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**Hmong Bilingual Paraprofessionals in the Mainstream Classroom**

by

Douchi Yang

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

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English: Teaching English as a Second Language

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### **Abstract**

The study focused on the perceptions of Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals regarding their roles and responsibilities in mainstream classrooms. 10 participants from three school districts in Wisconsin were interviewed to establish what they do to give support to the English Language (EL) professional and what support they give to English Language Learners (ELLs) to help propel them to be independent of ELL services. Findings from the study indicate that Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals tend to have various roles and responsibilities not limited to the classroom with mainstream teachers. This study also addresses the concerns of the bilingual paraprofessionals and what could be done to help improve the practices of staff to better support the ELLs.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Growing up in a Hmong family, education was regarded highly. The more education one had, the more respected one was. As a second-generation Hmong woman, I had many challenges growing up. I had to work with both Hmong and American culture. I struggled with wanting to be free and independent, yet I had to retain the traditional Hmong values and beliefs. There was no one that I could have talked to about this. My parents still held the traditional beliefs while slowly Americanizing. My teachers did not understand what I was going through.

My experiences in the education field have made me realize that there is more to paraprofessionals than meets the eye. In elementary school, I was placed in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program, currently called English Language Learner (ELL) program. At this time, the school that I went to was using the pull-out method. I would attend the usual mainstream classes, but I would be taken out during language arts to work either in a group of two or individually with an ESL teacher, now called English Language (EL) teacher. I did not know what ELL was. I would go with the EL teacher because she would come and get me from the class. The EL teacher that I had had no inkling as to what Hmong was. There were very few Hmong students in the elementary school that I attended, and it was not as diverse as it is currently. However, I was not in the ELL program long. My parents wanted to take me out of ESL because we mostly spoke English at home, and they did not want me to fall behind my classmates in learning new materials.

It was not until employment in Korea that I began thinking about ESL and teaching. My experiences there gave me a different perspective. I could see what the students were struggling

with in the English classes. Before I went to Korea, I had exposure to the language and culture. I took Korean when I was an undergrad for two years. By being exposed to Korean culture, I was able to have a relationship with my students. I was able to connect with them and understand them. It was one of the reasons why I believe I was successful in teaching my students English.

When I came back to the United States (U.S.) to complete my TESL-MA degree, I decided to also get my K-12 ESL licensure. As I began my journey and saw how schools had changed in my absence, I thought more about bilingual paraprofessionals. I did not see many Hmong in the education field as most of them gravitate toward the sciences. I was guilty of that as my undergraduate was in Biology. If I had not made the decision to teach in South Korea, I would not have thought about becoming a teacher and being where I am today.

The topic of bilingual paraprofessionals came up one day when I was talking to relatives. They started to ask questions about my field and what it entailed. Afterwards, they wanted to know the process of the ELL program. From that, the topic switched over to bilingual paraprofessionals—what do they do, are they only translating in class, why do we need them when children are speaking in English these days? It was then that I realized I did not have the answers to the questions they were seeking when it came to bilingual paraprofessionals. The discussion with my relatives sparked my interest in finding more information about bilingual paraprofessionals. I wondered how Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals felt when working with EL teachers. What were their roles in the classroom? Were they treated as an equal, or were they only in the class to help discipline the students? The more I asked myself questions, the more I wanted to find the answers, which led me to my thesis.



As I narrowed down my research questions, I considered what would be the most significant to my study of bilingual paraprofessionals. What would I want to know about? What would I want others to know about? This resulted in the questions below.

### **Research Questions**

1. In what ways do the bilingual paraprofessionals provide aid to the EL professional, and what do they need in order to provide the aid?
2. What do the bilingual paraprofessionals do or not do that helps propel the Hmong students to become independent of the ELL services?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Hmong

The term “Hmong” refers to an Asian ethnic group who call themselves “Hmong,” but labeled by outsiders as “Miao” in China and “Meo” in Thailand (Yang, 2001). The history of Hmong people is difficult to trace. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly where Hmong originated from, as they do not have a country to call their own. However, as a result of modern comparative linguistic research, the history of Hmong is linked to that of the sub-groups of the Miao ethnicity in southern China (Culas & Michaud, 1997). Historical Chinese documents described the area being inhabited by ‘Miao’ people, a group with whom Hmong people are often identified with.

As history shows, competition between powerful foes, in China, fighting for control over fertile land and trading routes is what had the Hmong fleeing the stronger aggressors and seeking better opportunities elsewhere. As a result, there are Hmong people residing in the regions of Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and China.

Unless an area in the U.S. is populated with Hmong people, many individuals do not know the history of Hmong people and how they came to live in the U.S. Hmong living in the U.S. added to the dynamic diversity of education. With an influx of refugees coming into America, educators had to quickly find educational and linguistic support for those individuals. In the next section, I am going to give a brief history of Hmong people, their residency in the U.S., their education, and other variables that factor into their education to succeed.

## **Secret War**

As said earlier, the history of Hmong is quite challenging to trace back in time. What brought Hmong to the public eye would be the influx of them coming as refugees to the U.S. after the Vietnam War. Even though they fought side by side with the U.S. soldiers, they were not recognized then. Thus, the name Secret War—it was supposed to be kept secret by the U.S. government. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Secret War began in the early 1960s as the CIA sought to recruit, train, and lead Hmong people in Laos to fight against the North Vietnamese Army. The war took place during the same time as the Vietnam War (1954-1975) and led to the deaths of thousands of Hmong people (United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2007). The Vietnam War was a conflict within its own country, between the North (Pathet Lao—communist party) and South (Royal Laotian Party). The U.S. and Thailand allied with Southern Vietnam.

The CIA became part of the Secret War when President Eisenhower wanted to stabilize the situation in Laos without introducing American troops into the conflict. Due to the Hmong's knowledge of the territory and financial reasons, the CIA created a program, Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU), which armed and trained the tribesmen against the Pathet Lao's communist army (United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2007). At this time, General Vang Pao, Hmong military leader, supported and guided his people and the CIA during this time of need. He was considered to be the mediator between the CIA and the Hmong people. The Hmong believed that the Americans would keep their word that they would aid the Hmong economically. However, that was not the case as the communist party succeeded. Both the CIA

and Hmong lost casualties. The Hmong population numbered about 400,000 at the time but declined to 100,000 afterwards.

The U.S. and North Vietnam agreed that Laos would remain neutral, and that was one of the main reasons why no one knew about the Secret War or how the Hmong were involved. Since the Secret War was not well known, the Hmong's contribution and assistance to Americans were not recognized, and it was one of the important reasons why the Hmong had a difficult time trying to voice themselves as an important ally to Americans.

The war finally ended. After the Americans left Laos and pulled out of the Vietnam War, Pathet Lao declared the Hmong people dead. General Vang Pao was forced to leave the country when the American troops pulled out. The result of the Secret War ended in Hmong genocide as Pathet Lao began retaliating and persecuting Hmong people in mass numbers. Some Hmong attempted to resume life under the new regime, while thousands trekked across the Mekong River into Thailand. This was the beginning of a mass migration of Hmong from Laos. Those that reached Thailand were kept in refugee camps until they could be resettled.

Since there was little information or recognition of the Hmong as an ally to the Americans during the war, the Hmong had to fight for their part to be in American history as respected people. On May 15, 1997, the Laos and Hmong Memorial or Lao Veterans of America Monument was made in honor of Hmong Veterans of the Secret War. They finally got their recognition as an important ally to the Americans during the Vietnam War. The reason why the dedication happened so many years after the war was that the Lao Veterans of America and other

organizations argued that there was no risk to national security in denying the Secret War's existence.

After the war, Hmong people began migrating and settling in the U.S., which begins my next section.

### **Hmong in the United States**

In early 1976, the numbers of Hmong started to grow as they began settling in the states. By 1980, approximately 27,000 Hmong were admitted (Yang, 2001). By 1989, Hmong Americans numbered approximately 100,000. At the end of 1999, 200,000 Hmong resided in America, including their American children. According to Yang (2001), the reason for the rapid growth is due to the continuous flow of Hmong refugees coming into America, Hmong's high fertility and low mortality rates.

Upon arriving, the U.S. government enacted a "scattering policy." This attempted to spread Southeast Asian refugees, Hmong included, evenly throughout urban and rural areas in the U.S. to encourage acculturation (Chiang, Fisher, Collins, & Ting, 2015; Tatman 2004). The Hmong had no say in the location of migration. According to Bulk (1996, cited in Chiang et al., 2015), the voluntary resettlement agencies selected locations for the Hmong based on Catholic churches willing to take part in the resettlement. The result of this had "Hmong people predominantly in poor communities" (Schaefer, 2008, cited in Chiang et al., 2015, p. 5).

During the mid- to late 1980s, the Hmong community relocated in mass to California. They were in search of better economic opportunities and uniting with family (Chiang et al., 2015). Then, during the mid-1990s, the Hmong started migrating out of California and moving

toward the Midwest, especially Minnesota and Wisconsin, to escape high unemployment and poor economic conditions (Yang, 2001). St. Paul, Minnesota became the unofficial Hmong American capital of the U.S. with 64,422 residents in 2010 as it offered low-cost housing, educational opportunities, and the existence of a large ethnic area of Hmong refugees (Chiang et al., 2015; Pfeifer, Sullivan, Yang, & Yang, 2012).

### **Education**

Hmong families depend on, cherish, and highly value the Hmong family and clan system. Hmong society is a patriarchal society with the male running the household. They place an importance on family and community. The Hmong culture follows a traditional system that values patriarchal ideology, early marriage and childbearing, and hierarchy within the elders of the family (Chiang et al., 2015; Tatman, 2004). According to Tatman (2004), “the individual is seen as a product of all the generations of the family, and the welfare of the family and community has priority over individual wants or needs” (p. 224). The ideology of family needs over individual wants has an impact on several areas of Hmong life.

Education has been a priority for many Hmong, as it is believed that education is necessary to reach a higher status in society (Chiang et al., 2015; Lee & Green, 2008; McNall, Dunningan, & Mortimer, 1994). However, when the Hmong first arrived in America, they lacked English skills and had different learning styles from that of Americans. Many Hmong had no formal education. Their knowledge was passed down through oral tradition (Chiang et al., 2015). The traditional lifestyle of the Hmong in Laos was agrarian, with little or no formal education.

Educational opportunities were extremely limited. Laos provided an average of two years of formal education for men, while women received no education at all (Chiang et al., 2015).

There were no appropriate placements or instructional methods to meet their academic needs when they started arriving in the late 1970s. According to Goldstein (1985, cited in Vang, 2005), schools perceived Hmong students' academic achievement as poor, identifying language deficiency as their biggest handicap in school. They were then identified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) and placed in ESL classes. They remained socially and academically segregated from mainstream students. Public school officials wanted to place Hmong students in classes in which they would fulfill only minimum graduation requirements based on the expectation that they would not successfully attend college (Vang, 2005).

In the 1980s, few Hmong bilingual teachers and paraprofessionals were available. This was due to the fact that they just started arriving in the states and getting settled. Everything to them was a new experience, and they had to assimilate for survival, first and foremost, learning the language. It was a struggle for those that did not have a Hmong bilingual teacher or paraprofessional, as they could only rely heavily on educators that did not understand the Hmong language and culture. After the first generation received their high school degree, schools started to recruit them to help with translation. Since there was an immediate and urgent need for Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals at the time, many school districts overlooked any educational requirements beyond the high school diploma.

The current situation has somewhat changed since the Hmong first entered American schools. There are more Hmong bilingual teachers available now, but Hmong students still lack

academic language and language skills in the American classroom. Most Hmong American parents are concerned about their children's education, but many of them are refugees who have not had any formal educational background to provide the support necessary at home (Vang, 2005).

Modern education and schooling are quite relatively new to most Hmong refugees, and some feel that bilingual programs are a safe place for Hmong students in the school (Vang, 2005). Meanwhile, "others feel that grouping students based on perceived ability is too dangerous and placing students in groups may result in a form of school segregation based on socioeconomic status and cultural factors" (Vang, 2005, p. 27).

Whelry, and Nelson (1987, cited in Vang, 2005) "noted that refugee students socialize almost exclusively among themselves as they progress from elementary to high school" (p. 28). What could be expected from students who do not know the language or the culture? They would want to find common ground with those they could communicate with and whose culture, as well as experiences of trauma, they shared. It makes them feel safe. However, those who are alienated tend to have a negative self-perception and see themselves as different from mainstream students. Although they want to stay among themselves, they do not want to be treated differently.

As Hmong families settled in America, generation after generation, one could observe the reversal of both gender and age roles (Tatman, 2004). It was difficult for Hmong women to receive education because in Hmong culture, women were perceived to be the caretaker, not the breadwinner. "The gender inequality negatively impacts Hmong women academically and



socially” (Vang, 2005, p. 29). There are some Hmong parents that may not support their daughters’ college education for fear that the daughters may be “too old” to marry after earning a college degree. However, according to Park (1998, cited in Vang, 2005), “U.S.-born Hmong girls do challenge the traditional concepts and seek college education and employment outside the traditional female roles” (p. 29). It is noted by scholars that Southeast Asian American female students are attending college at increasing rates (Chiang et al., 2015).

Hmong girls will eventually break away from the traditional female roles in order to advance their economic opportunities. Education is one way for Hmong women to gain respect inside and outside the home (Vang, 2005).

Within traditional Hmong culture, generational hierarchy is valued and communicates respect and honor when maintained. Because of a general limitation in elder Hmong’s formal education and English language skills, younger members of the family may need to obtain employment and provide financial support for otherwise able elders. (Tatman, 2004, p. 226)

Previous research identified the impact of cultural differences on Hmong American student achievement and success in the schools. Ngo and Lee (2007, cited in Chiang et al., 2015) discovered that early research revealed a high drop-out rate of Hmong American students from middle and high school in the 1980s and 1990s. Cultural barriers were the main focal point in explaining the trends (Chiang et al., 2015).

Researchers have found that Hmong American students have been placed into lower level courses and were held to low expectations by their teachers (Chiang et al., 2015). A study

conducted by Lee (2005, cited in Chiang, et al., 2015) “revealed that Hmong high school students’ experiences with racism and poverty have resulted in their cynicism about their educational opportunities in the U.S.” (p. 10). Nonetheless, it has been argued that Hmong American students who use education as the key to obtaining social mobility and status attainment tend to do well academically, using their obstacles and negative life experiences as a motivator to get out of poverty (Chiang et al., 2015).

### **Bicultural Identity**

Bicultural identity is the process of identifying with two different cultures. Immigrants or minorities who are bicultural in their acculturation orientation have been found to report a greater sense of empowerment and confidence while experiencing less anxiety, depression, and anger compared to individuals who have acculturated and identify themselves primarily with one culture group (Nguyen & Brown, 2010; Tatman, 2004). An individual may see the benefits of adapting to the customs and values of the dominant culture, but may feel internal and familial pressure to remain loyal to his or her culture (Tatman, 2004).

Speaking and understanding the home language shows loyalty to the individual’s culture. In a study by Nguyen and Brown (2010), Hmong adolescents demonstrated a complex acculturation process in which they were agents in defining what aspects of Hmong and American culture were vital to retain to their identities. The adolescents were expected to be able to have some fluency in Hmong; otherwise they would be viewed as outsiders in the community. Yet, the inability to speak English in school is a barrier as the language is the only way to gain access to the social world of school (Fillmore, 2000). If they do not know English, they will be

viewed as outsiders in the American schools. It is apparent that language(s) plays a significant role in an individual's identity.

One way an individual may significantly minimize the negative ramifications of having to choose one culture (language) over the other, while providing an environment to maintain customs from both cultures, is to maintain a bicultural identity (Tatman, 2004). The findings from Nguyen and Brown's (2010) study showed that one did not have to choose between cultures in order to fit in. One can speak his/her home language in order to preserve cultural maintenance but express his/her bicultural identity and ability to fit into the dominant culture by altering his/her behavioral style—the pattern of observable behaviors an individual uses in the presence of others. It is important to be aware of the students' bicultural identity and its effects on their pursuit of higher education.

### **Paraprofessionals**

Paraprofessional is a job title given to people in various occupational fields, such as education, who are trained to assist professionals but do not, themselves have a professional licensure. From the word itself, the prefix “para” indicates beside or side by side. Thus, a paraprofessional is one who works alongside a professional. “An educational paraprofessional is an individual who can assist in many tasks in the classroom or in the school” (Carrasquillo, 1980, p. 75). There are various perceptions of their roles, duties, responsibilities, and expectations that vary even among individuals who work at the same school (Patterson, 2006).

In the 1950s, paraprofessionals emerged in the workforce to provide clerical support and assistance to teachers. “College educated women who were not licensed teachers were recruited

and trained to perform clerical, monitoring, and other routine classroom tasks” (Pickett, Likins, & Wallace, 2004). While performing those tasks, paraprofessionals also reinforce lessons and help students in their learning that is initiated by teachers (Pickett et al., 2004).

As time went on, the laws concerning services for learners who came from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds began to change. In the 1960s and 1970s, federal legislation, such as the Head Start Act, Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII), and Education for all Handicapped Children Act (also known as Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)) led to the creation of programs that focused more on young, low-income children with limited English proficiency and/or disabilities. As a result of this occurrence, support is needed in classrooms to provide individualized education services to all learners who could benefit as it addressed the needs of educationally and economically disadvantaged children and families. Paraprofessionals are then expected to assist teachers and school personnel in the education of the children. This is what helped increase the employment of paraprofessionals in the school system.

However, in the 1980s, confusion among teachers and their supervisory roles of paraprofessionals occurred. During this time, the educational field focused heavily on preparing teachers to monitor paraprofessionals in the special education program. They did not prepare teachers in Title 1 or other disciplines for their supervisory roles (Pickett et al., 2004). In addition to that situation, limited federal support for paraprofessional preparation led to the decline of employment for this occupation.

It was not until the 1990s, with revision to various federal laws, that individuals have taken interest in the field of paraprofessionals. The impact of the teacher's roles in the classroom changed and expanded to include participation with staff to determine which programs will meet the needs of learners in their schools and how best to assign resources to meet the program (Pickett et al., 2004). In order to carry out these tasks, teachers required the assistance of the paraprofessionals and other support staff. This then shifted the roles of the paraprofessionals in the class. Instead of clerical duties, they began working alongside the teachers to provide support to the students, such as providing information about learner performances, discussing their child with the parents, and carrying out consequences for behaviors.

Patterson's (2006) study of 22 paraprofessional participants reported that the expectations for them in a class were to complete clerical tasks that included copying materials, filing, completing inventories, making necessary modifications to any material required. The study also highlighted the fact that teachers perceived the paraprofessionals to manage student behavior in the class, whether or not it concerned a child with a disability or not. This was often taking priority over tasks that were more academic. Findings from the study indicated that paraprofessionals tend to assume high levels of responsibility for all students—management of the academic and behavioral needs.

Results from Marks, Schrader, and Levine's (1999) study were similar to Patterson's (2006) study of paraprofessionals. The study interviewed 20 paraeducators (paraprofessionals) and their experiences in inclusive settings. Inclusive settings indicate that the students are in the class with the mainstream teacher. Instead of pulling the students out to work with them, the

paraprofessional will go in into the class to support the student and teacher. Marks et al., (1999) found that “paraeducators assumed a range of job responsibilities, such as providing instruction in academic and social skills; making curricular modifications; managing student behaviors; and developing working relationships with others” (p. 315). The findings also indicated that many of the paraeducators assume primary responsibility for both academic and behavioral needs in order to ensure that students would be successful (Marks et al., 1999). This resulted in the paraeducator taking responsibility for creating the student’s curriculum, when in fact, they felt it was the teacher’s responsibility to differentiate materials to the students. This is supported by another study in which the “data consistently indicated that it was the instructional assistants, not the professional staff, who were making and implementing virtually all of the day-to-day curricular and instructional decisions” (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997, p. 10). In the end, the paraeducators found that it was easier to create the materials themselves instead of waiting for the teachers to do it.

The role of paraprofessionals has significantly changed over the years. They play an important role in the students’ education. The roles and responsibilities seem to evolve each year. In the beginning, there was more support from the paraprofessionals to students with disabilities. However, we see more of an increase of paraprofessionals in the bilingual field currently.

### **Bilingual Paraprofessionals**

Since the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s, culture has been considered a significant variable in the education of children (Godwin, 1977). According to Godwin (1977), “when bilingualism, biculturalism, and poverty are brought together in the school setting, special

needs deserve to be considered. The involvement of the bilingual paraprofessional in such as setting is more than a question of titles and duties” (p. 266). In support to Godwin, Carrasquillo (1980) mentioned:

Bilingual aides help in bridging the gap between the child’s home and school experiences. In many ways, they are from the same community as the child and are able to relate on a personal, informal level with the parents and children of the school in which they work. (pp. 75-76)

They help students move through complex, unfamiliar school settings and make connections to life outside of school (Wenger et al., 2004).

Bilingual paraprofessionals who serve only as translators or implementers of activities with parents must be proficient in English and another language. They would either need a high school diploma or an equivalent. Other paraprofessionals’ requirements are similar to that of the bilingual paraprofessional. However, Rodriguez (2008, cited in Gonzalez, 2008) stated:

Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB), paraprofessionals hired after January 8, 2002, and working in a program supported with Title I, Part A funds, must have completed a minimum of two years of study at an institution of higher education or must hold an associate’s degree or higher. (p. 86)

A “bilingual paraprofessional may be the closest person to bilingual children who because of their racial, ethnic, linguistic, and social-class status are often inadequately educated” (Carrasquillo, 1980, p. 78). “Research on paraprofessionals reveals that often bilingual paraprofessionals share the same socioeconomic status, socioeconomic status, culture, language,

and educational experiences of many English Language Learners (ELLs) in the schools” (Rodriguez, 2008, cited in Gonzalez, 2008, p. 86). The bilingual paraprofessionals’ understanding of the students’ cultural backgrounds, families, communities, and socioeconomic status opens a line of communication between staff, parents, and students.

The bilingual paraprofessionals are not only teaching the subject in two languages but also teaching bicultural values and ideas. They play a role as brokers of the new culture and language for culturally and linguistically diverse students and parents ((Rodriguez, 2008, cited in Gonzalez, 2008). It used to be that paraprofessionals would reinforce materials introduced by teachers. Today, (bilingual) paraprofessionals are seen as independent instructors or team teachers that bring experience and culture into the classroom assuming various roles and responsibilities.



### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The research focused on Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals. As the Hmong continued to come to the U.S., there was a need to have a bilingual paraprofessional who knew Hmong and could reach out to them to help ease them into American structured schools.

I used qualitative research to present how the study was conducted and the gathering of necessary data for the completion of the study. Qualitative methods allowed me to bring in both my personal and researcher-self. It looked at the research setting from the viewpoint of deep understanding and went beyond statistics and numbers as the study investigated the participants in their natural settings and their experiences.

The qualitative study I chose to do was individual, face-to-face, in-depth interviews. I decided that interviews with Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals were the best route because I would not be restricted in asking follow-up questions for clarifications. “Asking questions and thinking about the range of possible answers helps us to take the role of the other so that we can better understand the problems from the participant’s perspective” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 70). In addition, it gave me an opportunity to interact with the participants, which might have led them to open up to me about their career. Meanwhile, with a survey, this might not have happened since I would not be able gauge their reactions and responses to ask follow-up questions.

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), “when we share a common culture with our research participants, and sometimes even if we don’t share the same culture, we, as researchers, often have life experiences that are similar to those of our participants” (p. 80). Considering the

fact that I am Hmong and could relate to them, the participants were more willing to share with me their personal experiences and inner thoughts.

The interviews were done at three different school districts with 10 participants. The study determined what Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals believed their roles and responsibilities were in the classroom, what challenges they faced, and improvements they would like to see happen in the future to help Hmong students become independent of ELL services. I recorded and transcribed the interviews. Through the process, I gave them the opportunity to express themselves and be heard. It was coming from their perspective on what they deal with in the EL and mainstream classroom. I then compared and contrasted the interview responses amongst one another.

### **Research Design**

I developed 13 interview questions to gather information from 10 volunteers who participated in my study (see Appendix). Questions included demographic information in addition to their perceptions of their workday, challenges of the job, working relationships, how their ethnicity affects their work with students, and overall job satisfaction. Depending on the responses of the participants, I asked follow-up questions to clarify the statements. The interviews were done in Hmong and English. This method of data provided for the participants' responses to be clarified, and it gave them a measure of freedom for their responses. The interviews ran between 30 to 60 minutes.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Although I am proficient in listening and speaking in Hmong, I am not proficient in writing it. The sections that were spoken in

Hmong were translated into English as I transcribed them onto my laptop. At times I was unable to translate verbatim due to the lack of words in the Hmong language. Therefore, I employed circumlocution to capture the meaning of the responses.

After transcription, I started to analyze and code the interviews. “A code . . . is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2009, p. 3). First, I defined what categories I wanted to code by making a list of key phrases. According to Gorden (1992), “coding categories must be more abstract than the concrete examples being classified in order to potentially include all relevant examples regardless of their superficial differences” (p. 180). Therefore, I made sure to cover my basis by leaning toward an all-inclusive model—“set must include the entire range of relevant response categories in a particular dimension” (Gorden, 1992, p. 181). Since I was looking for patterns in the participants’ response, it was fairly easy to code the responses. As I delved deeper into coding, I started to be mutually exclusive, searching for particular examples to group together.

For each theme that emerged, I color-coded phrases that were similar. I used symbols to code each participant to differentiate them from one another. In addition, whenever the participant responded in Hmong, I marked the response with a symbol so that I remembered which section was spoken in Hmong, English, or both. In order to make the coding process easier for me to analyze, I created a new document for each section that I coded and placed my color-coded phrases there, matching the color to the theme.

On average, it took six hours to transcribe a one-hour interview. It took less time than that to code. After coding all of the interviews, I observed a trend in the bilingual paraprofessionals' responses to the questions. According to Saldana (2009), “a theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded” (p. 13). Thus, a set of themes emerged from my analysis.

### **Participants**

The participants were from three different school districts in the state of Wisconsin (see Table 1). The schools were targeted if they have a Hmong bilingual paraprofessional in the district. E-mails were written to contact school districts before contacting school principals in order to approach the participants. Information regarding the study was included in the emails. Once the district and principal gave permission, I contacted the bilingual paraprofessionals through e-mails and phone calls to set up dates and times for the interviews.

Table 1

#### *A Comparison of School Districts*

	Population 2015	2015-2016 Total Enrollment	Percentage of Asians *
School A	233,209	25,231	9.0
School B	65,883	11,182	9.4
School C	39,106	8,443	19.01

Note: \* Asians—includes all Asians (not broken down by different Asian ethnicities)

The participants consisted of 10 Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals (see Table 2) with experience ranging from 6 to 32 years. All the paraprofessionals worked with students in the K-

12 schools. Nine of the bilingual paraprofessionals worked at an elementary school and one worked at a high school. The students they primarily worked with were Hmong students. However, they helped all students in the classroom as each of their schools followed the inclusive model (in which no pull-outs were practiced unless the student was new to the country and needed the extra support).

Table 2

*Participants*

Participant	Gender **	Entered School ***	Number of Years	Current Grade Level	Certification for BP
BP*1	M	GED— Technical College	20	Elementary	No
BP 2	M		32	Elementary	
BP 3	F	High School	24	Elementary	
BP 4	M		24	High School	
BP 5	F	GED— Technical College	29	Elementary	No
BP 6	M	GED—Adult School	27	Elementary	
BP 7	M	Adult ESL	20	Elementary	Yes
BP 8	F		11	Elementary	
BP 9	M	Elementary	16	Elementary	Yes
BP 10	F	Elementary	6	Elementary	No

Note: \*BP—Bilingual Paraprofessional; \*\*Gender—M is male, F is female; \*\*\*Entered School—Grade Level the bilingual paraprofessionals started when they came to the United States; Columns that are blank—the bilingual paraprofessionals chose not to answer the question.

Through correspondence, we met with each other. Before the interview, I informed the participants that our conversation would be recorded, and they could refuse to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable discussing. They signed a consent form before we began the interview. In addition, I told them that their responses were confidential, and it would be transcribed. The written transcripts of their responses were saved in a password-protected laptop.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

Before I go into the various ways Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals provide help for the EL professionals, I want to make it clear that I will be using professional and teacher interchangeably. Each school district has a certain title for the Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals. Even though the title differs, the duties are similar to one another. Due to consistency and anonymity, I am referring to all 10 participants as bilingual paraprofessionals (BP).

In addition, from what was said through the interviews and emails, the bilingual paraprofessionals and EL professionals do not necessarily work in the same classroom. From what is gathered through the interviews and e-mails, the EL teachers are in charge of the bilingual paraprofessionals' placement in mainstream classrooms. According to BP 9:

She (EL teacher) is the one that makes up my schedule. She is the one who keeps in touch with all the teachers and finds out where the needs are. From communication with the classroom teachers, she works my schedule out to best fit the needs of the students.

Instead, the bilingual paraprofessionals work directly with the mainstream teachers. If a classroom needs the extra support for Hmong ELLs, the Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals will be placed there to help the mainstream teachers, as all classes are inclusive. The EL teachers are not in the classroom with them. The EL teachers and bilingual professionals' schedules are different. They do see similar students and work with similar mainstream teachers, but at different times. All three teachers are not working in the same classroom at one time, according

to the interviews from the bilingual paraprofessionals. However, this is not to say that the bilingual paraprofessionals do not provide aid to the EL professional.

In this section, I compared the responses from all of the participants. I categorized the responses of the participants from the transcribed notes. I noted the similarities and differences between the participants. My findings in the study brought out certain themes for each research question discussed below.

### **Research Question 1**

*In what ways do the bilingual paraprofessionals provide aid to the EL professional, and what do they need in order to provide the aid?*

The themes that emerged from the interviews in how the bilingual paraprofessionals provide support to the EL teacher were translation, perspectives, and culture awareness. There were other concerns that came forth from the interviews when clarifications were asked from the Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals. The first theme that emerged was translation.

**Translation.** Translation is the process of translating words or text from one language to another. It is essential that the bilingual paraprofessionals be able to translate information from the school and/or class to students and parents. They have to be fluent in English and the language they switch to for communication with students and parents.

Translation is one of the main factors in which bilingual paraprofessionals provide aid to the EL professionals. The bilingual paraprofessionals need the ability to help translate and interpret the language and content to the students and parents, especially when their English level is low. The translations can occur in a variety of ways: translating what teachers say in class to



Hmong or a mix of both Hmong and English for the students, interpreting for parents during conferences, and translating newsletters from teachers.

The students who need the translations and interpretations come from Hmong speaking homes the majority of the time, know little to no English, and work most of the time. Even though the majority of students are born in this country, some of their parents might be born in a different country and came over to the U.S. when they were older. BP 2 explained:

The older generation—they are very respectful and caring. If they don't know the language, they will tell us 'you can do whatever you have to do, as long as you care for my child.' Then the child is left in our hands, and the child does well.

The older generation wants what is best for their child. They understand that they cannot provide the help at home if they are limited in their education and English skills. BP 7 agreed with BP 2 in that, "[W]ell, they (parents) really want the kid to do that (homework), too. But they don't have the educational background to help the kid . . . They (the school) need me to be there for the family who really needs help." When the bilingual paraprofessionals mention the older generation, they are referring to parents who speak Hmong as their primarily language at home. The child of the older generation may or may not speak Hmong at home. Therefore, his/her parents are the ones who might need the bilingual paraprofessionals to help them communicate with teachers and vice versa. This is one way in which bilingual paraprofessionals provide support to the EL and mainstream teachers.

BP 5 believes "We serve the second generation because they are the kids that were born here, whose kids are coming to school now. If the parents are old as us, we serve as both

translators for parents and students.” However, she later implied that parents now do not need the translation and neither does their child. They need help with the academic English. “Right now, we serve the parents, but we do not translate. They speak English, and some of them don’t read or write in Hmong.” BP 5 also expressed:

[T]he parents do not speak Hmong, they (the students) are ESL Hmong because they speak Hmong at home and we still serve them, helping them. They have the right to get support. To tell you, right now, we, a lot of the younger parents, they refuse ESL, too. But they know that their kids speak English. But English at home and English at school is different. It doesn’t mean that the kids speak English, that they will make it through school with no support and help.

When asked to clarify what she means by the differences between English at home and school, BP 5 stated:

[T]hey do speak in English, but it is in broken English. It’s not the language, the appropriate language. Because they are ESL, speaking it at home is different. The kids that come to school do speak in English. However, they cannot speak real English (academic English). So the kids are falling behind. There are very few that can be at grade level . . . because of the language issues.

When BP 5 mentioned that the parents do not speak Hmong, but the students are ESL Hmong because they speak Hmong at home, she implied that someone other than their parents could speak Hmong at the students’ home. If another language is spoken at home (not necessarily by the parents), the students still have the right to receive ELL services at school. She

expressed that translation is not needed for the second generation, and it will not benefit the parents and child.

BP 5's response contradicts what BP 2 and BP 7, in terms of translation, said earlier. It is a fact observed by all of the bilingual paraprofessionals that the majority, if not all of their students' oral skill in English is more proficient now than in the past, and Hmong is hardly used by the students. However, that does not mean that translations do not happen. When I ask the question on whether or not the bilingual paraprofessional translates to the students or vice versa, BP 7 replied:

[N]ot really. Not very often. They usually speak in English. But translation, when I help the kids, I do not do that in Hmong. Because we do not have, mostly we do not have the...Hmong word to go with the English word. So, what I did, I might do it in Hmong, too. But I mix it with the English word to make them understand . . . back and forth.

At first he implied that he does not use Hmong. Nevertheless, in the same statement, he retracted and stated that he uses a mixture of Hmong and English to help the students understand the subject the teacher is teaching. Therefore, verifying that he uses translation to help support teachers in the classroom. BP 1, 4, 6, 8, and 10 also supported this.

The translations are limited to only in class, but outside of class as well. All of the participants do translate for parents during parent/teacher conferences. Most also translate newsletters that staff send home. It cannot be assumed that all parents know English. Some might not know how to read in Hmong and English. Nonetheless, translations must be done

should the staff require it. It informs the parents of what is happening in the classroom and school.

Without the help of the bilingual paraprofessionals in translating information to the students and parents from the teachers, communication can be lost. This is vital in aiding the teachers. Even though translation is happening less these days in the school, there are still instances in which some students and parents do benefit from it. One cannot assume which students or parents would benefit from translations; it all depends on the situation to determine whether or not translation is helpful as was discovered by BP 6 above. Overall, from the interviews, translation is one of many factors in how the bilingual paraprofessionals provide assistance to the EL and mainstream teachers. In addition to translation, the second emergent theme that appears in the study is perspective.

**Perspectives.** Perspective is how someone perceives a situation and gives his/her own viewpoint regarding it. The viewpoint he/she gives is according to his/her own set of past experiences, culture, beliefs, and values. One makes sense of a situation based upon one's set of core beliefs. Within the school district, all individuals will have their own belief system and will therefore have different perspectives—see and think things differently. By bringing in different perspectives, it will enable a more understanding and empathic environment for both students and staff.

The bilingual paraprofessionals work directly with students and provide aid to mainstream teachers. They understand what is going on in the class and what the teachers expect the students to learn. While working with the EL students directly, they can offer input on a

struggling EL student in class and relay it to the EL teacher. BP 9 reiterated this as he stated: “I usually communicate with the ELL teacher when I see some struggling on the part of a student or students.” This implies that the student might need a different intervention or the student might need further testing to investigate why he/she is struggling in class.

The bilingual paraprofessionals are able to work closely with students and monitor their progress. BP 8 works with students, either one-on-one or in groups during her day. She told me: “I assist the ELL students, the ones that are struggling more, aren’t as fluent in English. I can break things down in a more simplistic way.” By working intimately with students, she can give her input to teachers about the students and how to meet the students’ needs in the class.

BPs 2, 3, 5, 9, 10 agreed that they are more than a bilingual paraprofessional at their school. They do more than translate, communicate with parents, and give support to the EL and mainstream teachers.

I do think we do more than where, anything that our paras are supposed to do. We have a lot of responsibilities . . . It’s not just helping out in the classrooms, it’s like throughout the whole building, you know. (BP 10, personal communication, 2015)

BP 3 agreed with BP 10 in that “[I]t’s just not only translating, but everything that the teacher does or the nurse or just everyone in the building is you.” They all expressed that they have a hand in everything that happens at the school. In the interview, BP 5 described her role at the school as follows:

[W]ear a couple of hats. I am a bilingual to translate. For the students and also read translation of English into Hmong for the parents. I can be a social worker. I can be a

psychologist. I can be anything that they ask me to do at school. So, because sometimes you translate, sometimes you facilitate . . . and they ask you things like cultural. For example, if the students, have abuse of the kids or some marks or hits. They come to you and ask you . . . The teachers or the social worker or school psychologists would consult with you. And then you have to sit together and go through and then help them for the best for their decision so that it does not go against the culture . . . they (teachers) do a home visit and you would go along with them (the teacher, social worker, psychologist).

In addition to BP 5's response, BP 2 added on to say that he also plays the role of the nurse to help the students. Through the various responsibilities that the bilingual paraprofessionals have, they see another side to the students that other staff might not be aware of. They might be privy to information that can affect the students' ability to learn in class and understand what and why the situation happened.

By having various roles in the school, the bilingual paraprofessionals have a glimpse of what other staff members' duties consist of in the school. The bilingual paraprofessionals have a chance to discuss with various staff members and gather their perspectives on the ELLs. This will then provide more information about the ELLs that the bilingual paraprofessionals can bring into conversation with mainstream teachers. It will help provide further insight into who the ELLs are, what they need, and what support they should be given. Having discussed perspectives, the third emergent theme to appear is culture awareness.

**Culture.** Culture is significant in that it delves into the knowledge, experience, behaviors, customs, beliefs, interactions, and values of a particular group. It represents who they are, what

they believe in, and their values. In this case, the particular group is Hmong. Understanding the background of the students and where they come from is essential as it can help the EL and mainstream teachers engage students effectively in the learning process. Since the bilingual paraprofessionals are Hmong, they can provide the EL and mainstream teachers information about the Hmong culture so that they can become familiar with it.

With that being said, bilingual paraprofessionals use cultural awareness as a form to provide aid to the teachers they work with. The significance of bringing culture into the classroom is vital. It shows students and staff that the school is open to all races and respects each and every one of them. It helps free us of cultural assumptions and stereotypes that may be brought into the classroom. According to BP 6, “In my position, they don’t know, culturally, and they are afraid. They come consult with me, and we talk about we should do something . . . We work together.” By asking questions and becoming familiar with the students’ background, it makes the classroom a safe and comfortable environment in which everyone can get along. As BP 10 stated, “[C]ulture-wise, you have to be the bridge between parents and teachers, you know, parents and the school, and staff.”

BP 2 helps bridge the gap by introducing Hmong culture to the ESL professionals at his school. He wants to help them be more culturally sensitive to the ELLs.

If they (staff) don’t know Hmong, the help is hard. If there are people such as us working in the school, then we have to tell our staff so they are sensitive to the needs of the parents and Hmong . . . you must educate the group so they know about our need. (BP 2, personal communication, 2015).

BP 2 does this by explaining the history of Hmong people, the beliefs and practices, the values, and the do's and don'ts of Hmong culture. BP 2 further explained:

[W]e can introduce Hmong things . . . over the years, I brought parents in and they do Hmong night or a Hmong music show . . . for multicultural night, we have a small session workshop about Hmong and do arts and crafts . . . These programs, activity, we remind them about multicultural groups and take turns focusing on different groups in the school.

BP 1 shared in the interview that he displays articles of clothing and books in a showcase at his school, along with a poster that informs students and staff what Hmong people do during the New Year. He believes that by speaking about Hmong culture in the school, it will help minimize the stereotypes.

From the above, stated by BPs 1, 2, 6, and 10, it can be generalized by bilingual paraprofessionals that by making EL professionals and staff aware of the Hmong culture, it will help them form a bond with the students. By being interested in the culture, the students are more likely to open up as they see it as an effort from the professionals' side. In addition, by exposing the staff to the Hmong culture and incorporating it into the lessons, the bilingual paraprofessionals bridge the gap between the EL professionals, mainstream teachers, and the Hmong ELLs.

Exposing culture in the class will not only benefit the teachers, but students as well. As stated earlier, some Hmong ELLs do not know the Hmong language, yet alone their own culture. As generations go by, the bilingual paraprofessionals feel that Hmong students are losing their



traditions and culture. The Hmong students are becoming more Americanized, adapting to the western culture, which cause them to forget their language and culture. By discussing Hmong culture and presenting it in schools, the bilingual paraprofessionals are not only making the teachers aware of the Hmong culture, but the students, especially the Hmong ELLs, aware of it as well.

Bilingual paraprofessionals can give an insight into the culture of the students and provide the tools to ‘unlock’ cultural puzzles. In addition, they help bridge the gap for the teachers (teaching them about the Hmong ELLs that they have) and students (teaching them their history), exposing both to the culture. They give an awareness of how much culture affects language acquisition and behaviors in the classroom. From these three emergent themes above, vital considerations came about in the form of communication, time, and scheduling.

**Other considerations.** In a school, working with several teachers can be difficult and challenging. During the interviews, it was brought to my attention the concerns of bilingual paraprofessionals. As I tried to sort out the information given to me, I noticed similar concerns across the interviews. Communication, time, and scheduling were the top three concerns that the bilingual paraprofessionals have in which they believe will hinder their assistance to the teachers, as a result, potentially impacting the students. The first concern I will discuss is communication.

**Communication.** Communication plays a vital role when working in schools in order to provide support to other staff members. In order to communicate, one has to express or exchange information to another in an oral or written form. This can be done through conversation, emails,

notes, and phone calls. Without communication with one another, there will be no support and miscommunication will occur.

The bilingual paraprofessionals interviewed feel that more communication among the staff and themselves are needed. It is a challenge to communicate with teachers as there is not enough time in the day to do it. They feel left out and not part of the team at their school, which they believe can affect the students.

As each participant is interviewed, it is noted that follow-up questions are asked to clarify meanings and explanations. Some bilingual paraprofessionals are direct and others are not in their answers and will take an indirect way to express what they mean. It is through the follow-up questions that other findings occurred. For the majority of the participants, communicating with the EL and mainstream teachers is not a problem.

However, there are challenges that the bilingual paraprofessionals face. BP 3 expressed her frustration when working with an EL professional “Yes, we do support the same classroom and the same students at a different time, but never talk or have time to talk about our students.” BP 3 explained that in the past, she was able to voice her concerns and talk about students’ progress and needs with the EL professional. Now, there is no time and “[F]or these couple of years, everyone is so busy, we never have time to talk. I think the ESL teacher now don’t even know what my job is.” Even the mainstream teachers must communicate with the EL professional on students who are ELLs, but the mainstream teachers are under no obligation to communicate with the bilingual paraprofessionals. This is why BP 3 feels the frustration due to lack of communication. She wants the best for her students and wants to be a part of the team.

However, if she is not included, then she cannot provide the aid she wants to for the teachers and students.

While it was said earlier that there is support for the EL professional in working with the ELLs, there is not enough support or feedback between the bilingual paraprofessionals and EL professional. This is also revealed by BP 3:

I'm not really part of the ESL. I'm just someone working there . . . I don't have communication with the ESL teacher anymore. This year, I only talked to the ESL teacher is like, I got my schedule . . . I say this is how my schedule is going to look like, what do you think about it? She says, she look at it and say 'looks good' and that's it . . . She doesn't check how I'm doing supporting the classroom and that and I know she's busy. But as an ESL, we're supposed to, we needed to talk, but we don't have time to meet. We don't talk.

BP 6 agreed with her in that there is hardly any feedback from the EL professional. They barely had meetings this past year to communicate with one another. If there is no communication between the teachers and bilingual paraprofessionals, the students' needs might not be met. As stated above, BP 3 wants to discuss more than her schedule. However, if the EL teacher is busy and does not make time for communication, it is the students who will be affected by the lack of communication. Communication between both professionals is vital, especially when working in the same field with students who rely on them to become successful in the classroom. In addition to communication, time becomes a factor that the bilingual paraprofessionals face as a challenge.

**Time.** The school day is not enough time for the bilingual paraprofessionals to get work done. From trying to plan with teachers and staying on top of the class to translating newsletters home, the bilingual paraprofessionals' day is packed. There is no planning time for the bilingual paraprofessionals and mainstream teachers. When I asked the interviewees to describe the challenges they face as a bilingual paraprofessional, BP 5's response was:

I think that the challenges that we (bilingual paraprofessionals) have, do not have planning time. Whatever classroom you walk into, whatever subject they are studying, you sit right there, then you listen, and work with the kids. So, there is no ahead of time preparation.

BP 5 further stated, "[I]t (elementary) is not very challenging and you sort of know and still easy enough that you do not need much time to study the lesson before you help . . . but in the higher grades." Even though she stated that elementary is not difficult in following along with what the teachers are doing in class, she insisted that there is not enough planning time.

BP 8 also agreed with BP 5 in her response to the question in which she answered, "I mean the work that's handed to me is not above my head that I don't know or understand." However, she disagreed with BP 5 about planning time. BP 8 felt that planning time is not a challenge for her. She added, "The work is not hard for me. If there is anything, we (mainstream teacher and I) will talk when I come in. There's not a whole lot of prep before I come in."

For high school, the need for planning time is desired. BP 4 expresses that it is difficult to sit in a class such as biology, chemistry, and physics due to the fact that you need to have some sort of background knowledge. He, himself, admitted that he studies the material in order to

understand it before he has to explain it to his Hmong ELLs. He has to take time out of his schedule to read through the textbooks so that he knows what the subject entails, what the teacher is talking about in class, and how to best present this to the ELLs he works with so that they will be able to understand the concept. For this, extra time will benefit him. The extra time can include more planning time with mainstream teachers, time to discuss the progress of the students with the EL teacher, and time with students. According to BP 4, “[T]ranslation does not work. You have to know the idea, the basic, the formula” for courses in high school as the classes are more specific. Thus, the use of time is essential.

In general, there is no set time for the bilingual paraprofessionals to meet and plan with either the EL teacher or mainstream teachers. Sometimes, the communication between staff is brief and at the beginning of class where teachers quickly discuss what they want the bilingual paraprofessionals to do. From the interviews, the three staff members (bilingual paraprofessional, mainstream teacher, and EL teacher) do not meet altogether to discuss students, subject matter, and interventions for students. From what is implied by some bilingual paraprofessionals, they want to set up a time and meet. In the end, it will benefit the students.

Another challenge that came up in the interviews dealing with time was translation. Although the bilingual paraprofessionals have allocated times for translation as stated above, it is not enough. The school districts that I encountered require the bilingual paraprofessionals to be able to do translations as part of the job description. Even though the students might not be able to read and/or write in Hmong, their parents might need the translation. There are some cases in which some parents might only be able to read in Hmong, not English. BP 2 stated:

I take time to do the newsletter for the parents that do not know the language. Some might know and some might not. For those that do, we include the newsletter in English. However, for those that do not know the language, we send them in Hmong.

It depends on the school and staff members if they would want the information going home to be translated. It is their responsibility to e-mail or drop off the hard copy to the bilingual paraprofessional. Then, the bilingual paraprofessional will do the translation, given that he/she receives the newsletter two or three days in advance.

Nevertheless, translations can be difficult. BP 5 emphasized:

Our teachers or people who do not speak another language, do not understand that translation is not easy . . . when they send pages and pages of things for you to translate, they only give you one time, one day or two days and you have a full schedule. Then you have to follow your schedule . . . you don't have any time. You only have the time in which you set up for translation. It's not enough time to do that. Sometimes, it's really hard...because you can't cancel your schedule and do that . . . young teachers . . . some people who never worked with you before, they don't understand what you're doing and then the pressure comes and sometimes they think, 'oh yeah, you don't do your job fast enough and you don't get the translation fast enough for us.' . . . especially translate for our Hmong. It's harder than other languages because in Hmong, we don't have too many words and I don't know about other people, but for me, it's really a challenge. It takes longer time than what you think.

BP 6 mentioned, “Some teachers don’t know and they say it . . . and have big words and hard for you to translate . . . you know, most time, Thursday and Friday, I don’t even have time to go into the classroom.” BP 2 and 4 also agreed in that translation takes up time. The bilingual paraprofessionals often get swamped with newsletters or letters from the principal to translate on top of their own classes that they go to and support. Even though it is part of their job description, they would like time in advance to be able to translate the information instead of rushing it.

Yet, there are exceptions to this in the case of an emergency at school. If there were lockdowns or drills at school, the bilingual paraprofessionals would have to have the letter explaining what occurred at school translated by the end of the day for the students to take home. This will take precedence over everything else that needs to be translated since it involves the safety of students in the school. The added pressure of this to their busy work schedule puts a strain on them, especially if they are expected to be in their assigned classes until the end of the day.

Time will always be a challenge to the bilingual paraprofessionals. There is only so much one can do in a given time. The bilingual paraprofessionals express that time is essential, especially for planning. Without conversing with teachers, they do not know what to expect the next day at work. It can be frustrating for the bilingual paraprofessionals, especially when they need to go over the materials ahead of time before they can support the students in the class. Along with time, scheduling can be difficult, as one has to factor in various aspects, which leads into my next discussion of concerns bilingual paraprofessionals have and that is scheduling.

**Schedule.** Each subject area has an allocated time and not every school follows the same schedule. When creating a schedule for the bilingual paraprofessionals, the school looks at where the highest needs are based on the Hmong ELLs' test scores. This indicates where the bilingual paraprofessionals will be placed. However, if there is a teacher that requests the additional help and feels that it is needed in the classroom, the schedule of the bilingual paraprofessionals could change to accommodate the teacher.

While most of the participants are satisfied with their schedules, there are a few that think their schedules posed a challenge. BP 4 voiced his opinion on this matter, "[W]hen you don't go to the class for a couple of days, I don't know what the teacher is teaching in the class. I go back and I kind of lost a lot of things." He mentioned in his interview what BP 5, 8, and 9 expressed in theirs that when something urgent (parent phone call, emergency, meetings, etc.) comes up, he will need to leave his class to deal with the matter. Therefore, missing part, if not all, of the class. It solidified his earlier statement above. He will be lost in the class as to what was covered.

In addition, BP 2, 4, and 9's schedules have been changed during the school year. For instance, BP 9's schedule has been changed many times. He reported:

It all depends. Where all the needs are. I might be in second grade math, science classroom . . . not the same every single day. It's kind of weird. I'm still carrying the schedule with me and it's in the middle of the school year. I can't figure out my schedule . . . Today, I might be having a 10 o'clock science class. Tomorrow, I could have an English class at 10 o'clock.

BP 4 also mentioned:



[O]ur schedule, it is based on the need of the students...if the students need more help on math, then I will go there during math time. If the students need help with reading or writing . . . I go to the classroom. But it depends on the service that we have.

The bilingual paraprofessionals go where the needs of the Hmong ELLs are. They do not have a say in their schedule. They jump from class to class, even if their schedules are set. It seems as if once they are comfortable and a relationship is developed with the teacher and students in one class, they are moved out and into another class where the process begins over again. It is not consistent, and as BP 9 stated, “[I]t’s kind of weird.”

Scheduling is a concern for bilingual paraprofessionals as it is inconsistent. Some days they are in the classroom and other days, they will not be. In order to aid the EL and mainstream teachers, it is beneficial for the bilingual paraprofessionals to have a routine, a structured schedule, which they follow throughout the school year. It will not be beneficial to both staff and students if the bilingual paraprofessionals are stretched thin, only going into a class once a week to help support them.

After analyzing the transcripts and emails, it can be said that the Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals do not necessarily provide aid directly to the EL professional, but to mainstream teachers. This does not mean that the bilingual paraprofessionals do not help the EL professional, it means that they provide assistance in other forms. The aid of translation, perspectives, and cultural awareness the bilingual paraprofessionals provide the teachers are not without their challenges. It is essential to understand how the challenges affect bilingual paraprofessionals in providing support to teachers. Communication, time, and schedules must be

considered. Otherwise, these three concerns will prevent the bilingual paraprofessionals from their responsibilities, which then affect how they provide help to the teachers. By keeping the three concerns in mind and providing the bilingual paraprofessionals what they need to do their work, they will then be able to give the support teachers need in the classroom.

### **Research Question 2**

*What do the bilingual paraprofessionals do or not do that helps propel the Hmong students to become independent of EL services?*

There were many factors that emerged from the interviews. One I did not foresee was the fact that all of the bilingual paraprofessionals and Hmong ELLs are already in the mainstream classes. As stated earlier, all classes in elementary are inclusive, all students stay in the class and there are no situations in which students are pulled out of class for one-on-one instruction.

Another factor was that the majority of the bilingual paraprofessionals interviewed for this study worked mostly with the ELLs on math and language arts (reading and writing). It was made clear in the interviews that while they were hired in the district to work as a Hmong bilingual paraprofessional, they helped all students in the class, not just the Hmong ELLs. If there were any student that needs extra support, they were there to provide it for the students. However, their main focus was the Hmong ELLs and their needs.

As I sat down and went over the transcribed interviews, I observed a trend between all of the interviewees' response concerning the support they provide to their Hmong ELLs. I started to notice the recurring themes that came about. Below are the five themes, experiences, strategies, communication, motivation, and Hmong identity, which I will discuss from the bilingual

paraprofessionals' viewpoint on what they do or not do to help Hmong ELLs become proficient in the language so that the Hmong ELLs will no longer receive ELL services. The first of five themes that I will explore is experiences.

**Experiences.** The bilingual paraprofessionals that were interviewed in the study have many experiences with the ELL program. By experience, I mean to say that the paraprofessionals have had things happened to them in the past, concerning education, that shaped them into who they are today. The bilingual paraprofessionals understand what the students go through in the ELL program. Some of them refer it to as the ESL program as it was formerly known as. There were some that experienced the ELL program and others that did not due to their age when they arrived to the U.S. (see Table 2). When they came to the U.S., they did not know the English language, and some did not receive help from schools. Meanwhile, others received help. Below are some of the experiences that the bilingual paraprofessionals went through.

When the bilingual paraprofessionals told me about their experiences in the U.S. school system when they arrived, the majority of them expressed that it was difficult for them. BP 5 remembers going to high school to register and revealed:

[T]hey sent me to register for high school, and there was nobody there to help me. I sit in the office all morning. So, I walked away. I went home and I think that is really something that stays with me. Sit all morning for three to four hours, and nobody came and help me.

However, BP 10's experience was quite different and is expressed below:

I was in ELL myself. I've gone through that experience, too, as well. I know exactly where they're coming from. A lot of people say that the ELL program is a downgrade. But for me, I really see it as a system that helps students. So in regards to that, I think that the students that get the assistance tend to move on, or they tend to go further than the students that are struggling in the classroom by themselves. They're more influenced. Based on my experience, the EL is very effective.

BP 3 recounted her experiences as follows:

I myself was an ESL student. When I just first go to this country, and when I was still in high school, I did a lot with, I volunteer with my teachers during the summer school. So, I did some school with them for two years, and then I liked it. I liked to work with people, with kids, you know, kind of helping other students learn English . . . And so you know as a Hmong person, you are the older one, you, you know when you graduate, both of you cannot go to college because at that time I felt that I'm the older one, I have to take care of my younger sibling, my younger brother. So, I then start looking for work right away and when I was in high school, I had a tutor. She was a retired counselor and she, she come and tutored me . . . when I graduated, she told me there was a job opening.

The experiences of BP 3 and BP 10 are different from that of BP 5. BP 3 and BP 10 were fortunate to have had positive experiences and support from the schools they went to. Even though BP 5 did not have a good experience, it shaped her into what she is today. She expressed in the interview that her situation to receive an education is not one she wants for future generations. She felt helpless when no one came to her aid at her school. Thus, from that point

on, she decided to have a career in which she can help others so that they can have a better experience than her.

The experiences, whether positive or negative, of these three interviewees influenced what they want to see in the education field for Hmong students in the future. They want to see the students become successful. Their own experiences do not hinder them, especially BP 5, from wanting to provide support to other Hmong individuals who struggle with the English language. Instead, they embrace their experiences and take what they learn from them to apply those experiences toward future generations. BP 5 does not want other Hmong individuals to go through what she went through. The feeling that she experienced back then still affects her to this day, and it is what keeps her going strong. When I conversed with her, I can hear it in her voice, her passionate nature to make sure others have a better experience.

The experiences of these three individuals showcase the fact that they draw upon their own experiences to help propel Hmong ELLs to become proficient in the English language so that the students are at grade level. Whether or not the bilingual paraprofessionals started off in the ELL program, the bilingual paraprofessionals can relate to the students. By having a similar background to what the students are going through in the school, it helps develop a relationship between both parties, which can influence the choices students make toward their education. In addition to experiences, the next theme I will discuss is strategies.

**Strategies.** Strategies are methods or tools used to help achieve a goal. In this case, the bilingual paraprofessionals use strategies given to them by mainstream teachers to help students learn the materials presented in class.

When they were asked in the interview of what they do as a bilingual paraprofessional to help prepare the ELLs for mainstream classes, the majority of their responses, especially from BPs 3, 5, 6, and 10, were that they would go over the information with the Hmong ELLs over and over again using the same strategies as the mainstream teachers they work with.

The bilingual paraprofessionals are not trained to use any specific strategies with the students. They follow what the mainstream teachers want them to do. BP 10 explained that:

[W]e don't want to confuse the students. So, we just teach exactly what the teachers is teaching. Unless, like I said, unless that student has no knowledge or just like has no idea what the teacher is talking about. They yes, we would refer it to our language . . . we just teach it how the teachers are teaching it just so that everybody is on the same page.

By working in the classroom directly with mainstream teachers, the bilingual paraprofessionals are familiar with how each mainstream teacher approaches the different content area with certain strategies. BP 8 agreed with BP 10 as she stated in her interview:

I'm not there to give them a completely different technique . . . My goal is to get them up to par with where they need to be fluently . . . I guess to help them be as fluent as they can and take that to every class and every year, next year that they go.

The bilingual paraprofessionals would then use the strategies mainstream teachers use when they work with Hmong ELLs, individually or in groups.

BP 5 reported that she “gives them (students) a second chance and help them over and over.” The bilingual paraprofessionals feel that by giving the students a second chance, the students are able to motivate themselves to succeed. This is backed up by BP 9:

I give them assistance here and there. Gradually, throughout the school year, I don't want to be their crutch. I don't think anybody else want that, too. January, February rolls around. If they are asking for that help, I don't provide that help as I do at the beginning of the school year . . . I kind of let them be on their own a little bit so they can have, so they are not always dependent on you for their help. You are there to help them. There comes a time when you need to back off a little bit so they don't rely on you as much, you know.

Similar to BP 5, he gives them support in the classroom. However, as time passes, he wants the students to be able to find their way in the classroom. He wants the students to become independent learners and helps prepare them for a time in which they cannot rely on him as a backup. BP 7 agrees with what BP 9 says. BP 7 described in his interview:

[S]ince I go close to the one I want to help or whoever is there, then they will start to work. But if I start to help them, they rely on me to help them. So, I should not really do that kind of things that much either. Sometimes, I force them to work by themselves.

When I asked him how does he know when to be there for them versus backing away and letting the students work it out by themselves, he replied:

[F]or several times, if he/she keep waiting for me to do that, then the next time, I just go to the next kid or the other kid even if he/she is not Hmong and let him do by himself . . . then come back check on them.

BP 9 went on to mention that when the students make the effort to accomplish something without his assistance, the students feel good about themselves. It motivates them in class to become successful.

BP 3 asserted that in order to help her ELLs, she tries whatever she can do to help them. She follows along with what the mainstream teacher would like for her to do with the students. She recalls using strategies, such as breaking down words into chunks and sounding them out, to help her students read. BP 7 recalled “[W]e, we use the strategy (from the teacher). Because each time, we have two or three strategies to help them. So, it’s up to the kid what strategy he likes better, understand better and we go with that.” After much practice, the students will be able to notice the patterns and begin using the strategies that they have learned.

In addition to this, BP 3 also goes over reading comprehension questions with her ELLs. In the interview, she communicated that, “[S]ometimes the teacher, the classroom teacher forgets that when the kids know how to decode, they can read fluently, but they do not understand what they just read.” Therefore, as a strategy for herself and for the students, she would often ask ‘what am I reading’ and try to elicit responses from the Hmong ELLs. This will go a long way with that simple question. It will give students a chance to take a step back and reflect on the story they just read.

BP 2 concurred with BP 3’s response. He also stated that he prepares and encourages the ELLs to read lots of books by “[T]elling the parents, even if they do not know how to read, they just have to make sure the kids read.” By reading books, students are being exposed to vocabulary words and the world around them, whether it is nonfictional or fictional. With the



involvement of parents, the ELLs are more likely to succeed in mainstream classes without the support of the bilingual paraprofessionals and EL professionals. When parents take the initiative to support their child in school, it encourages the child to do well. It opens his/her eyes to the many different opportunities out there and makes him/her believe that he/she can become successful, even though he/she is struggling with the language now.

If none of the strategies the teachers use in class works, BP 7 mentioned in his interview that he will use his own judgment to make the call and teach the student a different way of learning. He described a time in which he has to make that call:

I used to have conflict . . . one of the EL teachers . . . wrote down so many vocabulary for the kids to remember. And she asked me how come this kid do not learn well at all. But I told her that maybe it is a little too much . . . Then that teacher got really angry with me because the way I refused not to help her. Because the reason I say that is because I know it is very difficult. They are new, they are young. So, I used my own judgment for that . . . most of the teachers . . . are open-minded, they see.

When BP 7 was asked if he makes his own call these days, his response was yes. He feels that by doing this, it benefits the students. BP 6 has similar ideas, too. He uses his own experience and strategy of how he learned math to teach the students he works with. BP 6 stated:

In math, mostly, we talk in Hmong . . . The math is easy for us . . . I teach them my, experience from my country for them. So, like most of them have to know the math facts, how to times or division and give something like in a word problem . . . So I teach them to do the question in the last sentence, how many altogether, how many left . . . so it is

easy for them to understand . . . Math is the most skill that I work in the school because in math, we know how to explain in our language. Most of the teacher ask us to go there.

In order to meet the needs of the students and provide the help in class, bilingual paraprofessionals use a variety of strategies the mainstream teachers provide in class. Through the interviews, the strategies bilingual paraprofessionals use on their students all depends on the student, content area, and mainstream teachers. They work with students, one-on-one and/or in groups, to find what strategies will work as each student is different from one another.

There are some cases in which the bilingual paraprofessionals want to use their own strategies they found to be effective for themselves, on the students, such as BP 6 and BP 7 had done. Yet, the majority of the bilingual paraprofessionals refuse to use their own strategies, only focusing on what the mainstream teachers are using. When asked why in the interview, they expressed that they do not want to do anything different from what is taught in class because they want the student to be able to use the same method as the other students, even though the resulting answer is the same.

In addition, many of them stated that they are not the teacher. Even though they expressed that they do similar work as the teacher in the class, they do not have the license to teach. They feel that it is not in their place to teach (their own) strategies to the students—to do anything else besides what the mainstream teacher tells them to do is wrong. They do not want to step out of line and push the boundaries. Nonetheless, for few bilingual paraprofessionals, they feel that if the students do not understand the method mainstream teachers present, they will use their own strategies. Even then, they are hesitant to go forward with it, afraid that it might cause

conflict between them and the teacher, as BP 7 mentioned above. Although most teachers currently are open to try new ideas to help the students, the bilingual paraprofessionals still have the mindset that they must follow the instructions of the teachers and to deviate from those instructions is unacceptable.

What can be said is that all strategies the bilingual paraprofessionals use stem from what the mainstream teachers teach in the class, in some cases, with the extra help of translation. As BP 8 reported, “[I]t’s a slow pace. You work slower, break it down simplistic.” Even though bilingual paraprofessionals have other approaches they want to use, they are hesitant to use them if they were not taught or discussed in the classroom by the mainstream teacher first. Thus, it is vital that communication be open between both parties, which leads me into the third theme, communication.

**Communication.** As stated earlier, communication is significant. I already discussed communication earlier in the sense that it is a concern that needs to be tackled in schools in order for the bilingual paraprofessionals to provide aid to teachers, which will in effect, support students in the classrooms. In this section, I will discuss communication between the bilingual paraprofessionals, parents, and students.

When supporting students, communication between staff at school, is a major factor. Bilingual paraprofessionals feel that with the help of other staff (classroom teachers and EL professionals) at their school, they can help improve the students’ learning. BP 2 expressed, “[W]e care for the kids, not just the bilingual paraprofessionals, but from our department, ESL teachers, counselors, including the department . . . We want to prepare them to learn and read

English as much as possible.” BP 10 stated, “[O]ther departments . . . collaborate well in the school district...that’s a major thing, is collaboration and helping each other out.” BP 5 agreed with both, in that she mentioned, “[B]ecause of our job, we consult, teacher consult with us. We consult with the teacher. We talk all the time about the kids, too.” However, there are some bilingual paraprofessionals interviewed that do not have an open line of communication with their co-workers. In order to prepare the students to succeed, to become independent of ELL services provided by the school, time must be allocated to communicate with one another, whether it is before, after, or during the school day.

In addition to communication between staff, communication between parents, and students is also important when trying to support students in school. According to BP 5:

[S]ometimes in our job and if we see the child needs help to succeed. Sometimes, they don’t get help from home. Then our job is to be honest with the parents . . . If you see the child falling really behind, really need help, you will tell the parents, your child needs this and that and ask support from the parents.”

BP 5 expressed that parents need to take an active role in their child’s education. Parents play a significant role in the students’ life. Without the support from them, the student could fall further behind his/her classmates. “They need parents to support them. If the parents that know where the resources are, then the child gets all the support . . . if get this, then you (students) will be at grade level.”

BP 2 agreed with BP 5 in that if “[T]he kid does not receive the support at home, they will struggle. The kid will struggle at home and it will impact their schooling.” BP 2 also

expressed in his interview that parents need to intervene and be involved in their child's learning.

He stated:

We want to make sure kids are reading lots of books and to not dismiss it . . . we provide support to tell, teach, the parents that they should have their kids read at home. We encourage our students and tell parents that beginning in first grade, read 10 minutes . . . we tell parents, even if they do not know how to read. They just have to make sure the kids read. If kids do not have books at home to read, we provide books, send books home with kids to read at home and encourage them to use library. If they do not have library cards, then ESL or we can talk to librarians to make sure there is a way to give students public library cards.

The bilingual paraprofessionals communicate to parents to let them know where resources are so the parents are better equipped to help their child. Some parents are receptive and some are not. Parents have to make an effort and take the time to support their child's learning. With the open communication between the parents and bilingual paraprofessionals, it will send a positive message to the students letting them know that their education is important and there will always be a support system for them. In addition, BP 6 encourages parents to work with their child at home. He mentioned in his interview, "I encourage their (students') parents to say 2x2, 3x3, 6, so they end up know two through nine multiplication and division very easy, very easy for them to do. So, I encourage them to do."

From what is gathered from the bilingual paraprofessionals, communication is essential when trying to provide assistance to the Hmong ELLs. It is another aspect that can help the

students move forward in their education. With the support from other staff in the school and parents, the students are more likely to reach grade level, as was seen from the experiences of the bilingual paraprofessionals themselves. This leads into the fourth theme in how bilingual paraprofessionals propel students, which is motivation.

**Motivation.** Motivation is the desire or willingness to do something. When students are motivated, they are more excited to learn and participate in class. Without motivation, students will not learn effectively. They might not retain information, take part in class, and may even become disruptive in the classroom. According to the bilingual paraprofessionals, motivation can be a factor in propelling ELLs to be more independent and successful in class until they no longer need ELL services.

In one interview, the bilingual paraprofessional mentioned that testing the ELLs either quarterly or by semesters will help motivate them to get out of ELL services. There are some students who do not want to be labeled as an ELL. They have an assumption that ELLs are students who need help, cannot learn as well, and cannot do the same amount of work as mainstream students in mainstream classes. By scoring a certain range on the test, they are able to exit the ELL program. This is one motivation for Hmong ELLs to work hard to be at their grade level. There is another way to refuse ELL services at the school. The parents have to write a letter to the school stating that they refuse the ELL services for their child. However, if the parents do want their child to be given the extra support, then the child would receive the ELL services until he/she passes certain tests given by the district.

Along the lines of motivation, BP 10 remarked in her interview:

I think, the most major influence that I've seen in elementary is that they actually want to go somewhere. They see that we're there to help them, and at the same time, if she's able to make it, I can do this, too. They see it as an inspiration. They would, you know, work their hardest in school.

BP 9 concurred with her. He emphasized:

[I]f you present yourself as a positive role model who's being there to help the student, then you make yourself available to help the student . . . I think they'll be able to know and understand that they're there to help me academically and to help me learn.

Overall, motivation can come in different forms. As seen above, different bilingual paraprofessionals have taken notice of what motivates their students. It could be scoring in a certain range for an exam, being a role model, or even being present in the class. All of those are motivators that bilingual paraprofessionals provide for their students to become successful in class. It gives the students the belief that they, ELLs, can be successful in a mainstream class at their grade level. In addition to motivation, Hmong cultural resources are another emergent theme in which bilingual paraprofessionals use to help students succeed.

**Hmong cultural resources.** Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals have the means to bring in rich, cultural resources to the class. They, essentially, are the cultural resource in their school. They use their resources to support students in the class through translation, relatability, motivation, identity affirmation, and engagement. The aid that they provide the students will help propel the students to become proficient learners so they can exit the ELL program.

Being identified as Hmong and knowing the culture definitely has helped the bilingual paraprofessionals in their field. They have the advantage here, as they understand the history and background of the students. They know the struggles and challenges the students face in the classroom, whether or not the student knows Hmong. Even though students might not speak Hmong, the bilingual paraprofessionals can still communicate with them and their parents and be the bridge that connects them and the school.

In the interviews, the bilingual paraprofessionals went back and forth on how the Hmong language is used at school. The majority of the bilingual paraprofessionals interviewed work at an elementary school. The majority of the students that they work with are fairly young and Hmong is, whether constantly or not, spoken at some point in the students' homes.

Over the years, the bilingual paraprofessionals noticed a shift in generations. With that being said, all bilingual paraprofessionals agreed that the Hmong students that are currently in the elementary and high school levels are speaking more in English than in Hmong. According to BP 5:

[R]ight now, with the generation, they don't speak in Hmong anymore. So, they just come to you, 'help me with this' in English . . . the kids understand Hmong, but don't want to speak it. They want to say English back to us.

When I asked her how she helps those students because she is not translating the subject area to Hmong, she replied, "[Y]ou just have to rephrase it (in English)."

In addition, there is a consensus from the bilingual paraprofessionals that they speak to the students in English first and foremost. BP 7 stated that "[T]hey (students) speak in English."



When asked if he speaks English back to them, he replied, “[Y]es. Because they do not know their Hmong. But in the past, in the past, we speak Hmong.” BP 10 agreed with BP 7. However, she disclosed that she does use Hmong in the class, only when all other options are exhausted.

Usually there are specific students we sit down with . . . if they have no knowledge in regards to what the teacher says at all and you try to explain it in a different way and they still don’t understand, then usually, we would actually speak it in Hmong. Yea, we usually speak it in Hmong to them and then it will ‘oh,’ oh, it clicks and they will understand it . . . we try to reteach it back in the way the teachers teach it so that they have that concept . . . Hmong will be, kind of like, the last resort.

Whereas, BP 6 stated that, “[I]n the math, mostly, we talk in Hmong.” When asked if students can understand what he says, he replied, “[Y]eah, they understand, but the way they say (it back), they can’t. Some kids, they cannot speak to you clearly. But they understand what you say.” BP 6 also mentioned:

I like to speak Hmong to them, in a group two or three . . . they understand . . . if we have this topic, I would ask the students what are you going to write here, how can you write it?” Since BP 6 works with a small group, he knows if his students understand Hmong and can or cannot speak it. As he mentioned above, he speaks Hmong to them to clarify meanings and at the same time, keeps them exposed to the Hmong language. He, along with other bilingual paraprofessionals, does not want their Hmong ELLs to forget their culture.

Other bilingual paraprofessionals (BP 7, 8, 9) use Hmong when dealing with behaviors. BP 7 explained, “[B]eing a Hmong, I know that I use the way the parents deal with the kids . . . how they deal with the kids at home . . . So, we have our own way, own strategies of dealing with the kids” if they have behavior problems. Again, it depends on the students and whether or not they can understand Hmong. One must not make the assumption whether or not the student can or cannot understand Hmong. Since the bilingual paraprofessionals work closely with the students and their parents, they are able to know whether the students can or cannot understand either the Hmong and/or the English language.

For many of the Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals interviewed, they expressed how the Hmong ELLs feel. The students feel that they can ask anything to the paraprofessionals without being judged or without feeling naive compared to asking the mainstream teacher in class. They do not want to feel embarrassed in front of the whole class if they do not understand something that many other students know. They do not want to be put in that position. This is not to say that the mainstream teachers do not support the students. The students just feel safer with someone who can connect to them at a different level.

In the interviews, half of the participants agreed that students feel more comfortable with them due to their Hmong identity and background even though the majority of the students do not speak Hmong. The level of comfort for the students is high when they see someone of the same ethnicity in the class. BP 4 believes “when the kids see, see a person or staff of who is an elder, who has the same language, (they) are more comfortable.” BP 7 had a similar experience in that one of his Hmong ELLs calls him uncle. He relayed that it is “[B]ecause she knows I’m

there and coming, so she feels more comfortable talking to me.” The students feel a sense of security and community around others whose background is similar to theirs. The students are more likely to ask questions, behave well, and open up in class if they know that they can feel safe as BP 8 mentioned:

Oh, it’s a huge impact. The first time I spoke to this specific child in Hmong, because he was really off-task and not following directions, and I said in Hmong, ‘if you do not pay attention, I’m going to take your board away’ He looked at me and he looked around and he was so confused and he was like ‘you can speak that language’ . . . when they are struggling in other areas, they feel so prone and comfortable to come to you for help and it kind of opens that barrier with them and their teachers. They might not understand what the teacher is saying and they directly come to you and speak in Hmong with you.

There are some students who do speak Hmong and feel more comfortable with the Hmong language as opposed to the English language. BP 10 had similar thoughts in that:

[H]onestly, the Hmong students, they do feel more comfortable around because, oh you know, she can speak Hmong . . . sometimes when I start talking Hmong, they’re like, ‘oh, she knows Hmong’ . . . that also makes that connection to as well and sometimes shocks them.

However, BP 8 clearly emphasized that it all depends on the students. For some students, it does not matter if she can speak Hmong or is Hmong, the students probably will not open up to her if they do not know her.

Overall, this indicates that being identified as Hmong does have a positive influence in the class. By having someone who is Hmong in the class supporting the teacher, the students are probably more receptive to try and do well in class. It also helps that the bilingual paraprofessionals can call home and give parents updates on their child.

They support the students through translation, examples, or a different way of interpretation. By having the Hmong bilingual paraprofessional in the room, it gives the students the option to reach out and communicate to them if they are struggling. The students are more at ease with someone with the same ethnicity as them as they can relate to the bilingual paraprofessionals.

In addition, Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals use their identity to help motivate the Hmong ELLs to do well in school. As said earlier, motivation is an important factor that must be considered when it comes to students succeeding in school. The students have someone to look up to, especially in the elementary level. When the paraprofessionals tell the students their own experiences and how they struggled obtaining an education, it opens the students' perspectives on what they want to achieve in life and how they can use education to further themselves. According to BP 10, several of her students are influenced by her. They see that she is there to help them and think that if she is able to make it, they could do it, too. BP 10 further expressed this:

I have students that would go to high school, and they would write letters back to me.

That shows me how big of an influence that I have made on their lives and how they're going based on their education.

One must also keep in mind that while the bilingual paraprofessionals are willing to give support to the ELL students, it is to a certain extent. The bilingual paraprofessionals cannot have students constantly depend on them since the bilingual paraprofessionals want the students to work hard to reach grade level proficiency. The above responses from the bilingual paraprofessionals lead me to believe that there is a connection with being identified as a Hmong and working with Hmong ELLs. They want to help the students, but they also use their judgment on when to pull away in order to give the students independence in the class. Again, they are bridging the gap and making sure the transition for the students is smooth from receiving ELL services to being independent of ELL services.

Whether or not the students can speak or understand Hmong, the Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals will provide them the support according to their needs. As said earlier, some bilingual paraprofessionals do speak Hmong to the students. However, they are there more for the Hmong parents. This is observed by the bilingual paraprofessionals when they interact with the Hmong ELLs. There is a sense of comfort knowing that someone of the same ethnicity is in the room helping out. When students feel safe in the class environment, then they are more likely to be engaged and motivated.

Through experiences, strategies, communication, motivation, and being a Hmong cultural resource, bilingual paraprofessionals are able to assist Hmong ELLs in the classroom and help them become successful to move onto the next level, working their way toward grade level proficiency. Overall, being present in the classroom is a great influence on the students. It has a positive effect on the students as noted by all the bilingual paraprofessionals. The students are

more likely to come talk to them as opposed to the mainstream teachers since they can relate to the bilingual paraprofessionals. By forming a bond with their students through their experiences and identity, the bilingual paraprofessionals are able propel the students along in the students' education.

The strategies bilingual paraprofessionals employed when working with students come directly from the mainstream teachers. When they slow the pace down for the students and work with them, the students are able to grasp the material. Sometimes, all it takes is rephrasing the directions, repetition, and practice with the students for them to understand the concept.

### **Limitations**

There were limitations to this study. The volume of data was limited to only 10 bilingual paraprofessionals, most of them working in the elementary level. There were not enough bilingual paraprofessional volunteers from the middle and high school levels. The majority of the volunteers from middle and high school levels did not make contact with me. There were very few who did and expressed that they were busy with work and family life and, thus, declined. Therefore, there was an unequal amount of varying perspectives from different levels.

The scope of the participants was only limited to three school districts and only to Hmong. Although the study yielded a good amount of data for comparison, the majority was limited to those working in the elementary schools, with the exception of one bilingual paraprofessional who worked in a high school.

Another limitation to the study could be the length of time. The data collected for this study spanned an hour to an hour and a half in interviews. It gave me a representation of what the

bilingual paraprofessionals currently do in the classroom to support the students. Although many of them have worked in their districts for an extensive amount of time, they saw the changes districts made to the EL department regarding best practices. If the study were to follow the bilingual paraprofessionals longitudinally, one cannot determine if the data represented here would be similar after 5 or 10 years.

Lastly, because I have not been able to interview EL and mainstream teachers, I was not able to triangulate my data—meaning I was not able to examine the consistency of diverse data sources through interviews. Would the responses be comparable to that of the bilingual paraprofessionals? Would mainstream teachers view bilingual paraprofessionals differently than how they view themselves? Would similar challenges be present in the mainstream teachers' response?

Since the study consisted of only 10 participants (nine out of the 10 work at the elementary level), there needs to be further research among Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals. There needs to be research that encompasses Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals working in the higher grade levels. How would they compare to those of the elementary levels? Also, further research should look into either different school districts from different states, comparing notes amongst them, or concentrate on one district.

Finally, comparison among different ethnic groups of bilingual paraprofessionals would need to be further researched to gather comprehensive data to support whether the concerns and aid they provide are similar or different in the general population of bilingual paraprofessionals. If there are similarities across the board, especially in the areas of concerns, then it needs to be

addressed in order for the bilingual paraprofessionals to perform well in their profession. If there are differences in themes, then, what are those differences? Do the differences show an increase in student learning? Future studies that focus on the above suggestions will hopefully reveal what additional support and/or improvement we, as educators, need to develop in order to support our ELLs in the class to become successful.



## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

As seen in the study, Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals are an important asset in the mainstream classrooms. They not only support the classroom teachers and Hmong ELLs, but also support all students and staff in the school. They bring diversity into the classroom and with that, they make the Hmong ELLs comfortable. Even though they do not necessarily work directly with the EL professional, they are able to support the Hmong ELLs in the classroom working with mainstream teachers.

They not only see to the students' needs in learning the English language and other various subject contents, but they become involve with the parents and form a bond with everyone surrounding them. They are the school nurse, the school psychologist, the behavioral interventionist, the secretary, the teacher, and the parent all rolled into one. They help aid the teachers by translating, bringing in new perspectives, and providing culture awareness. They help with every aspect in the school, as they are flexible and versatile.

However, concerns of communication, time, and schedules are brought up in this study. There needs to be a set time in which bilingual paraprofessionals can meet and discuss with both the EL and mainstream teachers about the students' progress in the class. It is understandable that preparation periods for staff varies. It would greatly benefit all three staff members if time can be set aside for this so that all three would be able to hear critical information from one another, provide perspectives, and avoid miscommunication. From what is gathered, bilingual paraprofessionals would like to be informed and included in meetings about the ELLs they work with. Although some are fine with the communication that they currently have, it does not hurt to

improve it. Staff should keep in mind that the students are the ones that are affected should open communication not happen.

The themes that have emerged consistently from the study are experiences, strategies, communication, motivation, and cultural resources. Those are what bilingual paraprofessionals use in the classroom to help support the ELLs to be proficient in class where they can in turn, become independent learners and exit the ELL program. Overall, each Hmong bilingual paraprofessional had his/her own views, and it is apparent that each uses his/her culture, background, and experiences to help the students successfully transition out of the ELL program.

In conclusion, Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals are vital in the mainstream classrooms. They offer an advantage to teachers, parents, and students. They bridge the cultural and language barriers to create a safe and respectful environment for everyone. What they bring to the class is invaluable, especially with their knowledge, background, and understanding of the Hmong ELLs. What matters in the end, is that the Hmong ELLs are receiving the support they need to progress in their learning, and they do from the help of Hmong bilingual paraprofessionals.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

1. How many years have you worked as a paraprofessional?
2. Describe your inspirations for becoming a paraprofessional.
  - a. Describe the process of becoming paraprofessional for you as it relates to your job.
3. What age do you work with?
4. What are the predominant ethnicities that you work with?
  - a. Can you tell me or ballpark the percentages?
  - b. Hmong...
5. Describe your role in the school.
6. Describe how ELL support is provided in the school and your role.
  - a. Describe your strategies for giving this support.
7. Describe a typical day as a paraprofessional.
8. Describe the skills that you tend to work on the most with the students.
9. What do you as a paraprofessional do to help prepare the ELL students for mainstream classes without ELL support?
10. Explain or describe the challenges you face as a paraprofessional.
11. Is there anything else you want to tell me about being a paraprofessional?
12. How does your Hmong identity influence the way you interact with the ELL students?

13. Describe how your ethnicity, culture, and language background affect you and your students.