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GLIMPSES INTO THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND  
LANGUAGE EDUCATION: THE KAREN

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this inquiry is to draw attention to a few of the issues and puzzles present in the world of educating English language learners in American Schools. The topics highlighted and discussed were inspired by original experiences of the author while teaching a group of Karen children, ages seven to seventeen, in North Hill, Ohio. The Karen are a relatively unstudied, low socio-economic status, minority language refugee people group that have settled in various locations across the United States over the past five to ten years. Included in this report are vignettes of the author's experience working and living among the Karen that highlight some of the particularly pressing issues concerned with educating English language learners, specifically low socio-economic status refugee students. The issues included within this research are mainly issues related to reading and issues related the interplay of home and school. The author also includes pragmatic suggestions in each chapter to address topics where more insight is needed in order to more effectively aid the learning of English language learners like the Karen in American schools today.

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## Introduction

Throughout these past three years as a student in the College of Education and as a Second Language certification candidate, I have grown to see how teaching is more dynamic, risky, challenging, and fantastically rewarding than I ever imagined it would be. I have also grown to see my vision of myself as a teacher evolve from a mere transmitter of information to an agent of empowerment and change for the students who will someday fill my classroom. Most importantly, I have grown to desire to invest in the future of our world through teaching, and to create the type of school environment every student deserves, but sadly does not receive. I have also come to see how one of the most neglected groups of learners in most school system today is refugee English language learners. My experiences and insights have transformed my vision for teaching, and have fostered in me a desire to understand how to best meet the needs of this specific group of learners.

The demographic of the U.S. school age population is changing at a rapid rate. American classrooms are experiencing the largest influx of immigrant students since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Valdés, 2001; Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Crawford, 1993; García, 1993; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Teale, 2009). James Crawford (1993) describes demographic changes in the history of U.S. immigration. Until the 1950s, more than half of all immigrants to the United States were from Europe. However, by 1985, nearly 85% of immigrants to the United States were immigrants from the Developing World, and among this growing population of minority language immigrants are refugees (Crawford, 1993). More recent data from a 2000 US Census reports about one in five child between the ages of five and seventeen in the United States is a child from immigrant families, and this population is growing faster than any other child group in the Nation, with 40% of these immigrant families from Mexico (Garcia, Jensen, & Scribner, 2009). Thus said, as the face and pace of immigration and language minority speakers changes and grows, school districts that previously encountered few English-language learners are now serving an ever-growing population of language minority speakers (Shorts & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Valdés, 1998).

Despite the changing face of U.S schools, many school systems are not equipped to educate new immigrant populations. While refugee and immigrant English-language learners are the most rapidly growing school-age population, they are also one of the lowest achieving (Estrada, Gómez, Ruiz-Escalante, 2009, Fillmore & Snow, 2000; García 1988; Kelly and Prescott, 2007; Pica, 1986; Shorts & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Valdés 1998). Often labeled as deficient or slow-learners, this group of English-language learners is typically positioned within institutions in such a way that their access to academic success and resources is severely hindered, if not completely denied (Sharkey & Layzer, 2000; Jiménez, 2000; Moll, 1987). The failure of American schools to meet the academic needs of this group of English-language learners is concerning.

As a teacher education student, I was aware of the realities captured in these statistics, and I wanted to expand my capacity as a teacher by working with a neglected group of English language learners. This past summer, I had the opportunity to experience firsthand some of the emotional and intellectual challenges of working with refugee English-language learners. For about ten weeks, I lived and worked with the Karen, a refugee people from Burma (now Myanmar) currently living in North Hill,

Ohio, a neighborhood just two miles outside of the heart of Akron. Over the past fifty years, the Karen, an ethnic and cultural minority group in Myanmar, have become the political scapegoats of both the corrupt Burmese government and rebel military groups alike. In Myanmar, the Karen are a splintered people. Some Karen are vocal political dissenters, forming rebel armies and executing “acts of terrorism” against the dictatorship that persecutes them and refuses the Karen their independence, while other Karen are politically neutral as long as their safety and security are ensured. As Myanmar has become an unstable home, many Karen have fled to surrounding countries and abroad for asylum, fleeing to locations as seemingly obscure as Akron, Ohio.

My experience with the Karen in Akron took place through a summer camp hosted by Urban Vision, an organization located in North Hill that is dedicated to serving the needs of this community. While the North Hill community and thus the students at the camp used to mainly low socio-economic status African-American families, Urban Vision has watched as this small neighborhood has seen the influx of nearly three hundred Karen in three years, all living within a few blocks of one another. As the staff at Urban Vision saw a growing community need for instructional English classes and overall content enrichment opportunities, the idea for the summer camp “SOS: Set on Success” was born. With camp two weeks away and the roster full of one hundred students, approximately ninety of which were Karen, I was asked to come on staff as a co-teacher in the reading room. The reading position involved planning and executing reading lessons for five groups of Karen students on a daily basis. In addition to serving as the reading teacher, I also had many other meaningful interactions and engagements with my Karen students in the form of sleepovers, ice cream dates, pool outings, and Bible studies.

With the summer now behind me, I can say without a doubt that my experience in working with the Karen and grappling first hand with some of the most pressing issues in ESL education has only furthered my passion to better serve the needs of English Language Learners. Furthermore, my experience working with the Karen provided me with invaluable insight into [this currently unstudied people group. Unless the instability and warfare currently plaguing Myanmar comes to an abrupt end, more and more Karen will to flee to the United States in coming years, and thus the need for teachers to be able to understand the learning needs of these students becomes all the more pertinent. Additionally, glimpses into the life of the Karen are valuable to all teachers, regardless of whether or not he or she will ever teach a Karen student. With an increasingly diverse population of school-age children in all regions of America, it has become more important than ever for educators to attempt to become sensitive to the different backgrounds of ethnic, cultural, and language minority students.

In an attempt to advocate for increased awareness of some of the puzzles, challenges, and rewards of teaching English-language learners, specifically low socio-economic status (and more particularly, refugee) children in the United States, I have analyzed a series of vignettes that capture my brief experience working and living with the Karen. The vignettes detailed are a combination of my most potent, meaningful memories from this summer and examples of themes or reoccurring instances I observed. More importantly, these vignettes represent larger, non-group specific issues that need to be addressed within the world of teaching English-language learners. Therefore, each vignette is followed by additional evidence that testifies to the need for more research and

more attention to be brought to these pressing and growing challenges facing instructing English-language learners. Finally, I have concluded each theme with a summary of pragmatic applications with an earnest hope that immediate actions can be taken to remedy the situation.

Currently, the majority of English-language learners are in dire need; students are entering into kindergarten with the label of “Limited English Proficiency” and are graduating thirteen years later with the same label, or are not graduating at all (Estrada, Gómez, Ruiz-Escalante, 2009; Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Kelly and Prescott, 2007; Pica, 1986; Valdés, 1998). Furthermore, Trueba, Jacobs and Kirton (1990) discuss how schooling for refugee English language learners in particular is often complicated by a life of hardship, characterized by cultural and linguistic differences, lack of appreciation for home culture by schools, and lack of self-esteem. The large number of such children failing out of school, why these students are failing out, and what kind of evaluation and research is needed to help both teachers and policy makers to structure programs to best serve these students needs is currently one of the greatest issues facing the education of minority language students (García, 1988; Kelly and Prescott, 2007; Valdes 1998; Valdes, 2001). The future of refugee English-language learners in America is deeply tied to and dependent on how they are taught and learn English, and how we as teachers strive to better meet and address the needs of these learners.

Before I begin explaining my experience with the Karen and my insights, I would like to explain a few terms. Throughout this essay, I will also use the term “language minority speakers” to describe students or people whose native language is not English (Garcia, Jensen, Scribner, 2009). I will use the term “English language learner” to describe minority language speakers who are in the process of learning English. While a level of English proficiency is not necessarily implied in the term English language learner, I will mainly be using the term to describe language minority speakers whose English proficiency (reading skills, speaking skills, overall language mastery, etc.) is in the process of developing, as is the case with the majority of minority language students in American schools.

I will focus on English literacy instruction for English language learners in the United States. I am well aware that a great deal of emphasis and research in the field of educating English language learners is currently focused on bilingual education. While bilingual education research and studies have the potential to impact certain groups of minority-language students, my focus throughout this essay will remain on English literacy instruction for students whom bilingual education in the United States is not a realistic option in the near future. The vast majority of educators in the United States are mono-lingual English speakers who do not come from the same linguistic and cultural background as the students in their classroom (Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Valdés, 2001). Additionally, I focus primarily on the development of English literacy rather than in both languages because of the role English literacy plays in the success of English language learners in current school systems (Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Jiménez, 2000; Valdés, 2001) While I do not doubt bilingual education in Karen and English could some day be a reality, I have concentrated my research under the current language instructional contexts.

## Chapter 1: Issues Related to Reading

My first insight into my Karen students' understanding of reading occurred in the cafeteria over lunch one day. As was typically the case with every lunch with the older students, the girls remained relatively silent, occasionally chatting with one another in Karen. The older Karen girls in particular did not speak to Melissa, my fellow reading teacher, or to me unless we addressed them directly. After five or so minutes of eating, Melissa attempted to open the table up to conversation about reading. While both of us had hoped the girls would answer our questions candidly, neither of us expected the ultimate response Melissa's prompting elicited:

*Melissa: So what do you girls think of what we've been reading in class?  
(The girls looked at one another quietly, and then looked back at us. A few shrugged their shoulders while others acted as if they hadn't heard Melissa. While these same girls were always responsive to Melissa in class, no one spoke.)*

*Melissa; Do any of you like reading? (Melissa rephrased her question.)*

*At first, the girls remained silent. A few shrugged their shoulders, perhaps in apathy to the entire conversation, perhaps to express their feelings, while the rest rotated their gaze from one another to Melissa and I. After half a minute or so, Eh Dah Doe, the youngest of the group but also the most talkative in terms of English, responded. In between bites of food, she looked up and simply stated "No," whilst shaking her head:*

*Eh Dah Doe: No*

*Melissa: Why not? How come?*

*Eh Dah Doe: I do not like reading (Eh Dah Doe shrugged her shoulders. The rest of the girls bobbed their heads and nodded in agreement, some still eating while others sitting quietly.)*

*Melissa: Why do not you like reading? (Melissa probed further, leaning in toward the table and toward Eh Dah Doe.)*

*Eh Dah Doe: Too hard. I do not like reading, I just like stories (Eh Dah Doe shrugged again, and looked down at her plate, ending the conversation.)*

As a teacher, it is soul crushing to hear a student talk about reading in such a despondent, negative light. For me as Eh Dah Doe's teacher, I felt helpless to aid her in making the connection between the reading she professed to dislike and the stories she admittedly enjoys. For Eh Dah Doe, reading is the ability to name words correctly, not making meaning out of text. Though the stories capture her attention, her frustration with not being able to name words and thus (for her), elicit meaning from text, are linked, and reading is not a way to engage with stories; reading is just an act that causes Eh Dah Doe to experience a sense of failure and despair. As long as Eh Dah Doe views reading as simply the act of correctly naming words, an act disconnected from the content and the meaning the words convey, the motivation for her to learn to read will soon die out. Reading will become another seemingly impossible and purposeless task.

While Eh Dah Doe's struggle is not unique to her as a Karen English language learner, her struggle to make sense of written English text represents the manifestation of



the many barriers English language learners experience when engaging in reading in English. This chapter will discuss several issues related to reading that I observed this past summer while working with the Karen. The key is the gap between my (and the majority of mainstream Americans') views of reading and those of Karen, and the educational implications of this gap. First, I discuss my student's beliefs about the relationship between word calling and reading. Second, I explore my student's beliefs about what makes a specific text easy, hard, or enjoyable. Third, I include a brief summary of other barriers to reading comprehension I observed in my students. Finally, I discuss my student's beliefs about themselves as readers, specifically looking at the relationship between self-confidence and reading ability. Finally, I have included a summary of pragmatic suggestions that coincide with the topics explored within the chapter. These suggestions are concerned mainly with areas where research is still needed in order to help teachers meet the unique needs of English language learners like the Karen.

### **1.1 Student's Beliefs about Word Calling and Reading**

While I am now a voracious reader, when I was five, the last thing I wanted to do was read. I found the process of reading to be arduous, and would have rather been read to than forced to do the work myself. It was not until I found a series of books with stories I truly enjoyed that I felt motivated enough to learn how to read myself. Reading transformed from a painful ordeal where I could not make sense of the words on the page to a way to enjoy stories and make meaning of text. Since I experienced the transition at a young age from believing reading as word-calling to seeing reading as a way to make meaning, I was surprised that my middle school Karen students had a negative view of reading. In this section, I will begin with my notes of a conversation with a group of Karen students that revealed their beliefs about reading, and I will then continue with my evolving thoughts on their beliefs and the implications of their beliefs:

*Towards the end of the summer, I asked Youslena, one of the high school girls attending summer camp, "Who do you know that is a good reader?" In asking Youselena this question, I was hoping to gain insight into what her concept of a "good reader" was, and how she determined what made a person a good or bad reader. Youslena, after about a minute of silence, looked around the room at her peers who were busy completing tasks on Rosetta Stone. Youslena finally fixed her eyes on another girl – "Eh Ler," she responded definitively. When I asked Youselena why, she shrugged her shoulders and simply replied, "Because she knows words."*

*My reading interview with Ni Doh Gey Htoo revealed a similar belief about the relationship between word calling and reading. Ni Doh, much like Eh Dah Doe (the student who described frustration in the introduction), was a middle school student who demonstrated high levels of participation in reading class. Ni Doh was also the student whom his peers named most often as the best reader they knew. In a conversation about reading and Ni Doh's reading preferences and habits, I asked Ni Doh how he learned to read, and what he remembered that helped him learn to read. At first, Ni Doh sat quietly while he thought about the question. After a minute or two, Ni Doh responded, "Someone tells you what the words are, and you remember." A few minutes later, I asked Ni Doh*

*how I could help him in our time one-on-one that would allow him to grow as a reader, Ni Doh quickly answered, “you [could] show me more words, and tell me what they mean.”*

The strong connection Ni Doh and Youselena articulated about word knowledge and what is “good reading” or learning to reading has peaked my attention. A flurry of questions emerged in my mind: Have these students been taught in their English classes that reading in English is strictly related to word knowledge? Are their teachers emphasizing word recognition as the key to reading in English? Have Youselena and Ni Doh observed that readers who appear to understand English text can correctly call words, and have thus assumed “good readers know words,” not yet realizing the internal processes involved in reading comprehension? Has anyone taught these students other strategies for understanding texts, such as using context clues, prior knowledge, deductive reasoning to discern meaning?

While all of these interpretations are possible, I am particularly intrigued by my students’ perception of the relationship between word knowledge and reading comprehension. As a developing educator, I believe what we teach our children without meaning to – such as the relationship between successful word calling and being a “good reader” – is just as significant as the skills and facts explicitly taught in the classroom, if not perhaps more significant in the long run. However, research and inquiry into the relationship between *how* an English Language learner is taught to read – the vocabulary used by teachers, the skills emphasized or de-emphasized in learning to read, what is declared good/bad/success/failure, etc. – and the beliefs and understandings a student then forms about *what* is reading and *how* successful reading is defined has yet to be done. This is an important issue because readers have agency in the reading process.

The conversation also highlights students’ beliefs about the relationship between comprehension and word knowledge. While Eh Dah Doe and Youselena feel word knowledge is the mark of a good reader, or the prelude to successful reading, the disconnect they feel with reading is not simply because they cannot name the words in the text – the disconnect is further fueled by their inability to elicit meaning from the text caused by a break down in comprehension. Reading comprehension is not as simple as calling words; making meaning from text in any language requires prior knowledge, including an understanding of what literacy is, the abstract knowledge of the sounds and the structural makeup of language, a certain amount of developed vocabulary, and oral discourse skills (August & Hakuta, 1997). Having only been exposed to English for two short years as residents of the United States, and coming from a language background that shares little in common with the English language, many of my Karen students do not have the skills, knowledge, and understanding described above to comprehend every text they come across, especially as they are currently in the early stages of English language development and acquisition.

While word knowledge alone is not the sole source of the breakdown in reading comprehension for many English-language learners, word knowledge does play a primary role in reading comprehension. August and Hakuta (1997) report that a lack of word knowledge in English-language learners and native English speakers alike can indicate the absence of the relevant background knowledge that is fundamental in reading texts of certain complexity levels. Familiarity with content has been proven to promote

reading comprehension in one's first or second language, a topic that will be discussed more in depth later (August & Hakuta, 1997; Johnson, 1981; Fitzgerald, 1995). Additionally, word knowledge is directly related to comprehension because coming across unfamiliar words while reading slows down the reader's processing of text. Skilled readers (readers with an understanding of literacy and the basic prior knowledge described above) can handle a certain amount of unknown words using context clues. On the other hand, when too many words are unfamiliar, eliciting meaning from the text becomes difficult and reading comprehension breaks down (August & Hakuta, 1997; Johnson, 1981).

The vignette also speaks to issues beyond word knowledge. In the first vignette I shared in the introduction to the chapter, Eh Dah Doe's frustration with reading and not being able to make meaning from the text is undoubtedly due to some extent to a lack of word knowledge. Similarly, Ni Doh's desire to "learn to read" through finding out what new words mean is most likely related to the connection he sees between understanding the text (reading comprehension) and his own knowledge of vocabulary. Youselena also observes that her peers who appear to be "good readers" exhibit the ability to call words successfully. Word knowledge is clearly an important factor in reading comprehension.

One of the larger questions for me is what beyond word knowledge creates barriers to comprehension for my Karen students? What beside the inability to call words makes these students believe they themselves or others are not good readers? What are some of the other noteworthy features of either the text or the reader that contribute to my students' level of engagement in reading? While these questions are difficult, attempting to get to the root of these issues is key in helping my Karen students and students like the Karen to grow as English readers, and is also key in helping teachers of English language learners to better meet the needs of these students. The following sections in this chapter attempt to shed light on these complicated puzzles and questions.

The relationship my students see between word calling and reading is clear. While reading has the potential to be an avenue for making meaning from texts, a method of enjoying stories of all types, my Karen students believe good readers are readers who know words and who can successfully call words in a text. Though the origin of this belief is unclear, the implications are vast and potentially damaging; if my students are unable to see the connection between reading and meaning making, it is less likely that they get to the point where they are willing to attempt difficult texts with the goal of understanding in mind, let alone come to a point where they view reading as an enjoyable activity. My hope is that with more research, we can help these students and others like them to realize reading is not just word calling, but a productive, fruitful, and even enjoyable way to make meaning from texts.

### **Section 1.2 Student's Beliefs About What Makes a Text Easy, Hard, or Enjoyable**

As I previously stated, my desire to learn to read only grew as a result of finding books that I found interesting and enjoyable; only with the goal of engaging with intriguing stories did I decide to give reading a shot. In an attempt to find books my students would find engaging, I pointedly interviewed a few students about what types of books were easy for them, what types were hard, and what types were just right, or if they knew any specific books that fit into each of these categories. I also asked each student if

he or she had a favorite type of text or a favorite thing they liked to read. Many of the students were unable to answer the question because they could not articulate an answer or did not understand the question, and after a few minutes would respond with “I don’t know.” However, a few of my students were able to answer my questions in part or in whole. The responses that fall into this category are recorded below:

*Ni Doh was able to give me the most detail in his answers to my questions. I first asked him what kind of books he found easy to read. Ni Doh replied only ABC books fell into the category of “easy.” Next, I asked him which books were too hard. After thinking for a moment, Ni Doh answered Magic Tree House Books. When I asked him why these books were hard, he told me they had a lot of “hard” words on one page. I next asked Ni Doh what books he liked. At first, he couldn’t think of any. He rejected my offer of Green Eggs and Ham, informing me did not understand it when we had read it together the day before. Finally, when I prompted him to think of books that were “just right” to read, Ni Doh offered that he loved Curious George books, because he “knows” most of the words and can understand the stories.*

*I was later able to have a similar conversation with April Paw, one of my older high school girls. When I asked April if she could think of things that were easy for her to read, she replied she couldn’t think of anything, and appeared to be puzzled by the question. However, when I asked April what kinds of books or what book was hard for her to read, she appeared to understand completely. “Lots of English books,” April answered. She went on to highlight the difficulty of reading Bible stories, noting she doesn’t understand them because they are “too hard.” Finally, when I asked April about a book she enjoyed or had read recently, April remembered a book she had read in school, “Because of Winn Dixie.” April went on to tell me she “can read [the book],” thought it was a “good story,” and she also got to see the movie version in school.*

*Too Dan San was one of my students who was only able to answer one of the questions, specifically the question about what was his favorite thing to read. Too Dan San is a middle school student who has been in the United States for almost two years, and is currently unable to name all of his letters, identify letter sounds or the word onsets, recognize the vast majority of words on any given page of text, or recall what he has read when prompted to do so. When reading with Too Dan San, there were times I wondered if any of the words or any of the text at all was comprehensible to him; If I asked to read, he repeated the same grunting sound for approximately the amount of words on the page. Too Dan San has near equal difficulty in holding a conversation in English. Even still, when I asked Too Dan San for his favorite thing to read, he answered decisively superman comics because “They [the comics] are fun.”*

*Mook is another middle school boy whose overall English reading ability I perceived to be at a much lower level than both his native English speaking and his Karen peers. Mook often refuses to participate in reading class activities, and was one of only a small handful of students who would refuse to participate in choral reading, even when given an incentive like candy. When I asked Mook if there was a certain book he liked to read better than others, the question appeared not to register with Mook, and he*

*simply replied “I do not know.” However, when I asked Mook if he had a favorite book, he willingly and eagerly shared that his favorite books were Scooby Doo and Sponge Bob because they were funny.*

Minority language students and native English speakers alike have reading preferences, and what each student prefers is typically unique to him or her. Even still, in examining the statements of my Karen English language learners, a common thread is woven throughout all their responses – the issue of comprehensibility. While my students may not be able to articulate the precise understanding issues their own comments reveal, as teachers, we need to be able to draw conclusions from their stated preferences and the available information in order to better meet their needs as developing readers. The discussion I will engage in over the course of this section will explore a few possibilities of the contributing factors to my students’ determinations of books that are easy, books that are hard, and what books they enjoyed the most.

The below discussion focuses on mainly on issues related to lexicon and syntax in combination with other contributing to what makes a text hard, easy, or enjoyable for many English language learners. Some of these other issues include a lack of relevant background knowledge to understand the text, including but not limited to prior experience and understanding of the content, familiarity with the subject, and an overall, abstract understanding of literacy. Some such features are discussed in Section 1.3 and expanded upon in Chapter 2.

One of the main issues the above vignette sheds light on is what makes a text easy, hard, or enjoyable for my Karen students. What Ni Doh declares to be easy for him to read is not surprising when given his belief about the relationship between word knowledge and being able to read. However, Ni Doh’s comment on how ABC books are easy because he “knows [his] letters” brings up the issue of what input is necessary to make a text comprehensible for the reader. In an ABC book, the issue of word knowledge is quickly put to rest. ABC books in their most basic form often are composed of a single letter with a single corresponding word and picture per page, and are thus present very little challenges linguistically on any level. While Ni Doh says the book is easy because he knows his letters, the ease Ni Doh experiences in reading ABC books can be contributed to a wide variety of factors all related to reading comprehension and literacy development. For Ni Doh, he has come to a point where he as a reader has enough relevant background knowledge, enough vocabulary knowledge, enough familiarity with relevant content, and enough familiarity of the literary structure of ABC books that this genre no longer presents a challenge. As the remaining analyses reveal, the interplay of these factors all contribute to what makes a text comprehensible, and thus easy, hard, or enjoyable for my Karen English language learners.

The fact that Ni Doh says he does not understand Dr. Seuss’ *Green Eggs and Ham* highlights how simple vocabulary and structure are not inherently enough to make a text comprehensible for English language learners who are developing readers. Dr. Seuss’ *Green Eggs and Ham* is famous for being composed of only fifty different words, forty-nine of which are mono-syllabic, the sole exception being the frequently repeated word “anywhere.” With sentences averaging in length of about five words and a song-like, rhythmic feel, I chose *Green Eggs and Ham* for Ni Doh with the hope that he would enjoy the book, feel a sense of accomplishment with being able to recognize the majority

of the words, and (as I mistakenly assumed) thus understand the text. It became clear in debriefing with Ni Doh, and even more so as he told me later he did not understand it, that despite the simplicity of the words, he was not able to comprehend the story of the text, let alone enjoy the song-like flow of Dr. Seuss' witty verse. Ni Doh could not decode the text for meaning, and thus did not enjoy the text.

As was the case with *Green Eggs and Ham* for Ni Doh, there is not necessarily a direct correlation between the syntactic or lexical simplicity of a given text and comprehension for English language learners who are still developing literacy skills. Similarly, using adapted texts, or materials where the vocabulary or format have been changed to a seemingly more simplistic version with the intention of accommodating a lower-level reader, with English language learners does not necessarily guarantee greater levels of comprehension and engagement. Sadly, well meaning teachers often choose by default adapted texts or simpler books when working with English language learners without contemplating the fact that in some ways, these texts are no more useful than their unmodified or more complex counterparts; at least with the "more challenging" texts, minority language learners have the opportunity to engage with an authentic example of written English, and perhaps an overall more interesting, thought-provoking text (Valdés, 1998; Sharkey & Layzer, 2000; Estrada, Gómez, & Ruiz-Escalante, 2009; Moll, 1987).

If *Green Eggs and Ham* represents the conundrum of the unclear relationship between lexical and syntactical simplicity and comprehension for English language learners, perhaps April Paw's mention of the Bible represents almost the archetype of a text that will predictably be difficult for English language learners to comprehend. The barriers April (and, frankly, most English speakers) encounters in trying to comprehend biblical texts can be grouped into two broad categories – word choice and grammatical structure, and a familiarity with subject content and background knowledge, a topic that will be more thoroughly discussed later in this paper.

The Bible, the most translated book of all time, is also perhaps one of the most controversial and confusing texts of all time as well. Dozens of English translations and paraphrases of the Bible exist and are read today, and each version – all supposedly translated from the same original text – varies in word choice and in sentence structure. The translations of the Bible that claim to cling closely to the original ancient texts often present the most difficulty in comprehension for native English speaking readers due to their irregular use of English vocabulary and grammar. Additionally, reading the Bible for meaning also requires extensive background knowledge of relevant historical data and religious traditions and symbols. Finally, in order to fully comprehend biblical texts, one must have an understanding and familiarity with the different genres of literature included in the Bible, such as prose and poetry, historical accounts, allegories, and epistles, and the literary functions and purposes of each of these genres. As August & Hakuta (1997) explain, an abstract understanding of literacy provides a foundation to understanding all texts, and the Bible is no exception. It is no wonder that April finds Bible stories in English difficult to understand.

Like most English language learners, when reading English materials, April can most likely engage with a text in which some elements are incomprehensible, such as a particularly difficult vocabulary, unfamiliar structure, or foreign content or background knowledge (August & Hakuta, 1997; Fitzgerald, 1995; Johnson, 1981). However, texts

like the Bible are especially challenging for English language learners like April because of its peculiarity on multiple levels – in its unconventional use of English vocabulary and grammatical structures in combination with a high level of relevant background knowledge necessary for understanding all of the symbolic, literary, historic and religious references in the text (Johnson, 1981; Pica, 1987). Said another way, with the presence of zero to minimal familiar features, texts like the Bible can be almost a guaranteed struggle for English language learners.

Reading comprehension must be one of our main goals in educating English language learners if our ultimate goal is to give these students an opportunity to experience academic success; when English language learners are placed in ESL classes where comprehension is not emphasized, mastery and yet alone growth in English proficiency is seldom to be found (Estrada, Gómez, & Ruiz-Escalante, 2009; Snow & Fillmore, 2000; Sharky & Layzer, 2000; Valdés, 1998). However, teachers can also fail to provide accessible materials for their English language learners, and in turn fail to encourage a student’s English reading abilities (McCarthy and Moje, 2002; Fitzgerald, 1995; Valdés, 1998). If simple vocabulary and structure alone do not guarantee reading comprehension for English language learners, yet using any and all authentic text is not effective, we as teachers need to continue to strive to find what works for these students. In realizing being able to recognize and accurately call nearly all of the words in *Green Eggs and Ham* was not enough for Ni Doh to understand or enjoy the text, I attempted to tune into the characteristics of the texts he found to be too easy, too hard, or just right.

While the linguistic features of what made a text “hard” for my Karen students to read were slightly easier to determine, what makes a text “enjoyable” or “just right” proved to be slightly more difficult. However, as I examined the similarities between each of my students’ favorites, a few common themes emerged.

Repetition has long been thought of as an important element of language learning in both native language and second language learning. With the exception of April’s choice of *Winn Dixie*, each of my students mentioned a title in a series as their favorite books to read – Superman Comics, Scooby Doo books, Sponge Bob books, and Curious George books. By nature of being part of a series, once students have a positive encounter with one book in a series, they know what to expect in all the following books in terms of the consistency of characters, the format of the plot, the near identical language choice and structure book to book, and even the consistency of illustration style. Thus said, reading books in a series minimizes the amount of unfamiliar content or other unfamiliar literary features a reader encounters when he or she opens the second, third, or whatever installment in the series. When an English language learner or native English speaker alike opens a book from a familiar series, the encounter often lines up closely with his or her expectations based on past experiences with other books in the series. In short, series of books tend to be a safe choice for emergent readers because of the comfort and predictability they ensure the reader, and engaging with these books is thus often an enjoyable experience.

Furthermore, predictable books with consistent literary elements are not just enjoyable, but also serve instructional purposes in English literacy development. Linse (2007) explains how predictable books contain authentic language that is controlled (or predictable), and are thus an excellent way to introduce authentic literature to English language learners that is also accessible. Chien (2000) conducted a yearlong study

involving the use of predictable books in a literature-based curriculum for a group of kindergarten English-language learners in Taipei, Taiwan. The study revealed that using predictable books enabled the English language learners to develop key behaviors associated with literacy development, such as fundamental book awareness, the direction of print, and print awareness. Given the research proving the importance of comprehensible, accessible materials in developing literacy in English language learners, one could hardly argue that almost all of my Karen mentioning predictable books in series as their favorites is coincidental.

Transmediation also plays a role determining texts that my students found easy or enjoyable. Transmediation is considered the act of translating meaning from one sign system to another (Siegel, 1995). A sign system is considered anything used as a form of communication to construct meaning, such as art, music, drama, mathematics, and written and spoken languages (Berghoff, 1998). Each text my Karen students offered as their favorite included the all too important element of visual representations, whether in the form of in-text illustrations (Scooby Doo, Superman Comics, Curious George, and Sponge Bob) or a movie based on the text (*Because of Winn Dixie*), or a corresponding TV show (Scooby Doo, Superman Comics, Curious George, and Sponge Bob). The fact that each book a student named as their favorite involved visual representations perhaps lends itself to an argument in favor of the role transmediation can play in developing literacy skills. Siegel (1995) advocates that transmediation in the classroom can foster meaning-making in a way that text alone cannot. He also offers the idea that moving across sign systems (processes such as reading a book and watching the corresponding movie, or viewing a written text as well as pictorial representations of the story) is a generative process in which new meanings are produced that one sign system alone could not elicit.

Visual aids can also be seen as one more piece of input, or one more opportunity for engagement with a piece of literacy for English language learners. Pictures, illustrations, movies, and even television shows can serve to fill in gaps in comprehension due to lack of background knowledge, content familiarity or even word knowledge that the text alone presents. The text and the corresponding visual representations both serve to tell a story, and both thus can be used to make meaning (Sipe, 1998). When illustrations or other visual representations are available in correspondence with the written word, text can be used to interpret pictures, and pictures are used to make meaning from text (Siegel, 1995; Sipe, 1998). For English language learners like my Karen students, any opportunity to gain clues and information that aids in the interpretation of a written text is valuable, and it thus seems only logical they would all choose to read books with visual representations.

Understanding student preferences not only allows for teachers to choose texts that will be interesting and enjoyable for students, but also allows teachers to gain insight into the features of a text that either encourage students to read on or halt them in their tracks. As seen in the vignettes above, this issue is complicated by the interplay of the different aspects of a text – the syntax, lexicon, word choice, familiarity with culturally relevant background knowledge, subject content, and the presence or absence of visual aids. However, understanding how these different factors interact to create an easy, hard, or enjoyable reading experience for my Karen students allows me to ultimately better



meet their needs as English language learners, and thus the discussion of all these factors is pertinent to the goal of greater success for this group of learners.

### **Section 1.3 Cultural and Experiential knowledge: Additional Barriers to Reading Comprehension**

As a young reader, I rarely came across texts where my lack of familiarity with culturally determined content acted as a barrier in my reading comprehension. I gravitate mainly toward texts written in English for children with background knowledge based in American contexts. In contrast, my Karen students and the majority of immigrant and refugee English language learners encounter almost exclusively texts that draw upon subjects and cultural background knowledge that is completely foreign to them. This section will attempt to touch on a few contributors to reading comprehension that are perhaps less tangible than those discussed above, specifically the role relevant background knowledge, familiarity with the subject content, and an overall, abstract understanding of literacy play in comprehension. This section will also look at how all these factors effect the English literacy development of my Karen students. The description of the game of charades below serves as an appropriate and eye-opening introduction to this topic:

*The game was charades and the group was made up of higher-level Karen readers. Melissa had prepared a brown bag full of English nouns for the kids to perform for their team. Each student would draw a noun from the bag when it was his or her turn. Eh Kew got up and approached the bag, still bantering back in forth with his teammates in Karen. When Eh Kew pulled the word from the bag, he stared at it, squinted at it, and finally turned to Melissa and I helplessly. "What is this?" he said. I walked over to him, reluctant to read the word on the paper. While we wanted today to be a fun day – the kids had been working hard all week in the reading room – we also wanted the students to continue to practice reading, or at least practice sounding out new words. "Popsicle," his card read. I whispered the word in his ear. Eh Kew looked even more perplexed. "Eh?" He responded, as if completely befuddled.*

*"You don't know what that is?" I asked, unsure of how he would respond. Eh Kew shook his head. Puzzled, I looked to Melissa, called her over, and showed her the word on Eh Kew's card. "Maybe he just doesn't know the word," I offered. I then turned to Eh Kew and offered my best description. "You know, a popsicle is like frozen juice or ice cream on a stick; you eat it when it's hot out and it melts on you hands." I then acted out licking a popsicle. Eh Kew shook his head again sheepishly. I turned to Melissa in desperation.*

*Giving up on keeping the word a secret, Melissa asked the student, "Eh Kew, have you ever had a popsicle?"*

*"Pssssh, no, I don't what that is!" Eh Kew responded, making an exaggerated face that seemed to say "you're crazy!"*

*"Does anyone know what a popsicle is?" Melissa asked the group desperately. Some girls rolled their eyes. Others shook their heads. A few responded enthusiastically with "Psssh, no!" Melissa and I made eye contact, embarrassed at our lack of foresight.*

*“Okay then, well I guess we’ll try a new word.” Eh Kew pulled the word “soccer” and easily acted out the skill. However, as the game went on, more and more words caused problems for the Karen students: fire works, sleeping bag, crayon, birthday cake, toothbrush, ice cream cone, water slide, swimming pool. A few times upon hearing the description, one or two students would say “Oh, oh! I know that!” or “I’ve seen that!” However, the majority of times when we would explain the unfamiliar word, Melissa and I would receive blank stares.*

As discussed in the above sections, word knowledge is a vital part of reading comprehension in any language. However, as is the case with many English language learners, the issue of gaining word knowledge and growing in vocabulary is not as simple as pairing the written word with the abstract concept or tangible object that the word represents. Similarly, the issue is not just sounding out the written text until the reader is able to recognize that this particular written word is already a part of their oral language. As was the case with Eh Kew and the word “popsicle,” often English language learners – especially low-socio-economic status immigrants, the sub group that makes up the majority of the American school’s present language learning population – do not possess the relevant background knowledge, familiarity with the content subject, and/or the overall understanding of literacy background necessary to fully make meaning from a text. This section reviews these concepts and attempts to answer the question of what factors beyond the linguistic features of a text affect reading comprehension and overall English reading development in English language learners.

Research findings over the past several decades in the area of literacy development are fairly consistent in reporting that successful readers (or children who have an easier and more successful time in developing literacy skills) typically come into an instructional setting with specific prior experiences and pre-established skills that are of tremendous aid to literacy development (August & Hakuta, 1997; Snow & Fillmore, 2001; García, Jensen, & Scribner, 2009; Lareau, 2000; Pransky, 2009; Teale, 1986; Ramirez, 2003; Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta, 1991; Valdés, 1998). One of these previously developed attributes can best be summarized as a basic understanding of literacy, or a basic “orientation” to literacy (August & Hakuta, 1997; Pransky, 2009). Students who come from homes where both parents are literate in English (and their native language, if other than English) and whose parents regularly engage with their children in reading or literacy practices in general are more likely to succeed in schools.

Pransky (2009) discusses how English language learners also are more likely to come from non-literacy oriented communities, while their native English speaking peers are more likely to come from literacy oriented communities. In literacy oriented communities, parents are typically well educated and incorporate practices at home that better prepare children for success in today’s school systems. In non-literacy oriented communities and homes, while learning, education, and literacy may be valued, practices that prepare students for independent thinking and learning are not intentionally taught (August & Hakuta, 1997; Pransky, 2009). The issue is not that one community is not right and the other wrong. It is an issue of mismatch: American schools are typically set up in such a way that children from literacy-oriented communities are more likely to thrive due to their preparation at home (Bourdieu, 1977; Brice-Heath, 1983). Because the majority of English language learners and especially language-minority immigrants come

from non-literacy oriented homes, they usually do not have access to the prior knowledge and the skill sets valued by American schools, further limiting their chance at academic success. Thus said, the concept of literacy (or complete lack thereof) a child enters school with can ultimately affect the degree to which a child succeeds in developing literacy and academic success in general.

The lack of a basic understanding of literacy valued in the mainstream America is an important discussion when considering the comments of my Karen students, and their overall predispositions and orientation to literacy and English reading. Having an understanding of literacy plays in fundamental role in literacy development,] and the impact this has on my student's ability to engage with texts and to experience complete comprehension of a text in reading. For example, analyzing my student's behaviors while playing charades does not give a direct glimpse into the effects of not coming from literacy oriented homes; however, my students' lack of recognition of the English words and concepts does speak to their lack of prior experience with these words and concepts in the written form, experience that many upper-middle class American children would typically gain from interaction over literature with their parents.

Familiarity with content and culturally relevant background knowledge also plays a large role in preventing or aiding reading comprehension. As depicted by the game of charades, when English language learners are unable to use background knowledge to access meaning within a given text, full comprehension is almost guaranteed to be blocked. As was the case with Eh Kew when Melissa explained the word to him, when students do not have experience with the content of a given text or material, decoding and comprehending a text thus becomes even more difficult. Familiarity with the content of a text promotes reading comprehension in first or second language (Carrell, 1987; Fitzgerald, 1995; Johnson, 1981), and when English language learners have fewer resources to pull from in making meaning from a text (limited experience with vocabulary, unfamiliarity with the literary structure, etc.), content familiarity and being able to call upon relevant prior knowledge becomes all the more important.

The interplay of the language complexity and the culturally determined background of a text on reading comprehension have always been recognized as elements of concern in the selection of reading materials for [second language learners] and in the evaluation of their reading comprehension (August & Hakuta, 1997; Johnson, 1981; Pica, 1987). Johnson (1981) found Iranian students were able to recall and explain a story with greater accuracy when the story contained a plot, character, and structure similar to typical Iranian folk tales. Johnson also reported that the same group of Iranian students found passages in the American story of Buffalo Bill to be ambiguous, as both vocabulary and the cultural situation in the story were unfamiliar and thus presented comprehension challenges. Furthermore, Johnson observed that overall, second language learners at the intermediate or advanced levels of ESL who participated in her test tended to understand modified texts better than unmodified texts of stories of the cultural background foreign to the reader, especially in the recall of events.

Johnson's research explains why foreign language learners and thus English language learners like the Karen may have problems reading materials for which they have no relevant background knowledge as well as little vocabulary knowledge. When vocabulary in the target language is low, culturally determined background knowledge is one of the few tools students have to rely on in making meaning from text.

Comprehension breakdowns can arise from the combination of unfamiliarity with a certain aspect of the cultural background implied by the text and lack of experience with the language of the text (Johnson, 1981). Both of these factors were at play in the example of Eh Kew encountering “popsicle” during charades.

Furthermore, when students are unable to identify with the content of a text or make relevant literary connections, the level of motivation to decode the text for meaning is often low, while frustration levels are often high (McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Valdés, 1998). Elizabeth Moje and Sarah McCarthy (2002) worked with groups of English language learners in researching the relationship between identity and literacy. The authors reported that the majority of the students she worked with of various ages and ethnic backgrounds reported rejecting reading and reading materials in class because they could not identify with the people in the stories that the teacher had chosen for them; in some cases, well meaning teachers had chosen texts they thought would connect with students' experiences or particular ethnic backgrounds, but the students felt that the experiences and backgrounds of the characters in the stories were too different or foreign. Without a personal connection to content or the possession of relevant background knowledge necessary to comprehend a text, there is little wonder why so many English language learners like my Karen students experience feelings of frustration, failure, and despair in engaging with English texts.

Relevant background knowledge is also composed of prior experiences with subject and content matter of a text. Prior experiences are valuable in developing literacy and in facilitating comprehension (August & Hakuta, 1997). However, the usefulness of prior knowledge is only as great as the student's ability to connect it to a text; if a text has zero relevance to a particular student's set of prior knowledge, then the prior knowledge serves no purpose in facilitating comprehension. The problem is therefore not that English language learners lack *all* forms of prior knowledge – the issue is that English language learners typically cannot connect their knowledge to texts used in schools. This disconnect is often called a mismatch of cultural capital (Lareau, 2000), a concept that will further be explored in Chapter 2.

Because English language learners do not have access to the cultural relevant background knowledge, the prior knowledge, and understanding of literacy valued by American schools, reading development and academic success may not be fully possible in circumstances where these factors are not considered in reading and English instruction (Estrada, Gómez, & Ruiz-Escalante, 2009; Moll & Diaz, 1987; Valdés, 1998). My Karen students could not participate in the charades game because they did not have the relevant background knowledge or content familiarity to decode the text for meaning, let alone to act out the word and compete to win the game. Students like the Karen need to experience successful connections between their own prior knowledge and new information presented in texts if they are to develop as proficient readers, and we as teachers need to be advocates of their advancement, seeking out and developing new ways to foster experiential knowledge necessary for text comprehension.

#### **Section 1.4 Student's beliefs about themselves as readers**

When I was younger, it was not until I gained confidence in myself as a reader that I began to read more frequently, and choose more challenging books. As a student

teacher, I have also found time and time again that there is a connection between my students' beliefs about themselves as readers and their reading performance; my students that are more confident in their reading abilities tend to in general read more. In observing and talking to my Karen students about reading, a common theme also emerged concerning the relationship between student's beliefs about themselves as readers, specifically their professed level of confidence as readers, and reading behavior. Below is a summary of what I asked my Karen students, how they responded, and other observations I deemed relevant to exploring this topic:

*As part of conducting reading interviews, I asked all of my Karen students, "When you are reading and you come to something you don't know, what do you do?" Without any hesitation, six out of the eight students I interviewed promptly responded, "ask," or, "ask someone" as the first strategy that came to mind. Only two of my students, Ni Doh Gey Htoo and Eh Ler Thaw, gave me other strategies as their first choices. Ni Doh told me he "reads more to figure it [what he doesn't understand] out, and Eh Ler told me she "looks it up in a dictionary." Even Ni Doh, when I asked him if he ever did anything else, listed "ask someone" as his second go-to choice.*

*Later in the interview process, I gave my students the opportunity to rank themselves on a scale from one to five, one being a very beginning reader and five being an expert reader. All of my students who said they "ask someone" first when they come across something they don't know in reading also told me they were very beginner to average readers, or a one to three out of five. Only two students, Ni Doh and Eh Ler, named themselves as fours out of five, meaning they believed they were good readers – the same two students who did not mention asking someone as their first go-to strategy in reading. Ni Doh and Eh Ler also choose books for fun that they express to be "hard" for them to read, but still choose them anyway; Ni Doh attempts to read Magic Treehouse books, even though he finds there are "too many" words on the page, and Eh Ler tries to read the Bible in English, even though she reports the stories are hard to understand.*

*In observing both Ni Doh and Eh Ler in reading class and outside of the classroom, both students stand out to me as having some of the most advanced oral language and reading skills out of all the Karen students their age, older, or younger. Eh Ler is only surpassed in oral language and reading skills perhaps by two younger girls whose family has been in America for five years, while Ni Doh far exceeds his male peers in the frequency with which he is willing to read out loud, ability to accurately recall a text he just read, and ability to accurately call words in a written text. Ni Doh also is my only student who professed initiative in reading outside of Urban Vision or school; Ni Doh told me he walks to the library, a two mile journey that requires him to cross a mile long suspension bridge over a valley and through some of the less safe parts of the city.*

The correlation is clear. My Karen students who rated themselves as lower-level readers also all professed they "ask" someone first when they come to something they do not understand in their reading. On the other hand, Ni Doh and Eh Ler ranked themselves as good readers, and also volunteered strategies beyond asking for help as their go-to method when attempting to negotiate unknown meaning. However, the question remains as to why – why do my Karen students who profess low confidence in their reading abilities rely on others when their comprehension is threatened, while others who are

more confident in their abilities chose strategies that are less others dependent? And what came first – the confidence level or the predisposition to a certain strategy? Furthermore, does the more advanced reading ability of Ni Doh and Eh Ler as a result of them believe more positively in themselves as readers, or are they confident in the title of “good reader” because they are more advanced in ability?

A thorough discussion on all of these possibilities has the potential to unlock incredible resources for teachers to use in developing ways to best serve the needs of English Language Learners. The connections between reading ability, professed confidence, motivation, and dependent versus independent behaviors reading behaviors are complex and diverse, and the depth and extent of these connections still has yet to be discovered, analyzed, and made tangible for teachers to use in serving English language learners. However, this section will attempt to draw meaningful connections between these concepts using data from my experience in conjuncture with previously conducted research.

In analyzing the observations above, one of the most pressing questions for me is why do my Karen students who express more confidence in their reading abilities choose less others-dependent strategies and vice versa with their less confident peers? With respect to the issue of the role self-confidence plays in reading, Ann Powell-Brown (2006) argues that teachers who have a genuine passion for reading and who serve as role models in reading for their students can influence their student’s motivation to read and self-confidence, and thus affect their student’s reading abilities. Powell-Brown argues that we as human beings tend to avoid what is painful, and children who struggle to read are no exception. Children like my Karen English language learners who have little self confidence in their ability to read often avoid reading because it produces more discomfort than pleasure. Yet, these same children love stories, love to be read to, and are often involved in oral discussions of the stories read orally. Teachers can foster self-confidence and student motivation to read through engaging students in a variety of different literature strategies and making literature relevant to the student (Powell-Brown, 2006).

This question is further complicated by the discussion of what the use or the absence of a reading strategy actually indicates about the reader, let alone the reader’s self-confidence. Put simply, reading strategies are "plans for solving problems encountered in constructing meaning" (Duffy, 1993). Reading strategies can reveal the readers' resources for comprehension and indicate how readers conceive a task, what textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they do not understand (Block, 1986). If indeed the reading strategy a student chooses is indicative of what he or she understands about the task of reading, others-dependent strategies may indicate a desire to simply get through the material, while choosing more independent strategies may indicate a greater desire to make meaning out of reading the text.

The implications of these different attitudes and approaches toward reading and literacy are staggering. A correlation has also been found to exist between both the reading strategy an English language learner chooses and the confidence he or she expresses in terms of reading ability, and his or her overall resilience and success in American schools. In working with a group of English language learners in California, Yolanda Padron and Hersholt Waxman (2000) found that students who were performing

successfully in schools used “strong” reading strategies (e.g. thinking about what I am reading, telling the story in my own words, focusing on the main ideas) more often than “weak strategies” (e.g. skipping parts of the story I do not understand). On the other hand, lower-performing students more often reported using weaker strategies than stronger strategies. In the same group of students polled, the more resilient students professed higher self-concepts in reading than the non-resilient students, a finding consistent with my Karen students (Padron & Waxman, 2000).

These conclusions are also supported by previous research conducted with monolinguals, which has found that lower achieving students use less sophisticated and even inappropriate cognitive reading strategies during reading (Brown, Armbruster, & Baker, 1983). In working with a group of Hispanic English language learners, Padrón and Waxam (1988) also found the use of lower-level cognitive strategies in reading may be another factor other than English proficiency that interferes with the readers’ comprehension, and thus further inhibits successful reading experiences. Further research needs to be conducted to determine whether increasing the use of stronger reading strategies actually aids in reading for English language learners like the Karen.

I have little doubt that Ni Doh and Eh Ler use a variety of reading strategies when making meaning from texts. In order for Ni Doh to attempt a new Magic Tree House book on a subject he has little background knowledge on, he must grapple with the text on multiple levels to extrapolate meaning. Similarly, April would not be able to even attempt a Bible story if she could not draw upon a wide range of literacy strategies. My concern lies more with my students who are not confident, and who do not currently seem to possess the higher-level reading strategies necessary to make meaning from texts with unfamiliar features. As long as these students remain unable to make meaning from texts, I doubt their confidence in their reading abilities will improve, and thus doubt their desire to attempt challenging texts will grow either.

The relationship between self-confidence and reading thus seems to lend itself to one of two directions – an upward climb toward greater satisfaction with reading, increased literacy skills, higher reading achievement, and all around increased levels of motivation and self confidence, or a downward spiral of increased frustration with reading, stagnation of literacy skills, continued low achievement in reading, and all around decreased levels of confidence and motivation. Which path English language learners are on is crucial in shaping their overall experience of learning English and their overall success in U.S. schools.

### **Section 1.5 Pragmatic Suggestions**

The vignettes above speak to some of the patterns, puzzles, and relationships that need to be further explored by educational research. First, my observations and conversations with my Karen students indicate they believe reading to be word calling rather than a way to make meaning from a text. Second, the texts my Karen students identified as easy, hard, or enjoyable all contain a certain make-up of factors that caused my students’ determinations to fall one way or another. Third, a variety of barriers to reading comprehension exist for English language learners that are perhaps unique to them as cultural and linguistic minority-learners. Finally, a clear relationship exists

between the level of confidence my students expressed and the reading strategies they chose in making meaning from texts.

Each of these points presents my understanding of pressing issues for the education community and gives rise to new challenges for education researchers. It is true that we do not have adequate usable knowledge that can help teachers better discern how to meet the unique needs of English language learners, especially the diverse and complex needs of students like the Karen. Research still needs to be done to find practical ways teachers can use to better facilitate literacy development for learners like the Karen. Some of questions that emerged from my work are listed below:

1. How do skills and strategies taught implicitly or explicitly during reading instruction with English language learners affect the beliefs and understandings of what “good” reading is? As discussed above in the first section, how we teach has implications beyond the explicit skills taught.
2. How can teachers incorporate authentic English texts that draw upon their students’ prior experiences and background knowledge? So many instructional texts available for teachers today do not draw upon topics and content relevant to English language learners. How can teachers choose texts that are relevant to their students that also provide opportunities for interaction with authentic English texts?
3. How can teachers tap into literacy skills a learner has developed in his or her native language and capitalize on these skills in developing English literacy? If teachers can draw out the resources students already have developed in their native tongue, the potential awakening? For the student to have greater opportunities for meaning making in English, and being a speaker of multiple languages can be viewed as valuable and as an asset to the child instead of any sort of negative connotation.
4. How can teachers most effectively use transmediation to foster meaning making in literacy while still primarily engaging students written texts? If transmediation can foster meaning making in literacy, and the extent to which English language learners will enjoy academic success in American schools depends to a great extent on their English literacy skills, how can transmediation be utilized effectively with this end in mind?
5. How can teachers cultivate in the classroom independent, self-reliant reading strategies while not ignoring student needs? The practice of teaching and modeling beneficial reading behaviors, skills, and strategies is of all the more importance for teachers of English language learners. The classroom also needs to remain a safe place where students feel free to ask for help when necessary. How do teachers of English language learners strike this delicate balance?
6. What specific interactions can teachers facilitate in the classroom to grow the desire of English language learners to take risks and challenges in their reading? While some research has been done on the subject of how to overall foster motivation within



the classroom, how specifically can teachers of minority language students encourage and promote risk-taking in developing literacy?

7. What can teachers do to grow confidence in students who believe they are poor readers and perform at a level noticeably lower than their peers? What instructional techniques can booster both confidence and skill in struggling readers? While the relationship between confidence and skill is not clear-cut, enhanced confidence has the potential to be an important byproduct of instruction in many domains.

## **Chapter 2: Relationship between Home and Availability of Resources**

The difficulties low-socio economic status English language learners like the Karen encounter in schools cannot be attributed to their English proficiency alone. The academic challenges students from this population of learners experience can also be attributed to the mismatch between the cultural capital American schools are built on and the cultural capital of the learner's home community. Cultural capital, as coined originally by Bourdieu (1977) and adapted by Lareau (1997), can best be described as the elements of family life and cultural resources that impact how students adjust to school life and academic achievement. Lareau argues that schools draw unevenly on the cultural capital of the American upper middle class (1997). As is the case with economic capital, students and families who possess the cultural capital that is marked as desirable receive greater returns from schools. However, the majority of low socio-economic status English language learners does not possess this type of cultural capital, and often experience negative consequences of what can best be described as cultural capital mismatch (August & Hakuta, 1997; Lareau, 1997).

Cultural capital mismatch thus involves the interactions and the differences between the dominant, "desirable" cultural capital of the majority and the cultural capital of the minority. Mismatch may exist in any number of areas between cultures, but some of the most prominent places of difference that affect education exist in the languages spoken and how language is used, expectations and understanding of the role of teachers versus parents in educating children, and expectations and norms in parental roles in their children's school experience and performance (August & Hakuta, 1997). While one group's cultural capital is not inherently better or worse than another, children who grow up in homes with cultural capital that matches the values and resources reflected in the schools tend to do enjoy academic success more often than their peers who do not come from such homes (Lareau, 1997; Pransky, 2009). The Karen and the majority of low socio-economic status, refugee English language learners are in this latter group.

As the vignettes below reveal, cultural capital mismatch has created challenges for the Karen in their daily life in North Hill, Ohio, and, more specifically, in the realm of academic achievement and school experience. First, Parental employment status is one example of a factor that has negatively affected the academic achievement of Karen students due to the low wages and poor living conditions. Second, the activities my Karen students choose to participate in outside of school also have consequences on their school experience and academic achievement. Finally, refugees like the Karen bring to the table a unique set of experiences as refugees that inevitably affect their school experience in the United States on a regular basis. Understanding the different aspects of the lives of the Karen related to cultural capital is crucial to an overall understanding of who these students are and thus what their needs are as learners in our classrooms.

### **2.1 Effects of Parent Employment as Low Wage Workers**

While my first relationship with the Karen children was that of teacher, I also got to know some of the children – especially the girls – on a more friend-to-friend basis. These glimpses into their lives outside of the classroom occurred through casual, poolside conversations on days off, through interacting during Bible Study on Wednesdays after

class, or through chitchat before the bell rang for class to begin each day. The observations below speak specifically to the issue of parent employment, and how the employment of my students' parents affected the daily life of my students.

*For many families, work is hit or miss, or as needed. Many Karen are not able to find jobs at all. Many of my students' fathers worked as plumbers, mechanics, or janitors, and most of these jobs were on-call positions. Some of the men in the community have yet to receive a day's worth of wages since they arrived in North Hill, one, two, or three years ago. Upon arriving in North Hill, the Karen are provided with a monthly stipend for about a year by the government, but after one year, all aid is cut off. The vast majority of women within the Karen community do not attempt to work outside of the home, and those who do often cannot find employment. Women who are successful in finding employment are most likely housekeepers, dishwashers, or janitors. More often than not, women bring their children to work with them.*

*One of my Karen high school students, April, told me on a regular basis that she spent her days off from camp helping her mother clean houses. April lives with her family in a one-bedroom apartment in the same complex where the majority of the Karen attending Urban Vision lived. April would come to class what looked like fresh bug bites accompanied by old scars from scratched-off scabs on her arms and legs. When I asked her where they came from, April would only shrug her shoulders and say, "the bugs at night... so itchy."*

As briefly mentioned above and demonstrated in this vignette, the employment status of my Karen student's parents impacts their school lives and academic experiences in a variety of ways. The main source of problems for the Karen pertaining to parental employment status is the low wage jobs the majority of Karen parents hold. The consequences of a low-paying job on daily life in general are numerous, but one especially obvious consequence for the Karen is the poor living conditions to which the majority of families are subject. The discussion below concentrates mainly on these two factors – the effects of parent employment in low wage jobs and of living in poor conditions – and how they relate to academic achievement for this group of learners.

That status of parent employment in low wage paying jobs negatively affects the school experiences of low-socio-economic status English language learners like the Karen. Research consistently reveals that a strong correlation exists between a family's socio-economic status and academic achievement for both native English speakers and English language learners alike. Unfortunately, low-socio economic status students are the ones who experience the negative consequences of this relationship, and often perform at a lower level academically than their more financially well-off peers. Because English language learners in general are more likely than their native English speaking students to come from low income families, understanding the relationship between poverty and employment is crucial to understanding how to best meet the needs of these learners.

According to García, Jensen, and Scribner (2009), while there are minority-language populations and families across the socio-economic spectrum, English language learners in general are more likely to come from low income families than their native English speaking peers. English language learners are also more likely to be subject to

more risk factors than their native English-speaking peers, such as single parent homes, parent English proficiency, family income, and parent education level. The more risk factors a student has present in their lives outside and inside the school, the more difficult success in a standard school environment becomes for the student; while most native English speaking students experience one or two risk factors, ELLs experience three to five risk factors, making them more vulnerable to academic failure (García, Jensen, and Scribner, 2009). This theme will be touched upon again in this chapter as we continue to elaborate on the relationship between home and access to resources.

Additionally, parental employment affects the ability of parents to get involved in their children's school learning because it limits the time parents have available to be present at the child's school. American schools value a certain amount of parental participation in education, and including coming to conferences, open houses, responding to notes, and participating in the classroom – all of which may be foreign to immigrant parents (Adler, 2004; August & Hakuta, 2007; Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap, & Epstein, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Ramirez, 2003). Parent involvement at school has also been linked to instilling in students the importance of school activities and educational achievement (Morrison, Storino, Robertson, Weissglass, & Dondero, 2000). The majority of immigrant parents in the lower socioeconomic branch bracket are unable to attend school functions, and are thus labeled as disinterested in their child's schooling (Ramirez, 2003). With the primary jobs of many Karen adults being janitorial positions, the Karen are no exception to this pattern. When parents fail to participate in schools the way teachers expect, often it is the students who experience the negative affects of teacher's disappointment (Hidalgo, Sui, Bright, Swap, & Epstein, 1995).

Additionally, as in the example of April, a Karen student, living in poverty also affects a child's overall physical well being. While a bug bite is just a bug bite, one can only imagine April's nightly experience, tossing and turning from being bit by bugs. As I would often see April itching herself in class, I saw first hand how her physical state clearly affects her overall mental state, and thus her ability to work on an academic task that she most likely already feels is irrelevant at best. Children like April whose physical needs are not being taken care of at home cannot be expected to concentrate and perform on a regular basis at the level of their peers who live in comfortable conditions conducive to resting and recharging. Again, the limited availability of economic resources works against English language learners, creating another hurdle students like the Karen versus their native English speaking peers must jump over to access the opportunity to achieve academic success.

As mentioned above, parental employment is not the sole contributor to the mismatch of cultural capital, but the discussion concerning the availability of resources for the Karen and other immigrant or refugee English-language learners is crucial in understanding the current academic failure rate for this people group. A mismatch of cultural capital manifests itself in other ways, such as how time outside the home is spent by the Karen children.

## **Section 2.2 Activities Outside of School**

Part of the cultural capital that the majority of white, upper-middle class native English speakers possess is a literacy oriented home. As briefly discussed in Chapter 1, a

literacy oriented home involves parents who structure time outside of the classroom for their children presumably in a way that better sets up the child for academic success. As the vignettes below will illustrate, my Karen students do not readily experience literacy oriented activities at home, and in general do not engage in activities outside of school that will benefit their English acquisition. The discussion below will look at how a literacy orientation predisposes children to academic learning and achievement, and how the lack of a literacy orientation ultimately affects the ability of the Karen and English language learners of similar socio-economic status to thrive in the typical American classroom.

*Every morning, I would ask my children what they did the night before after camp, on their day off from camp, or over the weekend. While the responses varied occasionally from child to child, the answers I received from the majority of my students usually remained consistent week to week – “sleep” and “eat.” Rarely did any of my children mention things they did with their family, special vacations or visits, or anything else of a sort. Two of my students who owned computers, Eh Dah Doe and Eh Dah Poe, would usually report how they spent their days off watching TV or playing computer games. Every now and then, a student would report helping his or her parents “work,” such as April who helps her mom clean houses on her nights off.*

*Paw Lah, April’s sister, was one of the middle school aged girls who attended my class and who usually told me she spent all her free time sleeping and eating. One occasion after Paw Lah gave me her typically response, I asked Paw Lah why she never does anything on the weekend, and jokingly said to her, “there has to be something fun you enjoy!” Paw Lah responded in a voice I found to be atypically hostile: “I don’t know. Nothing ever to do. And I’m tired – I just want to sleep.” Paw Lah then placed her head on the cafeteria table and closed her eyes, ending the conversation.*

*One day after camp, Melissa and I piled seven of the high school and middle school girls in a van and took them back to her house. Later on in the evening after much playing outside and a big dinner, Melissa pulled out a picture book and read to the girls. While she read each page, the girls sat at rapt attention, and their postures seemed to convey they were all eagerly awaiting the next page turn. At the end of the story as Melissa closed the book, one of the girls cried, “Miss Melissa, please read it again! No one ever reads to us!” The rest of the girls either nodded or chimed along in agreement. “Never?” Melissa questioned, clearly a tad skeptical. “Never!” They all agreed.*

The notes above all concern the different activities my Karen students engage in outside of school that affect their experience in school. As I mentioned above, most of my students confessed they did nothing outside of school with their free time besides eating, sleeping, or watching TV. One student helps her mom clean houses when she is not in school. My students also mentioned they were not read to at home. While in isolation, all the activities (or lack there of) listed above are not innately negative; however, how time outside of school is spent and the type of activities that happen in the home have been linked by research to promoting or stagnating academic achievement for native English speakers and English language learners alike. Thus said, understanding how the Karen spend their time out of school is important to understanding the needs of this particular group of learners.

As detailed in the vignette above, many of my Karen students are not read to at home on a regular basis, or possibly even at all. Because a group of my students relayed that their parents never read to them, it is possible that the Karen are part of non-literacy oriented communities. In non-literacy oriented communities, practices that prepare students for independent thinking and learning are not intentionally taught, even though learning, education, and literacy may be valued. In contrast, parents in literacy oriented communities are typically incorporate practices at home that better prepare children for success in today's school systems. While both communities are capable of producing intelligent, school-ready children, a literacy orientation is more matched to what U.S. schools expect of students (Pransky, 2009; Fillmore and Snow, 2000; Lareau 1997; Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992; Ramirez, 2003). Because the Karen are not gaining these skills from the home through time spent intentionally engaged with literacy, they face yet another barrier in achieving academically, and they have to "double the work" (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

As seen in the descriptions of their free time offered above, the Karen students I worked with chose activities of their own will, and did not mention any structured or organized out of school activities. Research has consistently found that student participation in structured activities had a significant positive impact on their academic performance as well as cultivating self esteem and lowering drop-out rates (Feldman & Matjasko 2005; Jordan & Nettles, 2000; Schreiber & Chambers 2002). Jordan and Nettles (2000) also argue that investments students make during their time out of school affect their level of investment in school, and consequently their school performance. Most researchers also argue that involvement in extracurricular activities has an indirect impact on academic achievement by increasing the student's connections to the school and school community (Cosden, Morrison, Gutierrez, and Brown, 2004).

Non-participation in after school activities has been found to correlate with low academic achievement and other factors related to school performance, such as negative perceptions of school and high levels of truancy. Nelson and Gastic (2008) analyzed data from the Educational Longitudinal study of 2002 to examine the out of school time activity portfolios of over six thousand high school sophomores. The authors identified five distinct out of school time activity portfolios based on a cluster analysis, including one group that was termed the "Unstructured Recreation" group. The Unstructured Recreation group made up 18% of the sample, and contained both the lowest levels of academic and enrichment activity participation outside of school, and the highest levels by far for watching TV, playing video games, and hanging out with friends. Nelson and Gastic found the Unstructured Recreation group contained a disproportionately high level of minority learners and students in the lowest socio-economic quartile. Students in this group are also significantly more likely to report a negative view of school, report higher truancy levels, and are significantly less likely to report receiving academic honors in school. This study demonstrates how out of school structured programs play a valuable role in cultivating social, emotional and academic development, programs my Karen students are not currently participating in and thus are not reaping the benefits of.

Participation in after school programs is perhaps even more critical for low socio-economic status students like the Karen because of the high correlation with positive academic and social outcomes for all student, not just for children from families with high incomes who usually do better in school anyway (Nelson & Gastic, 2008).

Bourdieu (1986) argues that youth who participate in structured after school activities accumulate education-related capital, capital students like the Karen mostly cannot access in the home; thus, these activities serve to translate social, cultural, and economic conditions into academic achievement. When students like the Karen participate in structured activities outside of school, the achievement gap between students of high and low socio-economic status shrinks as English language learners grow in their possession of relevant cultural capital that their peers already possess (Bourdieu, 1986; Nelson & Gastic, 2008). By missing out on structured after school activities, students like the Karen miss out on the potential gain of valuable cultural capital that could unlock more opportunities to experience success in American schools.

However, two of my Karen students did mention engaging in an activity that research has proven has the potential to promote English proficiency and even reading fluency. Eh Dah Doe and Eh Dah Poe report that computer games are one of their favorite past times outside of school. Hirom Hiromi Ono and Hsin-Jen Tsai (2008) argue that play with computers among young school-age children can increase their interest in and familiarity with computing technology in ways that removes barriers against academic or work-related use of technology later in life. Furthermore, Jonathon Alexander (2009) argues that video games can help “gamers” actively develop certain literary skills, and teachers should view certain complex computer games as primary texts in literacy education and instruction. From this perspective, Eh Dah Doe and Eh Dah Poe are gaining invaluable experiences from actively engaging with computer games that will benefit them academically, and are therefore at an advantage over their Karen peers who do not have regular access to computers and computer games.

The issue of what my Karen students choose to do with their free time is not just related to whether or not they choose structured activities, their reported TV watching, or even reported time spent on the computer. In fact, all of the options the Karen express as choices they make on a regular basis are not bad in moderation throughout the school week, or in different proportions year round. The greater issue here is developing English proficiency in order to be successful academically in the U.S. school system. As discussed above, how time outside of school is spent is especially critical for low socio-economic status English language learners like the Karen. When time out side of school is not spent developing literacy or engaged in meaningful communication opportunities in English, English language learners like the Karen miss out on an opportunity to make gains in these areas.

### **Section 2.3 Understanding the Unique Experience of Refugees**

When I accepted the position to work with the Karen this summer at Urban Vision, I knew my experiences would encourage me to continue my work with English Language Learners. I also expected I would gain knowledge and insight into teaching English as a second language. However, I did not expect to gain a whole new understanding of the unique experience of refugees through hearing the stories of my Karen students. Below is a description of when I picked up one of my students with Rodney, the director of Urban Vision, for camp one day. I include this story because it was a turning point for me in my understanding of who my students were as refugees, and because this story is perhaps the my most poignant memory of the summer

Rodney turned onto a street a little less than a mile from Urban Vision, and pointed out a house or two where other Karen families lived. The houses were relatively medium in size, and looked very similar to the house I lived in about two miles away – three stories, deep window seats in a the living room separated by old-fashioned funeral doors with wood molding and trim you just don't see in new houses these days. However, the outsides of these houses were in relative disrepair. Off the sides of the houses, paint was peeling, bushes and plants and weeds were overgrown everywhere, and overall structurally speaking, the exterior of the homes seemed to speak to the neglect they'd experienced over the years. Ni Do Gey Htoo's house was no exception.

Immediately as we pulled into the driveway, I saw a small group of kids playing in the small bit of green next to the gravel driveway. Four of the boys present were ones I knew from Urban Vision, and with them was a woman who I'd never met before, who quickly went inside as the van pulled up. In the window seat facing the driveway stood a small baby with his face and hands pressed against the glass, wearing only a t-shirt and no diaper, watching the action happening in the driveway. The boys all jumped out of the way of the van as Rodney pulled up, turning to face us. "Miss Jackie! Mr. Rodney!" I heard a couple of the boys shout as we parked next to them. Rodney unlocked the van door and the boys flooded in.

As Rodney put the car into reverse, a man walked out the side door in the house toward the back yard. From my seat in the car, I could tell he was Karen, he was limping, and he didn't appear to acknowledge the car in the driveway, as he didn't turn around as we pulled out. "My father!" Ni Doh pointed to the man excitedly, tapping me on the shoulder. "He uh, uh," Ni Doh turned again as he and the rest of the boy made motions toward their legs and expanding their hands. "Bomb!" someone shouted, "yeah! Bomb, bomb!" Ni Doh echoed, pointing to his leg.

"Bomb?" I asked confused, looking back at the boys, then at Rodney, who looked equally as baffled.

"Yeah, yeah," Ni Doh and the boys responded, "He, uh, had a bomb, in uh, uh," more chatter in Karen, "yeah, a bomb." Ni Doh continued to point to his leg.

"O-oh!" Rodney voiced. I turned to Rodney and saw him nodding in realization. Rodney yelled back to the boys as he was driving, "You mean he stepped on a bomb in Burma and hurt his leg?"

"Yeah, yeah!" The boys nodded in agreement.

"What? I'm sorry... what?" I still wasn't sure what was going on.

"In Burma, Ni Doh's dad stepped on a landmine." Rodney began to explain, "They're persecuted church there, the Karen. The military junta, what they do is throw bombs at the Karen villages – they're mountain people, you know – and then they round them up and bring them to slavery camps – but they plant land mines in the villages, so if the Karen go back, they typically get blown up, or loose a leg." Rodney then turned to Ni Doh, "Do you mean he stepped on a landmine?"

"Yeah, yeah!" Ni Doh responded, bringing his two hands from his calves out, motioning his leg blowing up.

"When did they come over here, to North Hill?" I asked Rodney.

"Ni Doh and his family? About two years ago, I think? Maybe three?" He replied. "Actually, a lot of the kids have stories like this, but it's hard to ask them



*questions, ya know? They don't really know how to answer questions when you ask them, but every now and then, the stories come out. It's incredible, really."*

Ni Doh's story is unlike anything the majority of American students and teachers can relate to. The notion of a "refugee" is completely lost on the vast majority of Americans who have lived in relative political stability their entire lives. Ni Doh's story speaks of a childhood filled with violence and tragedy. His own father lost his leg to a land mine, possibly while walking in his own town, or possibly while being used a human mine detector while he was a prisoner of war. Whatever the case, Ni Doh's story and the stories of other refugee groups like the Karen are *foreign* in every sense of the world to the majority of students, teachers, and Americans in general.

Researchers agree that educating refugee children is different from educating minority language learners or immigrant English language learners in general; issues related to the education of refugee language learners specifically are often complicated by the hardships the child or community has experienced (Adler, 2002). Additionally, the issues to educating the Karen also concern the Karen's prior experiences in education, and prior experiences (or lack there of) with American social and cultural practices that may be reflected in our schools. With so much complicating the education of English language learners, there is a greater need than ever for teachers to understand their students, and one of the best ways to understand the unique needs of refugee students is get to know their unique backgrounds and stories (Adler, 2002; Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Knight 2008).

Prior to coming to the United States, the Karen had little experiences with American social and cultural norms. The Karen in Burma were traditionally a tribal, hill-dwelling people who lived in self-sustaining, trade-based societies, where each person played an integral role as part of the community. Before coming to America, the Karen never encountered money systems, a job search experience, hospitals and doctors offices, formal or compulsory education for children and universities, modern technology in general, or other regularities of daily life, such as plumbing, doors, electricity, etc. While no research currently exists on the long-term results of the Karen adjusting to life in America, the refugee experience and circumstance of the Karen is very similar to that of the Hmong, an ethnic hill tribe from Laos. The Hmong in Laos assisted the United States in its Secret War against the communists during the Vietnam conflict. After the United States withdrew its troops from Southeast Asia, the Hmong in Laos were persecuted for political reasons by the Communist governments. Between 1976 and 1999, it is estimated over 80,000 Hmong refugees have resettled in the United States (Thao, 2003).

Much like the Karen, the Hmong came to the United States with little experience with written language. Because of their lack of experience with written text, the Hmong face an even greater barrier than other immigrants in acquiring the basic English language skills, such as speaking, listening, and writing (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Adler, 2002; Knight, 2008; Thao, 2003). Consequently, these factors left them with very limited marketable skills to earn a living in a highly technologically developed nation such as the US, and as a result, they have faced notoriously difficult adjustment problems in almost every aspect of their lives in the U.S. (Adler, 2002; Fadiman, 1998; Thao, 2003). For instance, much like the Karen, the Hmong cannot get high-income jobs without formal education. Many Hmong adults do not earn enough to pay for rent, and

the majority of families thus live with other Hmong families to combine rent and expenses (Thao, 2003).

As is currently the case in North Hill with regards to the Karen, districts that had never encountered English language learners with background like the Hmong suddenly found themselves with an influx of students with whom they shared little in common linguistically or culturally. Hmong students were often recommended for Special Education because they have a hard time making sense of the content taught in lessons, as the content is rarely connected or related to them culturally (Thao, 2003). When her school experienced an influx of Hmong students, Caroline Knight, a language arts teacher in suburban Minnesota, recalls that the majority of the teachers receiving new students knew nothing about Hmong culture, history, or refugee experience; most teacher hoped that the few hours a week these new students spent in with the English as a second language teacher would meet their educational needs (2008). As was the case with the Hmong, there is great potential for refugees like the Karen to have a difficult experience in adjusting to schools and to life in general in America.

The Karen, the Hmong, and other refugees present and unique puzzle to teachers when they walk in the doors of our schools. Knight (2008) reported the majority of the Hmong who enrolled in the suburban Minnesota school she worked at had little or no previous school experiences. Because of the constant political upheaval and warfare, some students had never been to school before, or had perhaps not attended school in years. For many Karen now living in the United States, their only educational experience was in the refugee camps or in the forced relocation cities, where school experiences were hardly education based. In an investigation into three Burmese refugee camps on the Thai border, Su-Ann Oh and Marc Van der Stouwe (2008) reported some of the positive and negative aspects of education within the refugee camps. While some of the positive aspects included dampening impact of climate through educational opportunity and cultivating inclusive citizenship, education was also used as a weapon in cultural repression, and distributed unevenly in the schools (Oh & Van der Stowe, 2008).

Finally, many Karen families and students have seen unimaginable difficulties as refugees that are completely foreign to us as Americans. As the vignette above captures, some of these children have experienced more physical and emotional hardships in their lifetime than we as their teachers will never be able to relate to. The Karen Human Rights Group reports that stories like Ni Doh's are common; Karen still living in Myanmar live in constant fear of persecution. Land mines are only the beginning of the warfare the Karen are experiencing everyday in Myanmar. Forced relocation, labor camps, bribery, military created food scarcity, and being used as target practice are just a few of the realities a Karen person may experience living in Myanmar presently (KHRG, 2009).

The Karen are not alone in their story of struggle and anguish in being a refugee people. Many Hmong in the United States can share similar tales involving a perilous flight from Laos. Even though the Hmong and the Karen fled places of great danger, home is still not America for these refugees. Throughout the course of her interviews and observations with a Hmong family in California, Anne Fadiman once asked a Hmong mother who had seen serious hardship in America if she ever missed Laos, the country she fled from. In response, the woman told Fadiman that the horror and tragedies she experienced in Laos, not having food or clean clothes, make her not even want to think about going back. However, the woman told Fadiman, she missed the spirit of Laos – the

freedom and the joy of owning one's own land (Fadiman, 1997).

In order to effectively teach refugee children, we have to know who they are on multiple levels, and the story of who they are on different planes. It is not enough to ask refugee students their names, where they are from, and their previous experience level with English. These students' experiences as refugees are part of what makes them who they are, inside and outside of the classroom. Understanding my Karen students' refugee experience contributed to my understanding of who they are as children and as learners, and allowed me as the teachers to better meet their needs in the classroom.

### **Section 2.4 Pragmatic Suggestions**

As the vignettes above reveal, the role that cultural capital plays in student learning should not be underestimated. A mismatch of cultural capital has created challenges for the Karen in their daily life in North Hill, Ohio, and more specifically, in the realm of academic achievement and school experiences. Different aspects of life outside of school, such as the employment status of their parents, the activities they engage in outside of school, and their unique experiences as refugees, directly impact their experiences in the American school system, and thus their English language learning experience. As discussed with regards to the realm of reading, teachers need more usable knowledge about how to access the cultural capital of the Karen, and how to have this capital work for their students in schools, and not against them. Some of questions that emerged from my work are listed below.

1. How can teachers better accommodate the difficult schedules of parents working low wage jobs? Because teachers are prone to judge the parents of students who do not involve themselves regularly in schools, how can the cycle be broken, and rather these parents feel supported by school and teachers rather than condemned?
2. How can schools make after school activities more appealing to and inclusive of English language learners? Paw Law, one of my students, confessed she felt there was nothing ever to do, despite the activities made available by her school and community on a daily basis. How then do we attract more learners like Paw Lah into enriching extra-curricular activities?
3. What types of activities outside of school have the greatest potential to positively affect academic achievement for English language learners? If participation in such activities has great potential for English language learners to gain the cultural capital schools draw upon, how can we better set these students up for success in the classroom through their involvement in after school activities?
4. How can teachers design lessons that draw on the cultural capital of their students when teachers are not familiar with the cultural capital? English language learners like the Karen have access to cultural capital, but because it is not the capital schools value and draw upon, their capital is not utilized in schools. How can teachers find a way to tap into these resources and allow students to capitalize on it in school to achieve success?

5. What are the greatest impacts of the refugee experience on a school-aged student, and how do these experiences shape the student teachers see in the classroom? While teachers may not know their student's whole past, we need to know how their experiences have effected them, and more specifically how their experience have and will continue to effect them as learners.
  
6. How can we use the stories of English language learners in U.S. schools to help teachers prepare for diverse English language learner student populations? Considering the growing representation of English language learners in U.S. schools, we need to understand the strengths these students bring to the classroom, and how teachers can plan instruction to contribute to the process of the continued growth of English language learners.

## Self-Reflection

When I began working with the Karen, I was not entirely sure of primary goal for the summer. On one hand, I pursued a position at Urban Vision because I knew it was one of the few educational summer programs in the Akron, Ohio area with an opportunity to work with English language learners, and I wanted to grow in my strengths as an English as a second language teacher. On the other hand, I was hoping my experience working with the Karen would contribute to my research, and in some way help me form my undergraduate thesis. While I knew I wanted to write about the current landscape of teaching English as a second language in a non-bilingual context, I did not know exactly what I wanted to base my writing and research upon. With that said, at the beginning of the summer, I did not view my role with the Karen as primarily that of researcher or educator, but rather I saw being an English as a second language teacher for a group of people I had never heard of as a rare, exciting, challenging, and unique opportunity.

In reflecting on the summer, however, and as my weeks at Urban Vision unfolded, I began to realize how I was perhaps more impacted by the experience of teaching the Karen than the Karen were as my students. Even now looking back months later, I am still amazed at what I experienced and felt in just a few short months in working at Urban Vision. I am surprised at how my understanding of the role of a teacher – specifically, an English as a second language teacher for low socio-economic students – has changed and transformed. I am surprised at how my thirst for more knowledge and professional development has grown exponentially. Finally, I'm perhaps most surprised at how this one experience in Northeast Ohio has completely changed my view on what it means to be a teacher and a global citizen in our diverse world, and the importance of cross-cultural competence in all aspects of teaching. The following section is a self-reflection on the impact this experience has had on each of the areas listed above.

Perhaps one of the single greatest ways my view of teachers changed as a result of this experience is my perspective on the role of teachers as agents for social justice. Before working with the Karen, I knew teachers had the all too important job of rising up future leaders of the world by equipping students with a firm educational foundation. I did not realize, however, how important it is for teachers to be effective educators, to be successful at providing the basic foundations of knowledge for all their students until I worked with the Karen. As discussed within this paper, for the Karen, the extent to which they succeed to learn English directly effects the number and the type of opportunities available to them in all areas of life in this country. English proficiency and specifically English literacy are thus the vehicles by which the Karen become equipped with the necessary tools to navigate through daily life in America, and I as their teacher am responsible for equipping them accordingly so that they may more readily experience success.

As I came to understand my role as teacher as high-stakes, my approach to teaching my Karen students changed. I started the summer with the intent to research the Karen, to hopefully help them learn English, and to develop my skills as an English as a second language teacher. Once I realized that my goals, whether they were personal, professional, academic, or otherwise, were secondary to the mission of aiding the Karen in any way possible, my approach to teaching changed from merely imparting knowledge to being an agent of social justice and change. I came to view every class as an

opportunity to give my Karen students more opportunities to engage with authentic English texts and to have meaningful access to English in communication. I grappled with how I as a teacher could best provide an environment where my students felt supported and validated, where their insecurities in learning English were alleviated and their frustrations were met with tangible, practical solutions. I wanted to provide my students with an opportunity engage with the English language in such a way that they too wanted to be proficient in English with the same level of desperation with which I wanted them to experience success both in and out of the classroom through English proficiency.

Yet, my desperate desire for the Karen to experience success in English and the responsibility I felt as their agent for social justice did not always manifest themselves in my teaching in positive ways. After a difficult day of teaching when it felt as if my lesson flopped, or when more time in class was spent on discipline rather than content, I felt distraught, completely disappointed in my failure to meet my students' learning needs that day, whether or not my students realized it. There were also days where the pressure felt insurmountable, and I would contemplate calling in sick to avoid experiencing failure. It took extensive reflection before I was able to identify how the responsibility that I felt for opening doors for Karen was simultaneously motivating and paralyzing me, depending on how my feelings and my thoughts were effecting me at any given point in time. I spent a great deal of the summer trying to resolve my own internal struggle to approach each day and teaching situation with a rational perspective and realistic expectations without abandoning my ideal vision of success for these students. For me personally, this conflict was never fully resolved, and I think as long as I choose to teach in contexts like Urban Vision with students like the Karen, I will continue to struggle with this balance.

My precise mix of feelings and perceived responsibilities were unique to me and my teaching situation, and my feelings on my role as a teacher in that context arose after I got to know my students and I saw their needs. However, I can't help but wonder if a teaching situation exists (especially an English as a second language teaching context) where a teacher can be effective if he or she does not believe in the crucial nature of the content or skills that he or she is teaching. Similarly, I cannot imagine a context where a teacher can be effective if he or she does not believe in the importance of meeting his or her students' academic needs. Through my experience working with the Karen, I have come to believe that teachers need to feel passionate about meeting their students' learning needs through their role as a teacher.

Through teaching reading to the Karen, a lot of the core foundations of what I understood about myself as specifically a literacy instructor have evolved and changed dramatically. As discussed in Chapter 1, working with the Karen on learning to read English opened my eyes to the relationship between how students define reading and how this affects their own literacy development. Through the process of conducting reading interviews and engaging in informal conversations outside of class, I came to realize the majority of my students reported negative perspectives on reading in general and on their own reading abilities. Upon reflecting on the different ways my students must have come to these conclusions about themselves, I began to incorporate a new responsibility into my definition of teacher; if students are given standards for success primarily in schools, than teachers have the duty of thinking carefully about the messages they convey to their

students about what is success, or in this case specifically, who or what makes a good reader.

My impression of the importance of this responsibility evolved from pondering where my students got the ideas about reading (discussed in Chapter 1). After looking at the different influences at play in their academic lives, I concluded the most reasonable place my students got their information that contributed to their beliefs about reading was in schools from their teachers. This is not to say that my Karen students' teachers explicitly told them "good readers can correctly call and pronounce words." Rather, I am arguing that the way we as teachers approach the topic of reading and the way we go about literacy instruction has implications for our students. If teachers constantly enforce correct pronunciation, or being able to sound out words, it is no wonder my students would place such a heavy emphasis on knowing words, and thus call themselves poor readers. While we as teachers only have so much influence on how our students interpret what we say and how we say it, we as teachers are responsible for the messages we convey because of the implications and impact they have on student learning.

Here again, the role of the teacher is not just that of imparting knowledge or teaching a skill. With students like the Karen, the influence of the teacher goes beyond the skills taught. The teacher is also quite possibly the only person in these students' lives who is involved directly in their English acquisition or their American school experience, and thus could be the only one who helps the student define success. If the connotations and associations students form about school and about themselves as learners affect their learning and their academic performance, then we as teachers have a responsibility to contribute positively to the formation of these feelings.

My view of what is "success" and what is "failure" in an academic setting was also affected by this experience. Before working with the Karen, my understanding of what is success was very limited – I considered myself to be a successful teacher if my students demonstrated growth in their English proficiency, and I considered my students to be successful based on the measurable growth they demonstrated. However, as the summer went on, my understanding of these concepts changed. Success is not just performance based on a long-range scale, but success is the little victories that occur for individuals and for teachers and for classrooms. I felt success when I saw one of my students who never participates raise his hand to say "bathroom?" simply because it was the first time I ever heard him speak English in class. I found success in teaching when one of my students used the word "greedy," a word we had taught the day before, in a sentence that was otherwise riddled with grammatical errors, but conceptually correct. Failure occurred when I focused on my own goals over my students' needs, and when I projected my desire to be successful on my students, demanding them to perform accordingly. Through this teaching experience, I began to see success and failure as both much simpler and more complex than I originally thought.

Hand in hand with understanding the needs of one's students and one's role as a teacher in any given context is the importance of knowing and understanding one's students on a holistic, individual level. Before working with the Karen, I knew that knowing who my students were in and outside of the classroom was an important aspect of teaching. I had an understanding of what teachers needed to know about their students that lay beyond their permanent school portfolio or their prior report cards. I realized that knowing about my student's lives outside of the classroom was going to be a crucial part

of planning instruction in the classroom. However, through the experience of not just working with these students but intentionally engaging with them in social contexts outside of the classroom, my understanding of the importance of knowing my students grew into a passion for this aspect of teaching.

My passion for really knowing the students I teach also increased because I experienced first-hand what it is like to teach students with whom you share little in common, and whom you know little about. When I walked in on my first day of teaching at Urban Vision, I initially felt confident in my abilities to meet these students' needs. I had just completed four rigorous courses in the spring focused on different aspects of teaching English as a second language. Within these courses, I had multiple opportunities to plan and implement an English as a second language curriculum for English language learners ages four to thirty-four in a variety of contexts and settings. In pursuing the position at Urban Vision, I was confident in my ability to meet the needs of my incoming students because of my experience over the course of the past year and the knowledge I had gained through my classes that spring.

However, as my first group of Karen filed through my classroom door, I realized just how ignorant I was of who these students were, and how ill prepared I was to instruct them. I knew nothing about the country they came from, the circumstance of their moving, or what they left behind. I knew little about their ethnicity and culture, or about what they understood about American culture. I had no prior assessment data or records for these children – what their proficiency was when they arrived, how they had progressed, where they were today – beyond the comments I elicited from my co-teacher as the students walked in. I wasn't even sure how these kids found Urban Vision, or if Urban Vision found them. All I knew was these students who were now filing into my classroom, expecting me to help them learn to read in English, were called the Karen. They were refugees originally from the Karen state in Myanmar, but now they lived in North Hill. They were English language learners. They were different from me. This was as much as I knew about my students on their (and my) first day of class at Urban Vision this summer.

This realization on my first day served as a wake-up call that not all English language learners are the same. While no educator with any background or experience in English as a second language would make such a claim, I was under the impression that my experiences with one group of English language learners had adequately prepared to work with *all* English language learners, or at the very least, the Karen I was to teach that summer. However, as I would quickly learn, I didn't know these students at all, and no previous teaching experience, no matter how it enriched me academically or professionally, could have adequately prepared me to work with Karen. This is not because the Karen are just "too different" from other English language learners, but because each classroom has a different student make up and different learner needs, even if the goal of my instruction – to help them learn to read in English – was exactly the same as in a prior classroom. The importance of not viewing English as a second language as a one size fits all field of instruction cannot be stressed enough if teachers are to sufficiently meet the needs of the students in our classrooms. In learning about the culture and the background of my Karen students, our time in the classroom spent developing reading skills became more productive and richer.

While discovering anew the importance of really knowing the culture of my



students became a primary theme of my summer, I was also struck once more by how students from the same culture-linguistic background, even the same home can be completely different, and how I need to know my students as individuals in order to be an effective teacher. No two students allowed me to see this as truth more clearly than Ler Geh Htoo and Sunday Htoo. Ler Geh Htoo, fifteen, and Sunday, thirteen, were two of the students in my reading class every day. Sunday was in the second to highest reading group, and he participated actively and willingly for the majority of the class. He seemed to get a long well with his peers, and joked around with his friends in Karen during class every day. His older brother Ler Geh, on the other hand, was one of my struggling readers who was only placed in a the medium level group because the staff were afraid that if he was placed with beginners, Ler Geh would stop coming to Urban Vision. Ler Geh rarely spoke, in Karen or English. When addressed, Ler Geh would shrug or utter an indiscernible syllable. One of the senior staff members told me Ler Geh could speak English, but that he was painfully shy. I was surprised to see in one family how a younger brother surpassed his older brother in English skills, but did not think too much otherwise of their differences.

A few weeks into the summer, I noticed a change in Ler Geh and Sunday. Sunday began acting out in class. When I would ask him a question, he would stare at the floor sullenly, refusing to answer. Once, feeling frustrated, I demanded he at least looked me in the eye when I asked him a question. Sunday stood up out of his seat so quickly that the chair he was sitting in flew backward, and with malice in his eyes that I had never seen before, he shoved the table towards me with enough force to startle everyone sitting around it. As a few of the boys laughed and a few others shouted after him in Karen, Sunday walked out of the room. I later found out that after Sunday left the room, he walked home. Ler Geh, on the other hand, seemed to dwell in a perpetual state of exhaustion. While Ler Geh had always been quiet in class, he had also always smiled. Around the time Sunday started to act up, Ler Geh seemed to draw farther into himself. From about the moment he walked in to class to a few moments after the bell, his head would lay on the desk. After a few days of trying to talk to him, my co-teacher and I agreed the best option for now would be to let him sleep, as we still didn't know what had caused the shift in his or his brother's demeanor.

It would be a whole week before we would find out the truth of what was going on with Sunday and Ler Geh. I still remember how I felt when the staff director walked into the reading room to tell us Sunday and Ler Geh's mother had passed away the previous week unexpectedly due to an unknown cause. Suddenly, it began to make sense what was going on with the two boys in my classroom, and why they were completely different from who they seemed to be just a few days before. Finally knowing just what was at the surface of what was going on with Sunday and Ler Geh overwhelmed me with compassion for them, and I was horrified that I as their teacher had not known earlier about the tragedy they were facing at home. Having a better understanding of where the boys were emotionally and mentally helped me to understand how I could better serve them in the classroom. Even though I knew I could not stop regular instruction all together, I was better prepared to meet their needs emotionally in the classroom, and to all around be more empathetic to their situation.

Ler Geh and Sunday are perhaps the more extreme example I experienced of two students who by appearance, seemed to have a lot in common, but in reality were very

different boys with different academic, social, and emotional needs. While they shared the same background in terms of culture, home language, living environment, and even genetics, I had to plan my instruction for these boys as individuals with different tendencies and dispositions. I saw this pattern again and again throughout my classes with my Karen, where siblings surprised me with how different they were, or how two students in the same grade who had been in the United States for the same amount of time had completely different levels of English proficiency. If I had lumped all my Karen into the same category in terms of needs, goals, strengths, and weaknesses, my instruction would not have been equally beneficial for each student in my classroom, and I would have severely missed out on the opportunity and challenge of planning and differentiating instruction to meet the diverse needs of all my students.

While I have emphasized a great deal how important it is to know students as individuals, my experience this summer with the Karen demonstrated to me how there are some aspects of children that ring true seemingly regardless of social, cultural, or economic factors. One moment that showed me first hand how my Karen children are not so dissimilar from other children was the sleepover I had with a group of my middle school and high school girls. The day was filled with activities and conversation that would be found at any typical, American-girl sleepover. We went swimming and laughed as we played marco-polo and had a “crazy dive” competition. We talked about our siblings, how they bugged us but also what we loved about them. The girls gushed over Hannah Montana, the latest teen rock star sensation, and sang the lyrics to her latest song, doing the dance moves that went with it. They asked for seconds on dessert, double chocolate chip brownies. They begged to braid my hair, and then in turn begged me to curl theirs. We watched *The Princess Bride*, gasping at the “scary” parts, oohing and ahhhing and the romantic parts, and laughing all the while at the poor cinematography. At the end of the night when it was “time for bed,” the girls giggled with one another (in a chatter of English and Karen), rolling over in their sleeping bags periodically to exchange a joke with a friend. The night resembled many a sleepover I had when I was their age.

The only thing that differentiated this sleepover from my past experiences was the elements of Karen culture peppered throughout the evening. For example, I had never seen a thirteen-year-old shake so much red pepper onto her chili than I did that night over dinner. While outside, I was taught a Karen jumping game involving the use of rubber bands rather than a jump rope, and a Karen song that resembled the riddles I learned on the playground in elementary school. While the girls all wanted to take pictures with my phone of themselves or of themselves with me, they refused to smile in the pictures, saying it wasn’t “pretty” for girls to smile. Finally, while the night was filled with chatter and laughter, it was a harmony of Karen and English that floated to my ears throughout the night at any given moment. All in all, my first sleep over with a group of refugee, low socio-economic status girls was much more “normal” than I had ever expected it to be. This experience again showed me how even though knowing how English language learners can be different than the average American school-aged child is important, it is equally important not to pigeon-hole English language learners as “different” in every way. Had I simply assumed that the Karen were foreigners, refugees with experiences unlike anything I could relate to, I would not have initiated a sleepover with them, and I would have missed out on not only a delightful experience in getting to know my students, but also on one of my favorite memories of the summer.

The sleepover described above also brought to light the importance of getting to know my students likes and dislikes. An important aspect of understanding a child is understanding his or her passions outside of school. Through spending time with my students in informal and casual settings like sleepovers and after-school hangouts at the park, I was able to see first hand my students' passions and interests. For example, I realize Eh Dah Poe loved to dance while I watched her teach the other girls the dance moves to a Hannah Montana song at the sleepover. I was able to then engage her in class in a discussion in English about dancing and Hannah Montana, and she was in turn much more responsive and excited to talk to me than she usually was when I brought up generic topics or conversation pieces. Through spending an hour on the swings with April Paw, one of my high school girls, I was able to have a conversation with her about her future goals, which included going to college away from home and studying to be a pediatrician. Knowing April's future ambitions helped me to motivate her later when tutoring her one-on-one in reading. By engaging with my students in casual conversation outside of a school, I ultimately was able to be a better teacher in academic settings by drawing on what I had learned in my conversations with them.

On a personal level, I learned the necessity of getting to know my students holistically because of how quick I am to judge their quality of life based on surface-level knowledge. My entire summer at Urban Vision was filled with a personal struggle to not pity the Karen. I struggled with feelings of pity because they lived in poverty, dealing with housing conditions I felt were intolerable. I struggled not to pity them because of what I perceived to be limited access to "valuable" resources, such as meaningful communication opportunities in English, or the having strong English examples at home. One of the greatest areas I struggled not to feel pity was with respect to their lives as refugees. The more and more I heard about the average Karen refugee experience, the immense difficulties encountered, the horrors they faced, and the less than desirable conditions they presently endured while living in North Hill, the more I wished I could erase this part of my students' lives and take away all the pain they experienced in the past and were dealing with in the present. I struggled to see how any of these conditions were positive, and how they could evoke anything but pity in any teacher.

It was only after I spent time getting to know my students that I realized my own arrogance. Through getting to know my students, I was encountered the pride they had in being Karen, and the joy they felt in exercising Karen traditions and customs. I saw how my students had mixed feelings about school, but had favorite subjects and teachers like the majority of native English speaking American school students. I saw how they had formed genuine friendships through the shared experience of being refugees together, and coming to America. I realized all the reason I had felt pity for my Karen students were based on my limited perspective; I pitied them for what I felt they lacked, or were missing out on. Instead, I learned that English language learners like the Karen English language learners deserve our respect as teachers, not our pity. Having a diverse linguistic background is an asset, not a liability, even if the student is just encountering English later in life. A past void of consistent, stable schooling is not the end of the road for a child as a learner but rather an aspect of who the child is that needs to be considered by the teacher in planning appropriate instruction. As the Karen reading teacher this summer, I needed to recognize and nurture the intelligence of my students as well as view their prior experiences and valuable and meaningful parts of who they are as

students in my classroom. If we as teachers get stuck in patterns of pity because a student looks different than what we view is ideal, we will never be able to effectively meet their learning needs.

My interactions with the Karen outside of the classroom and my overall experience over the course of the summer not only demonstrated to me the need for teachers to get to know their students outside of the classroom, but to also get to know their students' communities. While conversation with individual students gave me great insight into who they were, perhaps even more meaningful were my trips to their homes when I got to see first hand where they lived and how they lived. For example, just from picking up my students at their house, I was able to gain a greater understanding of their home life. I saw the neighborhoods they lived in, and got a feel for the demographics of their community. I saw the homes they lived in, and the state of their exteriors and yards. I got glimpses of their families as I drove up when I saw who was playing on the lawn or the driveway, or who was watching from the window. It was also when picking Ni Doh up that I saw his father limping, which led to the story of his parents' past and a greater understanding of the former lives of the Karen refugees I now worked with.

One of the questions I also dealt with while working with the Karen is what defined community, and what defined a culture, and if the two were one and the same. In interacting with the Karen and engaging with them in life in and out of school, I was constantly wondering what experiences or what circumstances – culture, community, or the complex interplay of both – had shaped the students I saw before me. I wondered if Hey Geh Moo was always a quiet girl, sullen girl, or if she had become jaded and depressed through her refugee experience before moving to America, or if her life in North Hill had depressed and disappointed her, making the Hey Geh the girl I now saw before me. I wondered if Eh Dah Doe and Eh Dah Poe lived with three generations out of necessity or because of cultural customs. I wondered if my students considered their “community” to be the family and friends I assume they left behind in Burma, or if they considered their community to be their neighbors in North Hill. I wondered if they liked American culture, and if they were being taught Karen customs and traditions at home, or if their parents just encouraged them to assimilate. I also wondered if I could cleanly define what was the culture of the Karen, what was their community, and the distinct roles both played in the lives of my students.

Looking back on my summer at Urban Vision, I still believe what defines community and culture is not clear-cut. Do we limit what defines culture to ethnic specific customs in a geographic and social context? Is how we can define culture static, based in one set of traditions, or can a given definition for a culture change and evolve with time? Furthermore, what makes up a community? In defining community, do we give more weight to those physically close by, or to the people who have had the greatest influence in shaping our daily lives, regardless of their physical proximity? I also wonder if I dealt with these questions because of the unique situation of the Karen, their experience as refugees in America, and how foreign their life experiences were to me. I wonder if given a different teaching context if I would have even thought twice about many of these issues.

My deepest regret however was not ever going into the homes of my students. I never had the courage to ask to come over, and they in turn never invited me in. As many researchers have proven, having the teacher inside the home for a positive or a neutral

visit (rather than a visit to report on a problem at school with the children) is an important foundational step in creating a positive home-school relationship. Additionally, when the teacher visits the home and becomes a part of the community, the community is more likely to become involved in the school. While I did not have the opportunity to participate in such a relationship with my students, I know that other staff members at Urban Vision have experienced family and community events such as holiday celebrations, birthday parties, and even a few weddings. When the teacher enters the home as a researcher to get to know the child and family on a holistic level, the relationships between the teacher and the student, the teacher and the parent, and the school and community all reap the benefits. The idea of the teacher as researcher is one I will expand upon below.

Finally, my time working at Urban Vision showed me that the difference between being a good teacher and a great teacher is passion. For the teachers at Urban Vision, their job was not just English as a second language teacher, or summer camp director. They were deeply committed to the lives of their students, Karen and non-Karen. Most of the staff had moved within walking distance of Urban Vision, and would come early to camp or stay late to play with the students. The same teachers who would teach kids all day long would then invite them over to swim in their pools, eat with their families, and come play in their houses. The full time staff was deeply invested in the community of North Hill, and was passionate about the success and the development of each student in the school, and it was evident in every effort they made in and out of the classroom.

In addition to the many ways my experience with the Karen increased my passion for knowing the students I teach on a more complete level, my experience in North Hill also increased my desire for professional development and my increased commitment to be a life-long learner, specifically through the systematic inquiry into problem solving. As I stated previously, on my first day at Urban Vision, I was in way over my head. Despite all the classes I took and the preparation I felt I had experienced, I was not adequately prepared to meet the needs of the students who walked through the doors of my classroom. Yet, I had completed almost enough credits to successfully obtain a teaching certificate and a teaching English as a second language endorsement as an undergraduate. I realized through my summer as a reading teacher that I was going to need to be a life-long learner, constantly dedicated to answering the question of “How can I be a more successful teacher?” I knew I needed to continue to dedicate time to learning the best way to instruct English language learners, specifically refugees like the Karen, a people group barely researched until now.

A systematic approach to problem solving in the classroom is important because they offer data-supported results that can then be directly applied. I experienced time and time again this summer how difficult it is to try to solve problems in the classroom without the use of data, especially with respect to lesson planning for small groups and individuals. Toward the end of the summer, I offered extra reading classes on days when camp was off for any of my students who wanted additional instruction before school began again in the fall. I originally expected to have just a few students join me once or twice a week for a small period of time; what I got was an overwhelming response from my high school students, all twenty of whom were interested in more reading practice any day I was willing to come in! I quickly found myself looking at a few situations (problems) that needed practical, effective solutions. How was I possibly going to plan

instruction to meet all these students' needs when I wasn't even sure where each student was as a reader? What material should I use on a daily basis, and how should I choose the texts? What strategies should I teach – were there some I needed to teach? I felt overwhelmed, and desperately needed a concrete way to systematically answer questions.

Because time was limited and I had not been conducting any reflection on the effectiveness of my teaching or any assessment data from my students up to this point, I decided I needed some sort of systematic inquiry to best assess my students' needs and how to format my class. With not a lot of time and limited access to instructional resources, I decided to use a formal reading interview and miscue analysis to gather data to answer all these questions. I had first encountered both of these assessments as part of my course work in the fall, and later employed a miscue analysis in working with a Russian English language learner in State College. I chose a reading interview because I could easily use the reading interview to analyze the needs of individual students based on their answers, as well as look for needs across the group. I also thought a miscue analysis would be helpful if I used the same three texts with every student in helping me know again where group and individual needs lay.

While the reading interviews and the miscues did not go as smoothly as I anticipated for a variety of reasons discussed previously, I was still able to glean from my students a few insights into their learning needs as individuals as well as a group. For example, I learned through the interview that across the board, none of my student's parents read to them at home in English. Additionally, it was through the reading interview where I learned how almost all my students chose to "ask someone" when they came to a word they didn't know. The miscue also proved to be beneficial in learning about my student's reading skills. The results of the analysis and stimulated recall helped me to get a basic understanding student's strengths and weakness in reading, and I was able to better choose materials that I felt would facilitate their learning accordingly.

Additionally as a result of this summer, I have an increased desire to understand the interplay of being a teacher and a researcher. Going into the summer, I had research oriented and professionally oriented goals in mind. Professionally, I wanted to develop my skills as an English as a second language teacher as well as make a difference in the lives of the Karen through my role as their teacher. With respect to research, I hoped to glean insight into who the Karen were, and the challenges specific to teaching English as a second language to these students. While I was not sure how these two goals and two roles were related, I didn't worry too much about it, figuring it would all play out when I set foot in the classroom

However, as I quickly learned early in May, it was difficult to balance different hats, and I struggled to find how and if these two roles were related. As a teacher, my goals were focused on student learning, and English language acquisition. When in teacher mode, I was looking for evidence of student learning and evidence of effective teaching. I was focused on collecting data to help me better plan instruction for my next lesson. As a researcher on the other hand, I wanted to ask my kids questions about their lives at home, and their lives before they came to the United States. I wanted to sit across from them and hear their stories informally, asking whatever question I could think of to better understand these students. As a researcher, when I looked at student's performance in class, I attempted to make connections between displayed behavior and what I knew about the interplay of culture and school. For the first couple weeks of summer, I was

unable to be both a teacher and a researcher at once.

It would be weeks before I'd be able to merge the two parallel trains of thought running through my head in a productive way. Slowly, I came to see how I could be both an effective teacher and a productive researcher, and that in fact, these two roles were more deeply integrated than I originally thought. As a researcher, I saw my students from a holistic point of view that also had a place in planning instruction; when I combined what I knew about my students' lives, their pasts, their previous learning experiences, and the cultural capital they brought from home with the behaviors and academic performance I observed in the classroom, I realized I could better structure a learning environment to meet their needs on a multitude of levels. Having strategic knowledge as a teacher about my students helped me all in all to plan more effective lessons that were interesting to my students and helped me to achieve curricular goals as their teacher.

The effective nature of the teacher as a researcher is not just limited to teaching situations with low socio-economic status students or English language learners. Rather, I have come to understand how getting to know students and experiencing first hand their lives outside of school can bring about valuable insights about students and their learning needs, regardless of how similar or dissimilar a teacher perceives a student or a people group to be from him or herself. For example, while I did not have the opportunity to visit my student's homes, I did spend a great deal of time with them in casual, informal settings outside of school where I sought to glean as much information about them as possible. One such context was the Wednesday afternoon Bible Study that my Karen high school girls participated in. While hanging out with them before, during, and after Bible study, I got to hear about their home life – who they lived with, who took care of them, who they loved and who they felt loved by. I also heard their future ambitions and goals after high school – two of my girls wanted to be doctors, another a marine biologist, and all of them had dreams of attending college and receiving scholarships. My understanding of who these were was deeply enriched and enhanced by these encounters and conversations, and I was all the more equipped to meet their academic needs in the classroom.

One of the means by which this realization became clear to me was through the countless articles and books I read that summer, all based on research and inquiry into the teaching and instructing of English language learners. I found relevant implications for my classrooms in the articles I read, and realized that the practices being used at Urban Vision were in fact out of date. In reading about data-driven teaching processes and assessment methods, I was able to work with the staff at Urban Vision to create a tracking system that allowed for more personalized assessments than standardized, pre-fabricated Rosetta Stone software tests that were currently administered to every student. Without the aid and insight of teachers and researchers who have come before me, I would not have been and will not be in the future the most effective teacher I can be.

Finally, my experience working with the Karen increased my desire to develop a greater worldview and global perspective because it opened my eyes as to how diverse our global community is. With the aid of advancements in technology in every real of life, the world is growing smaller. Ten or fifteen years ago, the issues of a tribal hill people located on the opposite side of the globe would never have crossed our American radar. However, as our world grows more interconnected, the plight and the peoples of other countries directly affect our lives as Americans, especially when two cultures that

seem completely incongruous are forced to live and thrive together, as in what happened when three hundred Karen refugees were dropped off in North Hill, Ohio. Teachers especially need to push themselves to experience working with and learning from people with whom they share little background, as this will most likely be the case in their classrooms. My experience working with a people group completely changed my understanding of the interconnectedness of our modern world, as well as changed my view of what it means to be a citizen – a teacher – in a global community, where I am as deeply invested in my neighbor's – my student's – future as I am my own. Through this experience with a people from a culture and country I knew virtually nothing about, my perspectives on so many topics, including culture, community, refugees, the role and responsibility of a teacher, were dramatically changed and enriched innumerable and invaluable ways.



## Conclusion

The insights garnered from those few short months working with the Karen have forever transformed my perspective on educating low socio-economic status, refugee English language learners. With respect to literacy, I saw first hand how my student's positive or negative perceptions of themselves as readers and the act of reading directly correlated with their reading abilities and their willingness to read in English in general. I also observed consistency in the barriers my students encountered in reading, and the texts they found easy, hard, or enjoyable. With regards to factors outside of school, I saw first hand the numerous effects of cultural-capital mismatch on the daily lives of my Karen students. I saw how both factors beyond their control (parent employment and previous experiences as refugees) and within their control (how time is spent out of the classroom) affected the Karen students' acquisition of English and overall school experience. In summary, I saw this summer how the current landscape of English as a second language education for English language learners like the Karen is in dire need of additional research and attention. In order to better meet the academic needs of this group of students, and better set English language learners up for success in American schools, teachers need practical ways to facilitate literacy development for low socio-economic status refugees learners.

In addition to gaining a better understanding of the needs of this people group, as my self-reflection discusses, working with the Karen was meaningful and worthwhile if only because of how it transformed me in a multitude of ways. As a teacher, I could not have asked for a more rewarding or fulfilling experience than I had in this one summer working with the Karen. I started the reading teacher position at Urban Vision thinking I would shape these students' lives by helping them acquire English literacy skills; in the end, it was my students who changed me by helping me develop a greater sensitivity and understanding of educating refugee English language learners. While my time as a teacher at Urban Vision was brief, the impact it had on me with regards to my personal and professional perspective on teaching English as a second language to low socio-economic status refugees is immeasurable. I have truly become a more passionate and more effective teacher, and my hope is that the vignettes I shared and the discussion they provoke will inspire teachers and researchers alike to rally behind the cause of refining and improving education for refugee English language learners like the Karen.

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