

## English Literacy in the U.S.: National Policies, Personal Consequences

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This article examines the relationship between U.S. national policies on literacy, available literacy programs, and individual lives. Beginning with a discussion of the expanding role of English literacy in U.S. immigration policies, this article examines the pressures to become literate in English with consideration given to the resources that are available to do so. In the second section, language use in immigrant families is discussed with a focus on native language loss and the consequences of this loss for intergenerational relationships. The article concludes with suggestions for an approach to literacy in which the links between national policies and personal lives are made explicit. The authors make recommendations for policy and practice that take into account the plurality of literacies and the possibilities for nurturing families and communities through the development of native and second language literacy resources.

*I have ears but I am deaf! I have a tongue but I am mute!*  
(Chinese refugee on life in his English-speaking neighborhood)

In many ways, the feelings of this refugee are the result of policies and practices of the country that is now his home. He is deaf to the sounds around him because despite the pressure to learn English, oftentimes problems in availability, accessibility, and appropriateness of English classes make it difficult for him to develop proficiency in English. Furthermore, the fact that the sounds of his native tongue are muted arises from a lack of social and educational support for L1 language and literacy development in his community. The purpose of this paper is to examine how pressure to learn English, coupled with insufficient resources for either developing English or for maintaining the L1 within the community, has dramatic consequences for uprooted adults. We assume that without sufficient resources for language learning in general, it will be more difficult to develop English literacy.

In order to provide a framework for examining the consequences of U.S. language/literacy policies and programs for immigrants' lives, we begin by demonstrating that historically, the role of English literacy in the U.S. has been expanding. To the extent that language minorities desire participation in the political and educational process, today such individuals will need to know how to read and write English for more and more purposes. To demonstrate, we examine the history of English literacy in the U.S. in its role as gatekeeper for citizenship and permanent residency. Next, by looking at the experience of adults who try to gain access to English instruction, we discuss the degree to which adequate English language educational programs are available to address the increasing role of English literacy. Third, we examine the consequences of patterns of language use for immigrant families. Finally, we suggest directions for future literacy policies and educational programs.

We believe it is essential to examine the links between national policies and personal lives because they so heavily impact each other. Because language minorities are often asked to meet literacy agendas set by policy decisions, it is important to consider whether or not they share these agendas and whether or not they are provided with the means to

meet them. In order to explore these questions, we begin with a discussion of the expanding role of English literacy in U.S. immigration and naturalization policy.

## ENGLISH LITERACY AS AN EXPANDING GATEKEEPER

Even before the founding of the Republic, U.S. national attitude toward multilingualism has been ambivalent. As Leibowitz (1984) points out, this ambivalence is reflected in the fact that:

on the one hand, the U.S. Constitution makes no mention of language. This is somewhat unusual since the designation of an official language is quite common in constitutional documents, not only in multilingual countries, but also in countries where only one language is generally used. On the other hand, John Jay in the **Federalist Papers** saw the English language as the tie that bound the federal structure. (p. 45)

According to Heath (1992), the absence of a designation of an official language reflects "both the notions of language which the peculiar historical events of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries shaped for England and the diversity of settlement motivations which drew widely differing social, linguistic, and ethnic groups to America" (p. 20). As Heath notes, whereas many other colonial powers used language policies for unification and assimilation, British policy makers did not include language policies in the New World colonies. Most settlers came to pursue their own interests and not to extend the Old World political system. Furthermore, policy makers often associated language decisions with monarchies; thus, antimonarchical forces resisted national language choices. Finally, multiple languages played an important role in the political and social life of the nation leading to encouragement for the use of languages other than English. In keeping with these beliefs, U.S. immigration policies up until the fourth quarter of the 19th century did not use the English language, spoken or written, as a requirement for entry or naturalization.

Beginning in the late 19th century, however, the idea of using a language requirement as a condition for immigration and naturalization started to be discussed. In 1905, due to charges of bribery and fraud in naturalization procedures, President Roosevelt commissioned a major study of naturalization procedures and requirements. This committee recommended an English literacy requirement for naturalization because it was their belief "that knowledge of English made fraud less likely and resulted in greater understanding and support of existing institutions" (Leibowitz, 1984, p. 35). Two years later, a Federal Immigration Commission, the Dillingham Commission, recommended that a literacy test be required even for immigration. What is significant is that this test could be taken in any language, not just English. Thus, in the early 20th century whereas language began to be considered for controlling immigration, the language was not restricted to English.

At the basis of the Dillingham Commission's recommendation to include a literacy requirement for immigration was the belief that the current immigrant population was very different from former immigrants who had quickly become assimilated. In contrast, the new immigrants were thought to be less intelligent and willing to learn English, a conclusion that clearly reflects the racial bias of the commission. As the commission put it:

The new immigration as a class is far less intelligent than the old, approximately **one third of all those over 14 years of age when admitted being illiterate**. Racially, they are for the most part essentially unlike the British, German and other peoples who came during the period prior to 1880, and generally speaking they are actuated in coming by different ideals, for the old immigrants came to be part of the country, while the new, in large measure, comes with the intention of profiting, in a pecuniary way, by the superior advantages of the new world and then returning to the old country. (as cited in Leibowitz, 1984, p. 36)

Literacy requirements, then, were to serve as a means for keeping those who were considered to be undesirable immigrants from entering the country.

In 1913 and again in 1915, the Dillingham Commission's recommendation resulted in passage of legislation requiring literacy tests in any language as a requirement for immigration. However, both of these bills were vetoed by Presidents Taft and Wilson who emphasized the racial impact of such legislation. It was not until 1917 that a similar bill was passed by Congress over Wilson's second veto. According to Leibowitz (1984), the immigration literacy test of 1917 marks a major transition in the development of U.S. immigration policy because its basic intention was to reduce the number of immigrants, particularly those from southeastern Europe, through the use of literacy. In 1924 an immigration act was passed which did not change the literacy test requirement but added quota systems based on the U.S. population as it existed at the time, a policy which was clearly based on racial principles. With this legislation, literacy (although not necessarily English literacy) began to serve a gatekeeper function, excluding particular groups of individuals from immigration.

During the late 19th century and early 20th century, the role of language as a gatekeeper and the emphasis on English began to be expanded through state legislation. Various states began requiring English literacy tests as a precondition for voting. In 1889, the Edwards Law in Illinois and the Bennett Law in Wisconsin required, for the first time, that "parochial as well as public schools teach elementary subjects in the English language" (Leibowitz, 1984, p. 39). Although these initiatives were eventually overturned, they demonstrate the potential of state legislation to expand the role of English literacy. English literacy also became a condition for employment in certain fields through legislation requiring knowledge of English and indirectly through restrictions on jobs that those who were not citizens--and thus had not demonstrated their knowledge of English literacy--could hold.

In subsequent years, various court decisions have overturned some of the literacy test legislation but sustained English literacy as a requirement for naturalization. Today, to qualify for naturalization, there is an English literacy requirement, along with the requirement of demonstrating knowledge of U.S. history and government. More recently, the scope of English as gatekeeper has again expanded as evidenced in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) which provides the opportunity for undocumented individuals who meet certain requirements to become legal citizens (to gain "amnesty") and specifies sanctions for employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers. Under this legislation, in order to qualify for legal residence--not citizenship--undocumented workers must demonstrate proficiency in reading English and an understanding of U.S. history and government or show that they are making satisfactory progress in a course of study which is certified to fulfill such requirements. (For a full description of the English language literacy requirements contained in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, see Terdy & Spener, 1990.)

A number of advocacy groups oppose the literacy requirements in the IRCA pointing out that requiring individuals who seek permanent residence, and not citizenship, to read English and to demonstrate a knowledge of U.S. history and government is not typical of the process leading to permanent residency and in essence discriminates against this population (Wrigley, 1989). Furthermore, such groups believe that the mandatory course of study will cause a hardship for many students. Whereas it is possible for students to waive the course requirement by taking a test, originally the testing procedure was not standardized so that arbitrary questions such as asking for the names of political leaders, their wives, or even their horses could be used (Wrigley, 1988). The test option, however, is not available to a large number of persons seeking amnesty who are not literate in English. For these individuals, the only option available is to attend classes and learn to read and write English in order to receive a certificate of attendance (Wrigley, 1989).

This brief historical overview of immigration and naturalization requirements demonstrates how the role of English literacy in immigration and naturalization has been expanding. Whereas originally language served no function for naturalization, today, as evidenced in current amnesty legislation, English literacy serves a gatekeeper function not just for citizenship but, for some individuals, for permanent residency. In contrast to earlier periods of U.S. history, the literacy that is valued in immigration and naturalization regulations today is English literacy rather than L1 literacy, an attitude that appears to be pervasive in the U.S. In fact, as Wiley (1991) points out, most national surveys and assessments fail to report on L1 literacy because they collect no data on it. This increasing attention to English at the expense of other languages is clearly demonstrated in current state and federal initiatives to make English the official language. The movement itself is another clear indication of how the role of English literacy in national policies is expanding.

In examining the English Only movement, it is important to consider the question posed by Fidel (1990). Drawing on Frost's poem, "Mending Wall," Fidel asks: "What is the goal: What are we walling in, what are we walling out?" (p. 302). Is it English that needs to be "walled in"? Are language minorities failing to learn English? Statistics certainly do not support the idea that they are failing to do so. As Crawford (1992) points out,

Consider that 98 percent of U.S. residents over the age of four speak English "well" or "very well," according to the 1980 census.... After fifteen years in the country, three out of four Hispanic immigrants speak English on a daily basis. More than 85 percent of children from language-minority homes become dominant in English, and their children rarely speak anything else. Under these circumstances, who would assert that "English is under attack" and needs "legal protection" from the ravages of bilingualism? (p 171)

Hence, it is questionable whether English needs to be "walled in." What then are we "walling out"? Actions of such organizations as U.S. English suggest that the real purpose of the legislation is to restrict the political and economic power of language minorities. "In the past, U.S. English leaders have ... endorsed English Only rules in the workplace, petitioned to limit broadcasting in other tongues, threatened to boycott businesses that advertise in Spanish, and sought to ban telephone bills in Chinese" (Crawford, 1992, p. 176). Whereas such actions suggest that the real goal of the movement is to eliminate the use of languages other than English, advocates of the movement still contend that their real purpose is to ensure that language minorities do learn English. The assumption seems to be that language minorities do not want to learn the language and that unless they are forced to learn it, they will not voluntarily choose to do so. There is a vast body of evidence that does not support this view. On the contrary, most language minorities want very much to acquire English literacy but various factors limit their ability to do so. In the following section we examine some of these factors.

## **ACCESS TO ENGLISH LITERACY**

As the movement to make English the official language of the United States grows, along with it grows the perception that the "problem" resides in those who are not willing to learn English. This does not resonate with the experience of most immigrants who believe, accurately or not, that English literacy holds the key to their success. Delgado-Gaitan (1987), for example, found that the Mexican families she studied

were grateful to be in the U.S. where conditions were relatively better than those in Mexico. They were aware of sociopolitical and economic limitations, but hoped that their situations would improve once they learned English .... Motivation to learn English stemmed from many sources, from personal embarrassment at not knowing English to a desperate need to obtain steady employment. The adults in this study saw their position in society as oppressed but not necessarily hopeless, since they attributed most of their low socioeconomic condition to their inadequate English literacy skills. (pp. 28-29)

If language minorities, like those described above, are interested in developing their English literacy, what can prevent them from doing so? Below, we briefly review three of the factors that affect development of English literacy: availability of instruction, accessibility of classes offered, and appropriateness of programs. The difficulties that language minorities face in each of these areas is often the direct result of a lack of national and local policies that support the needed educational programs.

### **Availability of Classes**

Imaginative literacy providers scramble for funding from every possible source. Federal and state dollars are used to serve adult ESL learners through ABE (adult basic education), OBEMLA (Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs), workplace programs, and employment training. According to Wrigley and Guth (1992), one program even makes a case for providing literacy classes as a provision of mental health services. Private foundations are another important source of support for classes. Yet, with a myriad of funding sources and a variety of agencies where classes are offered, it is clear that these have not been adequate to serve the adults who need them.

In an investigation of the Hispanic community in the El Paso area, Amastae (1990) found that

very large numbers of non-English speakers are taking advantage of every opportunity to learn English.... Despite the variety of programs, the significant problem in El Paso at present seems to be a lack of teaching capacity rather than a lack of demand. (p. 202)

Hence, in contrast to the widespread belief that language minorities are refusing to learn English, Amastae argues that opportunities to learn are grossly inadequate.

The situation of language minorities in Arizona also supports this analysis. Due to lack of funding, the director of the Division of Adult Education for the Arizona State Department of Education estimated that in terms of the ESL program, his office was "able to serve less than 10% of the need in the state for educational services" (Brandt, 1990, p. 219). In addition, although courses in the past that were designed to develop English language and literacy did make use of the L1, such courses are now prohibited. As Brandt (1990) emphasizes,

there is **no** large group of individuals who are adamantly refusing to learn English. In fact, the need for English instruction and the desire for it is paramount among language minority populations. Neither school districts charged with delivering services to the young nor the adult education agencies are currently able to fulfill the demand for such services. (p.220)

Lack of availability of ESL instruction is not unique to El Paso and Arizona but is mirrored throughout the nation. Education Week reports:

thousands of prospective students, many of them recent immigrants are being turned away from adult English classes.... Whether in Los Angeles, Houston, New York City or Albuquerque, adult education officials report too few classes for too many students.... education officials in Los Angeles were unable to serve roughly 40,000 adults seeking English language instruction in 1986--more than twice the number turned away in 1985. New York City reported that 6,000 were on waiting lists for English and that many more had been lost due to lack of record keeping. (as cited in Bingham, 1990, p. 210)

Whereas it is tempting to attribute limited English proficiency to the motivations of newcomers, the waiting lists tell a different tale about where some of the problems lie. However, even when ESL classes are available, adults are by no means assured access to English literacy.

### **Accessibility of Classes**

One factor that can limit accessibility is the guidelines that exist for admission to a program. Refugees, for example, may be ineligible for support moneys if they are past working age or if they are not the head of the household. Mothers of preschool children may be ineligible if their husbands are enrolled in a program (Miller, 1991). In addition, the definition of a refugee has changed as the budget for refugee resettlement has dwindled. Whereas refugees once had 3 years to prepare themselves for working and supporting their families, adults who arrive now are no longer considered refugees after 18 months.

Some of those adults who need English the most may not only be ineligible but may also be afraid to seek services. For those women who are presently undocumented, gaining access to needed English classes, as with any interaction with "the system," may seem threatening. Hogeland and Rosen (1990), for example, in their study of undocumented women in the California Bay Area, note:

Fear of deportation permeates all aspects of the undocumented woman's life. In the U.S. without legal status, the undocumented woman is forced to live what has been called an underground existence, measuring her every move in fear of the INS. This fear affects all areas of her help-seeking behavior.... Any interaction that the undocumented woman has with "the system" . . . is overshadowed by this fear. (p. 2)

Thus for those who may need it most, seeking English instruction is not worth the risks involved.

Child care problems, inconvenient class hours, and lack of transportation are common obstacles that can limit the accessibility of classes for language minorities. Isolation in rural areas and dangerous neighborhoods in urban areas compound the difficulties of attending classes. Even when these obstacles can be overcome, however, the confusing bureaucracy surrounding enrollment in classes can be a deterrent for some learners. One native-English-speaking researcher describes her experience of trying to register for a friend at a local community college in the following way:

No one at the main campus could give me adequate information. Having gotten the name of a possible location for the ESL program from a passerby, I was forced to resort to the telephone book to find the address.

At the ESL campus, I stood in a long line. Finally, I talked to a clerk who was a student trainee, had limited English skills, and did not know much about the programs for which she was registering people. The schedule of classes listed a course called "pre-ESL." The clerk could not elaborate on it. She did not direct me to a counselor or explain testing and placement procedures. I was given a paper and a time that my friend should register and was warned that if she did not get there by 6:00 a.m., the classes would probably be full. (Miller, 1991, pp. 52-53)

This situation is symptomatic of what Fingeret (1992) calls a "crisis" approach to literacy, in which programs come and go with short-term funding (see Crandall, this issue), and no one source can provide centralized information or referrals. Without an infrastructure for the ongoing delivery of services, confusion is likely to be the rule rather than the exception. The National Literacy Act of 1991 authorizes new literacy programs and establishes the National Institute for Literacy whose purpose is to conduct research and disseminate information and assistance to literacy programs. The act, however, focuses on the development of English literacy for native speakers. As the National Literacy Act of 1991 provides resources to states and regions through governors offices, it remains to be seen whether these resources will change the current situation for nonnative speakers.

### **Appropriateness of Classes**

Ironically, once learners have "gotten in," they may remain outsiders for a variety of reasons, even as they physically sit in the classroom. When learners are not separated according to L1 literacy resources, the results are predictable. Students who have not had experience with print or with formal schooling are inevitably left behind as their classmates with histories of education benefit from classroom activities and homework assignments that tap their previous experiences. Weinstein (1984) postulates that the literate orientation of the typical ESL classroom denies certain learners the comprehensible input they need to make sense of the new language. Miller (1991) found that Hmong adults in southern California who were not literate in their L1 either fell behind or dropped out of those programs where they were mixed with more highly literate peers. In the two entire counties studied by Miller, only one testing center had any native language tests available for placement purposes. This means that learners who rank as beginners on English placement tests are likely to end up in the same classrooms regardless of differences in native language experience or education. Throughout the U.S., mixed "beginner" classes are the rule rather than the exception.

A second way in which ESL classes may be inappropriate for adult learners is when differences in expectations about classroom behavior are not recognized by teachers or learners. The work of Philips (1972) with Native American children in Oregon and that of Heath (1983) with black and white children in Appalachia were among the groundbreaking studies that brought to public consciousness what can happen in classrooms when styles of language use between children and teachers do not match. For learners from other countries, the contrasts may be striking. Southeast Asians who cast their eyes downward out of respect may be misinterpreted as being disrespectful by teachers who are not familiar with this pattern of interaction. Contrary to a mainstream U.S. teacher's expectation of active class participation, many nonnative-English-speaking students think it is inappropriate to set themselves apart or, as they see it, to "show-off" by volunteering in class. Rezabek (1987) found that teachers unfamiliar with the cultures of their

preliterate learners assumed that their students were "shy," "not with it," or "lazy" because of interactional patterns that would have been completely appropriate in these adults' own cultural contexts.

In addition, linguistic and cultural resources which could be tapped may be not only ignored but repressed or actually outlawed. Reactions to use of the L1 in the classroom are an indication of the degree to which an English-only perspective subtly influences beliefs and practices (see Auerbach, 1993). Many students, rather than speaking out in class, ask their peers in their L1 when they don't understand. However, teachers often have ambivalent and inconsistent reactions to such behavior. In one Philadelphia classroom, when the preliterate learners collectively prompted the woman who had been called on, the teacher assumed that her authority was being defied and consequently expelled one of the women for "sassing" her (Weinstein-Shr, 1986). Use of native language and cooperative problem-solving strategies were seen as threatening and inappropriate in a setting where these may be the best hope for success for the learners involved. Discouraging the use of the native language in such instances is not conducive to the development of biliteracy. Based on a comprehensive review of the literature on biliteracy development, Hornberger (1989) argues that the most productive environments for developing biliteracy exemplify a balance between attention to receptive and productive skills, between oral and written languages, and between the use of L1 and L2.

Finally, literacy classes may fail to meet the needs of learners when the goals of the learners and those of the program administrators or funders are in conflict. Workplace programs funded by employers may have increased productivity as the primary goal, whereas learners may wish to gain literacy to get a better job. (See McKay, 1993, for a discussion of conflicting agendas for second language literacy.) In investigating a job training program for Vietnamese refugees, Rezabek (1987) found that language and literacy acquisition were of primary importance to learners. As one student put it, "I think we know how to work very well. We just don't understand words . . . it is very hard for us." (p. 110). In contrast, some administrators and teachers did not give language and literacy a high priority because job placement rates

constituted the primary criterion for program funding, evaluation of success and accountability, and refunding.... Program policy relegated language instruction to the lowest possible priority with the program calling it a factor that had no relationship to job search and maintenance. (Rezabek, 1987, pp. 190-191 )

In this situation, as in many other language programs that are embedded in job training, there is enormous pressure on program administrators to place participants in any job. This emphasis sabotages participants' hopes of developing language and literacy skills for better jobs that would enable them to support their families. Such programs also dramatically illustrate the inconsistency that exists between U.S. national policies which support an expanding role of English literacy and nationally sponsored programs that minimize literacy training. Some critics (e.g., Spener, 1988; Tollefson, 1991) argue that inadequate support for language and literacy development is a policy which guarantees an adequate workforce for menial labor.

A source of frustration for participants in job training programs is that the pressure for immediate job placement often precludes drawing on their own previous job and career skills. Tales of immigrants who practiced law or medicine in their native lands only to work as janitors and restaurant workers are not rare. Programs may inadvertently neglect the resources of participants in other ways as well. In family literacy efforts, for example, the danger of operating on a "deficit model" (see Baylor, this issue) is to be blind to the rich resources newcomers bring. Programs which teach parenting skills, for example, may overlook the appropriate parenting that newcomers have been doing for generations. "Parent circles" (Habana-Hafner, 1990), in contrast, are gatherings of adults who discuss the dilemmas of raising children in a new country, request information about rules and beliefs of the new setting, and struggle together over which of the old or new strategies are appropriate given the new situation. Family literacy efforts can do more than involve parents in their children's education on the school's terms (see Auerbach, in press); they can involve tapping traditional knowledge and creating new knowledge together as young and old are connected through literacy (Weinstein-Shr & Quintero, in press).

All of these program factors--lack of availability, accessibility, and appropriateness--are aggravated by a lack of U.S. national policy which would direct resources to the development of literacy programs for adults who are not native

speakers of English. Inadequate literacy programs can undermine language minorities' abilities to develop their English literacy and thus contribute to their marginalization in the U.S. As Rezabek (1987) comments,

language minorities with limited English proficiency, already a socially marginal population because of their perceived language and cultural differences, face a double marginalization. Dependent upon social programs intended to reduce their marginality, they often discover the services provided by those systems to be inaccessible or of marginal quality or use. (p. v)

What are the consequences for language minority families when faced with increasing pressures to acquire English literacy coupled with minimal recognition of their language abilities in their L1? In addition, what are the consequences for multilingual families and communities when educational support is inadequate to develop either English or L1 language and literacy? We explore these questions below.

## **LANGUAGE AND UPROOTED FAMILIES: CHANGING ROLES, CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS**

If I translate for you when you talk to my mother [at school], please, don't look at me, look at her when you speak. (Vietnamese teen addressing a group of ESL teachers)

A group of Southeast Asian youth had just presented a skit at a regional TESOL meeting to illustrate their dilemmas being caught between the worlds of school and home. Afterwards, one teacher invited the players in the skit to give any advice they wanted to their captive audience. The answer of one young man, cited above, illustrates that role reversals between parents and children caused by language use are a cause of discomfort for all involved.

In this section, we look briefly at language use in refugee families. We examine the consequences for families when adults do not have an opportunity to learn English, often for some of the reasons noted above, while at the same time their children are losing their L1. Finally, we invite readers to muse with us about the consequences of patterns of language use when adults can no longer pass on the wisdom of their experience through the generations.

### **Language Use in Refugee Families**

Moving to a new setting entails drastic changes in what Hymes (1972) calls the "communicative economy" as new codes (languages) and new channels (literacy) are introduced into the fabric of daily life and into the "environmental press" (Erickson, 1989) of biliterate contexts in which individuals develop their language and literacy skills and resources (Hornberger, 1989). Because they have more exposure to English, more interaction in English, and more opportunities to study than adults, children of immigrant families acquire English more quickly and extensively than their parents or grandparents. As a result, uprooted adults often have to depend on children to translate documents as well as to interpret encounters with U.S. institutions such as schools, medical centers, or welfare agencies. Some families manage to divide the language labor very efficiently. In one refugee home in Philadelphia, for example, the children read the English mail, the mother reads letters from relatives in the home country aloud to the family, and the eldest daughter, who used her literacy skills to get her driver's license, has become the family driver. In many homes, every phone call is answered by two people--an adult native-language speaker and a younger English speaker. The superfluous interlocutor then hangs up (Weinstein-Shr, in press). Families manage as interdependent units whose members contribute to the well-being of the whole with complementary skills and resources for making their lives in a new setting.

Early research on multilingual communities tended to focus on how language use is related to domain. In a study of Puerto Ricans in Jersey City, for example, Fishman, Cooper, and Ma (1971) found that language use was determined by domains comprised of physical settings. For most speakers, Spanish was the language of the home and church, whereas English was the language of school. Children tended to use Spanish as soon as they entered their homes. In contrast, several recent studies emphasize how linguistic choice is related to generation. Zentella (1988), for example, in her study of a Puerto Rican community delineates four distinct patterns of communication in Puerto Rican homes. In

the majority of families, children hear their parents speak to each other in Spanish and are always spoken to in Spanish by at least one of their parents; children, on the other hand, speak to each other in English. Generational factors of language use also operate outside of the home. In initiating an interaction with a stranger, for example, children tend to greet Latino infants and women of their parents' age and older in Spanish yet use English with young people. In her investigation of Cambodian families, Weinstein-Shr (1992) found that the adults spoke Khmer with one another and to their children. As soon as children started school, the children began to use English with one another and often answered their parents in English. Linguistic choice in the home was thus associated primarily with the generation of the speaker rather than the setting, situation, or even the interlocutor.

One of the most pressing issues for children and adults in refugee families is the negotiation of power and the ascription of authority. Whereas it is clear that new ways of using language both signal and create changes in relationships, little is known about the processes by which roles are renegotiated in immigrant families. In her work with one Cambodian family in western Massachusetts, Bachy (1991) found that English, the language of the schools, was used among children to establish authority over one another in play. In addition, the Khmer-speaking parents themselves began to switch into English using the few phrases they knew to assert authority, with commands like "Go away," "Don't talk," "Sit down," "Be quiet," "Put the toys away." Bachy notes the irony in both parents and children ascribing authority to English, the language over which children have a far superior command.

For some, the reversal of traditional roles associated with language use may be a cause of considerable stress. In one family in Philadelphia, for example, a man did not learn of his son's expulsion from school until 6 months after the fact. The boy left every morning at 8:00 a.m., returned at 4:00 p.m., and was the primary support for translating mail and other English documents. He had successfully intercepted all communications to his father from teachers and administrators. In this case, language use was associated with shifts in power and authority as control over information came into the hands of the child. The loss of control became a source of despair for the man and was surely equally painful for his troubled son. As recognition grows of the importance of the family unit for the successful adaptation of its members (Sticht & McDonald, 1989), it becomes increasingly critical to understand the processes by which language use contributes to the health and interdependence of the family or to its disintegration.

To what extent has generation become the key feature that defines language use among multilingual communities in the United States? To what extent is the experience of Cambodian and Hmong Americans in Philadelphia and western Massachusetts similar to others in the country? What are the consequences of this pattern of language use? Clearly, more research is needed to explore these questions systematically.

### **Language Loss in Families and Communities**

"I take [English] classes all day, and work at night. When can I teach my children Vietnamese?" This is the complaint of Nghia Thai (1992) in a composition on the topic of families and changes. Alicia Munoz (1992), a young Spanish-speaking woman who is committed to raising her twins bilingually, tells with resignation of her experiences shortly after the twins outgrew their Spanish daycare situation:

I am observing the process Nicolas and Araceli are following in losing Spanish.... As long as the Ninja Turtles and Beauty and the Beast speak English, my children will eventually lose their native tongue.

These are adults who are themselves acquiring English. Despite their own best efforts and intentions, they are watching their children lose their L1, quickly for Thai's preteens, and with slow telltale changes in syntax and lexicon in the speech of Munoz's children.

The consequence of language loss among children is documented in a remarkable survey of 1,100 immigrant and Native American families across the U.S. The No Cost Study was conducted by the No-Cost Research Group (NCRG), a volunteer effort of over 300 members of the National Association of Bilingual Education (Wong Fillmore, 1991). The aim was to determine the extent to which family language patterns were affected by children's early learning of English in preschool programs. The study included 311 Spanish-speaking families with children in Spanish language

preschools who served as a comparison group with families who had children attending English-only or bilingual preschool programs. The preliminary findings indicate that 50% of families with children in L2 preschool programs notice shifts toward English language use at home as opposed to 11% of families in the comparison sample. As Wong Fillmore (1991) notes, "Sad to say, bilingual education does not appear to offer children enough protection from language shift....47.2% of the main sample families with children in bilingual preschool programs reported a negative change [i.e., a shift toward English] in family language patterns" (p. 333).

In the families interviewed by the NCRG, like other families described here, parents have minimal if any proficiency in English. Whereas it used to be the case that language loss was a three generation process, because of early immersion in English settings for children, along with pressures on adults which make it difficult to spend time with their children, in many cases, the process has been accelerated to two generations. Whereas once it might have been grandparents and grandchildren who struggled to communicate, the 1990s are finding increasing numbers of parents and children in the same households who do not share a common tongue.

Wong Fillmore asks, "What do parents do when their children speak mostly English at home, a language that the parents themselves do not know?" (p. 337). The NCRG found that some parents begin to try to switch, despite their minimal command of English. Other parents simply give up. In either case, the situation is difficult. Cambodian parents, baffled by U.S. laws, tell of threats from their children to report them to the police if they hit them (Sun, 1991). One man, after a parenting class on the topic of child abuse, joked bitterly that he would have preferred a session on parent abuse. As adults find that they hold dwindling resources for understanding and guiding their children, a language of connection and the connection itself deteriorate in synchrony.

## Language and Cultural Transmission

I love my grandchildren very much. I am learning English so I can talk to my grandchildren. But I also want them to understand a little Chinese. I think every language is useful! (Yin, 1992)

Susan Yin, from Burma, was 71 years old when this was written with the help of her tutor. Her sentiments echo those of many refugee elders. Without resort to their native language, they do not have the words they need to tell children what life was like in their country of origin. How can a Hmong child understand the story of her parents' courtship if she doesn't have the words for the courtship songs or for the ways in which her father played his courtship serenades on the reed pipe? How can Lao children picture a day planting rice, drawing water, and going to market without the vocabulary for the activities and materials that constituted daily ritual? Moreover, uprooted adults often have riveting stories of narrow escapes, remarkable survival strategies, and terrible losses as they left their homes. To make sense of experiences that are often puzzling, it is important for these stories to be told and remembered. This is not possible when elders and children do not share a language of telling.

Language is not only the fuel of telling but also for leading. At the Cambodian American Association in Massachusetts, the intergenerational Board of Directors meets to pursue their mission of connecting the Cambodian community with the wider U.S. community while supporting their members in gaining a positive sense of ethnic identity in a U.S. setting (Sun & Edgerly, 1991). In these meetings, which are ostensibly run bilingually, the initiative is clearly in the hands of the younger men who are English speakers. Although the agenda is initially read in both languages, it is written and posted in English. Elders rarely take the floor unless they are invited by a younger member to give an opinion. The meetings are run by the president (a young man), based on principles of U.S. organization. Talk is typically dominated by the youth who may or may not bother to translate the discussion into Khmer for the elders. The input of elders may be sought but usually through private conversation after the meetings are over. Whereas Sun and Edgerly have not explored how decisions are made or the way in which elders may have authority through informal channels, it is their opinion that without the language of the host country, and without knowledge of the rules and norms, the elders have far less "cultural capital" for asserting leadership in mixed-generation groups. The authors suggest that these dynamics bode ill for helping the community strengthen its sense of identity through valuation of traditional wisdom and connections to the past. Ironically, the association itself thus sabotages part of its own mission in

its very way of operating. As elders become increasingly marginal, channels for cultural transmission are correspondingly diminished to the detriment, we believe, of elders and children alike.

Adults bring a variety of goals to their quest for native and English language literacies. Among them may be to better manage their material circumstances and to earn a decent living--the goals addressed (to differing degrees of adequacy) by most ESL programs. However, adults have other agendas for literacy which may be equally important if not more pressing to them in the long run: supporting children in their social and moral development as human beings; helping grandchildren know the story of their past; creating circumstances in which their children can succeed without rejecting who they are and where they have come from; ensuring that their children will stay connected enough to take care of them when they grow old. Whereas immediate survival is surely a concern, adults also make meaning both by remembering and telling the past as well as by looking toward the future through the lives of children and grandchildren. The degree to which there is a shared language will determine the extent to which this is possible.

## **CONCLUSION: SUPPORTING LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT, SUPPORTING PEOPLE**

In this article, we have examined the expanding role of English using a historical look at immigration and naturalization requirements as one example. In light of the growing importance of English language literacy for access to opportunities in the U.S., we have examined some of the difficulties faced by those adults who wish to develop their English language literacy resources. The difficulties faced by adults in gaining access to English, together with the lack of support for L1 maintenance, creates perplexing problems for intergenerational relationships and transmission of cultural knowledge. We have argued that policies and programs which do not develop L1 language and literacy ignore one of the richest resources held by a community of newcomers, both in terms of individual learning as well as for families and communities in their ability to support their own members.

We have pointed out the basic inconsistency that exists when, on the one hand, various national policies are increasing the role of English while, on the other hand, there is a lack of policy initiatives that would direct resources to develop the needed kinds of literacy programs. In order to remedy this situation, we believe that as a profession, we need to support and advocate policy initiatives that would direct resources to increase the number and kinds of literacy programs offered, making sure that these programs do not deny access to language minorities through obstacles like rigid and arbitrary entry requirements, high costs, or inconvenient hours and locations. Such programs must be educationally sound, employing teachers and administrators who have the training and experience to meet the particular needs of language minorities in terms of their L1 literacy experience as well their cultural background.

We concur with Fingeret (1992) and Crandall (this issue) that there needs to be an infrastructure for literacy instruction which can provide ongoing services that are not constantly disrupted by changes in funding. We believe that this infrastructure will best serve diverse learners if funding is directed toward those organizations that (a) have a history of experience with ESL and literacy and (b) involve participation in both planning and instruction by members of the communities to be served; these organizations need to be given the time and resources to develop creative approaches to the diversity of learner needs. In this way, learners can find their way to the most appropriate programs, and programs can remain responsive to the goals of those they serve.

We advocate policies, programs, and practices that include a vision of literacy resources as a whole and that take into account the contexts in which the plurality of literacies are and can be used. One logical outcome of this vision is a set of national policies that support the development of native language literacies through L1 literacy classes as well as through the use of L1 literacy as a resource in English classes. Our vision also suggests the need for a more inclusive view of context, where language and literacy use beyond the classroom and workplace are of critical concern. It is through this kind of vision that we can encourage families and communities to develop both English and native literacies as resources for adapting to life in a new setting.

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