

The Hmong Literacy Project: A Study of Hmong Classroom Behavior

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Abstract

Reporting on the Hmong Literacy Project, a first language literacy project for Hmong adults funded by the National Institute for Literacy, this article focuses on research on Hmong classroom behavior that was conducted throughout the project. With the purpose of gathering data from which to make more informed decisions about culturally appropriate curriculum and instruction, the research sought to identify specific classroom behaviors and strategies used by Hmong adults as they learn to read and write in their first language. From among over 180 male and female Hmong adults ranging in age from the early 20's to mid 60's, data was collected through non-participant observation of classes with consultation and translation from Hmong research assistants who were thoroughly knowledgeable about Hmong language and culture, interviews of students and teachers, participant-observation by teachers, and analysis of videotaped classes. Behavior such as cooperative learning behavior, learning through example, concern with explicit direction, reluctance to perform in front of others, and others were identified and analyzed in terms of the cultural foundations of such behavior. Pedagogical implications of the research findings for both first and second language and literacy instruction for Hmong adults are discussed.

Introduction

In 1993, the Hmong Literacy Project, funded by the National Institute for Literacy, taught first language literacy skills to adult Hmong students at a local elementary school in the San Joaquin Valley of California. The project was designed to teach Hmong literacy and then continue with instruction in English language and literacy (pending continued funding and support).

The design and development of the program addressed certain shortcomings of other federal, state, and private programs to teach English language and literacy to Hmong adults. Many of the English as a second language (ESL) programs such as classes offered through GAIN (Greater Avenues for Independence) are

generally not content-relevant for adult Hmong needs and/or demand prior literacy skills. Weinstein-Shr and Lewis (1989) have found that the language, survival functions, and situations assumed in some ESL curriculum and texts for adults did not match the reality in which refugees exist and the situations for which they used language. Downing, Hendricks, Mason, and Olney (1984) argue that a major part of the problem that Hmong students face in learning English is a lack of first language literacy as well as the absence of formal schooling experience. Atkinson (1988) states that the reason that learners without literacy skills may lose interest in some ESL programs is that students cannot keep up in ESL classes due to difficulties in coping with learning both a second language and literacy skills at the same time. Speaking on educational policy and the Hmong, Strouse (1989) sees one of the problems in the education of Hmong adults in different programs was that aspects of some programs were ethnically inappropriate, with some programs containing a curriculum that was unsuitable for illiterates and that failed to take into account the cultural gap that Hmong face. In addition to this, some native-English-speaking teachers in ESL programs may not be familiar with Hmong culture and learning styles, leading to potential misinterpretations, frustrations, and problems due to lack of understanding between teachers and students. In short, problems in the relevance of curriculum to the realities and needs of students, lack of first language literacy to help cope with second language and literacy development, and cultural differences may be among the major sources of failures for programs designed for Hmong adult students.

These are some problems this project sought to address in its implementation of the Hmong literacy program and related research. One of the main goals of the program was to help adults develop Hmong literacy skills so that, among other reasons, they would be better prepared to develop English language and literacy skills later on. Following the Freireian approach, students were in control of the program content and requests for curricular materials, community activities and a newsletter were facilitated. Changes in the original program were made to adjust to the literacy needs and interests of the students, as both students and the Hmong population in general, were extensively surveyed to determine the uses and interests that Hmong adults have for Hmong literacy skills. In short, every effort was made to ensure that the content of the program was relevant to Hmong adult needs and interests.

Finally, the program sought to create a learning environment that was sensitive not only to Hmong needs but also to culturally influenced and individual learning behaviors and strategies. Native Hmong teachers that, through knowledge and experience, were aware of the learning behaviors and needs of adult Hmong students were used in the Hmong literacy project. In keeping with the Freireian approach, the final decision regarding which teachers to hire was left up to the parents who viewed the prepared lessons of each candidate. While future research goals include the study of potential affects that first language literacy development may have on second language and literacy development and on transfer of skills, research in this part of the project focused on identifying and describing such culturally influenced classroom behaviors of Hmong adult students. The purpose of gathering such data was to help teachers in this and other projects develop and implement instructional programs that are more culturally appropriate and sensitive to Hmong needs and learning styles. Such information would help teachers avoid potential misinterpretations of Hmong students' verbal or nonverbal actions and intentions which may inhibit student development of language and literacy skills. This research and its findings are the main focus of this paper.

Some previous studies of the learning behaviors of Hmong students have generally attempted to describe them in terms of cognitive and perceptual style. Worthley (1987), on the basis of data collected from the Group Embedded Figures Test among Hmong refugee students, concluded that Hmong adult male students are primarily field dependent in learning style and use primarily global problem solving strategies. Hvitfeldt (1986), in a microethnographic study of Hmong adults in an ESL and literacy class, identified a number of Hmong classroom learning behaviors and discussed them in terms of field dependent/independent cognitive style or in terms of socialization in oral versus literate and traditional versus modern culture.

Hvitfeldt's study was valuable in, among other things, providing descriptions of three general areas of classroom behavior: student roles and teacher roles, personalization of interaction and content, and classroom activity strategies.

The focus of this study, as with Hvitfeldt's, was on the identification and description of classroom learning behaviors of Hmong adult students. However, the focus was on more in-depth, detailed analysis and description of student learning behaviors more

in terms of influences from the students' culture-specific background knowledge that they have built up through a lifetime of social interaction in Hmong society and culture, rather than in broader issues of relating Hmong behavior to specific cognitive styles and general cognitive consequences of literacy versus orality or traditional versus modern cultures. Such hypothetical issues and related measures are still open to questions of validity and are beyond the focus of this project. The emphasis here is on gathering data to provide knowledge of specific Hmong classroom behavior, and the cultural information or experience that underlie such behavior, to teachers so that they can more effectively understand and interpret such behavior and take it into account in their development and implementation of curriculum and instruction. With this knowledge along with content-relevant material and prior student development of first language literacy skills, programs for ESL instruction of Hmong students may be more successful than previous ones.

The purpose of the qualitative research conducted in the Hmong Literacy Project was to investigate how Hmong literacy is learned by Hmong adults. Research questions studied in this qualitative study were: (1) What specific classroom learning behaviors are manifested in the Hmong adult literacy classroom? and (2) What overt learning strategies do Hmong adults use to learn literacy skills?

Method

An ethnographic study of Hmong classroom behavior was carried out in a series of Hmong adult literacy classes. Enrollment in all the classes was open. Throughout the project, over 180 students of ages 25 to over 60 attended classes with varying regularity, and there were generally eight to twenty adult men and women in attendance at any given time. The majority of students were female, and children also attended classes along with their parents.

The main research strategies employed were non-participant observation, interviews with students, teachers, and cultural informants, teacher observation and recording of verbal and nonverbal behavior, and a limited amount of videotaping of classes. The researchers observed two classes per week for a period of sixteen weeks, then conducted an intensive observation of classes four days per week for eight weeks. Native Hmong research assistants, serving as cultural informants, were present at the

observations to translate verbal behavior and provide cultural information on observed verbal and nonverbal behavior. Field notes of the observations, including descriptions of behavior, transcriptions of translated discourse, and information from cultural informants were kept. Teachers recorded and interpreted observations of verbal and nonverbal behavior on a daily basis. To supplement the observations, two classes per week were videotaped and either translated and transcribed for data analysis or viewed together with a cultural informant and translator.

Results and Analysis

These descriptions portray consistent and related patterns of behavior that are influenced by the cultural background and knowledge that Hmong adult students bring to the classroom. Though some behavior may be consistent with descriptions of certain cognitive styles such as field dependency, matching Hmong behavior to cognitive styles that are “dominant” within a particular culture was not the focus of this study, and any attempts to correlate Hmong student behavior with such here would be largely speculation. The focus here is on cultural influences on behavior.

Cooperative Learning Behavior

The most obvious and ubiquitous classroom behavior that was observed by the non-participant researcher, and mentioned in most of the teacher observation reports of verbal and physical behavior, was the practice of students continually learning from each other and checking each other’s accuracy on different reading, writing, and math tasks. The classroom was usually a continual buzz, with students constantly interacting with each other, asking help from and giving help to their peers, looking over other students’ shoulders. Help was continually given to each other, often unsolicited. Students were very sensitive to those around them and had a keen sense when other students needed help, giving help at the first sign of problem (which was usually when a student stopped what he/she was doing and looked around, laughed at their own mistake, leaned back and forth, or other verbal or nonverbal behavior). Students would pair up or form groups without teacher direction. Some students, for example, would teach each other words and sounds by saying it for other students and having them repeat after them many times. Some students read aloud together, one pointing to the words being read for the other. One student would help another fill

in missing words in worksheet activities. In writing activities, students would constantly be looking over each other's shoulders to see what their neighbors were writing and making comments on their or their neighbor's writing. Sometimes they would exchange, read, and discuss each other's writing. Since there was open enrollment, there would usually be a mix of new students and old students. The old students would watch and check to see if the new students were having any problems (which was often the case) and help them. On many occasions, children were seen helping their mothers and younger siblings in reading and math activities.

Even when the students were taking tests, they would still be continually looking over each other's shoulders, comparing and verifying their work with their neighbors and asking questions. Some of the teachers tried to prohibit this practice, usually with temporary and limited success as students would eventually revert back to this habit.

According to cultural informants and interviews with some of the students, this cooperative behavior has its roots in the importance placed to the group over the individual in Hmong culture. The extended family, or household, is the basic unit of society, and the welfare and needs of this unit take precedence over those of the individual. Being sensitive and helpful to each other is important for keeping harmony within the family. As one informant explained, if one student knew an answer but failed to help another who didn't, he or she would be considered selfish. Also, within the extended family, the education and training of children is not solely the responsibility of the parent but of the extended family as a unit. Everyone within the household takes part in the informal education and training of younger children.

Concern with Explicit Direction and Learning Through Example

There was also a great concern with exactness and clarification. When teachers would direct the class to do an activity, the non-participant observer noticed that an increase in the noise and interaction level would immediately follow the directions. In queries to research assistants in the class at the time of several such instances, it was explained that the students were checking with each other to clarify the instructions and make sure that they all understood what was expected. There was a great concern among students to know exactly what was asked of them. This was

particularly true when students were asked to take a test. Students would be continually asking their classmates for clarification of questions and looking at what their peers were doing. If they could not find out from their peers, students would ask the teacher to clarify the questions and give examples, saying things such as:

“I don’t understand what this question means.”

“Could you give me an example?”

“Do you mean...?”

During one test in particular, it took most of the class time for the teacher to answer questions on and clarify almost every single question on the test. Even straightforward questions that asked for simple facts from the readings, such as “What year did the general come to this country?” was met by questions of “What do you mean?” and requests for examples, at which point the teacher would come up with examples such as “When did you come the U.S. from Thailand?”.

In fact, learning from examples and demonstrations seemed to be a major style of learning among most students. Particularly in the math lessons, there were constant requests for examples and for the teacher to demonstrate on the board. Also, it was observed that, in most instances, the help that was given, solicited or unsolicited, among peers was in the form of modeling. Unless a student specifically asked another student for an explanation, the person giving help would generally show the person how to do the particular task for another student instead of explaining how to do it. When research assistants and teachers were questioned about this, they explained that, when students asked peers for help, peers were expected to do what was asked for others. They further explained that it would be considered rude to try to tell and explain how something was done instead of simply showing them by doing it, unless a student asked for an explanation. One researcher experienced this first hand when a student asked for help on a math problem. As the researcher’s teaching style in general was helping student discover for themselves how to do something, the researcher encouraged the student to try to figure it out with guidance from the researcher. The student seemed to become a little upset, then turned and asked another student to write the answer.

These Hmong students’ frequent requests for examples may have been a way for them to get more information to relate to a known, personal context through which to interpret and incorporate what is being taught into their background knowledge. It may also

be a culture-based learning style. When students were asked, a common response was that it is just the way they learned. Citing research by the Center for Applied Linguistics, Walker (1989) states that the learning style of Hmong children is mainly learning by doing, observation, and example:

Young people watch and listen while cloth is woven, fields plowed and tools made. If they learn a second language they do so by working alongside people from other villages... They learn by example (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1984; cited in Walker, 1989, p. 8).

This type of learning by observation and example seems to be one of the preferred learning styles common among the Hmong students observed in this study.

Answer or Completion of Tasks Prefaced by Expressions of Lack of Ability or Knowledge

Some of the most common phrases continually heard throughout the observations were:

- “I don’t know well, but...”
- “I’m not sure but I’ll try...”
- “I’m embarrassed to say this, but...”
- “I don’t know the answer, but...”

Every single student I observed would say something such as this whenever he or she was asked to do or answer something by the teacher. Students would not volunteer answers, and were generally hesitant to even answer when called upon, even when they knew the answer. When a teacher would ask a student a question, the first response would usually be “I don’t know.” After further prompting (if the teacher perceived that they did know the answer) students would then give their answer. Even the male and female teachers, when they would give researchers their logs and observations would generally say things along the lines of “I’m embarrassed to give you what I have written...” as they handed over the materials.

According to the cultural informants, this was in line with Hmong culture, as there is a general tendency for one to avoid the appearance of “showing off”. General accepted behavior is to be humble about your abilities. In fact, it was stated by students and

cultural informants that the more you know, the more humble you should be. If students volunteered many answers, asked a lot of questions or to talked a lot, they were considered “show-offs” by other students, as in the case of two particular students. If students were called upon to answer, were put in a position to show their abilities, or handed in work, it was considered polite to preface such with expressions of humbleness about their knowledge, abilities, or work.

Related to this is the lack of individual compliments that was observed in the class. It was observed by three research assistants that teachers and students would not give each other direct compliments. A teacher would only directly compliment a group or the whole class, not an individual. Teachers and students would only give individual compliments indirectly, such as through a third party (usually a research assistant) or to the group.

Laughter

Laughter also was a common occurrence in the classroom, so much so that one American observer was disturbed, thinking that the students did not take their education seriously. However, this laughter indicated several things that were quite different from such an observation. Students generally giggled or laughed whenever they made a mistake, were having problems, or were not sure of what they were doing or answers they were giving. This is one of the ways teachers could tell who was having problems. New students in particular, when they were lost in the class, tended to giggle. One could almost guess which students were new and which weren't by judging the amount of giggles and laughter that emanated from each student. Whenever one student laughed whenever he/she made a mistake, other students around him or her would laugh also. According to the research assistants, this was meant as a show of support as a way of “softening the mistake” as they put it. It was a way of helping the student save face when he or she made a mistake. Also, when students handed in their assignments, laughter, along with phrases such as “I don't think it's very good” was a way of showing their humbleness.

Reluctance to perform in front of others

It was observed that students were generally very nervous about performing in front of the class. For example, students were very reluctant to go to the board and write, although some of the teachers

would have students do this. When asked about this, teachers and cultural informants explained that this reluctance was due mainly to fear of making mistakes and looking bad or foolish.

Also, expressions of denial of ability, such as those discussed above, could also be a way of saving face in some contexts, such as when a student was put in a position where he or she was not sure of their ability or knowledge but had to perform in front of others. In one particular instance, the observer heard a male student make this comment to the class on the way to the board: "When you watch someone do it, you know it, but when it comes to actually doing it, especially in front of everybody on the board, you get forgetful."

The research assistant in the class, after translating this, informed the observer that this was the student's way of saving face. Prefacing his performance with this remark was a way of inferring that any potential mistake was not necessarily due to his lack of ability or knowledge but of forgetfulness while performing in front of everyone. Another student said that she felt humiliated when she read aloud and said something wrong, and that this fear was holding her back.

The concern with saving face presented some problems to the program. It was initially decided, upon request by the students and some teachers, to have separate classes for the men and women. However, many of the students, both male and female, were so motivated to learn that they would come to every class they could, so the classes quickly became mixed. However, some of the male students stopped coming to the classes.

Interaction with teachers

Students heavily relied upon the teachers for direction. The teachers selected all the tasks and assignments to be done. At the beginning of the course, one researcher once suggested to some of the teachers to get some input from the students as to what they themselves wanted to learn. The results were generally laughter, puzzled looks, and comments such as "I don't know", "We are stupid." and "Go ahead and do whatever you want." The teachers and one cultural informant explained to us that, in the Hmong culture, it is the teacher's job to know what to teach. Students would not tell teachers their opinions on this because it would be considered rude to tell a teacher what to do. Also, as mentioned above, students would generally ask for help from their peers and rarely from the teacher. It was explained that students ask the

rarely from the teacher. It was explained that students ask the teacher as the last resort out of respect, as asking the teacher means (to the students) that you are giving them extra work. One other aspect of teacher-student interaction was that students would not make eye-contact with teachers. According to teachers and students, it would be disrespectful to look the teacher directly in the eyes.

Reading Aloud and Speaking while Writing

One of the most constant behaviors observed was the practice of students reading aloud as they read and speaking aloud as they write. Only some, not all, of the children would read aloud, but all of the adults would. This was not just sounding out words they had problems with (although they did do that as well) nor was it reading aloud round-robin style by direction of the teacher, as many students were very uncomfortable reading aloud in front of many people and would read only loud enough for themselves or immediate neighbors to hear. This practice was consistent individual reading aloud no matter how fluently they read and wrote. They would read aloud when reading a story or text by themselves (usually in a quiet voice or whispering, almost to the point of subvocalizing but not quite.). They would read aloud when reading in pairs. They would read aloud to themselves what was on the blackboard while they would be copying it down. They would speak aloud when they were doing writing exercises or free writing. When asked why they did this, students responded in a variety of ways:

“I want to hear how I sound.”

“I can tell whether it sounds all right or not.”

“I want to hear if I am reading all right.”

“There is not much difference between oral and written language.”

In general, most students I heard from told me that they understood better when they hear what they are reading and that it was easier to write when they verbalized their thoughts as they wrote them.

When asked, some cultural informants said that they believed that this is related to the oral traditions of the Hmong culture. However, this was stated as a belief, not as knowledge. Since the data is inconclusive, no such claims are made here.

Learning Strategies

The most consistent strategy observed or reported in the teacher observations was the strategy of using imagery as a memory aid, in which students associate a letter with a picture. Students were observed drawing a flower next to the letter P or a cat on top of M (the letters begin words that stand for flower or cat), or associating the letter S with a snake. Many if not most of the students were either observed or reported themselves the use of imagery. There were isolated reports or observations of other strategies, such as: (a) using letters in a song as a memory aid; (b) relating letters to friend's and family member's names; (c) focusing on visually salient features of letters to distinguish and remember; (d) associating sounds of letters and animal sounds; (e) visualizing objects from their memory of their country and farm (such as cows and chickens) to use as aids in math; (f) using physical responses such as hand movements to remember tone group markings; (g) practice through repetition, taking notes (a very common strategy); (h) highlighting (particularly color-coding or making different symbols); and (i) getting help.

Discussion of the Results and Implications

These were the most commonly observed behaviors in the Hmong Literacy Project. Though these findings are valid for the population of adults in the Hmong community of Fresno, California, much of the behaviors observed were similar to those reported by Hvitveld (1986) in another Hmong community. Such similar behaviors include cooperative learning behavior, common denials of knowledge and ability, smiles and laughter, and insistence on explicit direction. It is clear from the data from observations, student interviews, and cultural informants that these student behaviors, as well as those of learning from example and concerns with face, are based upon or influenced by Hmong cultural knowledge and experience. Much of their behavior reflects a culture that emphasizes the group over the individual, cooperation over individual competition, and humility over boastfulness, along with an emphasis on maintaining harmony and face.

In any class, whether Hmong literacy or ESL, for Hmong students, knowledge through which to interpret certain classroom verbal and nonverbal behaviors of students from different cultures is an important asset to any effective teacher. Becoming an effective teacher with Hmong students means developing the cultural

awareness and sensitivity to anticipate, recognize, and even intuit student problems, desires, interests, etc. Student laughter may not necessarily mean that some students are goofing off, not taking the class seriously, or enjoying themselves. As mentioned earlier, it may signal problems, mistakes, and embarrassment, or a sign of support or commiseration from one student to another. The failure to look a teacher in the eyes may be more out of respect than deviousness or discomfort. Cries of “I don’t know.” and other statements of incapability and uncertainty laughter may sometimes be a way for students to appear humble and avoid being a show-off, at which point students may be further encouraged to answer. At other times it may signal lack of knowledge, frustration, and inability to answer or perform. Many times Hmong students said that they didn’t know anything or that they were too old or stupid to learn (even 30-year-old men and women expressed this). Students at times were quite insecure about their abilities to learn, and this showed up in observations as well as teacher observation logs time and again. A teacher has to recognize when cries of “I don’t know” and such are real or just a way of not appearing to be a show-off.

This knowledge, along with a sincere motivation to teach students, made the difference between more and less effective teachers throughout the Hmong Literacy Project. During the project it was observed that certain teachers, particularly one female teacher, were quite effective in terms of student attendance and production. In interviews, traits that students rated most important were the ability to understand student behavior and motivate them, the ability to teach students without putting students into situations which would embarrass them or cause them to lose face, and sincerity. Given a choice to compare these traits with traits such as excellent teaching techniques and different approaches to teaching, students still rated them as most important.

The more effective teachers in the program were very good at reading students’ nonverbal language and inferring their intentions, interests, and desires. They could readily sense when students were having difficulties and quick to adjust to make the instruction more comprehensible without putting any attention to those having difficulties. As mentioned above, students would say that they understood even if they didn’t so as to be polite and not place additional burdens on the teacher on their account. When asked, the teacher and another cultural informant said that it is the teacher’s job to figure out if students are understanding or not in the Hmong

culture. When asked how she did this, teachers mentioned that they could sense from their facial expressions and eyes, the way they looked around at other, and from body language such as leaning back and forth. Teachers also mentioned that students would usually chuckle when they were having problems. For teachers from cultures other than Hmong, the awareness and ability to interpret these often subtle verbal and nonverbal cues would be an important asset in effectively teaching Hmong students.

Also, students expressed how important it is that a teacher doesn't put students in embarrassing situations. There was a big concern among students with keeping face. Understanding what can be potentially embarrassing to students and trying to avoid situations in which they may be embarrassed or lose face should be the concern of teachers as well. Teaching styles and instructional strategies that call for student performance and demonstrations of competence in front of the whole class may put some students in the position of potentially losing face. This seems to be particularly the case of some Hmong men who became increasingly discouraged and dropped out after having to perform and making mistakes at the board and orally in front of other male friends, women and children. Finding alternative ways for some students to perform, ones that are less anxiety-ridden with fear of appearing foolish and losing face, may not only help such students get more inclass practice but also help to keep them in class. Group work, in which students are working with people they are comfortable with and in front of a much smaller audience, is a less threatening arena for student performance and practice. Also, effective teachers need to become adept at quickly ascertaining whether students really do not know an answer, at which point teachers may not press them, or whether students are just being humble and really know the answer, at which point they would encourage students to answer. Teachers should indirectly correct minor errors and, for more serious mistakes, talk to the individual students themselves without making the mistakes obvious to other students. Teachers should also not compliment individual students personally in class. All this is related to not embarrassing the student, as singling out students, for either praise, criticism, or identification of individual problems, may be embarrassing to the student.

Finally, the relationship between a teacher and students is very important, and a teacher who was sincere and truly cared that his or her students learn was very highly regarded by all those

interviewed. One student put it best by saying: “If we [students] don’t open our hearts, nothing will penetrate.” Empathy was considered to be a major asset of a sincere teacher. Students said that teachers should understand the difficulties and frustrations that they face in learning how to read, write, and do math. Two students mentioned that a sincere teacher was also one who gave homework. Students also said how important it is that the teacher be a good motivator who knows how to encourage students, who makes students want to learn and who doesn’t act superior and condescend or talk down to students.

In any strive to reach students and help them learn in the most effective way possible, being a sincere teacher who can understand their difficulties and frustrations and encourages them to do their best may, with some students, be more important than any other aspect of the teacher’s professional behavior and instructional strategies. Above all, it seems that Hmong students place a high value on teacher sincerity. Students can tell when a teacher is just going through the motions or is sincere about wanting to help students learn and better their lives. Though this may be true of students in general, it is particularly important for Hmong students.

One of the reasons that this knowledge and sincerity of teachers is important for Hmong students is that students are so heavily reliant upon teachers for direction. Students place a lot of trust in teachers and expect them to know what to teach and how to effectively teach them. Relying upon the teacher for direction and for selection curriculum does not necessarily mean that students expect to have no input; it is just that the input is more indirect. The teachers who were most effective in the project were sensitive to what students wanted to learn without having to directly ask them. As mentioned above, students expect the teacher to know best, and effective teachers were able to infer what activities and topics were most interesting and relevant to their lives through general discussion with and observation of the students. As with any group of students, an effective teacher knows how to motivate students. Part of that motivation is knowing what students are interested in and what is useful and relevant to their immediate lives. For Hmong adults, maintenance of language and culture, correspondence with relatives and friends, and gaining information about the community, their home country, and the world at large seem to be the main things that drive efforts to achieve literacy in Hmong. Topics that teachers based their lessons on included ones such as family issues,

culture, generation gap, cultural conflicts, marriage, sickness, and other topics that were relevant to students' immediate lives. However, for second language literacy and language development, a different set of motivational factors may apply. As Weinstein-Shr and Lewis (1989) found, assumptions about language and literacy skills that Hmong or other second language students need to survive may not always hold true. For any ESL program to be successful, information about these motivational factors and the purposes for which Hmong have both immediate and long-term need for English language and literacy must be gathered through observation, survey, interviews, and/or any other appropriate measure.

Any effective teacher has to decide which activities work best with particular students or mixes of students. In the case of Hmong adult students, one of the most common behaviors observed were students helping and learning from each other. Therefore, it would seem that pairs and small groups may be the ideal units for learning in the classroom. While individual and whole class activities may also have a place, total reliance on such would thwart Hmong adults' inclinations toward helping and teaching others and may serve to inhibit students' learning. Cooperative learning groups may have a place, since such learning structures would not inhibit group members from helping each other. However, in many cooperative learning activities, students are assigned different tasks, and pair and small group activities in which students work on the same or similar tasks may be more in line with the way Hmong students' work together.

As repeated requests for examples were consistently observed throughout the classes, learning through demonstrations, modeling, and examples may be preferred by many Hmong students. In the classroom, frequent use of concrete examples through which students can contextualize what they are learning in terms of their own experiences and background knowledge may be more effective than other instructional strategies. It is important that teachers help students build bridges between what they know and what is new. For teaching skills such as higher order reading skills, a form of reciprocal teaching which utilizes modeling and demonstration may be more appropriate.

One thing that program developers and teachers have to consider is student beliefs about and concepts of literacy and how to achieve it. This concern was very evident in the Hmong Literacy Project. Not only many of the students but also all of the teachers had

experienced phonic approaches in their home country or in the refugee camps in Thailand, according to the teachers and research assistants, and felt that any other way of teaching literacy skills was not real teaching, not being serious. Both teachers and students repeatedly resisted attempts to get them to rely less on a phonics approach and more on other whole to part approaches (such as whole-language and literature-based approaches) in which the emphasis is on reading text in context rather than individual letters. In spite of the original program design and these repeated attempts, emphasis throughout much of the program by both the teachers and students was generally on learning consonants, vowels, blends and clusters, tone marks, etc., more as isolated bits than in a context. Though this preoccupation with part to whole runs counter to some observations of Hmong students as having a whole to part learning style (Hvitfeldt, 1986), this emphasis on part to whole phonics may have been more of a result of exposure to styles that had been ingrained upon teachers and students from their prior experiences in learning literacy skills in other educational situations rather than an indication of any preferred learning style. Therefore, the information from this study does not necessarily invalidate Hvitfeldt's (1986) inferences from her observations.

Another example of student beliefs affecting their literacy development concerns observations of students' speaking aloud while both reading and writing. This practice was widespread, and many of the students when interviewed said that they believed that they comprehended and composed better if they spoke aloud. However, there were also reports, some by the same students that believe that they understand better by reading aloud, that some students were having a difficult time remembering earlier parts of the text they have read as they progressed further through the text. It seems that these students were paying too much attention and cognitive processing capacity to decoding the text that there was little left for comprehension. Though the students were not always "sounding out" words, this reading aloud may have been contributing to their difficulties in comprehending and recall.

What all this information indicates is that conflicts and differences concerning the concepts and beliefs of the reading and learning-to-read process among students, teachers, program developers, etc., may lead to situations in which students (and even teachers) may rely on approaches that are not effective due to prior beliefs. Even if presumably more effective ways of teaching reading

are implemented, success may be more limited due to both student (and/or teacher) resistance due to such beliefs. With Hmong students, teachers are expected to know what is best, but if teachers, due to prior experiences and/or training, also believe in certain instructional practices that may or may not be suitable to certain learning styles or be effective with students, then teacher selection and training takes on much more importance than perhaps in other programs. In second language and literacy programs, native-speaking English teachers have to be aware of students' prior educational experiences and be prepared to perhaps meet initial resistance to approaches that are different from students' prior experiences. Teachers will have to be tolerant and adept at encouraging students to try new approaches. With the trust that students put in teachers, once students begin to see that other approaches may work for them, they may be more than willing to change and follow new directions. However, teachers may have to expect to put in much additional initial effort to get to that point.

In a future program in which these Hmong students (or any Hmong students already literate in Hmong) begin to develop English literacy and language skills, the Language Experience Approach may at least initially be a more effective approach for literacy development in English. This approach uses language produced by the students, either orally to a teacher who dictates or written, as the text through which reading skills are taught. If students read text with vocabulary and structure they haven't learned yet, it may encourage them to overrely on decoding. Giving them exposure to reading over and over English words that they know may help them to begin processing the words more holistically.

Most of the learning strategies observed or reported for learning individual letters and consonant clusters were visually oriented, as students made associations between objects they visualized and physical features of letters or associations between visualized objects and sounds of letters. For learning math, much fewer overt learning strategies were observed, and a lack of effective strategies may have had an effect upon their learning, as most of the complaints about forgetting at home what they learned in school that were observed or reported in teacher observation logs occurred in the math lessons. However, there may have been covert and unobservable strategy usage that occurred during math classes that were not observed, and teachers' logs sometimes reflected comments concerning combined

literacy and math classes, so this speculation cannot be confirmed by the data gathered here.

To help students develop effective learning strategies, teachers may experiment with introducing different strategies in the classroom for student consideration. For example, for learning vocabulary, the Keyword method, in which visual associations are made between meaning and sounds, may work for some Hmong students. However, it is important for teachers not to assume that one particular learning strategy or type of strategy would work for all students of a particular culture. A number of other individual learning strategies were observed, and among any group of students from any culture, individual variation in the learning strategies students use may be greater than one may think. Different strategies may be introduced and covered in lessons, but they may not work for all. It is important for teachers to help students discover and use strategies that work for them.

Concluding Remarks

As seen from the descriptions and discussions here, there are numerous ways in which Hmong student behaviors may be different from those of American students or those of students from other cultures. Hopefully this information will help teachers, administrators, and other educational professionals understand better not only what Hmong adult students do but also why as well. It is easy to imagine how uninformed teachers can easily misinterpret Hmong verbal and nonverbal behavior.

Caution must be advised in the interpretation and applicability of these findings. While there was some replication of results from studies such as Hvitfeldt's (1986), these results, for the most part, are valid mainly for these students in this particular region. Also, the Hmong are a flexible people who have adapted to a number of situations, and behaviors can change to meet new conditions. Some Hmong students, such as the two labeled "show-offs" by other Hmong students in this study, may individually vary in their behavior as they seek to adapt, survive, and acculturate to different degrees to different social and educational situations. It is the responsibility of teachers to do a little ethnographic work themselves, watch for patterns of behavior, seek out sources of cultural information, find out what topics and materials are relevant to the immediate lives of their students, and try to interpret verbal and nonverbal behavior without an overdue amount of influence

from our own cultural filter through which we perceive the world around us.

In summary, the Hmong Literacy Project, in seeking to provide a quality program that avoided the shortcomings of other programs, gave students experience in a formal education setting and a solid foundation in first language literacy skills that could be transferred to the context of second language and literacy instruction, provided the students with content that was relevant to their interests and needs, and made every effort to take into account Hmong classroom and learning behavior. It is hoped that the information on Hmong classroom behavior gathered from the qualitative research in this project will help teachers in other projects facilitate language and literacy development among their Hmong adult students.

Further research should be done to find out more about the cognitive learning strategies that Hmong students utilize to learn not only Hmong literacy but English language and literacy as well. Many of these strategies may not be overt, and different methods such as a think-aloud protocol can be employed to investigate these. Also, observation to investigate whether these behaviors carry over to other educational and social situations should be conducted.

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