

2001

Hmong Language, Culture and Learning: A Course for Teachers

Donald F. Hones
University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer>

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Recommended Citation

Hones, Donald F. (2001) "Hmong Language, Culture and Learning: A Course for Teachers," *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*. Vol. 14: Iss. 4, Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer/vol14/iss4/7>

This Featured Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mid-Western Educational Researcher by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Hmong Language, Culture and Learning: A Course for Teachers

Donald F. Hones
University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh

Hmong Language, Culture, and Learning is a new required course within the English as a Second Language (ESL) and Bilingual Education minors at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. It is a course designed to familiarize teachers and others with the language, culture, and educational issues relevant to Hmong people in the United States. Areas of exploration include the nature of Hmong language, Hmong history, the traditional family and clan structure, child-rearing mores, healing practices, marriage and funeral practices, and educational beliefs and practices. Contemporary developments and adjustment issues within the Hmong communities are discussed, especially school achievements and challenges, intergenerational conflicts, youth gangs, and the need to provide high expectations and supportive educational environments for Hmong children, youth, and families.

Rationale

Supporters of America's "secret war" inside Laos, Hmong refugees began arriving in the Fox Valley area in 1975, and today their children comprise approximately 10% or more of many area schools. Previously, local districts had called for a one credit course to help teachers better understand the world of Hmong children and adolescents. In the last few years, many teachers and students have also expressed an interest in learning basic Hmong language as part of such a course. To meet the need of language study as well as in-depth study of the history and culture of the Hmong, we created a 4-credit course, and offered it for the first time in the summer of 2001. Unfortunately, our university does not have a Hmong professor at present who could teach the language. Therefore, we recruited Txerthov Vang, who, besides working as a bilingual interpreter and liaison for the schools, and producing a community access television show, teaches Hmong language to Hmong children and youth in the community. Mr. Vang and I became co-teachers for the new course.

The Hmong have been a presence in area schools and communities for over 25 years, and the students in this course, most of whom were experienced classroom teachers, had some background knowledge about why the Hmong had come as refugees to the United States; the students were also aware of some of the issues facing the Hmong community in transition in this country. However, an in-depth study of the history, culture, and community issues was quite revealing for students and for myself as well. We learned, for example, that not all the Hmong inside Laos sided with Vang Pao in his support for the American CIA's "secret war" against the Vietnamese communists. As a result of a decades-old

clan rivalry among the Hmong people, some Hmong sided with the Vietnamese and the Laotian communists (Quincy, 2000).

We were also forced to try to comprehend the scale of the tragedy of the Hmong people as we listened to stories of the war from Txerthov Vang and other Hmong elders. Txerthov was recruited to fight at the age of 12 in 1969. He spent the next 10 years of his life as a soldier, serving General Vang Pao, and later, within the Chao Fa resistance. He told of working sentry duty, alone, locked inside a small bunker, having to stay awake and fight against any encroaching enemy until help arrived. He told of his escape from Laos in the late 1970s, walking for days through the trackless jungle in order to avoid army patrols and land mines; of encountering the many dead along the trail, as young and old alike finally succumbed to a lack of food and water, and sat or lay down, never to arise again. Txerthov said, "Each time I saw a dead body, I was so surprised that I had not joined them yet. . . I was still alive." After finishing his harrowing tale, he reminded us that it was a common story, and that we could hear it from any Hmong person of about his age.

Objectives and Requirements

Through classroom discussions, research, participant observations in schools and community settings, presentations, and written assignments, our goals were that students would demonstrate the following knowledge, performances, and dispositions: (a) knowledge of the historical relationship between the Hmong people and the U.S.; (b) knowledge of the Hmong journey from Laos to the United States; (c) knowledge of and respect for Hmong history, culture, and religion; (d) knowledge of and respect for the multiple challenges facing Hmong children and their families in America; (e) ability to utilize techniques that can assist teachers in providing successful learning experiences for Hmong students; and (f) ability to utilize strategies that can help educators and community leaders to assist the Hmong to become full partners in the U.S. society while preserving important aspects of their culture. In addition, through participation in language lessons, computer-assisted learning, and community-based research, we expected students to develop basic oral and written communication skills in the Hmong language and demonstrate ability to utilize Hmong-English bilingual materials and books in classroom settings.

Our students met these objectives through the following required activities: (a) conducting ethnographic research within the Hmong community and shared their results through

a paper and oral report, (b) discussing various issues of Hmong language, culture, and learning in the classroom and on a website discussion board, (c) observing and volunteering in bilingual Hmong/English classrooms and assisting teachers with curriculum materials, teaching, and assessment, and (d) analyzing the bilingual Hmong/English program at the school where they volunteered in critical discussions and in a paper. Graduate students prepared a two-week curricular unit about the Hmong based on their research.

Txerthov Vang, our Hmong language instructor, focused on teaching basic greetings, extending and accepting hospitality, listening to and giving directions, and learning vocabulary for family relationships. Our goal was that teachers would learn enough Hmong to make children, as well as parents and other relatives, feel welcome when visiting or attending classrooms. We also wished to prepare students for visits to Hmong homes. The written script taught in our class was the Hmong Roman Phonetic Alphabet (RPA), the most commonly used Hmong alphabet in the United States.

Course Themes

There were several common elements, that ran through each class meeting. We opened with a Hmong folktale, followed by a discussion (Livo and Cha, 1991); students copied down a Hmong proverb and receive an English translation of it (Heimbach, 1980); and, during the last part of class, students received approximately one hour of Hmong language instruction. The rest of each class was devoted to the study and discussion of themes in Hmong history, cultural practices, family, and educational issues (Faderman, 1998; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; and Thao, 1999). Fourteen themes were elaborated through lectures, videos, discussions, and guest speakers, and included the origins of the Hmong people, Hmong History in China and Laos, the Hmong role in the wars in Southeast Asia (1950s-1975), Hmong resistance and exodus from Laos (1975-1989), life in refugee camps; relocation and acculturation in the United States, traditional Hmong cultural practices, extended family and clan networks, Shamanism and Christianity, and Hmong Cultural change in the United States as well as educational issues, generational issues, gender issues, and Hmong/English bilingual efforts.

An ongoing dialogue within our course involved the complex changes going on within the Hmong cultural community in the United States, and educational efforts to support Hmong children, youth, and families. The changing role of Hmong women, the generation and language gap between youth and elders, traditional practices such as shamanism and Christianity, socioeconomic concerns, and educational achievement. This dialogue began in the classroom and continued during our stay in St. Paul, where we could address questions to Hmong school personnel and community members.

St. Paul Hmong Community Visit

A special feature of the summer course was a one-week visit to St. Paul, Minnesota, the cultural heart of Hmong America. There students did participant observation at two charter schools, Hope Community Academy and the St. Paul/ACORN Dual Language Academy. Outside of these school experiences, students attended workshops and collected data on cultural, historical, political, and linguistic themes, and participated in homestays with Hmong families in the Twin Cities.

The Twin Cities of Minnesota are home to the largest enclave of Hmong refugees in the United States. In St. Paul, there is the Hmong Chamber of Commerce, the Hmong Cultural Center, the Hmong Language Association of Minnesota, the Hmong Times newspaper, and various other organizations. There are also two relatively new charter schools which primarily serve children of the Hmong community: the St. Paul/ACORN Dual Language Academy, an elementary school with an approximately 50% Hmong student population; and the Hope Community Academy, a K-3 school with approximately 90% Hmong students. Each of these charter schools arose out of the Hmong community's concern that their children receive a strong academic education, as well as classes in Hmong language and culture. Each school was in session in late June, and each welcomed a visit from our students.

During our visits to the Hope and ACORN academies, the content and structure of the Hmong language and culture classes at these schools proved interesting to observe. At Hope, the language teacher weaves the arts and storytelling into each of her Hmong lessons. After reading a story in Hmong and English, she typically has students engage in an art project related to traditional practices in Hmong culture. Around her room are many photographs and scenes of life in Laos, and she consistently seeks to remind students of the way of life of their grandparents and relatives still living in Southeast Asia. At the ACORN Academy, the Hmong instructors have developed their own curriculum, which they are extending to 8th grade, as the school will expand to include middle school next year. The Hmong curriculum is connected to the state standards; thus, for the middle school grades, students in the Hmong class will be researching the origin and life of the Hmong people in China. For students from the Fox Valley area of Wisconsin, visiting these schools was a great opportunity to see how an educational program might be better structured to serve Hmong children and youth.

During our week-long stay in St. Paul, our students spent their mornings at the Hope and ACORN Academies, with each student being placed two days in each school. In the afternoons, we would reconvene for workshops with the academies, Hmong language and culture teachers, program directors for English as a Second Language, and commu-

nity activists for women's health and teen pregnancy prevention. We also made site visits to the Hmong Lao Association, the Hmong Times Newspaper, the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent, the Hmong Language Association of Minnesota, the Hmong ABC Book Store, and the Hmong Culture Center. In the evenings, homestays with Hmong families were available, and for many of our students this family experience was the most enlightening aspect of the course.

A Pahau Hmong Language Lesson

It is a sweltering late afternoon in St. Paul, Minnesota. The thermometer, which has hovered around 100 degrees all day dips back down into the mid-90s. But as I sit with about 30 others in an unmarked storefront house in the Frogtown neighborhood, a large fan blowing listlessly at my back and a gaping hole above the door where the air conditioner was supposed to go, it somehow seems hotter than the street temperature. My students, my colleague Txerthov Vang, and I are attending a Pahau Hmong language lesson at the headquarters of the Hmong Language Association of Minnesota. Having Txerthov Vang accompany us to St. Paul opened many doors into the Hmong community, not least of which was his connection to the Pahau Hmong language. I had noticed that when he took notes, he used the Pahau script. He shared with me that he learned to read and write by learning the Pahau in Laos. By making a few phone calls, he set up our evening at the Pahau language lesson.

The teacher is a young man dressed in traditional clothing. His students, varying in age from approximately 9-15, are all Hmong. Several Hmong adults and teenagers come in and out of the house, or talk quietly in the back of the room. On the walls are pictures and photographs from Laos, including a series of photographs of notable Hmong leaders, including Touby Ly Fong and Vang Pao. In the back, near the door, is a flag of the Chao Fa movement, a spiritual as well as military threat to the communist government in Laos. In the front of the room, on either side of the blackboard, are the characters of the Pahau writing system, the system being taught in this classroom. In the upper right corner of the room, in a place of honor, is a large photograph of Shong Lue, an illiterate farmer who first taught the Pahau to other Hmong villagers in the 1960s. Some believe he invented this complex writing system, while others accept his own story, that he was taught the Pahau by two angels from heaven (Smalley, Vang, and Yang, 1990). Txerthov Vang, introduces me to one of the leaders of the Hmong Language Association of Minnesota. He is a small man with graying hair, probably in his forties or fifties, yet his eyes have a brightness I have seldom encountered. The Chao Fa flag, the Pahau lesson, the attentive students learning how to write their language, the stifling humidity inside the room, the bright eyes and calm voice of this Hmong elder? How does one separate the language lesson from the spiritual path of Shong Lue's followers, or the revolutionary aims of the

Chao Fa, still fighting inside Laos? Such questions occur to my students and myself many times as we try to learn about Hmong language and culture in the heart of the Midwest.

On our last morning in St. Paul, I discovered Txerthov Vang in conversation with another Hmong elder in the lobby of our hotel. Txerthov introduced me to Chia Koua Yang, a leading disciple of Shong Lue, the first teacher of the Hmong Pahau script. Like the elder I had met at the Pahau lesson, I was impressed with the brightness of Chia Koua Yang's eyes, and the calmness of his voice, incongruous in some ways with the noisy lobby of the downtown hotel.

Response to the Course

Students shared their reflections about this course through classroom and website discussions, through reflective papers, and in final evaluative comments. Their response, generally, was very favorable. The course readings, videos, and guest lectures were valued, and Mr. Vang's contributions as a language and cultural expert were highlighted. Yet, it was the experience of St. Paul's Hmong community which caused the most comments from students. A kindergarten teacher wrote, "It was an incredible educational journey, that began in our classroom and with our reading. We then were able to take this a step further and actually learn about the Hmong culture first hand. My head is still spinning with all I learned last week." A high school English teacher wrote, "Not only did I learn about the language and culture of the Hmong, I was endowed with the knowledge of their history. . .Mr. Vang's offerings were awesome. He was an excellent addition to the class and the instruction. He made everything much easier to relate to." "Visiting the schools," wrote a fourth grade teacher, "taught me so much, not only being with the students, but the teachers, community helpers, and assistants. . .I would recommend this trip to everyone to learn first hand the background on and the Hmong focus for the future." Finally, a high school social studies teacher wrote, "The St. Paul trip did for me what a great educational experience should do: It created more issues for me to think about and inspired a desire to continue learning about the Hmong culture so that I can be an effective educator when dealing with Hmong students and their families."

The students also made several valuable recommendations for the course. These included ideas about organizing the language lessons, and teaching the language in the first hour of class when students were fresh; suggestions for the homestays, including ideas about what to bring, staying in pairs, and seeking out both progressive and traditional families; and arranging additional visits to the schools during the academic year, in order to compare the charter programs with regular public schools which serve large Hmong populations. In addition to these supportive comments and useful suggestions from students, we were able to talk to personnel at the two academies about their evaluation of

our visit. The principals and teachers of the two schools responded very favorably; they were impressed by our students, and would like to continue the relationship we have started, perhaps involving bilingual student teachers from our university at some time in the future.

Future Directions

Our Hmong Language, Culture and Learning course will be offered yearly at our university, and we hope to continue to build on the success of this first experience. With the support of Mr. Vang, we hope to develop more opportunities for student projects locally in the Fox Valley, including ethnographic work with Hmong families. In addition, we continue to build up our library of Hmong language resources, including Hmong bilingual books, and hope to encourage within the schools in our area which serve Hmong students and families. The teachers who took our summer course have developed curricular units focusing on the Hmong culture, and we need to document how these units are delivered in schools, and encourage greater dialogue about the need for such cross-cultural focuses among all teachers. Finally, students in this summer course have inspired us to make plans to offer it some day in Southeast Asia, with the possibility of visiting Hmong communities in Laos. The success of multicultural and bilingual education, however, will come through local initiatives. The Hmong have made a great journey, and are in our midst. We only need to step outside our door and welcome them to begin our own journey of linguistic and cultural discovery.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the University of Wisconsin System Race and Ethnicity grant program and the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh 2008 Diversity Initiatives for funding which supported the development of this course.

References

- Faderman, L. (1998). *I begin my life all over: The Hmong and the American immigrant experience*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hamilton-Merritt, J. (1993). *Tragic mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the secret wars for Laos, 1942-1992*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Heimbach, E. (1980). *White Hmong-English dictionary*. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asian Program Productions.
- Livo, N., and Cha, D. (1991). *Folk stories of the Hmong: Peoples of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.
- Quincy, K. (2000). *Harvesting Pa Chay's wheat: The Hmong and America's secret war in Laos*. Spokane, WA: Eastern Washington University Press.
- Smalley, W., Vang, C. K., and Yang, G. Y. (1990). *Mother of writing: The origin and development of a Hmong mesianic script*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Thao, P. (1999). *Mong education at the crossroads*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.