from four different nationality groups (Arabic, Navaho, Samoan, and Spanish) as they read in English. They found:

All of the children, despite limitations in English, were able to read and retell stories. Background knowledge was a significant factor in how well they read and recalled. The more these children knew about the content, the easier it was for them to read and understand the text.

When Tran read the "drug" article, he didn't have any background knowledge of it. Both content and concept were foreign to him. He had to rely on the teacher to help him read it. When he read with the teacher, he was in a passive position. He was either asking questions, or being questioned, but was seldom able to contribute anything to the reading. The most frequent phrase he used in the conversation was "Does that mean...?", which reveals the uncertainty of his understanding of the reading and his lack of confidence in himself as a reader. Tran's words at the end of the thirty-five-minute transcript indicate what he understood about himself as a reader after the reading:

You see, my English is so poor. There are too many words I don't understand. When I read, I might get a little and the most is gone. I don't know what they talk about. So I can't read.

His self-evaluation "I can't read" helps show why Tran was a reluctant reader. The more reading he did, the more he thought he was "dumb". He was frightened, frustrated and humiliated by the reading he had to do. He put off reading until he couldn't delay any more. He was in dilemma as a reader. Simple reading was too childish for him and didn't match his interests, but the difficult reading highlighted his weaknesses. As a result, he tried to avoid reading and remained a poor reader. Tran's reading experiences are similar to what Mike Rose (1988) describes in writing about his own early struggles in school:

There are times when no matter how hard I tried, I wouldn't get it. I closed the book, feeling stupid to my bones....(p.57) When I tried to read it, I'd ended up rescanning, the same sentences over and over, not understanding them, and, finally, slamming the book down on the desk--swearing at this golden boy Johnson and angry with myself(p.49)

The reading experience Rose describes presents the point that even native-English speakers suffer the same kind of frustration as Tran, when they read something too unfamiliar. In Vygotskian view, learning happens in areas where learners have mastered part of the knowledge.

Most of the time Tran was in the passive position when he read with the teacher, but he was not totally passive. The thirty-five-minute transcript shows one spark of his thinking, but it didn't have a chance to expand or move further.

.....

J: Why are they going to spray it?

T: Does that mean.... to poison this one?

J: Right. The United States gave money to a program, so that the airplane can go over the field where the marijuana is growing with the spray, the chemical sprays. Then they can spray the marijuana, and the marijuana plants would die.

T: I think....that... that's not right. The people there can get trouble.

J: Who would get in trouble, the people or the government?

T: The people in that area.

J: That's a real good point. Because that's the problem with spraying chemicals, on everything, on any kind of crops that are growing. The chemical is going to the

ground and gets on to the people, right, that's the problem. But in one way it's good. What's been done?

T:Nn.....

.....

Too bad the discussion didn't expand on Tran's thinking, but took him back right on the "track". I know that Jane wanted to help him get through the reading so that he could go on to the next step: report writing. Jane noticed his insight, appreciated his thinking, and suggested he put his thought in the report. But at that moment she didn't have time to build the discussion. Tran's thinking just started and was abruptly ended. Knowing how much their students have to rush through their work, the ESL teachers try hard to help them get their work done within the time they have. So Tran would read to get through the reading, to answer the questions, or to write a report on it, and then promptly forget what the reading was on. Extended discussion and thinking were but off-track discussion. Reading, to Tran, was simply a "job". Powell et al (1985) found in their study that many high students are either schooled to become passive learners and graduate without knowing much.

"I have to read....for her."

Besides helping Tran with his classroom reading assignments, the ESL teachers also assigned Tran some other readings, especially after they noticed his difficulty in speaking, reading, and writing in English. Jane tried hard to

find reading that she thought Tran would be interested in, such as novels, stories, and newspaper clippings. But Tran rarely showed any interest in whatever Jane found for him. He simply took it as a job. Once Jane found the book Hatchet for Tran to read. It was a boy's adventure story that Jane thought Tran might enjoy. When Jane showed Tran the book, he took it without interest and said: "Okay, I'll read it." Her expectation was that every day he would read a chapter and write about it. The following day Jane planned to talk with him about the chapter.

One incident reveals where Jane's reading was on Tran's priority list. One Monday morning, I walked into Jane's room and noticed Tran by himself busy reading Hatchet and writing something down from the book. When he saw me, he said, "I didn't get to do this last night. After I did my homework, I watched movies with my brothers. They rented too many movies. I didn't have time to read this. Now I have to read and write for her (pointing at Jane's seat) before she comes back from typing something downstairs." Before I could respond, he went right back to his reading and writing. I knew this was his way of telling me not to disturb him with my questions. (He knew I always had questions for him.)

A few minutes later Jane walked into the room. When she saw Tran reading Hatchet, she asked him "Did you read it at home last night?" "Yeah..." he looked at me embarrassedly and added "some," in a very low voice. He continued his

reading and writing. Three minutes later, he put down the pen and handed the writing to Jane "Here is my reading." It was the summary of the chapter he read. The messy handwriting, the fragmented sentences and misspelled words displayed a reluctant piece of work (see Figure 2), showing carelessness and little effort.

Jane read Tran's writing, and was not pleased. She said to him "If you would write neater, I could understand you better." Tran stood there and looked relieved because he had finished the assignment on time. Since his writing showed little comprehension, Jane asked him some questions about the chapter. Tran answered the general questions but was stuck on the specific details. He told Jane that there were many words he didn't know, so he couldn't get the details. But he didn't think the book was difficult for him: "This book was easy, so I put it aside, and dealt with the difficult work first. I didn't have time to come back to it, so I didn't spend much time on it." I took this opportunity to ask him: "What if we assign you a more difficult book?" "No, no, no," shaking his hands and head hard and with a big smile said "I don't have time to read those stuff."

Jane was frustrated with his attitude toward reading and started to lecture him about how important it was for him to improve his English through reading and writing. During this time, Tran didn't say anything. When Jane finished, Tran raised his head and asked "Can I bring a manual of fixing

airplanes here, and you teach me how to read it?" Jane didn't know how to respond to his question. After hesitating a few seconds, she replied to him that she was not sure she could understand it herself.

Tran's request for reading the manual for fixing airplanes raises a significant question: what is reading for? In school, he was reading mostly for comprehension. His reading assignments required him to write a book-report, answer comprehension questions or write a summary of the reading. His request suggested that if reading was for comprehension, he would rather comprehend something that was more related to his life--his possible future job (he told me that there was a 50 percent chance that he might get a job fixing airplanes after he graduated from the high school), than reading something that had little relevance to his life. His request implies that he wished reading would somehow connect with his life rather than locking him within the text itself.

+ Part 5
 the plane into the L hand
 that Thais had
 After, crashed down the ~~ground at sea~~
~~the his memory back~~ - He talked with his friend ~~and~~ ^{very}
 So in the night, He saw his mother sat
 with a man. Then He opened his eyes
 and screamed. After a moment
 He heard the birds singing,
 He got a pain in his head and leg.
 Brian tried to get out from the
 water. into the land, and he want
 to sleep all night until he wake up
 at dawn.

7.47. I think it would be been over 2
 before they they found him
 13/1/91. He so hungry and thirsty and
 he can't see anything stand out.
 What is does secret

Figure 2 A Sample of Tran's Reading Summary

Dewey advised teachers to find out what children need instead of forcing them to read materials that they thought were good for them. In discussion of high school teaching, Powell, Farrar and Cohen (1985) state: "Dewey and others had urged educators to remake the curriculum so that it exploited students' natural curiosity, responded to their real-life interests, and encouraged them to make choices about what to study, and how" (p.258).

No doubt reading the manual on fixing airplanes would be difficult reading for both Jane and Tran, but because of the significance Tran saw in this reading, he would be more willing to spend time and effort in the reading. In this case, I believe, Tran would be motivated to accept the challenge.

"Don't think!"

Another type of reading Tran had to do in the ESL room was to read the ESL textbooks with the teacher to practice using the language. It seemed to me that kind of reading was meant more for doing exercises rather than for communication or understanding. The following scene of Tran reading the ESL textbook and doing the exercises associated with the text presents this point.

It was in Andy's ESL room, a small windowless room the approximate size of two ping-pong tables, where Carl, a Mexican student stood on a chair, painting the wall, for credits in his art course. Andy, the ESL tutor, was sitting at the desk. When Tran came in, Andy asked him:

A: How was the math test?
T: It was okay.
A: You think you did fine?
T: I hope so.
A: Today, I'd like to do some language exercise with you.
T: Okay.
A: You are okay with your biology work, right?
T: Yeah, but I still have some work to do...but that's all right.
A: We will have some time for that. Let's do some language exercises first.

Andy opened the ESL textbook, Turning Point, to the section on words of possession: mine, yours, his, hers, theirs and its. In this section, there were some pictures of advertisements for practicing the usage of the possessive words. Andy read the instruction to Tran (see Figure 3):

Read the advertisement and write the words that show ownership. For example,
a. yours

Andy asked Tran to get a piece of paper and they would do the exercises together.

A: Read the first picture, Tran.
T: Fruit Fizz, Cool, refreshing, different! Serve it on ice. The pleasure is yours.
A: Whose pleasure is it?
T: I don't understand you, I am lost.
A: Look at the ad, and answer "Whose pleasure is it?"
T: Customer's.
A: No, it is in there, in the sentence.
T: (Reads the sentence again) It's me.
A: No, you don't have to think, the answer is in the sentence.
T: It's mine?
C: (Carl stopped his painting) Don't think, just repeat the word in the sentence.
A: Yes, don't change anything, read the sentence again, the answer is there.
T: (Reads the sentence again) I don't know, I don't understand, I am lost.
A: Read the sentence, it's there.
T: It's mine?
C: (Shouts on the chair) Don't change anything, just say the word in the sentence.

T: (Becomes frustrated, and raises his voice) I don't understand it.
A: Okay, let's start from the very beginning. Read the directions. Here, read here.
T: (Reads the directions, looking puzzled at Andy) It's yours?
A: You got it!
T: (Shook his head hard) I don't know how to do this. I have never done this before.
A: Then, it's good practice for you. Do the next one please.
DL: (I interrupt Tran to ask him a question) Would you please me tell why you could not give the answer "yours" at first?
T: Because I thought the ad spoke to me when I read it. So I should say "Mine or something."

Andy and Tran went on with the rest of the exercise and Tran moved smoothly from one picture to another, until he read the ad with a big smiling female face with words like these:

Do you want PERFECT TEETH? Look at mine! I used SOLODENT!

Tran hesitates here. He looks at Andy and when Andy asks "Whose teeth are they?" Tran responds in a very puzzling tone, "Hers?" Andy shakes his head and says "No, just read the word there." Tran still puzzled looks at Andy. "Yes, put the word 'mine' down on your paper," Andy assures him. Tran writes the word 'mine' and shakes his head hard and with a confused smile, he murmurs "I don't know."

They move to the next section, titled "Locate People and Things." The example is:

The car is in front of the camper.

There are groups of nouns and prepositions in the exercise. Andy asks Tran questions with words and sentence patterns provided in the section. The exercise continues on:

Reading advertisements

1. Read the advertisements and write the words that show ownership. For example, *a. yours*.

<p>a.</p> <p>FRUIT FIZZ</p>  <p>Cool, refreshing, different!</p> <p>Serve it on ice. The pleasure is yours.</p>	<p>b. Do you imagine yourself HERE?</p>  <p>Fleetwood Soccer Shoes... They're yours for only \$35.</p>
<p>d. Try BOUNTY BURGER</p>  <p>Theirs is only a burger. But ours is THE Burger.</p>	<p>c.</p>  <p>His coat is elegant. And what about hers?</p> <p>e. Do you want PERFECT TEETH? Look at mine!</p>  <p>I use SOLODENT!</p>
<p>f. What's your key to success?</p>  <p>Theirs is reading.</p>	

Figure 3 Language Exercise Tran had in the ESL Room

A: Where is the tent?
T: It's behind the tree.
A: Where is the family?
T: It's in the tent.
A: Where is the bear?
T: It's in the jungle.

Andy pretends to be shocked by Tran's last answer, and Tran laughs. I then ask, "Have you ever heard about any bears in the jungles?" Tran turns his head to me and says confidently: "No, it doesn't make any sense. But you don't have to make sense, just make a sentence. Don't think."

Certainly by this time Tran now knows how to play this learning game. This episode reveals clearly how language was taught in a decontextualized way and only for the sake of the language use itself. In these exercises, Tran had to disconnect the language from the meaning and thinking, so he could get the right answers to meet the instructions. His confusion at the beginning was not because he didn't know how to read or use the language, but because he read for meaning and did the exercises in the context of real communication. When the text said "it's yours," he understood it to mean "it's mine." But he was wrong according to the requirement. That was why he was lost. Though he finally learned to read and answer the questions in these exercises in a detached way, it was still too difficult for him to give the answer "mine" when clearly, for him, the teeth belonged to the big smiling female face. He stopped, was puzzled and became lost again until the teacher reassured him and then directed him to

put "mine" down as the answer. As he did so, he shook his head and murmured "I don't know." This revealed his confusion and his reluctance to accept this meaningless way of learning.

As the language exercise progressed, Tran became a confident game player and completed the rest of the exercises smoothly with the teacher. His response when I challenged his nonsense sentence "The bear is in the jungle" showed that he had finally grasped the tricks of the "learning": "You don't have to make sense, just make a sentence. Don't think!" It didn't take long for Tran to become a mechanical and passive learner. Powell et al found in their study that in today's high school "Passivity rather than intensity predominates" (p.186), and "substantial numbers of quiet and passive teenagers simply pass through" (p.181). Powell et al also quote a high school teacher, "Adolescents had been 'schooled to be passive for most of their lives, and have no idea how to think for themselves, or how to engage themselves in any sort of procedure to find out their strengths and weakness" (p.51). This example of Tran's language exercise certainly exhibits how our adolescents are schooled to become passive learners.

These three examples of how Tran read at school showed that he read for the assignment and had little interest in what he was asked to read. In this way he didn't have to

think, express ideas, or connect the learning with his life; just repeat or retell the texts he read and answer the teachers' context-bound questions. His reading was disconnected and decontextualized and when he read, he was locked within the text itself.

A Transactional Reading Experience

Tran could express himself and liked to engage in serious thought, as long as he was not trapped in so-called "comprehension-type reading strategies." I discovered this one day when we read a legend from One Thousand and One Nights together. The story was called "Have You Ever Listened to Your Dream Voice?" I was supposed to tutor him to read the story. After he read the story, instead of asking him comprehension questions, I told him a story that my father told me when I was little about why the collection of the legends was called One Thousand and One Nights. He was very interested in my story and asked me whether I believed in my own dream voice. I said no and he then told me a story about how the people in his own country believed in a dream voice:

In Laos, we believe our dream voice. If a person doesn't wake up in his dream walking, he will die. If he wakes up in his dream walking, he will find treasure. In the past when the French left our country, they tried to take gold out of our country. But they were stopped by the local soldiers. They had a fight. The French escaped without the gold. The soldiers who didn't die buried gold with the bodies of their people that were killed during the fighting, and planned to get the gold

later. But the dead people sent the messages home through dreams. Their families and friends went to the place and dug up the gold, but they didn't see any bodies at all. When the French left our country, they buried a lot of treasure, but nobody knew where they were.

I was fascinated and asked who told him the story. He said that one of his great grandfather's guards told him: "He told me a lot of stories like that. He is just like one of the family. I like him and miss him a lot. He is still alive and lives in Laos."

Thus, Tran and I produced two stories from the one story we read. The oral literature the great grandfather's guard passed on to Tran had lived with him for years, and this story he told me helped me begin to understand the Lao people and culture. We both learned more than one story while we read. In telling this story inspired by the reading, Tran had a positive language experience and used it to connect the reading to what he knew.

Rosenblatt (1983), a reader-response critic, holds that reading is an experience of recreating and making meaning through transaction between the reader, the text and the author. She argues against locating meaning in the text and seeing the text as a fixed object. She suggests teachers lead students primarily "to seek in literature a vital personal experience" (p.59). In reading the "Dream Voice" story, Tran and I developed an awareness of each other. He

understood that my father liked to tell me a lot of stories when I was little, and I understood him to be a good storyteller, and someone who missed an old friend who told him stories back in his home country. In sharing our stories, we had gained a meaningful experience from the reading. Furthermore, we were able to communicate, to think, to express and to connect it with our personal experience and knowledge.

On another reading occasion, Tran surprised me with his sensitivity and thoughtfulness, a side I did not often see. It was in Jane's room, and we were reading some newspaper clippings together. They were about the Iraq War. After the reading, Jane and I began to talk about the previous night's TV news on the war. We talked about the missiles dropping on Iraq: "That country really can stand bombing," Jane said, "see how many missiles dropped on that small land in one second." Listening to Jane's remark, Tran shook his head with a sigh and joined in:

I am very sad now, sad about Iraq. It's like five big people beating up a small person. It's like a father beating up his son. (He pointed at the map.) You see, how small Iraq is, how big other five countries, America, German, France, Britain,... what is other country, Japan? I don't know, I just feel sad to see five big people beating up a small person, that's like the father beating the son up. That's not fair. Of course America will win, he is too powerful.

Jane and I were silenced by Tran's statements. We quietly looked up at him. He was standing there with eyebrows tightly knit, and without the usual smile on his face. We didn't know whether we were astounded by those unusual statements or simply by the fact they came from him, the person we knew to be only interested in doing his "job" and getting good grades for his tests.

Transactional reading-response theorists hold that a text evokes the readers' memory and brings his past experience into his interpretation of and response to the text. The interpretation and reading-response is a recreation of the text. With this in view, I assume, reading the newspaper clippings about the Desert War might have evoked Tran's memory of his home country: a small country invaded by many bigger countries for centuries and bombed every day during the Vietnam War. His memory and his experience of living through the war helped him feel pain for the Iraqi people. His response was an expression of his feelings and a recreation of a text out of a text.

This time Jane dispensed with comprehension questions and routine language points. His freely-offered comments on the war told us more than his understanding of the newspaper clippings. He made us do the thinking. We had followed the news, and voiced our agreements and disagreements with it, but his perspective was so astonishing that we were left

speechless. After a few seconds of his talk, I asked him whether his father talked about the Iraq War with him. He told me, "This is my own ideas. My father doesn't like to talk to us much."

Unfortunately, Tran seldom had opportunities like this to display or share the deep side of himself. At school we saw him as being busy every second, trying to finish "jobs", shifting from one book to another while flipping the pages. He was too busy to talk, to think, or to read anything in depth. Every time Jane asked him to read something, he would say "...But...I have job to do." His favorite word to describe the schoolwork was "jobs." Yes, to him, reading and writing at school was just a "job", a business. He held a business attitude toward this school business!

Writing

Tran thought that the way writing was taught in the Lao and American schools was very different:

I learned to write poems in Laos, but here they just ask you to write book reports. Writing is different here. Here you write step by step. In Laos, we don't write this way. We write about subject, but not step by step. That's to write for the small people. The smart people don't have to be told step by step. They can get it in the writing. In Laos, we were taught writing has three parts: the beginning, the middle and the end, then we just write. Here they ask you to write step by step.

It seems that Tran's worst experiences in American schools were writing related. Of all the work he had to do for school, he spent the least time on writing. He had to write a science book report every month for the biology class, write reading reports for the geography course, and also to write for the ESL teachers. One of the reasons he chose to take two math courses was "You don't have to write those book reports for the math class." Tran bluntly expressed his dislike of writing in straightforward language and it also showed it in his actions. When he wrote, he wrote very rapidly, and messily--the draft and copy, and done. After he finished his writing, he seldom went back to reread it again. This section focuses on a discussion of the contrasts in Tran's writing: writing for self-interest and writing for assignments.

Writing for Grades

Though Tran managed to avoid taking any formal English classes, he still had to write book reports. He said: "When you take English class, you always have to write those book reports. I hate to write those book reports." Except for math and music, every other class required them. The biology class demanded the most frequent book reports.

The first day I was in Jane's room, she showed me Tran's first monthly science report and told me, "This

doesn't represent his writing. He's mainly copied the article he read. His writing is much poorer than that." I read the report. The vocabulary, and the sentence structures showed that Jane was right. Not surprisingly, as that frequently happens with our native-speaking English students, too.

I had a chat with Tran about his understanding of book report writing. The following was our conversation:

DL: What do you understand a book report is?
T: (He looked very confused) What? Me understand?
DL: What should you do in a book report?
T: (Still confused) This...is....about the rising of the temperature....
DL: I mean what does your teacher usually ask you to do in a book report?
T: Something about the story you read, something important from the story.
DL: Do you write your own opinions of the reading?
T: (confused again) My?
DL: I mean what you think of the story. In other words, do you write if you like the story you read or not in your book report?
T: No, no, I just write what is in the story, but not what is not.

Tran took a piece of paper out of his bag and handed it to me. That was the requirement sheet of the book report given by the teacher. "Step by step," in Tran's words, it showed how to write the report:

	Page 1	Cover page
6 pts	Title of article, author(s), source, date, page article may be found, your name.	
	Page 2	
5 pts	One page summary of the article in your own	

words (What is this about).

6 pts Page 3 Review of the article
Your opinion of the topic covered (3 pts.)
--Did you find it interesting?
--Did you learn a new concept, an idea?
--Did you expand your knowledge?
--Was it worth reading?
--Would you recommend it to others?
Support your opinion.

Quality of article (3 pts.)
--Was it well written? Why?
--Was it clear, that is, did you understand it?
--Did it use too many uncommon words?
--Were there any pictures or graphs to support
or explain views?
Support your opinion.

After I read this requirement sheet, I understood very well what Tran meant by his statement "Here they ask you to write step by step. That's for small people." It directed what the students should write on each page including where their names should go, step by step. I could tell that the teacher intended to help the students organize their writing with these detailed directions. She was giving them the form and the structure. What remained for the students to do was, in Newkirk's words, "to give short answer or to fill in big blanks" (1991). But Tran didn't appreciate this well-intentioned direction, instead, he felt insulted by it: "that's for the small people (he meant small children), the smart people shouldn't be told that."

Tran didn't follow the directions for his first monthly book report. After reading the requirement sheet, I said to

him, "You didn't do 'Page 1'." He looked at it and uttered "Wow,...but too late. I am done." I then pointed at "Page 3" and said to him "You didn't do this part either." He read the directions for "Page 3" and moved his finger from one line to another, and turned to me saying "They are in it." He went on:

You don't have to say it, it is already in the writing. I wrote about it, that's what I learned. I read it, that must be interesting. I talked about it, that's to recommend it to others. Why should I say it? When people read it, they can tell. It's already in it. I don't have to say it.

After saying this, he put his report back in his folder and said to me: "Anyway, it's finished, it's done." I understood what he meant perfectly. He meant: in his summary of the text he showed what he had learned from the reading. There was no need to repeat it again. The fact he did the reading meant it was interesting to read, and the fact he wrote the report was his recommendation to the others. The step by step requirements for the book report were already implied in his writing--"it's already in it." He didn't think that he had to say it again.

However, a week later, he got his report back. He received a "C" for his failure to follow the specifics of "Page 1" and "Page 3" instructions. Since then every time he worked on the science report, he would check the requirement step by step and answer the questions one by

one. The following writing sample was the typical of his book reporting according to the "Page 3" format:

My opinion of the topic covered

This article have a lot interesting information about enviromental get concerned by burning and spill oils. I learned new thing about oil spill and burning oil. I learned how smoke from oil burning to get enemy planes and satellites system confused.

I think this article was worth reading. I would recommend this article to other people.

Quality of Article

This article is well written. The ideas were clear. There were many new words but I use the dictionary. There were 2 pictures and no graphs.

Every sentence was like an answer to a yes-or-no question: Is this article worth reading? Yes, I think this article was worth reading. Is this article well written? Yes, this article is well written. In writing his so-called opinions, Tran didn't go beyond saying more than yes or no. Tran's book report represents a typical feature of student writing. It does not have self involvement. It shows "the emptiness of 'dry-run'" Britton et al pointed out in 1975.

Even though Tran initially failed to write the required review, because, as he thought, it was already implied in his summary, he eventually did so for the sake of grades. Since then he seldom expressed much of an opinion about the book reports, but just followed the teacher's direction. Consequently, his grades went up. He received nothing lower

than B+ or A- all the time, although he continued to copy words, and phrases, and sentence structures from the articles on which he based his book reports.

In his book reports, he was not expressing his ideas, but copying words, reconstructing the sentences of the text and giving brief answers. The rise of his grades (from C to B or A-) didn't mean that he had become a better thinker or writer, but rather that he had learned to more obediently follow directions and had become a less self-controlled learner. Furthermore, he would write more to please the teacher and obtain a good grade than to please himself. Unfortunately, this type of book-report writing was the main genre for his classroom writing assignments. As Applebee et al (1987) reported, that report type of writing covered 82 percent of writing the high school students did in schools, from a survey conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

No time to write his stories

In the ESL room, he had a greater variety of writing. Besides writing reports about his reading, Jane and Andy would ask him to write stories or personal narratives. Once Jane and Tran read an adventure story together. Following that, Jane asked him to write a real adventure from his own experience. He was quite excited about it and quickly

responded, "I had too many adventures in my life. I know what I want to write about it. My escape, my escape from Laos to the refugee camp."

The next day I helped Tran write his adventure. I asked him to tell me the story first. He pointed at Laos on the wall map and started:

From here, we escape, we walk, in the dark, in the rain. We can't walk during the day, there are a lot of soldiers, Lao soldiers, and Vietnamese soldiers. They hide in the jungle, in the mountain, and here in the town too. We had to take a hard road to escape.

(DL: Did your family escape together?)

No, I escaped with Sy. My brothers and sisters escaped earlier, and from different way. Cham and Paw escaped together. From there (pointing at the northern part of the country), across the Mekong River. When we escaped, we couldn't go that way any more. A lot of soldiers there. We took the way here (pointing at the southern part). It was much more difficult way. There weresome.... I don't know how to say in English, some animals, that would eat people in the jungle and mountains, not wolves, but something like that. We had to be very careful.

(DL: Only two of you escaped?)

No, there were 24 people together, and three leaders. My cousin was one of them. They came from Thailand and knew the way, so they helped us to escape. The leaders had guns. One walked ahead to check the road safe or not, and we hid in the cave. If it was safe, then we would go. One leader walked in the middle, another walked at the back. We walked in the dark, can't make any noise. But too many people, walking on the leaves, tza...tza... making a lot of noise. We were nervous, very nervous.

(DL: Did you know other people in the group?)

No, only my cousin. In our group, we had a general's family. They were the most important people. If

something happened, we others would die first. The leaders would protect them first. Because they paid more. Each person paid three thousand baths (Thai money), but general's family, they paid 20,000 baths for each. Sy and I didn't pay as much as others as my cousin was one of the leaders. The general and his wife were old and sick. The leaders had to carry them all the time in the jungle, up and down, they couldn't walk at all. It was very hard to walk, in the rain, in the dark, walking in the water. We were so tired. We carried our clothes, food, and some....what do you say in English, something, you can use....to pay people,

(DL: Money?)

No, not money, something worthy a lot of money. No, not gold, some treasure, we could pay people in case something happen. Everybody had all their things on their back. We had ours too. We were so tired. We were afraid, it was so easy to get lost in the dark. We were so tired, so weak, and hungry. We want water. A lot of time we didn't think we could make it.

(DL: How old were you?)

I was eleven and Sy was six. We got on the boat, and crossed the Mekong River at the dark. The light was searching on the river, and there were pirates too. We just missed their boat when we got across the river. When we got to the Thailand, that doesn't mean we were safe. There were a lot of bad police on the border. They know we tried to escape, they took our money or treasure away from us. They asked for pass, a kind of green pass. The people didn't have the pass, they had to sing songs in Thai. Sy and I were too young, we didn't have to do anything. Many girls got raped and sold to the opium farms by the bad people there. Sy and I were almost sold to the farms. Two policemen who checked us, one wanted to sell us to the farm, the other was a good one, he said, "No, you can't do that." So we didn't get sold. We lost each other on the border, then we found each other about an hour later. That was scary. After we crossed the border, there was a long way to get to the camp. It was not safe, a lot of bad people tried to rob us.

(DL: Do you remember the date when you escaped?)

Yes, October 25, 1984, a Friday. That night I and Sy drove to my cousin's house. No, we didn't drive, we took car, the car you can rent. Yes, taxi, took taxi, to my cousin's house. Then we took a boat to the jungle and walked into a small house there. We saw 20 other people there. They would escape too. We had.....

(DL: Whoops, we ran out of time. Would you please down write what you told me at home? Let's see, you first mention the date when you escaped, how old you and Sy were and the route you took. Then tell the happenings on the way--how dangerous, how fearful, and how tired you were. You've just told me a very interesting story, you have to write that down. You just write everything down first, we will work on it more. Okay?)

I was sorry that I had to stop him. I wished that I could just let him talk. He had so much to say, and got so involved in telling his own story. Usually he would check his watch, and ask for permission to do something for the next class. But this time he just talked and talked. His English flowed easily and he took charge of expressing himself. I was fascinated by everything he said. I read some stories about how boat people escaped from Vietnam, but this was the first time I actually listened to a person who had experienced telling his own story. I discovered something that I never thought of before. I wanted to know more. There must be more stories. I thought the writing would give him a chance to tell his untold story.

The next time when I saw Tran, he showed me the draft he wrote. It was very short. I could tell he tried very hard, as there were four beginnings on the two pages he

handed to me. I read his draft and told him what I wanted to know more about it. He took the draft back and agreed to write more.

Two days later when I met him again, he gave me what he wrote. It was still quite brief compared to what he told me. I offered to help him work more on it, at least to finish writing what he already told me. But he shook his head and refused my help:

No, I don't like other to help me to write. Not because I don't like you, but I can't write when others help me. I would be so lazy, just let you do it. If I have to write, I like to write by myself, without others tell me this or that. I have a lot of work, other jobs too. I don't have time to work on it. I'm sorry, that's done.

It was a shame but I understood him. Writing in a second language was not easy, and the lack of time made writing even more difficult for him. He had tried hard this time. He knew he had a lot to say, but there was too much other work to deal with. He could only keep up with his assigned school work, and could not afford the extra time on this one extraneous thing. To finish! To get it done! that was how he survived in school. He had a lot of stories to tell but he was too busy to tell them.

I thought if he could write out his "escape" story, how much he would benefit from his own writing: he could relive his past experience from a distance in a different way; he

could express what was buried in his heart; he could learn to speak and write through English writing; he could understand his past and look at his present differently. And the others--his readers would gain as well. People who read his story would be educated. They would not only get to know Tran and the people who had the same experience with him, but would appreciate more what they had in this country today. Thus, this writing would not only touch Tran's heart and head but the others' too. It was shameful that he had no time to write out this story, because he had so many "jobs" to do. These "jobs" only disconnected and alienated him from himself and others, from his past and present, and kept him positioned on the edge of the new culture.

"I want to sing my own songs."

Though Tran experienced equal frustrations in his reading and writing, there was a difference in Tran's reading and writing experience. When he read, he diagnosed himself as a poor or dumb reader; but when he wrote, he seldom did that, although he had a lot of difficulty writing. He said: "I can write well if I have more time." He was a more confident writer than reader. Seeing how he rushed through his work every day, I doubted I would ever get a

product of his writing in which he could demonstrate real pride.

From September to March, he wrote many book reports for the classroom, and some assignments from the ESL rooms, but nothing on his own. However, he never stopped expressing his wish to learn to write songs. Each time he came back from his music class, he would say with a shake of the head, "That's not what I want, I thought I would learn to write songs in that class." One day in April, he wrote a song on his own and showed it to Jane and me.

Blue Girl

Blue Eye Girl
You are so lovely
with you standing there
I'm so aware of how much I care
for you
You are more than now
You are for always
I can see you in my dreams
come true
Don't you ever go away
You make me feel this
There's nothing I can do
And when I see you
I only want to say I know you
Oh! blue girl
The song U bring me
Every day and every night
see U in my mind.
How I've waited for that day
Some time I wonder
U'd ever come my way.
(April 19)

Jane and I were most excited by his poem and asked him what inspired him to write these beautiful verses. He smiled

and said to us "That's kind of thing I always want to write. In our country, we often sing to each other to express what we feel. I like to write poetry, and songs to express what I feel. I learned to write them in the Lao school." He told me that he hoped that someone would help him to put his words to music, "I like to sing my own songs."

Tran expressed a lot of personal feelings in his poem. He did tell me that he liked girls with blue eyes, and he wished he could have a girl friend like that. His personal feelings were connected to his cultural tradition, "We like to sing songs to express our feelings to each other," and molded by his past experience, "I learned to write them in the Lao school." In his writing, he linked his past with his present experience and connected the two cultures. When he wrote from his heart, he found the right words for it. More importantly he enjoyed doing it and wanted to write still more songs.

Before school was over for the year, and in the middle of final exams, he wrote another poem:

I love-U-Mom (Lyrics)

I didn't mean to tell you
I didn't mean to go far away from you
So U have to understand, Mom, I love you
The word Mom, It's still always in my mind
Mom isn't just a word
Mom can be good or bad
but always in my mind
Mom, it's very important to me
Mom, can be a teacher to her child

Mom, can be a good wife to her husband
Mom, can be a housewife who cares for a family
Mom, can be everything for a female
So, Goodbye, Mom, Mom.
Please pray for me
When I see the sun rise up in the morning
I think of your face
When I was young, every time I was down
You built me up and taught me right from wrong
Even though, I was the black sheep of the family
You still care about me
Mom, mom, I would miss you
And I always love you, Mom!
(June 10)

Knowing Tran and especially having heard some stories about his childhood from a daughter of his family's close friend, I was very touched by this poem. The story was that Tran's natural father deserted his family. His real mother brought up his two sisters and him, alone. Right now she is not in this country. Tran lives with his adoptive parents. This poem definitely expresses Tran's love and longing for the mother he wants to be with. These poems and songs prove that Tran can write in a beautiful way. When he was allowed to write what he wanted, he could find the time and the words for it. After writing this piece, he took it to Jane and asked her to polish his language. When he shared this piece with me, he told me that he would like to write more poems like this.

There are distinctive differences in the quality of Tran's book-report and poetry writing. He was reluctant to write book reports. That was an obligation, and he did it as

a job, for survival as a student. He had no feelings, no thinking, no attachment and no words for book reports. But he was an enthusiastic writer of poetry. He wrote it with heart and passion. In poetry, he expressed true feeling and emotions.

In writing his poetry, the words flew out from his heart, while in writing book reports, he copied the words from the texts. In writing his poetry, he followed the rhythm of his passion, while in writing book reports, he followed the rules of the teacher's. When he wrote his book report, he was done with it. Grades were all he cared about. "How was the writing?" we often asked him, "Oh, I got a B+." That was how he answered us each time. But after writing his poetry, he would show it to us, read it together with us and tell us: "I want to make it into a song. I like to sing my own songs."

His poetry writing was authentic writing. In a recent speech on "No Authentic Evaluation Without Authentic Writing" (Oct. 25, 1991, Halifax), Don Graves said: "Authentic in Greek is authentikos. It means ... originated from the author, genuine. That is the author's own words." In his poetry writing, Tran certainly expressed his true feelings and uttered his own voice in a familiar way ("In my country, we often sing songs to each other to express our feelings."). When he wrote with his own voice, he was in

control of his writing in terms of language and organization. His language became fluent and rich, and his writing flowed smoothly. While, in his book-report writing, he spoke in another voice and used sparse vocabulary for what he had to say. The language was borrowed, sentences were broken, and content was dry and empty. Tran's experience as a writer parallels with what Mike Rose (1989) found from his teaching of students in a remedial program: "As writers move further away from familiar ways of expressing themselves, the strains on their cognitive and linguistical resources increase, and the number of mechanical and grammatical errors they make shoot up" (p.188).

Conclusion

Tran was a substandard reader and writer when he read and wrote for assignments and grades, and when he read and wrote for the sake of learning the language itself. But he was a thinker, a compelling storyteller, and a passionate poet when he shared himself in the expression of his own ideas and emotions. The school's way of teaching reading and writing trained him to be a student, who knew how to follow the rules and directions. But his personal reading and writing liberated him as a learner, demonstrating that he could think, create and had potential to make it in the new world. The school way of learning to read and write

highlighted his weakness, but through his reflected reading and authentic writing, he proved himself to be a literate person in the new culture, having a higher potential for writing than the school allowed.

Chapter Six

Paw

A Real Reader and Writer in Life

Paw was a very shy and quiet girl. When Jane first introduced me to her, she gave me a very faint smile through her long hair which hid half her face. Her eyes were cast down to avoid direct contact with me. At that moment little did I know that we would have eventually become so close that we could share our experiences in the new culture, our memories of our past, and our feelings as women caught between two cultures.

Paw enjoyed reading and writing more than anything else in her life. When she finished her school work and housework, she would sit in her room reading or writing by herself while her brothers and sister were watching TV, going to the malls, or playing outside. On weekends or holidays, her family usually went to visit relatives or friends or went shopping. Paw would prefer to stay at home, doing school work, or reading and writing for herself. She told me that these were the moments she enjoyed the most. With nine people in the

house, she seldom had that moment. Thus, when the family went somewhere, she stayed at home to savor the peace and quiet of the deserted household. "It was so good, nobody, no noise, and nothing would bother me while I was doing my own things. I usually do my school work first, then I would read and write for myself."

Paw couldn't read or write in her native language, though she had three years of education in a Lao school. She thought that was because:

We didn't learn to read or write in the Lao school, but just learned words. I never read a story in the Lao school, but memorized words there. Now I forgot them all, and can't read or write in Lao.

So, Paw was mostly illiterate before she started school in this country. She learned many Buddhist stories from her great grandmother, whom she was very close to: "We talked all the time, and she taught me a lot of things." In the refugee camp she started to learn English. There she went to Sunday school and studied the Bible. She believed this experience helped her become a Christian:

You know I think I know more about Christian than Buddhism, because I never read any books about Buddhism, but I read the Bible. I read the Bible as stories. It is like the stories that my great grandma told me to teach the morals to the people and teach us how to live. I don't read the Bible as God's words. It is the stories told by people, not by God.

When she read, she constantly connected her reading today with what she knew before. When she read the Bible, she connected its teachings with what she knew about Buddhism. Her

past experience was important to her and she would never depart from it:

I have double religion, a Buddhist and a Christian. I learned about Buddhism from my great grandma, and about Jesus at the camp. I will never forget what my great grandma told me and I will always be a Buddhist. That was what I told my great grandma before I left my country.

As she became a more fluent reader and writer toward the end of her second year of study here, her interest in the subjects began to grow. Besides reading for school work, she borrowed books from the library. Later, she started to buy books on her own from the money she made from her summer job and had put aside for college. She told me:

You know, I seldom buy any clothes. They are too expensive. I want to save my money for my college. The only thing I wouldn't mind spending money on is books. I love books. It feels so good that I can read books, read stories on my own now. In the past I could only listen to the others.

One day when I was at her house, she showed me all the books she had purchased. They were almost the only books in her house besides the ones she and her brothers brought from school. The books were:

Love is Fire
Rachel Lindsay
Just a Summer Girl
Flowers for Algernon
Emily Climbs
Catherine George
Honeymoon House
Julie of the Wovles
Point of Lost Souls

She told me: "I love to read classics of romance and adventures." When her brothers would tease her "You only like to read love stories," she argued back, "No, that is about people and life." Her reading list reflected her interest in "ordinary people and their everyday life," in contrast to Tran who liked to know "great people and their great life."

Sometimes when she heard books mentioned by the ESL teachers, she would ask them to loan those books to her and read them when she didn't have much school work. Sometimes after reading these books, she got excited and shared them with the ESL teachers. Once I heard her saying to Jane: "I really like the book. I cried when I read the ending. I wish that girl would go with the man that she loved so much." It was very rare to hear Paw talking about something with so much feeling and her voice, louder than usual, was full of emotion.

Paw had been a student in the American high school for three years now. She felt she was a literate person since she could read and write in English. She was not a social person and had few friends. Books became her faithful companions. Whenever she had time she would read and write, as she expressed: "I read to understand others and write to understand myself."

The ESL teachers knew that Paw liked to read, so they often recommended books to her and gave her books as gifts. She appreciated the gifts, but with a sign she would often say:

I wish I could have more time to read these books. I have so much homework and housework. I wish I could have more time to read the books I like. I'll just have to wait until the vacation comes. Then I can have some time to read.

When I asked her in the interview questions: What did you learn from reading those books? Why do you like to read those books? What is the difference between reading for assignments and reading for your own pleasure? she answered:

I learned the most from those books was that the people should trust each other, especially the people who love each other. If they don't trust each other, they don't have happiness. You know my mom and my father separated for twelve years, because they trust each other, so they can happily live together today. I love to read those books because I like to know about the ordinary people and their life. When I read for the teacher's assignment, I have to read the books she asks us, no matter whether I like it or not. When I read, I have to remember the things in the book, otherwise I can't do the test. When I read on my own, I just read, and enjoy it, I don't have to worry about anything.

Paw's interest in reading reflected her down-to-earth personality. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, Paw was different from her brothers. The three of them all dreamed having a rich life in the new world. But Paw truly wanted "to have a good family and someone who can really care and love me." There was a connection between her personal interest and her reading preferences and in turn, her reading reinforced her life values--"A couple should first of all trust each other...." Obviously there was a difference between her pleasure reading and the required reading for school. When Paw read for

pleasure, she connected real life experience with what she learned from the books--"My parents separated for twelve years, because they trusted each other, so...;" when she read for school, she had the test on her mind--"I have to remember things in it, otherwise I can't do the test."

Paw liked to write too. She surprised me when she told me that she kept a diary:

I like to write. Especially when I am depressed, or angry, or when I am very happy or very sad, I would write to let my feelings or emotion out. It was like talking to some close friends, I can just pour my heart out without worrying about anything. No matter what I say, it won't hurt anybody. I love to write. My diary is very private, nobody knows I am writing, nobody can read anything there. That is me, and I don't let anybody read it or even touch it.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that she was writing on her own in this way and thought it would be rare to have a chance to read her diary. I knew that a diary was too private to share. One day when we were talking in the kitchen at her home, Paw suddenly left the room, and soon came back with a silk-covered notebook in her hand. She told me that this was her diary. She turned to a page and said to me: "You can read this piece." I was surprised and felt privileged and flattered. It was a poem about herself. I remember a few lines that went like this:

I am a moody teenager,
just like anybody else around.
Sometimes I am high, and
sometimes I am down,
sometimes I am happy, and
sometimes I am so depressed.

.....
Whenever I think of myself,
I laugh myself to death,
.....

This was a self-portrait type of poem. It opened my eyes and I gained a new insight of Paw. In school, she impressed me as a quiet hard worker and an insulated young adult. In this poem, it seemed that I heard her laugh aloud, and saw her jump up and down as a relaxed typical teenager. Certainly in her writing, Paw had a chance and a place to loosen herself and be what she couldn't be in life.

I read the poem at least three times trying to remember as much as possible. When she saw that I was interested, she turned to another piece. She read it first herself and handed it to me saying: "You can read this too." It was about how she missed a boy she liked in the refugee camp. Now he was in Canada and they could not see each other. It was a very emotional piece in which she recalled how happy they were playing together in the camp, "...those unforgettable days will always be in my memory and only in the memory. Now he is there and I am here, can't see and can't talk, but just think of the days when we were together."

I didn't know what I could say after I read the piece. I knew that she was a very private person and seldom shared anything like this with anyone, including her family. After a long pause I asked, "You don't have any contact with him?" "Sometimes he would call me," she replied with her eyes

looking down, "but I never call or write to him. In my culture, girls are not supposed to call the boys or do anything first." This helped me understand further why writing was so important to Paw. It was the way for her openly and candidly to express her feelings and ideas and be true to herself.

This sharing was a turning point in our relationship. Since she shared her diary with me, we became closer and closer. We often shared our stories, our excitement and frustration. When I conversed with her, rarely did I think of myself as being triple her age. Despite the differences in our age and experience, our sharing brought us together as equal conversational partners.

I asked her when she started her diary and how long she'd been writing it. She replied:

Last year, when the ESL teacher asked us to write a journal in her class, she said we could write anything we wanted. So I wrote a lot and became interested in writing. Since then I've kept a diary for myself and whenever I have something, I will just write. It is like talking to a friend. I really love it.

I was glad to hear that her diary writing was a continuation of her school writing. Jane was happy to learn that Paw was writing on her own at home. She expressed the regret that she couldn't have her students write as they did last year:

Last year, I asked them to keep a journal. They would write anything they wanted to, and I would be the only person who would read it. I asked them not to care about spelling or

grammar, just write. Everybody wrote, Paw wrote the most and wrote some things that were very personal, such as how she felt when she was at the school, things like that. But now they are mainstreamed and have too much work, and don't have time to do anything like this.

From her very first day in the American school, Paw realized how important it was to learn English well and she made up her mind that she would try her best. In her first written piece about her new experience here, she wrote:

The first day at school I was afraid because I didn't know how to speak or write so I went to many different classes and I realized that English was the one that I must study hard and do my best, because English was my favorite subject even though I know it will be hard for me to do so, but I knew myself that I tried my best and I do the best I can do. After that day, I was very happy that I was able to write and read a bit of English and I hope that one day my English will be getting better and better. I love to read because reading was one thing that can improve my English. I always kept one thing in my mind was I must do my best and be responsible for what it had to be done.

The next two sections will lead us to see how Paw tried her best to learn to read and write in English classes, and how differently she was required to read and write in intermediate (A track) and lower level (B track) English classes.

**Start with a Joy and End with a Loss
Her Learning Experience in the A Track English Class**

In the tenth grad Paw was in a self-contained ESL class. She did well in all the subjects, especially English. This

year, she was mainstreamed and assigned to the intermediate (A track) English class. She worked hard to keep up with the class.

For the first couple of months in the A level English class, she read, wrote and did the same assignments as her peers. It was not easy for her, but she "enjoyed studying together with the American students and learning the same things with them." She especially enjoyed the writing.

Her first writing assignment was to write about "your personal experience." The teacher asked the class to make their own choices. They could write about the people they knew, the places they visited and the experiences they had. "Make a list of things that you did, and then circle the ones you want to write about," the teacher told the class. Here is Paw's list:

<u>People:</u>	<u>Place:</u>	<u>Experience:</u>
Manichan	Thailand	Volleyball
Joe Smith	Lao	Illness
Janet P	Canada	English
Kim Dennis	Boston	Come to
Linda	Connecticut	America

She circled "Come to America" and wrote about it for her first week's writing. During the second week, she wrote a second piece about her experience in Thailand. This is the piece:

Thailand

Thailand is one of the countries I have live in. I lived there for three years. Thailand is not a

big country, but they have about 100,000 to 5,000,000 people living there. Most people there farm for living.

My culture and Thai culture are similar. For example: the way we talk, write, religions, beliefs, living, and customs. Thai live under the rule of the king and Queen, but my country lives under the rule of the Communist.

My family and I escaped from my country because my dad was a pilot before the communist ruled my country. The communist threw you in the work camp and brain washed, if you connected or had been working with old government. This happened to my father.

In Laos we had to do what the government told us to do. If you go against them they may kill you or throw you in jail. So we decided that the only way that we will have a better life is to escaped.

We escaped to Thailand. In Thailand we went to a refugee camp called Napho. It was not a big camp but many people from other countries lived in that camp. There were 9 parts all together in the camp, and most people lived in a group. For example, if you are Vietnamese, you had to live in your part, which means you had to live with your people.

In the camp some people had a job, but most people didn't have jobs, because there were too many people and the system was very small. They needed only a few people to work at the camp.

Some jobs people did were filling out forms, cleaning, translating and more. People who worked there didn't get payed. It was a rule but they had a bonus for the people who worked for. For example: if you worked there y would get more food and other things they give out to the people more than a person that didn't work.

It was very hard to lived there. We slept in a small hut and we had to get a water from a well and had to boiled before drinking it. There was not much food and many people got sick and some were died. Things were too expensive to buy.

In 1988 we got a sponsor (my uncle in Mass.) and we allowed to come to United States.

She told me that she enjoyed writing about her experiences: "That's the kind of writing I really like to do. I have a lot to tell and to say. If I could, I would like to write about my great grandma in the next piece. I really

missed her a lot. Now she is dead. She died last year in Laos. I was very close to her."

Unfortunately in the second half of October, the writing assignments were directed away from the personal and toward the text and the students were told to connect their writing to the text. They were more restrictive and topic controlled assignments than what she wrote before. After the class read an Edgar Allan Poe story, they were asked to write a mystery scene or something that produced frightening feelings. Paw wrote this short piece:

10/8/90

Paw Savang

Adventure English Pg 151
for Composition

One night in winter, soundless night in the house, my family were out to eat, I was alone in the small room doing homework. The wind were browng the cool air though, it made myself felt like my heart beating faster and the clock ran so slow. three later, the sounded of Feet step were coming directly from the front door, suddenly it open, meanwhile my heart amost stopped beating. But after I saw a person who was coming in, it made me felt free, because it was my mom.

Contrasted to the personal stories Paw wrote during the first two weeks, this piece was more "for composition" than personal expression. But she was able to bring her personal experience into it: "It was a true feeling. I had that kind of feeling all the time. But it was not a true story. Maybe it was, I couldn't remember it."

This was the last piece of the four that I collected of Paw's writing in the A track class during the first six weeks of the school. Later, Paw began to have more and more problems with the reading assignments. The writing was more directed at answering questions at the end of the text.

Paw's textbook was an anthology of American literature and the texts within it were compiled chronologically. It was very difficult reading for Paw, especially, the early sections in the chronolgy, because the language, style of writing, history and concepts implicit in them were unknown to her.

Paw needed a lot of help with her English reading. Whenever I was in the ESL room, Jane let me help Paw with her reading thinking that I had more background in literature than she did. The first text for Paw to read was a speech given by Patrick Henry in the Colonial Times. The speech called for an awakening of the American people in order to free them from British control. It expressed strong opinions and beliefs. The style was argumentative. When Paw came to me, she asked me to help her answer questions at the back of the text. One question was: "What made this speech so effective?" It called for an answer which pointed out the repetitions, rhetorical questions and figures of speech or metaphors in the text.

Paw didn't understand the words "repetitions" "rhetorical" and "figure of speech." When I tried to explain these to her, she was lost and confused. So I went into the text and pointed out the repetitions, the rhetorical questions

and figures of speech to her. She didn't ask me any questions but simply copied down what I pointed out to her as the answers to the questions. I asked "Do you understand those terms now?" She shrugged her shoulders without saying anything or looking at me. I asked again: "Do you understand this text? This is a really difficult one, even for me." She answered me very softly "A little bit, but not much." "Do you think we should go over the text together?" "No, I don't have time. I have to turn in this assignment today," she answered.

So with my help, Paw did her exercise without much understanding of the reading and turned in the work on time. But what did the work mean to her, or to the teacher? The exercise was to help the reader see how the text was constructed and what made the speech effective. Paw didn't understand the content or historic time periods, so she had a difficult time writing about its construction. It was as if she was expected to analyze why a cake was good before she had even tasted it.

Paw's English teacher realized that Paw was having more and more difficulties. She simply didn't know how to help her:

I could tell in the class, Paw couldn't understand me. And our reading didn't interest her either. One day when we watched the video tape of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" I saw that she had such a hard time. She turned her face aside and had a very bitter expression on her face. I didn't know what I should do. Should I ask her to leave the room or what? I just didn't know what I should do. She didn't participate in any class activities either. One day I divided boys and girls into two groups to have a debate. But she simply

left her seat and sat in the corner doing her math. In a situation like this I just don't know what I should do.

In November, two months into the school year, Paw's English class went on to read about the period of the Enlightenment. The following terms from the reading were discussed in the class: Transcendentalism, Romanticism, Realism, Industrialization, and Western Exploration. In her homework, Paw was expected to explain the above terms in her own words. She came to me for help. Looking at those terms, and knowing that we only had half an hour to do the work, I knew we were facing a difficult task.

"Okay, let's do Transcendentalism first," I said to Paw. She opened the hard-covered two-inch thick textbook to where this term was referred to: speeches by Emerson, articles by Thoreau, and poetry by Whitman. I knew that we didn't have time to go through all the texts. I wanted to find a short-cut to help Paw get through the work. I hoped that somewhere, I could find one or two paragraphs in the text that explained the general concept of the term. I read the introduction to these authors, trying to find paragraphs that would elucidate the term. Realizing that I had to go through Emerson's speech, Thoreau's article or Whitman's poems, I was overwhelmed. I very quickly went through one of Emerson's speeches, and found that the concept of Transcendentalism was not explained in one or two paragraphs but permeated the entire speech. There was no short-cut. But since we didn't have enough time to read the

texts, what should we do? I thought of E.D Hirsch's Cultural Literacy dictionary, which stood on the window sill all covered with dust. I was so happy to see that dictionary at that moment and thought that Hirsch's famous American cultural encyclopedia would surely help us get this job done. But to my surprise and disappointment, I couldn't find the word Transcendentalism. Finally, I gave up, and turning to Paw asked "What did your teacher tell you about Transcendentalism?" "She said 'it was to do yourself'," Paw answered. "Anything more than that?" I asked her. She shook her head and said very softly without looking at me "I don't know." Only ten minutes were left. She didn't have one term done. I felt I had no other choice but to tell her my own understanding of Transcendentalism. Paw practically copied my words one by one on her worksheet--Transcendentalism: to rely on yourself, to trust your own voice, and to break away from the old tradition. I wanted to further explain to her its historical significance and its effect on the present American spirit, but there was no time. We had other terms to do.

After Paw left the room with the work we had done, I felt guilty for giving her the answers, and frustrated by the impossible task of trying to help Paw achieve any significant learning. This time, I, too, had been entrapped by the system--of getting the work done for its own sake. I knew the experience Paw and I went through was not rewarding to either one of us. Nor was I helping her to study; she had not learned

anything from the exercise. We had cheated! I felt terrible and Paw was depressed. She told me sadly: "I wish I didn't need this kind of help, but I couldn't do it on my own. There was too much for me to do."

Mike Rose's discussion of one student's reading explains Paw's situation:

...certain elements of his [the author] argument, particular assumptions and allusions, were foreign to her--or, more precisely, a frame of mind or tradition or set of assumptions that was represented by a single word, phrase, or allusion was either unknown to her or clashed dramatically with frames of mind and traditions of her (p.182).

Paw was unable to identify with these Western assumptions and concepts. They were abstractions making no sense to her. Her English teacher was aware of Paw's problems with the assignments and was frustrated, too.

I could tell Paw had more and more problems with the texts now, especially when we got to the abstract material. Every day she looked so depressed. She simply was not getting anything. When we studied Longfellow, I explained his poem stanza by stanza, I could tell that Paw still didn't understand. But I don't know what I should do with her. I have so many students and I can't give all my time to her.

We were all short of time. Paw didn't have enough time to learn; her English teacher and I didn't have enough time to help her. We all felt guilty and frustrated. Within two weeks, Paw decided she couldn't handle it any more. She went to tell her English teacher about her frustration. The teacher suggested three choices and asked her to choose one as the

solution to her problems. 1. Have someone tutor her in the class. 2. Have different reading and writing assignments. 3. Move down to B track. Paw took the third choice as she didn't want to be singled out in this class. She stated, "I want to do the same as the others in the class."

It was not an easy decision for Paw to make. It meant a lot to study at a higher level. She had worked very hard in that class. Her English teacher didn't want to send her to B track, but she thought that Paw set "too unrealistic" goals for herself:

You know she could stay in my class, if she could accept B- or C for her work. But she wanted A's. How could I give an A when I saw so many grammatical mistakes and incorrect sentence structures in her work. I knew she had difficulty with her reading and work, but when I asked her to do lesser assignments, she refused. She wanted to do the same things with the class. I appreciated her efforts but think she set unrealistic goals for herself. I think she'd be better off to move down to the B level if she pushes for A's all the time.

The way the teacher solved Paw's problems was to give her easier assignments, but Paw refused. She felt humiliated and separated from her peers in this way. She said to me several times, "I just want to do the same as the others. I wouldn't feel good if I did something easier than the others. I know I need help but I can't help it, as I have too much work." The English teacher's solution reflects a common practice in American schools: when we find our students can't read or write, we let them read or write less rather than find another way to help them learn--"lower the expectations" and "water

down the curriculum" (Oakes, 1985, Powell, et al, 1984). Paw needed help, but she didn't ask to learn less. Her teacher's solution was a rejection, when Paw was looking for an invitation. Mike Rose (1988) suggested a better way to help students on the boundary like Paw, by describing his own learning experience:

Nothing is more exclusive than the academic club: its language is highbrow, it has fancy badges, and it worships tradition. It limits itself to a few participants who prefer to talk to each other. What Father Albertson did was bring us inside the circle, nudging us out into the chatter, always just behind us, whispering to try this step, then this one, encouraging us to feel the moves for ourselves (p.59).

Should Paw read this paragraph, I assume, she would say that was just what she had hoped her teacher would offer; instead she was offered the option of less and easier work in the class.

**Study for Tests and Write for Grades
Her Learning Experience in the B Track Class**

In early December, Paw was transferred to the B track English class, the lowest track. When she started her work in the B class, she was assigned to read a different book from the others. She was asked to read a western story called Shane, while the rest of her class read Huckleberry Finn except for Cham, her brother. Paw appeared very unhappy every day for quite a while. She became even quieter than before. Looking at her obvious unhappiness, Jane and I worried about

her. Paw didn't want to talk about why she was so depressed. When we asked, she just gave a deep sigh and shook her head. When we tried to verbalize for her "Is it that you don't like the teacher or the students here?" she would say "No, the teacher and the students are nice here." "Then why do you look so unhappy? Can we do anything to help you?" Jane asked in a very worried voice. Paw tried to sound casual, "I am fine, I just miss my old class. I like my old English class better."

Paw's former English teacher was surprised to learn that Paw missed her class and was very unhappy in the new placement. She said "I thought she would be relieved and happier, because the work should be easier and it was her choice to move down." Though I couldn't get Paw to express what exactly made her so unhappy, Jane and I thought that she must feel very low self-esteem. From her research, Oakes (1985) found "Not only has track position been directly related to self-esteem, with lower-track students scoring lowest on self-esteem measures, but placement in lower tracks has been shown to have a corroding effect on students' self-esteem" (p.148). Instead of feeling relieved as the teacher expected, Paw felt heavy-hearted and humiliated, even more when she found she was separated out again in the lower class. Her desire to do well and to fit in went unrewarded. She was more marginalized than ever.

The curriculum in the B class was very different from that of the A class. Of the five days each week, three were

spent on vocabulary and two on reading and writing. As the teacher in this class said: "These students are low and really need skills." Every Friday there was a quiz on vocabulary and every month there was a test on reading. A typical weekly schedule of assignments follows.

Assignments: April 15-19 11th Grade

Mon: READ "Maren's Escape" and "The Arrest"

Tues: VOCABULARY DEFINITIONS #24/ Write
vocabulary test 22-24

Wed: Study spelling and vocabulary/write
misspelled spelling word 5x

Thurs: READ "Smuttynose" "The Trial" pp 25-38
& do notes

Fri: ST # 24 VOC MASTERY TEST 22-24
STUDY STUDY STUDY

Note: COMPLETE "Moonlight Murder on Smutty
nose"

HAVE A GOOD VACATION

The weekly schedule and three capitalized words--"STUDY"--sent a clear message to the students about what the teacher cared for most: vocabulary and tests. The teacher told me that the vocabulary sheet she used for this eleventh-grade class was "from a ninth-grade nationwide spelling list."

Unlike the students in the A track, the B class didn't read from an anthology. They read stories and novels the teacher chose for them. She said: "I choose books for them which I think they can handle." Once the reading assignment was a novel called The Oxbow Incident. The following is a conversation between Jane and Paw about the book.

J: What did you do yesterday, Paw?

P: I read The Oxbow Incident. But I read a couple of pages, then I put it down. I

just couldn't read it. I don't like it at all.

- J: I read it a little too. It was awful. I couldn't go on reading it either.
- P: Shane was better, though I didn't like it either. It was much better than this one. I simply couldn't read this one. I have to stop all the time. When I read a book I liked, I could read it for hours without stopping until I finished it. But for this one, I couldn't do that.
- J: I wonder why she chose this book for you to read. Do you choose your own books to read?
- P: No, never. She just asked us to read, and we had to read.

It was not that the language or the concept in the story was too difficult for Paw, it was that the content itself was not interesting. She couldn't engage in the reading. She did it because it was assigned by the teacher. Detached as she was from the content, it was a struggle to sustain her reading.

After the reading, the teacher would give a quiz to check the students' comprehension. Here is an example of the monthly reading quiz:

Walter Van Tilburg Clark: The Oxbow Incident
Reading Quiz: Chapter two, pp 64-94.

DIRECTIONS: This is an open book test. Answer the following questions in complete sentences. Include specific details from the text.

1. Who is Sparks? Why does he decide to go with the "posse"?
2. Who is Ma Grier? How does she feel about going?
3. Who is Tetley? What position does he take?
4. What information convinces everyone that they should form a posse and go after the rustlers/murderers?

From the questions, we see that the quiz simply entails a text-recall and requires a large amount of memorization. It doesn't provoke thinking or provide for any connection between reading the text and real-life experiences of the students. Usually Paw didn't have any problems doing this kind of quiz, she was a careful reader and could remember very well. But this type of exercise was a very small portion of her assignments for English. She spent most of her time on vocabulary and spelling. Sometimes she even used the time in other classes to work on spelling exercises. Once she said to me:

Today I was doing my English vocabulary in the science class. The teacher found out that. He must be mad at me. The kids were chatting and I had nothing to do. So I took out my vocabulary sheet to work. I was so embarrassed when the teacher came to me and saw what I was doing. I am going to have voc test today, so...

Every Friday Paw had a vocabulary test. These tests were on her mind all the time. The English teacher had a very fixed and specific way for her students to learn the vocabulary.

Step One: Circle the words that will be tested.

Step Two: Find the definition of each word in the dictionary and copy it down.

Step Three: Use the content of the reading to make sentences with the circled vocabulary words.

Step Four: Have a weekly vocabulary test.

Paw didn't have any problems with Steps One and Two, but had problems with Steps Three and Four. In Step three, the teacher tried to connect the new vocabulary with the reading

content by asking the students to make vocabulary-word sentences in this context. In this way, the students would learn the new words and show their understanding of what was read.

Paw needed much help in writing the sentences required in Step Three. Usually Jane or I would make a sentence with the word to show her how to use the word, then she would make a sentence for the word relating to the reading. For example:

The word: Convenience:

My sentence: You can come to my
house any time at
your convenience.

Paw's: It's Mike's convenience to kill
his brother.

The word: Definite:

My sentence: Please give me a
definite answer
about his visit.

Paw's: To a definite, Mike killed his
brother.

From the sentences Paw made I could see the root of her difficulty. While she could spell the new vocabulary words, she had no idea how to apply them in a meaningful way to the context of what she had read because the text was incomprehensible to her. In addition, there was little enthusiasm to make sentences with words one seldom reads or hears or would expect to use again. While helping her with sentence making, I became stuck myself when we came across a word I had little acquaintance with.

From this experience, I could tell that Paw was not really learning the language. I had to help her reconstruct each sentence. For example, we changed "It's Mike's convenience to kill his brother" to "Mike killed his brother at his convenience," which still showed a distortion of meaning. I tried to tell Paw how to use this word more meaningfully, but she didn't show much interest and just merely did what I told her. After we finished the sentences, she went to the English teacher and gave the work to her. She came back to the ESL room and began working on her spelling test.

The last step, the critical one for supposedly demonstrating vocabulary acquisition was the quiz. Paw took these quizzes very seriously: "I want to do well and get a good grade." I frequently heard her saying, "I have to work on my vocabulary for the Friday test." She was always the last one to turn in her quiz. She seldom could finish the test within a class period, so she often asked to continue the test in the ESL room. The test usually had three parts: dictation, multiple choice on synonyms or antonyms, and fill-in-the-blanks. For example:

Part I: Dictation: (the words underlined are the vocabulary)

New Process College
Academic Circle
Occurrence, NM 42507

Dear Professor Smart:
With reference to your correspondence

about salary increases for Seniors: your proposal is completely retarded. Has it occurred to you what catastrophes will occur if we admit your policy is changeable? We will have referees at the admitted gate of every procession.

I propose you drop this crazy idea.

Very truly yours
Paw Savang

The teacher dictated this text to the class and asked them to underline the vocabulary words and sign his or her name at the end. This letter shows how the teacher created a context for the words she wanted her students to master. She tried very hard to include all nineteen words from the vocabulary list in this short text, stating "I stayed up until midnight in order to make this test." But the short letter the teacher wrote was too artificial to be used as a context for those vocabulary words. Right from the very beginning--the address: "New Process College, Academic Circle, Occurence," to the end--the signature of the student, we can see that the content was artificially created and was a meaningless vehicle for mastering the vocabulary.

In order to prove my point, I replace those vocabulary words with Chinese words to see if the content of the letter provides any context for the recognition and re-inforcement of the vocabulary. (Actually I don't have to use Chinese words, any nonsense symbols will do).

New Chen Xu Xue Yuan
Xue Su Circle
Chu Xian NM 42507

Dear Chen Xu Xue Yuan

With Gen Ju to your lai han about gong shi increase for lao nian ren: your jian yi is che tou che wei de retarded. Has it xiang ji to you what bu ke chi shi de jie ju will chu xian if we ren ke your policy is ke jie shou de? We will have referees at the ru kou gate of every guo dao.

I jian yi you drop this crazy idea.

Very truly yours
Paw Savang

If this text makes no sense to us, then it is enough to say it provides no context for students to learn vocabulary but presents them with a bunch of decontextualized sentences. Bruner (1990) asserts "Decontextualized sentences in the formal logical tradition are as if uttered from nowhere by nobody--texts on their own, 'unsponsored'" (p.62).

In addition to the fact that the text was nonsensical, the intent or tone of the letter would be offensive to Paw's cultural values, in my opinion. As Paw's father had stated: "I teach my kids to respect the old, to care for others and help each other." Paw intrinsically would never argue against "salary increases for seniors" or write to a professor proposing "you drop this crazy idea." When Paw signed her name at the end of the letter, I could imagine how detached and disconnected she was from the act. In her words: "I got it right just by listening to the words, but I don't know what it meant." When she showed Jane the dictated letter, Jane was so upset that she came to me saying: "I just have to show you this. It doesn't make sense to me, how can she (Paw's English teacher) ask them to do this?"

Here are some typical examples from Part II of her vocabulary test:

Part II: Synonyms in context: select the best definition (in the first two examples).

1. The President conferred honors upon the soldier.
a. bring together for discussion b. consulted
_____ c. bestowed upon d. talked about
2. Crime is not confined to the cities.
a. to keep indoors b. legally restricted
_____ c. to keep within designated limits d. liberated.

Paw usually had the most difficulty with this part of the test, because she didn't understand the choices. For instance, in the first example, she didn't know the meanings b. "consulted" and c. "bestowed upon"; in example two, she was unfamiliar with b. "legally restricted," c. "to keep within designated limits," and d. "liberated." How could she make a best choice from a field of unknowns? When she continued her test in the ESL room, Jane would explain what each choice meant. After Jane's explanation, Paw had few problems with her work. When she did this part of the test on her own back in the class, it was like a game of chance for her. The success of the work depended more on chance than her real English ability.

The last part of the test looked like this:

Part III: Fill in Blanks: write the word in the correct form

Recently, history books have given_____to life on the _____in the early 1800's. It was not one of_____. The early settlers were under _____ a lot of_____to obtain the meager_____they needed to survive. People were_____to their homes when bad wind

storms____, there were few places they
could ___for meetings to ___with one
another, and the___metals that were
discovered soon "panned" out.

prevail pressure prairie assemble
substance precious splendor
consideration confer confine/confinement

Paw had memorized the vocabulary words out of context. In this part, she had to insert them into a strange content that had no validity to her. She could not know which words rightfully belonged where, let alone decide the proper form in the sentences. Take two words "confine and confinement" for example. She learned the definitions of these two words from the dictionary but not in context. Thus, she couldn't tell the difference in the usage of the two words. I saw her shifting back and forth with "confine" and "confinement" when taking the test. She put first one in one blank, then she erased it and replaced it with the other. Then she erased again and put the first one back in the first blank. She repeated this putting-in-and-taking-out action again and again, six times. Finally she filled in with any word because she ran out of time. Very often she left the classroom with her work unfinished, looking dismayed.

With the ESL teacher's help, Paw could manage to get good grades. The English teacher was not happy about this, but she was obligated to grade Paw according to the number of "right" answers. One night she called Jane to complain. Jane and the English teacher had an argument on the phone. Jane got very

upset and angry. Jane relayed part of her talk with the English teacher to me:

She (Paw's English teacher) was very upset with me and said that I didn't tell the truth about Paw's ability. She thinks Paw has very low skills and is on a sublevel to her class. Every time when she (Paw) takes the test, she needs more time and has help from me. She (the teacher) thinks that Paw is cheating and this is not fair to the others. She claims that once Paw tricked her and took her test home. I told her that Paw was too honest to do that. Knowing Paw, I know she had no brain for that.

The English teacher's grounds for complaints on the special treatment given to Paw were legitimate for the normal rules of test-taking. Paw did use more time than the others and received help with her test as well. In this sense, it might be considered "cheating" and therefore not fair to others in the class. But shouldn't we also question the test itself and the way we test our students instead of just blaming the test takers? Frank Smith (1986) defined educational testing as "the opposite of the way people behave, learn and are evaluated in clubs" and it is a "discrimination against the confused" (p.142).

The vocabulary and spelling worksheets covered about 70 percent of the work Paw did in the B track English class. "In this class we don't write. We just do vocabulary and spelling. When I was in the other English class, the teacher asked us to write about our life experience. I really like that."

During the seven months of Paw's study in the English B class, I collected two essays that she wrote. In the B class,

the writing was more form-controlled and text-bound than in the A level. The students had to do a worksheet before they started the writing. The following is a sample of the worksheet before the writing.

Irene Hunt: No Promises in the Wind Name_____

Essay: Josh

Directions: Complete this sheet before you write your essay.

I. NOTES: Josh is,

Character:
good
bad

How and why did he become separated from his family?

Reasons he was able to survive:

Events and people who brought about his change of character;

II. OUTLINE

Topic Sentence: /This must state the whole idea of his character/

Details: /One paragraph each/

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

III. CONCLUSION/SUMMARY:

In the low-level class, the students were considered to "really need a lot of help with their writing. They need to be told what should be put in the writing and how to organize the writing," according to the teacher. This worksheet exercise was to help students form their ideas and organize their writing. It was intended to help students work on the

necessary parts of what should be in an essay. Then when they wrote, they should knit those ready-made pieces together. In the A track class, Paw didn't do this preliminary exercise before writing. Now in the lower level, she had to learn the form before she began to write.

The example of how Paw learned to write a topic sentence presents a clear picture of this step-by-step guided way. The first sentence Paw wrote for "the topic sentence" of the "Josh" essay was the following:

Josh left his family to survive during depression because he thought he was right and other people were wrong. But at the end he learned everybody could make a mistake. He learned how to care about other people and he also learned to forgive.

The comments Paw got back from the teacher were:

It was too long as a topic sentence. It should be like this:

Josh left home because he thought he was right and other people were wrong.

Please try it again.

Paw reasoned that since the instruction said: "This must state the whole idea of his character," she should include enough information of the character she was writing about, which one sentence could hardly hold. Now she had to try again and avoid using the teacher's sample sentence, although the teacher's sentence contained parts of Paw's original one. Paw attempted this difficult task for three days. The second time she wrote it like this:

Josh left home feeling sure he was right but through hard experiences he finally learned how to forgive people's mistakes.

She went back to the English teacher with this version, but again it was not approved. Paw went to Jane to ask for her help. Together, they worked out a sentence like this:

Josh Grandowske, was an angry 15 years old who left his family during depression to try to survive on his own.

The English teacher was still not happy, so Paw wrote the fourth one:

Josh, 15 years old, left his family to survive during the depression because he thought he was right and other people were wrong.

This time, the English teacher said it was okay and asked her to begin the essay. The first sentence in the essay ended up as:

When Josh is fifteen years old, he leaves his family because he believes he is right and other people are wrong.

Paw's five sentences were not much different from one another except some included a bit more information than others. She was shifting the same words back and forth and trying to fit them into the pattern which only the teacher knew. It was as if she was putting a puzzle together but the whole picture or design was only in the teacher's mind. For three days, her frustration and confusion grew. The teacher's notion of a topic sentence remained a mystery to Paw and also to Jane, who said: "I just don't know what she [the English teacher] wanted."

We knew Paw would work as hard on the essay, "Josh," as she had on the topic sentence. Finally she received an "A" for the paper. On the paper, the teacher wrote: "This is EXCELLENT, Paw-- Thank you for a splendid paper. I am very proud of you. "A" P.S Do watch your verb endings." When Paw showed me the paper, I asked "Can I make a copy? I will give it back to you tomorrow." She replied: "You can have it. It has no use to me any more."

In contrast to her diary, the "splendid" piece of writing meant little to her. Her diary was a part of her, but this "Josh" essay was just for the teacher and a grade. She wouldn't let anyone touch her diary, let alone read or made copies of it. But, she let me keep this piece, the original writing with the "splendid" remark and the big "A", and the boldface word **EXCELLENT** written on it. Good grades and good comments from the teacher were very important to Paw, "The most exciting thing for me in the school is to get good grades," but her attitude toward and treatment of this paper revealed that she felt no ownership of this piece of work.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen a wide variation in achievement in Paw's progression toward the attainment of English literacy. When she was given choice, as in the A track English class, she eagerly and openly told stories and

expressed her thoughts relating to her past and present life. In the first two months of school, she wrote four pieces, two personal stories, one poem and a short composition. She demonstrated her engagement in the use of language, using creative thinking and self-expression in her written products. When "choice" was shut off and the expectation became increasingly disconnected from what she knew; and the texts became increasingly abstract, her problems developed. She could write well when she could put herself in it. She could read better when she could relate the reading to the life she could identify with. The abstract reading and disconnected writing had little to do with her real world and life and were totally beyond Paw's ken. Her later experiences in the first English class began to parallel what Bruner quoted from Adrienne Rich, "When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and say nothing" (Bruner, 1990, p.32).

What Paw experienced in the B level English class parallels what Oakes found in her research: there is a distinctive difference in selection of reading materials, classroom and homework requirements, academic expectations and instructional approaches between the high level and low level classes. There, Paw was confronted with a mechanical way of learning to read and write. She spent most of her time learning vocabulary words from a spelling book, making

meaningless sentences and taking endless tests. From the work I collected of Paw's in her seven months in the B level class, 90 percent was worksheets--on vocabulary, on reading comprehension, on grammar and sentence structures. In that time, Paw did two and a half writing assignments: two "Josh"-type essays and a paper on the fission process which counted for both English and science.

Paw was a passionate reader and writer when she could "read to understand others' life and write to understand herself,"-- "when I read a book I like, I can't put it down for hours," and "Writing in my diary is like talking to a close friend, you can just let out anything in your mind. But in life I don't really have one I can trust so much...." But when she read and wrote simply for grades in the English classes, she went through very frustrating, humiliating and alienating experiences. Reading from the abstract to the abstract and writing to analyze what made no sense to her was like knocking at her head and telling her "You just can't read and write."

She had less freedom when she read and wrote in the A class than when she read and wrote for herself. She had little control when she tried to learn to read and write in the lower level B class. In the A class, she first started writing about her life, and later shifted to writing text-bound essays. She went from a familiar area to an unknown place. It was as if

she left home to go to "Alice's Wonderland" and got lost there.

When she studied in the B class, she was immediately put into mechanical drills. It was like working on an assembly line in a factory: no speaking, no thinking, no choice, and no life and self-connection, but mechanically moving words from the books to the worksheets. Those worksheets isolated her from the others and the real world; they froze her thinking and disengaged her from learning. The rationale for focusing low students on mechanical drills and fragmented parts of language is that they can't read and write. Vygotsky (1981) advised educators to "make every effort to push them (retarded children) in that direction (abstract thinking) and to develop in them what is intrinsically lacking in their own development" rather than "suppressing the rudiments of any abstract thought that such children still have" (p.89). Realizing what kind of reader and writer Paw was in life, we could tell her ability as a reader and writer was not only unrecognized or given an opportunity to develop, but painfully suppressed in the B English class, though Paw was a far abler learner than those to whom Vygotsky referred.

Paw was a hard worker and disciplined student. She knew education was very important for her future and her mastery of English would determine her success in the new world. She studied very hard at the school. She bought into the system, believing that school would help her reach her goal of going

to college. But unfortunately her learning experiences here were coincident with her learning experiences in Laos and her words for describing the earlier time rang true again:

In Lao we didn't read and write but just learned the words. Now I forget them all, that's why I can't read and write in Lao.

In this class (B class), we don't write, just do vocabulary words.

I wonder if some day in the future, Paw will think back on her education here as she did on her Lao schooling and feel that she learned little at school because her school time had been wasted on meaningless word drills which she could not remember any more.

Chapter Seven

Cham

Cham had five years of education in Laos, but he could not remember anything he learned there. He couldn't read or write in Lao. When I asked him about his schooling in Laos, he merely remembered how he got into the school and how he was punished by his teachers:

I don't know when I started school in Lao. You know in our country, if a child could use his right hand to touch his left ear over the top of his head, that means he is old enough to go to school. Maybe when I was five, my uncle, I lived with his family, he took me to school. The teachers asked me to touch my ear over the top of my head, so I did. Then I started school. I was punished all the time by the teachers. Once I didn't do my work, the teacher asked me to stand by the corner on my one leg and with a book on my head. Sometimes he hit my hand with a ruler if I didn't behave well at school. He yelled at me all the time. I really hated school and often skipped the school.

When Cham shared his past, he often mentioned how he played with his friends: swimming in the river, climbing trees, hunting in the woods or flying kites. He was different from Tran and Paw. Tran liked to talk about his glorious school years in Laos as a gifted student and a popular leader among his peers. Paw remembered her great

grandma who was her caretaker, mentor, and companion. Cham was outgoing and active---a person who enjoyed nature and activity more than anything else. He fondly remembered the places in Laos he lived, played and visited---palm trees and bamboo growing around the house, working with adults in the rice fields, and going to the temple which had a dragon gate.... He spoke the most often about life in the refugee camp: its hardship and the adventures he had there.

Those were his lasting memories. He wanted to write about them, but he regretted that "I don't have words for them, my English was too poor."

Now in the new culture he had a very different life pattern. On week days, he went to school from 7:10 am to 2:30 pm. Then he spent the rest of his time doing homework, watching TV, and helping with housework. On weekends he would go shopping, watch TV, and do housework. Sometimes he would take a walk in the mall with his brothers. At vacation time, he would work in his mother's factory packing fish on the assembly line. This was because in the new world, he needed to make money to help his family. He stated: "In this country, you pay for everything, even play." In contrast to his life in Laos, he saw less of the sky and felt less the presence of nature in his life.

Of the four school-age children in his family, Cham had the greatest difficulty with English. The ESL

teacher, Andy, tried to assess his English ability with a test commonly used for the placement of ESL students. He found:

I was not able to achieve a base. He was too low to establish a norm. Then I tested him with an ESL picture book with vocabulary. I tested him orally. His oral intake was extremely poor. When I write the words, he can recognize them, but can't understand them when I say them to him. Since I had no way to use a common standard to assess his language ability, I had to take a guess. I assume that his writing level is four years old, and speaking level is under three and a half. He doesn't understand many words. His working vocabulary, or communication ability, is on a four-year-old level.

So Cham was placed at the lowest level for all subjects, except art, which didn't have any tracking system. He didn't take as many subjects as did Tran and Paw. He had two periods of study hall, and one and a half periods for ESL, and the other three and a half periods were English, science, math and art. He studied math two hours a week individually with the math teacher because he, as Andy told me, "had problems with understanding the teacher in the class," and spent another three hours a week on the math in the ESL room with Andy. Andy believed that Cham learned better on a one-to-one basis, when the teacher could give him special attention, speak slowly to him and address his specific problems. Of the courses he took, Cham did best in math. But he didn't like math at all. He considered math to be the most useless subject he

had to study. Cham decided that science was the most interesting because "You could learn to do things with your hands," but mastery of English was the most important because through this he hoped "to get good career and make more money." When I read his report card, I said to him: "You have scored the best in math." He replied: "I wish that was English. I wish I could raise my English score to B or B+. But I know it's too hard." Paw observed that "Cham spent most of his time doing the English work at home."

Like his brothers and sister, Cham knew that English was the thing he had to master before he could make any plans for his future in this country. "I want to speak well, learn more words, and write correctly. I want the others to understand me. Then I can learn other things, and get jobs." Unlike Tran and Paw, Cham didn't want to do something significant in life, nor did he have the definite goal of going to college after high school. He just wanted to be able to get a job which would make good money whether it be as a: mechanic, electronic worker, salesman, or cook in a restaurant.

I'd like to work for three or four years, make some money, take a trip back to Laos, then I will see what I can do. I might go to a technical school, to learn some skills, to get a better job. I don't want to go to college, that takes too long.

Cham read at home. He was not interested in stories, novels, or poetry. He liked to read magazines and

newspapers. He usually spent his study hall time in the library. After he did his homework, he would get a magazine or some newspapers to read. His favorite magazine was People Magazine, "In that magazine, you can learn a lot about those Hollywood people. I love to read their stories and their life. I love their fancy life." Mostly he would read the classified advertisement section in the newspapers to find a job, or to see if something was on sale. Also he liked to glance over movie reviews. When I asked him what he read at home, he answered immediately, "Catalogues, to see what is on sale."

For the first half of the school year, Cham was far behind his classmates in just about all classes. As earlier stated, because of his difficulties in understanding his teacher, he had to study math one-on-one with the teacher. Cham's heavy accent made it necessary for the science teacher to read his papers for him, while everybody else in the class presented their own. The low level of his reading and writing skills resulted in his reading less difficult books and doing less difficult written assignments from the rest of the English class.

His first report card showed:

English (B)	D	C-
Algebra (1)	A	B
Science (B)	B	B

With special help from both classroom and ESL teachers, Cham received rather good grades for his math and science,

but not in English. In discussing Cham's performance in English class, his teacher stated: "Even with the 'D' and 'C-', I graded him (Cham) more on his effort than on his real ability. According to his real ability, he can barely be placed in high school. I don't understand why they put him in my class."

Cham had the greatest trouble with vocabulary work. Each week his spelling and vocabulary tested poorly. His best effort might achieve 70 percent. Most of the time 30 percent was the best he could do on a vocabulary test. The English teacher became more and more frustrated with Cham's poor progress and stated: "He has such low skills in language. I am a high school English teacher, and I am supposed to teach literature. I don't know how to deal with this kind of student. He (Cham) doesn't even have the basic language skills." In the second half of the school year, Cham was transferred to the English B class (the lowest rank) at the tenth-grade level.

The next sections will lead us to see how Cham learned to read and write differently in the two different English B classes and how the different ways of teaching reading and writing affected him as a reader and writer.

"Typically, Cham Would Fail [the Tests]."

Cham's work in eleventh grade got progressively worse. Cham's English teacher complained that Cham shouldn't have

been placed in her class and questioned the work the ESL teachers did with him. The ESL teachers felt, in turn, that Cham's English teacher unfairly blamed them and thought that she was the one who should modify her way of teaching and lower her expectations for Cham. Due to this conflict, the director of the ESL program called for a meeting in Jane's room. In attendance were the two ESL teachers, Cham's English teacher and the director himself. In the meeting, the English teacher was first asked to present her curriculum. The following is a dialogue between the director of the ESL Program and Cham's English teacher (D stands for the director, and T for the English teacher):

D: Maybe we should start with what your objectives are. Tell me your curriculum.

T: We have ten words of vocabulary. He (Cham) doesn't look them up, so he doesn't know what they mean....

D: I want to know your curriculum. Ten words and what?

T: They have twenty spellings, plus the different forms of them. They have a vocabulary test every Friday. I expect them to define them and to use them. I expect the other kids to relate them to the subject, but Cham doesn't have to relate them to the subject.

D: What do you ask them to do on the test?

T: They have to use them in phrases and sentences. They use multiple choice to find the definition in the context, then

write the correct forms in the paragraphs (select the correct words for the blanks). Depending on how their comprehension is.... For them it is a puzzle. It's difficult, I want to push them to use more complicated words. I have to dictate to Cham, word by word, sometimes letter by letter. If I slow down enough, he doesn't do badly. Those kids all have poor concentration skills...

D: What's the next type of test?

T: Literature. About the class reading. The class did Huckleberry Finn. That is way beyond Cham. So I did different books with him--Shane and The Man Without a Country. The vocabulary I gave him was easy too. He has very poor vocabulary. When he read The Man Without a Country, he didn't know the words 'country' and 'sailor'...

D: What do you expect them to do with the reading?

T: I read aloud to them, go over their notes. But I don't have time with Cham. So I do it with him at lunch time. I go over the study guide with him, almost everything. I go over questions with him orally. When I read aloud to him, he understands significantly better. I break down the reading, paragraph by paragraph. Cham wouldn't understand the text unless you read aloud to him. He doesn't have a sense of...

D: What's the test?

T: It's a reading quiz, quick test: short essay, true or false choice, filling in blanks and giving short answers. Typically Cham would fail them...

D: Let's go over your test again. Quiz: essay, filling in blanks, identifications, true or false choice.

T: I go over it with them every Thursday. I go over vocabulary and give pretest reviews.

D: Do you ask them to write something?

T: I expect them to write sentences with the vocabulary. We don't do too much outside writing. I plan to teach them how to fill forms, such as a driver's license or insurance forms, something like that.

.....

The curriculum the English teacher presented showed that she stressed vocabulary learning: ten words for vocabulary and twenty additional spelling words plus their different forms each week. Sentence making and weekly tests were the teaching strategies to master those words. The teacher would read the book to the class and go over the notes together with the class. The class would have a test, which required the students to recall the notes they took when she read to them. The writing exercise consisted of the sentences using the new vocabulary.

We also learned from the teacher that Cham had a lot of problems in English: he failed the tests, didn't do homework (looking up the weekly vocabulary in the dictionary), had very poor comprehension, and poor language skills. As the English teacher spoke, she could not stop complaining about Cham's low ability, and each time the director would interrupt her when this happened. In the end, she claimed that Cham's English skills were too limited to learn to read and write in her class: "I just don't understand why you placed him in my class."

The first day I met Cham in the ESL room, I was asked to help him with his vocabulary worksheet. By working with him, I realized his difficulty with the work. In my notes, I recorded my impressions that first day with Cham:

September 28, 1990

This was my first day of working with Cham. I helped him with his vocabulary worksheet. There were ten words on it. He was required first to define their parts of speech, second, to give the definitions, then to make sentences with those words. He looked those words up in the dictionary, and copied down the definitions and the parts of speech. But he didn't understand what "n" or "adj" stood for. I explained to him that "n" stood for noun, and "adj" for adjective. But it didn't seem to make any sense to him. He nodded his head when I explained to him, but when I asked him "Do you know what noun means?" He shook his head. It was so hard for me to deal with this linguistic issue out of the context. The next stumbling block was when we did the definition part. There were several definitions for one word in the dictionary, but should we copy one down or all of them? Cham said "just copy the first one down." The most difficult thing we came across was to make sentences with those words. He didn't know how to use them at all. I tried my best to explain how to use each word, but he didn't show any interest and simply copied my sentence which I used to demonstrate. I was so frustrated to find I didn't know how to help him learn to use those words.

My notes above reflect a typical pattern of how Cham did his vocabulary work. Because he learned those words out of context, he couldn't remember them or use them, even though he had copied the definitions word by word from the dictionary. Many researchers (Beck et al., 1980, Stahl, 1985, 1986, and Kameenui et al., 1987) pointed out word knowledge can hardly be learned out of context:

[W]hen a word is embedded in a rich context of supportive and redundant information, the learner might be more likely to acquire its meaning than when the same word is found in a lean context. In the former context, knowledge of a word is said to be derived, prompted, or assisted by the verbal context (reading or listening). In the latter situation, word knowledge is considered to be unprompted and therefore unassisted by the immediate context (reported by Baumann, Kameenui, 1991, p.605).

Some specific examples that follow show Cham taking vocabulary tests. They will demonstrate why students can hardly enlarge their vocabulary by learning it out of context. Take the word "advance" for example. Cham had copied one of its definitions in the dictionary as "To make earlier in time." He made a sentence with the word: "I advanced my homework last night." Then, on the weekly test, when he saw this word in the multiple choice section:

the advance in food prices
a. retrogression b. make early payment c.
proceed d. acceleration

he circled "b. make early payment," according to the definition he memorized from the dictionary. Further in the test, when filling in the blanks, he put the word "advance" in the blank to make a sentence like this:
"...but they are certain big cars advance better."

In these three exercises (making a sentence, multiple choice and fill-in-blanks), he was wrong each time. The three mistakes revealed that it was not because he didn't do his homework as his teacher stated, or because he forgot

the definition. It was because he only remembered one out of the seven definitions for the word "advance" in the dictionary, and learned it out of context.

Therefore, when he had to make a sentence with it, he used the word in a foreign way--"I advanced my homework last night." The teacher marked it wrong and asked him to correct it as: "I did my home work in advance last night." Britton (1970) stated children learned language by using it and constantly interacting with it. In this sense, copying a correct sentence would not "advance" Cham's understanding. Actually the teacher's version was awkward too, as most natives would say, "I finished my homework earlier last night."

The mistakes Cham made in the multiple choice and fill-in-the-blanks sections also stem from his memorization of the words out of context. The word "advance", depending upon the context, can be used as a noun or a verb. When Cham looked it up in the dictionary, he chose to remember it as a verb to mean: "make it earlier in time". But the test required him to choose it as a different part of speech: a noun defined as: "a rise, esp. in price or value." Hence, this was the root cause for his mistake in the multiple-choice section. Baumann and Kameenui (1991) state in their report of the recent research on vocabulary instruction: "some argue that multiple-choice vocabulary tasks 'are useless at best and dangerous at worse'

(Kameenui et al., 1987) because they are not sensitive to the various dimensions of vocabulary knowledge" (p.607). Cham's example of doing multiple-choice tests certainly proved Kameenui et al's point.

The purpose of the fill-in-the-blank section of the test, was "to push the students to use more complicated vocabulary words in the context." It was a puzzle to Cham. By inserting the word "advance" where he did in: "...but they are certain big cars advance better," it showed that he had not acquired a full understanding of how and when and where "advance" is correctly used.

Of the ten items in the multiple-choice section of the weekly vocabulary test, Cham got six wrong. And in the fill-in-the-blank section, he got seven out of nine wrong. As to his few correct choices, Cham didn't know how he got them right. "I got some right by guessing, and some because they were the only words I knew." That was how Cham typically took the test.

Every day Cham did his vocabulary homework, and every week he spent much time studying for the Friday test which he usually failed. Once just before the test, when he was in the ESL room. Jane asked him to do a language game with her. Cham was a person who usually got excited with any kind of game. He enjoyed challenges and a variety of activities. But this time he asked, "Can I do my pretest? Today I will have the test." I saw his pretest sheet:

twenty spelling words plus their synonyms and antonyms, and the rules for capitalization. I asked him whether he studied them the night before. He said, "I read them and worked on them for a long time last night. They are too hard. I can't remember them. I still don't know them." That day he went to the test with a worried look on his face. No doubt, he anticipated another failure.

Cham was also doing poorly on his reading tests. Remember the teacher's complaints that Cham had too little vocabulary to handle the reading? "His vocabulary is so low that he even didn't know the word 'country' and 'sailor' when I helped him to read the story The Man Without a Country." While it is true that those words are essential to the story, it is ironic to know what and how Cham was taught to learn the vocabulary. If the teacher knew Cham didn't have the basic vocabulary to read, then why didn't she teach him to learn the words he needed for the reading? Instead, she pushed him to learn more complicated words in the vocabulary book? The consequence for Cham was that he didn't master the words in the vocabulary book, nor did he have the vocabulary for his reading. It was like providing a person, lacking the basics of everyday clothing, with the likes of dressy suits and silk dresses for parties, and insisting that these were the essentials for everyday living.

In the course of reading in this class, the students had to do worksheets and take a monthly test to check their comprehension. Cham's worksheets and tests were based on separate books from the rest of the class. One book, Shane, was a western story, with twelve short chapters and about a hundred pages long. The worksheets and tests I collected for this reading totalled fourteen pages. After every two chapters, Cham had to do a set of worksheets on four areas: setting/time, plot, characterization, analysis of certain incidents or remarks. With Jane's help, Cham could finish the work on time. But Cham could not handle the test.

He took the comprehension test every month. The test had four parts: true or false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks, and a short essay or paragraph section. The first three parts contained one hundred items. Those one hundred items covered almost every detail of the book. When I saw the test I knew I could not handle it. The test required him to memorize the whole book. As usual, Cham failed the test getting only one-third right. Not finishing the test within the class, he took it to the ESL room and continued to work there with Jane's help. When Jane saw the test, she was shocked and said, "I read the book and I certainly couldn't do the test. How could I remember all those details in the book?"

It is true that few of us read to remember everything in a book. We only remember what strikes us most in our

reading, but not everything. Smith (1986) sharing his own reading experience in his discussion on memorization says: "I would only have to memorize deliberately if I were dealing with something I did not understand--but if that were so I probably wouldn't be reading the report in the first place" (p.74). The worksheets and tests made reading onerous and hard work when what should have been fostered was depth of understanding and a life-long love of reading.

In this class, there was little emphasis on writing except for writing sentences. The teacher had earlier disclosed that "We don't do much writing. I ask them to write sentences with those words." Altogether I collected three pieces of writing from Cham during his six months in the class: two short essays and a question-and-answer type of writing. On each occasion Cham needed much help either from his English teacher or the ESL teacher, even though the writing was part of the monthly test.

As I mentioned in the "Paw" chapter, in this B class, the students had to do worksheets before they wrote. Jane usually helped Cham work on the worksheets. He would first fill in some big blanks about the characters, the plot, the setting and etc., before he got to the structure of composition. My notes observing this process follow:

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Jane was helping Cham work on his worksheets for writing the essay. Step by step, Jane asked him to put down what he could remember about the character he was going to talk about. She told

him: "You don't have to put them in complete sentences, just anything you can remember about this character, then we can put the ideas into paragraphs.

Soon they came to the topic sentence. Jane said to Cham "Okay, let's do the topic sentence now. Do you know what a topic sentence is?" Jane asked very casually. "Yes, it's something, Nn.... that word, Oh, yes! It called details," Cham was so happy that he had finally remembered the expression "the details." Jane was shocked that Cham really didn't know what a topic sentence meant. First of all she would have to explain to him what it meant before they could work on it. "A topic sentence is the first sentence of your essay." Cham nodded his head. "No, that's not enough, it should contain all, or should be a summary of the information you are going to talk about." Cham frowned. "It is the first sentence that includes a look at what is put here, 'The topic sentence must state the main idea of your paper. (It must embrace the entire concept)'." Cham looked down at the worksheet without any expression on his face. "Are you clear now? Do you know what a topic sentence means?" Jane wanted to make sure that Cham understood it before she could help him work on it. Cham raised his head from the worksheet and said to Jane "Can we just write it now?" "But I want to make sure you know what it means, otherwise how can we do something that you don't know. Do you know what a conclusion means?" Cham shook his head." Jane rolled her eyes and slouched down and let out a big sigh. Cham kept his eyes on the worksheet with an expressionless face. Jane looked at her watch, and realized there were only five minutes left. She said to Cham "Okay, let me just explain all these terms to you today. I don't think we have any time to write this essay now. We can do it some other time. A conclusion means..."

I remember clearly that time as Jane spent the rest of the period explaining what a conclusion meant. Cham sat there with his eyes on his worksheet, his face expressionless. As soon as the bell rang, he dumped everything into his bag and rushed out of the room. Jane looked at me. We both shook our heads at each other.

After a few seconds, Jane remarked: "You see, how can he do the test? He doesn't understand what those terms mean on the worksheet. I still don't know whether he understands what a topic sentence and a conclusion mean after I spent so much time explaining them to him. Am I confusing him?" I could tell Jane was overwhelmed and frustrated. She wanted to help Cham, but it was hard for her to explain those technical composition terms to Cham, who had read and written so little.

From Cham's lack of expression and response to Jane, I could tell Cham was confused and lost. While there was spark of interaction with Jane at the start, at least he would nod his head or frown, he became motionless and stoic in a short time. It was too much for him as well as for Jane. "Topic sentence" and "conclusion" are the terms for composition. When a writer writes, he or she doesn't have to think of them before he or she starts to write. If he or she has something to say, he or she expresses it. It is the teacher who uses these terms for teaching, or the composition critic who uses these terms to analyze the writing. But for Cham, who seldom wrote much in his life, he had to deal with those technical terms before he could write. It was as what Oakes (1985) presented as the general situation for the students like Cham in American high schools: "Those students (low-track) who seem to need the

most appear to be getting the fewest schooling experiences that are likely to promote their learning..."(p.197).

Though Cham had problems understanding the terms "topic sentence" and "conclusion", he did have a topic sentence and a conclusion inherent in his writing. Let's see a short essay he wrote:

Start Wilson was from Kansas, and he was working for Fletcher. He was going to scare the homesteader so that Fletcher could get their land. Wilson was an Arrogent man. And he killed Ernie by Challenge and made him mad and Ernie took out the gun and Wilson shot him. After he killed Ernie Wright he scared all the homesteaders. Wilson was a serene person. He was confident and tough man. He thought that no one could beat him. Until Wilson met Shane. Wilson challenged Joe and Shane went to the bar. And got a fight with Wilson, than Wilson was killed by Shane.

In my opinion is Wilson is a bad guy because he thought that money was more important than people's lives.

Though Cham made a lot of mistakes in this short essay, he did show that he knew how to write, in terms of organization and expression of ideas. The first paragraph contains a topic sentence and the last sentence was obviously a conclusion. The essay also exhibited Cham's comprehension of the reading. He understood the main ideas of the book, Shane.

When he got his paper back from the teacher, it was covered with all the teacher's corrections and red marks on the margins and between the lines. There was no grade but the teacher's comment at the end, which read like this:

Cham -

This needs to be rewritten to put in better order. Please meet w/ me at lunch and we will go over it. Your details are good -- Once the order is logical it will be a good essay. Thank you for all the hard work you put into reading this book. Your good work shows you have made good progress.

At lunch time, she explained to Cham how to organize a piece of writing. She wrote on a piece of paper:

Introduction

*

1. Stark Wilson is proud man, killed 3 people reputation for being fast gunner....
2. Stark Wilson was reckless when he accept Fletcher's offer to scare the homesteaders, thought it would be easy, didn't plan on fighting Shane...

* * Conclusion:

Ernie - Wilson takes advantage of someone who can not protect himself.

After the teacher had talked to Cham, she asked him to copy his essay in the way she had corrected it. With these instructions, Cham came back to the ESL room. Jane didn't understand why the English teacher asked Cham to copy her corrections instead of rewriting it, so she went to the classroom to make sure Cham had not misunderstand the teacher. The English teacher told Jane:

Yes, I did ask him to recopy the paper in the corrected version, because I want him to copy it absolutely grammatically right, to get the habit of patterning, and get the flow, and put the writing in a good order.

Cham copied the teacher's corrected version word-by-word as the following:

Stark Wilson was a gunfighter from Kansas, and he was a tough gunfighter. He was hired by Fletcher to scare the homesteaders so that Fletcher could get their land.

Wilson was an arrogant man (more details). He killed Ernie by challenging him to a gunfight, first insulting him and made him mad and then Ernie reached for his gun but Wilson shot him before he could even get it out of the holster. After he killed Ernie Wright the homesteaders but Sevett and Shane were scared.

Wilson was a over confident person. He thought no one could beat him. After Wilson met Shane, he learned a lesson. Wilson challenged Shane to a gunfight and lost. Shane got into a fight with Wilson and Wilson was killed by Shane. In my opinion Wilson is a bad guy because he thought he had the right to take people's lives.

Cham copied it without asking any questions about the teacher's corrections. He assumed that the teacher was right and he was wrong. When I saw that the teacher changed Cham's sentence from "He worked for Fletcher" to "He was hired by Fletcher," I asked, "Do you know the difference between these two sentences?" Cham shook his head and said, "I don't know what was wrong with my sentence, but of course the teacher must be right. She is always right. Maybe she wants me to learn how to use the word 'hire'."

There is a subtle difference between "being hired" and "working for somebody" in the Western stories (I didn't know this until one day I shared my data with a group of graduate students). Then, the teacher was technically right in her correction--somebody "was hired" to kill somebody in the Western story. But how many Americans know this subtle difference? The teacher didn't explain why it

would be better to use "He was hired" instead of "He worked for," but simply asked Cham to copy her corrected version. Had this been a revealing learning experience for Cham? I doubt it, recalling Cham's earlier comment when he said he didn't know in what way the teacher was right and he was wrong, except because "the teacher was always right."

The teacher had made another correction on the last sentence of the essay. She changed Cham's opinion from "Wilson is a bad guy because he thought that money was more important than people's live," to "Wilson was a bad guy because he thought that he had the right to take people's lives." Jane and I couldn't understand why the teacher had to change Cham's opinion by substituting her own, and further, we both believed that Cham's opinion was a valid one. The character, Wilson, was a hired killer in the plot of Shane, and Cham rightfully concluded that that he was a bad guy because he thought money was more important than people's lives. As to how he copied the rest of the essay: Cham asked no questions, nor defended his opinion; rather, he passively rewrote the teacher's revision word by word. Cham's experience demonstrated what many educators have complained of: "Adolescents had been schooled to be passive for most of their lives..." (quoted by Powell et al., 1985, p.51).

When Jane saw Cham's essay covered with red marks and how passively and silently Cham copied the teacher's

corrected version, she was worried that Cham's self-confidence had suffered a blow. She thought some changes made by the teacher were unnecessary. So she decided to have a talk with Cham's English teacher. The following dialogue was a conversation between Jane and the teacher:

Jane: Can you modify your expectations for Cham? There are just too many red marks on his paper. I think he is overwhelmed by all the mistakes he made. Could we try bit by bit, and not expect him to do everything right at the same time? So as not to give him a feeling that all he makes is mistakes. Let's focus on the important or bigger things first. Let's narrow down, such as looking at capital letters and punctuations this time, then....

Teacher: You mean when I have his work, I only look at capital letters, but not sentences, words, or usages?

J: Yes, we have to, but not just ignore them, but... let's cut down our expectations....

T: I can't understand why he is in the eleventh grade. There is something crazy about the placement. I can't handle the basic skills, just no time for that. When I look at his writing, sentences are not correct, words are not correct, forms are not correct, I have to deal with them. I can't just let them go:

J: I mean let's narrow down, focus on a few incorrect things each time, not deal with them all at the same time. I am worried that he is too confused...

Obviously, there was no common ground between Jane and Cham's English teacher. They were talking to each other from different perspectives. Jane wanted the English teacher to be less obsessed with Cham's errors and more encouraging on his efforts. The English teacher saw this

as request to lower her standards. And she was unwilling to do. Their meeting resulted in Cham's transfer from the eleventh-grade B English class to the tenth-grade B English class.

"I Want to Be like an Eagle."

In February, after six months in the eleventh-grade B English class, Cham was moved to the tenth-grade B English class. When I asked him what he thought of it he replied: "I don't know. I can't stay in Mrs H.'s class. The vocabulary is too hard for me there. Mr. B. told me that I can build up my vocabulary in this class." Unlike his sister, Cham was not bothered by being moved down to a lower-grade-level English class. He told Jane that now he had more time because the vocabulary in the tenth-grade class was easier and the teacher didn't give the spelling or vocabulary test every week: "That is much easier, we don't have to take the test every Friday. I have more time for other things, not just vocabulary all the time." In the new class Cham still had to learn vocabulary from the vocabulary book and make sentences with those words. However, there was less pressure now and he became more talkative and interactive. He spoke more in the ESL room instead of bending his head down to do worksheets or the

tests. He participated more in the activities of the ESL rooms, and in school in general.

The reading materials were selected by the teacher and were mostly stories from magazines like Scholastic Scope. They were mainly about teenage life today. Usually the teacher would read the story with the class, then a discussion would follow. The class had only four students including Cham. They did fewer worksheets, but a lot of talking. The teacher was very humorous and tended to make jokes in order to provoke the students to speak and interact in the class. The two American girls in the class interacted with the teacher all the time. Cham spoke little but he would listen and laugh with the others. He looked much more relaxed than he did in his former English class.

There was no reading test but a writing assignment relating to the story the class had just read. For instance, after the class read the story "Camikazi Kid," about a boy called Sam who jumped back to the year 1961, the writing assignment was: "To imagine a time in the past or in the future. What did you do or what would you do then?"

That was the first writing assignment Cham got in this new class. Instead of worrying about the work, he couldn't wait to write what was in his imagination. He wrote about life in Laos in the year of 1912.

I want to go back in 1912. I want to go back to Laos because that was my old country I was born. How wonderful if I'm going back to Laos. I would like to see how my grand father and mother are doing in that time. The people in 1912 they wear black clothes always when they went to school they were very neat clothes. They studied ten hours a day in the school. In 1912 the people had a small family because they didn't had enough food and they didn't had time to take care there family as well. In that time the men were worked hard everyday in the farm. Every two day a week the men had to worked for the government for example they build the houses and dive the lake. The women had strayed home cleane the houses and cooked for the men and took care everything in the house. They live in a cubicle house. Every year the people pay tax to the government like get them rices about two hundred pound. In 1912 they didn't had free to do everything that they wanted to do.

Unlike his writing before, Cham enjoyed writing this piece. He didn't ask for much help and got the writing done in no time. In this piece, he combined what he knew about the life of his grandparents and what he knew about his country. He knew that his grandparent's generation lived a harder life than his parents and had to work much more than the latter for survival. He knew the people currently under the rule of the Communists in Laos don't have freedom to do what they want to do. He wrote what he knew about his country's past and present. No longer was he struggling to recall the facts from his assigned reading.

In April, he was asked to write on the topic, "Spring Fever." At first, Cham didn't know what "Spring Fever" meant. He looked it up in the dictionary, and still he

couldn't understand its meaning. He went to Jane and asked what kind of a "disease" Spring Fever was. Jane replied, "It is not really a disease, but a strong feeling of wanting to go out, do something outdoors instead of working indoors. This happens when the weather starts getting warm after a long cold winter." After Cham heard Jane's explanation, he almost shouted "Oh, I certainly have spring fever. I can't wait to go out. I want to climb mountains, to have a picnic on the beach, go sailing, swim in the ocean, play volleyball." Within a class period, Cham finished his "Spring Fever" composition in which he wrote about all of those things. He enjoyed writing out what was on his mind. He kept saying "Oh, I forgot to put ... down, that's the thing I really want to do too," while he wrote. When he finished, he read it aloud to Jane and me. As he read, he frequently stopped to edit his writing, "Oh, this word is wrong," "here, I forgot to put 'ing'."

Cham's grades improved. He got B and B+ for his two writing assignments. Above all, he enjoyed writing and had fun writing those two pieces. Furthermore, he was not worried or frightened about writing but couldn't wait to write again.

The writing assignment in May required him to write on this topic: "Why I Want to be an Eagle?" Cham wrote:

I want to be like an eagle because the eagle is the symbol of freedom in America. The eagle is a

bravny fighter. The eagler is a lofty flies (flier) in the sky, and I can fly wherever I want to go, [and] nobody will tell me what I should do or don't. I will be the leader of sky. [Perhaps I can fly back to my country in Laos and help my people to have freedom like an eagle. I will protect them, and get them good care. I will teach them to be like the leader of sky. They will become brave people, and always believe in what they can do. Nobody will control them.]* I will eat fish, quail and snake. I will sleep in a beautiful house with swimming pool.

Cham received an A for this paper. It was the first A he had ever received in English. Instead of looking at every mistake, the teacher saw the beautiful ideas in Cham's writing and responded in a very positive way:

[]* This section is excellent (and touching!) I admire your ability to take your thoughts beyond the ordinary level of the assignment. Very good job w/ this assignment.

In this class, I didn't see the teacher spend a lot of time talking about "how" to write, or use worksheets to teach techniques of writing. There was little discussion on the structures of writing before hand. He simply provided the opportunities and the time for his students to write in a self-expressive way. The weekly or monthly test was replaced by a writing assignment reflecting the introspection and self-interest of the teenage authors. There was no dry, dull, difficulty text-bound focus here. He "cut them loose" by opening a window for the free flow and surge of their imaginations--he had trust in the abilities of his students. Obviously, Cham benefited greatly from

this teacher's teaching strategies. He could write now and it was fun and exciting!

In contrast to the former classwork, he now read stories which more closely reflected the interests and feelings associated with his age group and the times. There were fewer worksheets and tests. This didn't mean that Cham read, worked, or learned less. He had written three pieces in three months in the new class, versus two pieces during the six months of his involvement in the old class. His dream of "raising his English grades to B or B+" was fulfilled. He had received a B and a B+, and also an A for his writing! Most of all he showed his potential and had gained self-confidence as a learner. Don Graves (1991) pointed out if we let students write what they know and want to express, "[t]heir sense of authority is rising and their potential is being realized more than ever, and not just in writing. But the exciting part about writing is that it shows potential in action, where it belongs" (p.126).

**"I Want to Make a Book to Tell the
Stories of My Past Life."**

Cham liked to draw. We discovered this after he was placed in the tenth-grade English class. When he was in the eleventh-grade English class, he spent most of his time on English and put little effort on other subjects. His first

grade report showed a rather low score (C-) for his art work. After he was moved to the tenth-grade English class, he began to "catch up" and "catch on" in his other subjects. He showed the greatest progress in art. He began to draw a lot on his own.

One day in April he brought in two drawings he worked on at home. In these drawings Cham had expressed a memory of his home country and an impression of America. These memories were juxtapositioned in each drawing. In the first rendering, he drew palm trees, a bamboo house and a river with fish swimming in front of the house. The sun was shining and birds were flying in the sky (see Figure 4-1). In this idyllic scene he had juxtaposed a helicopter, a bomb exploding and a bus climbing hills. When I asked him to tell me about this picture, he replied:

(Pointing at the house in the picture) That was my house in Lao. I remember everything beautiful there, our house, the palm trees, the rice field, the rivers. It was always warm there.
(Pointing at the helicopter in the picture) That was what I knew about America when I was in Laos. I remembered they dropped bombs on our land, the helicopters flying every day in our sky and their buses too.

The second drawing was a variation of the first with some major alterations (see Figure 4-2). His Laotian home scene still occupied the center space, but it had become smaller, it looked far away and was overwhelmed by the impression of America which he expressed using bright colors and different shapes. When I asked him to explain

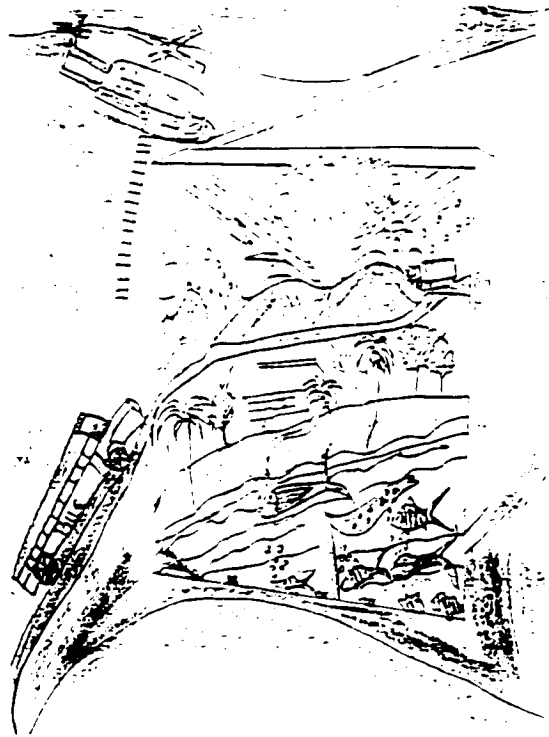


Figure 4-1 Cham's Memory of Laos and his Impression of America in the Past

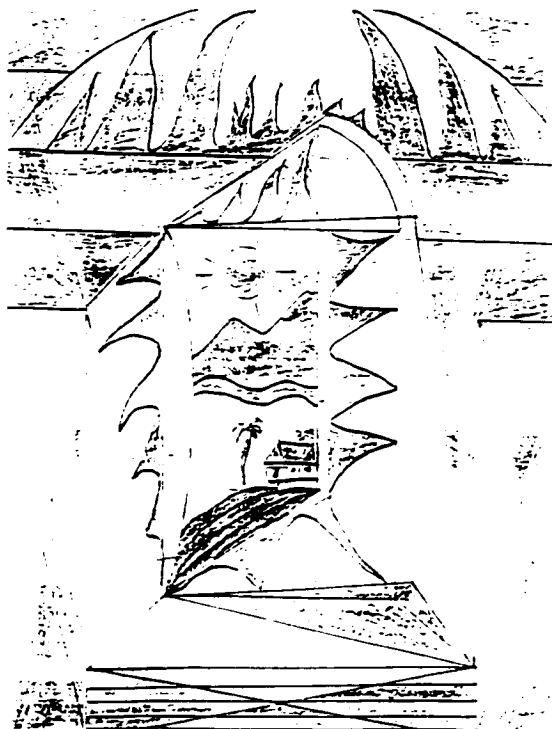


Figure 4-2 Cham's Memory of Laos and his Impression of America at Present
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this picture, he told me:

(Pointing at the center of the drawing) This is my country. It will always in my memory. It is beautiful. It will always there. Someday I want to go back see it. (Pointing at the all the shapes around the center) This all is America. I don't know how to draw about America, it is too much, but I don't really know what it is. That is what I feel about America.

In the first picture, Cham drew his country and his impression of America when he was in Laos. In the second picture, he shifted his point of view to America. He drew his country in his memory, which was still in the center. But it had become smaller and less dominating than it was in the first picture. It was surrounded, as if it were being suffocated, by all the different shapes, with bright red and yellow colors representing the artist's impression of America.

Cham couldn't say with words but he could show through his drawings that much as on his mind. Cham's drawings and his verbalization of them seem to validate Vygotsky's contention that drawing is not representational but rather it yields "predispositions to judgement that are invested with speech or capable of being so invested" (1978, p.112).

Jane, Andy and I were impressed by Cham's artistic skills, and intrigued by the messages his drawings conveyed. Cham was responsive to our adulations of his work:

You know what I really like to do, I want to draw a series of pictures about my life in Laos, and in the camp. I want to make a book about it, then after each picture, I will write something to

tell about the picture. I want to make a book to tell the stories of my past life.

Jane was delighted to hear his plan. She shared her excitement with the other teachers. Everyone, especially Cham's English and art teachers, were surprised, and pleased to hear that Cham had initiated a project on his own. These two teachers and Jane decided to help Cham carry out his project and on the basis of this, extend credits to Cham in English, art and ESL course work. Now there was great enthusiasm for a spark had been ignited and Cham could do something he really wanted to do in his studies. For the three teachers involved, it was a new and interesting project, "We are just glad to see him (Cham) want to write (draw) and like to do it."

Cham started drawing the second week of May. He drew whenever he had time, at home, in study hall, in art class and in the ESL room. By the beginning of June, I collected fifteen drawings, including drafts. The series of drawings began with a Buddhist temple with a large, big-dragon gate (see Figures 5-1 and 5-2); then came a rendering of his house with bamboo growing along the side and palm trees at the back; and a rice field was close by (see Figure 6-1). The third picture was the Mekong River flowing between its banks--Laos on the one side and Thailand on the opposite side; on the river itself, were the refugee boats escaping from Laos to Thailand (see Figure 6-2). Then he drew two pictures of his Lao school showing the Lao flay

unfurled on the top of the building (see Figures 7-1 and 7-2). His last two pictures were of the refugee camps in Thailand, in which he detailed numbered buildings: the jails, the office, the clinic, the wire fence surrounding the camp, and the trucks for transporting supplies to the refugees (see Figures 8-1 and 8-2).

Two days later, I went to the school, and encountered a delighted Jane who said:

You don't know what you missed yesterday, and no one would have believed this before. Yesterday Cham sat here and told us all the stories. He went through one picture after the other telling us all the details of his life in Laos and in the refugee camp. We didn't say anything, nobody said anything during his talk, or even asked any questions. He talked and talked straight, for forty-five minutes, the whole class period. If not for the next class, he would have continued his stories forever. It was so interesting. Having been with them for so long, this was the first time I heard all this. I really understand my kids better now after all the stories Cham told me....

Jane couldn't stop telling her story either, her enthusiasm grew as she was telling Cham's stories and sharing her new knowledge of Cham and all her Laotian students. Indeed it was a wonderful revelation for Jane, and she had further discovered that Cham's forty-five-minute-non-stop talk demonstrated that when he could speak from his own heart and head, he could speak English well enough to express his ideas.

In the face of Jane's delight I felt remorseful that

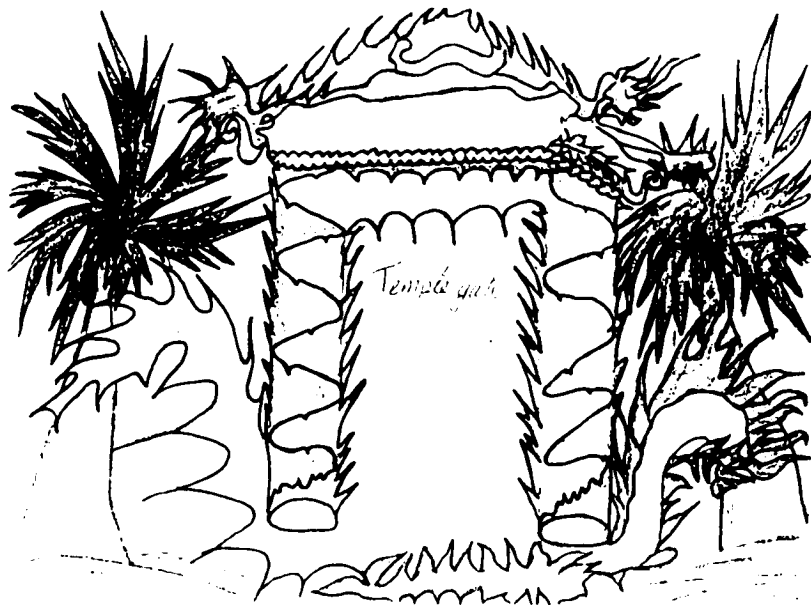


Figure 5-1 The Gate of the Buddhist Temple

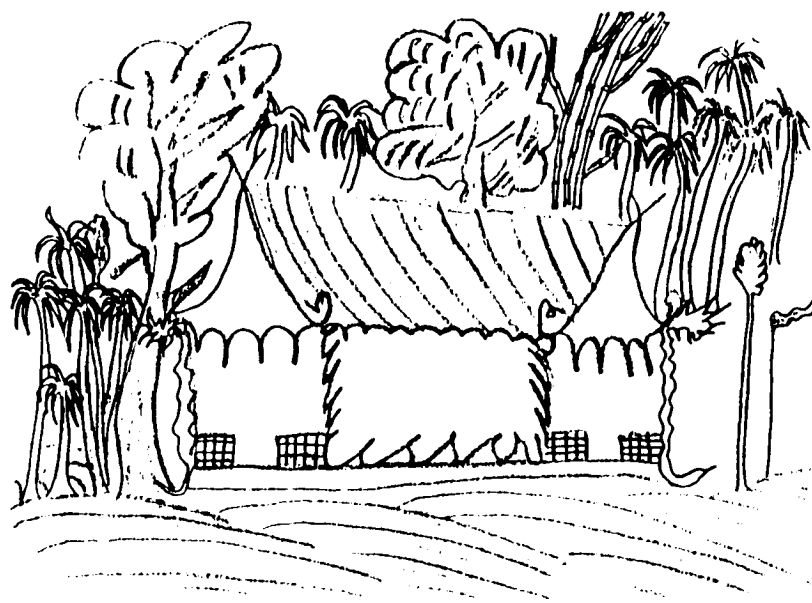


Figure 5-2 The Back of the Buddhist Temple

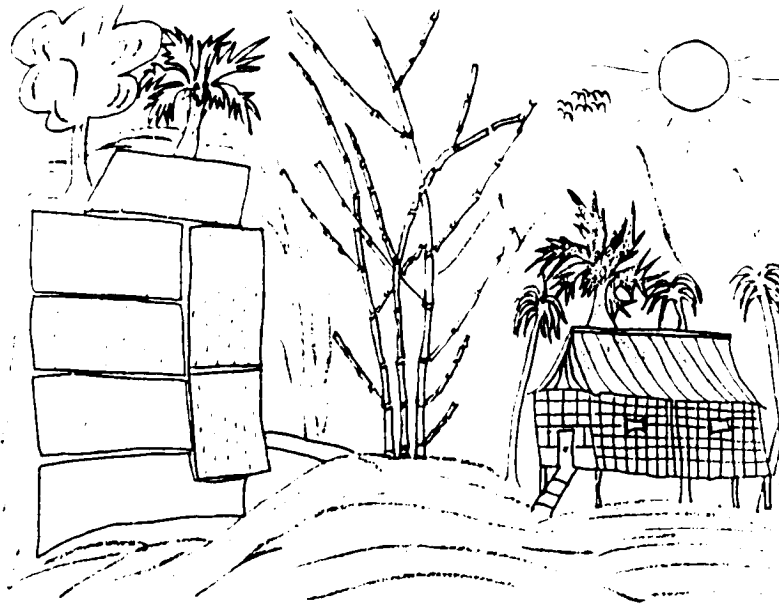


Figure 6-1 My House in Laos

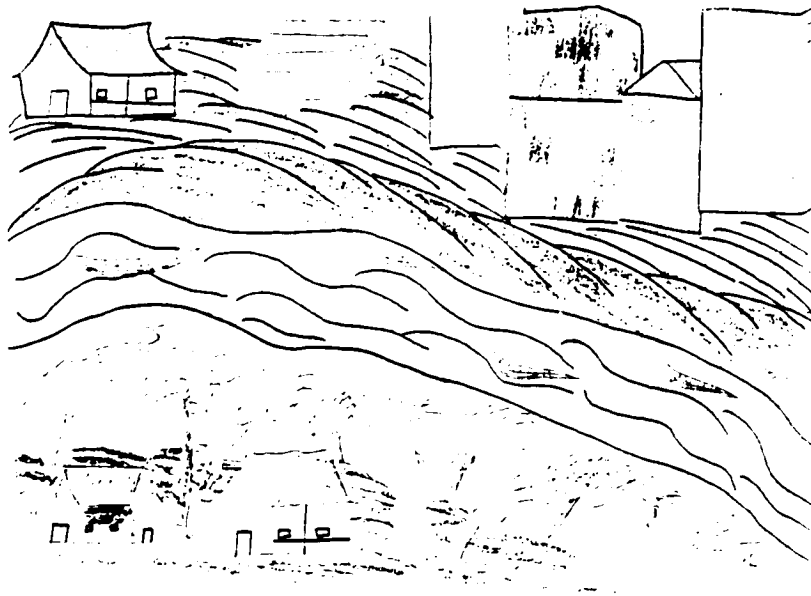


Figure 6-2 The Mekong River

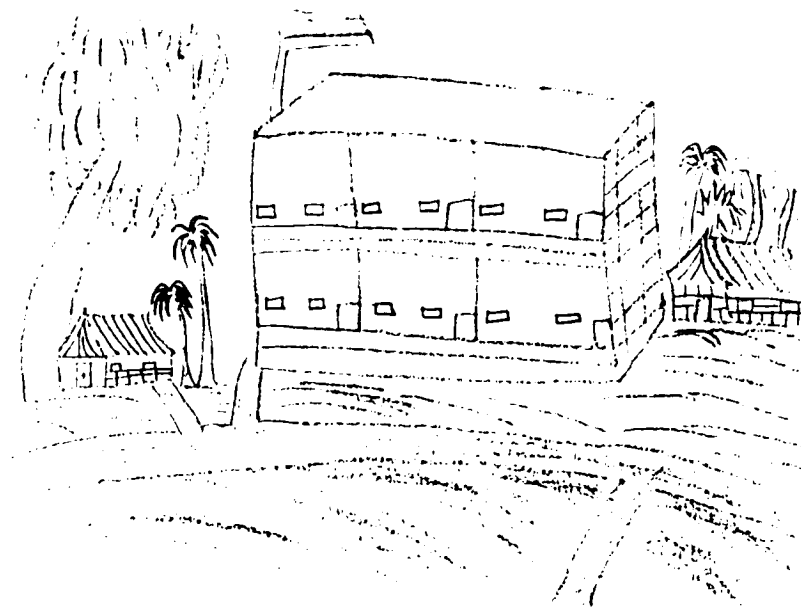


Figure 7-1 My School in Laos

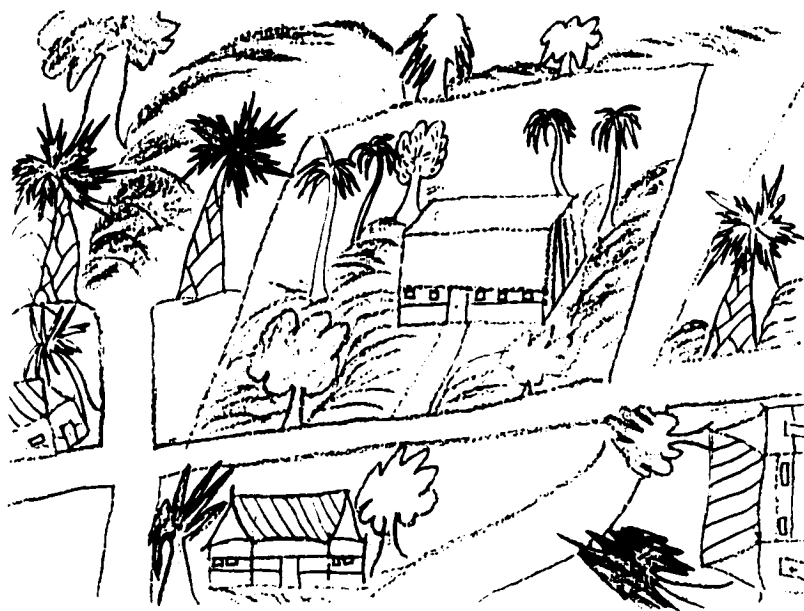


Figure 7-2 My School in Laos

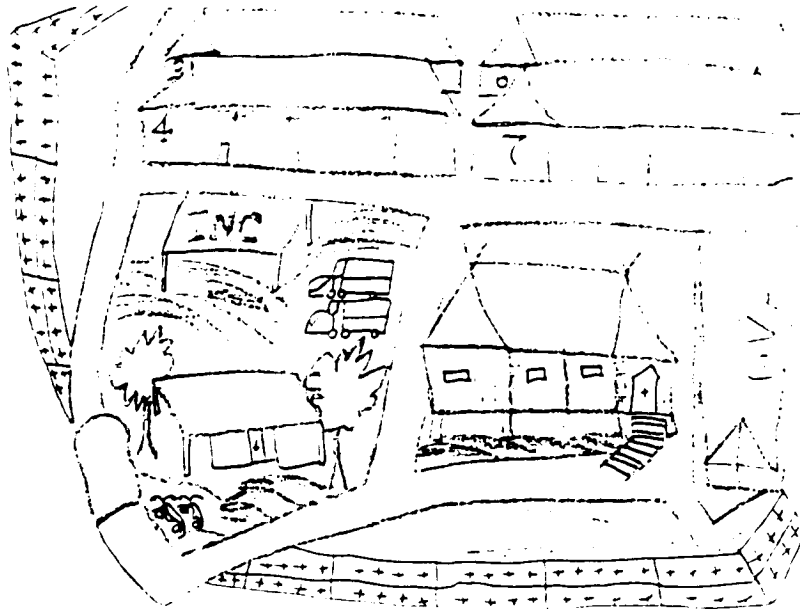


Figure 8-1 Thai Refugee Camps

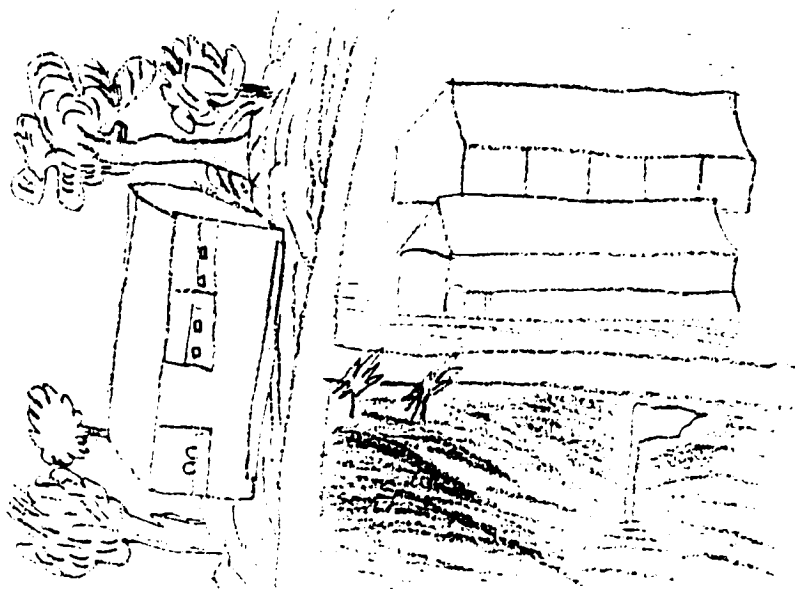


Figure 8-2 Thai Refugee Camps

I had missed this heightened moment. When Cham came to the ESL room, I told him how sorry I felt to have missed his stories. Cham gave me a big smile and said to me: "I can tell you again." He took out all his drawings and starting with "the temple," he told me what the temple looked like inside, how often people went to it, and what they did there. He described how their house was built and why it had to be built that way and how the families, relatives and neighbors helped each other in the rice field during the harvest season. He recalled his school days-- "The best part was playing soccer in the school field after school." He gave the most details about life in the refugee camp: what life was like, how they received their food ration and cooked their food; how he ran the risk of being put in jail by sneaking out from the wire fence to catch fish in the lake for his family; how they were punished by the police; how many sick people waited outside of the camp clinic every day....

He talked and talked without stopping for the whole class period, and I listened like Jane, and said nothing. During this time, I would sometimes laugh with him, sometimes I was silent when he recalled a bad experience and sometimes I tried hard to hold back my tears. I was totally spellbound--immersed in his stories, living through his past experience with him. Afterwards I asked, "Are you going to write out all of this?" He replied: "Of

course, that is what I am going to do next."

Through these drawings, Cham was able to organize his past memories and present an understanding of his past experience; he also communicated clearly with us, constructing a meaningful sense of self. In her study of children's drawing, Ruth Hubbard (1989) concludes:

Drawing is not just for children who can't yet write fluently, and creating pictures is not just part of rehearsal for real writing. Images at any age are part of the serious business of making meaning--partners with words for communicating our inner designs (157).

During the last few weeks of the school year, Cham worked on this project despite final exams and his other school work. He drafted five stories. His English teacher helped him clarify his ideas and Jane helped him edit his writing, polish the language and type the stories. During the last three weeks of the school year, he finished it all! His five stories were a crowning achievement. Out of the five: 1. The Buddhist Temple 2. Houses in Laos 3. Schools in Laos 4. The Mekong River 5. Refugee Camps, the following three appear below:

Schools in Laos

This is a picture of my school in Laos. The schools in Laos are small. Every city has only one school and most of the people go to it. In school we learn Lao and French.

School in Laos started at 8:00 am and goes to 12:30 pm every day. In Lao schools, most of the students wear uniforms. The boys wear short pants and white shirts. The girls wear skirts and white shirts.

If the students don't follow the school rules, they will be punished. They will have to stand on

one foot for one half hour. They are also punished by having to clean the outside of the school. Most of the time the punishment is having to stand on one foot while holding a stick in your mouth. The teacher can hit the students.

In Laos, we don't have lunch in school, like in American schools. Sometimes the students bring their own food to eat during the school break. If you don't want to bring food to school, you can buy food outside of the school.

In school in Laos, many of the students are hurt by the teachers. Laos had no laws to protect children, like in America.

The Mekong River

This is the picture of the Mekong River. It separates Laos and Thailand. The Mekong is about one mile wide. Most of the people in Laos use this river to transport food and other things. The Mekong is very deep, and has a lot of fish.

In 1972, the Communists took over the country. Many Lao people don't like the Communists because they tell the people what they should do. The people have to give their rice to the government. Many people try to escape from their own homeland because of the Communists.

Many people escape by boat, across the Mekong River to Thailand. Some people don't have money or a boat to escape. Some people try to make a raft to escape on.

Many people die in the Mekong because the weather is bad and the boats tip over in the rough waters. It's hard to escape from Laos because all around the river there are many soldiers. If the soldiers see you crossing the river, they will shoot you.

Refugee Camps

This is a picture of a refugee camp in Thailand. It is called the Napho Camp.

There are many buildings inside the camp. Every building there has ten rooms. There is one room for each family to live in. The rooms are very small. There are three thousand people in this camp.

The United Nations helps to give food to the refugees in the camp. Many people die in the camp because they don't get enough food and medicine. Water comes from a well. The U.N. gives meat, rice, vegetables, cooking oil and wood.

Life in the camp is hard. To get enough food, the people have to sneak out of the camp. If the

soldiers catch you, they will send you to jail for one month. There are many people in the camp who steal things from other people. There are many fires in the camp. If you burn your building, you will go to jail.

Most of the men and women work in the camp. They clean the camp. The children go to school. Most of the people stay in the camp from one year to ten years.

In the last week of the school year, Cham turned in his eight drawings and five stories. They were to be turned in for credit but he would continue to work on them through the summer. He chased after me when I was on my way to make copies of his work to tell me this. Contrasted to Paw's attitude toward her "splendid paper", Cham certainly treasured this project than Paw did her paper.

He received a long response from his English teacher, the longest one he had ever received for an evaluation. It reads like this:

Cham -

Congradulations on this achievement! The ideas, the concerns, and the work that went into this project are to be commended.

I truly enjoyed both the art and the written work. Combined, they give a good look at Laos and the differences between Laos and the U.S.A.

I especially liked the part about the school. Here, you show many significant differences -- they are many and profound.

Finally, I hope you don't stop here. I know you have more to tell/write, and I hope you will do so!

Oh - a grade? A In both content and in work, you've put a lot into this project -- Here is your reward.

As Paw's English teacher had done on Paw's paper, Cham's English teacher expressed a similar appreciation and similar compliments for Cham's work. Though Cham and Paw both received splendid comments and "A" grades for their achievements, they had very different reactions to their work. Paw saw it as the end, and Cham took it as the starting point and planned to continue to work on it.

At the high school assembly held on the last day of the school, Cham was given an award for the best achievement in the field of ESL study. Cham had realized his wildest dream, one he would never have believed a few months before, when he expressed wistfully, "I wish I could improve my English and get an award for ESL. I know that is hard. Dreams are hard to come true."

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen two different Chams: as one who was sinking into the chasm of failure early in the year; and later as one who, in the springtime of the year, flowered to become a writer, an artist and a story-teller. He failed while working hard to learn vocabulary, write sentences and prepare for tests. He succeeded when he did less vocabulary and was encouraged freely to express himself within the parameters of the assignments.

The new freedom found in the springtime of the year released him to soar as an "eagle" giving full play to his strengths and potential as a learner. He was finally able to express what he knew, what he felt, and what he wanted to tell. Most importantly, the discovery that Cham had a "voice to write" was exhilarating for all.

The series of the drawings and the stories were the impetus of Cham's emergence during the last seven weeks at school as a person with integrity, with something to teach and tell. His metamorphosis demonstrates that our students need to learn to speak and write with their authentic voice as well as with the basic skills of literacy. Using his authentic voice, Cham could indeed write. He was a failure when he read and wrote in decontextualized and artificial ways. In his own voice, he became creative, authentic and brave--free as the eagle he described, Cham had become the master of his own learning.

Chapter Eight

Sy

Sy was the youngest son of nine children in the family. Each time when I visited his home, he either hid himself in his room or sat in the corner by himself. He never joined the conversation I carried on either with his siblings or with his parents. At school, it was even harder to find any chance to talk to him.

Sy didn't like to sit and just chat with anybody, especially with adults. I tried several times to have a chat with him, but every time I made him nervous. The more I tried, the more he avoided me. Later when I became a quite frequent visitor to his house, all his family members would talk to me like an old friend, but not Sy. I had a couple of formal interviews with him, I tried to sound very casual each time. By the end of the talk, he became quite relaxed and started to say more and joke a little bit. But the next day he would become the same shy and quiet Sy to me again, and our relationship never seemed to improve any after each conversation.

Since I couldn't have much personal contact with him, I sat a lot in his English class and observed how he behaved in the classroom and among his peers. It was

almost the same pattern as I found in him at home, invisible and unheard. Each time I visited him in the class or in the ESL room, I would make copies of something from his folder. He didn't question me about what I was doing as Tran did so frequently. When I asked him to talk about some of his work, he usually replied with "I don't know," "I forgot," or simply shrugged his shoulders. Sometimes when he couldn't give me the above answers, he would give me as a short answer as possible such as "It's fun," "I like it" or "I don't understand it."

I heard some other Laotian students complain that some boys at the school gave him a hard time by picking on him all the time, but nobody heard any complaints from him. When I told him this, he didn't say anything but simply shrugged his shoulders and lowered his eyes looking at the ground. Not being able to get Sy to express himself as much as Tran, Paw and Cham did, I always had a feeling that I didn't know Sy that well.

Sy had one year of school in Laos. But that was in a year when his family was in the middle of trying to escape from the country. Six of his brothers and sisters, two at a time, left the country before him. A year later, together with Tran, Sy also escaped to the Thai refugee camp. Sy grew up in years when the family lived in uncertainty, worries, and fear. Before he was born, his

father was taken away to a re-education camp, and his six older brothers and sisters were sent to live with relatives. At the age of ten, Sy lived with his older brothers and sisters for the first time in the Thai refugee camp. He didn't know his father or live with him, until the family came to America when Sy was thirteen.

Sy couldn't remember anything about the Lao school he went to, as he told me: "I only had one year of school in Laos, and I even didn't remember how many days I went to the school. I didn't remember anything about the school." Sy recalled that in the refugee camp there was a school, where the children could learn English every morning, but he couldn't remember anything he learned there. He said that his brothers and sisters all went to the Sunday school in the camp, where they became Christians, but he didn't go. Paw told me that the family always thought Sy was young and immature, and nobody was serious about him--"He didn't like to sit in any class, that was okay for him. He just played all the time with other small kids. So he didn't learn anything."

Because Sy didn't have much formal school experience before he came to America and understood no English when he started school in this country, his first school in Massachusetts had difficulties placing him. He should be in six grade according to his age. As Jane, the ESL teacher told me:

When Sy first came to us, he didn't understand anything. No matter what we asked him, he would look at the other Laotian kids to let them translate for him. We just couldn't talk to him directly at all. I was told that when he was in school in Massachusetts, he was first put in the second grade. That must have been awful for him, as he was among tiny small kids. Then he was moved to the sixth grade, stayed there for a couple of months, then was moved down to the fourth grade. Before he first came to us, he was in a third grade class. Last year, when he first came to our school, we put him in a sixth grade class.

In one year, Sy had been shifted to four different grades (second, sixth, fourth and third). When I asked him about his first year in school, he told me: "I didn't understand anything. I didn't know anything the people said around me." This statement was later corroborated by Jane. The first year in the Riverside school, he stayed in the sixth grade without being shifted around so frequently.

In the sixth grade, Sy spent most of his time in the ESL room. He told me that he learned to speak English, to pronounce words, and to read textbooks that year. He couldn't remember any other books or stories he read besides the ESL textbooks nor had he written anything other than worksheets for his language exercises.

At the beginning of seventh grade, I interviewed his English teacher, Susan. She couldn't tell me much about Sy as a student. When she talked about her six other Laotian students, she could tell me specifically about where each one was. Pointing at each of their names on the list, Susan said to me: "She is an advanced student, she can go

to Yale. He is good, a college-bound kid. That one is average, he has to work hard. That girl is above average. She could be better if she put more effort into her work...." But when she talked about Sy, she struggled for words:

I really don't know him. I don't know what his level is, or will be. I can't tell about him at this point at all. Neither did his former teacher when they gave him to me. They just couldn't say where he was. I need time to see, to know him.

Sy seldom read or wrote anything besides his school work. When I asked what kind of reading or writing he enjoyed doing at home, he told me without hesitation: "I only read and write for the school work, because I don't have any time to do anything else."

"How about some novels, newspapers or even catalogues?" I pushed him to say more.

"No," Sy shook his head and said with eyes cast down, "I don't like to read. I like to play, play games. That's more fun than read and write. Yeah, sometimes I read funnies. They are like the cartoons I saw on TV, they are funny." He had a big smile on his face when he said that.

"How about writing?" I asked him.

"No, I hate to write. Yeah, I do write notes when I have to, to get permissions from the teacher to go to the library or some places at school," he told me. Tran said that he rarely saw Sy doing schoolwork at home: "When he got home, he would sleep for a couple of hours, get up

around 5:00 pm and then watch TV and play games." Sy's ESL teacher, Andy told me a story about Sy:

For a while Sy was so much into Nintendo. He played it all the time but never did his homework. I talked to him about it, that didn't work. I didn't know what I should do as I knew if I told his father, he would be in big trouble, get beaten, something like that. So I didn't want that to happen to him. Finally I told his brothers. Then, when they saw him play Nintendo games again, they practically dragged him out of the room and forced him to do his homework.

This year in the seventh grade, Sy was mainstreamed for every subject he took except for the one period a day in the ESL room. He enjoyed science and social studies the most. He stated: "In science, you learn a lot of things, and in social studies, you can learn about different countries." He claimed that he learned the most in the home-economics course: "I learned how to cook, how to sew, and do things. That was the most useful course I took." He didn't like the class of study skills: "That is the most boring course I ever took." He said that the most difficult work was reading and writing: "I know it is the problems with my English. I wish that I could learn more English than reading and writing. I mean speaking English, the conversation English, not reading and writing. I need a lot of help with my English."

Like Tran, Paw and Cham, Sy also knew that learning English was very important for him. Furthermore, he expressed several times that he wanted to be an ESL

teacher: "I want to be an ESL teacher, to teach English to the children in the refugee camps in Thailand. But of course if I can make my English good." I was so surprised to hear this. Sy was the one in his family who had the least memory of past schooling, including the English taught in the refugee camp. He had appeared the least interested in learning to read and write. He was the only one among my four informants to express a wish to be an English teacher, an ESL teacher to the refugee children in the camps. Tran wanted to be a businessman, Cham wanted to be a mechanic, and Paw wished to be a nurse. Becoming a teacher was, as these three indicated, the last thing they would choose to do for living. In a letter to Andy, Sy wrote:

Some day I would like to go back to Laos. My teacher Mr. Andy, he tells me thing in Laos are getting better.
My school is too small there are too many people.
My ESL teacher is very great and help me a lot.
Sometimes I got very frustrated, but I want got better.
I want good English when I go Laos so I can work for the Government. I would start school for the poor peoples.

Sy's seventh grade didn't have the ranking system like the high school's. In his English class, Sy had more time and more freedom to read and write and spent less time on worksheets and tests. From the work I collected from Sy for English, in one year he had completed:

12 pages of reading journals
2 pieces on discussion of myth
6 pieces of free writing

18 pieces of journal writing
one set of worksheets on Latin-roots
one test on Latin-roots
one final exam

Over 90 percent of the work I collected was samples of writing: reading journals, creative writing, and daily journals--a sharp contrast to the work samples I had from Cham and Paw in their eleventh-grade English B class.

In the following sections, I will discuss Sy's experience of learning to write in three different genres: reading-discussion writing, creative writing, and journal writing. The discussion will show how Sy grew as a writer, where his difficulties were and where he had the greatest ease and success in written expression.

Reading-discussion Writing

By reading-discussion writing, I mean the writing the students do as part of a book discussion. Susan, the seventh-grade English teacher, had designed the curriculum to include two, six-week units, which were presented between December and January and again between March and April. They were referred to as "two units on reading-discussion."

In the first unit, the students were allowed to read any books they wished. The reading requirement was that they had to keep a reading journal in which they would discuss the books they read. During this period, the teacher would discuss the elements of fiction writing in

general terms every day in the class. Her class discussion covered the "language", the "setting," the "plot," the "climax," etc.. The homework assignment usually was to use the books they were reading as a reference to discuss what the teacher talked about earlier in the day. For instance, if the teacher talked about the "setting" that day, the homework assignment was to discuss, in the reading journal, the setting of the books they were reading at the present. The second unit focused on the reading of mythology. During the six weeks of this unit, the teacher talked about the "concept," the "genre," the "purpose", and the "sources" of mythology. Meanwhile, the students were reading mythological stories. They could choose to read whatever myths they liked. In the reading journal they then connected what the teacher talked about in the class to the books they were personally reading.

Sy had the most difficulty with this type of writing. In the first two weeks of unit one, Sy read five short stories, but he didn't do much writing in his journal. When I asked him if he liked the stories he read, he shrugged his shoulders and said: "Yeah, I think so. I chose them because they were short. I thought short stories were easy to read." I asked whether he understood the stories, he nodded his head and said: "Most of them. But I don't know how to do the homework." Susan didn't know what to do with him:

I don't know what I am going to do with him. The only time he did his assignment was when I worked with him sentence by sentence. I can't work with him like that every time. When I asked him if he understood the direction, he nodded his head but he didn't do the home work. I just had to give him zero. What other choice is there?

Sy received three zeroes for not doing the homework three times in December.

In the second unit when the class was learning about mythology, Sy repeated the same pattern. He read a few mythological stories, but he didn't know how to discuss them. For instance, one day Susan discussed the purposes of myths with the class. Her homework assignment that day was: "What do you think is the most important purpose of the stories you read (use details to explain the purpose. You may think of one not covered in class today.) Sy didn't do the homework at home. The next morning he came to Andy (Sy's first period was in the ESL room with Andy every day), and said to him: "I have to write an essay, but I don't know what it is." Andy didn't know how to help him without knowing the assignment. That day Sy went to the class without doing his homework. During the six weeks of mythology discussion, Sy only did the homework twice. Susan became frustrated with him again and told me (in April):

I don't know why; but I don't see that Sy has made much progress in my class this year. Sometimes I feel I should take some ESL courses myself to understand students like Sy. I give homework every day, but he seldom does it. Maybe he is too exhausted after a whole day's work at the

school. Maybe I should give him something more solid, and concrete to do, like sentence combining, or another set of homework exercises. I don't know what I should do with him right now.

In order to have a better understanding of Sy, I observed him in the English class for a week and interviewed him during the mythology period. He appeared very attentive in the class. He sat at the front by himself. He jotted down whatever the teacher wrote on the blackboard, but didn't write down what the teacher or the students talked about. Many students interacted with the teacher, but Sy rarely made any noise or showed any response with body language. After the class, I asked him how much he understood of what the teacher and the other students said. He told me "A little, not much." "Is that the reason that you couldn't do your homework?" He nodded his head and said to me with his head down and in a low, guilty-sounding voice: "I couldn't understand much in the class and didn't know what the teacher wanted us to write." Mike Rose (1989) described the alienation that students like Sy often suffer in the classroom as the following:

People are taking notes and you are taking notes. You are taking notes on a lecture you don't understand. You get a phrase, a sentence, then the next loses you. It's as though you're hearing a conversation in a crowd or from another room--out of phase, muted (p.168)

I assume this to be what Sy felt but couldn't express. Of the only homework Sy did in the reading-discussion period, one was a summary of the story he read:

"The King of the Crocodiles" April 12, 1991

One day has one family live in their farm with a beautiful daughter. One morning he went out to farm at his field. When he get there, he saw a crocodile lying on the wheat, he wicked mad at him. He start to throw the stones at him. Then he went home. and the next day he came again and he did again. That time the big crocodiles came up and try to bit him and hurt him but he saving his own life to kill. Then they said to the father bring your daughter to marry our king. The father wanted to see his daughter under the water. He went to his field look for crocodile about he want to visit his daughter. The crocodile tell him to "deep into the water until you found a castle." he did what they said. After he visit them he became rich, because the king of the crocodiles give him a land, diamonds and something else.

This was a good summary of the story. Susan told me that Sy rarely had problems writing a summary if he understood the story.

The other homework he did in this period was in answer to the question--"How did the Greek myths get into the English?" It was the only assignment he had done in the discussion of the Myth. When I asked him why he could get this one done, Sy told me: "That might be the only thing I understood of what the teacher said, and I took good notes too." To answer the question "How did the Greek myths get into the English?" Sy wrote:

A person came from Greek with a story in their mind. he told stories to persons who know how to

write in English. Then they wrote the story in a book.

This answer was almost verbatim to his class notes. It reminded me of what the social studies teacher said of Sy:

He is a fact-person. He can remember maps very well and always gets good grades on fact sheets. But he is not creative and imaginative. When he answers questions, he can only tell you the surface meaning, but can't go further in the discussion. That is why he can't write good essays.

Sy's answer to the question about Greek myths was consistent with what the social studies teacher said about him. He repeated the teacher's words to answer the question, and didn't show any understanding of the text.

Looking through Sy's reading journals (twelve pages), I found that there was an obvious gap between his work and the teacher's expectations for reading discussion. They were mostly attempted answers to the questions the teacher had asked, but what he wrote didn't really satisfy the questions. Let's see some specific examples.

Sy read the book Hatchet. One set of the questions the teacher raised was:

Do you like the book? Do you think Brian will survive? Will he be rescued? What if he isn't found? Write answers to these questions before you read more.

Sy answered these questions only in part:

Yes, he is because he have the place to live and has food to eat.

It seemed that Sy only saw certain parts as necessary to answer. The following dialogue I had with Sy explains Sy's thinking.

DL: Why didn't you answer all the teacher's questions?
S: I did.
DL: You didn't say you liked the book or not.
S: I don't have to.
DL: Why?
S: I won't read it if I don't like it.
DL: You didn't answer "Will he be rescued? or What if he isn't found?"
S: Of course he will be rescued. You don't have to say it, otherwise how did people know the story. He will be found, for sure, he will.
DL: You don't think "what if" would happen?
S: No.

From this conversation, I could see that Sy saw no need to answer questions that were self-evident or had answers already implied somewhere else. In his mind, there was no need to answer questions just for the sake of answering questions. I remembered Tran's similar sentiments when we had discussed his book report. He was unwilling to follow the step-by-step way to arrive at an answer when it was there all along. Tran didn't want to repeat what was already evident and Sy had the same understanding when he encountered his teacher's questions.

Shirley Brice Heath (1983) defined this gap between the teaching and the learning as a cultural gap between the real life and the school life. In her study, she showed that black children had a difficulty answering the teacher's questions in a style which was unfamiliar to them. Many of

the teacher's questions were just for language instruction, not being intended to get at a deep revelation. The black children struggled to answer the question not because they didn't know the answers, but because they didn't know why the teacher asked questions to which she already knew the answer. Delgado-Gaitan(1987) stated in her presentation of Heath's view:

Questioning in the classroom by teachers required confirmation of certain skills necessary to indicate comprehension of material. Teachers often asked questions that required descriptors or labels. Trackton children did not respond because these type of questions were unfamiliar to them (p.334).

Sy and Tran's experience was similar to the Trackton children's.

Once the teacher asked Sy to evaluate his own writing:

Skim through your journal, which is your best entry? Identify it and explain why it is the best?

Sy wrote:

I think he feel very happy and have more safe now from porcupine and other different insects like mosquitos.
Now Brian has the place to live and he not very hungry again.

The teacher had asked him to discuss his own writing in effect, but it didn't occur to him that that was what the teacher wanted: "I thought the teacher asked me to talk about the best part of the story, not my writing. I don't know how to talk about my writing. It is the teacher's job." Self-evaluation was too strange to him. From his

answer, I thought at first he misinterpreted the teacher's question. What he said reveals that even if he understood what the teacher wanted from him, he couldn't do it because that evaluation was the teacher's job, not his. Actually self-evaluation is a new concept to most of our students as Graves (1991) said "Children spend 99 percent of their time with a book or a written piece. ... they are not schooled in self-evaluation" (p. 175). So Sy's avoidance or hesitation in evaluating his own work was understandable as he was programmed to be recipient, not the instigator of the evaluation process.

Most of the teacher's questions were geared toward a discussion of the elements of fiction writing: the "language" the author used, the "setting," the "plot," and the "climax." Sy had a lot of problems with this because he didn't always understand what a certain term exactly meant, and he didn't always know how to discuss a certain aspect of writing. Let's look at Sy's discussion of setting:

Question: How do you know what the setting is?

Sy's answer: The setting in my story is in the middle of the wood.

Q: Summarize ideas about how important the setting is to the plot.

Sy: In some stories the setting is important to the plot. For example the story about boy who live in the middle of the wood, had to be happening in the wood.

Some stories the setting does not important to the plot. A example the stories can not be happening in the middle of the city.

In the first question about the setting, the teacher expected Sy to discuss the language the author used to create the setting, but Sy only answered where the story took place. In the second question, the teacher wanted Sy to discuss the relationship between the setting and the plot, and Sy offered little more than he had at first. Obviously, he knew what a setting was, but he didn't know how to explain it. More examples revealed that he didn't fully grasp what was wanted.

1. Find and copy the climax of the story:
explaining why that event is climax.

Sy:

P. 157: (What Sy copied as the climax)

But there is difference now, he thought--there really is a difference. I might be hit but I'm not done. When the light comes I'll start to rebuild. I still have the hatchet and that's all I had in the first place.

When the airplane crashed in the middle of the forest on above the water of the lake and when he survived or living alone in the forest.

Because the pilot who drive the airplane got heart attack that why he live alone in the middle of forest.

He very tough boy and he never give up to survive in the middle of the forest.

2. How is the information organized?

Sy:

The Hatchet stories, the best I have been reading because it was about the boy survive in the middle of the forest. When the pilot got heart attack and the airplane crash on the lake then Brian swam out of the water but his leg it very hurt him then he found the cave and he made the arrow to hunt animals for food.

Instead of discussing climax and the organization of information, Sy talked about the main ideas of the story and the main character. When he was asked to talk about "what you like the least about the book," and to write a book review, he construed "the least" to mean "the most," and gave a similar answer for each.

1. Write about what you like the least about the book?

Sy:

I like the book it was about a boy, his name is Brian Robeson, he went to see his father in north Canada but airplane got crash in the middle of the forest, he very confusion because he doesn't know which way he gonna going.

2. Book Review:

The Hatchet stories the best book I have been reading, it was about the boy survive in the middle of the forest.

Brian personalities is was very smart and confusion. he smart when he dive in the water and find something in the plane, confusion when he don't know where he were.

He very tough boy, when the moose try to kill but the moose can't. Then the wind destroy Brian shelter, but he never give up.

To the four directives (find and explain the climax, write the part he liked the least, how is the information

organized, and write a book review), Sy summarized the main idea and wrote about the main character each time. This was, in his own words, "what I learned about the story." He could comprehend the story he read, but he didn't know how to analyze the techniques of writing fiction.

I observed how Sy read Hatchet with Andy, in the ESL room. He and Andy took turns reading paragraph by paragraph. Then Andy would sometimes ask Sy to tell him what the paragraph meant, sometimes, not. If Sy had no ideas when Andy asked about it, he would explain it to him. With Andy's help, Sy read one paragraph after another, taking them about three weeks (from Jan.10 to Feb.1) to finish reading the whole book.

I found that Sy's cultural and linguistic barriers and his scant "early" school background were contributors to Sy's present difficulty in understanding the teacher in class and in meeting the teacher's directives for the reading discussion. Hatchet was one of the few books he had ever read. It was a lot of effort for him to understand the story. After each chapter, Sy could only manage to tell the factual events of the story, but could not interpret the text and did not understand the elements of writing. Hence, he was confused and unable to provide an analysis of the story. Limited language and limited "early" reading experience precluded analytical reading for Sy.

With only two years of formal schooling, he wasn't equipped to talk about setting, plot, and climax. These terms were even foreign to him in his native language.

This was his first year to read a real storybook and also his first year to even hear a teacher discuss the art of writing. New language, new concepts, new non-textbook genre were enough to overwhelm him. Sy's introduction to reading-discussion writing was like moving away from "the personalized, contextualized, orally expressed knowledge of home to the depersonalized, decontextualized, primarily written knowledge of the classroom" (Goleman, 1986). In his school experience, Sy daily tried to make sense of strange concepts in a new language and in a new territory. No wonder he had to go to bed every afternoon as soon as he got home. There was too much translation for him to do (linguistically, culturally and conceptually) every day at the school.

Free Writing

In Sy's English class, a free writing period was the time to write "freely" about anything the students wanted. They chose their own topics and wrote at their own pace. Susan scheduled this activity twice a year for her students: once early in the year (from October to November), and again

toward the end of the year (from the second half of April to early June).

Free writing was a new concept to Sy. At first he didn't know what to write. So he did his writing from the other courses like social studies and science. Susan let him do it. Sy did this for a couple of weeks. Later, he wrote a piece about his life in the Thai refugee camp. It was short but something he knew about.

"Camp in Thailand"

In the camp the government gave us food every Monday, Wednesday and Friday like fish, meat, vegetable. Every group have the leader run get something the government gave to us. and every Friday they gave to us the rice. One person get 4.5 pound in the camp every house has they own kitchen.

Every day we went to school, after that me and friends we went to swimming play turns or sometimes we go fishing.

When the teacher asked the class to "choose the best piece you wrote and talk about it (explain why you like it the best)." Sy wrote:

I talk about my family live in camp of Thailand, first we came we don't have any money. When we stay longer as sister found a good job. She work for government of camp Thailand. They pay one hundred bucks from a mother. Her boss is the American.

I like "Camp in Thailand" this talk about myself and my family.

This was the first piece he wrote that was freely expressed. He saw it as his best piece. Now, he had no trouble with making a choice and the explanation of why it was his best

one. He didn't wait and let his teacher do the evaluation for him. When he was familiar with his topic, he had no problems talking about his writing and evaluating himself.

The second piece Sy wrote was called "Trick or Treting Day."

Sy Savang Trick or treting Day Nov.5, 90

One scare dark night me and Flutty went to down street near the school. it is halloween Flutty and I were trick or treting, I wear the werewolf costume. When I going to the next house and knock the door. The old woman came out. When she saw me, her face turn to yellow and her body start to shaking because she think I'm the Real Werewolf. When I said "Trick or Treting louger" she close the door she doesn't give me a candy. After I and Flutty was walk home but when we walk acrost in front of school heard the sound scream. It came from in side the school. Then I go close I saw two mans tie the girl on the chair. When I walk to the back of the school, the door is openning. Me and Flutty walk in to save the girl from the thief. Then we ran out of school. The thief saw me and short me on my leg than the police heard the sound of gun. Then they come and the thief run away. Now everything is very save.
The End.

This was the first fiction story Sy ever wrote. He said that he enjoyed writing this piece and did it almost entirely on his own. He told me that he did go to "trick or treat" with a friend and showed me the mask he bought for himself. But most of the details in his stories were his creations. He said that he got those ideas from what he saw on TV.

Sy wrote this story shortly after Halloween. We see him produce a fictional story using his real experience in

combination with what he saw on TV. He had revealed himself as someone who could create and imagine. This was the last piece he wrote at this time.

Four months later, the class entered the second phase of free writing activity. This time, Sy started out differently by not bringing in the writing of other subjects. He wanted to write a fairy tale. He knew what he wanted to say; but understandably had difficulties writing it.

He went to his sister Paw for help. He told her his ideas in Lao, linking in some English words, when he had no equivalent in Lao. The story which Paw translated from what Sy told her was like this:

Once upon a time there was a small kingdom that had a king. He loved to go hunting for fun. One day he went to hunt at [where] he used to go. But today he saw a very beautiful deer that he never saw before. The king go after the deer until he founded a small hut. He found a very beautiful lady and a deer that he looking for in there.

After I read it, I asked Paw how she helped Sy. She said:

Sometimes Sy would get so frustrated as he couldn't say in Lao or English. His face turned so red, but he couldn't find words for his ideas. He waved his hands, tried to find words for it, but he couldn't express it. Then I would help him, say, do you mean this, or do you mean that. I also helped him with transitions. For instance, he didn't know how to start the story. I told him in fairy tale, you often started the story with 'once upon a time'. That's the same in Lao. Or use 'then' something like that. It took us about an hour to do this story. He had all his ideas ready. I think he got his ideas

from the cartoon he watched on TV. He loved to watch cartoons.

Sy added that his ideas for the fairy tale came "not just from TV, but also from the reading of myth stories." I truly believed him as the class had just finished the unit on mythology, and Sy had read quite a few myths. This fairy tale had the flavor of a story Sy had summarized earlier. In the chapter "Surround the Children with Literature" Graves (1983) concludes: "[T]he provision of literature is not a passive event for children. At every turn the teacher seeks to have children live the literature. The most important living occurs at the point at which children make literature themselves through writing" (p.75). In his fairy tale, Sy certainly started to make literature himself through writing.

I asked Susan, if she objected to Paw's translation for Sy, she said to me:

At first when I saw Sy copy the story in class, I thought he was cheating. When he told me that it was all his ideas and his sister only translated them for him, I thought that was all right. As long as it was his story, it should be okay at the beginning. I will see what will happen next.

As soon as Sy finished his first story, he had ideas for his second one. He went to Andy to tell him "This time I want to write a story called 'Lazy Cat,'" Andy responded enthusiastically: "Great! Tell me about your crazy cat." With facial expressions and hand and body gestures, Sy told Andy his story. "Oh, You mean a lazy

cat. I thought you said a crazy cat. Okay, Let's start working on it."

Similarly to Paw, Andy helped Sy with transition, words he didn't know, and grammar he needed to make his writing clearer. However, Andy didn't write it out for him but let Sy write down his own ideas. Every day they both worked on the story. A week later, Sy finished his story of the "Lazy Cat." It was the longest one he had ever written.

Lazy Cat

Lazy cat living in big city. he like sleep all day long. Sleeping is a favorite thing he like to do. Before he sleep, he eats a tone of food. Late at night he was out with another cat and get drink. Then he and his friends made lots of noise in the street.

One day his master, Linda, went to the kitchen to get something to eat. She saw a mouse run across the floor. she jump up on a chair and screamed louder, but not loud enough to wake lazy cat.

Linda pick up the broom ran to the lazy cat and hit him because to wake him to catching a mouse. Lazy cat yawned slowly open his eyes and meowed then went back sleep again. She hit him harder this time. Lazy cat wake up very fast and jump on Linda and he scratched her and Linda grap the cat and throw him out of window.

Linda said "you stupid cat stay out until you catch a mouse!"

What Linda didn't know it that lazy cat was very afraid of the mouse this is why he sleeps all day and got drunk at night. After he kick out the house, he was disappear until 37 days after. He went back home to the town but he got accident and he die by the car.

The End

I asked Andy about the differences in helping Sy with his own story versus helping him in the reading-discussion format. Andy told me:

It was easy to help him with his creative-story writing, because he had all the ideas, I only helped him with the language. He got stuck mostly with the unknown words, not ideas. He knew what he wanted to say. Sometimes I helped him with grammar when it got too messy, but I didn't correct every sentence he wrote. I didn't want to stop him all the time. It was hard to help him write when he didn't have any ideas. That happened when he had to write an essay, or something to discuss the books he read. He not only didn't know what to write, but didn't understand the requirement. Sometimes he would come to me and say, "I have to write an essay, but I don't know what it is." How can I help him when he doesn't even know the assignment? I can't help him when that happens.

Sy turned in little homework during the times of the reading-discussion writing phases. He turned in all the homework for the free-writing phases. His behavior was noticeably different during these two writing times. From being markedly quiet in the class or ESL rooms during the times of discussion and writing, he would become quite animated with Andy and with his classmates in their small writing group during the free-writing periods. After Sy wrote "Lazy Cat," Susan also noticed Sy was beginning to emerge from his shell, "Sy has become very friendly to me recently. Whenever he sees me, he speaks to me loudly and clearly, and with a big smile on his face 'Hi, Mrs. M. How are you doing today?' I feel really good about it." Perhaps, because Sy had "join[ed] the literacy club" (Smith, 1988), he felt good about himself.

It didn't take Sy long to figure out what he wanted to write for the story after "Lazy Cat." "I want to write a story like Robin Hood," he told Andy in the ESL room, "It is adventure, has a hero, who helps poor people and fight the rich. That is the kind of story I like most. I love to watch those kinds of movies." This third story, also his last one, was called "Simple Robin Hood."

Susan was very excited to see Sy's progress as a writer. One day in June, a few days before the final exams, she told me:

Sy has made a lot of progress in this period. I didn't see him get frustrated. He never missed any writing assignments. I saw him more active in his group. He asked about the words he didn't know. Once I saw him ask Tim "How to write the word, Cuble..., cuble, it means two, two." Finally Tim understood that he meant "couple." One day I observed him revise and edit his writing while he was copying it. I saw him shift certain sentences, change the words, underline the names, and capitalize the words he hadn't done in the draft. I am so excited to see what he was doing. He has indeed made a lot of progress. I almost gave up on him a couple of months ago.

Sy had made progress, and had shown he knew how to write fiction. In the final exam, Susan asked the class to evaluate their own writing for the year:

Compare two of your better pieces of writing. How are they alike, how are they different? What makes each a good piece?

Sy wrote that he thought his "Lazy Cat" and "Simple Robin Hood" were the best stories he wrote this year because:

In the beginning of my two best pieces, I talking about where they living, what they like to

do in the day, and In the middle of my stories I put what problems they have.

This both stories are different when the place was happening and personal.

The idea that come from my brain are make the both stories are good pieces and I also think the dictionary for helping me all this year.

In the first paragraph, he mentions the setting (where they are living), the characters (what they like to do during the day), the plot and conflict (in the middle of my stories I put what problems they have). Though he didn't use those actual terms to describe his stories, his evaluation showed that he knew that stories needed those elements to make them whole, and he had included them.

The best part of his self-evaluation, I think, was the last paragraph. It declares his understanding of what made his writing good--"The idea that come from my brain are make the both stories are good pieces," and his realization of the importance of reference books to writing -"I also think the dictionary for helping me all this year." Five months previously, Sy had refused to evaluate his writing, as he thought that was only the teacher's job. By the year's end, he had learned how to write self-expressively and how to use a reference to find the right word(s). He had also learned to evaluate his ideas in the written form.

Journal Writing

Toward the end of the school year, Susan asked them to keep a journal at home, writing at least three entries each week. In the journal, they could jot down personal observations, private thoughts, comments about their reading and writing, or anything else. As Susan said:

I want them to become sensitive to their surroundings, and learn to describe their observations and thoughts. I think journal writing will help them develop sensitivity, imagination, thinking and also their writing skills.

This was the easiest genre of all for Sy. He didn't seek much help from teachers, or from his sister, as he had done on other occasions. During these six weeks, Sy wrote eighteen entries in his journal. Each one revealed something about Sy that I had never seen before. I had perceived him as extremely quiet, passive and obedient in the home or at the school. But in his journals, I discovered new dimensions to him. First, I found that he was a story-teller and loved to tell his stories. I found he could tell good stories in his "free writing" segment, but now among the pages of his personal journal, he wrote his stories freely there because he wanted to--not because he had to. Here he describes his dream.

April 26, 91

One day I went to some where but no direction to show where I'm going. I keep looking to. From my house to the place I never see before, I told myself where am I. But later I heard a sound of my

mom talk to me but I don't know where the sound come from. Later the sound was disappeared. I keep think in my mind what I got to do to get out of the here. Later I said to my mind "I get the better idea to get out of the here." I heard the noise again this time. The noise is so louder, my ear can't stand until I run fast I can to beginning where I starting, But the noise still following me. After that I sit down on road side to breathe because my legs is so tired and my heart is start shake harder. Now I walking on road side slow when I look down saw nothing but the tree couple minutes ago I didn't see the tree. That very Amazing thing happening to me. I said to myself bite yourself. After I did is not harm my skin. I say to my mine "I know it is the dream" when I wake up in the real world I ran downstairs and open the door that was my big brother was knock the door.

In many journals, he simply talked about what he did, felt or thought each day. The thing that struck me most was that, he didn't record bed-to-bed stories, like many inexperienced journal writers tend to do, but focused on one incident of the day. Here are some examples.

May 19, 91

Yesterday me and my friends ride a bike through downtown to got our pizza that we order. he promise me if I let him borrow my money he let me used the video game for two days, but he lie to me. I got mad at him and kick his bike on the back wheel of his bike is almost broke.

May 29, 91

Today I don't know what happening in my mind. Everything turn me borrry and made me sick of it. I hope some my cousin come over visit my house this weekend and or my father lets us go to the theater to watching the movies call "Don't tell mom the babysit is dead." This movie wick funny and interesting movie that the way I saw in the commercial after the movie I watching in the TV.

June 1, 91

Today I ride my brother bike to school to watching the baseball game. Our school won the game by scores 13 to 4. After the game I went to Woodland Drive to play basketball with my friend. This time on basketball game I'm not very careful but I try to lay up lot I fell down on floor I used my had to protect my body but went I hit the gournd I used only my right hand and my right hand I got hurt until now.

June 2, 91

Today I talk to my mom about this summer, where we gonna go and who we gonna go visit, she tell me we going to visit your father's friend in Tennessee after that we going to New York city to visit my cousin and we going to ride a ship to the Status of Liberty.

These four short pieces are like four snapshots of Sy's life outside of school. They are simple and very focused and clear. They show glimpses of Sy's personality (moods and feelings), his interests and activities, and some of his family life. Certainly the first entry shows a fiery side of Sy, one that I had not seen in him before. Each piece has the potential for further story development.

In some of his journal entries, Sy reveals himself as an observer of nature, and as someone who reflects on his observations.

May 6, 91

On this weekend me and my friends riding a bike around Riverside. I saw many things. the first beautiful thing I saw in the tree on the countryside. Animals ran across the road, some of them they play up on the tree. A people start to farm and growing some fruit and vegetable. We saw a man who own the horses farm practice horse ride.

I think if I ride them I might get kick by the horse. The horse is the one big animal. The horse is the one animal danger if you don't know how to control them.

May 21, 91

This morning I got almost missing the bus because I wake up too late.

During I was in the bus I look up into the sky, the color is blue and white, the sound of bird up in the tree and old man spend his time on fishing.

He describes the animals, trees, birds, sky, and people he observes like one learning to sketch the scenery around him. The entries were simple and interesting. Sy did them without worrying about the length or the structure of the writing. I agreed with Susan that this was a good way to encourage students to write about their surroundings in a sensitive way. I could see that Sy's pieces had poetic potential.

Most surprising for me in Sy's journals were his entries about his wishes. They exposed his imagination and thoughtful introspection seldom apparent in his other work and also uncovered a deep side of himself which I had not seen before.

May 15, 91

If I had a magic lamp I want to be the rich boy in the world and a good life, buy a house and has my own business.

May 16, 91

I think if I flying like the birds, first fly in Europe to Paris, I hear many peoples said "In there they have many thing it very beautiful" I

hope someday I will go France and have some hot tea.

May 26, 91

I wish I could fly like a bird to travel to every country I want, but I got a problem about how I gonna to change form like a bird and it change to a bird how I gonna fly over the ocean. The ocean is so far flying across it. Many people or the big animals thought me to a food and they gonna hunt me down from sky to the ground then how I gonna to escape from them.

Sy's use of the symbol of the "bird" seems to represent freedom. Sy and his family left their home country and came to America to be free. They were like birds themselves. His journals were where Sy, flying like a bird, could freely express his wishes and his desires through his imagination, where he could relax and not worry about rules, deadlines, and special forms to bind him. It was as Murray (1987) said that when writers are given choices to write what they wanted to say, they were the authorities of their own writing. Then they would write to learn.

Reading through his journal, I discovered many dimensions to Sy: a typical teenager with a strong personality, a boy who liked to dream, a young man full of imagination, a thinker, a reader, and a storyteller. I had not seen these traits in Sy before. It seemed to me that his journal was the vehicle for his self-expression, and his self-discovery---where he had found his authentic voice.

Conclusion

We saw three different Sy(s) emerge as he learned to write in the different genres. He was a lost and confused learner in the reading-discussion writing phase, so much so that he didn't even know how to seek help from his teachers and peers. He rarely turned in his homework assignments, and his writing didn't meet the teacher's expectations. The teacher, "confused" by Sy's confusion could only grade him according to his effort: "I couldn't measure his writing with the same standard as I used for the others, so I graded him according to his efforts. If he did his work, I gave him points. If not, I gave zeros." Sy got many zeros in the reading-discussion writing phases of the English class.

When the time came for creative story writing, Sy could take command and make progress. He still needed help, but he knew how to seek help from his sister, from the ESL teacher, from his peers and from the dictionary. He knew how to draw upon his personal resources for his ideas: from his own experience, from the TV shows he saw and from his readings. In the free writing phases, Sy grew as a writer by practicing writing and learned about writing fiction by creating fiction.

Sy surfaced as a real "flesh and blood" person, flying free as a bird in his journal entries. He was self-reliant when writing in his daily journal, much more so than he had been in the earlier reading-discussion and free-writing phases. He sought resources from within his own "brain" (the word he liked to use a lot), expressed himself from his own heart, and gave full freedom to his imagination and thinking. In short, he freed himself in writing the journal.

As we have seen the reading-discussion format for writing was the most difficult for Sy. It demanded thorough understanding of the text being read, and of the techniques employed in creating the text. Far too advanced for Sy who needed a lot of time to understand the text itself, and was not developmentally able yet to discuss the reading in the way the teacher expected. In that setting, Sy was on unfamiliar ground, with little connection to what he knew. Hence, he appeared as lost, passive, and to "parrot" the facts, in the the reading-discussion phase.

Free writing allowed Sy to connect with his own interests and personal experience. He was more at ease with free writing here and began in this format to talk about his life in the past, and create stories through the combination of his personal experiences, the stories he read, and his favorite TV shows. Through story telling, Sy travelled to familiar and favorite places much like having his own

private Disney Land. His language problems faded when he found ways to solve them, and began to use language as a key to unlock his own ideas. Once he had the ideas, the tools were within "an arm's length" away.

Sy's journals were Sy's alter ego. They opened up parts of himself that even he had been unaware of; like Murray (1987) says about his writing: "I write to explore." "I write to find out what I have lived, what I have felt, what I have thought. I use language as a tool of seeing and understanding..."(p.266). Through journals, Sy discovered his world and himself. His journals were the lyrics, songs and poems of his life, conveying his innermost thoughts, wishes and his imagination. Journal writing was to sharpen Sy's sense of his surroundings, and it became the key to his heart and brain, exposing his potential as a writer. Sy's journals created for me the image of a free bird singing in a merry land. Interestingly, Sy had the fewest language difficulties when he could speak from his own heart and experience. Sy's growth experience and development as a writer underscores what Graves (1985) claims "All children can write" if we give them time and freedom to write what they know and what they want to say.

The window for learning had been wider; the freedom for self-expression had been greater for Sy than for his brothers and sister in this school year. He had been able to move a distance away from the problems surrounding him at

the start to become a self-confident reader, thinker, and writer and he was "in gear" to continue onward and upward.

On the last day of the school year, Sy went to Susan and asked her in a very low voice with his head bent down: "Mrs M. what grade will I be next year?" Susan answered, "The eighth grade." "What? You mean I will go up to the eighth grade?" said Sy in a raised voice, as he lifted his head. He couldn't believe his ears! "Yes," Susan, in turn, raised her voice and pronounced every word slowly and clearly, "of course, you will go up to the eighth grade!" As soon as Susan finished her sentence, Sy jumped high and shouted: "Wow! I will GO UP to the eighth-grade! I will BE in the EIGHTH grade! Thank you! Thank you, Mrs. M!" Sy turned around and told everybody who happened to pass by with a loud voice and flushed face: "I will go up to the eighth grade!" Susan stood there, rolled her eyes, and murmured: "Why does he thank me? He earned it."

Yes, if Sy continues to progress as he did in the seventh grade, he will always "go up" as he continues on the ladder of literacy in the new culture.

Conclusion

My study has presented Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy as four individuals, each having their own personalities and dreams, and each trying in their own way to make it in the new culture. In this study, we constantly hear their voices. Through their voices, we enter their minds and understand their situations. The conversations they had with me not only have brought us close but also given them opportunities to open their minds to others and express their thoughts and feelings.

On the other hand, the study has given a silent picture of the learning experiences of Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy at school. We see them silently sitting in the corners or far away from others, and expressionlessly working on worksheets and tests. In their silence, we sense their alienation and humiliation. From their worksheets and tests, we feel their frustration and loss. Reading their book reports and essays, we learn little of their personalities except that they are students who struggle to learn.

At school, they are not taught or required to speak. All language skills are graded (valued) except for speaking. So they seldom speak. They don't need to speak for school achievement. They can't converse with others because of their limited English proficiency. They can't

join others' talk because they share little with them in common. Furthermore, they don't have time to speak as they are too busy with their schoolwork. Ironically the harder they work, the less they can speak, and the farther removed they are from others. Few people at school, including their teachers, know much about them and Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy don't know anything about the others either.

Britton (1972) gives great value to talk, which he thinks is critical not only to adolescents' pursuit of ideas but to their establishing relationships with others. He asserts that talk is the most likely means by which students first investigate, explore, and organize new fields of interest, and connect with others. Newcomers like Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy need "talk" to connect with others, to understand them and to explore the new world they came to join. Each of them has expressed a burning desire: "I wish I could speak just like the others;" "I wish I could understand what is on their minds;" and "I want to be just like them." But the schooling Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy have received here has provided little opportunity to connect them with the others, nor has it invited them to be part of the community. For three years, immersed in the English language environment, surrounded by Americans and working daily on English, Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy still have great difficulty making

themselves understood. Their heavy accent, their lack of English vocabulary and their limited knowledge of the new culture mark their distance from others. They all know what they need in order to move close to others, so they work hard at their English. But their hard work has helped them little to lessen their accent, enlarge their daily vocabulary, or gain the knowledge of the world and the culture they came to join. We have seen Cham and Paw spend most of their time learning vocabulary words from the spelling book, but the learning didn't help them read, write or speak better.

Examining my own learning experiences as a newcomer to this country, I realize I have benefited a lot from conversations. I started as a student on the margin in this country seven years ago. Like Tran, Cham, Paw and Sy, I silently sat through many classes and had little idea of what others talked about. Every day I was overwhelmed by the strange ways of interpreting texts and different approaches to reading and writing. It was conversation and classroom discussions that helped me slowly understand my teachers and peers and acquaint me with their ways of knowing. Gradually I was able to join the conversations, which marked a turning point in my learning.

Through conversations, my peers and I both became conscious of our different ways of knowing. Our knowledge

of and our interest in each other brought us together and stimulated our thinking. "Talk" introduced me into the new culture and helped me have a better understanding of myself. Through conversations, I explored the new world and examined my old world. The interplay of conversations connected me with others, helped me to join the community, and gave value to my own ways of knowing. My constant conversations with my mentors and peers have built my confidence as a learner, given me a new voice as a reader and writer, and sharpened my senses as a thinker. Conversations have contributed tremendously to my accomplishment as a minority student in this country.

Britton (1972) sees "talk" as a necessary step to reading and writing: "talk...prepares the environment into which what is taken from reading may be accommodated; and from that amalgam the writing proceeds" (p.166). Vygotsky (1978) asserts that learning happens first through social interaction. From my own learning experiences, I have found that "talk" is a process for me to make sense of what I read and make the external knowledge become my own. Conversations are essential steps to my writing: stimulating my thinking, organizing my thoughts, and searching for words for my writing.

"Speaking" is the language activity Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy have done the least at school. The silent learning approach not only disconnects them from the real world and

separates them from others, but also disengages them from the words they read and write. Sitting every day in the same room, they have no idea of what the others think, and how they read and write. Silently reading and writing by themselves, they mechanically move words from books to worksheets and rarely have them become their own.

Why are my learning experiences in this country dramatically different from my informants'? Is it because I had more English and more background in Western literature before I came than they? I think what has helped me the most become a literate person today in this culture is not how much I knew when I started out, but the fact that what I knew was recognized and given value by my peers and professors. I have gained this recognition through "talks" or "conversations," which invited me into the literacy community, broadened my view with different ways of knowing and provided me with opportunities to go beyond what I had known.

Tran, Paw and Cham are all good thinkers and potential readers and writers. They are good storytellers. But their schooling gives little recognition to what they know and who they are. Instead, what Tran, Paw and Cham have done at school highlights what they don't know and can't do well. Few people at school know that Tran can write poems or that Paw writes fluently in her dairy; none of the other students have ever seen Cham's drawings or heard his

stories of his past life. At school, they appear to others only as slow learners, limited English speakers, and quiet students. They are mysterious to the American students; and the Americans, including their world, remain unknown to them.

The fact that I have had more opportunity to converse with others in my learning experiences than Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy in this country is basically not because my English was better than theirs but because I studied at a graduate level while they at a high school level. The structure of graduate education is centered around students, and classroom discussion is encouraged and valued there. While at low levels, as Goodlad (1984) describes in his study:

In English language arts the dominant emphasis throughout was on mechanics--capitalization, punctuation, paragraphs, ...parts of speech, etc. These were repeated in successive grades of the elementary years, were reviewed in the junior high years, and reappeared in the low-track classes of the senior high schools (p.205).

Had I studied in a high school like Tran, Paw, and Cham, I would have remained as a marginal student.

The difference between my experience and that of my informants', reinforced by Paw's learning experiences in the A and B track classes, clearly demonstrate the fact in American schools that students at a high level have more access to classroom discussions and have more freedom in reading and writing than those at a low level. Those activities provide students opportunities to connect with

each other and engage themselves in learning. Actually the students at a low level, especially the language and cultural minority students like Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy, need more opportunities than those at a high level to converse with others and to read and write according to their interests. Through dialogues with others, they will improve their oral skills by using language in real communication and context. In addition, they make themselves known to others and are exposed to others' ways of knowing by sharing their reading and writing.

Contrary to what they most need, they are offered endless worksheets, meaningless tests and decontextualized basic skills, which serve to isolate them from others and alienate them from life experience and the real world. American education claims to provide equal opportunity to anybody that wants to learn. But the different learning styles that students experience at high and low levels suggests that education in this country is for the privileged. Through the tracking system, school provides students coming from literate backgrounds with opportunity to become the privileged and keep their privileged status as their education progresses. On the other hand, the existing school structure contributes to the marginalization of students from less literate backgrounds and keeps them on the margin by suffocating their creativity with endless mechanical drills.

My study of the learning experiences of four newly-arrived refugee students magnifies the problems of American students in the same track. Though their American peers don't appear as silent and alienated as they do, those students are also victims of the marginalization. They are separated from the students at a high track intellectually, more than culturally, and have suffered the same disengagement as have Tran, Paw and Cham in their learning. Though they know how to speak English, they rarely know how to talk about books, discuss their writing or even think for themselves in their learning. They are not prepared for high-level education but provided only with survival skills. To others, they don't know anything, or are considered hopeless poor learners. In some ways, I think, they are more humiliated than my informants, whose poor school achievement can be excused due to their limited English skills and their being newcomers to the culture. But what about the former? They can only blame themselves as being "dumb." At school, my informants feel like outsiders to the culture, while their peers in the same low-level classes might feel like outcasts of the society. Psychologically, the latter are hurt more than the former, as they are rejected insiders.

Who Should Be Blamed?

I have focused my attention on four individuals for

almost two years. In writing about them, I entangled myself in their situations, their experiences and emotions. Sometimes I couldn't tell whether I was presenting their situations, or representing them. It was as if I voluntarily acted as their lawyer. By writing about them in this dissertation, I felt close to them, even closer than when I was with them physically. The closer I looked at them, the more I found that the difficulties they were confronted with at school were caused by the fact that what they were required to do at school was incompatible with their wishes, their needs and their learning patterns. I use "mismatch" as the term to describe this incompatibility. The mismatches can be categorized into three groups:

- . the mismatch between their dreams and reality;
- . the mismatch between their need and the school requirements;
- . the mismatch between their learning patterns and the school agenda

Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy dream of joining the new world but they are kept on the margin of the culture and are given few opportunities to experience democratic values in their school learning. They need to learn to speak English and communicate with others. They want to understand and be known to others so as to become part of the nation, but they have rarely any chance to know or let others know them at school, which is the only place where

they are among Americans and could experience the American culture.

My study has shown that Tran, Paw, Cham and Sy can read and write when the school agenda matches their learning patterns, otherwise, they experience great difficulty in their reading and writing. The three mismatches this study has shown and described manifest that school failure or low academic achievement cannot be blamed on the students' linguistic code, their cultural backgrounds, or their different ways of learning. The source of students' problems in school is not to be found in them, but, as Mehan and Meihls (1986) argue,

[I]t is to be found in the organization of the school. The problems that lower class and ethnic children face in school must be viewed as a consequence of institutional arrangements which ensnare children, by not being sensitive to the fact that children display skills differently in different situation (p.123).

In addition to Mehan and Meihls' argument, I think that the institutional arrangements also enslave learners with what school has to cover and ignore their values, their needs, their interests, their intelligence and their ways of knowing. School learning is to develop students' intellectual power and treat them as beings of richly varied possibilities.

In my study, I present my informants' situation or experiences in specific classrooms with specific examples, which make certain teachers appear as the opposite force

of the students, or the cause of their disconnected and disengaged learning. Actually I don't intend to set teachers as the target in this study. I believe they are the scapegoats of the system and also the victims of the school structure. Every day they are exhausted by what they have to cover, though they know their students may have little interest in what they are required to do. To help students get through the school, they have to teach for tests, and prepare students for good grades. Like their own students, they don't have time to learn, but only to rush through the teaching requirements set by the institution. Tangled by the system, they tried hard to survive there. As participant-researcher in school, I experienced personally the frustration of being a teacher who couldn't help students learn, but only help them rush through the requirements. The detrimental thing to our students is not what we can't do for them but is when we are blindly driven to do what we are required to do.

The fault is found in the school structure, but it can't be changed in one night. Reconstruction of a system takes generations because people who create a structure should first become conscious of their own existence. Through questioning and examining their own situation and experiences, they will realize what needs to change and start to construct mentally an ideal world. Their consciousness of their own situation and their burning

desire for change will lead them to make specific changes in what they do daily in their own controlled small world. Small changes will be accumulated to make the big changes happen. Pragmatists hold that our world is in the process of forming. Every bit of effort we make contributes to the construction of a new system or completion of our world. That is what this study calls for: to become conscious of our situation and experiences (or our students') at school, and make changes first in our own teaching and classrooms.

Implications for Teaching

This study is about the learning experiences of four students with limited English proficiency (LEP) in regular classrooms. But the issue the study dealt with concern not only how to mainstream LEP students, but also the teaching of students at the low-track levels and reading and writing instruction in multicultural settings.

Demographers estimate that by the year 2000 one of every three children will be from minority groups. To face the social needs of a pluralistic society, American schools should prepare children with different cultural backgrounds to work and live together as one nation. To achieve this purpose, as cultural theorists (Trueba, 1987, 1988, 1989, Tharp and Gallimore, 1989, Spindler and Spindler, 1987) suggest, teachers, of all subjects, should

create their classrooms as culturally congruent environments for students to integrate their cultural values into literacy learning.

In a culturally congruent classroom, the instructional model should place an emphasis on "conversations" between teacher and students and between students and students. Vygotskian scholars (Bruner, 1986, Donaldson, 1978, Newkirk, 1989, 1992, and Trueba, 1987) posit that knowledge is not transmitted, but socially constructed through interaction. Hansen and Graves (1991) state "Not only is it important for children to learn to interact socially in our pluralistic society, but they learn from each other when they talk about their school work."

By inviting students to share their own stories or their interpretations of their reading, teacher not only give a chance for students to construct knowledge and make meaning in their reading and writing, but let them share their perspectives and cultural values. In this way, teaching cultivates in the young an appreciation of differences, a respect for individuality and a way of looking at the world with plural meanings. Through interaction, not only can students learn language in meaningful contexts and for real communication, but they learn the art of negotiation of meaning through recognizing each other's voice and values. Bruner (1986) states

"negotiation is the art of constructing new meaning in which individuals can regulate their relations with each other" (p.149).

Freire and Madedo (1987) hold "Literacy and education in general are cultural expressions." Formal schooling is to familiarize the young with the fundamental cultural values of a society. In schools, in addition to teaching materials which are used as the major means to introduce cultural values to students, the teaching approach should also demonstrate cultural values. In a democratic society like America, schools or classrooms should be places where students can experience democratic values in their literacy learning.

The democratic values of freedom, equality and individuality should be integrated into the instructional models. In learning, we introduce students to the values of freedom and individuality by giving them freedom to choose their own reading and writing, to discover what they want to find out, and to utter their own "voices." Instead of tracking students into ranked groups, we encourage them to collaborate with each other in an equal relationship. Each individual contributes to meaning-making. Consciously we create our classrooms as a community in which people learn to accept the fact learners can move at different paces and have different ways of knowing. Today in classrooms, we prepare them by letting them experience the

quality of democratic values in their literacy learning for their lives tomorrow in the democratic world.

In order to let students display their authenticity and potential in their learning, teachers should be sensitive to their needs, their interests and their abilities, especially of students who struggle to learn. Instead of watering down curriculum and lowering expectations, teachers should base instruction on what students know and are able to do as a starting point to move them beyond their limit. In Vygotsky's term, we teach at students' "zone of the proximal development." Take the teaching of essay writing as an example. Many students have great difficulty writing essays but are very expressive in personal narratives or colloquial forms of writing. We can start our teaching with the style they are familiar with. as Graves suggests: we can first let students present their ideas in a letter form, then change the letter writing style to argumentary or essay forms. In his words: "we first have students achieve fluence in their writing, then we deal with skills and forms" (1988, in the course of "Introduction to the Teaching of Writing").

We often believe that students with low language skills have difficulty with abstract thinking. So quite often, in our schools, instead of pushing them in that direction and developing in them what is lacking in their own development, we avoid teaching them abstract thinking

but only give them concreteness like mechanical skills or specific forms of writing. Vygotsky (1978) defines this avoidance in teaching what is lacking in children as irresponsibility. He affirms: "Concreteness is now seen as necessary and unavoidable only as a stepping stone for developing abstract thinking---as a means, not as an end in itself" (p.89).

Portfolio approach is an instructional model highly recommended by many researchers (Graves and Hansen, speeches at National Conference of Teachers of English, 1991, 1992, and at Conference of International Reading Association 1991, 1992, Mills, 1989, Wold, 1989, Graves and Sunstein, 1992). Portfolio approach combines home and school literacy and broaden the concept of literacy. Students participate in curriculum design and evaluation of their own work. From portfolios, teachers learn about students and assess them and their work in a holistic way. By keeping portfolios, students learn about their history as learners, set up their learning goals and evaluate their work and themselves. Instead of learning for grades and tests, today, they gain control of their own learning and master their own growth; tomorrow, they will take charge of their own living.

Further Research

This study focuses on four minority students. It

presents their school experiences in depth through descriptions mainly from their perspectives. The voices of others' (their teachers, their parents, their siblings and the other students) are presented as either a social context, or further explanations, or juxtapositions of their situations. However, those voices which this study de-emphasized point to the direction of many other possible studies.

- . A similar study from teachers' perspectives will be a counter balance to my study, such as:

How do teachers face and adjust their teaching agenda to students with diverse cultural backgrounds?

- . A study combining the views of both minority and mainstream students of their learning experiences in a multicultural setting will provide an understanding of students' adjustment to each other.

How do mainstream and minority students view and influence each other in their school learning?

- . A family study on literacy will help us see how the home functions as a literacy community.

How are refugee school-age children influenced in their literacy learning by their parents and older siblings, and also serve as mediators for them in the new culture?

- . A study on gender issues integrating with literacy learning will lead us to see differences male and female minority students show in their literacy learning.

What are the differences reflected in their literacy learning between male and female minority students in terms of their views of themselves in relationship to others, and of their roles in the American culture?

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