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# Cultural Factors in Implementing Communicative Language Teaching Methods with Karen English Language Learners

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CULTURAL FACTORS IN IMPLEMENTING COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE  
TEACHING METHODS WITH KAREN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in ESL

Hamline University  
Saint Paul, Minnesota  
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## DEDICATION

To the thousands of Karen refugees who have had to leave their homes  
to make a new life in a new place and learn a new language.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first and foremost thank God, who has given me life and breath and everything else. I would like to thank my wife Carrie for being such an amazing and supportive best friend through all of this. I would like to thank Mrs. Corina Khin for her work at translation and interpretation. Finally, my committee members have provided immense help and guidance, and I am indebted to them.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

It is hard to imagine what would connect the rural sub-tropical highland forests of Myanmar and Thailand to the urban upper Mississippi River valley of the Midwestern United States. However, Saint Paul, Minnesota has become the largest settlement of Karen (pronounced ka-REN) refugees from these regions outside of Southeast Asia (Arrive Ministries, 2014). It is just within the last decade or so that more than 7000 Karen refugees have made their way to Saint Paul to seek out a new life (Karen Organization of Minnesota, 2009; Marschalk, 2012; Minnesota Department of Health – Refugee Health Program, 2009). Needless to say, the need for adjustment in this new environment is massive. In their own communities, the vast majority of Karen work in small rural agricultural schemes, often being essentially self-employed. Karen are proud of their language and Karen is widely used in the community (Karen Organization of Minnesota, 2009).

When first arriving in the United States, most Karen refugees face an array of challenges. These challenges include jet lag, loneliness, adjustment to climate and temperature, locating housing and appropriate educational resources, securing employment, culture shock, and relating effectively to other members of the community (Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2012). In particular, the adjustment from a sub-

tropical rural community to a much colder urban community can be quite overwhelming. Nearly every skill developed for life in their former community becomes all but useless, while urban life requires an array of skills that all must be learned promptly. Everything from transportation to time-orientation requires significant learning and adjustment.

However, the most significant challenge comes in respect to language. The need for English language skill in their adopted context cannot be overstated, and the discipline required for this task is daunting at least, while for others the challenge is too much. Age, access to appropriate help, assertiveness, work context, and motivation all play a factor for those attempting to learn English as new migrants. In a recent study done locally, Matthews (2012) found that the central factor for Karen refugees in this context is the acquisition of English language skill, as this single factor impacts every other. Lack of proficiency in English complicates every other significant challenge that a Karen person must face as they resettle in the United States. Subjects indicated that while housing, job placement, health care, and education of children all were significant hurdles to their settlement, it was English language learning that both presented the greatest challenge and also played into every other hurdle. This finding is in strong agreement with recent literature from the United States Office of Refugee Resettlement (2011), which found language proficiency to be a determining factor in the success of refugee resettlement.

#### Researcher and Participants

Like many Karen refugees that I teach, I find myself in a significant chapter of transition. After nearly a decade living and working in urban community development in South Asia, I began to sense that it was time for a change. Given my previous training in

linguistics and the wide open invitation for English language teachers in much of Asia, I began my M.A in ESL on a year sabbatical from the work of urban community development. Having spent years as an English instructor both in the US and in Asia, I knew enough to be able to follow a curriculum and teach students, but much of my teaching was based on intuitive best practices gathered from both the experience of teaching refugees and my own experience of learning a language that was vastly different than my own. I saw on the faces of my students many of the same concerns and hopes that filled my own thoughts when struggling to learn language and become a functioning member of society in South Asia.

In this study, I seek to hear the voices of Karen people who have been resettled to the United States and are currently learning English in a non-profit English language center seeking to serve them. In particular, I will seek to examine the engagement of Karen cultural values with one of the most common English language teaching frameworks currently in use; Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). All participants in this study are ethnically Karen adults, currently enrolled in English language courses, and have been studying for a minimum of two months at this location.

In my own studies, I was deeply impacted with the study of CLT and its strong emphases on communicative ability and functional use of language. The use of authentic materials and real-life settings as the context of learning deeply resonated with me, since these were my needs for language in South Asia. My central need for language acquisition in South Asia had not been academic or artistic, but highly functional and practical. I needed language to make my life work in Asia, just like Karen students who

need functional and practical language to help with health care, housing, and searching for work. Language was not an independent interest or an end in itself, but was needed as a tool or vehicle to feel like I could fully express myself and actively impact the wider world around me. I needed language because I needed to function in a new place.

However, having lived in South Asia for so long, I also had significant questions about CLT and whether it worked with students who were not raised in the assertive, egalitarian, problem-solving, and initiative-taking culture of the Western world. After years of coming face to face with my own Western-ness for the first time, it seemed to me that much of the basis of CLT seemed to assume deeply Western values. While I enjoyed and benefited from many of the values foundational to CLT, I found myself wondering whether these values would be perceived and worked out in similar ways in the widely diverging cultures in which this method is being used. I felt concerned that implementing CLT without understanding students cultural framework might create additional obstacles to the already daunting task of language acquisition.

Having experienced the need to contextualize both language and values in South Asia, I come to the table fully convinced that what may work well in classrooms with English speakers learning other languages and some types of ESL students in the US may not transfer directly to use with students who come from cultures that have a radically different cultural orientation. There may be a significant need to contextualize the values and methodologies of CLT to ensure their effectiveness for some students who come from specific cultural environments. I do not mean to say that CLT may be irrelevant to some learners. Language is fundamentally communicative in each context, but the

methods and guidelines of communication can differ significantly, not to mention the cultural aspects of teaching and learning that can vary widely from culture to culture.

It is my aim to be teaching English in the Sultanate of Oman within the coming year, and it is also my intention to implement much of what I have learned regarding Communicative Language Teaching in this endeavor. Thus, the current study has direct import into the coming chapter of my own life and work, and will inform my teaching experience and practice in that setting. The exercise of contextualizing something valuable to a new context is valuable both for students who benefit from a more relevant delivery system, as well as those who seek to mold methods to the amazing variety of contexts in which English is currently being taught.

### Communicative Language Teaching

The origin of CLT methods can be traced back to the 1970s, when there began to be stronger criticism toward the then current Situational Language Teaching, and the Audiolingual method of language teaching (Parrish, 2004). Both of these methods focus on the memorization and drilling of given bits of language as the path to fluency and language use. Situational Language Teaching focused on memorization of high-frequency vocabulary and grammatical structures, while the Audiolingual Method encouraged students to memorize and drill model sentences and conversations, which would lead the way to fluency and more varied speech (Richards & Rogers, 2001). An effort was made to develop a way to teach language that would more closely correspond to the needs of people living across cultures and in international organizations to use language to communicate in diverse situations and to accomplish set tasks. CLT places a strong

emphasis on language function as opposed to grammatical form. It also seeks to reorient classroom dynamics from the teacher-centered paradigm of transmitting knowledge to the student-centered paradigm of language as functional, being used to accomplish varied tasks (Parrish, 2004). In CLT, students take on a more active role as they engage in role-plays, mixers, discussions, and debates; learning to communicate by communicating according to situational need.

The central aim of CLT is the achievement of functional communicative ability in which the learner is able to actively use language in varying environments (Lee & Vanpatten, 1995). Nunan (2004) sees CLT as an overarching concept - a broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum which encompasses a great variety of methods and teaching techniques. The typical syllabus for CLT, therefore, is not centered on mastery of language form, but on students' use of language in a variety of contexts and for a variety of functional purposes. There is no single text or technique universally accepted as the standard or authority in CLT. Instead, it encourages the use of a variety of materials and teaching methods and techniques that are appropriate to a given context of learning language, provided that the focus remains on functional use of language in context (Brandl, 2008; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

While CLT has become the default methodology in thousands of schools, it has not been spared from criticism, particularly in the realm of its relevance outside of a Western cultural orientation. Values of assertiveness, student-centered classrooms, and functional knowledge are not cultural universals and are not the operational framework for many non-Western students. There can be disconnect in cultural values for some

learners, and if inadequate consideration to the culture of learners is paid, students can become highly disinterested or demotivated by what they see as ineffective classroom leadership or teaching (Holliday, 1994). The implementation of CLT influenced syllabi in a number of places has been the subject of extensive literature, particularly in the Asian context (Hu, 2002; Li, 1998).

### The Impact of Culture

Culture can be described as a set of attitudes, values, and convictions that give meaning to what is encountered in the world. In common terms, culture operates like a pair of eyeglasses that filter and influence what we see as right, good, and valuable in the world. Lederach (1995, p. 9) states, “Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them”. Often we think of culture as mainly the content of art, music, food, and aesthetic that is unique to a given ethnic group. However, this misses the reality that these actions flow from underlying convictions about the world and about what is valuable in it. Thus, an identical action can be interpreted entirely differently by those of different cultural frameworks (Damen, 1987).

A growing field of study is Intercultural Communicative Competence, in which learners are equipped to understand the target language in its own cultural context, becoming increasingly able to navigate the cultural differences (Suntharesan, 2013). However, language instructors also must be adequately equipped to do the work of cultural analysis themselves if they are to foster this in their students and provide relevant instruction to students (Mazlaveckiene, 2014). Increasingly, the call is being raised for

instructors to target instruction to compensate for cultural values among certain populations and cultural frameworks (Abbas, Aslam & Yasmeen, 2011), including the Karen people (Watkins, Razee & Richters, 2012). These underlying cultural convictions and values can deeply affect what is viewed as valuable in teaching and learning, demeanor, appropriateness of listening and speaking, and even the process of requesting information. If left unaddressed, these mismatches of culture can add to the significant array of challenge that language learners face. Shafaei (2008, p. 227) observes: Understanding the students' home culture is vital for understanding basic aspects of their behaviours both in and out of the classroom, including language related behaviours. Different cultures have varying standards of what is and is not acceptable or respectful behaviours. Silence versus talking, touching, smiling, eye contact, competition versus cooperation, leadership roles, and expectations of the teacher's role can all differ depending on standards of a culture. Differences between a teacher's culture and that of students' can create conflicts and misunderstanding.

#### Significance to English Language Teachers

The current study aims to provide insights for implementing CLT in concert with Karen culture. CLT has been widely recognized to address lacks of communicative competence. However, in its home cultures of the Western world and increasingly in some EFL contexts, it has been criticized by a number of researchers for paying little attention to the context in which teaching and learning take place and instead assume common Western values of assertiveness, self-initiative, the centrality of individual need, and the importance of functional learning (Bax, 2003). These assumptions can create

additional hurdles for students and hinder effective learning. Since most English language teachers grow up with these dominant cultural values, they are very hard for them to recognize, but are simply assumed. The same is true for their students about an entirely different set of values. This is the central challenge of our own cultural values, as they are largely assumed and unexamined by those that hold them. Despite these potential weaknesses of CLT, its importance cannot be denied in modern English language instruction. There is a clear need to contextualize the strengths of CLT and fit it more closely to the culture and background of both students and teachers. This study seeks to discern some of these cultural and pragmatic issues that impede its progress and implementation for a particular ethnic group so that they can be addressed and overcome.

#### Guiding Questions

Three central questions guide the current study, and it will be our aim to answer these questions in the following chapters. 1) *Which aspects of Communicative Language Teaching do intermediate adult Karen English language learners value?* 2) *How do Karen learners describe their experience of three typical Communicative Language Teaching activities?* 3) *What adjustments do these learners suggest making to these three learning activities to ensure that they are relevant and helpful to Karen students?* Having gained an answer to these questions, we should be able to attempt to address a few of the obstacles that adult Karen language learners face.

#### Chapter Overviews

In Chapter One, I introduced the purpose, significance and need for this study. The context of the study was briefly introduced as was the role, assumptions and biases

of the researcher. The experiential background of the researcher was provided, and the central questions that guide this study were introduced. In Chapter Two, I provide a review of the literature relevant to the topics of CLT and some of the criticisms of its implementation in respect to culture. I further explore literature relevant to the culture and background of the Karen people of Burma, and their presence in an ESL context. I relate this research to the context of ESL instruction to Karen Refugees. Chapter Three includes a description of the research design and methodology that guides this study. Chapter Four presents the results and relevant data of the study. Finally, in Chapter Five, I reflect on the relevance of the data and its impact on teaching practice. Also, I discuss limitations of the present study, and attempt to identify potential additional research need.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to examine cultural factors that may impact effective implementation of CLT methods in the context of ESL instruction to adult Karen refugees. Three central questions guide this study. 1) *Which aspects of Communicative Language Teaching do intermediate adult Karen English language learners value?* 2) *How do Karen learners describe their experience of three typical Communicative Language Teaching activities?* 3) *What adjustments do these learners suggest making to these three learning activities to ensure that they are relevant and helpful to Karen students?*

This chapter will first present a discussion of the Karen people of Burma and provide a bit of cultural background and context. Next, I will review some of the unique qualities and needs of the Karen people in my city, along with a number of studies done in this context. Also, I will review literature concerning CLT methods and activities. In addition to this, we will discuss some of the criticisms of the CLT approach in respect to culture. Finally, the need for the current study will be demonstrated.

### The Karen People of Burma

The Karen (pronounced ka-REN) people are a tribal ethnic group living mainly in the hilly eastern border region of Myanmar (Burma) which adjoins Thailand, with the largest concentrations found in the Kayah and Karen (a.k.a Kayin) states of Myanmar

(Burma) (Accredited Language Services, 2015). Traditionally, the Karen people are farmers, cultivating these regions with rice and a variety of cash crops, living in small cleared villages. Karen society traditionally follows a matrilineal descent, with families not identified by surname (Neiman, Soh & Sutan, 2008). Linguistically, the two main Karen dialects (Pwo and Sgaw) are classified as members of the Tibeto-Burman language family (Accredited Language Services, 2015). Despite this classification, Karen has linguistic elements that put this classification into question and show external or previous influences, including pitch and tonal characteristics and the placement of the verb between the subject and object, contrary to the majority of languages in this family. In terms of religious belief, the Karen are traditionally folk Buddhist, but in the last century have been deeply impacted by the work of Christian missionaries (Binkley, 2015; Marshall, 1997).

As a result of decades of internal conflict, persecution, and systematic governmental oppression since independence from British colonial occupation in 1948, the Karen have now been scattered within the region and globally. Current estimates of the Karen population within Burma range from 3 million (Accredited Language Services, 2105) to nearly seven million (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010), with up to 500,000 living as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within Burma (US Department of State, 2010). In addition to this, there are nearly 400,000 living as refugees in Thailand, more than half of whom are living in nearly a dozen refugee camps along the Burma-Thai border (Binkley, 2015; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). As of 2012, 80,637 have been resettled in other countries, with 63,121 making their way

to the United States for resettlement (Binkley, 2015). In fact, more refugees from Burma (15,000) were resettled in the United States between 2006-2009 than any other group (Marschalk, 2012). In a matter of a decade, the Karen have become a fixture in a number of cities worldwide, including numerous metropolitan areas in the US.

As the situation of the Karen people is still relatively new on the world scene, there is not a large body of research on them in particular. Much remains to be done to truly understand their resettlement and its larger impact on the ethnic group as a whole and the communities to which they settle. However, there are a few studies that do warrant our examination. In a study of the communication patterns of the global Karen community, Green and Lockley (2012) put forth three “zones” in which the Karen community operates and in which communication flows. Zone one comprises traditional homelands in Burma and borderlands with Thailand in which the Karen exist primarily in rural villages. Zone two comprises the Thai refugee camps along the border with Burma in which the Karen exist primarily in an institutionalized refugee setting, dependent upon the services of the United Nations and other NGOs. Finally, zone three comprises those Karen who have immigrated or have been resettled to other countries through the UNHCR resettlement programs, with the largest percentage resettled to the US, UK, and Australia. Green and Lockley note that the Karen community in Zone three, which would constitute the setting of the present study, illustrates the intensity and longevity of evangelical missionary work, which has changed the face and internal dynamics of the global Karen community, disproportionately empowering the Christian subset of the Karen community, which constitutes a minority in Zones one and two.

## Outline of Karen Culture

Particularly relevant for the study at hand are cultural descriptions of the Karen people, mainly those aspects of culture that most impact language use and second language acquisition. Since ethnography typically contains painstaking detail about every aspect of life, I will attempt to limit my scope here to those aspects of culture having to do with general demeanor, communication, and cultural orientation. Much of the best published research in connection with the culture of Karen people comes from the health care industry as it attempts to provide adequate and informed care to the large Karen refugee community in the United States.

### General Demeanor

From the earliest published documentation of Karen culture by those who have lived among them and learned their language, the Karen people are notoriously shy, conservative, passive, unassertive, and reluctant to complain (Marshall, 1997). The Karen themselves also confirm this tendency (Odochao, Nakashima & Vaddhanaphuti, 2006), with one stating, “The Karen are mostly very shy. When they are being asked something, they’re very shy and they’re not outgoing. In the U.S. People are not shy; whatever they want to say, they say it. They speak very openly” (Cultural Orientation Resource Center (video), 2012). Positively stated, Karen culture promotes a sense of pride for being simple, humble, unassuming, and distant from conflict (Neiman et al., 2008). Karen people are reluctant to talk about themselves, and will often downplay acquired skills in an attempt to show humility (Minnesota Department of Health – Refugee Health Program, 2009). Many Karen have a strong cultural preference of being quiet and

submissive toward those in authority, preferring to not impose personal preferences on others. The Karen tend to be unassertive, and the need for assertiveness in new cultural and educational environments can be quite difficult for them, since they are hesitant to make needs known to those that can address them (Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2012). Public displays of anger or other strong emotions are considered shameful, and to share them openly is seen as prideful (Neiman et al., 2008). Outward expression of distress to those in authority is strongly discouraged, and quiet acceptance of suffering in life is encouraged and seen as laudable. Years of systematic persecution have likely only increased this cultural value (Watkins et al., 2012).

#### Verbal Communication

In regard to communication, the Karen people strongly value modesty and humility in communication, often deferring to others in every possible case (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). They often choose to communicate indirectly, discussing seemingly unrelated subjects first and may even say “no” as a demonstration of modesty (Stratis Health, 2014). Direct or assertive questioning when others are involved is avoided. In fact, assertiveness and overly direct communication is culturally considered prideful and rude (Chapman, n.d.). Many Karen find elements of the Western style of communication, such as directness, interrupting others, loud speech, and emphatic body language, uncomfortable (Neiman et al., 2008). It is very often a principle of courteous conversation to politely refuse up to three times as a demonstration of modesty and humility, even if the topic of conversation is desirable to you (Neiman et al., 2008). Finally, the Karen will often not directly inform you if they disagree or are not

served by a proposed action (Neiman et al., 2008). This is particularly relevant both for the English language instructor and the current study, as unmet needs and relevant questions may not be communicated at all. In most cases, input must be repeatedly invited and actively welcomed as part of corporate responsibility to take action.

### Non-Verbal Communication

Along with the challenges of verbal communication, a number of elements of non-verbal communication can come into play when attempting to involve Karen students in interactive classroom activities. Examples of these kinds of non-verbal elements would be touching the head of another person, pointing fingers or feet at another person, and calling another person with an upraised index finger. All of these actions are considered rude or offensive (Chapman, n.d.). Use of dramatic hand gestures that convey strong emotion is considered rude (Neiman et al., 2008). Something as basic as picking up an object that belongs to another person is considered rude (Chapman, n.d.).

### Cultural Orientation

In terms of general cultural orientation, Karen culture is quite different from the home culture of most instructors, not to mention the broader culture of the United States. More than this, many of the foundation values in Karen culture stand in strong contrast to a number of core values underlying much of CLT. First, Karen culture is strongly person-oriented, rather than time or activity-oriented (Chapman, n.d.). Many Karen see time orientation as rude to the person who gets left behind in order to preserve schedule. In connection with this, the time orientation of much of the educational system of the United States is utterly foreign to them, including the process of goal setting and longer term

planning (Neiman et al., 2008). Secondly, Karen culture is highly corporate in contrast with the deeply individualistic orientation of Western culture. This can be seen most clearly in the area of decision making, where Eastern cultures would be suspicious of a conviction held or decision made by a single person. This stands in contrast to Western portrayals of the single person standing strong against the mistaken majority. Decisions made corporately are viewed as more authoritative than those made individually, whereas Western culture has the exact opposite conviction (Neiman et al., 2008). The Karen individual will defer to the good of the group in nearly every case, even when it involves personal inconvenience or loss. In fact, obtaining input from others and first arriving at a group consensus is an integral part of individual decision making (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). For the Karen, self-expression that promotes community values and cultural identity is fundamentally more important than communication that promotes individual opinions or needs. This communication style helps to prevent disagreements and encourages harmonious interactions (Northeastern Regional Training and Medical Consultation Consortium, 2008). Finally, conflict and disagreement are strongly avoided in Karen culture, and when conflict does happen, it is usually addressed corporately and through an intermediary. This includes what most Americans would likely regard as friendly debate. Generally, conversations about religion, politics, and personal conviction and opinion are engaged in solely within the privacy of family and trusted relationships (Stratis Health, 2014).

#### The Karen People in Saint Paul, Minnesota

While every Karen student in English language courses has an amazing story to

tell, the Karen people corporately have an amazing story of the remarkable transition from the primarily mono-cultural, rural, agrarian life of sub-tropical Southeast Asia to the primarily multicultural, urban, semi-skilled labor lifestyle of the Karen community in Minnesota and the rest of the United States. In many ways, their story is a review of the story of the now well-established Hmong community in Minnesota, which also comes from Southeast Asia and shares a similar cultural framework (United States Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2011).

Following independence from Britain in 1948, the Karen people found themselves as a minority struggling against the largely oppressive rule of the majority Burmese, who sought to minimize the authority, influence, and even the numerical populations of minority peoples within their kingdom (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). After decades of civil war and organized persecution, many Karen lived either as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within Burma itself, or fleeing as refugees into a collection of refugee camps across the border with Thailand. Many Karen lived in refugee camps in Thailand for as many as 20 years until 2005, when the US government waived restrictions and allowed thousands of Karen refugees from Thai refugee camps to resettle as refugees to the United States and other mainly Western nations (Arrive Ministries, 2012).

The largest and fastest growing population of Karen refugees is right here in Saint Paul, Minnesota, with the population estimated at 6500-7500 (Karen Organization of Minnesota, 2009; Marschalk, 2012; Minnesota Department of Health – Refugee Health Program, 2009). Official records show that more than 5,500 refugees from Burma

resettled in Minnesota directly between 2003 and 2013, with more than 1000 coming in 2010 alone (Minnesota Department of Health – Refugee Health Program, 2014a). In addition to these numbers, Minnesota is receiving large numbers of secondary refugees who resettle to Minnesota from other states where they received their initial resettlement. In fact, Minnesota received 500 secondary refugees in 2013 alone (Minnesota Department of Health – Refugee Health Program, 2014b). Currently, there is no official way to track secondary refugees migrating to Minnesota. They usually are reported to the Refugee Health Program by local clinics and other social service providers. Saint Paul is also home to the first Karen-led nonprofit organization in the country, The Karen Organization of Minnesota (established 2008), which had its origins in the Karen Community of Minnesota (KCM), established in 2003 (Karen Organization of Minnesota, 2009). The Karen have found significant help from the older Southeast Asian communities that have become well established in Minnesota, such as the Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese (Tanaka, 2012). Contrary to the Karen population in Burma and Thailand, where approximately 30% of the population are Christian, the Karen refugee population is more than 90% Christian (Minnesota Department of Health – Refugee Health Program, 2009).

In a recent qualitative study investigating barriers to successful resettlement of Karen refugees, Matthews (2102) interviewed eight adult Karen refugees recently resettled to Saint Paul, Minnesota in regards to their experiences. Significant barriers to successful resettlement were found to be English language ability, a push to early employment, lack of educational background, health care, housing, lack of transferable

work skill, and social service complexities. Particularly significant in this study was the finding that English language ability significantly impacted every other area, and in the end becomes the most significant factor. This finding is also confirmed by a 2011 report from the US Government, which states that based on previous research with Hmong refugees admitted to the United States (also primarily to Minnesota), a refugee's education level, transferable work skill, and English language ability before coming to the United States largely determine how they will resettle within the current program structures (United States Office of Refugee Resettlement Annual Report, 2011).

Another study (Margolis, 2012) done in this same context investigated the impact of implementation of contextual right-brain learning activities to 14 low-level ESL students from Southeast Asia. The vast majority (12 of 14) of these subjects were Karen students. This study found that because of the consistent low level of L1 educational background among these students, acquisition of English (L2) was significantly more challenging. This study found that these learners strongly preferred more informal, hands-on, and cooperative group and partner learning activities over and against independent learning activities. There was indication that the need for initiative taking and assertiveness in independent learning activities hindered the language learning progress of these students.

A 2012 longitudinal ethnographic study of 67 adult female Karen refugees in Australia (Watkins, et al. 2012) sought to more clearly quantify barriers to education among this population over a two year period and found that the affective factors of adjustment are often utterly overwhelming and take years to overcome. Factors such as

lack of pre-immigration education, post traumatic stress disorder, experience of previous violence, an alien education system, interaction with unfamiliar persons, and even adjustment to unfamiliar sitting position added to the psycho-social difficulties already being experienced by these women. In addition to these factors, cultural customs and societal impacts of protracted persecution and institutionalization take their toll on many students seeking to participate in educational programs. Particularly relevant in this study were some of the cultural elements that created barriers to study participant's participation in classes. Participants reported a community-wide fear of misunderstanding, particularly by authority figures, which prompted students to choose to remain silent rather than risk misunderstanding or error. Other participants emphasized that inability to complete assignments was a significant stress factor, leading them to simply copy answers from others or have homework done by more proficient English speakers, thereby short-circuiting their own progress in learning. Service providers also confirmed that while there was an almost universal regard of the Karen as 'cooperative' and 'compliant' students, there was an equal frustration with prompting social engagement and assertiveness among Karen students. In many cases, instructors were simply not aware of student needs, or in some cases actively steered away from areas of need by student replies to probing questions. However, when asked how services could be improved, most Karen participants readily gave suggestions to improve programming. Watkins et al. (2012) recommend that instructors be actively aware of Karen passivity and develop strategies to facilitate enhanced communication, even recommending this as the subject of further study. This is, in fact, one of the purposes of the current study.

Over the past decade, medical professionals, social-service organizations, and English language classrooms serving refugees have become more and more familiar with the Karen people, with the vast amount of this knowledge being anecdotal and undocumented. Medical professionals, social-service personnel, and English language instructors have been challenged to come to terms with the Karen people in an effort to provide effective and efficient service to them. Particular to this study, English language teachers need to be prepared to offer effective English language instruction to Karen students.

#### Communicative Language Teaching: What is it?

Given the volume of literature on CLT and the wide variety of recommendations and observations that fly under this banner, it will be good to first clarify in our minds what we are talking about in respect to CLT. It is important to note that the term CLT has now become so broad and so encompassing of various methodologies and activities, that some have declared that CLT has “become a rather vacuous term” (Spada, 2007, p. 271). Confusingly, the terms “approach”, “method”, and “technique” are all used widely in reference to Communicative Language Teaching. However, these concepts are hierarchical and are not mutually interchangeable. An approach is a theory and/or set of assumptions about the nature of language and instruction, but does not involve procedures or details about how those assumptions should be worked out in a classroom setting. A method is an instructional system for presenting the content to be learned, which considers objectives, selection and organization of content, and types of tasks to be performed, based on the given approach. Most specifically, a technique is a specific and

concrete strategy designed to accomplish a clear and immediate goal included in the methodological framework (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Since the literature on CLT encompasses all of these concepts, it is easy to get lost.

### Communicative Language Teaching As Approach

Most generally, CLT is an approach to the nature of language and how that language should be learned in accord with the nature of language. The origin of CLT can be traced back to the 1970s, when there began to be stronger and more pointed criticisms toward the then-current Situational Language Teaching, and the Audiolingual method of language teaching, which focused on memorization and drilling of oft-occurring grammatical structures and bits of language to gain fluency. Despite the passage of time, these methods are still in place in many non-Western contexts. My own language learning in South Asia was deeply influenced by these methods, as my teachers had been trained in that period. Initially in the United Kingdom there began to be a movement to teach language in a way that would more closely correspond to the communicative and functional needs of people living cross-culturally, across cultures and in international organizations and businesses. CLT was triggered from the concept of communicative competence propounded by Hymes in contrast to the grammatical competence of Chomsky that linguistic competence is not the knowledge of grammatical rules but the knowledge of social and cultural norms as well (Hymes, 1972). In the United States, linguists and language teachers began to adapt the goals of their teaching to be more directed toward communicative competence and focused on learner needs. Instruction came to include a strong emphasis on language functions as opposed to the simple form

(Parrish, 2004).

The pioneers of this method Hymes (1972) and Halliday (1970) proposed that the primary function of learning a language is to be able to communicate and interact in the language. Likewise, CLT sees fluency and the ability to communicate in several settings and in a variety of ways at the heart of the teaching and learning process (Parrish, 2004). Unlike previous methods of instruction, CLT holds that the system of language form is best learned via its functional purposes and in the full contextual detail in which students actually encounter language in the world around them. Nunan (2004) sees CLT as an overarching concept - a broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum. There is no single text or technique that can be identified to be universally accepted as authority in CLT. Instead, it encourages the use of variety of materials and teaching methods and techniques that are appropriate to a given context of learning language (Brandl, 2008; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Parrish (2004, p. 31) lists the following seven key principles of CLT which she adopted from Richards and Rodgers (2001):

1. The goal of instruction is learning to communicate effectively and appropriately.
2. Instruction is contextualized and meaning based.
3. Authentic materials are incorporated from the start.
4. Repetition and drilling is used minimally.
5. Learner interaction is maximized; teacher acts as a facilitator of learning.
6. Fluency is emphasized over accuracy
7. Errors are viewed as evidence of learning

### Communicative Language Teaching As Method

More specifically, CLT is a method of teaching language in accordance with its approach to the nature of language. The central aim of CLT is the achievement of functional communicative ability in which the learner is able to actively use language in varying environments (Lee & Vanpatten, 1995). It also seeks to reorient classroom dynamics from the teacher-centered paradigm of transmitting knowledge to the student-centered paradigm of language as functional. The typical syllabus for CLT, therefore is not mainly centered on mastery of subject matter, but is more flexible and centered on students' use of language in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes. The teacher functions as a facilitator between the classroom participants and as a participant within the learning-teaching group. Students take on an active role as they engage in role-plays, discussions and debates, learning to communicate by communicating according to situational need. Bhusan (2010) summarizes, "The role of a language learner in CLT is of a negotiator, learning in an interdependent way. Learner takes a joint responsibility for a failed communication, similarly successful communication is an accomplishment jointly achieved and acknowledged" (p. 69).

In turn, classroom materials make significant use of authentic materials such as news reports, articles and interviews (Parrish, 2004). Classroom activities are driven by genuine use of language in situations that reflect the world outside the classroom to the greatest extent possible, and include all of the variety of response seen in typical uninitiated conversation (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Student learning is integrated with functional needs and language skills are developed in direct context of language use

(Littlewood, 1981). Students are encouraged to develop language forms that most closely correspond to their current language uses and needs, and to take language home with them in particular and relevant ways (Akhtar, 1997). Beginning students can practice expressions such as getting directions, asking for help, greetings, inviting, ordering food at restaurants and requesting. More advanced students may learn to advocate for themselves in the workplace or voice a complaint (Lee & Vanpatten, 1995). In the end, the language development is viewed as an exercise in empowerment, equipping and enabling students to wield their own personalities and contributions in the wider world, while gaining self-confidence, tools for learning, and decision-making skills.

#### Communicative Language Teaching As Technique

Finally and most narrowly, CLT becomes an array of techniques used to teach language in a communicative way. While CLT is not mainly a system of techniques, we will be examining a number of characteristic techniques common in CLT classroom instruction. Generally, anything that promotes real language use in functional situations relevant to student need can serve the purposes of CLT (Lee & Vanpatten, 1995). The central concern becomes that these activities are used in a communicative way. Typical techniques in CLT classrooms would be pair-and-group-work, mingles, project or task-based learning exercises, debates, role-play, problem-solving or discussion sessions, and simulations. In fact, Bhusan (2010) sees CLT activities as falling into two main categories. First, pre-communicative activities seek to develop structural competence and activate student knowledge and resource, and second, communicative activities are functional and socially interactive learning activities.

Apart from the activities in this study, the following are some typical techniques of Communicative Language Teaching instruction. First, integration of authentic materials into language acquisition activities is central to CLT practice (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Authentic materials are encouraged because they contain language used in an authentic and non-pedagogical manner in its genuine context and purpose. Most importantly they relate directly to learners' actual needs and provide a tangible link between the classroom and the outer world (Brandl, 2008). Second, CLT practice endeavors to foster classroom activities which promote communication and language use among the students themselves. Students interact in cooperative pairs or groups to complete a common task and achieve goals through communicative use of the target language. Students interact primarily with one other and then with the teacher (Brandl, 2008; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Group work promotes collaborative learning and enables students to not only hear language used, but to use language themselves and learn in context of a task. Thirdly, CLT strongly incorporates opportunities to engage in high-level thinking and problem solving. Classroom teachers make every effort to enable students to transfer previously developed skills in creativity and critical thinking and link these skills to the new language, activating the use of these skills in the context of a new language (Fisher & Scriven, 1997). Skills of creative thinking include creating something new and original. It also involves skills of flexibility, originality, fluency, brainstorming, modification, imagery and metaphorical thinking. Finally, though CLT emphasizes meaningful use of language in context, it does not neglect the structure and form of language, but seeks to teach these structural elements in context of actual usage. CLT

emphasizes development of targeted learning contexts in which language is accessible to learners via scaffolded activities constructed by both the teacher and the learner. The activities designed should be functional, targeting the needs of learners while move them forward in their understanding of language structure.

The current study has chosen three of the most common classroom techniques of CLT as the subject of participant reflection. First, a mingle or mixer is an activity where a student approaches a classmate, talks for awhile, and then moves on to speak to another. The distinctive feature of a mingle is that all students work simultaneously, in pairs or smaller groups. Once a given task is accomplished or time is indicated by the instructor, the student moves on to select another partner or group (Borzova, 2014). Second, information gap is a technique in which students are missing information needed to complete a given task or problem, and must communicate with classmates to fill in these gaps of information (Nakahama, Tyler, & Van Lier, 2001). Finally, role play activities allow students to develop and practice new language in a relatively safe setting, preparing them for full engagement in the non-simulated activity once confidence is further developed. Students fill a given role in a spoken interaction, often with minimized scripting and a more free use of spoken language (Kodotchigova, 2002).

### Communicative Language Teaching and Culture

While originally designed to address the needs of expatriate persons living in the midst of cross-cultural situations, a perceived lack of interaction with culture and context has become the abiding conversation regarding CLT. Culture can be described as a set of attitudes, values, and convictions that give meaning to what is encountered in the world.

Lederach (1995, pg.9) states, “Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them”. Since culture so deeply influences how we perceive and organize the world around us, it should be no surprise that differing cultural frameworks can deeply impact the categories and values surrounding language and learning. Since cultural values are shared with others of like race, language, or affinity, they can be very challenging to come to terms with or recognize in ourselves. Unless one is exposed to the frameworks of others, they may assume that their cultural convictions are transcendent reality or “common sense” rather than the outflow of an underlying set of values and convictions about the world. The same can be true of the values surrounding language and learning. Those that have been exposed mainly to the values and assumptions surrounding one language or framework can see these things as universally true of all systems and languages.

While instructors are increasingly aware of the need to equip learners with the tools needed to understand languages in their own cultural context and navigate differences presented to them (Suntharesan, 2013), language instructors must also be adequately equipped to do the work of cultural analysis themselves, if they are to foster this ability in their students and provide relevant instruction. (Mazlaveckiene, 2014) The call is being raised for instructors to target instruction to compensate for cultural values among certain populations and cultural frameworks, including the Karen people. (Watkins et al., 2012) These underlying cultural convictions and values can deeply affect what is viewed as valuable in teaching and learning, demeanor, appropriateness of

listening and speaking, and even the process of requesting information. Shafaei (2008, p. 227) observes, “Understanding the students' home culture is vital for understanding basic aspects of their behaviours both in and out of the classroom, including language related behaviours. Different cultures have varying standards of what is and is not acceptable or respectful behaviours. Silence versus talking, touching, smiling, eye contact, competition versus cooperation, leadership roles, and expectations of the teacher's role can all differ depending on standards of a culture. Differences between a teachers' culture and that of students' can create conflicts and misunderstanding.” (Shafaei, 2008)

These mismatches of culture, while not insurmountable, add to the significant challenge that language learners face. In a study of the cultural dispositions of Arab, Japanese, and American students, Kuroda and Suzuki (1991) found significant disconnect in the cultural values and communication patterns of the three cultures generally. They found central values of American students to be characterized by individualism, optimism, assertiveness, and paternalism. They found central values of Arab culture to be characterized by industry, nationalism, efficiency, decisive, and tradition centered. Finally, they found Japanese students responded in ways that characterized responses as corporate, contextual, non-directive, and conscientious. (Kuroda & Suzuki, 1991)

While some have announced the end of CLT in favor of new methods which account for the cultural context (Bax, 2003), it is clear that Communicative Language Teaching has much to offer, and has become the default methodology in thousands of organizations and schools. However, it has not been spared from steady criticism, particularly in the realm of its relevance outside of a Western cultural framework. There

can be significant disconnect in cultural values for some learners, and if inadequate consideration to the culture of learners is paid, students can experience significant dissatisfaction and become highly disinterested or even demotivated by what they see as ineffective classroom leadership or teaching (Holliday, 1994). This can be particularly true in cultures with highly developed articulations of the culture of learning and teaching, such as China, Japan, or India. (Hu, 2002; McKay, 2004)

Much of the debate related to CLT has focused on the issues of cultural appropriateness whether of context or content (Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2004; Hu, 2002; Pennycook, 1989; Canagarajah, 1993; and Yang, 2003). Further, implementation of CLT in various EFL contexts has faced challenges (see, for example, Anderson 1993; Bhatia 2003; Cheng 2002; Dam & Gabrielsen 1988; Li 1998; LoCastro 1996; Nunan 1993; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999; Savignon, 2003; Yano 2003). Yet, even its critics suggest that CLT has much to offer if it is employed after an analysis of a specific learning context. (Bax, 2003) Kumaravadivelu (2001, p. 538) comments, “The most important aspect of post-method pedagogy is its peculiarity. This is to say that any post-method pedagogy must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular context embedded in a particularly socio-cultural milieu”. By definition, pedagogy must be contextualized to a particular set of learners in a particular place, or it runs the risk of being irrelevant and unhelpful.

A number of studies have underlined the reality that while CLT is understood to be the norm in many environments, it faces a number of issues in intercultural environments. These studies found that a number of issues, including lack of training and

teacher confidence in Bangladesh and Uzbekistan (Chowdhury, 2012; Hassanova & Shadieva, 2008), disconnect with local cultural values of interpersonal space and contact in Iran (Shafaei, 2008), its tendency to opt out of the benefits of perceived strengths of other learning methods in Thailand and Iran (Kirkpatrick & Ghaemi, 2011), disconnect with Confucian values of teaching and learning in China (Hu, 2002), and mismatch in professed attitudes toward these methods and active practice and student expectation in Oman and China. (Al-Makhlafi, 2011; Wong, 2012)

In a study of Arab students entering Western universities, Alghazo (2000) observes that teacher and student roles in the US are set up such that the teacher is a facilitator. It is up to students to choose what sources they actually read and research that the teacher has provided. In other words, students play a major role in the learning process rather than being dictated what to learn. In Arab countries, however, teachers play an authoritarian role and the role of leader. Students rely mainly on memorization. During exams they are to rewrite and retell what has been memorized. Therefore, students in Arab countries are very dependent upon teachers, since it is the teacher who tells the student what to learn. Students learn to rely on the heavy guidance of teachers in their home environment, and face issues of isolation and anxiety when it becomes their responsibility to research and learn on their own. Students in Arab countries are not motivated or encouraged to interact or participate or disagree with teachers' views, which can even be considered "rude". These findings are in strong agreement with studies done in China (Hu, 2002), Pakistan (Akhtar, 1997; Akram & Mahmood, 2011), and Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2012).

Thus, we can see that while CLT remains current and highly relevant to English language teaching practice, questions have been raised as to its relevance for non-Western learners, particularly where students share a dominant cultural consensus. Now, we will turn to a number of more recent studies that attempt to examine some of these challenges, and make further attempts to suggest adjustments that need to be made to CLT practice for particular cultural contexts.

### Contextualizations of CLT

With a steady stream of studies coming out in the 1990s and into the 2000s questioning the relevance of CLT for the EFL and non-Western context, a number of recent studies have attempted to respond by examining the relevance of CLT methodologies in particular EFL contexts. What follows are summaries of some of these studies. While no studies were available in regards to Burma itself, the following studies were chosen as representative of cultures that vary significantly from Western culture and their attempts to come to terms with the implementation of CLT in their context.

Abbas et al. (2011) conducted interviews with thirty English language teachers, belonging to eight Pakistani universities and found wide consensus among the participants that CLT, while valuable and effective, needed to be modified and acculturated to be relevant to their context. Participants agreed that local culture must be given importance in the framework of CLT. It must serve as the starting point for the whole language learning process, and must be integrated in content, material and skills. Participants also highlighted the need for teachers training programs to include cultural courses as an integral component. Abbas et al. (2011, p. 338) conclude that, “If local

culture is given appropriate importance, it can be an authentic aid rather than a hindrance in language learning. Thus, language can function effectively only when we know the culture of the society in which we are communicating.”

Also in Pakistan, Akram and Mahmood (2011) demonstrate the wide neglect of Communicative Language Teaching among 200 primary teachers (75 male and 125 female) of Sargodha district, Punjab, Pakistan who were attending training programs. Participants were all active teachers aged 22-27 years. They conclude that the lack of teacher training equipping these teachers to use communicative methodologies is leading to widespread non-professionalism and near complete disinterest in communicative activities by their students.

McKay (2011) sought to evaluate the implementation of CLT methodologies in English language instruction by the Government of Bangladesh. After studying both government schools and schools run by NGOs in Bangladesh, McKay found that while there was a general lack of implementation of communicative methods in both types of schools, there remained evidence that where communicative methods were practiced and used, students did in fact show improvements in communicative ability.

Al-Jadidi (2009) conducted 10 classroom observations and interviewed 11 classroom teachers in English classrooms in Oman regarding their pedagogical methods. The bilingual English/Arabic teachers were more teacher-centered, relied more heavily on the use of textbooks, focused more on the teaching of grammar and used less varied techniques of instruction and engagement than did the monolingual English teachers. On the other hand, the monolingual teachers, while they were more learner-centered and

incorporated more communicative, interactive lessons and activities, seemed to be less successful in classroom management and focus less on accuracy, grammar and lexis than their Arabic-speaking counterparts.

Woods and Cakir (2011) studied the development of knowledge and beliefs in regards to CLT in six newly-graduated Turkish English language teachers. They all had participated in at least one-term teacher training which included observing EFL classes, and a year-long practicum where they taught EFL classes. Both the teachers' knowledge of CLT practice was examined, as well as their responses following the observation of CLT in practice (three videotaped lessons by a Canadian teacher). The researchers found that, when elicited in this manner, all the teachers “impersonally” resorted to almost reciting the stereotypical characteristics of communicative language teaching that had been verbalized in the literature and taught in their courses. They used this “abstract” knowledge when they were asked more conceptual and out-of-context questions about the characteristics and premises of communicative language teaching. However, there was nonetheless an important element of personalization that occurred when their own personal beliefs played a role in their choice of which aspects of communicativeness to emphasize. The study makes evident that theoretical and non-personal teacher knowledge, as derived from the literature and teacher education courses, is highly valued and considered “correct” but, at the same time, is isolated from the teachers' experiences and is not fully related to their actual teaching context. However, once it is connected to the more fine-grained texture of actual experience, the theoretical concept is deconstructed, personalized and reinterpreted.

Savignon and Wang (2003) sought to evaluate the implementation of CLT methodologies by the Taiwan Ministry of Education by looking at learner attitudes and perceptions toward both meaning-based / form-focused classroom practices and more communicative / competence-focused classroom practices. One hundred seventy four freshman students from two Taipei universities, 105 female students and 69 male students responded to a questionnaire designed to reflect their attitudes and beliefs about English language learning, in general, and their recollections of experiences with EFL instructional practices in secondary school in particular. Findings showed both that there was a mismatch between learner needs and preferences and their reported experience of actual classroom instruction, and that learners showed interest in communicative language teaching methodologies being slowly implemented in their classrooms.

Li (2008) examined the effectiveness of CLT teaching strategies in a Chinese university setting by surveying twenty English language teachers and 50 sophomore English language students' attitudes toward CLT methodology used in their courses. Data showed that CLT methods were both well received and highly effective in improving student language proficiency. In particular, both teachers and students rated role-play and pair work very highly among CLT strategies considered. Further, the author advocates for wider implementation of CLT methods in Chinese university English language courses. In particular she references early resistance to CLT methodology on the basis of teacher resistance and initial negative response by students. It appears that this resistance is beginning to break down and that CLT methodology is beginning to prove itself in this setting. However, recent studies observe that while CLT is more widely accepted

generally, the actual implementation of it may not correspond to this (Wong, 2012).

Also from the Chinese context, Hu (2002) documented the significant disconnect between the underlying values of CLT and the Confucian model of learning and teaching that still underlies much of the educational system in China to this day. The nature of knowledge, roles and expectations for student and teacher, and the expectation and development of precision all create difficulties for instructors using CLT methods in this context, as well as students' experience of these classroom methods. The author recommends that these “pedagogical imports” be carefully scrutinized before implementation to help bypass the resistance to these methods with both students and their instructors.

#### Research Gap and Niche

Since its introduction, Communicative Language Teaching has become the dominant model of English language instruction. Despite questions of the actual extent to which it is put into practice (Al-Makhafi, 2011; McKay, 2011; Wong, 2012), it has become the standard to which all other models are compared. However, there has been a long-standing discussion regarding the relevance of CLT in classrooms dominated by non-Western values (Abbas et al., 2011; Al-Mekhafi, 2011; Bax, 2003; Hu, 2002; Yano, 2003). Generally, this conversation has occurred in the realm of EFL instruction. However, there is no reason to believe that once resettled populations arrive in a new location, cultural values immediately change. A number of attempts have been made to address adjustments that should be made to the implementation of CLT in a given cultural environment (Abbas et al., 2011; Woods & Cakir, 2011), however these have been almost

exclusively in the EFL context.

In order to provide relevant and effective English language instruction to populations of resettled refugees, language instructors need to be aware of areas where their instruction may need to be adjusted so as not to conflict with the cultural values of their students. In nearly every case, these students are already dealing with a host of barriers to their language acquisition, and effective English language instruction will make every effort to eliminate or reduce these barriers. While English language instructors have a growing body of experience with Karen English language learners (ELLs), there has not been a growing body of literature to benefit from and communicate this knowledge to others.

This study seeks the feedback of Karen ESL learners regarding their experience of classroom activities based solidly within the CLT methodology,. With this in mind, there are three questions guiding this research. 1) *Which aspects of Communicative Language Teaching do intermediate adult Karen English language learners value?* 2) *How do Karen learners describe their experience of three typical Communicative Language Teaching activities?* 3) *What adjustments do these learners suggest making to these three learning activities to ensure that they are relevant and helpful to Karen students?*

### Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed the current literature concerning the Karen people of Burma, the entrance of the Karen to the ESL context of Saint Paul, Minnesota, CLT and its central activities, and the impact of culture in implementation of CLT. A current gap in the literature has been found in respect to the impact of Karen cultural preferences

on implementation of CLT activities in ESL classrooms. In Chapter One, I discussed the need of documenting the language learning experience of Karen students, as well as some of the valuable lessons learned in connection with instructing Karen ELLs. Through this study, I intend to listen to the language learning experiences of Karen ELLs with respect to culture. I want to document key areas of need for engagement between Karen cultural preferences and patterns and ESL classroom instruction. Three central questions guide this study. 1) *Which aspects of Communicative Language Teaching do intermediate adult Karen English language learners value?* 2) *How do Karen learners describe their experience of three typical Communicative Language Teaching activities?* 3) *What adjustments do these learners suggest making to these three learning activities to ensure that they are relevant and helpful to Karen students?* Chapter Three will describe the methodology and research framework used to answer the questions addressed in this study.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve a more relevant and effective language learning experience for Karen ELLs, this study is designed to explore some of the cultural preferences of Karen people that impact the implementation of Communicative Language Theory methods in ESL classrooms. With this in mind, three questions guide the current study. 1) *Which aspects of Communicative Language Teaching do intermediate adult Karen English language learners value?* 2) *How do Karen learners describe their experience of three typical Communicative Language Teaching activities?* 3) *What adjustments do these learners suggest making to these three learning activities to ensure that they are relevant and helpful to Karen students?* In order to answer these research questions, I conducted a Values Assessment and short questionnaires of adult Karen participants studying in an English Language program run by a small social-service organization at one of their branch locations. In this chapter, I describe the research paradigm, present the method of analysis, describe the participants, examine their learning environment, and look at data collection techniques and procedures used in this study.

### Research Design

The present study attempts to uncover cultural beliefs and perceptions of adult Karen students studying in an English Language program and their attitudes towards CLT. Since our aim is data regarding feelings, experience, perceptions, convictions, and

personal conclusions in connection with CLT, a qualitative research method will be used. Thus, data will be presented in the form of narrative responses to open-ended questions and categories of commonality in participants' responses, rather than by means of statistical analysis.

Qualitative research represents understanding about people's own experiences, their interpretation of these experiences and the meaning they attribute to them (Merriam, 2009). Data that results from a qualitative study is not easily analyzed by means of statistical methods often used in quantitative or experimental studies, since the data is not normally numerical. Qualitative data usually takes the form of responses to surveys, questionnaires, interview items, diary entries, or observation notes. Thus, the analysis of this data is most often interpretive, and not statistical. Mackey and Gass (2005) term the data collected in a qualitative research as "soft data". Qualitative research is very often process-based and discovery-oriented, meaning that research questions are not nearly so pointed as in quantitative research, but seek to uncover meaning and significance of data in the process of the study. Another important characteristic of a qualitative study is that it seeks to look at its subject within the rich detail of context and diversity. This stands in contrast with the attempt to isolate as many variables as possible, which is common in quantitative studies. Qualitative methods seem particularly appropriate to seek to document cultural sensitivities that would be impossible to document with quantitative methods and numerical data, since much of the content of these convictions is not directly observable or measurable.

### Participants and Location

The 12 participants in this study were level 3-4 (high beginning / low intermediate) adult ESL learners who studied English 20 hours per week in a common classroom. All participants had been active participants in current classes for a minimum of two months previous to the study. Classes were held Monday through Friday from 9:15 A.M to 1:15 P.M. These timings include a 30-minute lunch period. All participants were adult Karen students from Burma and/or Thailand, with the majority of them having seven to ten years of formal L1 education. Participants were drawn from a common classroom, level 3-4 ESL instruction, to ensure consistency of exposure to like activities. They ranged in age from 21 to 67. In total, seven men and five women participated. Each participant was assigned a number to ensure that their identity was protected and their responses were assured to be anonymous. (See Table 3.1 below for more detailed information).

The data collection for this study took place over a period of ten days of classroom instruction at an adult ESL learning and social services center in Saint Paul, Minnesota. This center has been in operation for nine years and has served 1660 students. The larger entity that operates this center operates a total of five such centers, served by both salaried and volunteer teachers. There were approximately 85 active students at this center at the time of the study, with roughly 75% of them being from Southeast Asia. The site operates six instructional levels in five classrooms: Beginning Literacy, Level 2 ESL, Level 3-4 ESL, Level 5-6 ESL, and GED. A variety of ethnic groups are represented at the learning center, however a large percentage of learners at this center were Karen

refugees from Burma and/or Thailand. In fact, this center has traditionally served a majority of learners from Southeast Asia in its nine years of service (exceeding 60% of its' entire student population). Most of the learners had resided in the United States for four years or less. Research was conducted during classroom hours with the permission and cooperation of the classroom teacher.

The particular level 3-4 classroom from which student participants were drawn exhibits a strongly routine-based weekly pattern of instruction based on functional month-long units of language. During the author's initial classroom observation, students were in the midst of a health-based unit in preparation for an interactive language experience in which doctors and nurses would come and do a health clinic simulation at the site. During the week of assessment for the study the topic was jobs and employment. The classroom generally has a predictable weekly classroom routine designed to give students a safe environment in which to develop language skill. Communicative activities are integrated with basic targeted grammar topics and a weekly story that provides the framework for weekly learning goals. The three activities used for the current study were selected in coordination with the classroom instructor to be good examples of CLT. Each communicative activity was experienced on a separate day in the classroom schedule, but targeted the same themed weekly story given for the week.

#### Ethical Matters

Permission to conduct the study at this location and with these participants was acquired from both the Human Subjects Committee of Hamline University, as well as the site supervisor of the social service organization running the center where classes were

held. All participants were supplied with a letter of informed consent in which it was made clear that participation in the study was not a required part of their course and they were entirely free to not participate in the study if they or their families wished them not to participate. Signed letters of consent were collected from all participants. Participants' identity and privacy were protected by use of participant numbers in lieu of participant names. All documents and digital recordings were securely stored on the researcher's encrypted personal computer. Digital recordings were securely deleted once they had been transcribed.

### Procedures

Each of the three communicative activity questionnaires was conducted in respect to a particular activity experienced the same day in the students' classroom routine. Since all students experience the very same teaching exercise in the very same classroom from the same instructor, this ensures that responses all respond to the same item of reference to greatest degree, minimizing the possibility of confusion related to the aspect of our questioning. Questions to be answered on the questionnaire were provided to students ahead of time to aid analysis. Activities were carefully selected in coordination with the classroom teacher to be activities with a strong communicative focus, well in line with central values of CLT. This coordination was done after a full week of observation in this classroom by the researcher.

The three communicative activities included in this study took place in the learners' classroom during the second week of May, 2015. Classroom instruction was in the midst of a unit focusing on job related themes and functional activities. The weekly

focus was on finding a job and interviewing for a job. Each activity took 30 minutes or less to complete. Upon completion of each activity, participants were asked to conduct individual private interviews with the researcher based on a questionnaire developed for each activity. Each questionnaire explored strengths / difficulties experienced during the given activity, as well as classroom preferences of these students in respect to such activities. A Karen-speaking interpreter was recruited to help participants understand questions and formulate answers if they needed assistance. The following week, the Karen-language values assessment was conducted by the same Karen-speaking interpreter. Questionnaire interviews took between 5 and 15 minutes, with demographic information being completed only at the time of first assessment. Of the included participant assessments, only two were conducted at a different time than all of the others, and the results of these assessments are completely consistent with other findings.

#### Communicative Activities

##### Mingle Activity, May 5, 2015: Job Match / Application Time

Students were given a prompt card with two colored sides with exercise information. The yellow side had a job that they would be seeking. The orange side had a job that they were offering to others, as well as a time that applications were to be submitted for that job. The goal of this activity was for students to take a given job that they were seeking and inquire from other students who were offering to hire as to whether they were looking for that particular job role (doctor, teacher, caseworker, cook). If there was no match, they would politely dismiss from one another. If there was a match, the students would then negotiate appropriate times to come and fill out an

application. Students spoke to others and recorded five matches on a conversation grid for use in a follow-up writing activity that immediately followed this one.

Information Gap Pairing Activity, May 6, 2015: Job Match / Availability

Students were given a prompt card containing a job role that they were either seeking (I am a cook), or offering (I need a cook), along with times that they were available to work during the week. The goal of this activity was for students to find their respective partner by speaking to others and determining whether that person was a match for the job and also the time available for work. Each student had information that matched only one other student in respect to both role and time. Only four job roles and five timings were used, making it possible that the job role would match, but not the timing. Once students found their partner, they were given a job application form to complete using the given information and their personal information. This activity was used as a pairing activity for another activity that followed after it.

Role Play Activity, May 7, 2015: Job Fair/ Recruiter Match

In this activity, students were first given a sample job classified listing, along with a job they were seeking. Students first needed to use the skill of skimming or scanning for information to find the few jobs that were relevant to their skills and availabilities. Employer information was given in the classified ad. The goal of this activity was for the student to first selectively filter information to find the appropriate job for them and then initiate a request with the appropriate employer. One of five different classroom volunteers received inquiries from students and determined whether the students job role and availability / experience was a fit for the job according to their prompt cards. Once a

match was found, employers requested applicant information from the prompt card, and then asked students to complete the job application.

#### Values Assessment

Finally, participants completed a values assessment, which was not connected to any particular classroom activity, but instead to their attitudes and convictions about learning language in this setting. This assessment was developed in Karen language and provided 25 statements regarding language learning and classroom preferences that reflect the foundational values of CLT. Participants were asked to indicate whether they would agree or disagree with the given statement in Karen language. The assessment was performed in Karen by the interpreter with no English speaking person present in order to most accurately reflect the actual sentiments of participants apart from the effects of the Cultural Adjustment Hypothesis, in which subjects subconsciously shift their answers to more closely reflect the cultural values of the language of the assessment instrument.

#### Data Collection

Since our first research question has to do with values underlying the entire process of language learning, while the second and third research questions are in respect to the implementation of particular communicative activities, data was collected for the current study by means of two types of instruments.

#### Values Assessment

In an effort to answer the first research question, *Which aspects of Communicative Language Teaching do intermediate adult Karen English language learners value?*, participants were given a values assessment. The values assessment consisted of 25

statements with which they were expected to indicate “agree” or “disagree”. (See Appendix A – Values Assessment). The values assessment was developed by turning some of the most common key central values and conclusions in regard to CLT into statements. Topics included statements about the functional nature of language acquisition, authentic materials, error correction, teacher-role, student-centered classroom dynamics, etc. Participants were asked to respond to these statements either by indicating “agree” or “disagree”. These statements were presented to participants in Karen language in an effort to bypass the “cultural accommodation hypothesis” in which respondents subconsciously adjust their responses to reflect the cultural values associated with the language of the question. (Harzing & Salciuviene, 2005) The intention of this assessment is to gauge whether value statements underlying CLT are agreeable to these learners. Participants were presented with the 25 statements written in Karen language. The interpreter read each statement twice, asking participants to respond with “agree” or “disagree”. Between each statement, the interpreter made a pause of 15 seconds. This allowed participants to reread and consider each statement before responding.

#### Communicative Activity Questionnaires

In respect to the second and third research questions in the present study, 2) *How do Karen learners describe their experience of three typical Communicative Language Teaching activities?* and 3) *What adjustments do these learners suggest making to these three learning activities to ensure that they are relevant and helpful to Karen students?*, participants were given questionnaires in respect to three communicative activities in which they participated in their classroom. Data was collected by means of a

questionnaire asking participants to provide answers to questions ranging from items about personal information (age, educational background, class level, etc.) to core questions regarding perceptions and opinions towards a communicative activity done in class. A questionnaire is any written instrument that contains a series of questions or statements to which the participants of the study respond to either by writing out their answers or by selecting most appropriate option among the existing answers (Brown, 2001). The questionnaire format was selected since the aim of research involves convictions, opinions, and perceptions that may vary significantly from individual to individual. In second language research, questionnaires allow researchers to gather the information such as participants' beliefs, motivation and reactions to learning and classroom instruction and activities (Mackey & Gass, 2005). All questions regarding the communicative classroom activities were initially open-ended because I felt that it was important to allow participants to phrase their responses in their own words in order to discern level of conviction and chosen nuance of expression. Open-ended items allow participants to relate their own thoughts and ideas in their own manner, and thus may provide a deeper, unexpected and insightful data (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Since these participants were currently level 3-4 (high-beginning/low-intermediate) learners, they were not expected to write answers, but were given the freedom to respond to questions verbally. Since the process of writing would have likely created an additional barrier to participant response, transcription of response was chosen. Also due to the level of these learners, questions had to be adjusted to facilitate ability to answer effectively. Since the first questionnaire proved difficult for participants in formulating answers to fully open-

ended questions, a number of questions and the second and third questionnaires were adjusted to be more concrete and give students parameters with which to formulate answers. A Karen interpreter was also available to help rephrase questions for participants or aid them in providing answers in English.

Dornyei (2003) sees three types of data questionnaires can yield about respondents. First, factual questions provide demographic information that is often helpful in later analysis and organization of resulting data. Second, behavioral questions aim to reveal participant patterns of activity and behaviors and seek to find out what respondents have done, or are currently doing. Finally, attitudinal questions provide data regarding attitudes, opinions, beliefs, interests, and values. As might be expected, varying kinds of questions produce varying ranges of answers. Thus, a question regarding educational experience can only produce a certain range of resulting answers, while a question regarding the value of student to student interaction will likely produce a much wider variety of responses, and increased nuance of language.

The questionnaire developed for this present study covers all three areas cited above. First, participants are asked to provide basic factual demographic information about themselves. Secondly, the questionnaire then turns to experiential information such as activity challenges and benefits. Finally, the questionnaire asks open-ended attitudinal questions regarding participant perceptions regarding cultural and/or behavioral hurdles that they encounter in their experience of these communicative activities in their courses.

Participants were asked to complete questionnaires in response to particular classroom activities. Three questionnaires were done for three separate activities during

the course of a common unit of teaching over the space of one week. This was done to ensure that responses were not simply responses to one particular activity, but to a type of teaching expressed through a number of activities. This enables us to compare responses to the activities overall to look for larger themes, as well as to each individual activity. All questions were initially identical and open-ended for each questionnaire in order to allow participants freedom to express their beliefs and perceptions. However, a number of questions were modified on the second and third questionnaires following the initial questionnaire to help foster student responses, since participants at this learning level seemed to struggle with fully open-ended questions. Thus, questions were modified to present participants with a multiple choice format, with the opportunity to add their further comments after indicating one of the choices. Questions were provided ahead of time to aid participant awareness during the activity. For each activity, participants were first asked to identify the element that was most helpful in that given activity. Second, participants were asked to identify a few key factors or points preventing them from being comfortable in that given activity in their classroom. Finally, participants were asked to identify barriers that may affect the use of the given activity and/or propose adjustments that could be made to the given technique to make it more effective and relevant.

### Research Data Analysis

While the resulting data from these responses might even be interesting in a narrative way to help us benefit from the perspective and personal experience of any given participant, the most beneficial use of the data comes when responses to like

questions are compared with one another to show both areas of agreement and areas with diversity of response. Areas of agreement will show us significant factors that are discerned by numerous participants and point to vital issues that must be addressed and come to terms with. Areas with a diversity of response will show us aspects that apply to certain types of people or certain aspects particularly present in the minds of some participants.

Once the data was fully collected from all participants, the work of analysis began. Initially, all responses were fully read and notes were taken regarding general themes apart from any actual coding of participant responses. This was done to allow the entirety of the collected data to speak regarding the largest and most significant themes that were most oft repeated. This was also done to make sure that the responses analyzed at the beginning of coding did not color and overly influence those that were coded at the end. These largest themes in each set of responses were then noted particularly to ensure that discussion of these themes would be particularly included in each given section of the analysis and discussion. No analysis of responses was done until all questionnaires were completed and ready for analysis to ensure that no one set of responses served to determine or direct the thinking of the research simply because it was completed first. Also, questionnaires were analyzed in a randomized order for each individual item to ensure that no one participant overly influenced the processing of responses because it was analyzed first or last.

Once themes were identified for each item, responses were coded for particular themes and totals were calculated regarding the prevalence of given themes for each item

on the questionnaire. Particularly similar themes were grouped together to form larger themes and titled accordingly. Themes that were most prevalent for each item are treated initially and more formally in the discussion sections of this paper. Data analysis done in this way served to highlight themes that participants saw as primary, and ensured that agreement among participants was reflected in the reporting of research findings.

#### Verification of Data

In an effort to provide data that was as fully reliable as possible in the current study, the following measures were taken. First, participants were all drawn from a single classroom and experienced the same communicative activities at the same time in an effort to prevent difference in implementation of activities or teacher presentation from skewing the data. Second, the Values Assessment was presented to participants in their own language in an effort to prevent any effect of the Cultural Adjustment Hypothesis in the answering of questions regarding underlying values. Third, communicative activity questionnaires were provided in respect to three separate communicative activities in an effort to prevent response to any one activity from skewing data. Finally, data was collected using two separate instruments in differing formats in an effort to prevent any single instrument from shaping response inordinately.

#### Summary

In this chapter, I have set for the research method as a qualitative study using a participant questionnaire as the central research instrument. I have given rationale regarding the types of questions used in the research instrument I have used to collect data and given reasons as to why I think that this instrument is the most appropriate tool for

me to collect the data in the given circumstances. The chapter contains some brief details about the participants and setting in which the data is collected. I also discussed the process that was used to analyze and code the resulting data. The resulting data should give us an picture of Karen English language learners perceptions of the barriers to participating in CLT based activities in their classrooms. Chapter Four of this capstone will present the analysis and interpretation of the data collected.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

In order to ensure effective and relevant English language instruction for adult Karen language learners, this study was designed to explore the experience of a selection of these learners and their interaction with some common communicative activities used in their classroom. Data were collected using a qualitative research approach using participant questionnaires / interviews during regular classroom hours. The participants took part in three communicative activities during the normal flow of their weekly classroom routine; collection instruments included three questionnaires each correlating to one of the communicative activities in which they participated, followed by a Karen-language values assessment made up of 25 statements to which participants were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the given statement. Three questions guide this study. 1) *Which aspects of Communicative Language Teaching do intermediate adult Karen English language learners value?* 2) *How do Karen learners describe their experience of three typical Communicative Language Teaching activities?* 3) *What adjustments do these learners suggest making to these three learning activities to ensure that they are relevant and helpful to Karen students?* In this chapter, I will present the findings of the Values Assessment with reference to the first question that guides the current study. I will then present the findings of the communicative activity questionnaires with reference to the second and third questions that guide the current

study.

The study took place in the level 3-4 English language classroom of a small social service organization. Approximately half of the students registered in this level come from Burma (19 students), with the vast majority of those being of Karen descent (15 students). The participants in the present study included 12 adult Karen English language learners. While 15 Karen students participated at least in part in the study, four of these students missed two or more activity assessments and three missed the Values Assessment. Eleven students gave full participation in the activities study, however it was decided in partnership with the classroom teacher that two students would be omitted from the study results because they were within the first ten days of attending classes at this level and location. All participants were Karen L1 speakers. Of the activities study participants who remain consistent throughout all assessments, five were male and four were female. Their ages ranged from 25 to 67 years (average: 46.5 years, median: 45 years). They had lived in the United States between two months and seven years at the time of the study (average: 28.4 months, median: 14 months, mode: 12 months), while their stay in Minnesota ranged from two months to four years (average: 21 months, median: 14 months, mode: 12 months) . Previous education in their country of origin ranged from four to ten years, with the majority of the participants having either seven or ten years of previous education. They had been involved in English language courses at this location between one and 24 months (average: 7.7 months, median: 7 months). Finally, they had been participants in their present classroom between one and 24 months (average: 6.5 months, median: 4 months, mode: 8 months). (See Table 4.1 for detailed

participant demographic information).

Table 4.1

Participant Demographic Information for Activity Assessments

<i>Participant #</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Months in USA</i>	<i>Months in MN</i>	<i>Previous Education</i>	<i>Months at location</i>	<i>Months in this class</i>
<i>1</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>7 years</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>7 years</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>3</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>67</i>	<i>84</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>7 years</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>10 years</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>5</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>10 years</i>	<i>1.5</i>	<i>1.5</i>
<i>6</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>7 years</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>7</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>10 years</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>8</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>8 years</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>11</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>4 years</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>8</i>

Since the values assessment was not linked to a particular classroom activity or classroom, all Karen L1 speaking participants who completed the assessment in Karen language have been included for a total of 12 participants. All nine participants that submitted data for the activities assessments are included in the twelve participants here, with three other participants who were not able to submit full sets of assessments for the remainder of the study or were omitted for other reasons. Apart from age (average age: 29.6 years) and time in the present classroom (average: 3.3 months), these participants fall squarely within the parameters previously described for all participants. See Table 4.2 for demographic information on participants of the values assessment.

Table 4.2

## Participant Demographic Information for Values Assessment

<i>Participant #</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Months in USA</i>	<i>Months in MN</i>	<i>Previous Education</i>	<i>Months at location</i>	<i>Months in this class</i>
1	Male	40	48	48	7 years	2	2
2	Male	60	24	20	7 years	1	1
3	Male	67	84	24	7 years	24	24
4	Female	38	12	12	10 years	3	3
5	Female	25	2	2	10 years	1.5	1.5
6	Female	45	12	12	7 years	9	4
7	Male	55	12	12	10 years	10	8
8	Female	52	14	14	8 years	7	7
9	Female	28	2	2	10 years	1	1
10	Male	40	48	48	7 years	4	1
11	Male	37	48	48	4 years	12	8
12	Male	21	9	9	10 years	8	8

## Findings

Results for Question One

The first question guiding the current study is *Which aspects of Communicative Language Teaching do intermediate adult Karen English language learners value?* In order to answer this question, the participants were asked to take a values assessment. The values assessment was made up of 25 statements (e.g. I feel afraid to ask a question in front of the class) with which the participants were asked to indicate 'agree' or 'disagree'. (See Appendix A – Values Assessment). Karen participants performed this assessment in the Karen language with the Karen interpreter. The assessment was translated into Karen language and checked via back translation for fidelity. No 'outsider'

was present when participants responded to these statements in an effort to enable Karen participants to give their most unhindered and authentic responses.

Participant responses for the values assessment have been grouped into coded categories so that statements on similar themes are grouped together for analysis. Items with the agreement of twelve or eleven participants were considered strongly agreed or disagreed. Items with the agreement of ten or nine participants were considered moderately agreed or disagreed. Items with the agreement of eight or seven participants were considered mildly agreed or disagreed.

#### Teacher role.

CLT seeks to reorient classroom dynamics from the teacher-centered paradigm of transmitting knowledge to the student-centered paradigm of language facilitator, guiding students through opportunities to use language in genuine contexts and offering pointed and contextual grammatical instruction and error correction. In an effort to discern whether Karen students share these values, the following questions were asked.

Statement Two – I want the teacher to tell me every time I make a mistake. There was mild agreement with this statement, with eight participants agreeing with the statement and four disagreeing. It is likely that the strong phrasing of this statement ('every time I make a mistake') gave some participants pause. This seems to indicate that while a majority of participants want maximum error checking and involvement from classroom instructors, this is not a universal for all participants. It should also be noted that while many learners may indicate eagerness for constant error correction, attention should be paid to their actual response when error correction is given.

Statement Three – I want to listen to the teacher explain how to say things correctly. There was unanimous agreement with this statement by all participants, strongly suggesting that they value a central place for teacher instruction in their classroom.

Statement Thirteen – It is best for the teacher to just tell me the best way to say things. There was strong agreement with this statement, with 11 participants agreeing and only one indicating disagreement. This strongly suggests that participants regard the classroom teacher as a central place for reference in terms of speech and pronunciation.

Statement Seventeen – The most important thing is to study and remember what the teacher says. There was strong agreement with this statement by participants, with 10 agreeing and 2 disagreeing. This seems to indicate agreement that teacher instruction is a core element in classroom success.

Statement Nineteen – I like to repeat things until I can say them very well. This statement met with unanimous agreement from all participants, strongly suggesting a high value on drilling and repetition as elements of success for their language learning.

Statement Twenty-Five – I want the teacher to check all of my answers to make sure they are correct. This statement also met with unanimous agreement, strongly suggesting that participants highly value teacher verification and input on their work.

Given the responses of Karen participants above, it seems that Karen participants remain eager for a strong teacher leadership in their classroom. Participants indicated a strong preference for active and regular error correction and checking, along with an expectation that teacher communication was central to their learning experience and

content of instruction. In addition, participant responses suggest that drilling or repetition was welcomed and seen as an expected part of language mastery. All of this seems to point to a strong expectation from Karen participants for a strong and active teacher presence in the classroom.

#### Error correction.

CLT calls for error correction and grammatical instruction that is contextual and is focused on meaning and task rather than simple form and structure. Errors are considered a fundamental part of learning and negotiation of language use and meaning. In an effort to discern whether Karen students share these values, the following questions were asked.

Statement Two – I want the teacher to tell me every time I make a mistake. There was mild agreement with this statement, with eight participants agreeing with the statement and four disagreeing. It is likely that the strong phrasing of this statement ('every time I make a mistake') gave some participants pause. Likely indicating that while a majority of participants want maximum error checking and involvement from classroom instructors, this is not a universal for all participants.

Statement Three – I want to listen to the teacher explain how to say things correctly. There was unanimous agreement with this statement by all participants, strongly suggesting that these participants value a central place for teacher instruction in their classroom.

Statement Nine – I like to check my answers with a friend to see if they are correct. There was unanimous agreement with this statement from all participants, strongly suggesting a preference to have the freedom and opportunity to verify the

validity and accuracy of their work with those around them.

Statement Eleven – I want to be sure to say things the right way the first time. There was moderate agreement with this statement from participants, with 9 indicating agreement and 3 indicating disagreement. This seems to point to a strong tendency for participants to attempt mastery of an element of language before attempting to use it.

Statement Sixteen – It is OK to make mistakes. That is part of learning. There was moderate agreement with this statement from participants, with nine participants agreeing with the statement and 3 indicating that they disagreed with the statement. This seems to indicate a general acceptance of errors as indicative of the learning process.

Statement Eighteen – It is better to stay silent than to make a mistake. In the end, this question was the most disputed statement on the assessment, with 7 indicating disagreement and 5 indicating agreement. While the meaning of this lack of cultural agreement is not clear, this does seem to indicate a point of contention and disagreement within these participants. More would need to be done to clarify the reason for this.

Statement Twenty Five – I want the teacher to check all of my answers to make sure they are correct. This statement also met with unanimous agreement, strongly suggesting that participants highly value teacher verification and input on their work.

Given the responses of Karen participants above, it seems clear that students have a strong eagerness for error correction and verification of the validity of their work. Lack of feedback from classroom teachers will most likely confuse or demotivate them. However, these questions also seem to indicate a strong preference for communal learning and verification of work with fellow learners, leaving the door open for

classroom instructors to employ these methods in the error correction process. In terms of participant regard for the presence of error in their speech and production, participants indicated a moderate preference to attempt mastery before active use. The most disputed statement on the assessment was question eighteen, in which students had to weigh making a mistake versus staying silent. This may indicate that this is an issue for some learners, but that some participants are ready to make attempts despite error. It could also indicate conscious effort to act counter to common pattern in this context.

In regard to error correction, it should be noted that eagerness for error correction may be linked to personality or learning style rather than culture. More study is needed in the field of error correction to more accurately discern the underlying reasons for the diversity of sensibility among students of differing culture, personality, and learning style in regard to eagerness for error correction.

#### Classroom materials.

Integration of authentic materials into classroom activities is central to CLT practice. These authentic materials are encouraged because they contain language used in authentic and non-pedagogical ways in the richness of context and purpose. In an effort to discern whether Karen participants share these values, the following questions were asked.

Statement Seven – It is better to use materials with simple language so that I can easily understand. This statement met with unanimous agreement from participants, strongly suggesting that accessible and understandable classroom materials is a strong value.

Statement Twelve – I would rather use a real job application than an easy one just for our class. This statement met with mild agreement from participants, with eight participants indicating agreement and four participants indicating disagreement. This statement is quite relevant, since two prepared job application forms were used in instruction the previous week. This suggests the possibility that students would have preferred the use of a more elaborate job application form in these exercises.

Statement Twenty-Two – I like to use class time to talk about filling out a job application or paying my bills. This statement met with moderate disagreement from participants, with ten students indicating disagreement and two indicating agreement. This suggests a moderate preference to limit functional instruction that is not strongly linked to language learning. Participants may prefer to address these needs outside of class time and to concentrate classroom time on language learning.

Statement Twenty-Three – I prefer when we use materials just like you see them in the world. While participants indicated unanimous agreement with this statement, it was only after a moment of clarification from the interpreter that the statement was making a distinction between the classroom and the outside world. Participants sought to clarify that to them, both “worlds” were equally important. This strongly suggests that these participants do not make a strong distinction between materials used in class, and those used in other realms.

In the end, this category and the questions asked proved to be the least conclusive. While participants did indicate a moderate preference for the use of authentic materials, this came along with the qualifications that students strongly value language that is

accessible and understandable. Without the developed skills of skimming and scanning for information, authentic materials used improperly will likely overwhelm these learners. Also, participants seem to indicate a strong preference to keep classroom time focused on language and not simply filling out job applications or talking about paying bills. While participants indicate an eagerness to have language topics relevant to life, they seem to indicate a strong preference to keep classroom instruction focused on language and not logistic. In addition to this, the term 'materials' proved a hard one to translate, participants were eager to know which things we were talking about, and this often got summarized down to the papers that we used in the classroom. Finally, participants sought to clarify that they do not make the strong distinction between classroom instruction and “the real world” that is sometimes communicated by CLT practitioners. They view both of these worlds as equally real.

#### Collaborative learning.

CLT encourages a learner-centered classroom where instructor facilitation encourages interaction and negotiation of meaning between students themselves. Students are encouraged to practice their language skill with one another and become significant resources to one another in their language acquisition and use. In an effort to discern whether Karen students share these values, the following questions were asked.

Statement Eight – All of the students in our class can learn things from one another. - This statement met with unanimous agreement from all participants, strongly suggesting that they value and benefit from interaction with other learners in the classroom setting.

Statement Nine – I like to check my answers with a friend to see if they are correct. There was unanimous agreement with this statement from all participants, strongly suggesting their strong preference to verify the validity and accuracy of their work with those around them.

Statement Twenty - Practicing using language with my classmates is helpful for me. This statement met with unanimous agreement from all participants, strongly suggesting that participants benefit from and value practicing their language skills with their classmates.

Given the responses of the Karen participants above, they are in resounding agreement with this value of CLT and highly value interaction and verification with their classmates. Corporate thinking and learning seem to be welcomed and participants remain eager for interaction with other students at their level. This aspect of CLT resonates deeply with them, and is likely a strong connecting point with them in terms of adopting this method in their classroom.

#### Assertiveness.

Since CLT encourages students to guide the learning process and since the CLT classroom is strongly student-centered, students must take a more active role in pursuing language use. Traditional methods including long passages of teacher instruction are replaced with students actively pursuing relevant language and actively using it in genuine contexts. In an effort to discern whether Karen students share these values, the following questions were asked.

Statement Four – It is important to let others speak first. This statement

encountered unanimous disagreement from all participants, suggesting that these participants did not regard this ethnographic statement of deference to others to apply in the context of language learning in their classroom.

Statement Fourteen – I try to avoid leading in a group activity. This statement met with moderate disagreement from participants, with 9 participants indicating that they disagreed with the statement and three indicating agreement. This seems to indicate a general readiness among participants to make attempts at leadership in the classroom and in their learning experience.

Statement Eighteen – It is better to stay silent than to make a mistake. In the end, this question was the most disputed statement on the assessment, with 7 indicating disagreement and 5 indicating agreement. While the meaning of this lack of cultural agreement is not clear, this does indicate a point of contention and disagreement within these participants. More study would need to be done to understand this issue more deeply and assess its impact on the learning of these participants.

Statement Twenty-One – I feel uncomfortable speaking in class and would rather let others speak. This statement met with unanimous disagreement from all participants, strongly suggesting that these students feel comfortable speaking in class and are not struggling with non-participation out of fear or discomfort.

Statement Twenty-Four – I feel afraid to ask a question in front of the class. This statement also met with unanimous disagreement from all participants, strongly suggesting that they are comfortable and confident to ask questions in this learning environment.

The responses of Karen participants above seem to indicate that while issues of shyness and assertiveness may remain, they communicate a readiness to pursue classroom leadership, communication, and active participation. From my classroom observations, I believe that this classroom format strongly facilitates this comfort level. This classroom is based on predictable and comfortable routines for students, which likely provide them the baseline to be able to venture out into their use of language.

Functional language / grammar.

Likely the foundation stone of CLT is its focus on functional language in contextual richness. Language is thought to be best learned in the richness and relevance of a communicative purpose. The CLT syllabus is nearly always based on functional themes, and this classroom is no exception. Grammatical form is thought to be best taught in context of functional usage for relevant learning to take place. Students were in the midst of a “getting a job / applying for a job” theme during these assessment. In an effort to discern whether Karen participants share these values, the following questions were asked.

Statement One – Learning how to do things using English is more important than studying grammar. This statement met with mild agreement from participants, with eight participants indicating agreement and four indicating disagreement. This seems to indicate that while functional learning is valued, students are not ready to dismiss the study of grammar fully.

Statement Five – Learning language as I use it in my everyday life is best. This statement met with mild agreement from participants, with eight indicating that they

agreed with the statement and 4 indicating that they disagreed. This seems to indicate that while participants may prefer relevant language input, they may not make a strong distinction between classroom learning and the rest of their life.

Statement Six – Grammar is not important to me if I am able to communicate. This statement met with moderate disagreement from participants, with ten participants indicating disagreement with the statement and two indicating agreement. This likely indicates a strong value placed upon grammar learning and language skill by these participants.

Statement Ten – I have really used things we have learned in class to help me in life. This statement encountered unanimous agreement from all participants, strongly suggesting that classroom instruction has been relevant and useful to them in their lives outside the classroom.

Statement Fifteen – I want to learn English so that I am able to do everyday things in my life. Participants unanimously agreed with this statement regarding functional language, strongly suggesting that students value functional language that they can actively use outside of the classroom. Taken with the item above, this also seems to indicate that instruction in this classroom has been relevant and helpful to these participants.

Statement Twenty-Two – I like to use class time to talk about filling out a job application or paying my bills. This statement met with moderate disagreement from participants, with 10 indicating that they disagreed with the statement, while two indicated that they agreed. This seems to indicate that there is a preference among these

participants to keep class time focused on language. This may also be strengthened by the fact that many of these participants have case workers or social workers to help them with such logistical issues.

Given the responses of Karen participants above, these students communicate a strong unanimous preference for functional and useful teaching topics that are useful for them in life. However, this comes with the following two qualifications. First, participants communicated a moderate preference to keep classroom time focused on language and not simply the functions of filling out applications or paying bills. One student even remarked after the assessment, “We have case workers for this”. Second, participants responded with moderate disagreement with the notion that grammar is not important or is less important than communication. These participants seem to remain eager to attain mastery of language, including grammar. It should be noted that these participants appear to be using the term grammar to refer to mastery of linguistic form, and not mastery of grammatical terms and labels used to refer to these forms. For these participants, grammar appears to be intensely practical and form-focused.

While these Karen participants seem to indicate a high value on the function-based cooperative learning environments of the CLT classroom and feel prepared to take initiative in their pursuit of English language, they also show a strong preference for active error correction by a strong teacher able to provide regular and relevant grammatical instruction related to mastery of linguistic form. Interested in practical and functional language learning, they appear to prefer to remain focused on the task of language learning with regular input from both classmates and the classroom teacher.

### Results for Question Two

The second question guiding the current study is *How do Karen learners describe their experience of three typical Communicative Language Teaching activities?*

Participants experienced three communicative activities, with questionnaires following each activity. (See Appendices B-D – Participant Questionnaire 1-3). Assessment #1 consisted solely of open-ended questions in respect to the communicate activity, while a few questions on the second and third assessments were adjusted to help aid participant response by providing a framework for participant responses. This was done in response to the amount of prompting done by the interpreter to aid participants in answering fully open-ended questions about communicative activities.

#### Assessment #1 - mingle activity.

Question One – What was most helpful about this activity for learning English? All nine participants responded to this question with a variety of answers. Three participants mentioned the follow-up activity to this one, where students take what they have recorded on their mingle grid and work to write a short story with one full English sentence for each of the pieces of information they recorded. This is a common practice in this classroom to use data gathered from mingle activities as input for a short writing activity. Four participants also mentioned that interaction and speech practice with other students was the most helpful part of the activity, with one participant mentioning listening to other student responses as a model as the best aspect of the activity. Other responses included “grammar practice” and mentioned the prompt card included in the exercise, which was color-coded to aid students comprehension of the two speaking tasks

of the exercise.

Question Two - What was the most difficult part of this activity for you? All participants responded to this question. The most consistently mentioned factor that was difficult for participants was the speaking interchange with other students. Five participants mentioned difficulty with speaking to others and/or making mistakes or lacking grammar or vocabulary needed to feel successful in their speech needs. One participant mentioned the listening aspect of the interchange, focusing on being able to hear other students speak. The second most common answer to this question was in regards to the instructions that preceded the activity, which some participants struggled to fully take in. Two participants mentioned that the instructions for the activity were the most difficult part of the activity, with one noting that the modeling of the activity by the teacher and researcher helped to make it more clear.

Question Three – What part of this activity made you feel uncomfortable? Five participants responded that nothing in the exercise made them feel uncomfortable, with one participant clarifying that “this exercise did not make me feel uncomfortable talking to new people because we are all learning English”. Of the remaining participants, three indicated that their inability to speak English fluently was the most uncomfortable part. Responses included “I want to speak English better, but make many mistakes” and “changing the grammar and making good sentences, it is easier for writing”.

#### Assessment #2 - information gap activity.

Question One – What was something new that you learned from this activity? Four participants mentioned that new vocabulary was presented to them in the activity,

including words like 'position', 'cashier', and 'gardener'. Three participants mentioned that the filling out of the job application was new to them and presented challenges. Two participants responded that nothing was new to them in this activity. One participant revealed that she had not understood the instructions and had simply shown her prompt card to others to compare information. One participant noted the challenge of matching both the job and also the schedule, having found numerous single matches.

Question Two – How many people did you speak to before you found your partner? Was it difficult? Participants noted speaking to anywhere between one and seven people (average 4.11 persons, median four people, mode five people). None indicated that the task was difficult, with some not responding at all (5) and others noting that the exercise was not too difficult (4). One participant in particular noted that they spoke to seven people, with three not having a matching job role and four having a matching job role. Of the four that matched, only one was found with a matching timing as well.

Question Three – Which part of this activity made you feel most uncomfortable or shy? 1) Before talking to others, 2) Talking to others, or 3) Writing the job application. Two participants responded 'nothing', while six participants responded '2 – talking to others' caused the most feelings of anxiety. One participant noted that it was before speaking to others that she felt most anxiety.

Question Four, Part A – What was difficult to understand about the instructions? Three participants responded that the instructions were understood, with one noting that pictures for the job roles helped their understanding. Five participants noted unfamiliarity with some of the words used, again with one student noting that the pictures used in the

instructions helped comprehension. Two participants noted the speed of speech used in the instructions posed problems for them. With one of these participants, the researcher asked a clarifying question as to whether the teacher was speaking too quickly. The student then sought to clarify that “the problem is with me” (speed of comprehension).

### Assessment #3 - role play activity.

Question One – What was most helpful about this activity for learning English? 1) Reading (skimming) to find the job, 2) Talking to the person giving the job, or 3) Filling out the application. Only one participant indicated that the reading skill of skimming was the most helpful part of the activity, and that response was made in tandem with response 2. Five participants responded that the conversation with the person offering the job was the most helpful aspect. Finally, four participants responded that the exercise of filling out the job application was the most useful part of the activity for them.

Question Two – What was most difficult about this activity for learning English? 1) Reading (skimming) to find the job, 2) Talking to the person giving the job, or 3) Filling out the application. Three participants found the reading skill of skimming for information was the most difficult aspect of the activity for them, with one noting that they found it hard not to want to try to read all of the information given. All of the remaining six participants found the most challenging aspect of the exercise to be the speech act of talking to the person offering the job and negotiating job fit and availability.

### Results for Question Three

The final question guiding the current study is *What adjustments do these learners suggest making to these three learning activities to ensure that they are relevant*

*and helpful to Karen students?* The first two questionnaires asked this questions directly, while the questionnaire following the third communicative activity focused on expectations of the teacher's role during these types of activities.

Assessment #1 - mingle activity.

Question Four – What could we change about this activity to make it better for learning English? While two participants responded that they liked the activity just as it was done, the remainder of participants provided suggestions for improvements. Some suggestions were logistic, such as “we should need to know how many people we should talk to and get all the information” and “the questions were very short”. The majority of participants called for more speaking or writing practice and/or more questions, indicating that they enjoyed the exercise and would have been prepared for more time spent on it. One participant in particular provided a suggestion that as students often write a story based on one of the people that they talked to as a follow up exercise, so they should also practice this skill with verbal reports of conversations. In the participant's own words, “as we write the story after, so we should also speak the story”. One participant also mentioned that it helped him to first listen to the teacher do the dialogue as a model for his own speech.

Assessment #2 - information gap activity.

Question 4, Part B – What could we change about the activity to make it better? Three participants made no response to this part of the question, while remaining participants made an array of suggestions. Two suggested that rather than simply filling the application form out themselves, they could have worked as a pair to ask the

application questions to one another, further extending the speech practice of the activity. Two participants also noted the suggestion that pairs could have presented their pair to the class so that all students were exposed to all vocabulary and diversity of response. One response addressed discomfort with the communicative nature of the activity, noting that “sometimes talking to people of another level (is) difficult. I cannot help them when they ask me any question”.

Assessment #3 - role play activity.

Question Three – What do you want most from the teacher during this activity? 1) Help with right answers, 2) Encouragement, 3) Practice with you, or 4) Teaching grammar. Participant responses were evenly split between response #3 – practice with you, and response #4 – teaching grammar. One participant clarified their response (#3) that it helped to talk with a teacher first. Another participant clarified their response (#4) that this “help(s) me to not make mistakes”. Both of these responses seem to indicate an eagerness for error correction by the teacher. during the course of communicative activities.

Question Four – When I don't understand or am having trouble, I usually \_\_\_\_\_. 1) Ask the teacher, 2) Ask my friends, 3) Keep quiet, or 4) Use my phone or dictionary. Interestingly, despite the researcher seeing the use of phones and dictionaries numerous times during the course of classroom observation, no participants indicated that this was a preferred method for them. Six participants indicated that they seek to ask the teacher a question when they are having trouble or do not understand. Three participants indicated that they ask friends in the classroom as a preferred method when they are

having trouble or do not understand, with two of the three further indicating that when their friends cannot help them, then they seek to ask the teacher as a second strategy.

### Summary of Findings

Which aspects of Communicative Language Teaching do intermediate adult Karen English language learners value? The results of the Values Assessment seem to indicate that participants strongly value a number of the core values of Communicative Language Teaching. Like CLT, these participants place a high value on cooperative and communal learning, which places learners in community with one another as ready resources for practice and verification of learning. Likewise, participants communicated a strong preference for relevant and functional themes that are highly reproducible in their daily lives. Participants also shared the conviction that initiative must be taken by students to guide learning and to practice language skills acquired. Passivity in the classroom was strongly rejected by these participants.

However, in potential tension with the values of CLT, participants equally stated a strong preference for a strong teacher role in the classroom with the teacher being a central source of guidance and reference, including modeling of right responses. Participants also strongly desire active and regular error correction and feedback on the majority of their work, generally regarding the instructor as the desired person of reference for feedback. Results in connection with the use of authentic materials in the classroom met with mixed results, indicating that while students appreciated the use of relevant and actual materials and tasks they would meet in the course of language use in the world around them, they equally indicated that they preferred class time to be spent

squarely on language learning and not to be spent on mere functional activity or material (job applications and paying bills).

How do Karen learners describe their experience of three typical Communicative Language Teaching activities? In response to questions asked in respect of three communicative activities used in their classroom, this study found that while these activities were generally well received by participants, a number of factors were central to future success of these activities. Participants noted that highlights of these activities were the chance to practice language with other students, along with writing activities that often are used as a follow-up to these activities. While the speech production portion of each activity was consistently mentioned as the most challenging part of each activity, it was equally recognized by participants as having the strongest benefit. While participants were clearly challenged by these activities and they served to be reminders of their lack of accessible language, participants also recognize the value in these opportunities to test their language to the point of requesting more opportunity to do so. Elements in these activities that challenged participants included the amount of new vocabulary used, as well as comprehension of the instructions associated with these activities. Participants indicated that in many cases instructions were not fully understood, but simply observed as the activity transpired. As they are designed to do, these communicative activities force students to employ the language that they have encountered in study. As such, these activities quickly illustrate to students where their spoken language is lacking, and this revelation, while needed, is not easy. Participants require encouragement after particularly challenging activities, as these activities press

them to employ language in less prompted ways.

Finally, what adjustments do these learners suggest making to these three learning activities to ensure that they are relevant and helpful to Karen students? In response to a number of questions regarding improvements that could be made to these activities, Karen participants mainly voiced the call for more practice and more opportunity to speak. At the same time, in order to further improve these activities, participants called mainly for three things. First, participants called for clear expectations, instructions, and demonstration of the activity by the teacher. Failure to understand the purpose, extent, or expected result of the activity hindered benefits gained from it. Teacher demonstration of the use of materials, as well as modeling of communication, aids students to accomplish these activities well and minimizes additional stress of simply working the activity. Second, participants called for strong integration with other activities and skills. Participants strongly valued activities that were strongly linked with follow-up writing activities or interviews, which extend the benefits of these interactions to practice other language skills of reading, writing, and listening. Finally, participants called for regular and active involvement of classroom personnel in providing error correction and feedback during the time of the activity. Participants communicated a strong preference for the ready availability of feedback on their language production and use of grammatical structures.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the results of my study. Participant demographic data was organized and presented, including previous education, length of time in the United

States, and time spent in the classroom that hosted my study. To answer my research questions, data from a values assessment and three communicative activities done in the classroom and their associated questionnaires was presented. In Chapter Five, I will review the literature in light of the current study, discuss the significance of findings, draw out a few implications for teaching practice, and suggest directions for further research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, data was presented from the current study aimed at answering our research questions. Three central questions guide this study. Data were collected using a qualitative research approach using participant questionnaires / interviews during regular classroom hours. The participants took part in three communicative activities during the normal flow of their weekly classroom routine; collection instruments included three questionnaires each correlating to one of the communicative activities in which they participated, followed by a Karen-language values assessment made up of 25 statements which the participants had to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the given statement. Three questions guide this study. 1) *Which aspects of Communicative Language Teaching do intermediate adult Karen English language learners value?* 2) *How do Karen learners describe their experience of three typical Communicative Language Teaching activities?* 3) *What adjustments do these learners suggest making to these three learning activities to ensure that they are relevant and helpful to Karen students?* In this final chapter, I will present a number of conclusions that I have drawn after analyzing the data presented in the previous chapter in light of relevant research. I will then reflect upon the implications of these findings for teachers instructing adult Karen English language learners. I will also discuss the limitations of the study and challenges faced in the course of completing the

research project. I will suggest areas of further research that are needed to continue growth in our understanding of these learners and the impact of methods used in their classrooms. Finally, I will examine the impact of the current study on my own teaching practice.

### Reexamination of Literature

In light of the findings of our study, I will now revisit the literature reviewed in Chapter Two of this study to revisit themes and set my findings in relief of relevant literature. While the Karen people have often been categorized as a shy and unassertive people, both by insiders (Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2012) and outsiders (Marshall, 1997; Watkins, et al, 2012), these factors do not seem to be a determining limitation for the subjects of this study. The indirect culture of the Karen people, while surely prominent to anyone that interacts with them, does not appear to hinder these students inordinately in this context and classroom. Specific Values Assessment questions addressing assertiveness, deference, and passivity noted by previous research (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010) were universally rejected by participants. This strong disconnect between previous literature and the findings of this study would need to be examined by further research.

Cultural values of communal decision-making and strongly routinized patterns of behavior seem to serve these students well in their reception and involvement in communicative activities in this classroom. Participants displayed a strong conviction that the other students in class were learning assets for them. The strong camaraderie of this classroom provides a safe environment in which to exercise language skill in

unprompted ways. The classroom that was the subject of this study set more unscripted and free communicative activities into a frame of more routine learning activities that participants find familiar and comfortable. This strategy seems to lend to students actually receiving more benefit and having more confidence in these less predictable and more communicative opportunities to use language.

Particularly in the classroom observed, where more than half of the students are from Burma, there is a strong feeling of communal learning and interdependence, and these participants also strongly indicated a preference to check work with one another and benefit from the progress of other students. Obstacles noted by Margolis (2012) regarding initiative-taking in independent learning activities was also observed, with participants struggling most with activities in which they were expected to complete tasks without interaction with others. Even in the process of gathering data during the Values Assessment, communal decision-making was observed as students compared notes when answering questions. Particularly older members of the classroom were consulted in the weighing of costs/benefits. In fact, the question arose from the interpreter as to whether they should be allowed to do this.

A number of obstacles to involvement in classes noted by Matthews (2012) and Watkins, et al., (2012) were observed in this study, with a number of potential participants unable to complete assessments because of issues with work, children, health care appointments, or other scheduling conflicts. Particularly for males, the constraints and distances traveled for relevant work remove them from participation in class, which in turn puts additional pressure on females to bear more of the burden of family and

logistics.

In contrast to previous research, where researchers noted minimal pre-immigration education (Matthews, 2012; Watkins, et al., 2012), the participants in this study showed higher levels of pre-immigration education, with only one participant having less than five years of formal schooling. Previous related studies of Asian students interacting with CLT teaching methods (Hu, 2010; McKay, 2004) particularly in the Bengali, Chinese, and Japanese contexts have found a strong disconnect, demotivation, and even disillusionment among students where disconnect with local culture and expectations of teacher roles strongly differed. While the participants in the current study do show a strong preference for a strong teacher role in the classroom, there is no evidence of any negative effects of demotivation or disillusionment.

#### Study Recommendations

English language teachers serve a vital role for new immigrants entering a new context. They equip students with the fundamental tools that are needed to function in a new environment and navigate the remarkable array of challenges before them. (Matthews, 2012) While molding classroom and teaching models to conform to every preference or shortcoming of learners may not be possible, nor desirable, being unaware of these things is even more dangerous. The greatest hindrance to effectiveness is not failure to always respond to learner preferences, but failure to even be aware that they exist. (Kumaravadivelu, 2001) Further, teachers must be aware that teaching methods are based on cultural assumptions that may not be shared by learners. In some cases, even simply talking about these realities helps to alleviate them to some extent. Classroom

instructors can very often aid students simply by stating assumptions and a few of the reasons why something is important in a specific context.

The emphasis of CLT on functional learning with instruction on grammar being woven into the context of functional learning seems well received by these students. Further, the communal and student-centered atmosphere of learning while promoting active and contextual use of language to achieve clear goals is also well received by these students. However, CLT is not a standalone system that can simply be imported into any learning context and thrive. As is seen in the current study, a consideration of the context and values of students in respect to language and learning must shape the implementation of CLT at the level of technique.

One of the key recommendations of Watkins, et al. (2012), was that English language instructors be actively aware of Karen passivity and develop strategies to facilitate enhanced communication for them. In light of the current study, I want to highlight a number of elements that may serve to facilitate this communicative practice which Karen students need in their pursuit of English language fluency. First, I will propose a number of classroom level elements that participants in this study strongly indicated are key to their learning. Secondly, I will propose a number of elements that participants indicated are key to effective communicative activities.

### Toward Effective Classrooms

Successful implementation of communicative activities begins at the classroom level and involves realities on a much higher scale than the management of activities. A number of preferences indicated by these participants address preferences on the

classroom level. The following suggestions address issues of classroom culture and format which lay the groundwork for effective communicative activities.

First, participant responses and classroom observations both seem to indicate that the routine-based rhythm of this classroom aids students in feeling more free to venture out into less routine and more unstructured activities. Learners already are forced to cope with a massive array of unknowns in their attempts to learn English. Predictable and unswerving classroom rhythms with which students are familiar serve to provide students the stability in learning that they need to be ready for more unprompted communicative activities when they encounter them. Predictable patterns of activity and exercise also minimize time spent seeking to understand activity instructions, such that when instructions do come, students are more prepared to take them in. Framing more free and communicative activities within the confines of exercises with which students are familiar serves to confine anxiety and learning fatigue.

Second, communal learning and thinking is a high value to these participants, so classrooms should be oriented to maximize time in community and exercising communal thinking. Encouraging classroom community and unity gives students confidence that peers are also in process and will minimize anxiety associated with speech production and writing. Including aspects of peer interaction into every activity serves to draw students into effective community and allow them to fully benefit from one another. Also, using peer interaction to help address the strong desire of these participants to have almost constant error correction can be highly beneficial. Installing steps into all activities where partners or groups help to find one error and “make it better” can help to

address the desire for correction and error checking. Finally, communal learning projects and exercises will likely foster communicative interaction and group decision-making.

Thirdly, while students strongly value the relevant and functional themes addressed in classrooms, they also communicate clearly that they value a strong focus on language learning and not simple tasks of function. While it is true that learning function can be one of the best ways to address learning language, particularly lessons that are not well prepared or targeted for language can stray into simple practice of function. While instructors may be able to fill time with these activities, participants communicate a preference to target language in the classroom and leave the filling out of job applications to the case worker or social worker.

Finally, these participants have strongly indicated a desire for active and regular error correction and feedback on their language, which they view as instrumental in their progress. Classroom instructors need to find creative ways to provide this feedback to students, while preserving their efforts to foster student-centered classrooms. Failure to provide feedback to students will likely result in students becoming demotivated, particularly in their attempts at speech and writing. These participants have clearly communicated a strong eagerness for the maximum levels of error-correction and teacher feedback possible.

#### Toward Effective Communicative Activities

The following are suggestions drawn from the current study which either flow from participant suggestions, or are formulated in response to student difficulties. These factors should be included in preparation of communicative activities for Karen English

language learners.

First, when preparing activities beforehand, consideration should be given to the amount of new vocabulary or grammatical structure introduced or expected in the activity. Anything new or potentially new should be addressed in the warm-up or instructions for the activity. Very often, this can be in the form of verification of comprehension, but if something new is needed to accomplish the activity, it should be taught and modeled. Feedback can even be sought immediately following activities to help discern unforeseen things that should have been included in modeling or instructions.

Second, the need for clarity of instructions and expectations cannot be overstated. These participants clearly communicated that effective instructions were a key factor in whether they were able to confidently participate. Since student anxiety is already high in communicative activities, every effort should be made to remove anxiety related to instructions or expectations to foster effective communicative participation. Instructions must be clear, practical, and contain a clear expectation of what should be accomplished in the end. Conversation in itself is not an adequate goal, so give students something to work toward with their communicative activity.

Third, the activity should be modeled by the teacher once instructions are given. It may be helpful to think of this as separate from giving instructions, since it is more interactive and involves student responses. Teachers could ask, “what should I do now?”, and participants should be able to guide them through the activity. Choosing a student or set of students to guide through the process often aids in ensuring that instructions are

comprehended and further practicalities are addressed in the students mind.

Fourth, teachers should ensure every opportunity for appropriate error correction and feedback during the course of the activity. If classroom assistance is available, ensuring maximum feedback for students as they perform the activity will ensure students are motivated and on-task, while at the same time assured of appropriate response and language form. As above, including peer feedback as a section of the activity can often help address some of the need for error correction, while also engaging students in further communicative interaction.

Finally, communicative activities should be strongly linked with other activities around them that serve to use and further reinforce structures or language activities. Follow-up writing activities in which students write a small passage from the data gained from communicative activities can be very effective and can ensure that these activities are used to maximum benefit. Assembling students in groups to report findings or difficulties can assist students to rehearse language used in the activity. Peer interviews or error checking steps following communicative activities can encourage students to assist one another with difficult forms or vocabulary.

#### Challenges and Limitations of the Study

A number of challenges were faced in the current study that would need to be addressed by further research in this area. First and foremost, the participants used for this study were level 3-4 English language learners and as such were limited in their ability to make full responses to strongly open-ended questions on the activity questionnaires. While the interpreter did help give participants the ability to more fully

give words to their experiences, there was no way to discern how much filtering occurred between the statement of the participant and the translation or rephrasing of their statement by the interpreter. In the midst of the study, questions on these questionnaires had to be adjusted to be slightly more concrete to facilitate student response. While higher level English language speakers could have been used for the study, these are in nearly every case individuals with significantly more exposure and experience with Western culture. Second, it was a significant challenge to develop questions that addressed the issues and impact of culture that were comprehensible and answerable for students of this level. Since elements of culture are often assumed by those that are impacted by them, questions targeted to touch the realities of culture can be often answered with reference to other layers of disconnect and anxiety. Finally, in many Asian cultures there is a fundamental cultural dynamic of respect to those in authority which prevents criticism or correction of anyone in authority. It seems that this dynamic often was apparent in student responses, with students feeling hesitant to say anything that might communicate anything but appreciation or case discouragement. Repeatedly, participants were assured that these responses were welcomed and intended to help us improve our teaching. Participants obviously struggled to feel fully free to suggest improvements or state difference with current teaching practice.

In addition to a number of challenges faced in the current study, there are a number of factors that limit the scope and validity of the study. First, the study is by definition direct communication about culture and about values which students know to be different from those held by those asking the questions. By asking about these things

directly, we engage cultural mechanisms to handle these kinds of situations. Such strategies may include indirect or inconclusive communication, intentional silence, or patterned default responses designed to avoid conflict and avert the communication of disrespect to those in authority. Since I am a recognized teacher to these students, any number of these mechanisms may be in play in the current set of responses to questions. Secondly, the number of participants in the current study is too small to make wide generalizations about the nature and responses of Karen students and their experience generally. Thirdly, all participants experienced the same activities and were a regular part of the same classroom routines. Results have not been compared in any way with other students experiencing these or other activities, or members of other classrooms with significantly varying routines or classroom frameworks. Thus, these findings can represent only the beginning of a conversation regarding the engagement of CLT generally with this population. Fourthly, results from Karen participants have not been compared in any way with other students at this level and in this classroom to discern commonalities across ethnic lines or responses unique to Karen English language learners at this level. Finally, the classroom activities used for this study all occurred within a single week and upon a singular functional theme. Participants may well respond differently to different activities based on different functional themes. Thus, this study is limited in its ability to make generalizations about communicative activities generally and their engagement with Karen learners widely.

#### Future Research

Much work remains to document the growing experience of English language

teachers teaching Karen students. Rich experience in the teaching community remains anecdotal and unverified with other practitioners and is thus ineffective in shaping our teaching to this population. Every effort was made to pursue relevant literature regarding English language teaching to this population, and precious few studies were available. If language instruction to this and other refugee communities is to be effective and relevant, a much richer depth of literature is needed to reflect the experience that is actually out there among effective teachers serving these populations. Particularly in areas with heavy concentrations of learners from a particular cultural background, the teaching community must do better to ensure effective teaching and service. The proximity of these populations to us implies our accountability to advocate for them and aid others to serve them well.

While studies abound examining the effectiveness and validity of CLT in the EFL context, examination of the impact of cultural assumptions on teaching and learning in the ESL context are minimal. While factors do differ between these contexts, there is no reason to believe that the issue of culture vanishes once learners arrive into the realm of the cultural assumption of the vast majority of English language teachers. Of all teaching personnel, ESL/EFL teachers need to be adequately equipped to both see their own cultural assumptions and also examine and adjust to the cultural assumptions of their students.

Finally, extending the current study, the teaching and learning preferences of students must be more extensively weighed against the assumptions of the teaching methods that we adopt. The current study assessed the values engagement of 12 Karen

students in a single classroom, but much wider comparative studies need to be done to uncover the variety and commonality of learner preference. In addition to learners from differing cultural backgrounds, studies including a control group of learners from traditional Western cultures should shed help to discern the impact of culture on these results. Even if teaching personnel do not choose to adopt these preferences in their classrooms, they dare not be unaware of them and thus risk students becoming disengaged, discouraged, and demotivated.

#### Impact of the Study

At the close of this study, I want to draw attention to a number of areas which should impact the teaching of those giving instruction to Karen L1 students, and in fact any students that share a differing set of cultural assumption that guide their learning of English. I will then share a few particular areas which the current study has impacted my own teaching and thinking.

The current study highlights the importance of evaluating assumptions made about teaching and learning English that form the basis of classroom practice. While we may assume that these are universal truths, there will certainly be times when our convictions are not shared by learners. By evaluating the values underlying the learning of these 12 Karen ELLs, we have seen both areas of concord and areas of difference. The areas of concord (communal learning, functional frameworks, etc.) with the assumptions of these participants serve as opportunities to engage these students fully, enabling them to have instruction that is relevant and effective for their learning. The areas of difference (repetition, regular error correction, focus on form) are areas that we need to consider

carefully to ensure that students are not unnecessarily hindered or demotivated by this lack of shared values. These are areas where instructors can either carefully make modifications to better engage student assumptions, or actively inform and encourage to consider their assumptions when classroom activities do not integrate well with their values. These participants seem to place value on CLT as a methodology and practice in their classrooms, but modification made to better engage student values will likely make CLT more effective for student learning.

Personally, I have been challenged toward better teaching in the following ways. First, the interweaving of routine-based teaching with less prompted communicative activities as an avenue to provide both familiar rhythms of learning along with more challenging opportunities to use unprompted language has impressed me. While students need to stretch and use language and negotiate meaning in context, learning fatigue can be a strong factor. Providing students with predictable learning routines which they know how to operate and for which they need less instruction allows students the safe place from which to make their forays into more unknown territories of communication. Second, participant responses regarding integrating and extending these communicative activities with routines of writing, reporting, interviewing, and critical thinking exercises has challenged me to do better at providing additional facets to communicative exercises. Finally, I see clear value in assessing, whether formally or informally, the values of my students to help highlight areas that will need my consideration in future teaching. Highlighting areas of concord and discord will enable me to provide teaching that is effective and valuable to my own students.

### APPENDIX A: Values Assessment

Read each statement and please check “agree” or “disagree” for how you feel most often.

Value Statement	Agree	Disagree
1. Learning how to do things using English is more important than studying grammar.		
2. I want the teacher to tell me every time I make a mistake.		
3. I want to listen to the teacher explain how to say things correctly.		
4. It is important to let others speak first.		
5. Learning language as I use it in my everyday life is best.		
6. Grammar is not important to me if I am able to communicate.		
7. It is better to use materials with simple language so that I can easily understand.		
8. All of the students in our class can learn things from one another.		
9. I like to check my answers with a friend to see if they are correct.		
10. I have really used things we have learned in class to help me in life.		
11. I want to be sure to say things the right way the first time I speak.		
12. I would rather use a real job application than an easy one just for our class.		
13. It is best for the teacher to just tell me the best way to say things.		
14. I try to avoid leading in a group activity.		
15. I want to learn English so that I am able to do everyday things in my life.		
16. It is OK to make mistakes. That is part of learning.		
17. The most important thing is to study and remember what the teacher says.		
18. It is better to stay silent than to make a mistake.		
19. I like to repeat things until I can say them very well.		
20. Practicing using language with my classmates is helpful for me.		
21. I feel uncomfortable speaking in class and would rather let others speak.		
22. I like to use class time to talk about filling out a job application or paying my bills.		
23. I prefer when we use materials just like you see them in the world.		
24. I feel afraid to ask a question in front of the class.		
25. I want the teacher to check all of my answers to make sure they are correct.		

## APPENDIX B: Participant Questionnaire 1 – Mingle Activity

## Participant Questionnaire #1 – Mingle Activity

Participant Number: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your name?

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What language do you use most at home?

How long have you been in the United States?

How long have you been in Minnesota?

How many years of school have you completed before you started English classes?

How long have you been attending classes at this center?

How long have you been in Level 3-4 ESL?

- 1) What was most helpful about this activity for your growth in English?
- 2) What was the most difficult part of this activity for you?
- 3) What part of this activity made you feel uncomfortable?
- 4) What could we change about this activity to make it better for your growth in English?
- 5) What is your favorite learning activity that you do in class each week?

## APPENDIX C: Participant Questionnaire 2 – Information Gap Activity

Participant Questionnaire #2 - Information Gap  
Participant Number: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) What was something new that you learned from this activity?
  
- 2) How did you find your partner? How many people did you speak with?
  
- 3) What part of this activity made you feel uncomfortable?
  1. Before talking to other people
  2. Talking to other people
  3. Writing the job application
  
- 4) What was hard to understand from the instructions?
  
- 5) What is the hardest (H) part of using English for you? Which is easiest (E)?
  1. Listening
  2. Speaking
  3. Reading
  4. Writing

## APPENDIX D: Participant Questionnaire 3 – Role Play Activity

## Participant Questionnaire #3 - Role Play Activity

Participant Number: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) What was most helpful about this activity for learning English?
  1. Reading to find the job
  2. Talking to the person giving the job
  3. Filling out the application
  
- 2) What was the most difficult part of this activity for you?
  1. Reading to find the job
  2. Talking to the person giving the job
  3. Filling out the application
  
- 3) What do you need from the teacher most?
  1. The right answers
  2. Encouragement
  3. Practice
  4. Teaching Grammar
  
- 4) When I don't understand or am having trouble, I usually \_\_\_\_\_.
  1. Ask the teacher.
  2. Ask a friend in class.
  3. Keep quiet.
  4. Use my phone or computer to find the answer.
  
- 5) Which activity during the week is very difficult for you?

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