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An ESL Program with Laotian Refugees

Patricia A. Ryan-Croes
School for International Training

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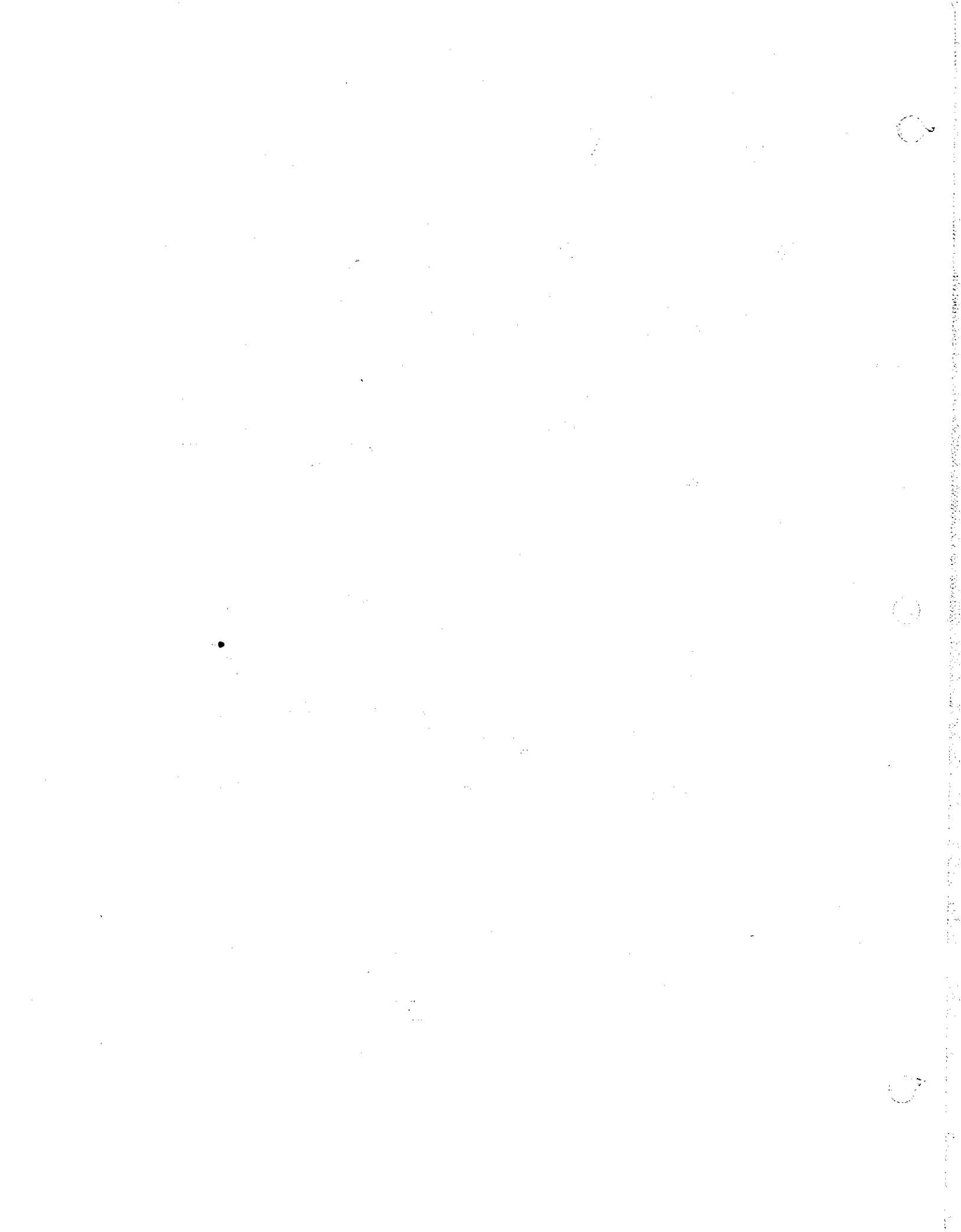
AN ESL PROGRAM WITH LAOTIAN REFUGEES

BY

PATRICIA A. RYAN-CROES
B.A. Quinnipiac College 1971

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the
School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

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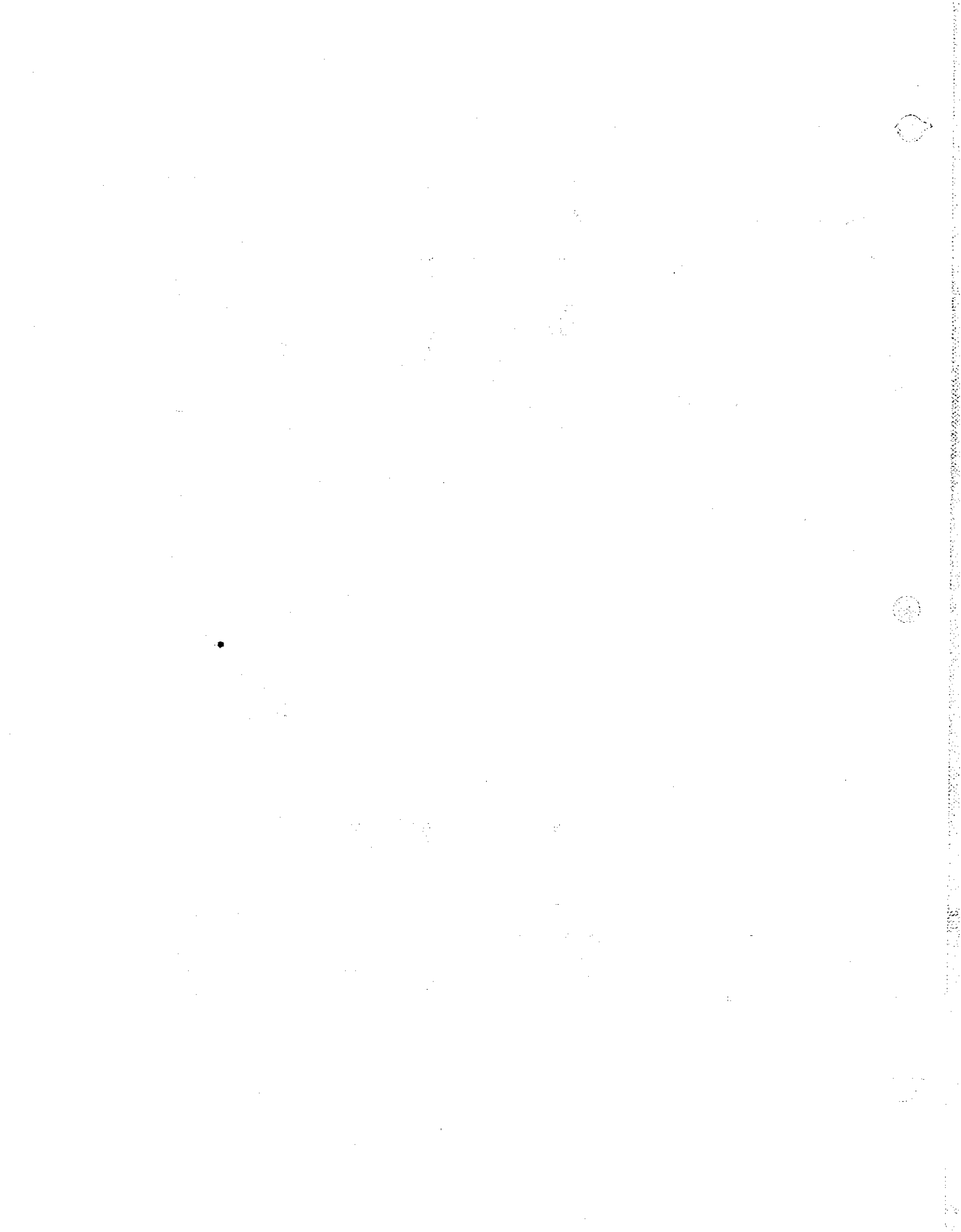
This project by Patricia A. Ryan-Croes is accepted in its present form.

Date July, 1980 Principal Adviser Diane Larsen-Freeman

Project Reader: Elizabeth Tannenbaum

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ABSTRACT

This project is a report on an ESL program developed for and taught to a Laotian couple who arrived in Brattleboro, Vermont in December 1979. The program took place from January to March 1980. The purpose of this report is to present and discuss issues, incidents, suggestions and conclusions regarding the teaching of ESL to Laotian refugees which may be helpful to program organizers and teachers.

The first part of the report details the refugee couple's background before their arrival in Brattleboro. Next is a description of the process of organizing the program and establishing the classroom procedure. This is followed by details of teaching the program including the general problems faced in teaching illiterate and semi-literate Laotian adults. This report also details the various problems, choices and decisions that had to be made in teaching literacy, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. There is then a description of the methods used in teaching each of the skills. Appendices include a partial sequence of the skills and samples of the literacy activities. Finally, a detailed bibliography of useful publications and resources is included.

CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
BACKGROUND	1
ORGANIZATION OF THE PROGRAM	4
TEACHING THE COURSE	10
General Problems	10
Literacy	16
Pronunciation	21
Grammar	24
Cultural Aspects	29
CONCLUSION	30
APPENDIX A. INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONAL PROJECT PROPOSAL	33
APPENDIX B. STUDENT TEACHING OBJECTIVES	34
APPENDIX C. PARTIAL ESL SEQUENCE	35
APPENDIX D. EXAMPLES OF SOME WRITING TASKS	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY	42

INTRODUCTION

While I was a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Teaching program at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vt., I organized and taught an ESL course to a Laotian refugee couple who had come to live in Brattleboro. Working with this family, I gained some insights into teaching the Laotian refugees who are coming to the U.S. Laotian refugees present special problems for ESL teachers in the areas of cultural adjustment, counseling, literacy training and English language acquisition.

In this report, I will describe the family history of the family. Perhaps by understanding the traumatic experiences of Laotian refugees, ESL teachers can be more sensitive to the problems these refugees are having in adjusting to American life and learning English.

This report will also describe the process of organizing the course and the decisions and problems involved in teaching it. Throughout the report are my impressions of relevant cultural, educational and linguistic aspects that affected the students' learning.

The assumption behind this paper is that other teachers working with Laotian refugees will encounter similar experiences and can benefit from my insights and conclusions.

BACKGROUND

When a Laotian refugee family consisting of two children and their parents arrived in Brattleboro in early December,

1979, they knew no English and had had no cultural orientation to America. The family's background had given them no preparation for this enormous change of life. The parents, middle-aged Lao-Thais, had been born in a very small village in the south-western part of Laos. The man had had four years of elementary school, during which he had barely learned to read and had never been shown a map of the world. He had worked mainly as a farmer until the time he became a soldier working for the U.S. government cleaning up battlefields after skirmishes. He still has many vivid and frightening memories of his military experiences. The woman had never had schooling and was illiterate. Most of her life seems to have been spent in the day-to-day activity of a rural village.

While the man was working as a soldier far from their village, the woman was taking care of their two small children. When the Americans withdrew their support and the Laotian military dispersed, the man had to flee for fear of being caught and killed. Afraid of the Communists, he had to struggle for survival far from his family and friends. Eventually, he realized that he had to escape to Thailand, where he got a job working on a ferry on the Mekong River. When he sent for his family to join him at the border, his wife made plans to leave their lifelong home. Since she was married to a former soldier, she was not safe in Laos. Furthermore, food was beginning to become scarce and living conditions in general had deteriorated. At that time, she had a two-year old child and a baby. Realizing that she could not

take both of them on the long journey to the border on foot, she had to make the agonizing choice of which child to take. She chose the younger because she could carry her on her back; therefore, she was forced to leave the two-year old boy with her mother, who was afraid to leave. She described climbing mountains with the baby on her back, and she told of old and sick people walking near her dropping behind and being left. After a day and a night of walking, she reached the river, where she was reunited with her husband, and they went to the refugee camp in Thailand where they stayed for almost five years. Another child was born in the camp, and although they wanted to get their son smuggled out of Laos, they had no money to do it.

During the time that they spent in the camp, the man worked at odd jobs trying to earn some money. Some of his jobs were pulling a rickshaw, working in a Bangkok factory, and working in a teakwood forest in a distant province. The family suffered a great deal during this time, and at one point the woman had an emotional breakdown requiring hospitalization. Somehow they survived the camp.

For some reason, they chose the United States as their destination. They wanted to learn English, but the Thai teachers charged too much for them to pay to learn. They said that there was a school for children in the camp and that every day their little girl would stand outside the classroom door begging to be admitted but was refused because she was too young.

When they finally arrived in Brattleboro, they had spent almost five years in Ubon, one of the refugee camps in Thailand. The parents were both thirty years old, and their families were separated. Her father was still in the camp; two or three of her brothers, her mother and her child were still in Laos; one brother was in New York State. The man's brother had been killed by the Pathet Lao, and he did not know if his mother was alive or dead. He never mentioned anyone else from his family. Two of their friends were in California. They arrived with only each other, two children, and the will to start a new life. They had no idea what to expect, and they could not understand one word of English.

The family was sponsored by a church and placed with a local family. While in Ubon, they had been asked what kind of area they would prefer to live in, and they had requested a place which had cold weather. Perhaps they were tired of the constant heat of Laos and Thailand. Whatever their reasons, this request and the available sponsorship apparently determined the location of their new home.

It was with this background that they came to Brattleboro to begin a new life and to learn a new language.

ORGANIZATION OF THE PROGRAM

This section describes how I set up the program with the School for International Training, not as a model but as an example of how such a program can be established. The second part of this section deals with the organization of the class.

The sponsors for the Laotian couple approached the School for International Training's English Language Office seeking assistance in teaching the couple English. Knowing that I had taught in Thailand and was available for tutoring, the director suggested the project to me.

I went to meet the couple at their sponsor's apartment, where they were living temporarily. I learned that they would soon be living alone in an apartment without a telephone and that they spoke no English. The man had a job in the evenings as a school custodian. They had had no orientation to American life and customs. I felt that their lack of English had reached an emergency level and that they needed a trained ESL teacher with some knowledge of their background and language.

Since the School for International Training's M.A.T. program requires each of its candidates to have a student teaching internship, I proposed to the director of the program that mine be to teach the Laotian couple. He asked me to submit a detailed proposal including a schedule and justification to the department for consideration. (Appendix A) Because I was an experienced ESL teacher and because SIT had voiced interest in helping this first refugee family, the proposal was approved. In addition, the school agreed to provide me with a classroom, materials and use of the copying machines.

The one concern of the staff--that the students' ambition might wane and that I might not be able to fulfill the required number of teaching hours--proved to be unnecessary: the couple always wanted more time than I could give.

The dominant factor in organizing the program turned out to be the children. In the objectives that I wrote for the program and for my teaching, my overriding concern was my pedagogic objective of developing an effective learning sequence, and this was greatly affected by the presence of the couple's children in the classroom. Although this objective was pedagogic, the children's presence made an effective learning sequence intrinsically cultural and interpersonal as well.

Since one child had been born in the refugee camp and the other brought there as an infant, it seemed best not to separate them. I felt that adding to their tragedy, upheaval, change and stress by separating the children from their parents would be unwise, unnecessary and counterproductive.

The first problem in having the children with their parents was how to set up the classroom. How could I make it as effective a learning center as possible for the parents with the children there? In Lao/Thai culture, the students' heads should never be above the teacher's or oldest person's head. Consequently, students could never stand next to the teacher if the latter were sitting on a chair because this would show a great lack of respect. It would be very uncomfortable for them to do this even if the teacher insisted that it was appropriate to do so. Also, if one is sitting in a chair, the feet must be put in such a manner that the toes are not pointed at someone. This is always awkward and uncomfortable for me. Consequently, I arranged class so that we would all be working sitting cross-legged on the floor.

My head was always above theirs because I was the tallest, and an informal atmosphere was created.

Next, I sat with my back to the blackboard and the two parents faced me leaving an area behind them for the children to play in. I put down a blanket on the floor as a kind of mat and brought in toys for them to play with. I also hung colorful posters all around and labeled everything in the room so that they would see English words all around them.

The first day that I spent with all four members of the family, I tried to create a relaxed, fun atmosphere and included the children in everything. The second day, I tried to sit the children in the area behind their parents for short periods of time, and I gave them little projects such as coloring or putting beads into a bag, etc.

As the week progressed, they gradually spent more and more time in their little area. I was often able to work the first hour with the parents doing a lot of oral work while the children played.

One of our daily rituals seemed to give the children the security they needed to play alone for a while. This was the tea break. During the morning usually after the first hour and a half or whenever the parents began to be overwhelmed or tired or when the children became too restless, we stopped to have tea. Everyday, we all prepared an area away from the study area. I would lay down a tablecloth on the floor and the man would fill up a container of water. The woman would bring out sticky rice and meat or eggs she had prepared, and

I would take out the fruit or whatever I had brought. We all had an equal part in this, and the children would sometimes help. During this break we would speak a mixture of Thai, English, Lao and sign language, and we relaxed, laughed, ate and drank. This tea break provided an important time between lessons to rest and to become closer. We talked about anything and everything, and we played with the children giving them the attention they needed. During this time they asked me questions about English or about America, and a great deal of informal learning took place.

I also tried to incorporate the children into the lessons. The little four-year old girl knew the alphabet well and was deft at distinguishing sounds and correctly repeating after me. Many times when the parents could not hear or repeat my sounds, they could distinguish and repeat her repetition of what I had said.

The little boy, however, was too young and too attached to his mother to play by himself for any length of time. Also, in Lao/Thai culture, boys may be favored over girls and spoiled as a result of the attention. Naturally, then, the boy was a constant distraction, especially to his mother. After the first week, I realized that while I was accomplishing some things, much of the three hours during which I taught them was being spent in dealing with the smaller child. Yet I still did not feel that they should be separated, and they did not want to be, either. They were extremely ashamed that the child disrupted us because they felt that the teacher's time was

precious. I always smiled and assured them that I understood, but it was difficult for them and they were so eager to learn. I decided that I needed someone else to help me in the classroom if the children were to remain.

Coincidentally, a young Japanese woman who had just completed her English course at the school agreed to work with us. Everyday she sat in the back playing and working with the children. Often during the lessons, the children would wander over to tell their mother something, but in general there was a great deal more time available, which enabled the parents to accomplish much more.

When I felt the children had begun to be somewhat secure and accustomed to their new life, and when I felt the parents trusted me enough to make decisions, I arranged for the four-year old to attend a nursery school and I found a babysitter for the younger child.

Thus, after a little more than a month, I was able to teach the couple alone in the class knowing that they felt secure and happy about their children. This enabled them to direct their attention to English for three hours every day in a more positive way. They seemed to feel very comfortable with me, and I felt it was because they trusted me. The trust came in large part, I felt, because of the concern I had shown in my understanding of and patience with the handling of the children.

I really was not able to develop an effective learning sequence when the children were in the classroom. Perhaps

more important than the effective learning sequence was the establishment of a trusting relationship between the family and me during this time, a lack of which might have made any English instruction or personal relationship impossible.

TEACHING THE COURSE

GENERAL PROBLEMS

In this section, I describe what I found to be the idiosyncrasies of teaching non-literate or semi-literate Laotian refugees. These included their lack of formal schooling, the question of what skills to teach and the methods to use, decisions about the degree of correctness to accept/demand, their preoccupations, their ability to sustain an attention span through an intense course, their quiet nature and their attitude towards the teacher. On the other hand, their self-image, patience and ability to work supportively together were positive aspects of the experience. In describing these questions and issues that confronted me, I also explain the rationale for my decisions. Following this is a detailed account of my teaching of the various skill areas.

The greatest problem I encountered was the couple's lack of formal education. Because this couple had had little or no previous schooling and study of language, they did not have linguistically analytical minds. They were not able to remember items nor could they hear distinctions in sounds. A sentence longer than three or four words confused them: they could not repeat it or understand it even if they knew the basic words.

They did not seem to be able to guess at concepts, and for the first two and a half months they never tried to manipulate or experiment with the language. They appeared never to have memorized in their lives, and they had not learned how to use a teacher as a source of information.

Due largely to this lack of educational background and the corresponding inability to internalize the language, progress was very slow and partial. An example appropriately illustrates the problem. The first breakthrough that I thought I clearly saw came when the man could work with English alphabetical order enabling him to begin using his English/Lao dictionary. A whole world was opened to him when he realized the power and independence this skill gave him. We practised repeatedly as I gave him English words to look up for a Lao translation. He could do this in the context of a dictionary assignment. One time, however, when he was working on a grammar assignment by himself, I could see that he was stuck on one word. He just sat and stared at the one sentence, so I suggested that he try to guess at it from context. Then, when he could not do that, I suggested that he continue with the assignment and return to the problem word later, which he did. Finally, I had to suggest that he look up the word in his dictionary--an idea that had not occurred to him--but he could not find it. I noticed that this happened a few times, and I could not understand his inability to find a word when he had found words in dictionary exercises many times before. I finally had a Thai woman ask him the problem, and it turned

out that he thought articles were part of the words: he would look under T for "the bird." Not only did progress seem to take excessively long, but also I was never certain what they had internalized and what it meant to them.

The decision of which skills to teach and emphasize in a short, intensive course for illiterate ESL students was a second difficult problem. In addition to the typical ESL teacher's question of sequencing, there was the question of teaching reading and writing: should literacy training precede, coincide with or follow oral ESL work, and which should be emphasized? There was the question of taking a notional/functional approach or a more traditional, grammatical approach. The sequence I developed is outlined in Appendix C, and the rationale for my decisions is in the skill sections.

Another decision I faced regarded the choice of methods. During the first days I used a variety of methods to see what they responded to best. An eclectic approach seemed effective because what they could not understand in one way they might understand in another. I usually could not determine why one method or technique succeeded or failed. Included in my approaches were pictures, flash cards, Silent Way rods, translations, role-playing, dialogues, games, songs, question and answer, Community Language Learning transcripts, dictations, minimal pairs, etc. The variety of methods I used is described in more detail in the skills sections below.

Related to the two previous questions of what to teach and how to teach was the question of the degree of correctness I

would demand: I decided that I wanted them to be able to communicate rather than to speak correct English. I found that by making them speak in correct sentences with all the words included was frustrating and unnecessarily time- and energy-consuming. Because in Lao fewer words are used to communicate a meaning than in English, they could not remember to use seemingly unimportant words. For example, whereas Thai/Lao has a word to indicate future tense, it is sometimes dropped in everyday use resulting in Bai nai (Go where?), the English equivalent of which would be "Where are you going?" Similarly, Bai tan keow (Go eat rice) would be ten words in English: "I am going to eat some rice (in a restaurant)." At first I used sector analysis with Silent Way rods, which makes visual each word in the sentence. But gradually I began to feel that it was more important for them psychologically to be able to talk and understand basic things as soon as possible rather than to concentrate on each word. Hence, I became less strict and permitted their use of broken English. In response to "Ok. We're finished. It's eleven o'clock. Let's go home now, ok?" I would accept, "Ok. Finish. Go home."¹

Interfering with lessons occasionally were the couples' preoccupations, a problem common with adults but magnified with the refugees. They worried about the other family members who

¹Two months since the end of the formal class, I have found the woman asking me linguistic-type questions about specific ways of saying things in English. She now seems ready to learn more precise English.

were not there and about their children's needs. The woman never had free time away from the children, and the man worked full-time as a custodian from 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 or 12:00 p.m. These problems required patience, understanding and alternative activities in mind.

A further difficulty in working with this couple was the great pressure of such intense education, compounded perhaps by the small class size. For both the students and me, three hours was a very long time to work with just two beginning students even with the variety of activities I provided. There was great pressure on the students to pay attention constantly, and there was strain on me to have numerous teaching, review and alternative activities ready every day.

Two cultural characteristics of these people added to the difficulty. First, while they were very happy to be able to communicate with me, they were very shy and quiet. Their faces did not show or express very much. Generally speaking, when they meet new people or are in uncomfortable or unfamiliar situations, their faces become uncommunicative revealing nothing about their feelings or thoughts. Their personalities seem to disappear behind their faces.

A second cultural characteristic, which I noticed in Thailand and Laos and which I see in them, is a great respect for and deference to teachers and elders. This does not preclude friendship with them, but a teacher can not be regarded as an equal.

These two characteristics are evinced in a rather passive

and respectful nature typical of rural Laotian people. This made them non-aggressive learners, which put the burden of direction and class activity on me.

The previous pages have dealt with problems and decisions I had to make due to the peculiarities of working with a class of two illiterate/semi-literate Laotian adults. On the other hand, there was an absolute strength in these two people that is important to mention, although it may have nothing to do with their being Laotian or illiterate. The strength lay in their positive self-images, their good humor and their ability to work well together. According to literature I have read about literacy training, illiterate adults may feel embarrassed, powerless and inferior because of their inability to read and write. But this Laotian woman did not seem to feel bad about her illiteracy. It was merely something she could not do or had never learned but was now going to learn. Neither of them became discouraged nor seemed to think they might not be able to learn English. Often I used techniques which had been successful with other beginning ESL students but which did not succeed with this couple. Even after I would try several different approaches and we all would realize the failure, they would still not become discouraged or feel impatient with themselves.

Furthermore, they worked exceedingly well together throughout the intensity and difficulty of the course. They were never competitive, shared the responsibilities of looking after the children, and knew how to help each other. Eventually,

when it seemed necessary for the woman to become literate in Lao, the man taught her. She can now read and write Lao and use a Lao/English dictionary.

Whether or not these strengths are Laotian characteristics, they greatly enhanced whatever progress in English and success in the course that resulted.

The remainder of this section deals with the specific skill areas: the important choices and decisions involved and the techniques I used.

LITERACY

At the beginning of the course, there were three immediate decisions to make: whether to teach literacy in Lao to the woman before beginning ESL work and English literacy, which method(s) of literacy training to employ, and whether to teach print and/or cursive writing.

It has often been written that for someone to become literate in a second language, they must be literate in their first language. Although this couple could understand Thai, which I speak but can not read or write, only the man was literate in both Thai and Lao. Being unable to teach reading and writing in either language and having only two months to work with them, I decided to work solely in English with occasional help from the little Thai that I knew.

If I were to teach the course again and knew how well this couple worked together, I would have the man teach the woman to read and write Lao at the beginning and would con-

concentrate on oral ESL with her in the meantime. As the course developed, the man progressed much faster than the woman-- though slower than other ESL beginners--because of his limited literacy. She did not seem to make the mental connections of sound, symbol and meaning required in reading. Finally I asked the man if he could teach the woman to read and write in Lao, and he agreed. Within three months she could read and write in Lao, and English literacy work I did with her after the course seemed to have much more meaning. She was then able to use an English/Lao dictionary, which would have accelerated her progress during the course. Had I taught this way, she might have been discouraged because she was so anxious to learn to read and write English at the beginning, but I think I could have explained my reasons to her satisfactorily.

My second problem was to learn and choose methods of teaching and developing literacy. "Methods and Materials for ESL Literacy" by Ann Ebersole-Strauch gave me a good overview of literacy approaches and methods. I was also familiar with Laubach's methods and with Silent Way's Fidel and word charts. Consequently I had a variety of methods available, but what determined my eventual first method was the family's orientation. They had been studying the alphabet before I began to teach them because they owned an old book written in Lao about English with the alphabet in it. Thus, the alphabetical approach was the first method I tried because it was something they felt comfortable with already. It also shows English to be something finite, which makes the task a little less over-

whelming. Later on, I used phoneme and morpheme approaches, Community Language Learning transcripts of their own speech, Laubach word shapes, and flash cards: I developed an eclectic approach in order to provide variety and capitalize on whatever methods succeeded.

The third decision I faced at the outset was whether to teach print or cursive writing. I decided to teach them printing because books, signs, bills, official documents and newspapers would be in print and because I felt I could teach printing better.

The rest of this section on literacy describes the techniques I used and the more interesting experiences I noted in teaching literacy. Beyond teaching the alphabet first, I did not follow a sequence but rather built daily as the need appeared.

To teach the alphabet, I used flashcards with both capital and small letters. We did a variety of exercises focusing mostly on putting the letters in order and naming them. They loved singing a children's alphabet song, and this helped develop the pronunciation of the letters' names. Singing the song also gave them a feeling of progressing in the new language.

When they had learned the alphabet, the man's needs became quite different from the woman's. He was ready to copy sentences, fill in missing words, answer questions, use the dictionary, and study spelling words. On the other hand, she did not know how to use a pencil either to draw or to write. Apparently she had never even drawn pictures as a child and

was unable to make a visual representation of a person, let alone a sound. As I mentioned earlier, she did not seem ashamed of her illiteracy, but she did seem embarrassed about not knowing how to draw. Consequently, it was necessary to teach her how to hold a pencil and to move her fingers, hand and arm to write and draw. First, she would trace large letters in the air accustoming her muscles to these new motions. Then she would copy and trace lines and circles. I divided the letters into different shapes for her to practice:

E F H I L T	verticals and horizontals
A K M N V W X Y Z	diagonals
C G O Q S	circles
B D J P R U	circles and straight lines

The next step for her was to connect dots to form letters. Appendix D has some of the literacy activities I used. After that, she was ready to copy words and sentences that we were doing orally in class. This, of course, provided both writing and reading material. At this point, I made a workbook for her to practice the shapes of words she had already learned during the oral parts of class. I also gave her children's workbooks for reading readiness and introduced the couple to the television programs, Zoom and Sesame Street, which helped in many skill areas.

One approach I used consistently was recognition of whole words as units, which depended partly on words we had studied orally. The first words I taught them to recognize as whole units were their and my names. I taught the woman to pick out words she knew in a series of words or in sentences. I also gave her words with letters missing for her to fill in. I

used songs and short dialogues--sometimes their own--for word recognition and reading practice. I would stop in the middle of a song and have them point to the word we had stopped at. I also typed dialogues or songs leaving out words for them to fill in. Labeling everything in the room, as I mentioned earlier, was also for this purpose. We worked on sign words such as men, women, stop, etc. I made a large word chart, and we tapped out questions and answers to each other. One surprising failure occurred when I thought they might be able to find Laos on a world map. Unfortunately, they had no idea of where Laos was on a map.

Another approach I found complementing this whole-word approach was phonemic. First, I provided written practice on everything we had worked on orally. I dictated a great deal and would always point to the letters as I said them during corrections. For example, I would emphasize each sound in the word son and point to each letter as we checked their dictation. Then, I would have them point to the letters as I pronounced each word.

It is significant to note that once the woman had learned to write and read in Lao, her ability to learn from these two approaches--whole-word and phonemic--improved greatly.

Writing and reading numbers was comparatively easy for them. They confused seven and eleven orally, and they forgot the higher numbers unless I worked on them daily. I made flash cards to introduce the numbers and then wrote the names of the numbers on other flash cards for a matching game. We

played card games such as "21" and "Crazy 8's" to develop number recognition. They both learned to write the numbers quickly, but they had trouble with the written form of the numbers. For telling time, I made a clock to practice with, and I gave them homework in a children's workbook about time. They loved these workbooks and felt a great deal of accomplishment when they finished.

In fact, this overall sense of accomplishment that resulted from the literacy work we did was probably as important as the foundations in reading and writing that they learned.

PRONUNCIATION

There were essentially only two difficult decisions for me to consider in dealing with pronunciation: whether to use the Silent Way Fidel and Color/Sound charts and what degree of correctness to demand.

I decided not to use the Silent Way charts for several reasons. First, I felt that learning the charts would be an additional burden on their memories. Second, with only two students in the class, the benefit of having others to remember and suggest sounds did not exist. Third, I was not confident in my facility with the charts. Finally, I felt that the additional learning would take longer.

In retrospect, I think that the charts may have been beneficial. Like the alphabet, the charts visualize the finiteness of English. Perhaps the transition from the sounds to the Fidel and Word Charts would have been great aids in

speaking, reading and writing.

The second issue--the degree of correctness of pronunciation to demand--arose when I first began to teach them. When they would repeat something I had said, there seemed to be no relationship between our utterances. What they would say was often quite a shock to all three of us. After working with them for a while, I decided that correcting their pronunciation was excessively time-consuming and not very productive. As a result, I corrected gross mispronunciations but did not require precision. Generally speaking, I did not spend a great deal of time on pronunciation.

The first thing I did related to pronunciation was to give them English names. I decided to use these names only in the classroom, but I chose names that both were similar to their Lao names and had phonemes that were difficult for them. For example, a final /t/ in Lao sounds like /s/, so I gave one of them an American name with a final /t/. It took them days to say their new names correctly, but I suspect that success resulted partly from hearing my repetition of their names correctly. Having these English sounds correctly in their repertoire provided a basis for correcting the same sounds in other words later in the course.

I relied on two pronunciation techniques, one a partial failure and the other a success. The less successful was minimal pairs. It failed partly because they could not hear the distinctions between phonemes and partly because I could not convey the concept of same and different. Occasionally

during the two months, they could respond "yes" if I said the same word twice and "no" if I said two different words. They could never tell me which word I had said first, and they could never produce the sound contrast I had pronounced. Regarding the problem of the concept of sameness and difference, I modeled, explained and even translated the minimal pair procedure, but it took half the program for them to understand the concept, and then there were numerous sounds they could not distinguish.

Interestingly, although there is evidence to the contrary, this couple were able to produce sounds that they could not hear. Work with minimal pairs showed what sounds they could distinguish. I would then show them how to produce the sounds they could not hear. Even when they could thereby produce the sounds correctly, they could not distinguish the sounds in minimal pairs.

The successful pronunciation technique was using the four-year old girl. Because she was linguistically more flexible than her parents, she could repeat after me exactly. She could repeat any sound or word I made, and her parents would always be able to hear her pronunciation and repeat it after her.

It may be useful to note some of the phonemic differences between Lao and English which cause difficulty. First, since there are no consonant clusters in Lao, ending /s/ sounds are difficult to produce. Furthermore, since Lao is a tonal language, one sound like /na/ could be six different words depending on the tone. I wondered if, in the above-mentioned problem with sameness and difference in the minimal pair drills,

the sounds were alike to them because I pronounced them in the same tones. Perhaps difference to them depends on tones more than on pronunciation.²

I have found that with time, their pronunciation and listening ability have improved significantly. This leads me to believe that time and exposure to English may produce better results in some cases than intense pronunciation lessons and corrections.

GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY

This section describes some general problems I encountered teaching grammar to this Laotian couple, the methods I used and some grammatical problem areas for my Laotian students.

The first serious difficulty I encountered was that the couple did not know how to memorize. Learning another language involves a degree of memorization, but they were not accustomed to memorizing a language. I had to show them how to study and memorize a language through repetition at home. Complicating this was the man's work schedule and the woman's constant attention to the children. These two factors combined to make the memorization of the days of the week a two-week task. They seem to remember the names of the months they have lived here, so by December, 1980, they should know the months of the year.

²For a more detailed analysis of English pronunciation difficulties for Laotians, consult the Indochinese Refugee Education Guides produced by the Center for Applied Linguistics, especially Teaching English to the Lao.

A second difficulty was to progress in grammar with such a limited vocabulary and little ability to reinforce grammar through reading and writing. The first part of the course was devoted, therefore, to vocabulary of the room, useful places and items, foods, weather terms, etc. I felt that a basic vocabulary was not only necessary for grammatical structures but also useful in their daily lives.

I decided that my approach to grammar instruction should be functional rather than traditional in concentrating on grammar patterns. I tried to anticipate the most useful expressions they would need to survive in Brattleboro. Grammar patterns exploring each of the tenses, parts of speech, singular and plural, etc. would be too difficult if not incomprehensible. Consequently, I would teach the notion of desire, "Do you want some/a _____" and the answer, "Yes I do" or "No, I don't," rather than the present tense, the pronouns, contractions, determiners, question word order and countable/noncountable nouns.

Within this notional/functional context, I incorporated a wide variety of methods, approaches and techniques. During the first week I used Total Physical Response to teach them certain useful imperatives. I used simple classroom directions, which I reinforced and expanded daily. These worked well.

The Silent Way approach of emphasizing careful listening and concentration and the students' doing most of the talking governed most of my teaching regardless of the method or technique. I used the Silent Way Word Chart to reinforce

grammar, and the man could use it very well. I also used the Silent Way rods for a variety of things such as colors, imperatives, numbers and prepositions. Progress was slow, but they enjoyed working with the rods, and I perceived that they grasped concepts more quickly using them. I also used the rods for sector analysis of word order, as I mentioned earlier. However, when I realized their great difficulty with small, seemingly unimportant words, I began to allow less perfect, more broken English. Communication was more important at that point than perfection.

Audio-Lingual dialogues proved very useful and enjoyable for basic conversation needs such as greetings, finding out names, ages, addresses, introductions, etc. They were embarrassed to perform the dialogues with each other, but they had a great deal of fun doing them. The short dialogues worked well because they gave the couple things to say when people knocked on the door, gave them something or introduced them to others, and this made them feel more comfortable. They did not learn these dialogues quickly, but they felt a sense of accomplishment when they had learned them.

Another Audio-Lingual technique was the use of pictures. We asked and answered many questions about pictures. They liked to choose a picture and ask each other questions about it. Similarly, I brought in some paper cut-out dolls of an American man and woman and their two children and put them on the wall. We named them and daily created information about the family, and I continually used them to reinforce the

grammar. Sometimes, one of the students would role-play the father or mother and we would ask questions about what the family was doing that day, how they felt, etc.

I also tried to allow them to express their needs and wants, but this occurred only twice. Once, after we had worked on numbers, the woman put some coins in my hand and wanted me to explain money. Delighted, I promptly taught them about money, and they even took notes. Another time, I tried a Community Language Learning technique in writing letters to the Japanese woman who had helped us in class. They loved her and wanted to write to her after she had left. I asked them in Lao/Thai what they wanted to say, translated their message into English on paper, and worked with them on the phrases. I did not see any learning from it, but there might have been some. They were certainly overjoyed and satisfied to be able to communicate with their friend.

Finally, sometimes I would translate because all other approaches had failed. I did not find translation effective, though I think the ability to communicate in Lao/Thai greatly facilitated our relationship. Translation occasionally sped their understanding of a concept, and I do not think my knowing Thai inhibited their English acquisition because all of us ~~wanted them to learn English so desperately.~~

As with pronunciation, there are several linguistic differences between Lao and English which can be obstacles to their learning. I tried to teach the differences between some and a, but they never grasped it. Likewise, the difference between

singular and plural meant nothing to them. They never remembered to put an s on plurals even though they finally understood the concept. This may be because in Lao, classifiers determine pluralness. Hence, a Lao phrase would be, "paper, two piece."

A concept they understood but did not consistently use was adjective-before-noun word order. In Lao, adjectives follow the nouns: "rice sticky" rather than "sticky rice." Similarly, Laotian word order would say, "It color blue" rather than "The table is blue."

Pronouns proved to be a big problem. Informally, Laotians drop personal pronouns assuming that the listener knows whom they are talking about. (However, they are retained in formal speech.) This Laotian couple seemed to use pronouns correctly in certain phrases they had memorized, but they could not use them consistently in other situations, which led me to believe they really did not understand either the use or the meaning of pronouns.

Prepositions of spatial relationships in English are not directly translatable into Lao, which divides the world up differently. The concept of spatial prepositions was difficult for the couple to internalize.

Finally, the English tense system is quite different from Lao's simple addition of a tense signal, and it would require a great deal of concentrated and organized work to make it comprehensible.

In conclusion, grammar and vocabulary studies provided

the substance on which to base literacy training and pronunciation, the greatest number and variety of methods, and the most gratification as they became able to communicate with Americans.

CULTURAL ASPECTS

In addition to language studies, I felt responsible for making them aware of certain general American cultural habits. I talked with them informally and explained in Lao/Thai that some traits they may have observed were not impolite here as they would have been in Laos. These included touching the head of an adolescent, sitting with one's feet pointing at other people, a man's informally and friendly touching a female friend, looking another straight in the eyes, pointing at people or stepping on the threshold of their house or room. They did not seem to do anything that would be particularly offensive to Americans except to ask questions some Americans might perceive as too personal--age, weight, salary, cost, etc.

I made them aware of some cultural norms here through role-playing introductions, requests, receiving visitors and buying things. We also celebrated Valentine's Day by making valentines to send, baking a valentine cake and attending a valentine dance. We celebrated one of their birthdays American-style with a cake, candles, a song and presents and St. Patrick's Day by wearing green. I also told them about George Washington on his birthday.

One cultural difference between Laos and America is the

role of women. Laotian men sometimes have two or three wives, and women are considered subservient to men. Male babies are sometimes desired over females. Fortunately, this Laotian man was fairly sensitive to and aware of his wife. I felt it was important to make them aware of the more equal role of women in this society and of the opportunities available for women. I did this in small ways--showing concern for the woman's well-being, praising the daughter's intelligence and progress and dealing with the couple as equals.

Another cultural difference, affected by their Buddhist background, was their attitude of acceptance and acquiescence. Americans tend to be more aggressive than fatalistic. While I did not explain this to them, an understanding of this and the previously mentioned cultural traits should be useful to ESL teachers working with Laotians.

CONCLUSION

After approximately ten weeks in my course, the man was put into a beginning level ESL class at the School for International Training of at least high school-educated people from many other countries. Perhaps because of his deficiencies in writing and reading and because he did not understand how to analyze language, he was unable to keep up with the rest of the class. But he was able to progress and to learn. The class was beneficial in terms of broadening his cultural experiences and observing how other people learn.

I feel that he needs a great deal of individual help or

a small class with people from similar, non-educational backgrounds. Furthermore, I think that what language he has learned has not helped him significantly at his job. He does not speak English at home, and he can not speak much English at work because the people he works with do not try to understand him. In retrospect, I believe that English more specifically related to his work might have been more useful to him. I could have visited the job site, walked through all the duties, listed all the terminology necessary for the job, sampled conversations he might have with co-workers, collected instructions the boss might give and devised a functional course based on the job information. In this way, his English would be reinforced, the job would be easier, and he could have more contact--and learn more English--with his co-workers.

I have been individually tutoring the woman for five or six hours a week during the two months since the class ended. As I teach her new things, she learns them much more quickly than either of them did originally. She now goes shopping for groceries by herself. She asks about English now and requests much more vocabulary. I have begun asking her in Thai what she wants to be able to say in English, and she has responded very well. She also works with her four-year old daughter, who now speaks more English than Lao.

One problem for her, both linguistically and culturally, is a lack of company. Not only does she continually need more practice in English, she also needs the psychological support of companionship. In her country people always visit each-

other. There is a kind of loneliness in being an American that is not present in her culture. We value our privacy and are not accustomed to being with other people constantly--we feel we tire of each other after a while. This family does not understand this concept. The community needs to maintain contact with them after the initial newness and specialness of having a refugee family diminishes.

In conclusion, I would offer a few recommendations for future ESL literacy programs with Laotian refugees:

1. Classes should be small, consisting of five or six Laotians with similar backgrounds.
2. The teacher should know Lao or Thai or have access to a bilingual aid.
3. There should be an effort to involve the people in the community.
4. English instruction should be as functional, even job-oriented, as possible.
5. Teaching Lao literacy before English literacy would facilitate overall education.
6. Having a job should be delayed until the people have studied English, acquired literacy and begun to use basic, functional English.

INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONAL PROJECT

PROPOSAL

SUBMITTED BY Patricia A. Ryan-Croes

Type of Project: Program Development

Brief Description: Since January I have been working with Brattleboro's first Laotian refugee family. Not long ago a second family arrived and more families are expected to arrive in the future. Some communities such as San Diego, California which has 5,000 Laotian refugees are having difficulties assimilating these people into their work places, schools, and social life, largely due to these refugees' inability to speak English, and to understand and participate in the culture of the United States.

While I worked with this family, I gained several insights into teaching these people who I feel are fairly typical of many of the Laotian refugees who will come here, and who are here already. They present special problems for the ESL teachers in the areas of cultural adjustment, counseling, literacy training and English language acquisition.

I propose to write my Independent Professional Project about my experience working with this family in the hopes that it may help other people deal with the education of Laotian refugees in the future.

Specifically, I plan to describe the couple's background, outline my knowledge of their culture and language (which I am fairly familiar with because of some time spent in Laos and two years spent in Thailand as a Peace Corps Volunteer), and detail the teaching methods, approach, and materials that I used in working with them. Included in this will be my evaluation of what I did, the sequence of what I taught them, sample lessons, and ideas for other ways to work with them such as in the area of English for Special Purposes.

I feel that writing and collating this project will be helpful to me in analyzing and synthesizing this experience and as I stated above, helpful to others who will be working with Laotian refugees in the future.

PRINCIPAL PROJECT ADVISOR

Marianne Loren Freeman

SECOND PROJECT ADVISOR/READER

Elizabeth W. Tannenbaum

ANTICIPATED DATE OF COMPLETION

June, 1980

APPENDIX B

STUDENT TEACHING OBJECTIVES

Linguistic

1. To have them be able to produce the verb "to be" in the present tense correctly.
2. To have them be able to recognise and use most of the more common verbs in English in the present tense, the present progressive tense, the future tense and the past tense fairly well. (regular and irregular verbs)
3. To have them be able to make yes/no and Wh questions with these verbs.
4. To have them know the vocabulary of survival in Brattleboro. (e.g., vocabulary of the body, food, rooms, weather, etc.)
5. To have them be able to count and handle money and tell time.

Cultural-Interpersonal

1. To have them be able to conduct social conversations. (e.g., receive visitors, be introduced to someone, etc.)
2. To have them be able to make telephone calls. (e.g., to friends, for emergencies, for information, etc.)
3. To have them be able to shop in a grocery store, to eat in a restaurant, to give directions, to go to the bank and conduct their business.

Professional

1. To develop a way to enable the woman to write and read in English.

Pedagogical

1. To develop an effective learning sequence when the students' children are in the classroom.

APPENDIX C

PARTIAL ESL SEQUENCE

The following lists most, but not all, of the items taught during the eight-week program. Classes were for two and a half to three hours per day, five days per week.

First Week

imperatives: eg., come here, come in, sit down, go to the door, look at _____, put/take/give, open/shut the door/window/book, stand up, etc.
 greetings: Hi! Hello, Good morning, How are you, etc.
 introductions: How do you do. Happy to meet you.
 other expressions: Excuse me, Thank you, etc.
 vocabulary of the classroom
 vocabulary: husband/wife, girl/boy, man/woman, teacher/student, friend, sponsor, colors
 writing: alphabet, numbers 1-10 in words and numbers
 pronunciation: everything above, alphabet song

Second Week

review
 days of the week
 personal pronouns
 How old are you? I am _____. How old is _____
 numbers 1-50
 matching new vocabulary to pictures
 vocabulary: flowers, dog, airplane, etc.
 introduction to world map
 adjectives of language, country, people
 Where?
 writing: tracing for the woman, filling in words in sentences, spelling, dictations
 pronunciation: poem, stressing final sounds of words

Third Week

review
 numbers board game
 first six months of the year
 yes/no questions: present tense "to be"
 "to be" in present tense with adjectives from pictures
 U.S. map
 vocabulary: village, city, town, state, country, house, apartment, street, address
 writing: spelling, dictation, numbers

pronunciation: song, minimal pairs (final /s/-/t/
television shows--Sesame Street and Zoom

Fourth Week

review
Wh questions: Who? What? Where? How?
this/that, these/those
money
numbers: 50-100, dictation
singular/plural
telling time
writing
pronunciation: final /s/-/z/-/iz/, consonant clusters

Fifth Week

review
vocabulary of body, weather
"or" questions
dialogue of receiving visitors, role-play
How many?
possessive adjectives
directions: go straight, turn right, etc.
writing
pronunciation: /zh/-/ch/
Song: "One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock, rock"

Sixth Week

review
vocabulary of illness: sick, ill, etc.
synonyms: mad/angry, little/small, big/large, happy/glad
Concentration game with new vocabulary
dialogue, role-play buying something at store, post office
Go Fish card game
Do you want? Yes, I do. or No, I don't.
Do you like? Yes, I do. or No, I don't.
writing
pronunciation: /ɛ/ /æ/
Happy Birthday song

Seventh Week

review
vocabulary of food, utensils, antonyms (wet/dry, warm/cool)
present continuous tense (pictures and action)
Simon Says game
numbers bingo
calendar: day after, before, next week
writing
pronunciation: /w/-/v/
Are you Sleeping? song

Eighth Week

review

antonyms: new/old, tall/short, cheap/expensive

word bingo

daily routine: present tense verbs--wake up, get up, etc.

writing a letter

writing

pronunciation: consonant clusters /p/-/k/

APPENDIX D

EXAMPLES OF SOME WRITING TASKS

1. Tracing letters (connect the dots)

A B C D E F G H

2. Copying

Good Morning

3. Shapes

Monday

Tuesday



4. Fill-in

A B _ D E F _ _ _ J _ L _ _ etc.

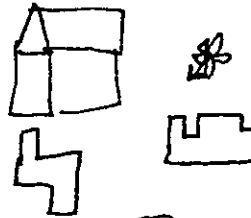
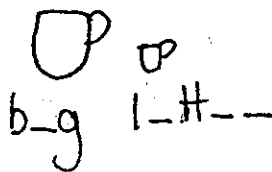
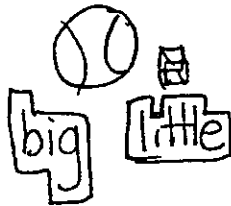
My n_m_ is _____.

5. Recognizing differences

Circle the word that is different.

- | | | |
|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. tall | 2. tall | 3. fall |
| toll | tale | tall |
| tall | tall | tall |

6. Meaning through pictures



A big ball.

A big box.

A big cup.

A big cup.

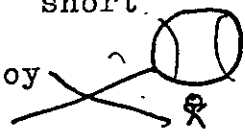

7. What is it?

1. _____ 

2. _____ 

8. Connecting.



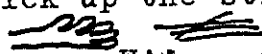
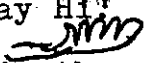
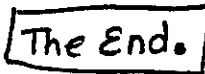
tall — big
 big — little
 little — tall
 short — short

little boy — 
 big ball — 

9. Put these words into their correct order.

Monday _____
 Sunday _____
 Tuesday _____
 Saturday _____
 Wednesday _____
 Friday _____
 Thursday _____

10. A poem.


One, two - tie my shoe!
 1 2 
 Three, four - open the door!
 3 4 
 Five, six - pick up the sticks!
 5 6 
 Seven, eight - say Hi! - to Kate!
 7 8 
 Nine, ten - that's the end!
 9 10 




11. Spelling

12. Dictations.

13. Fill-in.


 She is tired.
 ___ is tired.
 She is _____.
 She ___ tired.


 He is angry.
 He ___ angry.
 ___ is angry.
 He is _____.



14. Working with sounds.

ill it at

pill pit pat
hill hit hat
bill bit bat

ap tap map cap lap clap

dog
dig

sit sat set

15. Translations

What are these words in Lao?

1. breakfast
2. smile

16. Mixed up words and sentences.

btale

rhcia

is Today fifteenth January.

17. Putting together questions and answers. (Make a chart and tap out the words as you say them.)

How	daughter	are	I	?
Where	son	is	you	.
	today	am	he	
	fine		she	
	thank		they	
	Friday		your	
	yes			
	no			
	happy			
	sad			
	tired			
	and			

18. Today is Tuesday. It is nine-fifteen. Naoko is happy.

What day is today? _____

What time is it? _____

Is Naoko sad? _____

19. Questions.

How old is your daughter?

Is Naoko Japanese or Korean?

20. Here are Kathy and Tommy. Kathy is eleven years old and her brother is fifteen years old. They live in Putney. They are happy today because they are going to eat dinner in a restaurant tonight.

Here are Kathy and Tommy. Kathy eleven old and her is fifteen years . Putney. happy because are going to eat dinner in a tonight.

1. Who is fifteen years old?
2. Are they happy today?
3. Why?

21. Dialogs. Reading, erasing words, memorizing, acting out...

Excuse me.

Yes?

What time is it, please?

Oh. Its seven o'clock.

Oh No! I'm late! Thank you.

Okay. Bye.

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