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# "A Hmong American Esl Teacher'S Struggles With Quietness And Its Effect On Oral Acquisition Of English: An Autoethnography "

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A Hmong American ESL Teacher's Struggles with Quietness and Its Effect on Oral  
Acquisition of English: An Autoethnography

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English as a Second Language

Hamline University

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# A Hmong American ESL Teacher's Struggles with Quietness

## Abstract

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The research question addressed in this project was: What factors, whether internally or externally, contributed to my quiet behavior as an English learner (EL) and did these factors affect my own English language acquisition, and if so, to what extent? The purpose of this autoethnography was to reflect on my personal experience as an English learner (EL) in order to explore and make an attempt to identify some of the factors that may have caused me to be a quiet learner. Understanding what these factors are can help me and other educators understand why the majority of our Hmong English learners are quiet.

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# A Hmong American ESL Teacher's Struggles with Quietness

## Dedication

This capstone project is dedicated to my beautiful children, Chyanne, Jayce, Ryan, Ayden, and Jaxyn. You continue to give me strength by teaching me to find my voice so I can advocate for you when you could not do it for yourself. Because of your inspiration, my hope is that you will let my quiet personal experience, as spoken in this paper, guide you into becoming the person you are meant to be and to never be afraid of using your voice to speak up and be heard.

### Acknowledgements

This capstone project would not have been possible without the endless support from my capstone committee: Michal Moskow, Rebecca Bauer, and Jennifer Weddell. I am grateful to have had the pleasure of working with you. I am especially indebted to Michal Moskow for her relentless encouragement and support. She whole-heartedly believed in me and worked actively, amidst her busy schedule, to ensure I received the support I needed in order to complete this project.

In addition, nobody has been more instrumental in supporting me in my pursuit of this degree than my loving husband, Yeng, and my beautiful children, Chyanne, Jayce, Ryan, and Ayden. Their continued love, support, and words of encouragement have fueled me with great motivation in my endeavor to complete this project, even during times when I felt I wanted to give up. Jaxyn, my beautiful little girl, your soon-to-be-arrival has also motivated me to complete this project so I can spend the much-needed time with you. You are not even here yet, but already you are an inspiration like your daddy and siblings.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my amazing parents and wonderful siblings for their endless support and understanding as I shared my personal narrative and our life struggles in this project. I appreciate and thank everyone for your love and guidance.

A Hmong American ESL Teacher’s Struggles with Quietness and Its Effect on Oral  
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# A Hmong American ESL Teacher's Struggles with Quietness

## A Hmong American ESL Teacher's Struggles with Quietness and Its Effect on Oral

### Acquisition of English: An Autoethnography

#### CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this autoethnography is to reflect on my personal experience as an English learner in order to explore and make an attempt to identify some of the factors that may have caused me to be a quiet learner. Understanding what these factors are can help me and other educators understand why the majority of our Hmong English learners are quiet. Some of the more overarching factors that might be considered for my quiet behavior may be: cultural and parental influence, a socially-introverted personality, level of English proficiency, confidence (or lack of), interest (or lack of) in subject/content matter, classroom environment, immersion in the target language, gender, and peer and teacher influence. This chapter will introduce the key concepts and possible factors that may have had an impact on my quiet behavior.

#### Background of the Researcher

As an English learner teacher working with primarily Hmong English learners, this topic is of importance to me not only because I am Hmong, but because I am also a quiet learner and a social introvert. Learning is optimal for me when I am given the time to process what I am hearing without the added pressure of having to respond or react orally. The idea of having to contribute to any sort of discussion in the classroom or in any social

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setting or to give a presentation in front of others terrifies me. Just the thought of being put on the spot is enough to trigger a physiological effect on my body. I can feel and *hear* my heart racing and my palms sweating as the level of anxiety in my body starts to rise.

Then, similar to a temperature gauge on a mercury thermometer, I can feel the blood rise up to my face as it starts to flush. I feel the intense heat in my face as if I have been sitting in close proximity to a campfire for hours on end without getting up. My mind is racing at a million thoughts per minute of what I want to say while my slow mouth stammers as it struggles to catch up.

This fear is very real and still resides in me as an adult. It is embedded in every nucleus of every cell in my body. Too often, I have to consciously calm myself down in order to avoid the possible onset of a panic attack. I am unsure what specific factors or events in my life contribute to this part of me, but I have a strong feeling it has to do with how I was raised. Is it because I am a Hmong woman raised in a predominantly male culture and have been told that women are second to men? Is it because my culture teaches me to remain quiet, keeping my thoughts to myself in order to be respectful and not question authority? Is it because I was told to speak only English while growing up in school and felt that who I am or what I speak naturally is not important? Or, could it simply be because of who I am as a person, shaped and molded by my very own life experiences?

A well-established reputation is critical in the Hmong community and displays one's social prominence and, as a result, all measures will be taken to ensure such a status remains that way. Growing up as the oldest daughter of four children, my parents set very high expectations for me as well as being very strict about what I was able to do before and after school. Because the Hmong culture is a male-dominated one, my gender played a

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heavy role in how my parents raised me. Because I am a daughter, my parents held a tight leash on me in fear that if I was given too much freedom to roam, I may do something to tarnish their reputation.

To make matters worse, my parents were the first generation of Hmong to resettle in America. When they first arrived, they were far more traditional in the sense that they closely conformed to the rules of the Hmong culture and were not as open about learning and adhering to the American ways. What drove this reluctant behavior was the belief that settling in America was temporary and that the situation in Laos, as a result of the Vietnam War, would resolve itself and the Hmong people would be able to return home someday.

My parents' anticipation of returning to Laos only frustrated them further as they realized, in time, the Hmong people could not safely return to Laos to live as they had before under the same conditions they once did. My parents now had to change their outlook on life in America and, slowly, they began their journey to change their ways and learn to do what was needed in order to become successful. Success, in their eyes, meant being independent. This independence required them to work for themselves and not be dependent upon the government for assistance. This means they would have to attend adult English classes to learn and improve their English-speaking skills and network with community centers to receive assistance on how to navigate the ins and outs of successfully preparing for a job. Although they were determined to do what it takes to be successful in America, they never neglected their native traditions and customs. My father is deeply rooted in who he is and where he came from. This was never going to change no matter where he lived in the world. He struggled tremendously with the transition to become

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more "American" while hoping that he would return to Laos. As a result, he gave very little effort to establishing a foundation for the start of a new life in a new country.

There were many obstacles that stood in my parents' way. The English language, by far, was the biggest barrier. The etiquette of the American culture was also another barrier to overcome, not to mention trying to make a living supporting and raising their family. They had to learn how to navigate their way between both worlds, which meant maintaining the skills and knowledge needed to conform to the norms and traditions of being Hmong as well as equipping themselves with the skills and knowledge needed in order to be a successful Hmong family living in America. Their constant struggles fueled their passion of wanting to succeed, which in turn, added to the tremendous amount of pressure they put on their children to excel. This had a direct negative impact on me to the point where it affected and still affects my self-esteem and self-confidence. I have always felt the presence of a dark cloud overhead constantly reminding me that no matter where I go, what I do, or how old I am, I will never be able to do well enough to meet my parents' standard.

The Hmong culture teaches us to be humble and modest with our accomplishments; therefore, we should let others acknowledge and praise our work instead of us praising ourselves. As a result, my parents had more criticisms for us than they did praises even when a praise was deserved. Further, they were not explicit with how they raised us. They were strict, but there were no guidelines as far as what we were or were not able to do. There was very little dialogue about expectations or goals for our future as they were no longer surrounded by a solely Hmong community where everyone lived by the same norms. They spoke of the importance of education and that message was explicit, but they

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were not equipped with the necessary skills to provide the academic support at home. As a result, no matter what it was that I wanted to do, the mere thought of failing and the consequences of it were enough to deter me from even trying. The worst part is being an introvert in the midst of it all and not being able to express the battles I was waging.

Are any of my quiet learners, especially Hmong students whom I am currently teaching, under the same amount of pressure to conform to high expectations set by their parents as I was? Does their gender affect the way in which their parents are raising them? Does the age of their parents play a role in how they are being raised? How close do these parents conform to their own Hmong identity and culture and how does this affect the way in which they are raising their children? What are these students' attitude or behavior towards learning the target language or just learning in general? Do these students receive the support needed from teachers at school? Do they receive support from home? How strong is the message that school is important? How immersed are the students in English at home and are there ample opportunities to interact in English for those whose parents do not speak it? What are the personalities of these students like and are they willing to take risks when it comes to learning? What is the degree of these students' oral English proficiency? What other factors play a role and to what extent? These are all questions I ponder while interacting with my students. I often wonder how similar their journey is compared to mine and in what ways I can help build their confidence and instill some positivity to help guide them in the right direction as far as their potential can hold. Looking more closely at my own background can help me better teach them.

I have also conducted interviews with my siblings in order to see whether they were affected in the same way as I was by how we were raised. I would like to see if my three

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brothers experienced the same discrimination as my sister and I had. It would be interesting to see if the pressure of success from my parents was as great for them as it was with me or if my parents became lenient with subsequent children.

This study will help provide educators who work with English learners, particularly Hmong students, a better understanding of these varying factors and patterns which likely contribute to their quiet behavior.

### Summary including the Guiding Question

What factors, whether internally or externally, contributed to my quiet behavior as an English learner and did these factors affect my oral English language acquisition, and if so, to what extent? Some of the more overarching factors considered for unusually quiet behavior of Hmong students, especially girls, appear to be: cultural and parental influence, a socially-introverted personality, level of English proficiency, confidence (or lack of), interest (or lack of) in subject/content matter, classroom environment, immersion in the target language, and peer and teacher influence. Identifying my own life experiences growing up can help me as a teacher as well as other teachers to understand the trends identified by the general observations made during interaction with my students, other teacher feedback and interviews of my siblings. It is my hope that this autoethnography will help shed some light on these quiet Hmong students, as well as other students with similar behavior and background.

Without a doubt, being quiet can be part of one's personality and, if that is the case, that is all right. However, if students are choosing to be quiet or feel compelled to be quiet as a way to retreat or because they have been culturally conditioned to remain quiet, it would be beneficial to educators to know why this is happening and what factors may be

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causing this, and what options may be readily available to help, especially with students who do not want to be this way, as was the case for myself.

The guiding question that will drive my autoethnography is therefore the following: What factors, whether internally or externally, contributed to my quiet behavior as an English learner and how did these factors affect my oral English language acquisition, and if so, to what extent?

### Chapter Overviews

In the first chapter, I established the purpose of this autoethnography, the significance, and the necessity for understanding why I was such a quiet English learner and the problems it caused me in school. This can help me and other teachers understand why so many Hmong English learners are quiet and how this quiet behavior may impact the rate at which they orally acquire English. This is of importance because if we want our students to be successful and acquire English speaking skills, we need to understand what it may be that is causing them to hold back. I also provided a close examination of my background and life experiences and how these are connected to my role as the researcher. In chapter two, I will provide a review of literature relevant to this study along with my reflections and personal account of the general observations I have made while teaching, including the gap. Chapter three will discuss the methodology used in this study, including the gap. Chapter four will present the results of this study. Chapter five will provide a summary of the research, including the limitations of the study as well as implications for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this research project is to study and describe the different factors that may have contributed to my quiet behavior and how this quiet behavior affected my oral English language acquisition. As a quiet English learner myself, I will be reflecting on my own personal narrative to explore and identify which factors may possibly affect the quiet behavior of my students. I would like to see if there is any connection between the possible factors in their quiet behavior compared to mine and its effect on my oral English acquisition.

### Brief History of the Hmong People

The Hmong people are an ethnic minority group who originated from China. In a disparaging and racist way, the Chinese used the word "Miao" to refer to the Hmong people. This term is offensive and hateful, one which the Hmong people do not like to use nor do they like to be called it. It is a name connected to thousands of years of being oppressed and suppressed by the Chinese people and carries with it contempt for and towards the Hmong people. Instead, the word "Hmong" is who we are and how we like to be known. Hmong means to be free (Moua, 2007).

The Hmong lived freely in the highlands of southern China for centuries as this particular area was of very little value to the Chinese. After four centuries, however, the Chinese aimed to construct a gateway for trade to all of Southeast Asia. This was when the Chinese drove out the Hmong people. The Hmong people were relentless and fought back



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for twenty years, but after the population had dwindled down, the Hmong people dispersed into the northern highlands of Laos (Quincy, 2012).

In 1954, the French protectorate in Indochina ended after 61 years and Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia were then recognized as independent states by the Geneva Accords (Creiver, 2002). This independence created a civil war between the Royal Lao government and the Pathet Laos. The Royal Lao government was in partnership with the French and supported by the United States. The Pathet Lao were Communists backed by the Viet Ming of North Vietnam (Creiver, 2002).

The Hmong were experts on their mountainous homeland where they farmed despite harsh conditions and they knew how to navigate their way around efficiently. As a result, they were asked by the United States CIA to help during the Vietnam War as the mountainous terrain of neighboring Laos was rugged and filled with dense jungle. The Hmong of Laos became allies with the United States and played a critical role in assisting the Americans during the Vietnam War in what was known as the Secret War. More than 30,000 Hmong men and boys recruited by the CIA were killed during this time (Moua, 2007).

In the aftermath of this horrific war, Americans not only abandoned the warzone, but they also abandoned the Hmong people. Thousands more were left to the hands of the Communist Pathet Lao to be killed off, one village at a time. Those families who were forced out of their villages by the Communist soldiers fled into the jungle to try to seek safety. The refugee camps in Thailand to which they fled were the only refuge for many and carried their own dangers. The camps have now been closed and many forced back to the dangers in Laos. To this day, there are still countless Hmong families living in the

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jungles of Laos in the most inhumane way one can imagine. Their cries, their tears, and their pleas for help have been ignored by the United States. Those who were fortunate to escape the political reprisal and ethnic persecution from the Communist regime became war refugees. Many Hmong refugees eventually resettled in the United States, among other places in the world (Moua, 2007).

In the 1990s, Anne Fadiman (1997) concluded definitively that the Hmong were ones to persevere in any condition or situation presented to them. They were not ones to take orders nor do they like to lose or surrender. They are an independent group of people who stand their ground and continues to carry the customs of their culture and traditions and are not easily intimidated by dominant groups or groups that are superior to them, even though they may be outnumbered (Fadiman, 1997).

### Cultural and Parental Influence of Hmong Students

Most Hmong parents are perceived as strict and controlling and their parenting style can be described as a "one-way communication" from the parent to the child. They are overly protective with their children as a result of life-threatening experiences related to being war refugees (Su et al, 2005). The influence of parenting style can have a negative impact on academic achievement as well as affecting the development of autonomy and maturity levels in children (Vang, 2005).

The Hmong are a people of agrarian and agricultural background whose traditional family structure is dependent upon close-knit, family-centered communities. Therefore, Hmong students lack the skills and learning style necessary to succeed in an academic setting. They lack the academic language found in American schools, which puts them at a

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disadvantage in the mainstream classroom. The Hmong language was not written until the 1950s and since formal education had not been a large part of the Hmong lifestyle prior to resettling in America, parents also lack formal education and, as a result, cannot provide the necessary academic support needed at home for their children. In addition, the Hmong people believe that schools and teachers are the experts in their children's education. Some parents do very little to provide support in the belief that they are not qualified to do so (Vang, 2005).

The Romanized Practical Alphabet (RPA), was completed in 1953 by Protestant missionary Dr. William A. Smalley and researcher G. Linwood Barney along with Roman Catholic missionary the Rev. Yves Bertrais as a way to produce Christian material. The RPA was a written form of communication for the Hmong. The Roman alphabet was chosen so as to align with Western type-writers and presses. The Laotian government disapproved of this orthography for the Hmong; however, after multiple meetings with Hmong intellectuals, the orthography was finally accepted (Mote, 2004).

The reputation of the family is essential within the Hmong community. Family reputation comes in many forms such as socio-economic status, education, and work ethic. Each Hmong family belongs to a certain Hmong clan. Among the clans, there is an unspoken competition as well as opportunities to network. Hmong culture holds a strict belief in gender hierarchy. Family views and expectations are drastically different for men versus women. Men are viewed as superior to women in family matters. With the elders, men have more influence in family events, discussions, and disputes (Gonzalo, 2010).

According to Vang (2005), researchers define at-risk students as those who are limited in English proficiency, live in poverty, are economically disadvantaged, and are

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underachieving. The majority of Hmong students fit into this category. Having an understanding of the culture, parenting style, and overall expectations of a student can provide insight into their behavior in the classroom.

### Asian Culture Versus American Culture

When Asian students are being compared to their White counterparts in the classroom, they are often described as quiet and passive learners. This is due largely to the cultural differences between the people of Asian descent and Westerners. Because of the collectivist culture and holistic perspective from which they come, Asians exhibit a more reserved and quiet behavior. Their style of communication is indirect and non-confrontational whereas Westerners embrace more assertive methods of communicating as well as more frequent verbal interaction (Devis & Yokoyama, 2014).

The social structures that are characteristics of Easterners and Westerners align with their respective belief systems and cognitive processes. Easterners (specifically the Asian societies of China, Korea, and Japan but including other Asian groups due to lack of research on Hmong people) view the world in a collective or holistic approach whereas Westerners (primarily Americans and most Europeans) take on a more independent or individualistic approach seeing objects in isolation from their context. The reason for this is because Westerners believe they can learn the rules that govern the object and therefore can control and manipulate the behavior of the object (Alberts, 2009).

As I provide instruction and interact with my students, I have often looked to see if there is a common trend that exists among my quiet learners as it did in me. Numerous studies have been done on the active participation level of students in an English language-

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learning environment; however, few have been done specifically on Hmong students or students of Southeast Asian countries.

### Different Types of Quiet Children

In order to help students, we first have to get to know them better to determine why they are quiet and whether they want or need help. According to McCroskey (1980), there are seven possible factors that can be the cause of quietness in children: low intellectual skills, skill deficiencies, social introversion, social alienation, ethnic/cultural divergence, communication apprehension, and low social self-esteem. Any of these, by itself or in combination with another, can contribute to the quietness in a child and to the extent to which a child is quiet.

According to McCroskey (1980), there is no correlation between quietness and intellectual ability; however, when children discover they are not academically as strong as their peers, they refrain from active class participation, which can be perceived by others, including some teachers, as having lower intellectual ability even though this may not be the case. This becomes a cycle – teachers and the students themselves believe they are intellectually inferior and, in turn, the students become quiet.

When children have not yet developed the necessary skills needed to communicate successfully with others, they are said to have a communication skill deficiency. This can include having inadequate language and/or speech production or being a second language learner. Once they become aware of this obvious deficiency, they withdraw from any or all verbal participation. This type of communication deficiency can be overcome with the help of speech and language specialists (McCrosky, 1980).

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Social introversion is when one chooses to be quiet rather than to socialize with others and is established as part of one's personality (McCroskey, 1980). People who are socially introverted typically have no difficulty with communication and can do so when they want to; it is by choice that they remain quiet.

By the time some students reach high school, they would have already figured out that they see no rewards from participating in class and as a result, will become alienated from mainstream society and its values and goals. Not only are they quiet, but they may even be mentally *absent* from the school environment (McCroskey, 1980).

Regardless of the type of quiet that is found in these students, they have to find some way to make a connection to what is being taught. How do they make sense of the world around them and how do such constructions influence their perceptions and experiences in school and of the English language (McCroskey, 1980)?

According to McCroskey (1980), children who are allowed to be passive learners are being deprived of important learning experiences. As a result, students are perceived to be unprepared and unengaged. This is an account through a deficit model, which states that students who are passive learners have failed to meet the minimum standards as set by the teacher. Through this model, a teacher can easily come to the conclusion that these students do not have a voice and in order for them to move beyond this unproductively silent phase, optimal combination of pedagogical strategies will need to be utilized.

### Birth Order

Birth order is important and is a good predictor of why you are the way you are. It also is the science of understanding your place in the family. Leman (2009) believes that

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people do not spend enough time being aware of how their branch fits on their family tree. Whether one is first born, middle child, the baby, or an only child, we all sprout in our own direction and, as a result, we make our own contributions to our family (Leman, 2009).

According to Leman (2009), the sex of each child can cause pressure points in a family, such as a later-born child becoming the first-born boy or girl. The fact that I am a first-born Hmong daughter did not play in my favor because not only was I a trailblazer for my younger siblings in paving the way for them, but I often felt as if I was a guinea pig that was being experimented on to see what was acceptable to do and what was not as far as being a girl was concerned.

Further, Leman (2009) continues that parents of the children are a major variable as well, when their own birth order, their critical eye, and their values come into play while raising their children. All of these factors are powerful variables that affect each child, particularly the first-born or the only child (Leman, 2009).

### Teachers' Role

According to Reda (2009), student talk and dialogue is sometimes represented as the "voice." A student who is vocal is perceived to be a *good student* while those who are quiet are then perceived to be a failure. While many teachers interpret this outcome to be a result of the teacher not engaging a student's interests, others may see it as the student's fault for not meeting the expectations as set by the learning environment.

According to McCroskey (1980), teachers are in a role to help students in all aspects of their learning. However, many teachers unintentionally "harm" some quiet students by calling on them and putting them on the spot. When asked what can be done about quiet

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children, some teachers suggest, "giving students more talking time" (McCroskey, 1980 p. 240).

This remains true with teaching English learners. Minnesota is a state within the *World-class Instructional Design and Assessment* (WIDA) consortium that provides the framework for our English-Language teaching (<https://www.wida.us/standards/eld.aspx>). This framework targets the four main domains in which English learners are provided instruction and assessed. These four domains are: *listening, speaking, reading, and writing*. Therefore, students will have to participate orally in discussions in order to be gauged on their oral speaking skills. This approach is not always helpful since one child is different from another. There are different types of "quiet" children. As discussed above, McCroskey (1980) suggests that teachers need to identify who these children are, why they behave this way, and whether they need help. Many teachers are under the impression that quiet students are not as bright and capable as their talkative peers (Townsend, 1998).

During whole-group instruction, I am able to identify these quiet students immediately based on their lack of voluntary participation. They usually do not make eye contact with teachers, probably in an effort to avoid being called on, or because they lack the English proficiency to understand what is being said or to adequately provide a response. It also maybe cultural as to which students do not make eye contact in an effort to be respectful. I have also seen on many occasions, in both small and whole-group settings, more talkative students advocate for a quiet student either by speaking on their behalf or by getting the teacher's attention for the quiet student.



### Montessori Learning Style

As an English learner teacher, I am teaching in a Montessori school where my students have a choice over what activity they can choose to do or what format they wish to do it in order to learn a new set of skills being introduced. In addition, multiple grade levels are combined into one class so students, especially the older ones, are empowered to help and guide the younger students who may not yet know how to navigate their way around in the classroom setting.

Maria Montessori was an Italian physician and educator who developed the Montessori approach of teaching and learning. This child-centered approach is based on the idea that each individual child learns and interacts directly with manipulatives and other learning strategies in a natural environment to develop their skills, which supports their natural desire to learn. Montessori saw that children were naturally drawn to activities that interested them and stimulated their minds far beyond what can be traditionally attributed to them in a regular classroom (David, 2016).

Maria Montessori spent her lifetime observing children and came to the realization that children prefer independence to dependence and that the act of movement allowed their innate power of learning to be hard at work. Children gravitated towards activities that were mentally and developmentally appropriate for their age and, as a result, gained a great amount of satisfaction through this purposeful work. Montessori rejected the traditional educational system which viewed children as empty vessels receiving information from an adult. Instead, she believed children should be nurtured in an environment that gives them freedom, self-confidence, social skills, an innate love of

learning, and a respect for all living creatures, which in turn can give hope for peace on earth (David, 2016).

The concept of a Montessori approach is relatively new to me. Although I have had some exposure to the background of this learning approach through my teacher preparation program and have visited a Montessori school, my experience as a whole in the Montessori style, in and of itself, is rather limited as English learner teachers are not required to be Montessori certified.

The Montessori learning approach presents a pressing question about whether it actually helps facilitate the quietness in students as its goal is for students to learn at their individual pace.

### The Gap

As this chapter indicates, there are factors that can contribute to a quiet behavior. Although there are numerous studies of quiet behavior found in classroom settings and the factors that may contribute to it, few have been done on Hmong English learners and the effects a quiet behavior may have on their oral English acquisition. Therefore, while limited research may hinder the ability to compare and contrast the results of this autoethnography to other available studies, my personal account can help bring an understanding of quiet Hmong English learners. In contrast, based on my personal account and reflection, generalizations should not be made on a population as it does not provide a definitive conclusion. Therefore, the final reflection made from this study cannot be used as a generalization on all Hmong students, all English learners, or all quiet students.

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As I provide instruction and interact with my students, I have often looked to see if there is a common trend that exists among my quiet learners. Numerous studies have been done on the active participation level of students in an English language-learning environment; however, few have been done on Hmong students or students of Southeast Asian countries.

The guiding question that will drive my autoethnography is therefore the following: What factors, whether internally or externally, contributed to my quiet behavior as an English learner and how did these the factors affect my oral English language acquisition, and if so, to what extent?

In the Chapter 3, I will explain and go into detail about my research methods and how I collected the data. Chapter four will focus on the analysis of the data collected in comparison to my own narrative. Finally, Chapter 5 will present a summary of the findings as well as the implications for future research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELF-STUDY RESEARCH

The purpose of this research project was to identify and study the different factors that may have contributed to my quiet behavior and which may be contributing to the quiet behavior of other Hmong English learners and how this quiet behavior affects their oral English language acquisition.

The guiding question that will drive my autoethnography is therefore the following: What factors, whether internally or externally, contributed to my quiet behavior as an English learner and how did these factors affect my own English language acquisition, and if so, to what extent?

On reflection, I feel that possible factors resulting in my quiet behavior may be:

- How much EL support was provided
- Types of teaching/pedagogical methods/cultural relevancy
- Teacher influence
- Immersion of target language (or lack of) at home
- Hmong cultural influence (or lack of)
- Gender Roles
- Personality

By doing self-reflection, I hope that my findings will help those who teach Hmong children to have a better understanding of why they behave the way they do.

## A Hmong American ESL Teacher's Struggles with Quietness

This research will be done as an autoethnography study. My story and my impressions over the years will help me make sense of the quiet behavior of my students and maximize the experience of these Hmong English learners. I will describe how I was affected by classroom teachers, specialists, and support staff. It is important to consider all perspectives as each teacher has a different relationship with students and looking at how I was affected can help me understand my own students better. These aims are in line with what Clements (1999) suggests for the teacher to reflect on how his or her own experiences and background may affect teaching. Moreover, he points out that the reflective act itself can help to define and refine how teachers use their own experiences as they develop their teaching skills. Recognition of the role of a teacher's background in how he or she teaches is surely as important as the scores on standardized tests and, in turn, teachers can make use of their own experiences as they refine their teaching and how they connect pedagogically with their students.

According to Anderson (2006), there are five key features of analytic autoethnography: 1) complete member research (CMR) status, 2) analytic reflexivity, 3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, 4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, 5) commitment to theoretical analysis. Group members, who are both members and researchers seldom exhibit a uniform set of beliefs, values, and levels of commitment. As a result, even complete membership confers only a partial vantage point for observation of the social world under study (Anderson, 2006 p. 381).

Family dynamics obviously play a role in how we grow up. As I write my story, I will therefore, also conduct interviews with my own siblings in order to go beyond my own reflections. Their personal narratives will help me understand my struggles and whether

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or not our parents had any influence on them the way I felt they had on me. This data will also help me to identify any trends, patterns, or themes that may have surfaced so I can analyze whether the same factors applied to them as they did to me.

An autoethnography was a favorable choice in conducting this study as it allows me to reflect on my own personal narrative to make sense of and analyze the trends and/or patterns that I see in my teaching as well as what may surface from my siblings' life experiences.

Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research where its approach to writing and research attempts to describe and systematically analyze and write (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) and, as a result, autoethnography is a method that is both process and product (Ellis, 2011 p. 273). Further, autoethnography is an approach that acknowledges and accepts subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research as compared to hiding from or assuming they do not exist (p. 274). During the ethnography process, researchers study a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders, such as cultural members, and outsiders, such as cultural strangers, better understand the culture (p. 275-276). When writing an autoethnography, researchers retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that come from being part of a culture and/or by possessing some cultural identity. In addition to telling their stories, autoethnographers are often required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences (Ellis, 2011 p. 276).

An autoethnography will enable me and other educators to have a better understanding of the quiet behavior that is so prevalent in many Hmong English learners.

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Through this study, the hope is to provide some insight and clearer understanding into the complexities of quiet behavior in the context of oral English acquisition. Further, narrative stories can influence identity, behavior, and personal as well as social change (Anderson, 2006 p. 381).

However, based on my personal account and reflection, generalizations should not be made on a population as it does not provide a definitive conclusion. Therefore, the final reflection made from this study cannot be used as a generalization on all Hmong students, all English learners, or all quiet students. But it can help enlighten teachers who have quiet Hmong students.

### Procedure

As an English learner teacher working with primarily Hmong English learners in kindergarten through third grade in a Montessori learning environment, this topic is of importance to me not only because I am Hmong, but because I am also a quiet learner and a social introvert. Learning is optimal for me when I am given the time to process what I am hearing without the added pressure of having to respond or react quickly. My main goal is to see whether identifying the same factors that may have caused the quiet behavior in myself and the information that I gather from the interviews with my siblings will help make me a more effective teacher.

Ethnographic reflexivity is the researcher's awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and their effects upon it. In addition, it entails self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to increase understanding for both self and others by

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examining one's actions and perceptions in reference to and in dialogue with others (Anderson, 2006 p. 382).

As I provide instruction to my students, I have been aware of my own feelings and reactions based on the interactions I have had with my students. The hope is that this study will help provide educators who work with English learners, particularly Hmong students, a better understanding of these varying factors and/or patterns which likely contribute to their quiet behavior.

### Participants

As previously mentioned, I will be conducting interviews with my siblings to gather pertinent information, such as barriers and cultural and parental influences, that will help me analyze their upbringing compared to mine and decide whether my upbringing influenced my quiet behavior. I have three siblings of which two are brothers and one is a sister. I am the oldest of my parents' four children and the only one born in a refugee camp in Thailand. I do not remember anything about the experience, as I was only two years old when we came to America. In this section, I will provide a brief summary of each of my siblings so as to give the reader a profile as well as a glimpse into their childhood.

My only sister (whom I shall identify as S) is ten years younger than myself. She is a fast thinker and responds and reacts to people and/or circumstances as she wishes with no fear of its consequences. She is not only physically bigger and taller than me, but her confidence level is through the roof as well. She carries this strong trait of a warrior because of her status of being a middle, second born daughter as well as being married into a family where extended family members all dwell together. When you live in such



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circumstances, which I can only imagine as chaos, one needs to learn how to fight and advocate for oneself. She was born into a time when we also had younger siblings and so not only was she responsible for the chores in our home, but she was also responsible for babysitting our younger brothers as well. She expressed on many different occasions when she felt it was unfair that she solely was responsible for *everything*. At this point in time, I was either away at college or married already because she had also mentioned that I was never around. The pressure of having to balance between two cultures and to do it effectively was wearing her down. And to make matters worse, she had no outlet to release her frustration. Although she had many good friends at school, she felt she needed to maintain this image of calmness and that everything was “perfect” so she was unable to share her deepest feelings with anyone. She was torn between two very different worlds and was finding every means possible just to keep her head above water.

My next sibling is my brother (B1), who is seven years younger than my sister (S). Although on the forefront he seems to be immature at heart and seems to lack any real responsibility, he actually has self-discipline and is trust-worthy. He is a person of few words and does not like to talk or be talked to. He likes things short and simple.

My next brother, also my baby brother (B2), was more outspoken than B1. Even though he is the youngest, he had no problem speaking his mind. Not only does he speak up and stand up to his older siblings, he also does this to our parents as well-something I can only imagine myself doing. There have been too many times in my life when I would relive a moment in my head while recreating a dialogue I wish I could have had. My mom, nonetheless, is most lenient with B2 and defends and protects him like no other. Although I

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have a close relationship with all my siblings, I have the closest relationship with my sister even if she is ten years my junior.

However, unlike my sister and myself, who are at odds with our mother, my brothers are the opposite and seem to have a more difficult time with our father. In the case with her boys, our mother was more nurturing and understanding. She was far more patient with them whereas our father was much harder on them. My father was also a man of few words and he often spoke in poetry style where we would have to decipher its meaning. I understood my father's messages to us, but my brothers were often impatient and took his words for their literal meanings. My father also held very high expectations for all of us, but more so with the boys as a father would for his sons, but he did this in a way that was subtle and not spoken.

### Location/Setting

The setting for the first interview was done at my home. I interviewed my brother (B1) there because he lives with me. We had a nice talk about our childhood which transitioned into the interview. We have never talked much about growing up since there was a big age gap between us. I did find that it was hard for him to open up. During the course of the interview, he often turned the questions back to me expecting me to know the answer. I reminded him that how I saw things with him growing up was very different from his own perspective of it. I needed to know what he saw and how he felt about it.

My second interview was done with my sister. Because she has four little ones, I conducted the interview at her home. During the interview, although she did not actually

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say it, I sensed from her a little bit of hostility towards our mother. In contrast, she spoke more warmly of our father.

Finally, I had my last interview with my baby brother (B2). Because of his work schedule and busy lifestyle, it was difficult to find the time to sit down with him. This last interview was done over the phone. I reminded him to be honest and to take his time in thinking about the questions before providing his responses. See the appendix for the interview questions.

### Data Collection Technique 1

The first part of my data collection method is to analyze my own personal narrative. The purpose for this personal narrative is to reflect on my own life experiences. The hope is to learn about the events, whether big or small, that took place in my life that impacted me to become the quiet person that I am. I understand that part of who I am is genetic. According to Leman (2009), birth order is also important and is a good predictor of why you are the way you are. It also is the science of understanding your place in the family. This makes sense to me because as the oldest, I often feel the burden of having to get things done for the sake of everyone else. I have been carrying this weight on my shoulders for as long as I can remember. Whether or not my family expects this of me, I am unsure, but I sense that it is one of those unspoken expectations.

This is the first time in my life where I actually thought about past events and experiences that I know have played a role in shaping me into the person I am. Going back as far as I can remember, I think that the little comments made in passing were probably the ones that had the biggest effect on me since my parents were not ones to sit and have

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an open dialogue. I do not remember words of encouragement, words of support, nor words of endearment. Further, my parents were not ones to show any physical love at all such as a hug or a kiss. These were things that I had to *learn* to do when I had children of my own. I certainly did not want my children to be deprived of the very basic need such as touch. Let me emphasize that despite my parents' seeming lack of "love," this is actually very typical in a traditional Hmong family.

### Data Collection Technique 2

I conducted interviews with my siblings in order to see if they were affected in the same way as I was by how we were raised. I wanted to see if my two brothers experienced the same discrimination as my sister and I had. It was interesting to see that the pressure of success from my parents was as great for them as it was for me even though my parents became more lenient with subsequent children.

The technique used to collect data was a series of open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A). These questions were asked in an interview with each of my siblings. The interviews were done individually in order to maintain confidentiality and validity from influencing one another's response. Another reason was that I wanted my siblings to be able to openly and honestly express themselves without the worry of upsetting another sibling because of what they may say that someone else may not agree with.

#### Interview Questions for my siblings:

- 1.) What do you remember about mom and dad as you were growing up? As far as:
  - a.) Discipline

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- b.) Negative/positive messages (i.e. about school, about your future, any spoken goals)?
  - c.) Freedom – after school activities or just going out in general?
- 2.) Any family memories that stood out or having a big impact on your life? Whether positive or negative?
- 3.) Anything you would do differently with your own children? For example, would you discipline them the same way our parents disciplined us or would you discipline in a different way and why? What about your involvement in your children's school life? How involved are you with your children's school activities during the day as well as outside of school hours?
- 4.) How did mom and dad influence you? Was it good or bad and how did that impact you?
- 5.) Do you feel that you were treated differently as a boy or as a girl from the other siblings? How does the order in which you were born influenced the way mom and dad raised you?
- 6.) Was mainly or only Hmong spoken in the home as you were growing up? Who spoke which language and with whom? How do you feel this affected your acquisition of English and your confidence in speaking English in school?
- 7.) Did you experience a smooth transition from a mainly Hmong culture at home to mainstream culture in school or did you experience a disruption? Please explain.
- 8.) In an academic setting, were you a quiet learner? Did you contribute to discussions held in class voluntarily? Did you ask questions when you did not understand something or advocate for yourself or others?

- 9.) Can you reflect on teaching styles that may have affected your spoken English and your confidence or lack of confidence in speaking out in class?

This part of the research is an analysis of my own personal narrative compared with the narratives of my siblings. After the interviews were conducted, an analysis was done to see what themes arise from the information I gathered. The hope is that the themes in combination with my own life experiences will provide insight for educators on why the majority of Hmong ELs are quiet. Drawing on Clements (1999), reliability and validity will be enhanced as I compare and contrast the experiences of my siblings with my own. This can also help account for any possible misremembering that I may do as we can provide a check against each other.

### Ethics

The hope for this ethnography is to better understand the implications of the quiet behavior of Hmong English learners. Throughout this autoethnography, it is with utmost care that I am taking extreme measures to protect the privacy of my siblings who have whole-heartedly shared their personal life experiences with me to the extent that I was not fully aware of until now.

My siblings, who were interviewees, participated voluntarily and were aware that they could withdraw their participation at any time. Participants were also informed that they would be recorded and have their responses be transcribed and analyzed for the sole purpose of this research. Because the participants in my interviews are my own siblings, Hamline University did not require consent forms to be completed.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained the process by which I conducted my autoethnography research. I gave some background on my participants and what role they played in order for data to be collected. The hope with this ethnography is to better understand the implications of the quiet behavior of Hmong English learners. This will help educators have a better understanding of why Hmong English learners are quiet and in what possible ways they can help these students outgrow and overcome their quiet ways and confidently and actively take part in their education and reach their learning potential. Chapter four will focus on the analysis of the data collected in comparison to my own narrative. Finally, Chapter 5 will present a summary of the findings as well as implications for future research.

Chapter 4: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The guiding question that drove my autoethnography was therefore the following:  
What factors, whether internally or externally, contributed to my quiet behavior as an English learner and how did these factors affect my own English language acquisition, and if so, to what extent?

Because the Hmong culture is heavily male-dominated and a man's reputation as well as clan reputation are on the line, the girls in the family are typically restricted as far as their freedom goes and what they can and cannot do (Moua 2010). For example, in a more traditional family such as mine, I was only able to go to school and come right back home. This was not a problem in elementary school as there were no after-school activities, but I was definitely in for a rude-awakening in middle school when I stayed after school one day to try out for the volleyball team without my parents' permission. Had I been aware of the tryout dates, I would have communicated this with my parents, but because I only found out the day of, in my mind, I thought I would stay after school to try out and explain the situation later and my parents would understand, but unfortunately, it did not turn out that way.

My mother was a little more understanding since she trusts me and knows I would not do anything other than what I said I did. My father, however, was not as understanding. In his mind, I made up an excuse to do something that may tarnish his name and reputation in the community. I remember being very angry and feeling cornered. The anger I felt inside was inexplicable. I had never felt so betrayed by my own parents. In a weak attempt



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to retaliate, one in which I can only imagine in my head, I have often felt that I *should* do something to tarnish his reputation since I get this harsh, unfair treatment anyway. I felt that no matter what I said in my defense, it was pointless. I did not even try. I sat and sulked in this one-way conversation. To this day, I still could not fathom the idea and reality of being in trouble for participating in an after-school sport. It just did not make any sense to me no matter how I looked at it. There were a number of similar incidents that followed throughout the rest of my time in middle school as well as high school. It was routine-I just came to expect the anger and yelling and then the permission got granted afterwards. I found that my friends, all of whom are Hmong as well, were not subjected to the same treatment even when their parents were much older and, I assume, just as traditional as my parents. I also realized, in time, that my brothers were not subjected to the same restrictions as my sister and I were.

*"Good Hmong girls do not stay after school to play volleyball. There are men lurking in the gym and hallways who will suck your sweet nectar dry so you are no longer a fresh flower!"*

*Ka Vang, 2012, p. 101*

After reading the above quote, it just made sense to me why my parents were so angry at my staying after school for volleyball practice. I also realized that birth order does, in fact, play a large role in how one behaves and is treated by their parents. In my case, I am the oldest of my parents' four children. Because I was the first-born, I was given assignments and responsibilities that my younger siblings were not given. Often times

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when chores and jobs were assigned to us, even as adults, I felt the burden of having to carry all the weight for everyone since I felt that was my responsibility to do so. I carry a tremendous amount of guilt inside of me if I do not do what I feel I should do, even when my siblings are all fully capable of contributing their fair share to the family.

According to Leman (2009), the sex of each child can cause pressure points in a family, such as a later-born child becoming the first-born boy or girl. The fact that I am a first-born Hmong daughter did not play in my favor. I considered myself the guinea pig of the family since I played the role of trailblazer having to pave the way for my younger siblings. Further, Leman (2009) continues that parents of the children are also a major variable as well, when their own birth order, their critical eye, and their values come into play while raising their children. All of these factors are powerful variables that affect each child, particularly the first-born or the only child (Leman, 2009). Even though my parents were not the first-born in their own families, they currently are considered the first-born since their older siblings have passed on.

As I analyzed my siblings' personal narratives against my own, I am surprised that my sister's recollection of growing up seemed to be much harsher than mine. In many aspects, we both have had a difficult time navigating both the Hmong and American cultures and our transition from one to the other was not as smooth sailing as was our brothers' because of the pressure of having to maintain a certain image to uphold our parents' reputation especially because we are girls. But I believe what made it easier for me, although not by much, was the fact that I was able to develop and maintain a closer relationship with my mom. We had more intimate moments and conversations about life where I felt she may have been compelled to be more reserved when it came to disciplining

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me. My sister, on the other hand, was ten years younger than me and did not have the same relationship with our mom. As supported by Leman (2009), being the middle child, she felt invisible and had to be outspoken in order to be heard; therefore, she spoke out against anyone and everyone, including our mom. Whereas with me, on the other hand, under any and all circumstances, I kept to myself whether or not I agreed with what was being said or done.

As a young child, I already realized I had become a product of the environment I grew up in. I have learned to be quiet as I realized time and time again that my opinion did not matter to my parents and I remember moments in my childhood when I was much younger and was not yet aware of the "certain way" I was supposed to behave. I would make curious remarks about people and voice my opinions aloud only to be told to be quiet and done in a rather harsh way. I was basically conditioned and reconditioned to be quiet. I have often wondered how different my personality would be if I had parents who were less strict and embraced the western ideology of open discussion and honesty.

### Emerging Themes

The themes discussed below emerged from my analysis of the interviews conducted with each of my siblings. Although each sibling is different in their own personality, there seemed to be a common trend among us.

#### Theme 1: Gender

It is crystal clear and something that was already obvious to me that our gender played a significant role in the treatment my sister and I received from our parents as

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compared to our brothers. In the Hmong culture, the boys are the ones who carry the responsibility of not only the family name, but also the tradition, ceremonial rituals, and care of the parents and elders. The girls, meanwhile, are being raised in an orderly fashion in order to be presentable as a wife and daughter-in-law into another clan. It is because of this reason that I felt little or no efforts were being made on my and my sister's behalf. We are unable to carry on the duties and rituals of *our* clan and so, for a period of our youth, sadly, we were just there to pass some time.

In Kao Kalia Yang's *The Late Homecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (2008, p. 80), she talked about the time when they transitioned into a refugee camp in Thailand where they lived until they moved to America. During this time, her grandma and uncles wanted her dad to marry a second wife because her mom was unable to produce boys within the decade that they were married. The only children her mom was able to produce were two girls:

*There was the issue of children. My mother and father had been married nearly a decade, but there were no boys yet. The pressure for him to marry another wife was mounting from all his brothers and his mother, too. They all said that my mother could not give him sons; he was still handsome, he could marry another and love my mother just the same. We were only girls, Dawb and I. What would happen to him when he died? What would happen to my mother? As girls, we could not perform the ceremonial rituals to carry my mother and father's spirits back to the land of the ancestors. These things were said out of love for him.*

*Kao Kalia Yang (2008, p. 80)*

As I looked over and analyzed the results of the interviews conducted with each of my siblings, it was very clear and confirmed my suspicion that the boys *were not* subjected to the same treatment from my parents as my sister and I were. The boys came and went as they pleased with no boundaries set for them whatsoever. My parents would question the boys about their whereabouts every now and then, but they did not seem fazed by their absences.

By the same token, the boys had very little to no responsibility around the house. Even though they were fully capable of performing the duties that my sister *had* to perform, they were not held to the same standards that my sister was held to. At one point in time, our mother made an attempt to assign the boys chores, but my sister and I both believe she did it only because my sister complained about the unfairness that was so obvious in the home. Our mother did not reinforce or follow through with any consequences if the boys did not do their chores the way she had with my sister, which was another strong indicator that she really did not care whether the boys did their chores. My sister always had a list of chores to do, *especially* if she wanted to go somewhere. Our mother was adamant that she finished her work before going anywhere *and* she was given a time limit or a curfew as to how long she could be gone and when she needed to be home.

At this point in time, I was already married with two children. I was not a very good support for my sister at the time other than being the one place she could often come to without permission from our parents. I served as an outlet for her, although I could have been more understanding and supportive as well as being an advocate for her since I had already gone through the same ordeal she was currently going through. Because of the

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closer relationship I had with my mother and because I was married with children of my own, I automatically fell into this "adult" role I felt I must play. Not only was I young and naïve, and often brain-washed and influenced by our mother, I sided with her thinking that my sister was just being selfish only because *I* never complained. My way of coping was to absorb everything that came my way-good or bad-and suppressed those feelings as a way to escape while my sister was verbal and spoke her truth.

"What does it mean to be a good Hmong girl or bad Hmong girl and who defines this? Further, who practices and enforces these rules? If these rules are followed or *not* followed, what are the rewards and consequences for the Hmong girl and her family? Finally, what would happen to the Hmong culture if there were no more *good* Hmong girls? (Vang, 2012 p. 104)" These are great questions asked by Ka Vang, the author of *The Good Hmong Girl Eats Raw Laab*. Vang questions the very essence of what being "good" means in the Hmong culture for a Hmong girl. Since the Hmong culture and its society is patriarchal and patrilineal, it is no surprise that the role of a *good* Hmong girl has been historically and is currently defined by Hmong men. On the flipside, boys are considered the pillars of the family and will eventually carry the family name and traditions, including spiritual practices. Not only do boys have obligations to maintain lineage and spiritual traditions of the family, they are also raised to be lifelong authority figures within the family as well as the community (Vang, 2012).

It was not until I had both boys and girls of my own that I realized how unfair and unjust the Hmong culture is. I strive to make things equal and fair among my own kids and knew for a fact that I was not going to raise them the same way my siblings and I were raised. Chores are being delegated equally among the kids and depending on what the

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occasion is, everyone can go where they would like assuming I know the details of the event.

My sister is my best friend and, occasionally, we would reflect on the past when the situation arises and talk about how sad and unfair things used to be growing up, and in some respect, still are. We do not talk about the past much since it always stirs up raw emotions to the surface-emotions that we both know we do not want to feel, whether it be feelings of hurt, anger, resentment, or betrayal, among others. When these talks do come up, I find myself apologizing to her numerous times for the lack of support I provided-often through tears that I try to choke back. These are emotions that she and I have gotten very good at suppressing and keeping far away in a dark corner where they belong. When the feelings do surface, they are strong and they somehow manage to put us both in prisoner mode-locked up in shackles and confined to a dark and cold 6 x 8 prison cell with nowhere to go and no one to talk to but our own shadow. This is a complete feeling of helplessness and vulnerability from which we both cannot seem to escape as much as we try.

According to Vang (2012), in order for the *good Hmong girl* concept to change, Hmong women must stop colluding with Hmong men to oppress other women and girls. Once the Hmong women stop helping the Hmong men enforce this concept, they will soon realize that there are respectable roles for their daughters or sisters that go beyond being the accepted good Hmong girl.

Vang (2012) finds it understandable that Hmong men are ones to set and enforce the *good Hmong girl* concept; however, she never understood why women allowed this to take place. It seems that a Hmong girl's harshest judges, who constantly and consistently remind her of her duties as a *good Hmong girl* are her mother, sisters, aunts, grandmothers,

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mother-in-law, and Hmong girlfriends. She further explains that the mother of the daughter is harshest towards her daughter because the father blames her for being a bad mother and, as a result, the daughter becomes bad (Vang 2012, p. 108). Although our mother never explained this to us, the reason why she was harder on us than she was on her sons was because she felt the pressure from our father to enforce the *good Hmong girl* concept. If she was not harsh and strict toward us, we would be tempted by the freedom and opportunities that we face every day and could, in their eyes, do something that could diminish their reputation. Because of the possible repercussion our mother could face from our father, she was proactive in making sure my sister and I did not step out of line.

A family's good name and the respect that comes with it is central to the Hmong people. Further, the family's name is the foundation on which people build community and as a result, determines how others in the community treat you depending on your *good* or *bad* name (Vang, 2012).

Despite the limitations imposed upon us by our parents and more so by our culture, I feel that my sister and I have flourished in our own ways in becoming successful in our own eyes. These limitations, in a sense, have empowered us by giving us the drive and motivation to be the best we can be, no matter what life's calling was for each of us.

Again, according to Leman (2009), the order in which a person is born is a good indicator of the role they play within their family. Because I am the first-born, I blame myself for my sister's pain and how she was raised. I had a voice and could have easily influenced my mother to be more understanding and to provide my sister more slack when it came to the responsibility that was bestowed upon her. In hindsight, I have failed her and I failed her miserably. But could I have challenged our mother? I do not know. I know



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I cannot change the past, but I often wonder how different my sister's life would have turned out if I could have been a backbone for her. I understand the deep resentment and hostility my sister feels towards our parents, but more so towards our mother. I share these feelings as well, but not to the extent she does.

### Theme 2: The Struggle

Throughout my childhood, I learned to become very good at decoding and interpreting my parents' code-the language they use where they expect us to be able to read between the lines and understand what they mean. They often use reverse psychology on us and it seems that I was the only one that was able to decipher their meaning. Even if I did not know, I have had plenty of experiences to figure out what the message *could* mean. Many times, my siblings would take the message for its literal interpretation and I would have to explain to them the actual meanings behind the message. They often do not care for the meaning since they would still be upset about *how* the meaning was conveyed, asking why our parents could not just be straight forward. Because of this "unspoken" communication from our parents, we found ourselves struggling to please our parents. I believe that at some point in our childhood, my siblings and I were all looking for approval from our parents. We wanted so much to make them proud. This was much easier to do when we were younger. As we became older, it was more difficult to make the "right" choices that they would want us to make. For example, our parents would emphasize how important education was and that we needed to try our best. They wanted us to be successful and to someday have successful careers; however, they did not define for us what success means in their eyes.

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Our parents also did not have the resources to help guide us in the direction they would like us to go. Their “unspoken” expectations left each of us on our own struggling to find common ground that would make us successful and to also receive the approval we desperately were seeking from them. This part was left to open interpretation. For example, success to me meant that I needed to have a college degree in order to be able to move up the ladder in whatever career I choose whereas success for my brother (B1) meant that he should graduate from high school and find a job that would provide him with a stable income, never mind higher education.

As I wrap up my graduate studies and the prospect of receiving my Master's degree looms in the near future, my parents often speak about this at almost every family gathering. This still tells me that education is of utmost importance to my parents as this is what they often praise me for. Although I appreciate their support and encouragement, I often wish they would not praise me in front of my siblings because it makes me feel cast away from them. Each of my siblings' highest level of education was a high school diploma and here, I am working towards my second higher education degree. To me, in my eyes, this is success. Again, each of my siblings have their own definition of success. I do not want them to feel a sense of resentment towards me because of the path they each chose to travel. By the same token, I do not feel that I am better off than they are just because I am more educated. In my opinion, we are not defined as individuals simply based on the amount of education we each chose to receive.

Theme 3: Identity

In the same way that we struggled to become successful adults in our parents' eyes, we were having difficulty in searching for our own identity as well. My siblings each talked about ways in which they found comfort in coping with the pressure of life. One thing that we all have in common is that we are all athletes. We participated in school sports activities. Some of my siblings also played sports outside of school such as at the neighborhood recreation center. We also made time on the weekends to get together with family, set up a volleyball net and everyone would play regardless of the level of their volleyball skill. Participating in sports activities helped to pass some time, but that is trivial compared to the amount of time we spent in school and at home.

I believe part of the reason for this identity search has to do with the desire to conform to both the Hmong culture and mainstream American culture. It was not easy to be torn between two cultures, Hmong and American, which have conflicting sets of rules and expectations. We have been told numerous times by elders in the family that the Hmong we speak is not fluent enough. This is evident in the way we speak since we are unable to speak an entire sentence in Hmong without having to add an English word or two. I have challenged myself to speak entirely in Hmong before, which I have found to be very difficult to do. I have to consciously make an effort to think ahead about the things I want to say and how I would say them whereas this is something I seldom do when I code switch to English. Therefore, it is evident that English is my dominant language. In the eyes of Hmong elders, cultural and language retention is key to continued existence of Hmong identity (Her, 2012).

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Up until I became an English language learner teacher, I have never paid attention to my English and how “native” I sound. It sounded fluent to me and I never gave much thought or effort into how it sounded. After completing the teacher licensure program, which consisted of a fair amount of English grammar, the history of English, and the basic building blocks of English words, I realized I am focusing a lot more of my attention on how I sound when I speak English or, in my mind, how I feel I need to sound in order to be considered fluent comparable to a native-English speaker.

Because I have been so focused on how I sound when I speak English, I strongly believe that a person's English language proficiency plays a huge role in their confidence level, with or without their knowledge of it. I have noticed the subtle reactions from my students during interactions with them. Students whose English proficiency levels are higher are more confident in being outspoken and are far more active in participating in discussions compared to those whose English proficiency levels are lower, who then are more reluctant to respond or interact.

According to Her (2012), history tells us that the experiences of Hmong Americans are not unique. Issues of race, immigration, and national origin have always been front and center of the identity debate in American society. This is where I find that I struggle with who I really am as a *whole* person. I would like to consider myself “American,” but that makes me wonder if outsiders see me as American. On the flipside, I think I am more than just a Hmong woman, since I am bilingual in both Hmong and English and I can function relatively well in mainstream American culture. However, looking in the mirror tells me differently. Then, I come across the fact that I do not know enough of my own culture, language, and traditions to consider myself holistically Hmong. By the same token, I'm not

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American enough. This leaves me wondering what or who I really am. I have been this way for the longest time, surfing between two worlds, and it never really bothered me. Now, however, it does bother me that I am not really one or the other and, to me, that gives me a great sense of uncertainty. And I do not like that feeling. On the surface, I do not mind being both, but the truth of the matter is that I am Hmong. And no matter how "American" I am, I will never be American enough because I carry and treasure my culture, language, and traditions. Once I came to the realization that I do not have to be one or the other, I stopped bouncing back and forth between the two worlds in uncertainty. Since, I have learned to embrace me and who I am and all the different parts that make me holistic.

In chapter 5, I will conclude by restating the purpose of my study and disclose the major findings which I came across while conducting my research. I will also share the limitations of the study as well as any recommendations I have for further research on this topic.

Chapter 5: CONCLUSION

The goal of this study is to help provide educators who work with Hmong students a better understanding of the underlying factors, which likely contributed to their quiet behavior in an academic setting. Further, this study has examined my personal experience and its possible influence on my quiet behavior.

The guiding question that drove my autoethnography was therefore the following: What factors, whether internally or externally, contributed to my quiet behavior as an English learner and how did these factors affect my own English language acquisition, and if so, to what extent?

The study cannot be used as a generalization of all Hmong students, all English learners, or all quiet students. The trends identified by the interviews I conducted with my siblings compared to my own narrative will hopefully give teachers some insight into how to instruct and interact with quiet Hmong students, as well as other students with similar behavior and background. Although it is not definitive that these may be the reasons why most Hmong ELs are quiet, it will certainly shed some light on the personal lives of some of these students, which is important to keep in mind while delivering instruction and/or interacting with them.

What factors, whether internally or externally, contributed to my quiet behavior as an English learner and did these factors affect my oral English language acquisition, and if so, to what extent? Some of the more overarching factors considered for unusually quiet

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behavior of Hmong students, especially girls, appear to be: cultural and parental influence, a socially-introverted personality, level of English proficiency, confidence (or lack of), interest (or lack of) in subject/content matter, classroom environment, immersion in the target language, and peer and teacher influence. Identifying my own life experiences growing up can help me as a teacher as well as other teachers to understand the trends identified by the general observations made during interaction with my students, other teacher feedback and interviews of my siblings. It is my hope that this autoethnography will help shed some light on these quiet Hmong students as well as other students with similar behavior and background. Without a doubt, being quiet can be part of one's personality and, if that is the case, that is all right. However, if students are choosing to be quiet or feel compelled to be quiet as a way to retreat or because they have been culturally conditioned to remain quiet, it would be beneficial to educators to know why this is happening and what factors may be causing this, and what options may be readily available to help, especially with students who do not want to be this way, as was the case for myself.

### Major Findings

Through the interviews with my siblings, it is clear that I am using most of the same principles as my parents did to raise my children, *except* that I have opened up the lines of communication so that my children can share their thoughts about the process. To me, this not only serves as a way to get everyone's perspectives, but also as a means to empower them to speak up wherever they may be in the world. I tell them there is a difference between being disrespectful and talking back compared to expressing one's thoughts in a rational and respectful way, even if there is a disagreement. This holds true in the real

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world as well. With my daughters, I do not follow the "Good Hmong Girl Concept" closely, but it does set the parameter for me. I believe no matter what the society is, there is this ideology that sets these parameters of what is considered good or bad for all people.

My brothers do not yet have children of their own so it will be interesting to see how they will raise their children when the time comes, especially because their perception of how they were raised differs dramatically from how I perceived it to be for both my sister and me.

My sister, however, raises her children similarly to how I am raising mine. We are each other's support and often we confide in each other about how certain situations should be handled so as to avoid handling it the way our parents would have.

After writing my personal narrative on my life, it would seem that I spoke very little of my parents and gave them very little appreciation, but the truth of the matter is that I owe my life and my accomplishments to them – to their blood, sweat, and tears. I would like to acknowledge the love and encouragement, although subtle and unspoken, that my parents have provided for my siblings and myself. My parents transitioned to America under unique circumstances and have continued to assimilate and flourish under harsh conditions. While supporting our family on minimal income, my parents tried their very best to learn a new language and equip themselves with the necessary tools to become self-sufficient in a land where obstacles were formidable. For this, I owe them a tremendous amount of gratitude. In my heart, I know and understand that my parents did their very best to raise us. It was very likely that they raised us in the same way in which they themselves were raised. To this end, I took away from them what I felt was appropriate and used those techniques with parenting my own children. For example, my parents'



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strong messages about education came through to me loud and clear and the subtle ways in which my father would emphasize the importance of education is something I stress with my children. Likewise, what I felt was inappropriate and unnecessary, I would not use on my own children. A prime example of this is the way my parents spoke in poetry form and expected us to figure out the meaning behind it. As an EL teacher, I am sure to make my communication with my own children and my students explicit and succinct. I do not want to give any room for misinterpretation. Further, good examples and modeling are necessary in order to guide my children in the direction I want them to head so they can be independent and successful in whatever path they choose.

Does my firsthand knowledge of my past experience, told in the first-person, hold value as history and does it validate the concerns I see in the classroom of these quiet Hmong English learners? In my paper, I used my own personal lenses of my culture and American immigrant experience to set the stage for exploring the possible basis of my quiet behavior. In doing so, I hope that I was able to shed some light on the possibilities of why many Hmong students are such quiet learners. These possibilities may provide a background to help educators understand what may be going on in a Hmong student's life that may be contributing to their quiet behavior.

Why is this important? Once an educator, especially one who is not from a multicultural background, has some idea of the complexity of having to navigate between two cultures and their expectations and whether a student has the support needed from home, the educator will have a better understanding of the issues that may cause the quiet behavior of such students.

### Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As an ELL teacher, I have noticed that there is an overwhelming number of ELs, particularly Hmong students, who are quiet. Through my own lens as an English learner, I understand first-hand what some of these factors are that may contribute to the quiet behavior of these English learners. By looking closely at my own life experience, I realized that my upbringing played a big part in shaping the person that I have become.

Future research could look more closely at the experiences of parents as their lives changed. It could also focus more on boys. My plans for communicating the results include sharing this autoethnography with other teachers of Hmong students. In addition, I plan to present my findings at a conference. In the long-run, I would like to submit a shortened version for publication.

This study has brought on a deeper awareness of quiet learners for me and has allowed me to pay close attention to my students to figure out whether their environment is contributing to their quiet behavior or whether their quiet behavior is due to their own personality. Through this study, my hope is that educators will also develop an awareness for quiet learners and, in the meantime, provide guidance and support to them until they are able to find their own voice.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1.) What do you remember about mom and dad as you were growing up? As far as:
  - a.) Discipline
  - b.) Negative/positive messages (i.e. about school, about your future, any spoken goals)?
  - c.) Freedom – after school activities or just going out in general?
- 2.) Any family memories that stood out or having a big impact on your life? Whether positive or negative?
- 3.) Anything you would do differently with your own children?

For example, would you discipline them the same way our parents disciplined us or would you discipline in a different way and why? What about your involvement in your children's school life? How involved are you with your children's school activities during the day as well as outside of school hours?
- 4.) How did mom and dad influence you? Was it good or bad and how did that impact you?
- 5.) Do you feel that you were treated differently as a boy or as a girl from the other siblings? How do you think the order in which you were born influenced the way mom and dad raised you?
- 6.) Was mainly or only Hmong spoken in the home as you were growing up? Who spoke which language and with whom? How do you feel this affected your acquisition of English and your confidence in speaking English in school?

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- 7.) Did you experience a smooth transition from a mainly Hmong culture at home to mainstream culture in school or did you experience a disruption? Please explain.
- 8.) In an academic setting, were you a quiet learner? Did you contribute to discussions held in class voluntarily? Did you ask questions when you did not understand something or advocate for yourself or others?
- 9.) Can you reflect on teaching styles that may have affected your spoken English and your confidence or lack of confidence in speaking out in class?

**\*\*Note:** Hamline University did not require consent forms to be completed by my research participants because the participants are my siblings.

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