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Preliterate English Learners: Refugee Camp to the U.S. Classroom

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Summary: Despite high motivation to learn English, Hmong students, like all new arrivals, present educators with unique challenges. How can teachers begin to understand these students, their backgrounds, and their needs?

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Circles of barbed wire lined the roadway and perimeter of the camp. Inside barefoot kids in bright colors ran through streams on cracked dirt paths. Small, tin-roofed shelters with gaps in the bamboo walls leaned on one another. Young and old pushed awkward wooden carts filled with water jugs, passing young mothers carrying umbrellas and babies strapped on their backs. As I had neared the military checkpoint and armed Thai guards in camouflage, I wondered if I belonged at Wat Tham Krabok, the last Hmong refugee camp in Thailand. I had received a Fund for Teachers Grant to pursue a lifelong dream - one that would impact my students and teaching. I knew this was the place I could learn about the lives of kids who would soon be my students in the U.S., learn more about the Hmong, and convey the goodwill of my community to families relocating to the U.S.

Many of the Hmong, who assisted the U.S. in the Vietnam War, escaped to Thailand where they have lived for years, moving from one refugee camp to another as the camps closed. Thailand would no longer allow this group of Hmong to stay in the country and the U.S. agreed to accept most of the 15,500 residents of the Wat. For two weeks I taught 2 classes a day at the Hmong school in the camp and two classes in the community where over 95 men registered to learn English. I made home visits, shopped at the market, ate at a storefront restaurant, passed out shoes to barefoot kids and purchased a pig and rice for a ritual that allowed a family to proceed with their U.S. Embassy interview. I did belong here - I needed to experience the place, people and culture. The students hungered for learning English and said, "We want the American teacher!"

Knowing the Students

That hunger has continued in our American classrooms. Despite high motivation to learn English, these Hmong students, like all new arrivals, present educators with unique challenges. How can we begin to understand these students, their backgrounds and their needs? It is not a quick, effortless process, but one that is crucial to the success of English Learners. Not all teachers have the opportunity to experience the students' cultures firsthand. However, we can become listeners, observers and active participants of culture in our classrooms.

What began as a journal of my refugee camp experiences became an extended log of classroom observations here in the U.S. - lessons that worked, frustrations, student reactions, student performance and growth in student language. The listening, observing and reflecting process has included other teachers' observations as well as my notes from home visits. This work has reminded me of the sort of informal ethnographic teacher research that Carolyn Frank describes in her book *Ethnographic Eyes: A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Observation* (1999). She describes a method for getting to know our students that creates a foundation for instruction. She notes how classroom observation can open a teacher's eyes to seeing students and the teaching practice from multiple perspectives. This has helped me see and teach my students as individuals rather than teaching from my own "gut" reactions that I know are affected by my own cultural biases. It has helped me identify and serve my students who are literate in Hmong, those who are literate in their second language only, students who are somewhere in-between and preliterate students who do not read or write in their first language.

Many Hmong new arrivals only speak Hmong and their spoken language may vary from the Hmong spoken in the U.S. The written language came much later and students have had few opportunities to learn how to read or write Hmong because of poverty or displacement. Other students who did not learn to read and write Hmong have become literate in the Thai language during their years in Thailand. Many attended Thai schools and have received content area instruction in Thai. These are the students who will need

continued language support, but who can progress quickly because they have study skills, critical thinking skills and content knowledge. For others with interrupted schooling or some skills in Hmong or Thai, the process of acquiring language may be easier, but filling in the gaps is difficult. Perhaps the most challenging group of Hmong new arrivals is the preliterate students who have never learned to read or write in any language.

The Stories of Preliterate Students

My 14-20 year old preliterate students have had few opportunities for education because they come from extreme poverty and survival was their focus. They have had to work to help support their families, complete family chores while others worked or perhaps be a caregiver to others in the family. Few have known choice. They find it hard to imagine the opportunities education can provide. The students are anxious to share their stories with the help of Hmong interpreters who are available in entry level classrooms. It is with their stories that I begin listening and reflecting in the classroom:

-Ya stitched "paj ntaub," beautiful Hmong stories in embroidery, to make money for her family. She also made beautiful Hmong clothes to sell. Of one piece of the traditional Hmong dress she said, "It takes 7 or 8 days to finish, but you have to work 8-10 hours a day and you can't take breaks!" She is disciplined in her schoolwork, too, completing all assignments and doing careful work.

-When I asked Chee what he did in the camp he smiled and said, "I played all day!" I had seen many young boys passing time throwing flip-flops to knock over stacked cans, wandering the camp with younger children or playing soccer or volleyball. Chee has a hard time focusing on seatwork because it is his first time at a desk. He does a great job helping with classroom tasks.

-Several 14-16 year-old girls were mothers and said, "I stay home. . .take care baby." They say they like the opportunity to learn with their peers and be themselves as well as being a wife and mother. Many are taking their schoolwork seriously and put in long hours to get housework and schoolwork finished.

-Another student raised chickens and told how he fed them rice, but grass made them fatter. He is one of many students who made everyday survival tasks in the camp a learning opportunity. These students bring with them an array of cultural knowledge.

Learning in the Classroom

In the classroom, students' behaviors reflect their backgrounds and life in the camp. Students enter the room using loud outdoor voices. They are learning the routines and school skills. A picture poster reminds them to enter quietly, sit down, and take out homework, a pencil and paper. A simple illustrated agenda written on the board helps them begin to work as I say,

"Copy - A, B, C. . . What are the sounds? . . Mloog (listen)!"

The students giggle at hearing the teacher speak Hmong. Then I model, "Aaa, buh, cuh, duh," as we begin working on the alphabet. Classmates toss a sponge ball around the room as each student says the next sound in the alphabet. Students are learning to build oral fluency. "Kgoo-lue-bay-who-ah," I say as they are learning to tell about themselves. "My name is. . ." Questions follow - "How old are you? Where are you from? Are you a girl or boy?" Rhymes and chants allow even shy students to enjoy the rhythm of the language, the fun repetition, mixing up words, and saying different parts:

A. Hello. Hello. How are you?
B. I am fine. Are you too?
A. Yes I am. I am okay.
B. That is good. Have a nice day!

Active games that replace pencil and paper lessen learning time. As students divide into two teams and form lines facing the board, excitement builds as "The Fly Swatter Game" begins. The 1st person to slap the correct word on the board wins a point for their team. Students lose all shyness as they cheer teammates on. One game involves opposites. When I say "hot," they slap "cold". The game continues until all the words have been found and the points are counted.

Students are also excited about storytelling because Hmong culture is an oral and a storytelling culture. To begin building vocabulary and allow students to hear spoken English, I read aloud to them but also tell the students stories. I use a large board with an interesting background and colorful cutout characters and objects from the story. As I introduce the character, a Hmong boy named Sue, I place him on the board. "Sue has a new hat. What color is it?" I say slowly as I ask a student to find the hat. Students take turns finding and placing objects from the story on the board. The room is buzzing with student advice when a hesitant student is uncertain about a word. Later, students volunteer to tell the entire story using the

flannelgraph board.

Stories become books. Their first book - "Who Am I?" - is visual responses to text built around our oral work. Colorful Hmong vests, pants, hats and sashes with detailed stitching and jingling silver coins fill their "I am Hmong" page. Students help one another and work together as a group while learning to share supplies. When it is time for testing - copying letters clearly within the lines or writing the answers to questions from the book - students chatter in Hmong and immediately help students who are confused. They are practicing one of their greatest skills - cooperative learning. It is one of many opportunities to teach how to work independently.

In another preliterate reading class, many students struggle with new vocabulary. They act out and draw words. Hmong students have traditionally learned through observation and many have an acute visual sense. In studying weather, students illustrate the word "windy" with delicately curved leaves flying in the air and bending trees that nearly blow off the page. We also write words in the air, spell and chant the words, hear words read aloud and use the words in conversation. Our room is filled with words - poems, charts, labels and student writing. Yet, without language skills in their first language, the words are hard to retain. Simple words - go, look, get.

"Teacher, teacher," they say, "Kuv tsis paub" (I don't understand)!

Physical responses and hands-on or a thematic activities provide the connection kids need to retain the vocabulary. The first day it snowed, the students came running to my room saying, "Teacher. . .go outside. . .take picture!" They convinced me this was important - that we needed to experience the giant fluffy flakes. "Go!" I said. "Get your coats. Let's look at the snow." "Thank you, teacher!" they shouted.

Celebrating Culture

Our preliterate students bring to our school rich cultural knowledge that they can share. They become the teachers and the teachers become the students. In some classes boys and girls stitched small paj ntaub to sell to earn money for our school's annual trip to an amusement park. They answer questions in English about the figures or events they have stitched.

A once a year cultural celebration allows students to share music, dance, food, arts and traditional dress. Invitations are sent the neighbors, school district officials and even local press. It is a chance to bring the community to our school. Students plan, organize and prepare for weeks before the event. They design a cultural area with artifacts, murals, flags or country information. Students create intricate paper cuttings to hang in hallways, and even parents help make the cuttings at home. Students cook hundreds of egg rolls, giant pans of sticky rice and noodles and hot papaya salad. The day of the party they wear handmade cultural clothes, dance Hmong dances, sing or play the "qeej," a wooden Hmong instrument. I am amazed at the stage presence and self-confidence of students who show less confidence learning English. I admire their respect for staff and one another, their enthusiastic teamwork and their gratitude at having the opportunity to learn English and celebrate.

Creating Opportunities

What additional things can we do to help preliterate students? How can we acknowledge their cultural knowledge while teaching them our culture and language?

- ✎ Provide a variety of opportunities. Offer hands-on, authentic experiences. Visit a local store, for example. Bring in community resources or bring the students into the community. Attending local Hmong events and speaking about their experiences gives them self-confidence.
- ✎ Design a mentorship program where higher level students or community mentors work one on one regularly with new arrivals.
- ✎ Teach American culture and important community rules - crossing streets, safe and unsafe areas, knowing whom you are with, gang awareness and personal health issues.
- ✎ Work closely with specialists, staff members and bilingual staff. Get their help and feedback and feedback from students. Identify special needs students.
- ✎ Develop a before or afterschool program that offers students homework help, allows them to catch up and develops their interests and skills.
- ✎ Teach routines and break tasks down into smaller tasks.
- ✎ Let the students see you as a learner. Learn what interests them. Use the cultures, languages and traditions of your students in the classroom.

The Future

Tou, one of the students I'd seen playing in the camp, has made tremendous progress. He is willing to try any task, is undaunted by mistakes he makes, asks good questions and helps others who struggle. He will need continued support throughout his remaining high school years as he moves from conversational to

academic English. He will need help with study skills, all areas of the English language, understanding content, background knowledge and American culture. It will be a challenge to meet Tou's needs, but also a joy to get to know him as he makes a giant leap emotionally, socially and academically in his new life in the U.S.

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Frank,Carolyn. *Ethnographic Eyes: A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Observation*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999.

About the Author *Beverly Alsleben is a teacher-consultant with the Minnesota Writing Project. She teaches at International Academy-LEAP in St. Paul where about 500 new Hmong students have enrolled over the past two years. She is a former member of the ELL Leadership Team of the National Writing Project and has been teaching English Learners and Hmong students for thirteen years.*

Preliterate adult learners have little or no experience with formal learning or classroom expectations. Thus, educators must be vigilant about the assumptions they make when conveying information and expectations to preliterate parents (Gunn, 2003). They should also consider the effects of culture and traumatic experiences on preliterate adults and their families' learning. Events during which parents and siblings can contribute to the child's learning. When oral traditions are seen as a strength, family literacy and parent involvement programs can use them to build literacy skills. Furthermore, educators may garner insights into parents' educational goals for themselves and their children. Classroom in the Ampain Primary School located in the Ampain refugee camp in the South West of Ghana near Takoradi. Photo Credit: UNHCR/Caroline Schmidt. Between 2013 and 2015 accelerated English language classes were provided for about 900 children. Additionally textbooks and teaching material needed to be procured and the Ivorian refugee volunteer teachers needed to be replaced by trained Ghanaian teachers.¹ We also see that there are challenges that are not specific to the refugee students but equally affect Ghanaian and refugee students in public schools. For example, the shortage of textbooks is a national problem; it is not only refugee students who cannot take their textbooks home to study.