

**The Grammar and Vocabulary Challenges of
Generation 1.5 Hmong College Women
in Academia**

By

Kim Huster, Ph.D.

**Hmong Studies Journal
Volume 13(1), 30 Pages**

Abstract

Higher education institutions in the United States are seeing steadily increasing numbers of Generation 1.5 students from long-term immigrant populations. As part of this trend, more and more Hmong young people are successfully completing graduate and undergraduate degrees; however, by their own admission, many continue to struggle with English and are often frustrated in their college experiences by ongoing language challenges. A narrative research study of 13 Hmong women at a small private liberal arts college in northern California revealed specific types of grammatical and vocabulary limitations experienced by these students. These limitations are demonstrated through samples taken from oral and written stories told by the women. The article concludes with a discussion of the possible reasons for these limitations and then suggestions for ways that teachers and students may be able to enhance the language and literacy development process for Generation 1.5 populations including the Hmong.

Keywords: Hmong Americans, Higher Education

Introduction/Background

The term *Generation 1.5* has been defined in various ways. Generally, the label is used to describe the in-between status of a generation of young people whose characteristics fall between those of first generation immigrants, who actually emigrated from their home countries, and those of second generation immigrants, who often assimilate quickly to the culture around

them. Historically, this term was used to reference young people who were born outside of the U.S. (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988); however, the definition that was adopted for the purpose of this research project is based on the definition of Roberge (2002), who proposed that the designation be expanded to include U.S.-born children of immigrants who are raised in environments where English is not the primary language of the home and community. Using this definition, many Hmong American students would be considered part of the Generation 1.5 population.

Recent research in the field of second language teaching has noted rising numbers of linguistically diverse students in college and universities in the U.S., especially in parts of the country with high immigrant populations. In the three years between 1998 and 2001, UCLA, a California state university, experienced a tripling of the number of first-year immigrant ESL students who were born in the United States or had attended American schools since elementary school (Holten, 2002). Goen et al. (2002) related similar changes that occurred in the student population of the ESL program at San Francisco State University, where the proportion of the ESL student population who had been in the country for more than ten years had grown from one-third to two-thirds in nearly the same period of time. The Hmong have contributed to this rising Generation 1.5 college population as evidenced in a summary of the 2000 U.S. Census data produced by Hmong National Development, Inc. and the Hmong Cultural and Resource Center. Yang and Pfeifer (n.d.) note that according to census data, from 1990 to 2000, the percentage of Hmong who had graduated from high school rose from 11% to over 27%. In addition, in 1990, only 3 percent of Hmong had Bachelor's degrees, but by 2000, the number had risen to nearly 12% holding Associates or Bachelor's degrees and 1.5% with graduate degrees. 2010 census figures show that 25.9% of Hmong Americans over age 25 possess an Associates Degree or some college with 11.3% holding a Bachelor's Degree and 3.3% a graduate or

professional degree (U.S. Census, 2010). A growing body of studies have examined the experiences of Hmong Americans in higher education (Xiong and Lee, 2011; Huffcutt, 2010; Khang, 2010; Yang, 2010; Yang, 2008; Moua, 2007; Vue, 2007; Crevier, 2002; Garrity, 2002; Boshier, 1997; Lee, 1997). To date, however, researchers have not investigated the important issues which are the focus of the present study.

This article will present the results of a research study which was conducted in the spring of 2010. The primary focus of this study was to collect memories and stories related to the language development experiences of Hmong female college students in an attempt to find answers to the puzzle of how Generation 1.5 students who come from homes where English is not the primary language can receive all of their education in English, yet are described in college as still being in the process of learning English (Harklau, Siegal, & Losey, 1999). Although the purpose of this narrative research study was to develop a collection of stories to chronicle the language and literacy development experiences of this group of students, the data provided the researcher with an opportunity to closely examine the English language patterns and observe the particular language usage structures of this group and the ways in which those structures differed from standard American English usage. The data collection process for this study resulted in nearly one thousand pages of text, including journal responses written by the participants as well as transcriptions of recorded individual interviews with the researcher and group discussions between the participants. Through this large sample of written and spoken language from the Hmong women who participated in this study, the researcher was able to identify language patterns that were shared by many, if not all, of the participants. Furthermore, in addition to the grammatical issues, the participants' responses, or stories, also revealed another key area which they felt contributed to their challenges in the college classroom: the

development of academic vocabulary. Although many non-minority college students might also lament that they struggle with vocabulary, the women in this study felt that their lexical challenges were a direct result of their home language and culture and that they experienced these challenges to a greater degree than most of their native-English-speaking classmates.

Methods

Using a narrative, qualitative research design, this project aimed to examine the language and literacy development experiences of the Hmong women at a small Christian university. Because of the multiple intersecting and contributing factors involved in literacy development and language learning, traditional empirical research methods fall short in providing a satisfactory picture of this lifelong process. Relying heavily on the observations and conclusions of the observer-researcher, empirical research generally presents an outsider's (etic) perspective of a particular phenomenon by explaining the experience of the research subjects from the viewpoint of the researcher. The goal of this study was to present an insider (emic) perspective using the participants' own words. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their privacy and identities.

Many of the research studies involving Generation 1.5 college students are somewhat dissatisfying because they present the literacy development process in a fragmented way. In addition, the research often contains misrepresentations and overgeneralizations, especially concerning populations like the Hmong, who are often subsumed under more general categories, including Asian American, which include vastly different Asian ethnic groups who may come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and represent diverse educational, economic, and immigration histories.

In contrast to empirical research, narrative inquiry offers more potential for examining multifaceted processes such as the development of biliteracy because it “begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 54). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that people are “embodiments of lived stories” (p. 43), so “lived experience” (p. xxii) is the logical starting point for all social science inquiry. In addition, since “[e]xperience happens narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19), researchers should study it narratively. The data outcome of this research project was a collection of *lived stories*, vignettes of remembered experiences, which allowed the researcher to examine the differences and commonalities in the experiences of these women.

Richness and authenticity can be captured by using the students’ own words as a primary source of data. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) advocate that *small stories* are a more effective means of exploring identity than the larger narratives which are the traditional products of narrative research. Furthermore, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) argue that first-person narratives provide a much more meaningful source of data than third-person observations. They also assert that the refusal to recognize the importance of first-person accounts of bilinguals regarding their own experiences, in effect, subverts the experiences of an already marginalized population. Of further relevance to this study, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) provide support for legitimizing “retroactive” first-person narratives (p. 158) as a valuable source of research data. Liamputtong & Ezzy (2005) agree that memories have the potential for empowering and liberating marginalized people and that memories have the added advantage of being fairly easy to obtain and can link theory with lived experience.

Haug (1987) contends that reducing one’s experiences to writing imbues those experiences with a greater value and significance. Furthermore, she believes that the act of

writing can turn the subject of the research into a researcher herself and be a source of empowerment for the writer—especially a writer who is part of a subjugated population:

Writing is a transgression of boundaries, an exploration of new territory. It involves making public the events of our lives, wriggling free of the constraints of purely private and individual experiences. From a state of modest insignificance we enter a space in which we can take ourselves seriously. As an alternative to accepting everyday events mindlessly, we recalled them in writing, in an attempt to identify points in the past where we succeeded in defending ourselves against the encroachment of others. (p. 36)

Through the use of writing, which is often a site of conflict for multilingual students, and the telling of personal stories, which individuals often consider insignificant, this study had the potential for empowering those who participated.

Of the 20 Hmong women on campus at the time this study was conducted, 13 volunteered to participate after being presented with a description of the project and the time commitment involved. Once they started the project, all of the women continued and fully participated until the end. Background and demographic information was gathered through the use of questionnaires. Only two of the thirteen were born outside of the United States, and both came to the U.S. before they started school. The women ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-six. Three were first-year college students, three were second-year, one was in her third year, three were graduating at the end of the semester in which the research was conducted, and three were recent graduates from the undergraduate program who were pursuing advanced degrees. The group also represented several different fields of study: five were in education, three in Christian ministry majors, three in business, and two in pre-nursing.

Because one of the goals of the primary investigator was to engage these university students as co-researchers, in the initial informational meeting, the women were presented with summaries of the research regarding the college writing challenges of Generation 1.5 college students. The participants were asked for suggestions for writing and discussion topics to begin exploring their own experiences. From this initial meeting, a set of questions or prompts were compiled to use as a starting point from which to begin writing their stories. Their writing served as the foundation for succeeding group discussions and interviews. Topics for writing and discussion included the language and literacy practices in their homes, their successes and frustrations with their two languages, their educational experiences both before and during college, and finally their roles as women in the Hmong community and the influence of that role on their experience in higher education.

The stories were collected through a recursive process of journal writing, group discussion, and individual interviews with the primary researcher. When the women came together after writing their stories, they read the stories aloud in the group. As each woman read her story, she often added details and further explanation orally, and after each story was read, the other group members had a chance to ask questions or to share personal experiences that were similar to those of the reader. After each group meeting, the journals were collected, and the recorded conversations were transcribed. In preparation for individual interviews, the researcher reviewed the journals and transcriptions and prepared specific questions for each individual to clarify information and to fill in details of her stories. The topics that were salient in the group discussions subsequently served as a guide in developing the next set of writing prompts.

After three cycles of this process, the researcher turned to the task of constructing short narratives from the information gathered through these three forms of data. To fully represent the stories, the most complete version of the individual's story served as the foundation of the narrative. In the retelling of these stories, great care was taken to maintain the integrity of the participants' own words; however, the researcher took the liberty of inserting additional information provided by the storyteller herself into the appropriate place in her most complete account of the story.

The researcher was careful to re-construct these stories, retaining the original words, intent, and tone of the participant. There was only one exception to the use of the participants' exact words. Many of the women demonstrated to some degree their generation's dialectical language distinctions—the extensive use of the word *like*, for example. In cases where these oral insertions and filler phrases were excessive or distracting, they were removed from the stories in order for the reader to be able to focus more fully on the content of the story. Grammatical and word choice distinctions that might be considered inaccurate use of the language were retained to allow readers to see for themselves the language usage of each of the participants.

Once the stories were completed, recurrent themes were identified, and the stories were organized according to these themes. Some of the more prominent categories that were identified were conflicts between American and Hmong language and culture, educational experiences before and during college, experiences involving gender, culture, and education, and feelings regarding perceived inadequacies in the skills and vocabulary expected for college reading and writing. Once the stories were coded according to topic, they were analyzed for commonalities and differences across the individual participants, and the researcher explored the

possible impact that those experiences had on the language and literacy development of the women in the group.

The study was limited to women for several reasons. First of all, since the subject matter had the potential to be personal and intimate, the researcher expected that a single gender design would increase the likelihood of open and honest discussion. Secondly, within the Hmong culture, the attitude toward education may be very different for men and women. Thirdly, Reinharz (1992) strongly makes a case that women are especially suited for interviewing and studying other women: "A woman listening with care and concern enables another woman to develop ideas, construct meaning, and use words that say what she means" (p. 24). Thus, the design of this study maximized the benefits of a female researcher.

This group of women proved to be especially suited for this type of project. Because the Hmong culture is a collective culture and values oral interaction, the women wholeheartedly embraced the discussion and sharing of personal experiences. In addition, most of them knew each other and the researcher quite well before beginning the study, so they were able to trust the group with their stories. Finally, as college students, they had the analytical and writing skills to effectively describe and evaluate their personal experiences and those of their peers. These factors greatly contributed to the success of this research design.

Generally, the women who participated in this study felt that they struggled in multiple ways in their college classes. Most of them stated that their written assignments were often returned to them with copious red marks highlighting their errors. In addition, they felt that, compared to their native-speaking peers, they lacked the critical thinking skills and academic vocabulary necessary to participate as fully as they would have liked in the college environment. The following section will present a brief discourse analysis of the types of linguistic and

structural variations that the researcher observed in the written and spoken language of this group. The data presented will also include the participants' descriptions, in their own words, of their perceived shortcomings in the mastery of academic vocabulary.

Results

Most of the women who participated in this study voiced dissatisfaction with their English language ability—especially for the purposes of writing for college classes and participation in the college classroom. The participants in this study viewed themselves as struggling with specific language skills, namely grammar and academic vocabulary, which they felt limited their ability to communicate as effectively as many of their native-English-speaking classmates. The researcher requested that the students give specific examples and evidence that they had limitations in these areas, and several of them were able to identify and describe specific situations through which they had developed their perceptions that they were weak in these domains. Samples of student classroom writing were not part of the data collected in this study, but in the writing and speaking that the participants did as part of the study, the researcher was able to identify specific surface error issues exhibited to greater and lesser degrees by this group of women. In addition to those surface errors which had little impact on meaning or communication, the women themselves often voiced frustration with the limitations of their vocabulary, which they feel affect their ability to perform academically as well as they would like.

When compared with Standard American English, the language used by the women in this study demonstrates anomalies in the use of irregular forms of nouns and verbs, grammatical

inconsistencies surrounding the use of non-count nouns, and subject-verb agreement errors, in addition to a few other miscellaneous divergences from standard usage, which will also be exemplified below. These deviations from Standard American English were salient in both the writing and speech of these women. As would be expected, the frequency of these patterns varied from person to person, though the language of none of these participants was free of these distinctions. As the examples below will demonstrate, these easily noticeable language structures are likely to be bothersome to college-level instructors despite the fact that these errors do not significantly impair the meaning or intent of the written or spoken communication. By the participants' own admission and by observations made by the researcher during the study, problems in communication and comprehension seem to be more directly related to difficulty with vocabulary than grammar. At times, the women had trouble answering questions posed by the researcher because they did not really understand a word in the question. They voiced that this also happens to them in classroom situations.

Samples of the grammatical errors from the data will be presented first, followed by examples of difficulties with the accurate use of vocabulary. Finally, this section will include stories from the women regarding their vocabulary and critical thinking challenges.

Grammar Examples

While the Generation 1.5 Hmong students who participated in this study do not have a distinctive pronunciation or accent, the examples below will illustrate that they do exhibit language pattern alterations which are related to English morphology and syntax. Morphology is a linguistic term that refers to the way that words are constructed, including the roots, prefixes, and suffixes; syntax relates to the arrangement of words into phrases and sentences. Although professors may not be satisfied with the written language of some linguistically diverse students,

as the examples of grammatical errors listed below will demonstrate, the meaning is generally clear despite the errors. Surface errors such as those highlighted below are often obvious even to casual listeners; however, the careful examination of the data allowed the researcher to identify patterns in the types of errors made by the women in the research group. Examples from multiple participants have been included to show that these language forms were not limited to one or two of the participants.

Native English speakers seldom give conscious attention to whether the past tense or plural forms of a word are regular or irregular; in most cases, they are automatically able to form the required morphological changes with very infrequent mistakes. An example of an irregular verb form is the word *break*. If this verb were not irregular, the past tense of *break* would be *breaked*; however, because it is irregular, the past tense form is *broke*. Here are some examples which demonstrate that the women in the study tended to regularize noun pluralizations and verb tenses which have irregular forms. In the following examples, the regularized forms have been italicized for ease of identification.

- I think he started to believe in that lie, and it *hurted*. (Emma, individual interview, April 11, 2010)
- We still *seeked* for a higher education. (Paj Chia, group discussion, April 11, 2010)
- I think the pastors, they see it and they appreciate the contribution the *womens* make (Hli Chia, group discussion, April 12, 2010)
- Cause we have 12 kids in our family, so me and Paj Chia were the middle *childs* (Chu Ka, group discussion, February 1, 2010)

Another type of variation that appeared frequently were errors surrounding the use of non-count or mass nouns. Non-count nouns are simply described as nouns that cannot be counted. For example, *education* is a non-count noun. Non-count nouns generally do not have a plural form. In addition, non-count nouns require the speaker to make certain syntactic choices regarding the words surrounding a non-count noun. For example, *much education* is correct, but

many education is not. The participants in this study demonstrated several kinds of errors associated with the use of count and non-count nouns, such as pluralizing the nouns and using the incorrect quantifiers and determiners.

- ...a lot of my professors are...telling us that they are going to be correcting our *grammars*, and everything. (Hli Chia, group discussion, January, 30, 2010)
- They don't want to take that position because they see so *many* drama that they don't want to be in charge of it. (Pajka, group discussion, April 12, 2010)
- And my oldest sister will call me, too, and just ask me for *advices*. (Pajka, individual interview, March 1, 2010)
- They were illiterate so they couldn't help us in our *schoolworks* (Hli Chia, group discussion, February 20, 2010)
- When I had used to put down Hmong as my first language, the school *staffs* would always ask what I'm mixed with (Meh, journal, February 22, 2010)
- You can have *as much* PhDs as you want and stuff and you can come back to your Hmong community or your tribe or your clan and they still don't value your voice cause you're a woman. (Nkauj Choua Shoua, group discussion, January 30, 2010)
- We're supposed to have *as much* kids as they have right now (Paj Chia, individual interview, May 4, 2010).
- This meant that they really didn't want to do homework unless they had to because they were able to do all *those* other stuff (Youa, group discussion, April 11, 2010).

Subject-verb agreement errors were also common in the language of the women in this study.

In academic English, writers are expected to ensure that the form of the verb matches its subject in number (singular or plural) and in person (first, second, or third person). As evident below, errors occur most frequently in the third person.

- My dad and my mom *was* just like, "Oh." (Emma, individual interview, March 15, 2010)
- Why *does* your parents want to be missionaries? (Emma, individual interview, March 15, 2010)
- Where I went to elementary school, there *wasn't* any Hmong girls except for one. (Kaying, group discussion, February 22, 2010)
- I am so glad that I'm bilingual because I love to help those Hmong families that *doesn't* speak English. It makes me happy knowing that I can be a middle man for those that *needs* translating (Chu Ka, journal, February 22, 2010)
- My mom and dad *does* not read or write English (Paj Chia, group discussion, February 20, 2010)
- There *are* a lot of jargon in the teaching field that you need to know and you need to be able to say it correctly (Youa, individual interview, March 21, 2010)
- When my parents realized how my sisters and I strive for higher education, my parents *wants* to support us more (Pajka, journal, April 12, 2010).

Lastly, a couple other language structure differences which are very prevalent but do not fall into one of the above categories are the use of *mines* as a possessive pronoun and the non-standard use of *too* and *both*, instead of *either*. Here are some examples of these structures:

- I can read *mines* (Hli Chia, group discussion, March 14, 2010)
- I think of putting someone's needs before *mines*. (Nkauj Choua Shoua, journal, March 14, 2010)
- I still feel insecure about my English and Hmong. I don't feel confident in *both* (Mai Mee, group discussion, February 22, 2010).
- They're not the best brothers, *too* (Nkauj Ntxawm, group discussion, April 11, 2010).
- They supported me in my education but they weren't able to help me with schoolworks or the financial aid application... No one from my family went to the only musical plays that I have been in, *too* (Hli Chia, group discussion, March 14, 2010).

Vocabulary Examples

Holten and Mikesell (2007) made the point in their study that although Generation 1.5 students have been exposed to academic vocabulary, they have not mastered the use of that vocabulary. In order to truly know a word, a person must know many characteristics associated with that word, including the pronunciation and spelling of the word, the root form of the word and its possible variations, the sentence patterns that the word requires, and common collocations or words that frequently occur before and after that word (Laufer, 1997).

Many of the participants voiced a concern that their vocabulary was a significant limiting factor in their ability to use English confidently and effectively. In response to probing by the investigator, the participants were able to give specific examples of challenging vocabulary words. Some excerpts of imprecise vocabulary use taken from the stories will be presented below. These examples are followed by actual stories told by the women. Their stories reveal their awareness that their vocabulary limitations have a significant impact on their writing and their ability to participate effectively in class.

In most of the examples below, the meaning and intent are fairly clear. However, the word is not used in quite the same way that a native-speaker might use it, or in some cases, the syntax surrounding the word is not quite standard usage. The following are a few instances in which words were used in ways which varied slightly from the standard way of using them.

- They were very *objected* to me going away to college. (Meh, group discussion, March 15, 2010)
- In high school, it felt like my writing skills went on a *recession* (Hli Chia, final questionnaire, May 2010)
- Well first I would *research* on what I was supposed to say, and so that I can like write down exactly what I was thinking about and go back to do the intro and then I switch things around to like have them *compartmentalize* with each other (Hli Chia, individual interview, May 5, 2010).
- I remember my mom would always *say* stories like when she was like 5 years old, she would be carrying a baby on her back (Pajka, group discussion, February 1, 2010).
- And he did not enroll into college because he said that he wanted to work to save money from McDonalds in order to get a car for when he does go to college. I was like, “No, that’s just a *saying*.” (Chu Ka, group discussion, February 1, 2010)
- I *frustrate* often at finding the right word (Chu Ka, individual interview, March 24, 2010)
- I’m glad I have this decision I can make instead of, you know, getting married young and then having kids already like a lot of my friends and they can’t even go to school if they want to, so I’m glad that I have this decision. Instead of being *indulgent* to my culture, and listening to my parents, getting married young, by now I would have like three kids already, so I’m happy at the point that I’m here (Paj Chia, individual interview, May 4, 2010).
- The Hmong language contain words that is difficult to find meaning in the English language and vice versa, so it becomes *contemplative* when one knows two languages because of the knowledge of both languages (Chu Ka, group discussion, Feb 22, 2010)
- We still pursue our education and aim for higher goals, but we are still *engraved* to our families and the needs of them (Chu Ka, group discussion, April 12, 2010).

Here are several personal examples provided by the women, describing how they perceive that they fall short in terms of their understanding of advanced vocabulary. Phoua, a second-year transfer student, shared about some specific words that she had had difficulty with recently. The examples that she gives are not words that one would expect college students to struggle with.

People kept on talking about, “Stop procrastinating.” And I was like, “What’s procrastinating?” They’re like, “That’s when you do your homework the last minute.” I

was like, “Oh, OK. That’s a new word I just added to my vocab.” Then like I guess like perception and what’s the other word...perception and what’s, oh my gosh, I don’t remember the other word, but... I can’t remember that word, it was like similar to it, but it’s...oh, perspective. I always have those two mixed up, but when I like read it in a sentence, I was like, “Oh, OK, it’s not perspective, it’s perception,” so I have those two mixed up (individual interview, March 25, 2010).

Mai Mee is planning to pursue her teaching credential. As Mai Mee talks about her limitations in vocabulary, she also describes her perceptions about flaws in her critical thinking ability.

I don’t feel like I have a big enough vocabulary cause I guess just hearing other people talk with you, they use a lot of big words. Sometimes when people speak out in classes, like other students or my peers, there’s some times I don’t know what they mean because I’ve never heard [the words] before. Or like I’ve heard of it, but I don’t remember the definition or what it actually means. For the critical thought, I just realize [my weakness] sitting in class and listening to how other students catch on like with just reading a book or something and just critical thinking about it and disagreeing or agreeing with it, and why they disagree with it or why they agree with it. They understand what the author’s trying to say. I can’t grasp that as fast as they can. After they say what their thoughts are, then I would understand it, you know. I know when I read by myself, I understand what the author is trying to say but I don’t really go to the point of what he or she is really saying. Sometimes I feel like maybe it’s just how we were brought up like in a different culture where we weren’t supposed to think critically on our own because a lot of us, our parents would say, “You know we’re always right, and you have to listen,” and we always listened to them. So when we’re in class, we always just listen and we think that the answers are always correct because they know more than we do (individual interview, March 24, 2010).

Youa, a recent graduate who was also pursuing a career in education, is a little older than many of the other participants in this study and demonstrates astute perception and keen self-monitoring regarding her language choices. She presents as a very professional and competent young woman, yet she voiced significant feelings of inadequacy with her vocabulary and communication abilities. She describes why she is hesitant to use some words or is unable to pull them out of her mental lexicon.

I know I don’t have enough vocabulary because I don’t have big words... I’m very limited to just the everyday, the easiest way to say things, the easiest way to put down in words. I’m not articulate. I wish I can use bigger words in my everyday speaking and

writing. When I'm just with friends and with people I'm comfortable with, I don't really care, but once you're in an interview, you start feeling like you don't have the right...you don't seem as smart or as higher upper class or whatever. If I'm not sure about something, I try not to write it. I change it to something more simple that I know is correct. That's my technique to making sure I don't try too hard and just make a fool out of myself too. Then in speaking sometimes, as I say in meetings, I try. If I want to use a word, and I think maybe that is the right word, I still won't use it because I'm not sure if it's correct because I feel not using it is better than using it incorrectly. You hear other people speak and you see the way they write, and I'm usually really good about understanding what they say. It's just that I don't have [the word] in my dictionary. I don't have it memorized or have it in my own personal dictionary to where I can just use it whenever I want. Now if I do see it, I can use it, or if I have it in the back of my head at that very moment...you see, I think my vocabulary, the book in my mind...it's not big enough, where I'm not able to store the words that I would like to store so I don't remember them when I want to use them. And I think that maybe the words that I want to know, maybe the reason they're not in my dictionary is because I don't know all rules for using them, so then I feel insecure using them. Sometimes it gets frustrating when I know that I can't use the words. I can't use big words, or I can't use these words I want to use because I don't have it, and then that frustrates me. In [education] classes, we talk about how you want to teach your students the academic language, and I sometimes I feel like, "How am I going to be a teacher if I don't even know, if I don't use academic language as much as I should." I think I have to do a lot more reading because I feel like if you don't practice it...and with me being afraid of using words because I may not know them...I don't practice it, but I think if you read it enough in books or, then that, in a way, that's practicing and so when the time does come for you to use it... And I think that's the problem because I'm so afraid of using words, I don't use them anymore and when you don't practice them, you start forgetting, or you start losing them. I don't know. I just need to do more. I need to practice more academic language.

I honestly believe, I'm convinced, that if I was to take someone who's more native, their English is their first language, and if I was to be able to take out their dictionary from their heads and take mine out. I know for sure that I won't have as much as them. We [second language users] don't use the language as often. I mean, because you're [native English speakers] always speaking English, so yes, you're not using academic language, but yet you're still using proper English that makes you use certain words that for us, we would never really use because we never have to. Because at home, we don't need to and with our friends, we're already speaking street language anyway. And so I feel like, yes you don't have to purposely use academic language to really practice certain rules. For us, we don't practice it at all except for school, and at school, you don't speak that much either to your teachers. I mean, mainly you listen to what they say, or what they write (individual interview, March 21, 2010).

In the above story, in addition to describing her own frustrations and experiences, Youa brings up an important issue which is often discussed in second language acquisition studies—that

practicing using a word in interactional situations is vital to truly mastering the nuances of a using a particular word.

Emma, who is pursuing a postgraduate seminary degree, was one of the most vocal about her embarrassment and disappointment regarding her English ability, even though she is quite articulate and analytical as evidenced by her written and verbal contributions to this study.

Emma did not feel limited by her English ability prior to entering college, but when she attempted to participate in college classes, she began to feel awkward and unprepared. She describes how she developed a close friendship with a native English speaker with whom she could practice and discuss her questions about vocabulary or complicated concepts.

At first it was definitely different because the majority of the students were white, unlike the public schools that I went to. This made it a struggle because I was really intimidated and felt strange being the only Hmong student (or minority) in the class—I'm not sure where it came from but I didn't feel adequate as a college student because it seemed like everyone had an understanding of the concepts and I felt so far behind. It was mostly because everybody always had something to say. They always were raising their hands, giving input, and I was like, "Really? I've never even heard about this until now," or like I wouldn't just raise my hand and tell something that was fake because I don't know the experience, especially with a lot of Bible stuff. In some other classes also I just kind of sat there. Like, "I don't have a clue what they're talking about." It was hard to relate, and I think just because everyone else had something to say, or when we did get into groups, everyone had input, or they would know the answers and then when they said it, it was right, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, that would never even have crossed my mind." And so that's what I mean when I say that. [My good friend] helped me to overcome this fear a bit. She would let me use words that I was learning and help to correct me if I wasn't using them in the right context or form. She also helped me to see that if I didn't understand, it was likely that someone else probably didn't either so I wouldn't only be helping myself but someone else as well. [My friend] helped me to see the good in what I saw as an unfortunate disability. I eventually have found it a little less intimidating to ask for help when something doesn't make sense to me, even if it seems to make sense to everyone else. This is a bit harder to do in class but when I'm having smaller conversations with people, this makes it easier. In hindsight, I see how far I've come, and despite feeling like I was not capable of doing the work for my classes, I received good grades and passed my classes (journal, February 2010; journal, March, 2010; individual interview, March 24, 2010).

Chu Ka, a sophomore who plans to be a teacher, shared specific examples of how her limited vocabulary slows down her study and deters her from participating fully in class.

When I was in grade school, I thought I was doing OK with my English. I thought I was pretty good. I think once I started hitting middle and high school, I'd be getting only C's on my essays. I was like, "I don't know what's wrong. Is it my vocabulary?" I started doubting my writing, so that made me think that maybe I should work on my vocabulary because when I read other students' work, I go, "Oh, OK, that's why they get A's because it has like a good vocabulary in there." Yeah, so we're given assignments like by you or by other professors, and we have to do like a journal on it, and I want to understand it. I'm not understanding any of it because of the big words, then I would have a dictionary on the side and just type it up and then, "Oh, that's what it means." Next word in my reading. Look up another word. That's how I would understand. Like recently, like yesterday, I just learned what impoverished means. Yeah, cause I looked it up. I was like, "What does destitute mean?" I looked it up, and I was like, "OK, what does impoverished mean?" I just looked it up. I just had to read it for an article. Like there are so many words that I don't know. Maybe because like there was no one to talk to, to expand your knowledge, like upon learning new ways to write and new vocabulary, you know. But I felt like even if I took those and used it, there were still some things that you had to do outside of class. Of course, like reading. I don't like reading. Like I don't read for pleasure; I read for class. So like, yeah, I think I just didn't know what to do. I'm passive [in class]. Probably I feel like someone probably has a smarter answer anyways, so I will just let them say it, which eventually they do. Like especially in like the conversational classes, like the interacting classes, such as like our Bible classes, like sometimes you want to say something, but like, you know, our vocabulary only goes so far as to what we know and then like another person raises her hand and be like, "Oh, da da da da da." That's just like, "Oh, OK, see, that's why I don't raise my hand." I mean if people really point me out and just ask me, then I'll say what I know, but I don't sound as smart because they use big words (group discussion, February 22, 2010; individual interview, March 24, 2010).

Chu Ka's sister, Paj Chia, graduated in the semester just prior to when this research was performed. She was employed in a job in which formal usage of the English language was important, and her use of language was, in fact, noticed and evaluated by her co-workers and supervisors. Even though she was no longer in school, she continued to feel like her English language ability limited and defined her. She voiced her dissatisfaction with her vocabulary in the following story.

Like after the Bachelor's degree and then now working where I work now, working with writing papers and actually editing the lawyer. I feel like I should have better [English].

I feel like I haven't been trained enough or haven't been educated enough or even here sometimes the teachers are so lenient and they don't...They go "work on your grammar," and that's it. You know and it's like, "Okay, um, how?" It doesn't really affect your grades so you're like "Well, I can fly with this." But now it's my job and people view you as, "OK she speaks another language." And now it really matters. I think it's a big deal.

People use words that I don't know. I guess like when I write, I write more simple. I should write it in a more complex way or use a broader vocabulary, but then I don't. It doesn't come naturally. I have to try to use bigger words, or I feel like, for example, at work, when my co-workers write sentences, I can totally tell the difference of when I write it and if they write it. They use words that I wouldn't think of, but I know they're there. I just don't use it. It sounds better or more professional, but it doesn't come to me right away and I want it to just come to me naturally like that. Like, today, my computer crashed, and [my co-worker] just took over and wrote in a way that used words that I knew were there but I just didn't use. Like *compel*, or you know, just words like that. Even at work right now when I do stuff. I do dictations and everything for the lawyer and I give it back to [my supervisor] to review or something and she'll just say, "Hmmm," and she'll just find something wrong with it, you know. And I'm like, for once, why couldn't it just be perfect, you know. There's like one word in there that's like missing, or I don't know, not the right tense.

I always have trouble with the tenses. And then of course, I always want a broader vocabulary but I think as much as you study, I don't know how broad it could be. Ever. In high school, when I would take AP English, every week we would have huge words or bigger words so that we will know what they mean. I remember my teacher always made us use vocabulary in a sentence, and she'll give us points if we use it in class. It's like you did it because you have to, but then the words go away. Now, if I come across a word I didn't understand, I would probably look it up (group discussion, January 30, 2010; individual interview, March 24, 2010).

Even some of the journal prompts provided by the researcher contained challenging vocabulary. For example, one of the prompts began with the following: "Many first generation Hmong immigrants view higher education with ambivalence..." In response to this prompt, in a group discussion, Emma made the following statement: "I had to look [it] up in the dictionary. Ambivalence? I never used that!" (group discussion, April 11, 2010) Another question was "Were your parents more disposed to allow you to leave home to come to [this school] because of its Christian-based status?" The following response comes from Kaying, who is a freshman

pre-nursing major. She is the sixth of eight children and has two older sisters who have graduated from college.

To be honest with you, I tried to look up what the word *disposed* means and I don't really know what it means still, it's either agreed to let me come to school here because of the Christian-based status or disagreed because of something else. But if it is agree, then yes, I think so because since [it] is so expensive, my parents don't want me to go into debt when I get out of college. They were about to not let me come [here] but because my dad's faith was really strong in God [they let me come] (final questionnaire, April 25, 2010).

Discussion

The results above represent only a small portion of the data obtained in this narrative inquiry into the literacy and language development experiences of thirteen Hmong college women. The women self-identified themselves as having problems with the grammar and vocabulary skills expected of students in college. Some of the information presented above was in the form of the women's own stories, and some of the information was the result of the researcher's analysis of the common language patterns shared by the students in the writing and speaking that they did for this project. This section of the paper will address the findings presented above by giving recommendations for educators who have contact with Hmong students and other Generation 1.5 students, whether in elementary or secondary school or in college. The suggestions will identify the need for a change in practice and attitude toward the importance of reading and studying at home, especially for Hmong girls and women.

As is evident from the examples given above and from the stories told by the women, the types of deviations from standard English that these Generation 1.5 students exhibit do not significantly affect comprehension on the part of a listener or reader; however, they do often stigmatize the speaker or writer as nonnative or foreign—or even worse, as uneducated or unintelligent. As the label Generation 1.5 indicates, long-term immigrant students are not like

recent immigrants, nor are they like native speakers. They make different kinds of errors and require different kinds of instruction. In the course of the research study, nearly all of the women shared that they had been designated as ESL (English as a Second Language) students in their public schools and were required to receive ESL intervention. Overwhelmingly, they felt that this intervention was too remedial and did not address the struggles that they were actually having. Thus, they derived no significant benefits from this remediation. Here are a couple of brief segments from the stories they shared about their ESL experiences. Several of the women shared stories similar to the representative examples below.

I just knew that I didn't have to go at such a slow pace; I didn't have to do so many worksheets. In the class that I was put in, we had to like pronounce, like re-pronounce, words like 'bat' or 'hat' and 'cake' and just simpler words like that, and I thought "I'm already in fourth grade. I know how to say these words. It's not hard for me at all."
(Meh)

I vaguely remember in fourth grade, during class sometimes, I would be pulled out of class to go over a few things that I thought were kind of ridiculous. I remember looking at pictures and being asked what they were pictures of. "What is this picture of?" "A chair." For example, he showed me a picture of a table. He would point to the legs of the table and ask me what they were called. I remember it being really simple things, and so I never liked going. I felt I was missing out on some fun things my class was doing while I was gone. So, sometimes, you're not at a level where you feel like you need to be in ESL because they're teaching you "A is for apple" and you know that already. (Youa)

Stories like these demonstrate the need for increased awareness of the unique needs of many Generation 1.5 students, and perhaps Hmong students in particular. The types of instruction given must be tailored to the specific needs of this population, as well as of each individual.

Second language acquisition (SLA) researchers offer many possible reasons for the grammar variations noted above. However, two seem to most logically apply to this population. Interestingly, the remedy for both causes is the same: explicit instruction from educators designed to result in increased awareness on the part of the language learners. The first likely explanation for some the language irregularities identified in the usage of the women is the

unconscious overgeneralization of certain morphological “rules.” For example, regarding the use of *mines* as a personal possessive pronoun, in English, all of the personal possessive pronouns except *mine* end in *s*—*yours, hers, his, ours, theirs, and its*. The unconscious assumption of a nonnative English speaker may be that the first person pronoun *mine* should also end in *s*. This overgeneralization process could also account for errors such as the regularization of irregular verb forms and irregular noun pluralization, as well as the unnecessary pluralization of non-count nouns. Possibly, these unconscious developmental errors became so widely used in the Hmong community that they have simply been perpetuated and re-learned within the community as the norm. With these types of errors, simply providing correction and raising the unusual structure to the level of consciousness may enable many learners to make the necessary adjustments in their personal grammar knowledge and usage.

An alternate explanation for the non-standard structures arises from the theory that members of the Generation 1.5 learn most of their English through informal methods (Goen et al., 2002). Even though much of the learning occurs in the classroom, it is incidental and not through direct English language instruction. One of the most frequently advanced explanations used to account for the particular types of errors noted in the writing of Generation 1.5 students is that of Reid (1998), who describes the difference between formal and informal learning as arising respectively from “eye” or “ear” learning. She proposes that U.S. resident writers (her preferred term for Generation 1.5 students) learn English primarily through their ears from what they hear in the world around them and that their struggles with some academic tasks may be related to a lack of literacy development and/or reading experience, which would incorporate eye learning and a more precise understanding of words and terms. Ear learning limits one’s ability to discern nuances of language structures which are not aurally salient. In everyday oral

conversation, many verb and noun endings are lost in the combination of words in a sentence. For example, in normal conversation, if a native speaker says, “I walked to the store,” the past tense ending on “walked” essentially disappears, and the sentence sounds like “I walk to the store.” Reid (1998) gives an example of a student who thought “why” and “while” were the same word with different meanings because the *l* sound at the end of “while” is often not very noticeable.

Whether their modified usage problems arise from overgeneralization of rules or from ear learning, Generation 1.5 students will likely benefit from explicit explanations regarding their non-standard use of certain grammatical structures. Likewise, even though native speakers rarely require instruction concerning non-count nouns and subject-verb agreement, Generation 1.5 students may benefit from such explanations in order to increase their awareness and understanding and allow motivated individuals to begin self-monitoring their usage. This would require that educators at all levels of the education process understand and be able to explain these grammar concepts in an effective way, which can be a challenge for native English speakers who are not expressly trained for teaching English to nonnative speakers.

Like the grammar variances, the vocabulary challenges identified in the data may also warrant the need for increased awareness and explicit instruction. However, in addition to second language acquisition research, common sense indicates that exposure to a second language is vitally important to the development of advanced language skills. Opportunities to interact in a second language also help to further the development of language and vocabulary skills, as demonstrated in Emma’s story above which described her friendship with a native speaker who allowed her to practice with new words. Even though long-term immigrant students are often perceived as being immersed in the English language, in reality, they are not.

Most of women in this study knew little or no English prior to entering kindergarten. In addition, by their own admission, as they were growing up, they rarely spoke English outside of school. In fact, even within the walls of the school, they tended to restrict their friendships to other Hmong students with whom they spoke Hmong or “Hmonglish.” Several of them shared that when they did attempt to establish close relationships with non-Hmong classmates, they were discouraged by their siblings and other Hmong friends. The tendency of the Hmong culture to remain insular can significantly limit its young people’s exposure to English.

Exposure to language can be increased through extensive reading. In the field of second language teaching, extensive reading is distinct from intensive reading, which is the type of reading usually required in educational contexts. Intensive reading refers to the type of reading in which students strive for precise understanding of every line and word. In contrast, extensive reading involves reading large numbers of pages for pleasure and for global understanding. Krashen (2004) asserts that free voluntary reading is an extremely powerful tool for language education, including the learning of a second language. For second language learners, it provides increased exposure to the language that may not be available to them in their homes and communities. Krashen (2004) further contends that, while reading in itself will not result in advanced levels of language proficiency, it will provide a foundation which facilitates the learner in developing advanced proficiency. Unfortunately, requiring extensive reading has become deemphasized and devalued in many of America’s primary and secondary educational systems—perhaps even in many institutions of higher education—and would have likely been more valuable to the women in this study than the remedial ESL instruction that they received. The importance of extensive reading as a method of developing automatic, unconscious standard use

of English vocabulary and grammar is heightened in immigrant and refugee populations like the Hmong, who are very protective of their home cultures and language.

Although extensive reading may be beneficial for Generation 1.5 students, in some cases increasing their reading and exposure to the language may not be easy to accomplish for some Hmong women and girls. Several of the women in this study alluded to the fact that they were not encouraged to read at home, and that, in fact, sometimes reading or studying was viewed as a sign of laziness—especially for Hmong girls, whose mothers sometimes expect them to assume extensive household responsibilities. This expectation may arise out of necessity because the families are large and the mother is working outside the home. Alternatively, it may come from the cultural belief that girls must be trained early to assume their roles as wives and mothers and that preparation for this role is more important than reading and studying. Some of the women reported that they were often encouraged to postpone studies and reading until later in the evening after the family was fed and the house was clean. A further reason that this group of women postulated for their lack of reading for pleasure was that they seldom observed anyone reading as a hobby or for enjoyment.

To summarize, the grammar and language limitations revealed by this group of Hmong women suggest that Generation 1.5 students would benefit from different instructional language interventions than either native-speaking students or newly-arrived ESL students require. Educational experiences as early as elementary school should begin to challenge students in their development of the needed grammar and vocabulary skills to succeed in their future academic endeavors. Early intervention is important before linguistic habits become ingrained and more difficult to change. One strategy to start this process should include accurate assessment of school children to ensure that they are receiving language assistance that benefits rather than

bores or belittles them. In addition, educators must be prepared to offer explicit instruction and explanation of troubling grammar concepts, such as non-count nouns, subject-verb agreement, and the morphology of irregular nouns and verbs. Finally, since input in English is limited by extensive use of the home language outside of the educational environment, students must be encouraged both in school and at home to read extensively. This may require education within the Hmong community regarding the importance of reading for girls and young women to facilitate their literacy development and prepare them to be successful in the college classroom.

As with most narrative research projects, this study included a relatively small number of participants; thus, the generalizability of the data could be questioned. However, the strength of this type of study and representation comes from the fact that it presents the experiences of an often silent group of women, using their own words to share their experiences. The fields of literacy and language development and second language teaching and acquisition could benefit from further studies of this type which include men and women, as well as participants from a variety of heritage language groups. Studies similar to this one may provide valuable insight into the challenges and needs of immigrant and refugee populations. This insight would not only benefit the populations involved in the research but has the potential to transform educational practices for future immigrant and refugee groups.

References Cited

- Bamberg, M., & Georgakopoulou, A. (2008). Small stories as a new perspective in narrative and identity analysis. *Talk and Text*, 28(3), 377-396.
- Bosher, S. (1997). Language and cultural identity: A study of Hmong students at the postsecondary level. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3): 593-603.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Crevier, M. (2002). *Hmong Students at UW-Stout: Factors Influencing Attendance and Retention in a Post Secondary Institution*. M.S. Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Stout.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Garrity, C.A. (2002). *Hmong Women in a Non-Traditional College: The Replacement of Fragmented Backgrounds with American Individualism*. Ed.D. Dissertation, University of Saint Thomas (St. Paul, MN).
- Goen, S., Porter, P., Swanson, D., & Vandommelen, D. (2002). Working with generation 1.5 students and their teachers: ESL meets composition. *The CATESOL Journal*, 14(1), 131-172.
- Harklau, L., Siegal, M., & Losey, K. M. (1999). Linguistically diverse students and college writing: What is equitable and appropriate? In L. Harklau, K. M. Losey, & M. Siegal (Eds.), *Generation 1.5 meets college composition* (pp. 1-14). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Haug, F. (1987). *Female sexualization: A collective work of memory*. London: Verso.
- Holten, C. (2002). Charting new territory: Creating an interdepartmental course for generation 1.5 writers. *The CATESOL Journal*, 14(1), 173-189.
- Holten, C., & Mikesell, L. (2007). Using discourse-based strategies to address the lexicogrammatical development of Generation 1.5 ESL writers. *The CATESOL Journal*, 19(1), 35-52.
- Huffcutt, M. (2010). *American Hmong Youth and College Readiness: Integrating Culture and Educational Success*. M.S. Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Stout.
- Khang, M.S. (2010). *Hmong Traditional Roles and the Pursuit of Higher Education for Married Hmong American Women*. M.S. Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Stout.
- Krashen, S.D. (2004). *The power of reading: Insights from the research* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Lauffer, B. (1997). What's in a word that makes it hard or easy: Some intralexical factors that affect the learning of words. In N. Schmitt & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *Vocabulary: Description, acquisition, and pedagogy* (pp. 140-155). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, S.J. (1997). The Road to College: Hmong American Women's Pursuit of Higher Education. *Harvard Educational Review* 67(4): 803-27.
- Liamputtong, P., & Ezzy, D. (2005). *Qualitative research methods*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Moua, M.T. (2007). *An Investigation of Factors impacting Hmong Students' Completion of a Four-Year Postsecondary Degree*. Ed.D. Dissertation, California State University, Fresno and University of California, Davis.
- Pavlenko, A., & Lantolf, J. P. (2000). Second language learning as participation and the (re)construction of selves. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*, (pp. 155-177). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Reid, J. M. (1998). "Eye" learners and "ear" learners: Identifying the language needs of international student and U.S. resident writers. In P. Byrd & J. Reid (Eds.), *Grammar in the composition classroom: Essays on teaching ESL for college-bound students*, (pp. 3-17). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Roberge, M. M. (2002). California's generation 1.5 immigrants: What experiences, characteristics, and needs do they bring to our English classes? *The CATESOL Journal*, 14(1), 107-129.
- Rumbaut, R. G., & Ima, K. (1988). *The adaptation of Southeast Asian refugee youth: A comparative study*. (Final report to the Office of Refugee Resettlement). San Diego, CA: San Diego State University. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED299372).
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). S0201. 2008-2010 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates: Selected Population Profile in the United States.
- Vue, P.P. (2007). *Factors that Contribute towards and/or impede Hmong Women from Obtaining a Higher Education Degree*. Ed.D. Dissertation, California State University, Fresno and University of California, Davis.
- Xiong, S. and S.E. Lee. (2011). Hmong Students in Higher Education and Academic Support Programs. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 12: 1-20.

Yang, A. (2010). *Themes in the Career Development of 1.5 Generation Hmong American Women*. PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota.

Yang, K., & Pfeifer, M.E. (2004) Profile of Hmong educational attainment. In *Hmong 2000 census publication: Data and analysis*. Retrieved from <http://www.hmongstudies.org/>

Yang, P.P. (2008). *A Phenomenological Case Study: Factors in Hmong-American Students' Successful Transition to a Large Public Research Institution*. PhD Dissertation, Edgewood College.

About the Author:

Kim Huster is currently the ESL Director/Assistant Professor at Nyack College in New York where she primarily teaches college writing skills to ESL students. She previously was a TESOL instructor at Simpson University in Redding, California. She has a Bachelor's degree in Physical Therapy from the University of Pennsylvania, a Master's degree in Education/TESOL from Alliant International University in San Diego, and a Ph.D. in Composition and TESOL from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She first encountered the Hmong people in Philadelphia as a volunteer English teacher at a church in the early 1980s and has been thankful for the opportunity to be involved with the Hmong consistently through educational opportunities, church involvement, and friendships for many years. She is especially indebted to the Hmong women who participated in and made this study possible.

