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## Maintaining and Retaining the Home Language While Learning English

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MAINTAINING AND RETAINING THE HOME LANGUAGE WHILE  
LEARNING ENGLISH

By

PaNhia Vang

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a  
degree of  
Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Overview

In this first chapter, I will be giving a brief historical overview of who the Hmong people are, the struggles they faced, and their journey to the United States. In order to understand our Hmong students and parents. It is important to know and acknowledge the history of the Hmong because this history is what shaped the Hmong American Community today. I will also share some of my personal experiences and why I decided to choose my research topic “*How can school personnel at a Hmong school help students retain their Hmong language and learn English effectively?*”

#### Background

Who are the Hmong people? The Hmong are an ethnic minority group who now live all over the world. Many researchers believed that the Hmong people originated in the land we now know as China. During the Han Dynasty, the Hmong people rebelled against Chinese oppression. After being defeated by the Hans, they migrated to many of the Southeast Asian (SEA) countries like Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. Those who stayed in China moved to Southern China and to more mountainous regions (Gerdner, 2015).

In 1961 a war broke out. This war is known as the Secret War. Laos was an important country during this time due to communism. If Laos had fallen to

communism, it would have been the gateway to turning other SEA countries into communist countries. No one was supposed to be in Laos but because the Northern Vietnamese was using Laos as a staging area, the United States military decided to send the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to Laos in 1961 (PBS: *America's Secret War*, 2019). The CIA had recruited many Hmong men and young boys as old as 10 or 11 as allies. Many of the Hmong did not have a choice to choose because no matter what side they chose there were consequences (PBS: *America's Secret War*, 2019).

The secret war went on for many years. It was 1975 when the United States withdrew its troops from Laos leaving many Hmong citizens behind (Gerdner, 2015). Once the Americans left Laos, the communist group known as the Pathet Lao was on a mission to annihilate all the Hmong people who aided the United States. Hmong people were left to fend for themselves. Many fled and migrated to Thailand in hopes of immigrating to the United States. If Hmong families were captured they would be killed if they did not surrender and cooperate with the Pathet Lao. If they did surrender and cooperated, they were sent to seminars and re-education camps (PBS *America's Secret War*, 2019).

Many families chose to stay in Laos but there were also many who fled for a better life. The families who decided to flee and not get caught faced a dangerous journey. Families hid in the mountains where many mothers had to drug their small children and babies with opium in order to keep them quiet. This

was done to avoid being caught by the Pathet Lao. Those who chose to run to Thailand had to cross the Mekong River, in which many lost their lives due to being shot by the Pathet Lao or drowning. Oftentimes families were separated from each other to avoid being caught (PBS *America's Secret War*, 2019).

After years of seeking refuge and living in refugee camps, Hmong families were slowly getting sponsored and resettled in the United States. According to Gerdner (2015), based on the 2010 census there are about 260,073 Hmongs living in the United States. As the Hmong slowly adapt to a new society and culture, they are slowly losing their Hmong culture and language.

### **Personal Experiences**

I was born in the United States in the Midwest region. Growing up here, my paternal grandmother always told me to speak Hmong at home and speak English at school. She told me I had to learn English so that I could fit into American society and I had to speak Hmong at home so that I do not lose my language and cultural identity. I was lucky to be able to learn how to speak Hmong at a very young age. I was able to have conversations with my paternal grandparents and parents. Growing up I spent most of my childhood with my paternal grandparents who speak no English so I had a lot of practice with the Hmong language. However, as I started going to school and learning English, I began to lose my ability to speak Hmong clearly. I am not as proficient in Hmong anymore compared to when I was a child. I still know how to speak and

understand Hmong but my pronunciation could use some work. After my paternal grandmother passed away and my paternal grandfather moved out to live with my uncle, no one really spoke Hmong in our home anymore. My parents still do, however they understand some English so I speak to them in English more than Hmong. My siblings and I code-switch between English and Hmong when we converse with one another. Code-switching is a term used to describe when a person of color speaks in English and then switches to their home language in the middle of a sentence and vice versa.

Oral language is important to the Hmong culture, this is how elders pass their knowledge to the younger generation. Before my paternal grandmother passed away, she used to tell us many Hmong folktales and stories about their journey to America. She would tell these stories to us in Hmong. I loved listening to them. When my grandmother told these stories there would be words that I did not know, I would ask her what they mean and she would explain them to me. Up to this day when I hear a Hmong word that I have never heard before or I do not remember what it means I would ask my mother or father what it means. Being able to hear Hmong and learn how to speak Hmong through oral storytelling and oral communication helped me retain my Hmong language.

As a young child, I was never taught to read and write in Hmong. In my elementary school, there were many Hmong students that attended there. My elementary school was located near public housing where many Hmong families

lived. During this time there were still many new Hmong immigrants. There were many Hmong students who were ELLs. I was one of them. I was an ELL from Kindergarten up until ninth grade. I don't remember much about my elementary school incorporating the Hmong culture in the classroom. However, I do remember my elementary school celebrating the Hmong new year. I remember arriving at school early and helping the staff set up. I remember running around with my friends and eating Hmong food with my parents during the Hmong New Year celebration. I remember watching Hmong dancing and singing. In fifth and sixth grade we had Hmong members from the community coming into our classrooms to teach us about Hmong culture such as dancing, recreating Hmong houses with popsicle sticks, and learning how to write a few Hmong words and phrases. This was the very first time I was exposed to Hmong writing.

I only learned how to write a few phrases and words in Hmong I was not taught the Hmong alphabet or how to read in Hmong. I learned how to write phrases like *nyob zoo* (hello), *ua tsaug* (thank you), and *kuv hlub koj*(I love you). I learned how to write words like *niam* (mom), *txiv* (dad), *pog* (grandma), and *peb* (us/we). I would constantly write these phrases and words over and over again until I had them memorized. In a way, these words are Hmong sight words. Once I became familiarized with these words reading in Hmong became easier however, as a grown-up, I still struggle with reading Hmong and writing Hmong.



In 2019 I was an intern at a non-profit organization teaching Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes for immigrants and refugee communities. I saw these students using their home language to help them learn English. They were using their phones for translation, consulting with their peers, asking each other for help, and translating for one another. I also saw students writing their home language next to the English words that they were learning. It was impressive to see how these adult students were able to make connections between their home language and the English language.

I have been working at a Hmong charter school for three years now. When I started working at this Hmong school I was beginning to speak more Hmong again. Talking to students, and parents and translating for parents gave me an opportunity to practice using my Hmong. English is a language that has many synonyms for a word, unlike the Hmong language. When I am translating for parents I have to really think about which Hmong word is closely related to the English word. When I was translating for parents it really challenged me to think about what is the appropriate word to use to not lose the real meaning of the translation.

Every year during conferences, when teachers ask parents what their concerns are I would hear parents say things like “I am concerned about my child not learning Hmong,” and “It’s hard for me to communicate with my child because I know very little English,” or “my child can’t communicate with their

grandparents because they don't know any Hmong." Witnessing the faces of parents when they voice their concerns is saddening. I can see that these parents want to have a relationship with their children and they want to be able to communicate but because of the language barrier, it has become challenging for parents to build relationships with their children. I have also seen Hmong students be frustrated and upset with their parents because they do not understand English.

I have had many opportunities to have conversations with some of my students in Hmong. I have encountered a few students who are really great at comprehending Hmong and speaking in Hmong. There are some students who only comprehend and cannot respond back in Hmong. Then there are students who can do neither. I recently realized that there are more students who can comprehend Hmong but can not respond back in Hmong.

### **Purpose**

I knew that I wanted to do my research on topics related to Hmong students and Special Education (SPED) students. I wanted to do my research on Hmong students because I feel that there is very little information or studies done about Hmong students. The school that I am employed at has a high population of Hmong and Karen students. However, many of the ELL students at my school are mainly Hmong students. I was also noticing that many Hmong students who are considered ELL aren't proficient in Hmong (oral, reading, and writing). I want to learn more about how to help Hmong students be more successful in school. I am

interested in SPED students because I work with SPED students every day. I want to know more about SPED students and how to help them be successful in school. It was a hard decision to make, however, after self-reflecting, discussing with the Hmong teachers I work with, and discussing with family and friends, I was able to determine my research topic.

With my self-reflection on my own education, I have noticed that I struggled a lot with learning English. I was not considered proficient in either of the languages that I spoke. This reflection made me question a lot about why I was struggling with both languages. Questions like *why was I an ELL student for so long?* Or *why am I not speaking Hmong as well as I used to?* came up with this self-reflection. After thinking about these questions and discussing with the Hmong teachers about our students struggling with speaking Hmong, this got me thinking about what can we do to help our students to be able to speak in Hmong and retain it while also helping them improve their English. This is what led me to determine my research question "*How can school personnel at a Hmong school help students retain their Hmong language and learn English effectively?*"

### **Conclusion**

The Hmong have faced many struggles to get to where they are today. From being war victims to adapting to a new country, the Hmong did everything they could in order to survive. Learning about Hmong history will help us to understand how it shaped the Hmong American experiences in the United States

today. Oral language is a huge part of Hmong education, without it, Hmong students are losing their home language. As a Hmong American, I was able to learn how to speak and understand the language through oral storytelling and conversing with my parents and grandparents. Being able to reflect on myself, on my interactions with students and parents, and talking to colleagues, families, and friends, I was able to come up with the research question “*How can school personnel at a Hmong school help students retain their Hmong language and learn English effectively?*”

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

In this chapter, there will be discussions about the background of the Hmong's oral and written language, the differences and similarity in Hmong and English, the sociocultural theory, English language learners (ELL), the academic achievement of Hmong students, and the existing implemented strategies. By discussing these topics, this research will allow school personnel to understand the research question: *How can school personnel at a Hmong school help students retain their Hmong language and learn English effectively?* The Hmong people have been through traumatic events that have led them to do everything they can to survive in the environment that they are in today. For many generations, the Hmong have always relied a lot on their oral language to survive and to pass their knowledge down.

Foreign-born Hmong students are not the only ones that struggle with learning English. American-born Hmong students also struggle with learning English which is why there are many Hmong students who are considered ELL. Even though American-born Hmong students have a higher proficiency in English compared to the foreign-born Hmong students, their English is considered to be emergent compared to native English-speaking students. American-born Hmong

students are able to obtain higher English skills due to having a little more exposure to the language compared to foreign-born Hmong students.

Parents play a big role in their children's academic success as well. Many Hmong parents are usually never present in school activities. Hmong parents do not really volunteer at school functions, they rarely go on field trips with their children, or they are not present at their children's sports games. There are many different factors that play a role in delaying Hmong students' academic success which will be discussed later on in this chapter. Discussing the Hmong written and oral language and the difference between Hmong and English will help better understand why Hmong students are likely to be considered ELL. Discussing the academic achievement of Hmong students and existing implemented strategies will help with understanding how to support Hmong students.

### **Written and Oral Language**

History tells that a kingdom of Hmong existed in China and they had a king. The kingdom was rich with culture, traditions, and had a written language. However, not much is known about it. There have been many different versions of how the Hmong lost their written language. There was a book that was filled with the Hmong alphabet and knowledge about the Hmong written language (Duffy, 2007). When the Hmong rebelled against the Chinese oppression and lost their king, they had to flee and migrate. In the process of fleeing they had to choose between taking everything with them or their protection. They chose their

protection; the outcome of that was losing their written language. When they were fleeing they had to burn their books that were filled with the Hmong alphabet and knowledge. This is just one of the versions of how the Hmong lost their written language. There is a version where the books were lost in the Yellow River when they had to cross during migration. Another version is that the books were eaten by their horses (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1998; Duffy, 2007; Her & Buley-Meissner, 2012). Although we don't know which is the true story, at one point the Hmong did have a written language but it was lost due to political conflicts.

As the Hmong lost their written language, they relied on their oral language to communicate. In the Hmong language, there are two forms of oral language, formal and everyday. With the everyday language form, it is used for casual everyday conversation. With the formal language form, it is used for social occasions, religious ceremonies, and political events. The formal language form requires more sophisticated vocabulary that only certain individuals understand (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1988). Histories, traditions, knowledge, and storytelling has always been passed down from older generation to the younger generation through the usage of oral language. The Hmong have never really had a proper formal education (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1988). Learning was expected through auditory learning, observation, and participation. Improvement was based on oral feedback from their elders.

Ever since the Hmong lost their books about their written language, they never used a writing system again. Hmong who were born years after fleeing from China have heard about what writing is, but they have never seen it in action before. Many Hmong did not start writing again until they got to Laos and went to school there. There were only a few Hmong children who were able to attend school. The reason for this was that they lived in the mountainous rural areas of Laos. It also was not a requirement for Hmong children to attend school. They did not have to go if they did not want to (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis & Yang, 1988). Those who attended school had to travel long distances in order to get to the schools in Laotian villages. The students who were able to attend school only learned how to speak, read, and write in Lao. However, most of the time they did not understand the language (Mahowald & Loughnane, 2016). It wasn't until after families sought refuge in Thailand that more Hmong children started to attend formal schooling.

### ***Art Used as a Written Language***

Oftentimes art/illustrations are disregarded as a written language. However, Martens, Martens, Doyle, Loomis, Aghalarov (2012), and Wu (2009) stated that art/illustrations are important and they are able to tell a story just as well as a written text. When a written text is accompanied by illustrations, it helps students to fully understand the written text. Sometimes illustrations have information that the written text does not provide. When students only focus on a



written text it limits their comprehension (Martens, Martens, Doyle, Loomis, & Aghalarov, 2012). Teachers use drawing/art as a scaffolding method to help students who are emergent writers transition to writing (Wu, 2009). In other words drawing is a way to help emergent writers get their message across.

As human beings, we want to communicate with one another. We do that through oral, text, illustrations, or gestures. When we struggle to communicate through oral and text, we tend to resort to illustrations and gestures to communicate. For example, in Rogers and Helman's (2009) study one of the participants was very animated with his gestures and used facial expression to communicate when he was in large group activities. Using art/illustration as a written language allows students to gain skills to critically think, make inferences, and pay attention to details. Like authors, artists make conscious decisions about where to put lines, shapes, or colors in their artwork to make meaning (Martens, Martens, Doyle, Loomis, & Aghalarov, 2012).

Before the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) writing system was developed, the Hmong used a textile art called Paj Ntaub (flower cloth) as a writing system. The Hmongs used Paj Ntaub to create the story cloths. Story cloths were a way to preserve traditional folktales, the Hmong journey of war, and civilization (Gerden, 2015). With oral language, it was easy for knowledge to be lost or modified thus creating different versions of stories and history. This was

seen with the different versions of how the Hmong lost their writing system. With the story cloths being made, the Hmong history was being recorded.

Currently the Hmong has various writing systems but only one has become the main writing system (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1988; Jaisser, 1995; Michaud, 2020). The RPA writing system was developed in the 1950's by American Protestant missionary linguists J. Linwood Barney and William Smalley when they traveled to Laos (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1988; Michaud, 2020). This writing system was created based on the two dialects of Hmong. These two dialects are Hmoob Dawb (Hmong white) and Hmoob Ntsuab/Hmoob Leng (Hmong green) (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1988).

### **Difference and Similarity in Hmong and English**

Hmong and English are two languages that can be difficult to learn. These two languages are very different from each other, but there are also some similarities between them. The Hmong language is a very tonal language unlike English which is more phonological. The Hmong language has 8 tones. The letters *B, J, V, G, S, M, D, and -* (*this dash represents a tone but it means that there is no tone letter at the end of the word*) determine the tones and these tones determine the meaning of the words. The *B* makes a high pitch tone, *J* makes a high falling tone, *V* makes a mid-rising tone, *G* makes a breathy mid-low tone, *S* makes a low tone, *M* makes a low falling tone, *D* makes a low to mid-pitch tone, and lastly the *-* makes a mid-pitch tone (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1988;

Mahowald & Loughnane, 2016). In the Hmong RPA writing system, these letters generally go at the end of each word. If a word does not have one of these letters at the end you would read the word with a mid-tone. In a way these tones are like punctuations in English. Based on the punctuation, you use voice pitch to express ideas (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1988). Although punctuation does not change the meaning of a word like the tones in the Hmong language, it changes the attitude of the sentence.

Structurally, Hmong and English are similar. According to Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, and Yang (1988), in both languages, the structure would have a subject, verb, and object. The Hmong language is a monosyllabic language compared to English which is a polysyllabic language. If a Hmong word has more than one syllable the words are most likely made up of monosyllabic words that can stand alone as an independent word. In other words, think of them as compound words. In a Hmong syllable, it must consist of consonants, vowels, and a tone. Similarly, an English syllable must consist of a consonant and a vowel. In the English language a vowel can stand alone by itself in a syllable. It does not need to be accompanied by a consonant.

English is a language that uses inflections, past tenses, present tenses, nouns, gender etcetera. These are important parts of the English language that help readers and writers to identify the situation that is being presented. For the Hmong language, there is very little to no use of inflections, words only have one

form, there is no tense usage in the Hmong language, and it relies a lot on word order (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1998; Mahowald & Loughnane, 2016). Let's take a look at an example: The sentence *I go to school* is *kuv mus kawm ntawv* in Hmong. The sentence *I went to school* also translates as *kuv mus kawm ntawv* in Hmong. In this example the only words that changed were *go* and *went*, this change of word in the two English sentences changed the meaning, but in the Hmong sentences, they had the same meaning of *I go to school*. The literal translation of *kuv mus kawm ntawv* is I go learn paper. In the Hmong language, nouns are grouped into different categories other than sex. These nouns can have different meanings based on the classifier. In the example, paper (ntawv) is the noun and the classifying word is learn(ed) (kawm). This classifier changed the meaning of paper to mean learning. Unlike the English language, the Hmong language does not really have synonyms, this can make it difficult for Hmong students to find a word in the Hmong language to really understand the English meaning.

Since the Hmong language does not use inflection, affixes, and suffixes when Hmong students are learning English for the first time it can be difficult for them (Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1988). The differences in phonemic or tonal usage between the two languages, grammatical structures, and lack of affixes and suffixes in the Hmong language can be difficult for Hmong students to speak, read, and write in both languages proficiently (Mahowald & Loughnane,

2016). Despite many Hmong children in this generation being born in the United States, they are still considered ELL students. The reason for that could be due to the differences between the two languages. These differences cause Hmong students to not be proficient in English and Hmong.

### **Sociocultural Theory**

As stated before, the Hmong use oral language to learn. Learning was through active participation and collaboration with peers and elders. Improvement was based on oral feedback. This is connected to sociocultural theory. Discussing sociocultural theory will help school personnel to understand the development of Hmong and English language acquisition and retainment in the Hmong student population.

Sociocultural theory is a theory that was developed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. This theory was developed to understand how children learn through social interactions with their skillful tutors. Skillful tutors can be teachers, parents, or someone older with more knowledge (Desai, 2014, Lantolf, 1994). Skillful tutors are people who model skills such as behavior and verbal instructions. When they model, children imitate what is being modeled. Children then internalize this model/social interactions that they have with their skillful tutors. By doing this, they are appropriating what they see and hear to guide their individual performance (Lantolf, 1994).

When students are internalizing their social interactions, they are using their zone of proximal development (ZPD) to expand the new knowledge that they are taking in. The ZPD is the process of connecting known knowledge to unknown knowledge. Each individual learner has a different ZPD. Some children have a larger ZPD because they have more exposure and experience with their skillful tutors while some have a smaller ZPD due to the lack of exposure and experience with their skillful tutors. The ZPD can increase from corrective feedback from the skillful tutor. Corrective feedback helps lead to learning from internalized interactions. Learning also happens through the frequency and quality interactions with the skillful tutors (Lantolf, 1994).

Language is a means of passing information to children. Before written language was used, oral language was a tool used to pass down information (Desai, 2014; Lantolf, 1994). When children are speaking, they are not speaking to remember but to construct meaning (Lantolf, 1994). When Hmong students are learning English, they learn through interactions with their teachers and peers who are native English speakers. This will help them to expand their ZPD to learn new English vocabulary.

### **English Language Learners (ELL)**

Many Hmong students are learning English as a second language. They come from homes that speak primarily Hmong or from homes that code-switch between Hmong and English. There are also a few Hmong students who come

from homes that primarily speak English. Many Hmong students today are born in the United States. However, despite being born in the United States, the majority of them are considered ELLs. There are four different categories of ELLs. Let's take a look at figure 1, this chart provides a visual that explains the four different categories of ELLs. In the chart from figure 1, ELLs can be recent immigrants with some English skills, recent immigrants with little to no English skills, born in the United States who are simultaneously bilingual, or born in the United States who are sequential bilinguals. Many of our Hmong students fall into the category of simultaneous bilingual ELL.

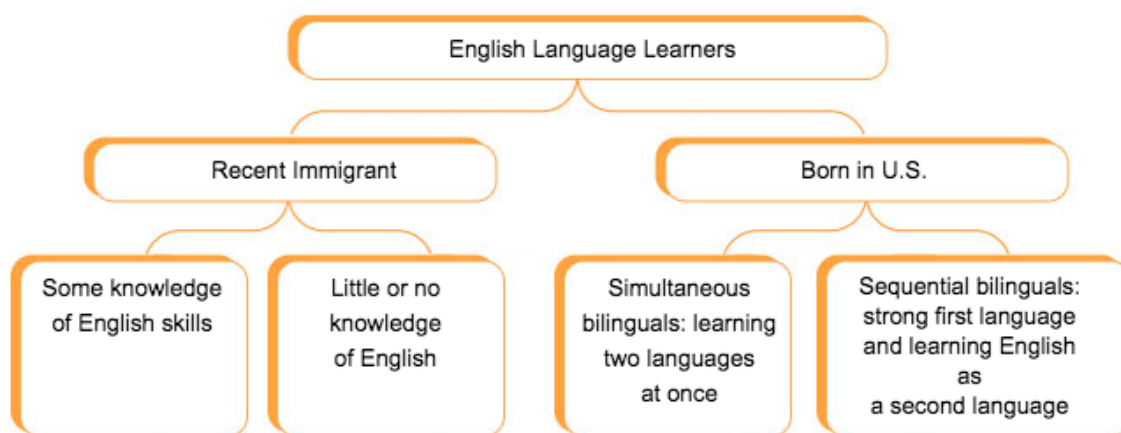


Figure 1. A chart showing the four different English Language Learners. *What do teachers need to know about students who are learning to speak English?* IRIS Center. (n.d.). Retrieved November 4, 2021, from <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/ell/cresource/q1/p01/>.

Although Hmong students speak Hmong at home, they are illiterate in the Hmong language. They do not know how to read and write in Hmong. According

to Albus, Thurlow, Liu, and Bielinski (2005), the reason for Hmong students being illiterate in Hmong is because the RPA writing system is relatively still pretty new and the oral language was un-accompanied by Hmong text literacy. The RPA system is only about 70 years old, not many Hmong parents or grandparents learned how to read and write in Hmong. Parents who are immigrants or were born in the United States were not taught how to read and write in Hmong because their parents never really got the chance to teach them the skills. This situation leads to the cycle of parents not knowing how to teach their children to read and write in Hmong. Hmong students today can speak Hmong at an emergent level, but there are still a few who can speak Hmong proficiently. Hmong students who can speak Hmong at an emergent level know how to read and write in English more fluently. However, it can be considered as intermediate level when compared to an English native speaking student. If students are not literate in their home language it would be difficult for students to develop their reading skills, large vocabulary skills, and writing skills (Albus, Thurlow, & Bielinski, 2005). On the contrary, even if students are considered illiterate in their home language, they can still use their home language to improve their English.

Studies have shown that when ELLs have a growing sight word, phonemic awareness, and phonological awareness they are more likely to have reading success (Peterson et al., 2014; Helman & Burns, 2008). Sight words are



high-frequency words that students are expected to recognize, for example, words like *but*, *to*, *the*, and *it* are sight words. Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds. An example of this is breaking a word into its individual sound like the word *cat*, you would break it down into *c-a-t*. Phonological awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate units of spoken language, for example, identifying the initial or ending sound of a word. Being able to recognize and have a growing sight word vocabulary allows students to see word patterns which makes it easier for ELL students to read (Helman & Burns, 2008). Although Hmong students are not as literate in their home language, being bilingual orally still has its own benefits. This is why it is important to have language minority students retain and maintain their home language while they improve their English skills.

### ***Home Language Retainment and Maintenance***

Researchers Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean (2006) stated that the average minority language survival rate in the United States is expected to die out with second generations. This is usually common with the Asian languages. When an individual student adopts and acculturates to American behavior and patterns, the individual will have greater proficiency in oral and written English language (Bosher, 1997). Although this is great, the consequences of this situation range from losing their sense of cultural identity, self-esteem, and reduced family relationship (Kohnert et al., 2005). The cause of language death is due to the

influence of English media, technology, schools, students feeling ashamed of their home language, and the overall hegemony of English (McCarty, Romero, & Zepeda, 2006; Bradley & Bradley, 2013).

When young minority language students do not have a chance to develop their cognitive skills in their home language, they are at a greater risk for academic delays when learning their second language (Kohnert et al., 2005). If Hmong students are stripped from learning their home language and culture they will most likely have lower academic achievements. Students will feel guilt, anxiety, isolation, and shame. These feelings are a result of students failing to develop and maintain their home language. When they don't maintain and develop their home language they lose their cultural identity (Kohnert et al., 2005; McCarty Romero, & Zepeda, 2006).

It is important that minority language students retain and maintain their home language. There has been research that has shown that bilingual students tend to be more successful academically. If schools implement programs and spaces that incorporate Hmong language and culture this will help students to be confident and motivated to achieve high academics. Hmong students will also be motivated to maintain and retain the Hmong language. More discussions about different strategies for helping students to maintain and retain their home language and help students to improve their English skills will be discussed later on in this chapter.

### **Academic Achievement**

Students with a home language that is not English typically score lower on their reading assessments compared to their peers who only speak English.

However, when you compare Hmong students' reading assessment scores, they score even lower than their peers with other home languages and English only peers (Mahowald & Loughnane, 2016). As stated in the section *Difference and Similarity in Hmong and English*, the two languages are so different that they can cause Hmong students to have difficulties. Because the phonetics of the Hmong and English alphabet are so different, students whose primary language is Hmong have difficulties with articulation. This can affect their phonemic awareness in kindergarten and first-grade word reading (Mahowald & Loughnane, 2016).

There have been perceptions that when a student is considered ELL or ethnic diverse, they are unable and not capable to engage with academic language. Academic language is the language of school. It is the structure for academic dialogue and text. The academic language uses advanced vocabulary and syntax to support messages that are being delivered through oral and written language (Lynch, 2017). This perception of ELL or ethnically diverse students causes educators to give ELL or ethnically diverse students low-level text. Giving students low level text causes them to have little exposure to complex concepts and languages (Spycher, Girard, & Moua, 2020).

There are many factors that play a role in Hmong students' academic achievements. These factors include the lack of exposure to literature/culturally relevant materials in the mainstream classroom, family academic, and socioeconomic background, learning style, and the model minority stereotype. Hmong students whether American-born or foreign-born both struggle academically due to the lack of exposure to literature in their early years. According to Yang (2003) and Vang (2005), family background and education level are one of the indicators that determine a student's academic achievement. Many of our Hmong students have parents who are first generations or recently resettled in the United States. This means that parents who are first-generation or recently resettled most likely have little exposure to formal education. With little exposure to formal education, parents cannot get high-paying jobs. With a low-paying jobs, parents are not able to afford and provide academic materials for their children.

According to Ngo and Lee (2007) based on the 2000 census, Hmong families averaged the lowest income of \$6,613 among the Southeast Asian groups (Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian, and Laotian). Even though Hmong parents want their children to achieve high academics and have high expectations for their children to do well, their instinct is to survive. Having food and a roof over their head is more important than academic achievements. Oftentimes Hmong families would share a house with another Hmong family to be able to pay for rent (Thao,

2005). Since Hmong parents most likely do not have a formal education, they do not know how to support their children at home with their academic needs. This leads Hmong students to go to school preliterate (Vang, 2005).

Another factor that delays Hmong students' academic achievement is the lack of exposure to culturally relevant materials, curriculums, and teachers not knowing students' ethnic culture. Based on DePouw's (2012) study, some of the Hmong participants stated that they felt school personnel did not know enough about the Hmong American community which caused them to not know how to support them to be academically successful. When schools try to assimilate ethnic students into the mainstream classroom of whiteness and shame students for being a minority, it causes students to feel discomfort. Students can also feel disconnected and have low self-esteem in themselves. The lack of culturally relevant materials can make minority students feel excluded, alienated, and different (Vang, 2005; Thao 2003; Spycher, Girard, & Moua, 2020). When students have these kinds of feelings and emotions they would be unmotivated to learn. They would feel that there is no point in learning.

Hmong students are collaborative individuals; they learn and do everything through collaboration and social interactions. According to Ngo and Lee (2007), Hmong students are field-sensitive learners. This means that they learn through active participation, they need guidance, and focus on social cues. They learn from observing the adults around them. Because the mainstream

classroom focuses more on independent learning styles, it can be difficult for Hmong students to excel in school.

The model minority stereotype is also another indicator of low academic achievement for Hmong students. This stereotype is more harmful than it seems especially for Hmong students. The model minority is an Asian American stereotype that perceives Asian Americans as individuals that do not need assistance and are able to achieve high academics by themselves. This stereotype also puts people of color against one another (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Thao, 2003). Among all the Asian American groups, Southeast Asians are the group that has higher poverty rates. They are also the group that has the most students with low academic rates (Adler, 2004). Hmong Americans are the lowest academic achieving group out of all the Southeast Asian groups. This model minority is harmful to Hmong students because school personnel assume that they are high achievers. When Hmong students are not achieving as high as they expect, expectations for Hmong students become lowered. When school personnel has low expectations for their students, they are relaying subtle messages that they cannot succeed.

Even though Hmong students are not the highest academic achieving group, there have been some significant improvements throughout the years. Hmong students have higher education goals, positive attitudes toward education, and they have more social and family support compared to their peers (Ngo &

Lee, 2007). Although parent involvement is still low, parents are supporting their students to do well in school. Parents and school personnel have to work together to help our Hmong students to be successful and to achieve academic success. In the process of helping our Hmong students, we have to accommodate and acculturate to their culture this way Hmong students can be successful (Vang, 2005; Ngo & Lee, 2007). This will allow students to do well in school.

### **Existing Implemented Strategies**

There have been existing strategies that have been implemented and proven that educators are able to help minority language students to retain and maintain their home language while also learning English effectively. Many of these articles talked about the importance of encouraging students to use their home language, connecting literacy to home language, finding opportunities for students to use their home language, having structural support, and making parents and students aware of the benefits of being bilingual (Bradly & Bradly, 2013; Mahowald & Loughnane, 2016; Rumbaut, Massey, & Bean, 2006; Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang, 1988). Taking a look at these existing strategies will help guide new strategies that can be implemented, or we can take these existing strategies and modify them to match academic goals of our students.

In a school where instructions are given only in English, school personnel can encourage students to use their home language during enrichment activities or during passing and social time. School personnel can also find a way to

incorporate culturally relevant materials and curricula in the classroom. Creating a safe and culturally relevant environment and classroom allows students to feel welcomed, confident, and motivated to succeed in school. School personnel can encourage students to speak their home language during recess when they are with their peers or during transition time. When peers with the same home language background interact, they are modeling naturalistic linguistic interactions which can encourage other minority language students to speak their home language (Kohnert et al., 2005).

In Spycher, Girard, and Moua's (2020) research, the school that they were at created opportunities for students to explore their cultural traditions. For example, in their study, the sixth graders explored and researched the Hmong New Year. They explored this topic through various activities like reading and discussing multiple articles. This activity allowed students to learn their own culture while practicing the academic language. The school that Spycher, Girard, and Moua (2020) did their study in read the book *My Name is Yoon* by Helen Recorvits to students in grades three, four, and five. For this activity, students were to interview their family members about their immigration experience. Students who did not have family members with immigration experiences interviewed their families about their sense of belonging in school or in their community. This activity allows students to use and practice their home language and written academic language in English. Interactive read out louds are also



effective ways to get students to practice their academic language. When doing interactive read out louds teachers should use culturally relevant texts. Culturally relevant read out louds expands students' language awareness and usage of disciplinary language (Spycher, Girard, & Moua, 2020).

When doing read out louds Spycher, Girard, and Moua (2020) have found that the interactive read out loud strategy SPIRAL (Sequenced process for interactive reading and attending to language) is an effective strategy that allows students to expand their language awareness. This strategy also helps students to be aware of disciplinary language. SPIRAL is an extended text-based discussion. As it is a text-based discussion it enhances students' ability to expand their disciplinary language to support the attainment of both languages (Spycher, Girard, & Moua, 2020).

In a culturally relevant classroom, setup is also important. Making sure that students have a space that is non-threatening, stress-free, and multi-culturally relevant materials, students will do well in school (Thao, 2003; Schechter & Cummins, 2003). Posting multilingual signs around the school, being aware of implicit bias towards other cultures, and having culturally relevant books that reflect students' culture and home language are some of the few things that can make the classroom non-threatening and have a welcoming environment.

The use of dual language activities can be an effective tool used to support ELLs to retain their home language and English improvement. When students are

reading a dual language book they are able to practice two languages at a time. When students write in dual languages, students are practicing writing in two languages at a time. When students read out loud dual language books students are able to practice speaking two languages at a time (Schechter & Cummins, 2003).

Often, Hmong parents are likely to be uninvolved with their children's school events and academics due to language barriers, lack of school experience, and their perception that teachers are superior. Hmong parents assume that schools and teachers know what they are doing and believe that they will equip their children with employment skills, academic skills, and cultural skills to survive in American society (Thao, 2003; Vang, 2005). The lack of support makes students feel unmotivated and lack confidence to do well in school (Thao, 2003). Hmong parents most likely have thoughts and questions but because they tend to be passive individuals, they do not take the initiative to confide with their child's teacher because they trust that teachers know what they are doing (Adler, 2004; Thao, 2003). School personnel should take the initiative to reach out to Hmong parents to build a home-school relationship. When they are reaching out to parents it is important to reach out when students are doing well and not just when they are in trouble.

Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, Yang (1988), Kohnert et. al. (2005), and Thao (2003) suggested collaborating with parents to create a parent training program to

help support students with their home language. Professionals would work directly with parents on techniques that can support home language development. Strategies that would be taught to parents would be modeling, imitation, responsive feedback, role-playing, demonstration, and coaching (Kohnert et. al., 2005). Collaboration with parents will allow them to know what is expected of them and what to expect from the school personnel. It is important to provide parents with information and instructions in their home language so that the language barrier does not cause any confusion. Spycher, Girard, Moua (2020) and Thao (2004) stated that having community members that speak students' home language coming into the school allows students to explore and discuss issues within their community. This is a great way to motivate students to practice using their home language and academic language based on discussions or projects that go along with it. During a final writing project, teachers can invite parents to do some storytelling. Parents will be grouped based on grade level. When parents are storytelling they would read or tell the story in one language, then do it in the other language that way bilingual students and monolingual students are able to follow along and be engaged (Schechter & Cummins, 2003).

Parents are encouraged to speak to their children in their home language and teach them to read and write in their home language. When parents speak to their children in their home language at a young age it helps them to build cognitive skills. Speaking in a language that you are not strong in may limit the

quantity and quality of verbal interactions between parents and children (Bliaout, Downing, Lewis & Yang, 1988). Many researchers suggest that parents can read books, storytell, or sing in their home language to their children to help them maintain and retain their home language (Kohnert et al., 2005; Mahowald & Loughnane, 2016; Vang, 2005; Thao, 2003). Thao (2003) also suggested that students can read to their parents in English and they can discuss the story in Hmong, this way parents can be involved. This strategy allows the Hmong students to practice their English skills and Hmong skills.

Teachers also play a role in helping students to succeed. It is important for teachers and other school personnel to know about their student's ethnic backgrounds. When teachers have knowledge about their student's ethnic background, they will be able to build a rapport with their students. Rapport is the built mutual trust and emotional connection from the built connection between two individuals which is also known as a relationship. There have been many studies done that show that teacher-student rapport is very important to students' success. According to Waterford (2019), building a rapport with students allows students to trust their teachers. When teachers and students have built mutual trust and respect for one another it motivates students to go to class because they know their teacher will support and care for them. Building a rapport with students also helps students build a positive attitude and self-regulation skills.

Helman, Burns (2008), and Peterson et al. (2014) stated that teaching and intensifying instructions in phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, and growing sight words at a young age will improve students' English and academic performance. Educators can use incremental rehearsal (IR) to help students recognize and identify phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, and sight words. This drill practice could even be used for math facts. IR is an intervention strategy that helps students learn knowledge base questions, retain new information learned, and increase fluency and automaticity (Haley, 2014). This strategy can be used in Hmong language courses when teaching the Hmong alphabet and sight words. These are some of the strategies that have been effective in helping students to maintain their home language and improve their English language skills.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter Two has discussed the different reasons why Hmong students have a challenging time acquiring English proficiency and retaining their Hmong language. Being caught in the middle of political conflict that leads to war and poverty are some of the indicators that explain why Hmong students have a challenging time achieving high academics. Throughout the Hmong history, they had to flee and migrate to different countries many times. These wars and political conflicts caused the Hmong to have to focus more on survival than anything else.

Being able to maintain and retain one's home language plays an important part in achieving high academic success. Research shows that being proficient in your home language cultivates the process of learning English. If Hmong students are illiterate in their home language, it will be difficult for them to learn English. It is important for parents to help their children be literate in their home language for them to be able to improve their English skills. In Chapter Three, I will be explaining what I did for my project and how it will support my research question: *How can school personnel at a Hmong school help students retain their Hmong language and learn English effectively?*

## CHAPTER THREE

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter Two, we discussed the different factors of how students' home language is able to help students achieve high academics and how it provides students a cultural identity. We discussed factors that affect how Hmong students acquire their English and Hmong languages, and lastly, we discussed how students can retain the languages that they have acquired. These all contributed to answering the research question: *How can school personnel at a Hmong school help students retain their Hmong language and learn English effectively?*

In this chapter I will be discussing my project and why I decided to do my project the way it is. I created a website for my project. In doing so, I used Shiffett, Murdoch, Meschke (2001), and Chamberlain (2005)'s study to discuss what makes an effective website and to discuss why websites are a great learning tool. I will also be using Shifflett, Murdoch, and Meschke (2001) to describe how I created my website. Lastly, I will also be discussing the timeline of my project.

#### **Audience and Setting**

The main intended audience for this project are the school personnel at a Hmong school or school personnel who work with a big Hmong student population. This audience was chosen based on my position as a teacher at a Hmong school. My other intended audience are school personnel who are

interested and would like to learn about the different strategies that they can use to help their minority-speaking students. The intended setting for this project is any Hmong elementary school or any elementary school with a big Hmong student population.

### **Project Description and Research Framework**

I created a website for my capstone project. On my website, I included five different topics. Two of the main topics have subtopics included. The topics that I had included on my websites are about the Hmong history with subtopics called Life in Refugee Camps, Living a double life, and the Hmong culture. I also have topics on the difference between the Hmong and English language, the history of Hmong writing, and Best practices and instructional methods. The Best practices and instructional methods have subtopics called Culturally relevant materials and curriculum, Parent involvement, and Phonemic and Phonological awareness. Lastly, I will also be including a home page for my website. My home page will include the purpose of my website. The home page will be the first page that users will see when they access the website.

I decided to create a website because it is a tool that allows users to find and access information that they are looking for in a short amount of time (Shiffett, Murdoch & Meschke, 2001; Chamberlain, 2005). I want to provide school personnel at a Hmong school or at a school with a big Hmong population resources that they can use to help their students to do well and to achieve high



academics. Websites allow users to be inquiry learners. According to Shiffett, Murdoch, and Meschke (2001) websites have meta-link that leads to other meta-links which allows users to collect information that they are looking for. This connects to inquiry learning because when a user is curious about something a website is a tool that they are able to go on to find information that will lead them to use meta-links to find even more information.

Websites also offer the community resources to different materials and it empowers the community (Shiffett, Murdoch & Meschke, 2001; Chamberlain, 2005). Let's take a look at Chamberlain (2005) study. The institution that Chamberlain (2005) was at had created a website to allow users to explore grade-level curricula. These users consisted of parents, students, and school personnel. They created this website for parents and students to know what is being taught and to help students be prepared for standardized state exams. A website does not have to be too complicated to be effective. A well thought out simple website can be an effective tool.

According to Shiffett, Murdoch, and Meschke (2001), when creating a website it is important to have detailed information that can help lead users to more information. However, it is also important to make sure that the website does not have too much information on one page. Having too many things on one page can be overwhelming, this can cause confusion for users which then could possibly cause them to exit the website. They also stated that it is important to

make the background as neutral as possible. This is to help prevent distraction from the information. When including pictures or illustrations, it is important to make sure that they are easy to understand. Shiffett, Murdoch, and Meschke (2001) also suggested that writing should be in an active voice. It is important to also use concrete terminology and make sure that these terminologies are being defined. To ensure that my website is high quality I took these suggestions to create my website and made sure that my website was not too overwhelming.

On my homepage, I have my different categories on there. Users will be able to click on the categories and it will lead them to the page that has information about it. I also created a logo that appears on every page. This logo is at the top left corner. When users click on this logo, it will lead them back to the homepage.

I utilized the writing center, my peer reviewer, and content reviewer to make sure that I was writing in an active voice, to make sure that my writing is consistent, and to ensure that my website is spelling and grammar free. I also made my website as simple as I can while making sure that there are enough details and information.

### **Project Timeline**

I started this project at the beginning of September 2021. I first had to identify what my topic and research question was going to be. It took a few weeks to be able to determine my research question “*How can school personnel at a*

*Hmong school help students retain their Hmong language and learn English effectively?*” I had to discuss with my peers, family, and content reviewer in order to determine what I wanted to do for my research question.

After picking my topic, I started writing the rough draft of my first chapter. While writing the first chapter I took some time to find literature reviews that were related to my research topic. Once I had submitted the rough draft of my first chapter, I started skimming through the literature reviews that I had found. When I was done skimming through and taking notes on the literature reviews, I started drafting my second chapter. In the midst of drafting my second chapter, I had to determine what I wanted to do for my project. Originally I was planning on creating professional development for the school personnel at the school that I am working at. However, after discussing with my content reviewer and the Hmong language teachers at my school, I decided to create a website instead. Creating a website will help me reach a larger audience and not just the school personnel at my school.

I began drafting Chapter Three in the middle of November 2021. I started creating and drafting my project at the beginning of January 2022 and completed the project in May 2022. From February 2022 to mid-April 2022 I drafted my website and Chapter Four. I had a complete rough draft of my website by April 3, 2022. After receiving feedback, I updated and edited my finalized project. I

turned in a complete rough draft of Chapter Four on April 17, 2022. I submitted my final project and final Chapters One to Four in May 2022.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed the reasons why I decided to do a website for my capstone project. Creating a website will allow me to reach a bigger audience and it will make it more accessible for users. Websites will provide users access to materials that will help guide them to find what they are looking for. In this chapter, I discussed what I had done to ensure that my website will be of high quality. In the next and final chapter, I will be discussing my reflection on my project and future research.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PROJECT REFLECTION

#### **Introduction**

In this final chapter, I will be reflecting on my overall research topic “*How can school personnel at a Hmong school help students retain their Hmong language and learn English effectively?*” In Chapter Three, I discussed my process of creating a website called *Maintaining and Retaining the Home Language While Learning English* to provide school personnel at a Hmong school or work with a significant Hmong student population to best support them. With this final chapter, I will summarize my overall experience with creating this project and share some of my own reflections on the process.

#### **Reflection on the Capstone Project**

I was excited and nervous when I first started my project. I was excited about being able to do a project that I was interested in. I had so many ideas and topics that I wanted to do. Through talking with family, friends, and co-workers, I eventually picked out my topic “*How can school personnel at a Hmong school help students retain their Hmong language and learn English effectively?*” I was excited because this project meant that I was one step closer to achieving one of my goals.

In the process of working on my project, I did start to lose a lot of motivation and I struggled with writing. Writing has always been an area of

weakness for me and despite the fact that I have written many literature reviews as an undergraduate student, I was still anxious to write a literature review for this project. It could have been because I was struggling to find literature that was relevant and related to my topic.

I was so focused on finding literature about my chosen ethnic population that I forgot that it was okay for me to search about what other ethnic groups have done to support their students and helped them retain and maintain their home language. My content reviewer and one of my professors who I have kept in touch encouraged me to search literature about other ethnic groups and how they maintained and retained their home language and learned English. After conferring with them, searching for literature became less stressful and I became motivated again to finish up my project.

In the process of doing this project, it gave me the opportunity to do a lot of self-reflecting. I reflected on my own experience as an ELL student, I reflected on my cultural identity, and I reflected on myself as an educator. Regardless of the struggles, this was such an incredible and rewarding experience.

### **Reviewing of Literature**

I was able to find many incredible works of literature that were relevant and related to my topic. As stated previously, I did struggle a lot at the beginning with finding literature that would support my project. However, I was able to

persevere and continued searching for literature. After reading a lot of literature I was able to break my topic down into a few themes.

In Chapter Two, I discussed different topics such as the differences and similarities between the Hmong and English language, the history of the Hmong written language, the academic success of Hmong students, and existing strategies that help students to maintain their home language and learn English. Bliatout, Downing, Lewis, & Yang's *Handbook for teaching Hmong-speaking students* (1998), was a resource that I used frequently throughout my literature review. They touched on many of the topics that I wanted to cover. Mahowald & Loughnane's *Reading Development and Achievement of 4th-grade Hmong Students* (2016), was another resource that I used throughout my literature review. It influenced my thinking about the differences and similarities between the Hmong language, English, and academic success. In the article, *Intervention With Linguistically Diverse Preschool Children: A Focus on Developing Home Language(s)*, Kohnert et al. (2005) discussed different strategies that have been used to help students develop their home language. This resource helped me identify strategies for educators to use in classroom settings. Many resources influenced my literature review but these three are the ones that were most relevant to my research topic and I used them consistently throughout my process.

### **Project Implications and Limitations**

With this project, I hope that it aids school personnel at Hmong schools to feel more comfortable, confident, and prepared to work with their Hmong students. I also hope that this project gives school personnel who work with other ethnic minority students some resources they can use to work with their multilingual students. With the growing population of ethnic minority students who are considered ELL, it is important for school personnel to understand their student's ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. This website will help school personnel best support their students.

As I was doing this project there were a few limitations that occurred. One of the limitations was that the student population for my project was focused on one specific ethnic population. As I continued to research and review literature, I realized that this project could be broadened and be applied to other ethnic minority groups as well.

Another limitation is that much of the literature I found is outdated. The publication dates ranged from the early 2000's to early 2010's. I was fortunate enough to still have found literature that has been recently published. With outdated literature, some information may not be as accurate. Even though some of this literature is outdated, I find the information to still be relevant and I hope that school personnel can modify it to best support their students.



**Future Plans**

This project focuses on providing resources to school personnel to support their minority students, specifically, Hmong students. However, with the parameters of this project, I was not able to test the effectiveness and success of this project. In the future, this is something that can be done. Other future research that could be done is the study of outcomes if school personnel at a Hmong school know or learn their students' language and see if there is any correlation to students' academic success.

**Communicating and Benefits to the Profession**

As a second-grade teacher at a Hmong school, I plan to share my project with my co-workers and other grade-level teachers at my school. I plan to show it to our school directors and hope that it is a resource that they can show to new staff during our new staff training. As a Hmong American, I am lucky enough to have knowledge of my student's backgrounds and family backgrounds. As I talked to my co-workers who are not Hmong, before they started teaching at this school, they knew very little about who the Hmong were and had limited knowledge about the Hmong culture. With this information, I hope that new staff are able to get an idea of their students' backgrounds and have resources to best support their students.

## **Conclusion**

This project of creating a website to support my research topic “*How can school personnel at a Hmong school help students retain their Hmong language and learn English effectively?*” has been an exciting and wonderful experience. As a Hmong American teacher, doing this project has allowed me to reflect on my own experiences when I was a young ELL student and reflect on my own teaching methods. This project has helped me better understand why Hmong students who speak English, are still ELLs in school settings. With the creation of this website, I hope that it is shared among school personnel whether they work at a Hmong school or not. I hope that those who come across this website are able to take away information that could be of use to them and their students.

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