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## THE CASE OF THREE KAREN FAMILIES: LITERACY PRACTICES IN A FAMILY LITERACY CLASSROOM

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THE CASE OF THREE KAREN FAMILIES: LITERACY PRACTICES IN A FAMILY  
LITERACY CLASSROOM

By

Sabrina D. M. Quadros

A THESIS

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# THE CASE OF THREE KAREN FAMILIES: LITERACY PRACTICES IN A FAMILY LITERACY CLASSROOM

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The lack of research in understanding the literacy practices of Karen families, influencing their schooling performance and language acquisition, leave professionals in the educational field limited in their knowledge about the forms of engagement of these families into American schooling. To better understand literacy practices in which Karen families engage, in this case study the author explores some of the literacy practices of Karen families when at school and in their homes. The author observed three Karen adult/parent learners during a period of three months, in an ESL family literacy program at Kennedy Elementary, in Lincoln, Nebraska. One interview with each of the participants, as well as three home visits, were also performed. Four core themes emerged from 42 instances of the researcher's participation and observation of literacy practices. Literacy practices included adult/parent learners' engagement with memorization and their literacy practices in the community, parents' literacy practices through reading texts aloud to improve their speaking skills, and parents' use of computers to engage in literacy in America. These case study experiences are discussed in light of the sociocultural theory of literacy models as a form of these Karen parents to engage in their learning processes at school, as well as in their children's schooling. Furthermore, considerable issues in literacy and literacy adaptation are addressed, reflectively collaborating with

cultural studies with the Karen population, adult and language teachers involved in literacy practices, and theorists in the sociocultural field of literacy.

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DEDICATION

To God and the Karen people

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## **Introduction**

Literacy, a multi-faceted socio-cultural concept, one which has been referred to in the research literature as an “elastic concept” (Kern, 1990), regulates school practices, varying according to ideological stances and utilitarian needs, as well as cultural practices. Literacy no longer solely refers to the ability to read and write and largely represents social practices and the political nature of relations amongst people (Gee, 2008). Considering the literacy practices that characterize the cultural and contextual uses of reading and writing, evidence from the refugee Karen population regarding their own literacy events and practices is lacking in the scholarly field, which also implies a limited knowledge by professionals and scholars regarding the Karen people’s prior experience with literacy in their own country, thus influencing their forms of engagement with American schooling.

Previous sociocultural research scholars (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Gee, 2008; Sarroub, 2005, Street, 1984, 1995) have highlighted the need to investigate culturally different literacy events and practices in which immigrants and ethnic groups engage, whether in a new context or in their own. Citing Street (2001) and Gee’s (2000, 2008) work, Hull and Schultz (2001) highlight that literacy must be studied in its cultural, social, economic, historical, and political contexts, in the school context, as well as outside of it. In this view, Street (2001) could construct a notion of literacy tied to social practices and ideologies, such as economic, political, and social conditions, social structures, and local belief systems (Hull and Schultz, 2001). In this same line of inquiry, Barton and his colleagues (1991) developed a research project to demonstrate how everyday literacies involve a differentiated use of media and symbolic systems, also

reporting how various literacies correlate with particular cultures and cultural systems within the lives of individuals. Prinsloo and Breier (1996), in studying the meanings of everyday literacy practices in varied contexts in South Africa, concluded that there is a need for a reconceptualization of literacy that recognizes and applies the idea of literacy outside of the school context and into the setting of local practices.

In connection to the research literature about family literacies (Anderson, & Gundersen, 1997; Blakely, 1983; Hayden, Schoorman & Zainuddin, 2008; Markose, Symes, & Hellstén, 2011) and ethnic groups (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Bigelow, 2006, 2011; Clark & Ivanič, 1997; Freebody, Luke, & Gilbert, 1991; Gee, 2008; Jones, 2000; Street, 1995) regarding literacy and engagement with literacy practices and events, little research has focused on the Karen population and the literacy practices and events in which they engage while at school or in their homes. The few studies with this population (Oh & Van der Stouwe, 2008; Oh, 2011; Watkins, Razee, & Ritchers, 2012), as well as one book (Marshall, 1922), concentrate on depicting aspects of the culture in their own villages (Marshall, 1922), educational issues within the refugee camps (Oh & Van der Stouwe, 2008; Oh, 2010), and Karen women's refugee challenges that affected their well-being while in school in Australia (Watkins, Razee, & Ritchers, 2012). No research has been developed to investigate the literacy practices, forms, and events that Karen families engage with while in the U.S. school system or what they have brought as literacy practices from refugee camps.

Building on course work research projects that introduced me to Karen youth in a public school setting and then developing a new study about family literacy, I offer in this paper an analysis founded on fieldwork focused on adult Karen women's literacy

practices and events. The analysis is framed by a sociocultural perspective, reflecting a collaborative and interdisciplinary synthesis of the educational research in literacy studies, and ethnographies about literacy, family literacy programs, and professionals involved with and educating immigrant families, whether children, teenagers, or adults.

The purpose of this ethnographic study is to understand and discover patterns of literacy practices for Karen families enrolled in the Family Literacy Program (FLIP) in Lincoln, Nebraska. At this stage of the research, literacy practices will be defined as the patterned concepts created by social institutions that people bring to the context when they engage in the practice of reading and writing, which determine the choice of literacies that will be more dominant and influential than other forms of literacies. In order to investigate such patterns, events, and practices, three principal questions were asked: (1) What are some of the literacy practices that Karen families engage with in their homes and school? (2) What are some of the cultural norms of Karen lives that influence learning and adaptation to American expectations within a family literacy setting? (3) How does the literacy program structure the teaching of American culture for these Karen families? In investigating these questions, some of the answers provided will open space for more discussion and further research with Karen families as they participate in literacy practices in the U.S., combining these with their prior experiences in their home-villages and schools at the refugee camps.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This chapter maps out the concepts of literacy practices and its perspectives, respectively, in the social, linguistic, and cognitive fields, connecting these to the lack of research with the Karen population and their academic educational involvement in the U.S. The section on “Theoretical concepts on literacy programs” focuses on the traditions and perspectives in literacy and how they have influenced teaching and learning for immigrant adults who participate in family literacy programs across the United States. Within the topic of “Literacy Practices,” procedures of literacy practices, as well as notions of language teaching, are highlighted as a foundation for the discussion in conjunction with the data collected from the Karen families reported in this study. Additionally, the theoretical aspects of family literacy programs are explored in order to further situate the reader in the state-of-affairs of classroom practices within the family literacy programs. The literature developed here specifically opens space for discussion regarding the Karen people’s literacy practices in their moves to participate in American schooling and society.

### **Theoretical Concepts in the Family Literacy Programs**

Regarding trends in family literacy programs, Auerbach (2009) examines and reflects on the use of three types of approaches in programs in the United States: the intervention prevention approach, the multiple literacies approach, and the social change approach. In the intervention prevention approach, the intergenerational lack of connection with schooling produces and/or influences the literacy development of

children. In this perspective, the reasoning for schooling failure of children in low-income families reflects back to the lack of engagement of illiterate parents with literacy practices, to which advocates (Darling, 1992; Mansbach, 1993) of the intervention model blame families for the reproduction of poverty and illiteracy disengagement. Contributing to the intervention prevention approach, but not justifying its use and/or validity, Wiggan (2007) argues, with works from Herrnstein and Murray (1994) Fischer et al. (1996), Madhere (1995), and Sorensen and Hallinan (1984), that student achievement is a social construct, therefore it is influenced by the family and socialization, as well as by equal access to high-quality instruction. Both of these factors lead to major influential roles in student achievement. Additionally, considering the work of Bernstein (1973), as well as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), regarding language as speech that influences and dictates the process of socialization, it is noted that students from lower socioeconomic classes develop disadvantages in habits and attitudes, differing from the middle and upper class learners.

Inversely to the prerogatives of the intervention approach, further studies (Baker, Serpell, & Sonnenschein, 1995; Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992; Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; Ortiz, 1992;) have investigated such assumptions regarding the intergenerational reproduction of illiteracy practices, and the results have shown that parents, in fact, do engage in literacy practices, promoting wide ranges of literacy practices, even when English is not the native language of the families. Barton and Hamilton (2000) define these literacy practices as “the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives . . . literacy practices are what people do with literacy” (p. 7). Barton and Hamilton (2000) also explain that



“this includes people’s awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses of literacy, how people talk about and make sense of literacy” (p. 7). Although no study has focused on Karen families’ engagement with literacy practices with their children, the present research yields data pertinent to these parents’ participation in literacy events in their homes and classrooms. Furthermore, in spite of the intervention model being considered a model focused on the rhetoric of “strengths,” Auerbach (2009) argues that, “despite aiming to be culturally sensitive and descriptive, the traits and characteristics, as they are presented, may in fact be culture-specific and prescriptive, leading toward conformity to particular values and expectations” (p. 649).

The multiple-literacies perspective defines the problem of illiteracy as incongruent between culturally variable home literacy practices and school literacies. In this model, cultural sensitivity is the centerpiece of curriculum development, and empowerment is promoted through affirmation of cultural identity and community-building. Three premises surround this approach: first, the learner participates in the curriculum development; second, the school, as an institution, creates culturally familiar contexts; and third, the teachers use and instruct in the first language. Auerbach (2009) argues two main possible issues in a multiple-literacies classroom; one is that “programs which follow this approach often find that parents do not want to focus exclusively on child-related matters, but rather want to develop literacy for their own purposes” (p. 653). Secondly, the incorporation of family cultural pedagogical practices can be incongruent with educators’ own pedagogical understandings and preferences. Coming from a different perspective in literacy but contributing to the hypothesis of parents being interested in developing literacy for their own needs, Schoorman and Zainuddin (2008) in

examining a family literacy program for Guatemalan Maya families, found that participants in the program did not have social and structural change as their primary goal for seeking literacy education. Conversely, Schoorman and Zainuddin (2008) highlight that parents sought literacy education to “fit in” to the American system, mainly contributing to the academic success of their children. Within the framework of multiple-literacies, no investigations regarding Karen interests in becoming literate in family literacy programs have been developed.

The third perspective in family literacy practices draws from the field of critical theory. The social change perspective encompasses principles from the multiple-literacies approach, yet it adds and emphasizes issues of power, culture, and social change. In essence, it is the “conditions created by institutions and structural forces which shape access to literacy acquisitions” (Auerbach, 2009, p. 654). In this perspective, literacy in itself, does not lead to empowerment or resolve economic problems, but the link to a critical understanding of the social context and initiative to change inequitable conditions is required. In critical theory studies, family literacy program principles involve participant control over the program’s goals, issues, themes, and research agenda, dialogue as a key to pedagogical process, content centering on critical social issues for participants, and the critical notion of action for social change. Auerbach (2009) recognizes that “although many programs incorporate aspects of this model, few would say they are premised on it” (p. 655).

Through the exercise of critical pedagogy in literacy programs, researchers have also presented the limitations of the perspective. For example, Rogers et al. (2009), understand that the use of critical literacy in education is necessary but insufficient to

overcome the struggle for justice and social action. They argue the need for practitioners to work with cross-societal structures in order to build more reliable alternatives. Rocha-Schmid (2010) calls for teachers' discourse patterns to be revisited and scrutinized through the lenses of power and control. For Schoorman and Zainuddin (2008), the immediate need and desire of immigrant learners to participate in the school and in mainstream social discourse challenged their engagement with the critical view. Although such a perspective has been recurrent in the educational context, research to investigate the critical aptitudes and engagement of the Karen population in literacy classrooms is lacking in the research field.

### **Literacy Practice**

Regarding theoretical ideas and the pragmatic forms of literacies, notions on the linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural fields embody mostly classroom practices of learners and teachers who engage with literacy practices in their need to become proficient within the language of the context. While these notions and conceptualizations in literacy permeate the classroom's ambience, isolated, they limit the learners' experiences with different contextual language use, distancing their out-of-the-classroom practice from their formal learning environment (Kern, 1990). In closely examining these views, issues and inquiries will arise, illuminating the concepts and practices behind these views, collaborating toward further comprehension and analysis of the literacy practices of Karen families in family literacy programs.

In the linguistic view, literacy comprises the ability to “recognize and produce graphic representations of words and morphemes, and knowledge of the conventions that determine how these elements can be combined and ordered to make sentences” (Kern,

1990, p. 25). In exploring the reading and writing processes within a linguistic perspective, Harris and Hatano (1999) collected a series of studies that provide an overview of different morphological and phonemic awareness of children in their process to “become literate” in reading and writing. For example, the authors emphasized that those scripts that are more regular in their representation of sounds were also easier to master, for which English was not the case. In their research, Harris and Hatano (1999) also found that the children’s speed of reading and spelling and the strategies they adopted depended on many factors, such as “children’s pre-reading experience at home and in nursery school, the method of instruction used in school to teach reading and spelling and societal attitudes towards activities” (p. 9).

From a functional linguistic perspective, Halliday (1989) acknowledges that the use of language depends on the function it exerts on the social situation, with languages being shaped by specific knowledge. Moreover, he presents the lexical density difference of the written language in comparison to the spoken. In Halliday’s (1989) perspective, written language (more static) involves a higher use of content words, more grammatically intricate, as well as syntactically subordinated constructions. In speech (which encompasses processes), the individual relies on intonation and syntactic coordination in sentences to convey meaning, context, and understanding. Referring to literacy, Halliday (2007) argues:

In many instances the term *literacy* has come to be dissociated from reading and writing, and written language, altogether, and generalized so as to cover all forms of discourse, spoken as well as written. In this way it comes to refer to effective participation of any kind in social processes. Having argued for much of my

working life that we still do not properly value spoken language, or even properly describe it, I naturally sympathize with those who use the term in this way, to the extent that they are by implication raising the status of speaking, of the spoken language, and of the discourse of so-called "oral cultures." The problem is that if we call all these things literacy, then we shall have to find another term for what we called literacy before, because it is still necessary to distinguish reading and writing practices from listening and speaking practices. Neither is superior to the other, but they are different; and, more importantly, the interaction between them is one of the friction points at which new meanings are created. So here I shall use literacy throughout to refer specifically to writing as distinct from speech: to reading and writing practices, and to the forms of language, and ways of meaning, that are typically associated with them. (p.9)

In this same line of inquiry, Schleppegrell (2004) highlights that the systemic functional linguistic theory offers possibilities for users to identify grammatical features peculiar to a type of text, so that the language choices can be explained in functional terms and contextualized. In identifying one of the major goals of systemic functional linguistics research, (Christie, 1999, 2002; Lemke, 1990; Halliday & Martin, 1993), Schleppegrell (2004) states that it "has been to describe academically valued contexts of use, elucidating the linguistic features of the genres of schooling and showing the challenges that those features present to students who are developing advanced literacy" (p. 19). To examine the present data through the linguistic lens, literacy practices of Karen families would be simplistically observed from the formal schooling practice of using and engaging with literacy.

While literacy is considered, in the linguistic view, as a contextualized and situated competence with the written and reading forms, cognitive dimensions in literacy (Hirsch, 1987; Huey, 1908; Thorndike, 1917) presuppose the participation of learners at a cognitive level by elaborating mental representations and requiring predictions, inference and synthesis of meaning, all influenced by the reader's values, attitudes and beliefs (Kern, 1990). Thorndike (1917) explains that "reading is a very elaborate procedure, involving a weighing of each many elements in a sentence, their organization in the proper relations to one another, the selection of certain of their connotations and the rejections of others and the cooperation of many sources to determine final response" (p. 323). As explained by Kern (1990), then, writing will also require active thinking and problem solving as much as reading. Overall, both skills can be considered as meaning construction, once practitioners connect textual elements and existing knowledge structures to create new knowledge structures. In cognitive literacy, the idea of literacy becomes the "process of creating and transforming knowledge" (Kern, 1990, p. 29).

Although knowledge is divided into declarative (knowing that) and procedural (knowing how), it is also schematically organized in the mind. According to the "Schema Theory," knowledge is based on complex units or hierarchies where knowledge is stored, which determines how knowledge is represented and/or used. In essence, schemata is knowledge about concepts. Such concepts and schemata influence the way in which we perceive reality, also determining literacy practices and understandings in reading, since mechanisms activate the schemata more relevant to the reader's task.

Inasmuch as the idea of schemata and cognitive literacy deals with literacy processes in reading and writing thinking, Kern (1990) suggests that our purposes and

goals are the driving forces for readers and writers to engage in literacy practices. In this manner, Barton and Hamilton (2000), exploring the meaning of literacy, affirm that “literacy is a social practice” (p. 7). In the sphere of socialization, the means for recognizing specific contexts, in which reading and writing accomplish a specific purpose, reflect the sociocultural perspective views of individuals who enact literacy, in other words, what they *do* with it (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Whereas the cognitive perspective encompasses literacy’s universal properties of the human mind, comprising personal and communal goals and the use of literacy, the sociocultural perspective looks at these variables as socially constructed, perceived, and practiced.

In the sociocultural perspective, Street (2001) explains that literacy as a social practice focuses on the understanding and use of knowledge: “the ways into which people address reading and writing are themselves routed in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being (p. 7). Additionally, Barton and Hamilton (2000) complement that social literacy practices may not be observable because such practices involve forms and discourses of literacy, people’s awareness of literacy, and the form in which individuals talk about and understand literacy.

In this same view, Kern (1990) interprets “literacy identity” as a process of socialization and acculturation of particular conventions that recreate and interact with texts from a particular discourse in community. In essence, “becoming literate means more than apprenticeship with texts—it means apprenticeship in particular ways of being” (Kern, 1990, p. 35). Complementing the idea of identity from a broader perspective, Bigelow (2011) uses the term “hybridity” to explain the process of

reconciliation between cultural practices and view points, which is also influenced by powerful discourses in the dominant and powerful.

The idea of “literacy identity” is defended by Gee (2000) who explains the influence and differences between *Discourses* and *discourses*, which form the “literacy identity.” In dividing “discourses” into two categories, Gee (1999) argues that Discourse refers to “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing and using various symbols, tools, and objects, to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (p. 21). On the other hand, “discourse,” with a lower-case “d,” simply means language-in-use or stretches of language, such as conversations or stories. Furthermore, Discourse also refers to socially- accepted associations in ways of utilizing language, as well as thinking, acting, and interacting within the expected places and in the “right” times. In other words, the main aspect of Discourse is the recognition accredited from the social order to the one enacting the “Discourse” pattern. The problem with Discourses falls on its subtle manifestations and on the challenge to explicitly teach it in the classrooms. Aside from this, acquiring a Discourse is a process of apprenticeship and enculturation regarding the practices of a social group (Gee, 1999).

Theoretically connecting to the idea of Discourse as ideological and learned practices, Street (1984) explores the meaning and manifestations of literacy in two concepts: literacy events and literacy practices. Derived from the sociolinguistic idea of speech events (Barton, 1994), Heath (1982) first utilized the term as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants’ interactions and their interpretive process” (p. 50). The literacy event, then, encompasses the repeated activities



of everyday life, linked to some specific routine sequences that are also linked to social structures and respective expectations, such as schools, workplaces, or welfare agencies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). The concept of apprenticeship and enculturation of Discourse by Gee (1998) can be compared with Street's (1995) emphasis that these events are internalized by participants who learn how tightly controlled the conventions are in their daily encounters with literacy during meetings, in conventions, or in seminars.

Moving to literacy practices, Street (1995) explicates the cultural uses and meanings of reading and writing—in other words, the concepts that people bring to the context when they engage in the practice of reading and writing. Barton and Hamilton (2000) acknowledge that literacy practices “are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others” (p. 12).

In practical terms for the adult family literacy classroom, the idea of literacy as mastering social practices that connect to specific Discourses proposes a multiplicity of understandings of contexts, uses of text genres, and experiences in purposes. Problematic to this view in literacy would be the challenges that the Karen population faces as refugees in different countries. In a broader, macro-perspective, Watkins, Razee and Richters (2012), in studying barriers for Karen women to participate in formal schooling in Australia, argue in their findings that language proficiency “is an essential part of resettlement and both directly and indirectly affects well-being through increasing self-efficacy, reducing social isolation and enhancing educational and vocational opportunities” (p. 137). Additionally, the Karen participants demonstrated value towards education, social participation, and contribution (p. 137). Oh and Van der Stouwe (2008)

also acknowledge that refugees in Thai-refugee camps highly value education because it means higher social status, better-paying jobs, and increased service for the community. They examined cases of exclusion from the benefit of schooling, due to religious disagreement and pregnancy factors, as a form of punishment. “Exclusion from the school denies young people not just an education but also friendships” (Oh and Van der Stouwe, 2008, p. 603). Regarding these concepts and practices of formal schooling, Karen literacy practices become a field of inquiry and examination. To make sense of their experience of literacy, this project will refer to their current, and previous, social practices.

### **Chapter III: Research Methods**

#### **Research Design**

In order to examine the extensions and life experiences of the Karen population in their engagement in literacy practices in the U.S. context, this study presents the qualitative nature as a means to create “a systematic approach to understanding qualities, or essential nature, of a phenomenon within a particular context” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 95). Creswell (1994) also highlights the use of a qualitative study when the researcher inquiry is “defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting a detailed view of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p. 2).

More importantly, this study is also of ethnographic character. In utilizing ethnography as a methodology, Saldaña (2011) explains that “originally the method of anthropologists studying foreign peoples’ ethnography is now multidisciplinary in its

applications to explore cultures in classrooms, urban street settings, business and organizations, and even cyberspace” (p. 5). Although this project presents case studies of Karen families, meaningful understanding of the Karen culture, as well as relevant questioning of their literacy adaptation process, can be drawn. Considering this, Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2007) point out that “through the individual we come to understand the culture, and through the culture we come to understand the individual” (p. 286). In a final reminder Saldaña (2011) explains the goal of ethnography as “to research the default conditions (and their ‘software updates’) of a people’s ways of living.”

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to understand and discover patterns of literacy practices for Karen families enrolled in the Family Literacy Program (FLIP) in Lincoln, Nebraska. At this stage of the research, literacy practices will be defined as the patterned concepts created by social institutions that people bring to the context when they engage in the practice of reading and writing which will determine the choice of literacies for being more dominant and influential than the others.

### **Research Questions**

This study explored three research questions:

1. What are some of the literacy practices that Karen families engage with in their homes and school?
2. What are some of the cultural norms of Karen lives that influence learning and adaptation to American expectations within a family literacy setting?
3. How does the literacy program structure the teaching of American culture for these Karen families?

## **Data Collection Procedures**

**site.** Lincoln, Nebraska has a population of around 225,581 (U.S. Census, 2010). Since 1983, the city has resettled almost 5,500 refugees, and according to the Asian Community Center, the county has become the nation's 18<sup>th</sup> largest resettlement area for Asian refugees and immigrants. At the beginning of the research, in one of my meetings with the staff responsible for the FLIP program, a staff member asked me which school site I was interested in to develop my research with Karen participants. Since I had no idea of where the concentration of the Karen population was, I asked the staff member for more information about the schools and the Karen students involved. After examining my options, I opted for "Kennedy Elementary," where the concentration of Karen students was higher, thinking that, perhaps, my participation and access would be easier with the community.

As I drove to Kennedy Elementary School, the beauty of the building characterizing the traditional American school, with partial front white bricks and pillars, side brown bricks, and a long staircase to the entry way, reminded me of American movies that I used to watch in Brazil, where students would hang out at the school entrance, waiting for their friends to park their cars or bikes to enter the school building and put away their books in their lockers, heading to their classrooms. This "image" of the fictitious, now in connection to the real world, felt quite magical. However, I was in that school not to live the American life, with cars, bikes, and lockers, but to research the ways in which Karen families engage in literacy and, consequently, in American culture. Like the little girl who used to watch the American movies in Brazil, I was and am still the spectator.

At Kennedy Elementary, the FLIP program had been going on for about two months prior to the research. Before being transferred to Kennedy Elementary, the FLIP program functioned at First Baptist Church, close to the Karen neighborhood, and the program's focus was the Karen population. Contracted by the Asian Center, the church provided transportation, childcare, and rooms for the families to learn English. It was at this exact year that the FLIP program had moved to Kennedy Elementary, which caused the program to lose some Karen adult learners due to its distance from their homes. At the church, the FLIP program served Karen parents from five different schools from the LPS district. To participate during PACT time, the parents were bussed to the schools where their children were enrolled in formal education.

In the FLIP program classroom, which was shared with the Community Learner Center (CLC), a before- and after-school program that supports students with learning opportunities and school homework, parents gathered in their groups of proficiency, which were divided into areas of two larger desks in front of the classroom and another three larger desks in the back of the classroom. Books, crayons, toys, and children's work were part of the classroom decorations, depicting the learning environment in which the children were involved. A poster about the FLIP program also hung on the wall, as well as the school calendar and other announcements, such as tax filer help centers, etc.

The schedule of classes are five days per week from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. Adult immigrant and refugee learners gather everyday there to learn about the English language and cultural topics and to participate with their children in the elementary classrooms. The program happens during the afternoon because of the availability of the classroom in the school. Depending on the day, whether it is cold, warm, or some other unknown

variable, students start entering the classroom as early as 1:15 and as late as 1:35. As they enter the classroom, they usually sit close to their ethnic peers, especially if they are part of the same English-leveled group. The teacher starts the class with the announcements for the day, going through the school's programs, as well as activities in the calendar (everyday the teacher reinforces the announcements and upcoming programs at school).

The first part of the school day for the Karen parents involve their participation on the Parent and Children Together (PACT time) for half an hour. When they come back from PACT time, the students engage in English lessons with tutors and with the teacher. On Tuesdays, parents do not have PACT time but are involved with what the program staff call "Parent Time," a time where parents engage in learning aspects of life and culture in the United States. Usually, during the regular class days, parents are so involved with the activities in their groups and with the tutors that even the break time is forgotten. However, on Tuesdays the break would be remembered due to the possible nature of the class, with lectures about American life and adaptation, as well as the change of presenters and sometimes classroom settings.

The overall atmosphere of the FLIP classroom reflected a significant amount of talking amongst students and their peers in their first language, tutor, teacher and student talk in simplified structured English, and cross-cultural interaction of students, also in English. The Karen students, specifically, loved to laugh, smile, and imitate the pronunciation of words. Every day was a day to share their lives with each other in the classroom, updating the teacher about their busy lives or explaining who was sick in the community, helping each other with the language exercises, and, consequently engaging in learning the foreign language and culture.

**participants.** The recruitment of participants occurred after my third visit with the FLIP classroom on October 10<sup>th</sup> of 2012, after I talked to the Karen interpreter, during break time, and asked her help to translate my talk about the study to the participants. As I started to explain the project, ending with my attempt to schedule an appointment with her to come to the classroom and meet with the Karen adult learners, she was already translating the information about the project to the Karen group that I had told her. I only noticed this dynamic after I asked her, “So, when could we talk?” and her reply was “Right now,” as she started pointing out the Karen people while turning to me, saying their names and explaining that they would help me. I reinforced by saying that they were not obligated to participate but only if they wanted to do so. She confirmed positively with her head and continued to point to them and talk in Karen.

As my gatekeeper, the interpreter recruited two of my participants, Hkee La and Tee Cha, during this exchange. With my third participant, Kle Ser Mu, our interaction occurred on October 11<sup>th</sup> of 2012, when I joined the advanced learners group of which she was part. In her group, I told her that I was doing research about “Karen people and how they were learning English.” Kle Ser Mu, in reply, told me that I could ask her any questions and that she knew “everything about Karen people.” I asked if she would agree to be one of the participants in the study, and she agreed. In that same week, I handed out the consent forms, and, with the help of the interpreter, I told the participants what was required from them.

In examining how the interaction with the Karen students happened and how the interpreter approached the situation, I analyze the recruitment of the participants as a mixture of maximum variation with snowball/chain sampling. The maximum variation

sampling strategy refers to the researcher who purposefully selects a sample of persons or contexts that best describe or represent the wide experience related to the phenomenon in study (Creswell, 2012). In this regard, the school site was chosen based on the significant Karen population at the same site, and Kle Ser Mu as a representation of an advanced English learner, since I already knew the other two participants were at lower levels of English proficiency. In considering snowball/chain sampling, the researcher utilized connections within the context of study, the interpreter, to identify the cases of interest. Once the first contact was made by the interpreter and the study was explained, I started interacting with the participants of this project, and, with the help of my gatekeeper, Tee Cha and Hkee La became part of the group in which I was about to spend three months.

**data collection.** The data collection period started on October 10<sup>th</sup> of 2012 and ended on February 08<sup>th</sup> of 2013. I visited the school site three times a week, during the period of the FLIP classes, also participating in the FLIP staff meeting for four times, interviewing each Karen adult participant once, as well as the teacher, and visiting the participants' homes three times for approximately three hours each (except for Hkee La, who dropped out of the program before the end of the research) (See table 1.1).

As defined by Creswell (2008), observation refers to the “process of gathering open-ended, firsthand information by observing people and places at a research site” (p. 221), and Wolcott (1994) highlights that participant observation is a way of experiencing the research data. The goal of using observations is to “understand the culture, setting, or social phenomenon being studied from the perspectives of the participants” (Hatch, 2002, p. 72). In utilizing observations, which were recorded through fieldnotes and the use of a



voice-recorder, I engaged with the Karen participants during their classroom lessons and activities, as well as in their interaction with their children during PACT time.


Also during observations, my role as researcher changed as the participants' needs increased. At the beginning of the data collection, my participants had me as a helper for them to learn English or the tutors would ask me how to define a specific word or explain a specific grammar topic. There were times when one of my participants did not have a tutor, and she would ask me to help her to understand grammar issues and exercises. In this way, I went from being only an observer to a participant observer. In one of these moments, the teacher explicitly told one of the groups that "she isn't here to teach you; she is here to do research." Although being a participant observer made it difficult for me to take notes, the recorder helped with what I sometimes missed.

The visits to the Karen families' houses occurred three times during the research period, depending on the participants' availability and time. Often, the home visitation happened after classes or in the morning when the participant was home. When scheduling the visit, I left the invitation open for the participants to inform me of the best time for them to have me at their homes. Tee Cha and Hkee La chose to have me come in the evenings, after class, while Kle Ser Mu chose the mornings, since she worked in the evenings at a Thai restaurant. The visits lasted for about three hours each, and fieldnotes, as well as the voice-recording of the talk, was also utilized.

Interviews occurred at the end of the collection of data, to ensure their familiarity with me as someone trustworthy, since I was dealing with a vulnerable population of refugees. For the interviews, I personally contacted the participants in the classroom, scheduling the date and time for our interviews. Tee Cha, one of the participants who was

extremely involved with the community, and her family, due to time constraints, chose to have her interview at the school site after the PACT time period. I contacted the teacher by email, and later personally, seeking her permission to have the interview in the classroom site. For the sake of convenience, the teacher and I also met at the FLIP classroom to have the interview. We arrived approximately one hour before classes started. The other two participants had their interviews at their homes. Out of the three participants, two had interpreters to convey the questions and answers in a fuller manner. Still, even making use of open-ended questions, due to language interpretation and/or understanding, sometimes the questions were asked and rephrased more than twice. Additionally, informal conversations and extra explanations also contributed to my deeper and broader understanding of the program and the students' lives.

Table 1: Forms of Data and Frequency



Participation in the Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monday</li> <li>Tuesday</li> <li>Thursday</li> </ul>
Home-visitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mornings</li> <li>Evenings</li> </ul>
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Home</li> <li>Classroom</li> </ul>

Table 2: Totals of Data Collection

Tee Cha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Observations: 11</li> <li>Interviews: 1</li> <li>Home-visitations: 3</li> </ul>
Kle Ser Mu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Observations: 9</li> <li>Interviews: 1</li> <li>Home-visitations: 3</li> </ul>
Hkee La	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Observations: 12</li> <li>Interviews: 1</li> <li>Home-visitations: 2</li> </ul>

### Ethical Issues

Approval from the Internal Review Board (IRB) ensured that participants would be ethically regarded during the study through the use of informed consent forms and detailed explanations of how they would be approached at the school site, as well as their anonymity in the study. For the interpretation of the consent forms, the interpreter read

and explained my participation within the school site, the home-visitations and interviews, my presence during PACT, and the compensation for the participants' time and dedication to this study. I further explained to the interpreter that no one was obligated to participate, also informing them that they could withdraw from the study at any time, which actually happened to one of the participants, due to her withdrawal from the FLIP program.

### **Data analysis procedures**

The observational data collected, whether from home-visitation or school participation, was mostly in the form of fieldnotes. A first step to analyze the data was through the use of descriptive coding, regarded by Saldaña (2011) as just one of the approaches to analyze ethnographic data, and further explored by Tesch (1990), saying that "it is important that these [codes] are identification of the *topic*, not abbreviations of the *content*. The topic is what is talked about or written *about*. The content is the substance of the message" (p.199).

After the first step of descriptively coding, the researcher utilized MaxQDA, a qualitative software used to help with the second stage of coding and, later, with the emergence of themes. During the process of analyzing the data, in vivo codes were then written, utilizing the participants' words as representations of their concepts and experiences. Strauss (1987) explains that the meaning of in vivo is "in that which is alive." Saldaña (2009) points out that "as a code [it] refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" which had been used by the participants themselves (p. 74). In vivo code is also used in "studies that prioritize and

honor the participant's voice" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 74). The researcher also wrote analytical memos, connecting theory and research studies with the codes that emerged.

The interviews were transcribed in the most accurate manner, considering the interpreters' misuse and/or lack of words in the English language, such as verbs in the middle of sentences. After transcription, the data was also analyzed through descriptive coding, and later, through MaxQDA software. The codes and themes that emerged became part of the prior coding categories, also adding more codes and themes to the broad spectrum of the research.

In using the software, the researcher divided the fieldnotes into groups by participants' memos, Parent Time memos, and the teacher interview memos, to organize the overall visual form of the totality of the data collection.

### **Reflexivity**

As a second language speaker of English, the process of acquiring the language and being acculturated into American society made me sensitive and partially aware of the needs and challenges that surround those who migrate to this country for innumerable reasons. Specifically with the immigrant refugee Karen families, my experience occurred in three different stages. My first experience occurred in an ESL classroom in the Fall of 2010, when I first met Karen children who welcomed me with their "never fading" smiles on their faces, bringing with them their struggles to learn the language. In the Spring of 2011, one of the LPS staff members presented the FLIP program in a literacy class, and when asked about the research that has been developed regarding the program, the staff member confirmed that none had been done. My immersion with Karen research projects

that pointed to their struggles of fleeing their country and their lives in the refugee camps also influenced me to develop this project.

All of these experiences have shaped my interpretation of the phenomenon of refugees learning literacy in a specific way. I recognize that, as a second language speaker and educator, consciously or unconsciously, I focus on the literacy practices that these families engage with as a form of “learning” and participating in the American system. Although struggling with the language and slowly learning through difficulties, they were practicing literacy. In essence, the ultimate bias in the analysis may be my own identity as someone who learned how to participate in the culture and my hopeful perspective that they are doing the same.

#### **Chapter IV: The Toyota Family Literacy Program**

The Toyota Family Literacy Program (TFLP) was established in 2003 by the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) with funding from Toyota to fulfill the educational needs of Hispanic and other immigrant families. The program serves parents of children enrolled in kindergarten to third grade, and it also recruits parents who hold refugee or immigrant status.

The program is divided into four components: Children’s Education, Parent Time, Adult Education, and Parent and Child Together (PACT time). Each one of these segments in the TFLP works as a “system of influence” (*Toyota Family Literacy Program: Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009) that involves parents and children in learning and engagement within the school system. Although Children’s Education alludes to the academic instruction of the K-3 classroom, the focus on this component is

to support the learning processes and activities through parent involvement and engagement (*Toyota Family Literacy Program: Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009).

### **Understanding the Four Components**

For the adult education, the TFLP highlights the benefits of concentrating the teaching of English as a Second Language in terms of contextualized teaching, by utilizing the learners' needs to build on their experiences and knowledge, using a variety of approaches, by teaching listening, reading, writing, and speaking, as well as language functions with different strategies and competencies, that focus on the knowledge and skills to engage and participate in American society, by writing and discussing issues in the participants' lives (*Toyota Family Literacy Program: Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009). With this same emphasis on contextualized teaching and concerns in engaging students in writing and reading, Meltzer and Hamann (2005), in their study focusing on adolescent literacy learning in the content-area, state that "to support literacy development, teachers must find ways to motivate learners to substantively engage with text. The literature consistently points to the efficacy, and, indeed, the importance of two strategies that motivate students to engage: (1) activating and building upon background knowledge and (2) making text-text, text-self, and text-world connections" (p.15). Furthermore, in adult education, teachers also need to purposively encourage parents to set goals for their learning process, since "goal setting is an interactive, ongoing, and cooperative process involving instructors and adult learners" (*Toyota Family Literacy Program: Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009).

The definition of Parent Time is to "provide training for parents regarding how to be the primary teachers for their children and full partners in the education of their

children” (*Toyota Family Literacy Program Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009).

Parent Time also has four main purposes. The first is to “share information and new ideas about their children’s educational process” (in this it includes “children’s language and literacy, the school’s curriculum, ‘structure,’ and expectations); second, to “offer encouragement and support as their children’s first teachers;” third, to “help parents set goals for themselves and their children;” and fourth, to “provide advocacy and referral so that parents can access services such as legal assistance, health care, substance abuse education and treatment, counseling or therapy, nutritional information, housing assistance, emergency shelter, and community resources” (*Toyota Family Literacy Program Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009).

Regarding these assertions, the Family Literacy Program (FLIP)<sup>1</sup> in Lincoln, NE, holds Parent Time once a week (on Tuesdays), fulfilling the requirements of the grant proposal from the Toyota Family Literacy Program handbook. During this once-a-week meeting, parents engage in learning American culture in and outside of school, as well as the norms of adaptation and/or functionality of the school. For the Parent Time, the coordinator of the FLIP program organized the topics in the talks, reflecting the needs of the students regarding issues worth knowing about in American society or that parents have requested or have questions/doubts. Presenters and/or speakers often used visual tools to better explain the topics, repeated information upon request, showed examples of activities by other students, and allowed extra time for parents to ask questions or make any observations/comments. Additionally, during Parent Time, interpreters participated in translating information from the speakers to the parents and vice-versa. In the process

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<sup>1</sup> I will refer to the program in Lincoln, Nebraska as the FLIP program, since this was the term used by the staff members and coordinator, rather than TFLP.

of translating, interpreters acted as cultural brokers, translating not only the talk but also further explaining the context and the information or asking further questions that were not asked by the parents. These roles are out of the scope of this project, but further research needs to be developed in order to observe how information is processed, especially by Karen interpreters, and how their own experiences in the American system shapes their understanding of the school system, influencing their interpretation of the topic themes during Parent Time.

For the fourth component, PACT time provides opportunities for parent-child interaction, enhancing “children’s development and learning as well as parents’ understanding of how children learn, the value of play and their role as their child’s teacher” (*Toyota Family Literacy Program Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009). The meaning of the critical role of parents’ involvement in children’s literacy and language development embodies the diversity of learning environments in which literacy-related parent-child interactions occur. Moreover, PACT time purposes reflect the program’s commitment to “aid parents into discovering” through the reaffirmation and expansion of their roles as leaders, parents, and teachers of their children, “enhance parents’ awareness” of how their children learn language and literacies, and with what strategies they learn best, “give parents tools” to support their children’s learning development with language and literacies, “provide an opportunity for parents to practice” the new strategies in the context of the classroom where the teachers offer suggestions and support for using the learning techniques, and “ help parents feel comfortable” in interacting with these new tools and strategies for learning and teaching their children



within the family, school, and community contexts (*Toyota Family Literacy Program Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009).

The implementation of PACT time addresses major components, such as the schedule of the parents' participation in the classrooms on a regular basis, the quality of their one-on-one time, being student-centered, the parents' observation of what is said by the child and the teacher during PACT time, and the implementation of home transfer strategies and review strategies that bridge the learning in the classroom with learning outside of it. In addition, holding debriefing sections and giving parents opportunities to report their experiences, give their opinions, and discuss individual observations offers communication strategies for understanding parents' involvement with PACT time (*Toyota Family Literacy Program Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009). At the FLIP program at Kennedy Elementary, these debriefings were held every week, mostly during Parent Time. As the parents' participation in their children's classrooms continued, the FLIP teacher also created journals for students to take with them during the PACT time meetings in order to take notes and bring to the classroom on Fridays to work on their writing skills and report strategies.

### **FLIP Staff Meetings**

As highlighted in the project handbook, "the instructional team meets weekly to discuss the families, instructional strategies, state educational standards and the overall goals of the program" (*Toyota Family Literacy Program Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009). At Kennedy Elementary, the first staff meeting occurred on October 23<sup>rd</sup> of 2012, and the coordinator of the program invited me to participate in the meeting. The meeting was scheduled to take place in the FLIP classroom every Tuesday at 12:45 p.m., which

later changed to Wednesday in the afternoon. I expected that in this meeting, the FLIP teacher and the program coordinator at Kennedy Elementary would be the only ones sharing information, but as I entered the classroom, not only were both of them in the classroom but also in attendance were the interpreters (Karen, Chinese, Spanish and later, Kurdish), the district coordinator from the Community College, and the childcare teacher. The FLIP coordinator at Kennedy Elementary distributed the meeting agenda for each one of us, with seven topics to be addressed, such as celebrations, adult ESL, parent education, PACT time, childcare, recruitment and retention, and additional topics. Overall, the meeting was an update report of the recent facts in the FLIP classroom and students' lives. Additionally, the teachers who were involved more directly with the parents, such as the FLIP teacher and the childcare teacher, had the opportunity to propose ideas and plan classroom events to involve parents and their children in the school site. It was during these meetings that the childcare teacher proposed activities to engage the FLIP parents in the learning process of the children in the childcare room. Activities, such as celebrating Thanksgiving in the FLIP program, building a gingerbread house together, mapping the country of origin, and the "word of the day/week," exemplify a few of the learning activities and experiences that germinated from the staff meetings.

In my observations, I noticed the roles played by each one of the members participating in the meeting. The FLIP program coordinator usually led the meeting, handing out the piece of paper with the topics to be addressed. She would introduce the topic and listen to the participation, mainly of the FLIP teacher, who would bring the information about celebrations in the school or American calendar, as well as parents'

birthdays. In approaching the topic of adult ESL, the FLIP teacher and the FLIP coordinator also shared information about new tutors coming to the classroom, the involvement of parents during PACT time who needed to be tested in their English proficiency, and the response from the elementary teachers. The FLIP coordinator also led the topic of Parent Time, announcing the topics that would be addressed in the following meetings on Tuesdays for parents and the respective presenters. She also reminded them when PLC day and the non-meeting class for parents were scheduled to take place. The PACT time topic was also addressed by both the FLIP teacher and coordinator, regarding the experiences that parents were having in their children's classrooms, the activities that parents were bringing to the FLIP classroom, and, eventually, some issues with the schedule and students' requests, such as their desire to visit their children at different times of the day, which was not possible due to the structure of the program and ESL classes. When the topic of childcare emerged, the childcare teacher would bring to the table the activities with which the children were involved and some ideas and requests for parents' involvement. In the meantime, interpreters participated by asking questions, taking notes, and also informing the school staff about help regarding tax file returns, vaccinations, or even signing up for Toys for Toddlers during the Christmas season. The district coordinator from the Community College would also take notes and suggest ideas for some requests, such as how to integrate the parents in the FLIP classroom and their children in the childcare.

### **Testing and Assessment**

Within the TFLP, teacher assessment involves formal assessment, such as standardized tests that are almost always required by the funders of the program and other

stakeholders (*Toyota Family Literacy Program Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009).

In an interview with the FLIP teacher, she explained one of the formal assessments as follows:

And, so, Southeast Community College, at the beginning of the year, we have a tester, Sue, come out and they do an initial testing of our students for their levels, uh, and that is called “The Best Plus,” which is an oral test. And it’s, um, actually computer generated, so depending on how the student answers the question, or doesn’t answer the question, the computer will decide, then, what to ask next.

Um, the students get tested then, um, if they are doing ‘The Best Plus’ after every sixty hours of classroom attendance, that then they get retested to see if there has been progress. Once students get to a certain level in “The Best Plus,” or what we would say, they test out of that, then they’re given a reading test, the Tabe reading test, and, um, that then is what they will go from at that point. They are not given the oral test anymore at that point and it’s for every fifty hours of class time that they are retested for the Tabe. (Mrs. Jane, interview, February 2, 2013).

In addition to the formal testing applied by the Community College, the leveled groups also had a written assessment of the textbook unit after the completion of the unit. Usually, the tutors proctored the tests, helping students with the meaning of some words and explaining the different exercises. The FLIP teacher graded the tests, handing them back to students and explaining their performance and their mistakes in a face-to-face conversation.

Also in the TLFP informal assessment takes place in the form of interviews with students, observations of student performance, dialogue journals, portfolios, information

forms, and sentence stems. In the FLIP classroom, the teacher used journals and verbal participation as informal assessments, and within groups, tutors worked on closer observations of students' performance. In this specific aspect, the FLIP teacher explained her own challenges:

It's very different because, um, for me as the teacher it's hard because I want to be able to give my attention to every student and to try to help them, but with different levels, obviously I can't do that, because unless we are doing a whole, um, group class, we have four different groups going on, and I can't be in four places. So, um, some of it is being able to trust, um, the volunteers or the instructional assistant to take the lesson and to go with them or just to be able to know how to work with them. Um, on the other side of that, because I'm not working with them, I'm not always as aware as I would like to be of what their needs are. I try to get feedback from the volunteers and, um, the instructional assistant, but it's not the same as working with them and hearing everything. It's a small enough class, though, that I can often hear what's going on inside, and so I do pick up things, um, listening to the other groups. Um, but I would say that that's, for me, what's the biggest difference and challenges, just the fact that I can't be hands-on with every single group. (Mrs. Jane, Interview, February 2, 2013).

The importance of assessing adults reflects an ongoing process to examine the learning process by establishing "a baseline level of learner's knowledge, skills and abilities;" identifying "students' learning goals, interests and needs;" determining "students' learning preferences or detect disabilities;" evaluating "learners' performance

and progress” (*Toyota Family Literacy Program Foundations in Family Literacy*, 2009).

Although issues and challenges when implementing informal assessment were pointed out by the FLIP teacher, further research is necessary to determine and examine the impact levels on learning achievement, and if the dynamic of not being able to participate in all groups affected the teacher’s perceptions about students’ development in the language acquisition.

### **The FLIP Classroom at Kennedy Elementary: A Portrait**

The classes commonly started at exactly 1:30 p.m., with parents coming into the FLIP classroom to leave their materials, to listen to some of the announcements, and to head to the PACT time. Usually, two parents would stay in the FLIP classroom to go to PACT time at 2:00 p.m. until 2:30 p.m. During this time, the students worked with their vocabulary books or on some other activity involving language skills or knowledge about American society, such as studying for their citizenship test. After all of the students gathered back into the classroom at 2:30 p.m., they were divided into groups by proficiency level, consisting of about four groups, ranging from beginning/Karen illiterate, beginning/literate in their first language, high beginning, and high intermediate. Each group had their books, and tutors worked within each group, with the exception of the high intermediate that did not always have a tutor. At the beginning of the program, the FLIP teacher would work more frequently with the beginning/Karen illiterate group.

The FLIP teacher, who I will call Mrs. Jane, started teaching in the FLIP program in September of 2012, when the FLIP program moved to Kennedy Elementary. As a teacher, she started her career in 1996, immediately after finishing her master’s degree. Mrs. Jane explained that most of her experience had been in teaching ESL classes in adult

education, which were leveled classes, in South Carolina and California. She also taught overseas, in Albania, for about six years in ESL-leveled classes, as well. Mrs. Jane acknowledged that this had been her first time teaching in a multi-leveled classroom.

Before the classes started, for approximately fifteen minutes, Mrs. Jane would go through the books and activities that the students had been working on in their groups, checking with the tutors where they had stopped and informing them of which activities they should be working on with the parents. During this short meeting, before the class started, Mrs. Jane would shortly describe the agenda for the day, explaining if they would be working with the groups or there would be a lecture after PACT time. If it were to be a lecture, then she would be in charge of the exercises and explanations, with tutors giving the parents support with the exercises, and if in groups, she would, most commonly, be with the least-proficient group while the tutors would be divided within the other levels. Usually, the tutors stayed within the same group, unless a specific tutor was not present on some day of the week. Some tutors came to the FLIP classroom for just a period of time, sometimes for two or three months, and a couple of the tutors participated more regularly.

Although the FLIP classroom presented a structural routine, Mrs. Jane pointed out that in terms of a typical day in the class, the idea of “typical” did not relate to this classroom because:

It seems like there's always things, um, that happen, that you might have a plan and this being that you're going to work with this group to do a certain thing, and that this group, if it's two students, neither one is there that day, or only one is there, so then you don't want to necessarily go forward in something, um, when

the other student is missing. So, you kinda shift and figure out what to do. Um, we do have a couple of days that are different than the normal routine, whether is doing whole class lessons or going to the library. Um, we do also, on a couple days, have some of the groups working on the computer. We don't have, earlier, we had them, what was a computer day for everybody, now is more by level, so on a certain day this group might work on the computers for an hour, and another day another group might, just to give them some experience with technology. (Mrs. Jane, interview, February 2, 2013).

In this FLIP classroom, there were about five different ethnic groups: Mexican, Kurdish, Karen, Karenni, and Chinese, who participated in the program for a short period of time. When I asked about the challenges of teaching the adult learners, Mrs. Jane explained that the lack of formal schooling experiences that some of the parents show has been a “different” experience for her. Reflecting on Reeves’ (2009) work about how teachers form their identities relationally and how these identities are co-constructed with interested others, I wonder how Mrs. Jane’s identity as an ESL teacher will be shaped by the multi-leveled literacy practices and her illiterate students, influencing her instructional practices. In recognizing this “difficulty,” Mrs. Jane explains:

It's been, and we have students in this class who are illiterate, um, illiterate in their own language as well, obviously, as in English. So that's been, for me, very different, is just working with some people who are really at ground zero, and um, in English, and learning how to write, you know, and in some cases just holding the pencil for the first time, and um, a couple of them are older, so that also plays a factor, I think sometimes, in their...just maybe the quickness on being able, uh,



there's a lot of repetition, and um, so, it's been a different experience for me.

(Mrs. Jane, interview, February, 2, 2013).

The activities were planned according to the needs of the class and the curriculum. As explained before, the groups utilized books, which Mrs. Jane explained as being the "curriculum" for the class:

We have the Ventures series, and I think that's a Cambridge University book.

And, so, it is an all-skills book and then it works, um, it introduces like new vocabulary, every unit is topically organized, and so it might be on places around town, um, and so the vocabulary will be, um, based on that. And then there will be a grammar that's introduced. Um, there is reading, a reading segment, writing segment. Um, there's some speaking activities that they can do, and then there's a review. Um, and so, um, there's, I think, really five levels to this curriculum all the way from basic up to level four. And we have students in four of those. We have students in basic, and one, two, and then in four of that curriculum. We also have different reading, um, curriculums that we use, um, kind of some have been the same type of book but at the different levels. Um, one for example, in the fall we were using is "from home to school." And so a lot of the readings have to do with things that happen during school, or like a letter home from the teacher, so kind of helping parents make that bridge to school life and what's happening and what's normal and...or what do you do in situations like if your child gets in trouble at school, or...or things like field trips, you know, or being a volunteer in the classroom, or when report cards come out, so, just to kind of help... make them more aware of what school life is. Um, and since this is a family literacy

class, that was very appropriate. Now, one of the groups is doing something on health-related stories, so, another one, is...group is working on stories now about a girl who comes from another country and comes to the United States as an immigrant, and what her experience is, what she thought it was gonna be and what her life turned out to be. So, it's something that they can, hopefully, identify with. But the reading, then, all of the reading is really good for introducing new vocabulary. But a lot of times they also bring up grammatical aspects, not that it is overt, but it's more kind of just having them practice things in a way that they might not think that they are practicing grammar (Mrs. Jane, interview, February 2, 2013).

For the Karen illiterate parents, Mrs. Jane emphasized that they were not using a “curriculum” because the students were not ready to “be in it.” The teacher explained:

so it's really just trying to get them comfortable with numbers, with letters, with basic questions like about their names, and phone number, and, um, real basic vocabulary, um, but at the point to where they are now trying to get them ready to, um, not just only look at things and hear words but starting to recognize questions, and so if something's asked to them they can start recognizing what it is that's being asked. Um, and so, trying to take 'em from kind of up to the next step. I guess in really a lot of things it is kind of, that is what we are doing is trying to get them to that next step. (Mrs. Jane, interview, February 2, 2013).

Furthermore, the planning of the activities consisted of book activities, when in groups, and sheet exercises, when lecturing, or a reinforcement of some topic of learning.

In this regard, Mrs. Jane noted:

Each level it's gonna be more for where they are at, but really I think that it is kind of for where, what they have been working on, if I feel like there's a need for them to maybe review and practice that more, um, and if so then to look for extra material or ways that they can practice that, um, and then if not, if they are ready to move on, then, since it is...we have curriculums and a lot of times it is just moving on to what the next unit is or the next chapter for them to go on to.

(Interview, February 2, 2013).

Aside from the above depiction of the major classroom dynamics involving learning, space for participation and assistance with clothes and toys was also provided. During the class meetings, as well as during Parent Time, parents had the opportunity to vocalize their opinions and doubts at any moment in the classroom. In Parent Time, for example, presenters and the FLIP coordinator regularly opened spaces for questions, also inviting parents to give their opinions and share ideas about the topics being addressed. Parents also participated in the meetings by answering questions and sharing their personal concepts of themes. For the Parent Time meetings, once, the FLIP coordinator distributed pieces of paper for parents to take notes on what was being told, and in another meeting, the coordinator took some time to ask parents what topics that they wanted to learn. The FLIP coordinator gave parents a sheet of paper containing suggestions of topics, and they discussed in their ethnic groups about which topics they wanted to learn more. The interpreters passed on the information to the coordinator.

The overall participation of the Karen parents observed varied, mostly, according to their language proficiency, age, and disposition toward learning in class. Kle Ser Mu was the most talkative in class, followed by Hkee La and two other Karen high-beginning

students. The older, least proficient students did not participate as much with the big group, even when the interpreter was present, during Parent Time. They talked amongst themselves in the group, asking for help with exercises or even about general information. There were times that they would ask me to help them with pronouncing words or in turning on and setting up the computer. When they made some mistake with the language, such as spelling a word incorrectly or pronouncing a word differently, thus influencing its meaning (a significant reading miscue), they were the first ones to laugh at themselves. When music was part of the class activity, for example when the teacher taught some holiday songs, even the quietest of parents would engage in singing with the whole group. With activities on the computer, parents would repeat and reproduce aloud the sounds of letters and words within their groups.

Within this context, parents engaged in different literacy practices, and at their homes, other literacy practices emerged, sometimes reflecting the ones in the school context and at other times not. Nevertheless, the parents' involvement with literacy revealed their commitment with schooling and with helping their children to succeed in American education. Through closely observing the lives of three participants at the school and at their homes, I intend to shed some light on the Karen process of interacting with formal literacy practices in their knowledge of how to engage with these practices and uses.

## **Chapter V: Cultural Facts and the Three Karen Women Participants**

### **Cultural fact: A Historical Background**

The current year in Karen culture is 2752. Information about Karen people (Abbott, 2010) states that the Mon and Karen were the first groups to settle in Burma

more than two thousand years ago. Marshall (1922) explains that the Karen people are descendants from the Chinese, having their first descendants living on the upper reaches of the Hoang-ho or Yellow River, of China, the given name of the river because of its silt and sandy waters. Before reaching this centered place, Marshall (1922) describes the migration journey of some Asian ethnic groups, such as the Tibetans, who migrated westward, the early tribes of Indo-China southward, and the Chinese southeastward. The Karen progenitors were probably part of the southward migration, and at some stage of their journey, decided to stop at the Yellow River banks. From this region, they made their way to Yunnan, where they settled for a time but were pushed farther south by migrating people advancing behind them.

The Karen people are divided into a few subgroups, such as the Skaw Karen (the largest subgroup), Pwo Karen (the second largest), Bwe Karen (who prefer to hide in the jungle than to walk to the Thai-border, due to the distance), Karenni, Pa-O, and Karen Muslims, also known as Burmese Muslims in some regions of Burma. Karenni and Pa-O refer to themselves as “cousins” of the Karen people, preferring a distinct identity, although anthropologists have placed them as one of the Karen subgroup.



Figure 1: Map of Burma Divisions

The Karen flag is red, white, and blue. The colors are symbolic of the following respective qualities: bravery; purity; honesty. At the top left corner of the flag there is a

sun shining with nine rays representing the nine Karen districts, as well as a Karen drum.

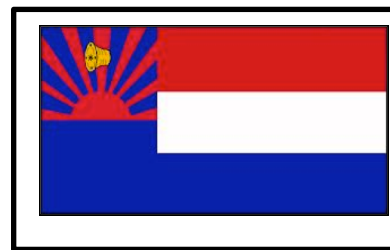


Figure 2: Karen Flag

The war in Burma has lasted for sixty years and has been considered the longest civil war in the world (Abbott, 2010). By the time of World War II, Aung Sang led a pro-independent movement in the Burma government, and he is generally considered one of the few leaders who had the abilities and vision to unify the country and the various ethnic groups. However, a rival politician assassinated him a few months before the 1948 elections. As WWII developed, ethnic groups stayed loyal to the British government while Aung Sang's Burmese Independence army initially joined the Japanese army. After WWII, the Communist Party of Burma withdrew from the government and rebelled against the central government in 1948. The Karen "revolution" began on January 31<sup>st</sup> of 1949 (Barron et al., 2007).

Although documents lack numbers of death and birth rates, numbers of formally educated people and ethnic groups living in the Burma regions, Barron et al. (2007) acknowledge that after the elections of August 8, 1988 (known as Shiq ley lone, the "four eights") the security services from the military regime killed 3,000 people, only in that period. For the ethnic groups who started to flee from the country, Lang (2001) points out that the first refugee camp, settled on the Thai-border between Thailand and Burma, dates from 1984, and approximately 100,124 Karen people were registered in the border camps in 2008, the last report in the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR Atlas Map, 2008). For 2014, UNHCR members have requested and announced the implementation of the first national census in 31 years.

In Lincoln, Nebraska, Nohr (2012) highlights that Karen people are one of the fastest growing groups of refugees moving to the state. In citing data information about the numbers of Karen refugees settling in Lincoln, Nebraska, Nohr (2012) states that according to federal DHHS data, nearly 600 people from Burma and another 287 people from Thailand have arrived since 2000. Considering the moves of Karen refugees who first come to live in one state and eventually move to Lincoln, Nebraska, which is the case of one of the women research participants, the numbers increase and, as Nohr (2012) acknowledges, “people within the Karen community, however, guess that there are thousands of Karen in Nebraska.”

Besides the history and statistics involving the Karen population, another cultural fact that emerged from the observations in the classroom and in the women research participants’ homes was the meaning and choosing of their names. As a theme that requires further research, I will point out how the “naming” of Karen children occurs and how they have adapted their names after they arrived in the US.

### **Cultural Fact: Names and Meaning**

Traditionally, Karen people do not have family (last) names, but only given (first names) names. Also, names in Karen culture are mixtures of random words in the language. For example, flowers are popular names for either boys or girls (Abbott, 2010). Although not reflecting the names within this research study, Barron et al. (2007) explicate that usually Burmese names are made of two syllables or even three syllables, but rarely of four or more syllables. With my participants, most of the names were made of more than four syllables, such as “Naw Hser Lar Paw Eh Bwe Ku,” meaning “Girl Sweet Shore Love Perfect Cold.” In talking with my participants, all of them reported

that prior their arrival in the US, they were advised to have only two names, since this is the custom in the US. Within the families observed, the children born in the U.S. had their names reduced to two syllables already.

In this research, the real names of participants remain protected, although the names chosen by me reflect their personalities or a particular physical attribute. These “characteristics” were inferred by their family members or even by themselves, and I chose to use them as their names in the research. As for example, “Tee Cha,” meaning “perfect heart,” was chosen as an attribute of the oldest participant after her oldest son told me of his desire to find someone that has a “Tee Cha” like his mom. “Kle Ser Mu” means “Curious girl,” referring to one of the women research participants who showed significant excitement when learning new skills in language or with the computer. “Hkee La” means “Sweet Face,” relating to the youngest woman participant whose face was so sweet and beautiful that some people in the Karen community had invited her to participate as an actress in a Karen “movie.” However, her husband did not allow her to be part of the cast.

Barron et al. (2007) also explain that many individual names will have certain letters of the alphabet representing the seven days of the week. As an example, a person born on a Tuesday might have a name formed by using the letters “sa,” “has,” “za,” or “nya.” An example would be “Wah Paw,” meaning “July flower,” or “Sunday Naw,” meaning “Sunday girl.” None of the names has any relationship to the others; each is unique. Such construction of names has caused problems to the Karen population when migrating to Western countries. Barron et al. (2007) point out that people with names of more than one syllable usually use their last syllable in the surname box and the



remainder in the given name box. Although information about the process of creating names emerged in this study, further research and analysis is required in order to understand, for example, if the linguistic features of names with more than four syllables are particular to some Karen tribes and not others, or if they are an arbitrary choice, or they index family or generational affiliations and the like. The same can be said about the use of days of the week and months in names. Were they used during a period in time? Are they used for some tribes and not others? Or are they just used as a preference for any Karen family?

### **The Three Karen Women: The Case of “Tee Cha”**

*Tutor: Look for the Burmese flag...*

*Tee Cha: (looked back to listen to what the tutor was saying)*

*Tutor: (repeating the information) Burma’s flag...*

*Tee Cha: No, no Burmese flag...Karen flag.*

*Tee Cha: (looking at me) no Karen flag...I sad (smiling and leaving the classroom).* (Tee Cha, fieldnotes, January 10, 2013)

This interaction occurred during an activity with the childcare children and the parents enrolled in the program. The activity involved parents telling, in front of the classroom, where they were from and connecting a piece of yarn from their place of origin to Nebraska. After the activity, Mrs. Jane invited parents to come to the front of the class and search for their country’s flag on the World Map. After much search, Tee Cha did not find it, acknowledging the fact for me.

I chose this interaction as a representation of the “deterritorialization” (Collins, Slembrouck, & Baynham, 2009) that Tee Cha faced in contexts that, for policies and

political reasons, have refused her a formal identity. As Karen people, they have no documents back in Burma or even as refugees at the Thai-border. They are not considered citizens anywhere. Nevertheless, Tee Cha's identity as a central and influential person in her community, as a mother of five children, as a member of the first Karen family to arrive in Lincoln, Nebraska in 2007, as an English learner, as the daughter of an unknown father, who left her as a little child, and as a literate person who learned to read and write by watching other people doing so, makes her not only inspirational for any human being, but an essential figure for study regarding her interactions in the American school system, as well as for her experiences in becoming literate within American contexts.

Tee Cha moved to the Thai refugee camp in 1987, leaving the village because of the hunger that assaulted the villagers. They heard about the refugee camp and the benefits that they would receive if they reached the border: shelter and food. She did not remember how long they walked in the jungle, but she did not go with her family: "No mother, no relatives," She said. Although in the camp the refugees have the opportunity to go to school and have some formal education, though not regulated by any government (Oh & van der Stouwe, 2008; Oh, 2010), Tee Cha could not go because, upon her arrival at the camp, she needed to work as a babysitter for a family. Her formal school education was limited to what she had learned as a six-year-old, having completed only kindergarten. After living in the camp for about twenty years, in June of 2007, two months after they had applied for refugee status in the U.S., they received the news concerning their move to the country. Tee Cha told me, "I cry all way," meaning that she was unwilling to leave the refugee camp to come to the U.S. At the time of their arrival in

Lincoln, Nebraska, people did not know who the Karen people were, and as she and her sons told me, they confused them, mostly, with Korean and Vietnamese people.

Tee Cha's formal classroom experiences have been few, but they have been enough to feed her with a desire to continue learning with her children and for her children. Tee Cha told me that her experiences at the camp with English had been with her children teaching her vocabulary words, such as cat, dog, tree, and whatever else they learned at the schools in Mae La refugee camp, the largest one on the Thai-border. In her home in the U.S., Tee Cha took charge of her children's education by looking in their backpacks, being present at PLC days, and helping her younger children with homework. When asked if she had a desire to have a career or a profession, she answered by saying that she wanted to be a missionary, "teaching the Bible to other people." She said that, unfortunately, she could not do this due to her lack of education. In my reply to her, knowing her role in the Karen church in the U.S., her prizes won for her knowledge about the Bible, and her leadership with the youth and women in the church, I told her that she, in fact, was a missionary. We smiled, and she replied, "like, uh, I need more English. Like if I need to visit other families and I don't understand, I cannot go alone" (Tee Cha, Interview, February 7, 2013). When I asked about her dreams, she stated, "learn English until I don't need any more help. Travel alone...but like now I cannot..." (Tee Cha, Interview, February 7, 2013).

### **The Three Karen Women: The Case of "Hkee La"**

*Hkee La explained that she left the FLIP program because she could not attend both programs, the Community College English classes and the FLIP program. They [the*

*Community College staff] asked her to choose one of them, and Hkee La chose the Community College English classes. (Fieldnotes, January 24, 2013).*

Hkee La was one of the participants who was the most available to be in schooling in order to learn English. Three times per week, she would go in the morning to the Community College to attend English classes and in the afternoon to the FLIP program close to her house. Her husband stayed at home during the day until 4 p.m. when he would leave for work. After a few months of being enrolled in both English programs, Hkee La was told to choose only one, and she chose the Community College.

Differently from the other two participants, Hkee La was born in the refugee camp “Mae Lae.” She was 23 years old at the time of the research and had been in the U.S. for nearly three years. She had ten siblings, eight of whom were living in the U.S. Her mother and father were in the U.S., as well, and their lives in the country had been wracked with illness, such as cancer and asthma.

The school at the Thai-camp offered education until the seventh grade, and Hkee La attended school until the sixth grade. The classes began at 8:30 every morning and lasted until noon. The students would go back home to have lunch and needed to be back by 1:00 p.m. where they would stay until 3:00 p.m. At this school, the children learned six subjects: Karen, English, Burmese, Science, Math, and Geography. Hkee La’s favorite subjects were the English and Karen languages. I asked if they had books at the refugee camp school, and she said that the teacher had books and the students copied them in their notebooks.

Hkee La was married at the age of seventeen, and, after approximately two years, she became pregnant with her first child. Bwe Ku, the oldest, was born in the camp and

was four years old during the time of data collection. Ku Moo was born in the U.S. and was about two years and a half when Hkee La was a participant in the research.

During observations, interviews, and informal talk, Hkee La shared some of her life at the camp: she had never met her relatives, such as aunts, uncles, cousins, or grandparents; she had been punished for not doing the homework at the school camp or not doing it properly; she needed to look for a job outside the camp in some Thai farm, harvesting or planting rice to earn some money; and food, as well as money, was scarce for her family. At the camp, Hkee La also acknowledged that on Saturdays, she needed to go out and look for some food, such as vegetables, because the agents from the UN provided only sixteen kilos (approximately 35.28 pounds) of rice per month for the family.

Hkee La told me that prior to her arrival in States, the UN and people at the camp were advertising the opportunity to come and live in the U.S. She also described the screening process through application, interviews, fingerprint check, airplane and American culture training. She added that her family decided to come because of the lack of food and money and the chance to have a better education for her children. It took them approximately one year until they received refugee status from the U.S.

When at home, Hkee La dedicated herself to her children and her extended family, such as siblings and parents. The usual entertainment for the children was the computer that was placed on the floor of the living room for the children to watch some kind of movie that Hkee La or her husband chose for them.

Academically, Hkee La was also taking classes with an “American woman,” from her church that knew the Karen language. Hkee La showed me an English/Karen

dictionary and told me that when studying the English language, she tried to memorize words in the dictionary at home or even read texts, but the meaning was difficult to memorize or understand. A similar approach to studying was held at the camp, which Hkee La explained as reading and memorizing. In going to the FLIP program, she told me that her goal was to learn more English, as well as learn how to help her children with homework. In the interpreter's words, she said, "because people told her that if she would go to study at the FLIP program she would learn more about her children in school too" (Interview fieldnotes, February 7, 2013).

### **The Three Karen Women: The Case of "Kle Ser Mu"**

*I: Uh-huh. And what was freedom in the refugee camp?*

*Kle Ser Mu: In the refugee camp? We were poor. You can't go outside, but I still find the freedom because I went to the library and borrow some book, and you don't need to worry about food, but, uh, if you want to eat good food, you just need to find some somebody to work in a Thai field, go to work. The work is not always, only sometimes when they need people. When you go work, you get some money so that you can go and buy fish. Your meal is gonna be more delicious. But if you don't think about that, you just eat whatever you have... and go to the library and read, when you read, you feel like entering a new world... (Interview fieldnotes, February 5, 2013).*

Kle Ser Mu's depiction of freedom goes hand-in-hand with her experience in the classroom, whether in the FLIP program or in her child's classroom. She was one of the most vocal Karen students, partly because of her English proficiency, but also because of her own curiosity as a learner. Kle Ser Mu showed excitement every time I sat with her in the classroom because of her opportunities to ask me questions about the U.S.,

presidential politics, the English language, my personal life, and help for her own personal needs. In lectures and during Parent Time, Kle Ser Mu was outspoken and highly participative. She would ask questions, request further information, suggest ideas, and be involved in translating information when the interpreter was not available. In her child's classroom, Kle Ser Mu was popular with classmates who liked to hug her or chat randomly when she was in the kindergarten class. When she and her little boy engaged in activities together, she would be excited about writing words with him and reading with his group.

Kle Ser Mu was born in Burma in 1981. She had been living in the U.S. since 2008. Her life in Burma can be summarized by the following: going to school, coming back from it, taking care of the cows (because, as she told me, the cows used to eat the rice plants, and she, along with her siblings, needed to make sure that the cows were eating the grass and not the rice), and playing with her friends. Due to the war Kle Ser Mu moved to a different village when she was four years old. Being outside of the war zone, Kle Ser Mu engaged in studying and, amongst all three participants in this study, she had the most formal education experience: the ninth grade. As she told me, the school was not very far away from her, about a 15-minute walk. The classes started at nine in the morning, ending at three in the afternoon. After graduating from ninth grade, Kle Ser Mu tried the high school examination to enter the tenth grade, but she did not pass. Her father decided to go back to their previous village, to their land, and her education was interrupted, first, because she did not pass the high school examination, and second, because the school at the village was new, and, consequently, Kle Ser Mu became one of the teachers of the school. Her favorite subject at school was mathematics.

Kle Ser Mu's trajectory to the camp was slightly different from the other two participants. Her aunt used to live at the Thai camp and invited Kle Ser Mu and her sister to go and live with her. At first, Kle Ser Mu and her sister did not have the refugee ID, as she called it, thus not receiving food from the UNCHR agency. Only after becoming a legitimate refugee at the Thai-border camp were they allowed to receive food from the UNHCR.

Kle Ser Mu decided to come to the U.S. for similar reasons as the other two participants, for more food and a better way of life, such as housing, education, and work. She first came by herself, without her husband, who was Thai and did not hold refugee status. Upon her arrival, Kle Ser Mu worked all day during the week, leaving her child in some permanent house (in-keeper), and having her little boy only on the weekends. She told me that her stress level was so high that she lost a lot of hair and was slightly depressed. After receiving their marriage certificate her husband came and joined her in Portland, Oregon. They moved to Nebraska after two years.

Kle Ser Mu worked in Thai restaurant in town. She was a cook at the time of the research. As we grew to know each other better, she would call me to ask me to tell the teacher about her absence for the day, if her baby was sick or she needed to be at an appointment at the Social Security building. In my last weeks of research, Kle Ser Mu asked for my help to acquire Internet service for her new computer. Kle Ser Mu and I engaged in searching for a good and cheap service for her, and I ended up calling the company to schedule appointments and plan the payment method. After one week of dealing with the Internet service, with my calling them, Kle Ser Mu came to the classroom with a broad smile on her face, thanking me for my help. On this same day, her



“baby” had “disconfigured” her cell phone, and Kle Ser Mu did not know how to configure the ringtones and the call service back again. She handed me her cell phone, asking if I could help her. She headed to a group to work on the class lessons for the day, and, after half an hour, I handed her back her fixed cell phone. As our relationship developed, she continued to ask me to teach her more, such as how to use the Internet, how to find jobs and houses close to her husband’s work, how to learn more English, and she asked for help to read some bills and letters that came in the mail. She also trusted me by leaving her children with me at her apartment as she went to buy some groceries. In the end, we became friends, and I was pleased to help and teach her basic knowledge about life in the United States.

### **Chapter VI: The Three Karen Women’s Literacy Practices**

*I: Okay, uh, what do you want to learn in the program?*

*Kle Ser Mu: In here? In this parent program? Yes, in this how they can help me. They give me some books and some internet, just trying by myself. They cannot stay with me all the time because they have to help somebody else, so just enough for me... This is how they can help me. If they cannot sit with me all the time, I understand.*

*I: ... Okay, so, what do you think that you need to learn, in the school, in order to be successful in America?*

*Kle Ser Mu: I think that they know... (unintelligible). I don’t know. In the school they know more than us, so they know what we need. Yeah...*

Positive in her views about school and learning, Kle Ser Mu reproduced typically compliant behavioral attitudes amongst Karen people. Marshall (1922) explicates this attitude, referring to a “fearful” trait within the people. He narrates, “I once asked an

educated Karen what he thought was the chief characteristic of his race, and he immediately replied that they are a people who can be afraid” (p. 22). Exploring this same attribute in their research findings, Watkins, Razee and Ritchers (2012), in a research project with women in the Australian educational system, also reported that “Karen culture values compliancy, and respect towards elders and authority figures . . . It is likely that the effects of persecution and forced displacement have both strengthened and complicated these cultural traits . . . respect for authority becomes fear for authority” (p. 133). Under these circumstances, the authors emphasize that such cultural and societal characteristics have affected the refugees’ ability to benefit from available educational opportunities because of how the Karen use these services and also because of how service providers understand and react to Karen cultural actions.

Reflecting the “fearful” trait within the Karen people from the above scholars and relating it to the idea of expecting critical participatory attitudes of Karen parents in the school system, during a Parent Time meeting, for example, the topic addressed was “bullying,” along with explanations about the forms and consequences of bullying. The presenter also explained terms and procedures that parents and school engage with to deal with bullying situations. One of the procedures that parents could exercise was to acknowledge the problem to the school staff, such as teachers, the principal, and the school counselor. During the break, I asked the Karen interpreter if coming to school to “complain” about a bullying behavior would be a consideration for the Karen families in Lincoln, Nebraska. Emphatically, she said, “No.” The reasons were “because of the language and if they come, which I suppose to go...yeah...struggling. And they never be in a different place and they shy asking people. Maybe 2 or 3 percent.” I asked if the

parents would ask her to come, to speak up for them, and she said that they would tell her “outside of the school context. When they see us...” but they would not ask her to come to school and complain. (Interpreter, fieldnotes, November 6, 2012). Furthermore, the apparent fear of being misunderstood within the context is also another finding pointed out by Watkins et al., (2012). The researchers state saying that “these fears are likely to be underpinned by experiences of persecution and are further compounded by a new environment and lack of knowledge regarding local rights, responsibilities and cultural customs” (p. 133).

Considering the above findings, the reproduction of formal literacy practices in the classroom, such as memorizing vocabulary and coping with “every” bit of information, from the board to the notebooks, can also connect to the regulated ways of punishment in the schools at the refugee camps. As stated by Hkee La, one of the participants, she expressed, “In my country, when I am reading, I need to read it and then memorize it and then go (unintelligible) and then the teacher will hit you... [if you don’t memorize the text] with the stick. . . yeah, it used to happen to me, very often.” Such experiences may further explain the challenge of engaging adult parents in a more democratic participatory classroom, or what Johannessen (2002) points out as an issue in (post-) conflict situations, that “altering the fundamentally hierarchical structure of the relationship between teacher and student proves difficult and culturally sensitive. It is extremely delicate to introduce the notion of a child having the right to oppose adults, to discuss with them on equal terms and [to] have another opinion” (p. 4).

Despite the background of fear and subservience in relation to the school system, participants also engaged in peculiar forms of literacy, such as answering a written

exercise orally and reading aloud to practice speaking. In their homes, a community involvement to “do homework” and use the computer also highlighted the literacy practices of Karen families. In the following analysis, the cultural dimensions of the literacy events analyzed, as well as how they can possibly be considered literacy practices will be examined with research in sociocultural literacy and ethnographic studies regarding the Karen population.

### **“Memorize It”**

*I: Tell me how you practice your reading.*

*Hkee La: Read the story, put it in my mind...*

*I: Uh-huh. Do you read with your eyes, take notes, out loud? Do you translate? What do you do?*

*Hkee La: Uh, I read and memorize it, and then I say.*

*I: (Asking to the interpreter) is that very common, in Karen culture, to memorize?*

*Interpreter: Uh, reading out loud is easier for me, and then they would memorize and then we would try to say again, and again and again.*

*I: Do they do that at camp?*

*Interpreter: It depends, but usually they would read out loud, again and again and again, and memorize it.*

*Hkee La: In my country, when I am reading, I need to read it and then memorize it and then go (unintelligible) and then the teacher will hit you... (if you don't memorize the text) with the stick.*

The practice of memorization in Asian cultures has been significantly explored as a strategy to effectively acquire language, as well as engage with the school discourse of

learning literacy (Ding, 2006; O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, & Kuper, 1985; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Stevick, 1989; Yu, 2011), especially in learning vocabulary in English as a Foreign Language Classrooms. With Hkee La, the strategy to learn the English in her home encompassed vocabulary memorization with the use of a dictionary given to her by a voluntary teacher, reading stories out loud in order to memorize the text, and reinforcing of English words with her children. With other participants, at school, Kle Ser Mu, through copying, reading, and trying to memorize the citizen questions for the citizenship test, also exercised memorization, and Tee Cha, when learning vocabulary, would write it down and repeat the word, checking with her tutor or with me if her pronunciation was correct. These events of literacy, which are described as "activities where literacy has a role" (Barton et al., p. 8), embody not only processes of engaging with literacy and how the context rules the processes but also the theories in second language learning of strategies that adult learners use to learn vocabulary and the new language. Barton et al., (2000) and Street (1995) explain that in order to understand the literacy practices of a specific group, we must first analyze the literacy events that reflect the literacy practices, since literacy events are observable episodes that arise from practices and are shaped by them.

In the literacy event of learning vocabulary at her home, Hkee La utilized an English/Karen dictionary to memorize words in order to learn how to speak in English. During the time of my visit at her house, when Hkee La first showed me the dictionary, she sat on the floor, and with the dictionary open, she started reading random words, asking me if her pronunciation was correct. I would help her with the pronunciation, and when I asked her what a certain word was in Karen, she would read the Karen meaning

and tell me that she did not know what that word was in Karen either. In examining this regularly observed event, Hkee La tried to apply a learned event from her prior schooling experience in a new context that required from her a meaningful understanding of what she was striving to learn. As Lee (1992) explains, for Hkee La, there are “competing discourses” at work across the literacy event that she enacted in her home with her understanding of literacy at school. Accordingly, based on her first learning experience at school in the refugee camp, Hkee La’s vocabulary memorization activity mirrored a literacy event detached from contextual forms of applying, understanding, and using vocabulary. Another factor to be taken into consideration is the role of English in both contexts, namely the refugee camp and American school. In essence, in a context where English was learned as a foreign language, at the refugee camp, the vocabulary may have been used differently than when participating in a context where English is the main language of communication. Hkee La’s argument of “I don’t understand” the meaning or “I can’t memorize” the words could be, aside from her personal difficulties with memorization, a consequence of the lack of contextualization and practicability of the literacy events that she was developing. In lacking the contextual use and applicability of the vocabulary words, Hkee La acknowledged her limitation in interacting effectively within schooling experience.

In another memorization event, Kle Ser Mu, who held the status of having a higher level of fluency in English amongst the Karen students, also utilized rote memorization as a cognitive strategy to study the written text form for the citizenship test questionnaire in class. In copying, reading, and trying to memorize questions, such as “What is the supreme law of the land?”; “What does the constitution do?”; “The idea of

self-government is in the first three words of the Constitution. What are these words?” and “What is an amendment?,” Kle Ser Mu would first take note of each question and answer in her notebook, read it aloud, and ask or look for further explanation of some unknown word. In each class, as she explained, Kle Ser Mu would set her goal to copy and “study” at least ten questions in half an hour. Kle Ser Mu was also the only one who had an electronic dictionary within the Karen group, and, as she explained to me, she was more fluent in Burmese than the Karen language, since she had studied in Burmese schools while living in her village in Burma.

When the questions started to become more complex, for example, they asked for understanding of the representatives of the state and about the democratic government of the United States, I asked Kle Ser Mu if she understood the answers given after the questions. She acknowledged that she did not. Her goal was to memorize the 100 questions in order to apply for citizenship status. Commonly, when I sat with her to observe her literacy forms of engaging (events) in class and other interactions, she would ask me what the structural organization of democracy was, such as in the question, “If the President can no longer serve, who becomes President?” and the answer was, “The Vice President. Kle Ser Mu asked me what a vice president was. Other concepts, such as the “House of Representatives” and the “State representative” were also complex for me to explain, since in my own country the democratic system is structured differently.

In examining some of the processes that learners engage in when developing understanding of the written language, Freebody (1992) and Luke and Freebody (1990) elaborated on the Four Resources Model that explores four literacy “practices” that involve the events of participants’ engagement with the written text; namely, code maker

(coding competence), meaning maker (semantic competence), text user (pragmatic competence), and text critic (critical competence). Within these components, which are necessary but not sufficient on their own, the adult English language learner needs to interact with the written word in a situated and authentic context, having the knowledge that the text goes beyond the immediate meaning of the words. Whereas Kle Ser Mu was decoding and translating the meaning of the words, the meaning maker and the pragmatic aspects of the text were lost, due to her limited knowledge of democracy within the political American system. With the presence of the tutor, who focused on explaining the meaning of the words rather than the political context and the democratic implications of the government, words, such as “supreme,” “constitution,” and “rights” were explained as (supreme) “the highest law,” (constitution) “a written document that was written when United States was first formed, like the laws and the rules of America/defines what the government does and the rights of the people. So, we have the right of life, liberty...,” (rights) as “something that is given to us, we just have that. The right to speak; the freedom of religion. Those are rights. They are things that are given,” just to cite some examples. (Kle Ser Mu, fieldnotes, October 26, 2012). In Kle Ser Mu’s process to only memorize the questions and answers for the citizenship test, a priority observed within the Karen families, further comprehension and active participation through interaction and contextual meaning were not developed or emphasized. Furthermore, the implications of the literacy practice involving, mainly, the first two components defined by Luke and Freebody (1990, 1992) as code maker and meaning maker, also need to be investigated in terms of being the first or the main approach utilized by adult learners in their process to acquire the language when enrolled in literacy programs. Also,



investigation of the barriers faced by Karen immigrant refugees when learning a different governmental system, considering their prior political experiences and their own understanding and involvement with politics, needs to be taken into consideration in order to understand their process of adaptation to and participation in U.S. society.

As memorization emerged as an inherited practice to acquire, particularly, vocabulary and, consequently, proficiency in reading text, the Karen families observed depicted a strong connection with the practice of memorization in order to acquire fluency in their new context. However, as Knobel and Lankshear (2007) highlight, “it is impossible to abstract or decontextualize ‘literacy bits’ from their larger embedded practices and for them still to mean what they do in fact mean experientially. This, however, is what the traditional conception of literacy does, in effect, tries to do—and to this extent it is incoherent” (p. 2).

Alternatively, as Luke and Freebody (1990, 1992) acknowledge, the Four Resource Models for literacy practices refers to a family of practices, considering that literacy is a feature of an individual’s history, capability, and possibilities, as well as a reflection of the collective or joint capabilities of a group, community, or society. In other words, the memorization events observed were the first instances of literacy practices of three Karen participants in a fairly recent literacy program that had been moved to a school setting. Further research is required to examine the participants’ deepening and evolving development in the stages of literacy practices suggested by Luke and Freebody (1990, 1999). Another topic worthy of investigation refers to the Karen traits of being compliant and fearful that may influence their literacy practices in and out of school in their new context, possibly pointing out to significant implications regarding Karen

people's further development and engagement with the participatory characteristic of the family literacy classroom. Inasmuch as memorization regulated the primordial literacy practices of the three Karen participants in their search to develop their literacy skills in the U.S., other literacy practices commonly used at the refugee camp schools also need investigation in order to understand the implications of memorization in the Karen language and in their language-learning processes in their previous context.

### **“Ask Her to Help You”**

*Suddenly a neighbor showed up with a little girl carrying a sheet of paper with activities to be completed. Soon, I found out that I was asked to help the girl with her homework. As I strove to explain and work with my language skills to make it easier for the little Karen girl, K’Paw came from school and started to explain in Karen what I was telling her to do. Her aunt, who brought her to Tee Cha’s house, also gave instructions in Karen. In an activity to write the names of known people and count the number of letters, the little girl should have written the names, but instead, each one around the circle grabbed the little girl’s pencil and wrote their names in the activity. She counted the letters of the names in English while her aunt would count in Karen as well. We finished answering the exercise sheet and they left right after. (Tee Cha, fieldnotes, February 4, 2013)*

The participation and involvement of neighbors in the lives of the three Karen participants in this research occurred in different forms and during different times of the day. Karen neighbors often entered the Karen women’s houses without knocking at the door. Sometimes, this would scare me because of their quick appearance, the opening of the door, the delivering of the message, and the closing of the door and exit. The above

description occurred in my last home visit at Tee Cha's house. The neighbor with her child came in, asking for help with the homework. Tee Cha quickly pointed to me, and the attention turned in my direction with translations in English, telling me to help the child with her homework. The end product of the homework was the group participation of all of the four people writing their names on the homework sheet and the child trying to understand what I was saying in relation to what her aunt and neighbors were translating in Karen. During this interaction, I found myself wanting to ask the people to stop talking so as to let me talk and explain, but, fortunately, I did not interrupt the learning moment that all of them were involved with in the nature of the exercises.

Marshall (1922), in a study about Karen life in Burma, acknowledges some of the dynamics of the community life that villagers engage with, saying, "there was little occasion for individual initiative among the Karen, on account of the important part played by communal activity amongst them" (p. 130). In detailing his observation, Marshall (1922) describes that "in some sections it was the custom for the chief to beat a gong or blow a horn as the signal to go to the fields. Every one went to the signal. None would go without it. If a supply of fish was wanted, instead of an individual taking his or her rod and going alone to catch them, the whole village, or as many of its members as were free to do so, would join in a fish expedition . . . (p. 130)." In emphasizing the communality of the Karen people in their affairs and activities, highlighting that no one Karen member would sail out on a journey or attempt to do any special job alone, Marshall (1922) also explains that if members failed to participate in the community activity, even they "were not left out in the division of the spoils, if they managed to be present at the proper time, and they usually did" (p. 130).

Confirming Marshall's findings, albeit more than a hundred years later, in one of my conversations with Kle Ser Mu, she explained to me how the houses in the villages were built. She recalled that when one village member was about to build a bamboo house with a leaf roof, all the villagers or neighbors were the ones helping to build the house, without any compensation given. In my interview with Mrs. Jane, the teacher in the FLIP program classroom, she also pointed out the community engagement with each one's affairs, saying, "they are pretty strong at community, or at least that seems. Often they can tell me if someone's missing. Usually somebody in the group knows why or who...what the situation is with that person and so they can often fill me in on, you know, who's sick or who's children are sick" (Mrs. Jane, interview, February 7, 2013). In connecting this evidence with the description made by Marshall (1922), the communal practice of members in engaging together in special jobs, reflect the literacy events observed in the classroom and at their homes, as well.

Another example observed of literacy events and communal participation with school-related tasks occurred in the classroom with two other older illiterate Karen students who happened to be in class before everybody else. Although they are not directly connected as participants in this research, I cite their participation as an example of another dimension of Karen students in the enactment of literacy practices within their community. In this episode, the oldest student in class, who was Karen, asked her Karen classmate for help to write the number "eight" in her notebook. The younger Karen classmate went to the board, pointed to the number "eight", confirmed the information, came back to the desk, grabbed the classmate's pencil and notebook and wrote the number 8 with two little circles, one on the top of the other. She handed back her

classmate's notebook and pencil, pointing out how to draw the number (Karen students, fieldnotes, October 11, 2012). As these interactions and others repeatedly occurred, such as my constant participation in helping with the homework during my home visits or the Karen students amongst themselves interacting with each other's homework, the characteristic of Karen cooperativeness in tasks and jobs in their villages, revealed itself in the literacy events in the classroom and at home, consequently, possibly turning these events into their literacy practices of participating in formal schooling in the United States.

During Parent Time, the participation of parents in their children's classrooms also depicted the collective participatory characteristic. When Kle Ser Mu engaged in reading with her son and the kindergarten teacher, she would not only sit beside her son and help him by pointing to words, but she also read with him by mouthing, and sometimes speaking the words at the same time as he did. Kle Ser Mu would also help her son with the written exercises by telling him what to write and which letters to use. For example, in completing sentences such as "a mat \_\_\_\_ a cat," Kle Ser Mu told her son to write "for" and spelled the word out for him. During another writing activity, the children were supposed to spell a three-letter word dictated by their teacher and write it out on their "sandbox" papers, as the teacher called them. The teacher said the word "cat," and the children used their arms to separate, in three parts, the letters in the word "cat" by dividing their arms into parts, then, afterwards, write each letter separately on their papers, and finally to write the full form of the word. When the exercise started, in an attempt to help her son in his process of learning how to write, Kle Ser Mu helped him by sounding out the words and telling him what the letters were. Consequently, the

teacher interrupted this dynamic, addressing Kle Ser Mu's son by saying, "Ywar, I know you can do it." Smiling and embarrassed, Kle Ser Mu quickly looked at me with her hands on her mouth, showing that her participation in the activity was more disruptive than helpful.

When examining these literacy events connected to Karen literacy practices and Burmese village life, literacy, then, refers not only to the literacy practices, *per se*, but also to the social institutions and social groups that have these practices because literacy practices reflect ways of talking, interacting, thinking, valuing, and believing. Gee (2001), referring to works from Cook-Gumperz (1986), Heath (1983), Shuman (1986), and Scribner and Cole (1981), just to cite a few, explains that "literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs" (p. 45).

According to the findings and observations regarding Karen literacy practices involving collective and community-based participation in building knowledge and helping each other to integrate into the formal schooling system, I wonder, for example, if more centered and individualistic activities will influence the Karen families to focus on themselves as learners, leaving their community "apprenticeship" involvement, whether with their neighbors or children, aside. For example, in introducing the idea of taking notes for the journal during PACT time, which occurred at the beginning of January in the FLIP classroom, parents may focus on their own observations as learners instead of helping their children in the classroom. Again, we can argue that, in the classroom, teachers are the ones in charge of the learning processes, and if so, it is necessary to examine the goals of having parents in their children's classrooms in order

to promote activities that center on that specific purpose. Until then, we need to continue to ask questions about how to explore the traits of working and learning within community for Karen families and the implications for this issue on their literacy practices and engagement.

### **“I Don’t Write (Because) I Practice my Speak”**

*As Kle Ser Mu strove to listen to the book exercise CD at the same time as she read out loud the texts and exercises, she turned to me, asking if what she was doing was good for her to practice speaking. I told her that if she would write the answer of the exercises instead of just giving an oral answer to them, she would practice the language even more and learn more. She replied by saying that she needed to practice more speaking, more dialogues to understand what people say to her.*

*At the library, Kle Ser Mu asked me to help her to find a book. She wanted a “dialogue” book to help her with speaking. I asked Mrs. Jane where the “dialogue” books could be found, and Kle Ser Mu and I followed Mrs. Jane, both working together to find some books for her.*

As defined by Street (1984,1995), literacy, aside from the narrow concept of writing and reading as decoding and encoding processes, ultimately refers to an ideological practice that differs culturally and contextually. In observing the literacy events practiced by these three Karen adult participants, the use of written text to practice speaking apparently fulfilled their need to become fluent in the language in order to participate more fully within their contexts. Because Kle Ser Mu spent a significant amount of time managing her own learning practices in class, the use of the written text to practice speaking did not seem to compromise the schooling and academic institutional

notions and requirements for practicing literacy. In adapting her utilitarian needs, such as finding a better job, to her learning context, Kle Ser Mu interacted with the written language in a pragmatic function to achieve the end result of being more orally proficient.

In reading texts with her daughter, Hkee La also practiced speaking during one of my visits to her house. After her daughter came back from school, where she attended the Early Childhood Special Education (EXCITE) class, Hkee La checked her backpack and took a couple of books out of it. The first book that they worked on together was a vocabulary book that had pictures with names in English. Hkee La would tell her daughter the names of the pictures in English, and her daughter would rapidly look at the picture, repeating the word. After engaging with other forms of activities, such as drawing lines and forms and writing the numbers from one to ten, counting them out loud, Hkee La called on her daughter to start reading the book *The Three Little Pigs*, which the EXCITE teacher had sent home. Before they started reading, Hkee La asked her daughter to write some of the alphabet letters, and she wrote from “a” to “f.” Hkee La reviewed the writing, pronouncing the letters aloud, with her daughter repeating after her. After finishing with the numbers and alphabet, they moved on to read the book. Hkee La started, reading word-by-word, stopping for her daughter to repeat the words. As soon as Hkee La finished reading one page, she would explain to her daughter what was written in the story.

In this interaction, the use of written text to practice speaking skills reflects a similar literacy event used by Kle Ser Mu during classroom lessons. In this regard, utilizing Street’s (1985) definition of literacy practices as folk models and beliefs embodying and shaping literacy events (Hull & Schultz, 2001), the event of practicing



speaking through the reading of the text might reflect assumptions about concepts of language learning, assimilation of vocabulary, and immersion with the immediate form of communication, the talk. In the participants' opinions, language proficiency, in terms of verbally communicating, allows for opportunities for integration, more work choices, and status within the Karen community, with status referring to opportunities to help members who are not fluent in the language. For example, Tee Cha acknowledged her desire to be a missionary, but she noted that without English, she could not communicate with people. She said, "I need more English. Like if I need to visit other families and I don't understand, I cannot go alone" (Tee Cha, interview, February 8, 2013). Kle Ser Mu stated this idea by saying, "I also need to learn what is around me. I also need to learn what I hear what I see," and she also emphasized her need to "feel comfortable and successful so I become independent by myself. I don't need to ask help for anybody else. Maybe I can also help somebody" (Kle Ser Mu, interview, February 5, 2013). When I asked Hkee La about what she thought the program helped her with, she articulated by saying that the FLIP program, "help me to learn more English and understand English, and I can communicate with Americans or other people who do not speak the same language as me" (Hkee La, interview, February 8, 2013).

In considering the participants' aspirations and choices of using language to participate more effectively within American society, Bourdieu (1986) argues the idea of "cultural capital" being forms of knowledge, skills, education, and any other resources that collaborate for status and prestige in a community or society, which in this case, the English language would be a source of cultural capital since it supplies refugees and adult immigrants with understanding about the culture, involvement with their own business,

and status within their communities. Watkins et al., (2012) also point out that “language proficiency is an essential part of resettlement and both directly and indirectly affects well-being through increasing self-efficacy, reducing social isolation and enhancing educational and vocational opportunities” (p. 137).

Although the connection between the literacy events of reading texts aloud to practice speaking could be considered only events in literacy, I suggest that these events could possibly be regarded as literacy practices, since the Karen participants strongly expressed their need to communicate in America society, as well as their demonstration on focusing on speaking, even during writing and reading exercises. However, further research needs to be developed to investigate in more detail the idea of verbally reproducing texts in order to practice speaking skills, since this study conveys information and observations of only three participants in the Karen community.

**“I asked where I could find a job, and they said I should use the computer”**

*She repeated over and over again how hard it is to find a job and make friends. She said that when she asks people where she can find a job, they tell her to look for one on the internet; however, she told me that “the internet is not good for me” because she does not know how to use a computer, and she doesn’t have one. (Kle Ser Mu, fieldnotes, January 21, 2013)*

The use of computers and technology by adult second language learners have been documented in studies by Warschauer and Kern (2000), Warschauer, 2003, Warschauer, Turbee, and Roberts (1996) that emphasize and demonstrate that computer technology has turned out to be an essential new means of language. In addition to learning the lexical, grammatical, pragmatic and spoken aspects of language,

learners also need to know how to utilize and communicate effectively through electronic devices, since the computer has become widespread in many contexts and aspects of modern-day life (Saltourides, 2008).

In tandem with the acknowledgement of the increased use of computer technology in immigrant families, Karen families also evidenced and expressed their needs of learning and interacting with computer technology in their talks and home visits. For example, Tee Cha used the computer to watch Thai channels, leaving her laptop in her own bedroom. Hkee La used the computer to entertain her children when they were home, and Kle Ser Mu was in the process of buying a computer for her family, as well as getting internet service in her home.

In the classroom the Karen participants used computers in their small groups, and as Mrs. Jane explained, “We do also, on a couple days, have some of the groups working on the computer. We don’t have, earlier, we had them, what was a computer day for everybody, now is more by level, so on a certain day this group might work on the computers for an hour, and another day another group might, just to give them some experience with technology” (Mrs. Jane, interview, February 7, 2013). In my participation in the classroom, I observed that the students used the website “usalearns.org” as a resource that provided diverse exercises by topics and levels of proficiency in English. The three Karen participants used the website at least a couple of times each during the observations. At the Karen homes, the computer was mostly used for entertainment, and, as Kle Ser Mu stated, she needed the computer to look for jobs and, perhaps, to learn the English language.

In the classroom, the website “usalearns.org” was created to help English learners practice speaking, listening, reading and writing in different levels and with different topics about American life. Despite the leveled and topical organization of the website, the topics addressed revealed levels of challenge and difficulty for interaction with themes and vocabulary learning. For example, in the two times that Kle Ser Mu utilized the website, she chose the low-intermediate level of the online course while trying to learn the topic of “taxes, law and community issues.” In the first lessons about “taxes,” the website addressed concepts such as “dealing with taxes,” “dealing with the law,” “discussing community issues,” and “civic participation.” Even with the presence of the tutor, vocabulary and issues, such as forms and people involved with law, were not only foreign concepts for her but also difficult to understand in making meaning of the contexts. Kle Ser Mu ended up changing topics because of her difficulty in understanding the idea of “taxes.”

Tee Cha and Hkee La used the “basic skills” level that brought together topics such as food, the house, clothing, numbers, and school, just to cite a few, with vocabulary that was more accessible and sentence structures that were known by the participants. Still, in terms of literacy events, I observed Tee Cha mostly using the computer to interact with the website, instead of using it for emails or looking for further information about topics of her choice, and sometimes she would also ask for my help to type the website domain for her or read pop-ups that would come up on her screen. Hkee La was fairly proficient in typing the URL and accessing the “usalearns.org” website and choosing the levels and topics to be learned. In reading pop-ups that would show up on the screen, Hkee La had a harder time identifying and understanding the characters and

meaning, asking for help from the tutors or me, when I was available. Furthermore, no further difficulties were observed with these two participants interacting with the context of the topics, since the topics were familiar to them.

In their homes the computer was used as a form of entertainment as well as a resource for learning. For Kle Ser Mu's home, just two weeks before I finished my observations, Kle Ser Mu had bought a computer for her family. She explained to me that she wanted to buy a television and a computer, but that her husband did not have enough money for both, so they bought the computer. She asked for my help to find an internet service, and after a week of helping her to schedule the service, she finally told me that they were very satisfied and excited to watch movies and use the computer. During one of my home visits, Kle Ser Mu expressed the idea of using the computer to find out more about the town where her husband worked, as well as to practice her English. In the fieldnotes, I noted, "Kle Ser Mu had asked me if it was a good idea to use the website site that they use at school to practice her English at home, and I positively agreed with her" (Kle Ser Mu, fieldnotes, February 5, 2013). Twice, Kle Ser Mu expressed the response of people when she asked them about how to find jobs. The first time "she said that she had asked help to find a job, and people used to say to her to use "google" to find a job, and she did not know how to use the computer" (Kle Ser Mu, fieldnotes, January 21, 2013), and in the second time, "She said that when she asks people where she can find a job, they tell her to look for them on the internet; however, she told me that 'the internet is not good for me' because she does not know how to use the computer, and she doesn't have one' (Kle Ser Mu, fieldnotes, February 5, 2013). Still, at her house, I participated in literacy events with her oldest son, as well. In my last visit to her house, right after

arriving there in the morning, Kle Ser Mu asked for my help to understand a message that popped up on her screen that she did not know what it meant. In turning on the computer, a “restore” message came up on the screen, and after “fixing” the computer for her, her son showed me a “Scoobydoo” DVD. I asked him to read the title of the DVD, “Scoobydoo and the Pirates.” He recognized the word “the” and repeated after me “and” and “pirates.” He opened up the CD compartment and placed the DVD there. I asked him to click on the “little square” at the top of the screen to enlarge the screen, and he did. I told him to click on “play,” and he recognized the word by clicking on it.

In Tee Cha’s home, her children were the ones that interacted the most with the computer as well as games on the television. When I helped her daughter with the homework, I asked Tee Cha if she had a computer so that I could use the website that the math teacher gave to check on math terms and show how to do the exercises. To my surprise, Tee Cha’s children informed me that she not only had a computer but that the computer stayed in her bedroom. They told me that she liked to watch Thai soap operas and movies. We helped her daughter with the homework, though the computer was not of great help, since it did not have the program to download the information from the website.

With Hkee La, the home dynamics also involved using the computer to entertain her children. During my home visits, Hkee La used the computer to show movies for the children on the “Youtube” website and to take pictures of the children with the webcam. She did not verbalize the use of the computer to look for a job or even improve her English skills. Nevertheless, the children would spend hours on the computer, and

sometimes her daughter, and more frequently Hkee La, would look for the movies for them to watch.

Reflecting on and connecting with the above interactions and computational literacy events, especially in terms of giving Karen adult learners enough input on computer skills, Saltourides (2008) observed in his research with immigrant populations and their use of computer technology, that in interacting with computers, the participants complained about not being able to follow the class or understand what was expected of them or complained that it was too confusing. Saltourides (2008) argues that these findings reinforce Warschauer's (2005) and Egbert's (2005) assertions that second language learners need sufficient literacy to begin a computer literacy class. In similar terms, Kle Ser Mu acknowledged the same difficulty when expressing her need to find job but not being able to use the computer because of her lack of knowledge and skills.

In considering such difficulties, Murray (2005) points to a series of challenges that second language learners face, even those more proficient with print texts, such as reading texts specific to the Web, such as home-pages (Murray & McPherson, 2004), determining which texts have more reliable information, which helps with their needs (Murray & McPherson, 2004; Walz, 2001), and having a lack of skills for examining non-text features, such as visuals (Sutherland-Smith, 2002), pop-ups, or advertisements (Murray, 2005). In this regard, in the struggle to understand the needed response when pop-ups would show up on the computer screen or even to type the URL, Kle Ser Mu, Hkee La and Tee Cha also showed the same struggle during classes, with Kle Ser Mu, specifically, in her home when using the computer. Murray (2003) states that "the skills of literacy to navigate the Web are essential for life, whether social, personal, or

educational, in an increasingly digital world; for many learners, these skills will need to be in an L2, especially English because it still dominates information on the Web” (p. 191).

Saltourides (2008) reinforces the motivational and empowering impact of second language learners being able to use computational skills in the classroom, confirming that “one of the most resounding ways computers empowered students was by increasing their self-esteem, confidence, and comfort level with using the computers. No matter their literacy level or the reality of their true abilities with computers, students felt proud of themselves for having taken the steps to learn about computers. This went a long way into contributing to their sense of imagined community” (p. 202). Toyoda (2001) also acknowledges that learners’ computer literacy skills had a meaningful impact on student perceptions, perseverance, and success with online learning. Regarding the motivational and empowering traits of second language learners in effectively engaging with computer technology, I wonder how Kle Ser Mu would develop her own literacy events when practicing English at her home or looking for jobs online and how these would impact her desire to learn more. As the three women’s language skills continue to evolve, I wonder how much of their knowledge in using computer literacies and practices will also increase

Furthermore, in considering the three-dimensional model proposed by Lankshear, Snyder, and Green (2000) that involves literacy education with digital technologies, such as how a language system operates and how to operate the technology, how the cultural dimension refers to the “authentic forms of social practice and meaning” (p. 45) of using both language and technological systems, and how learners employ critical dimensions to



critically analyze texts, software, and online information, Murray (2003) emphasizes that “for learners to be digitally literate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they need to master all three dimensions, often in more than one language” (p. 196). As the Karen participants become more involved with computational technologies, whether by themselves or through their children, further research needs to be developed in order to evaluate how or even if this population has learned the three dimensions in computer literacy, where they have developed, and what the impact of being “digitally literate” will have on their language-learning process, literacy practices, and adaptation in the United States.

### **Final Considerations**

Focusing this research project within a sociocultural perspective, more specifically on literacy practices (Street, 2001), the findings regarding Karen literacy events in and outside of school reflect cultural practices that families have brought, mainly from their schooling experiences in the refugee camp and their villages in Burma. Additionally, the use of computer technology to interact with language learning, entertainment, and “job hunts” also resonate with the participants’ immediate culture and social and educational needs.

Contributing toward ongoing research and also demonstrating the importance of carefully documenting their literacies in everyday life (Barton et al., 2001), my study and analysis of the data offer a set of themes that reflect the idea of “hybridity” highlighted by Bhabha (1994) and Bigelow (2011) in which a “third space” is created, enabling other positions to develop, such as literacy practices being used by reproducing previous practices in Burma and at refugee camps, and adapting new literacy practices in the U.S.

school context. As already observed and explored, these practices refer to memorization, community teaching and participation, and computer performance and use.

First, regarding memorization, Tee Cha, Hkee La, and Kle Ser Mu engaged in the memorizing of texts and vocabulary in order to develop language acquisition and assist them in passing the exam for the citizenship test. As previously examined, the practice of memorization reflects their schooling practices of learning in the refugee camps, as well as in their villages. Second, in terms of community teaching and participation, a long-ago study (Marshall, 1922) revealed the communal participatory practices that Karen people embody in their village communities. The Karen families in this study also engaged in participatory practices of literacy when involved with homework or in PACT time with their children in the classroom. Whereas this practice could “jeopardize” the children’s English literacy development, from a Western perspective (Freebody et al., 1991), the immersion of parents and children in answering questions together and doing exercises together could not only reinforce their community practice but also benefit parents cognitively and linguistically in their process to learn about the school culture and their children’s knowledge acquisition processes. In this sense, further research needs to be developed to investigate varied dimensions of community engagement in relation to school literacy practices of parents and children working together with assignments and in activities. Third, the use of the computer and the participants’ desire to acquire “fluency” with computer technologies opened up space for questioning the impact that a technological culture has on Karen refugee families in their literacy practices both in and out of school. As they continue to make progress in their language proficiency and

acquisition of English, I wonder if computers or another type of technology will have a more influential role in their lives and literacy practices.

Although the themes that emerged and some of the literacy practices that unfolded through the period of intensive observations and, at times, active participation, my time in the field, of approximately three months (in addition to an introductory experience with Karen youth in a different study), was not enough to convey in-depth investigations and further assertions of how Karen families engage in literacy practices both in and outside of school. This could possibly be considered one of the limitations of this study. Additionally, my lack of fluency in and knowledge of the Karen language limited my understanding of linguistic exchanges in the classroom and at times during which the participants (with limited English skills) wanted to communicate with me. Nevertheless, in contexts such as the homes of the Karen women, more proficient English speakers were usually present to translate the interactions or information into English. Another limitation would be the little research conducted with the Karen population within the new cultures in which they have been resettled. In this regard, the findings of this my study could not be compared to other findings and literacy practices and schooling in the U.S., since there has not been research with this particular population. I hope that my study will bring more researchers and scholars together to investigate the Karen people and their literacy practices, as well as their adaptation processes in the U.S.

As previously stated, further research with this population is required in order to comprehend the literacy events and practices that influence their learning within the U.S. educational system. Furthermore, research focusing mainly on the Karen communities' literacy practices in contexts, such as church, work, and leisure activities, would

significantly contribute to these findings, providing more evidence for what has been observed. For example, Hkee La acknowledged the presence of a weekly tutor at her home who teaches her English. If more Karen families have access to volunteers who teach them the English language, further research on the literacy practices of these interactions could possibly illuminate the concept of literacy and the practices that immigrant and refugee adult learners have access to in their new countries. In other words, when considering the sociocultural concept of literacy as literacy being a product of the context in which the learners interact and participate, how the interactions at the school and with the volunteers will influence these Karen adult learners' literacy practices and events in their new culture and which literacy practices they will continue to prioritize, are also important inquiries. Lastly, further research within the FLIP program, examining the extent of the connection between the adult learners and the program's structure, also need to be considered in order to better understand the dynamics involving Karen parents and the opportunities available for them to successfully learn the literacies required by the new context.

As these three Karen families evolve in their years of participating in American culture and schooling, the daily administration and management of their struggles in adaptation, in which language proficiency and formal literacy plays a major role, demonstrate the dedication of these adult learners in "dribbling around" the inequities from their prior "homes" to succeed in a foreign culture that slowly acknowledges their origins. In recognizing their literacy practices and events with which they engaged, my main purpose was not only to contribute to a theoretical framework of literacy in the educational and ethnographic fields but, more importantly, to better understand a culture

that has not been studied and to honor the experiences of Karen refugees as they navigate multiple cultural and educational spaces. My admiration for these Karen families grows greater as I learn more about who they are and what they continue to go through.

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## Appendix A

### Adult Learner's Interview Form

#### Interview Protocol

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Place: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Tell me your name, age, gender, and where you are from.
2. How long have you lived in the United States? When did you arrived?
3. Tell me how was your life in Myanmar until you arrived at the refugee camp.
4. Did you go to school? If so, tell until what grade and how schooling was in your country.
5. What were your favorite subjects?
6. Did you ever thought about being a professional?
7. Do you use reading and writing skills in your day? In which language do you use more?
8. Do you have a job? If so, where? At what time of the day do you work? Tell me about the work that you do?
9. Do you have other Karen people who work with you?
10. Why did you decide to come and live in the United States?
11. Tell me how was to leave the refugee camp.
12. Have you ever studied English before? Where? Explain how the classes were.
13. Why did you decide to participate in the family literacy program?
14. How long have you been participating in the family literacy program?
15. What do you want to learn in the program?
16. Do you have a favorite part in the program? Explain.
17. When do you use English in your daily life? When do you have more difficulties with English? Explain.
18. What do you think that you need to learn in the school in order to integrate into American society?
19. How do you think that the program helps you with your needs?
20. Do you plan to continue studying after the program? Tell me your academic plans for the future.
21. How is academic education important in your opinion?
22. Does education in the United States, education at the refugee camp and education at Karen state have the same importance? Tell me how they are similar and/or different.
23. How do you think formal education/schooling will help you to adapt to American life?
24. What areas of your life will American schooling make better?
25. What are some difficulties for you in participating in the program?
26. How do you overcome these difficulties?
27. How does the knowledge you learn in the classes help you in your daily life (home, community, and social events)?
28. What are the next steps to continue your education and growth in American society?
29. Explain what freedom is for you. Were you free in the camp? In Karen state? Are you free here?



## Appendix B

### Teacher's Interview Form

#### Interview Protocol

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Place: \_\_\_\_\_

P.S. Some questions may be deleted or added depending on the teacher's answer and/or responses revealing rich details, specific vocabulary, and thoroughly descriptions.

1. Tell me how long have you been teaching and your experience in educational setting.
2. Can you tell me how many nationalities or ethnic groups you have in your classroom?
3. Could you walk me through a typical school day in your family literacy classroom?
4. Could you explain how different it is to teach to different levels of English?
5. Can you tell me your concepts of teaching EFL
6. Can you tell me about the last time that you were outside of the school and something happened that reminded you of your students, classroom, or your role with the immigrant/refugee students?
7. Can you remember a teaching experience with refugees that have impacted you in any way? Can you describe what happened and how it affected you?
8. You said a specific part of teaching Karen students have affected you. Are there different ways that it has affected you?
9. Could you describe your thinking process to plan the activities for the students?
10. Can you share with me one typical activity that you have with the students?
11. Can you describe what is typically involved in the activity you named?
12. Could you tell about what is like to teach Karen students?
13. Can you tell me what usually involves in teaching Karen refugees?
14. When you are teaching, what are your thinking and feelings as you move through the class?
15. Can you give me an example of the kind of class event you find yourself remembering during the week?
16. Can you tell me some of your favorite experiences in teaching?
17. If you were telling another teacher about an experience that you had in teaching Karen refugees, how would you describe it to them?
18. You described some different ways that teaching has impacted your weekly routine. You said that you felt X because of what you had experienced in teaching immigrant. Are there different kinds of ways to feel X?
19. When you say that this part of teaching Karen refugees was Z, is that also part of X?
20. Are you saying that when you do Y, it is because of X or is it just something similar that happens?
21. Would you usually say X to your students or is that just a term that you are using with me because I am a teacher and/or more influent in the language?
22. Are you saying that X, Y, and Z all feel like the same kind of teaching experience for you?
23. You said that A, B and C students and/or cultures all had an impact on you. Did they each impact you in the same way or are they different in some way?
24. How would you rate the experiences we have just named in their ability to impact your life as a teacher?

## Appendix C

### Agenda of the FLIP team Meeting

Kennedy Elementary FLIP team Meeting  
November, 13, 2012

Celebrations:

Adult ESL:

Parent Education Class:

PACT Time:

Childcare and Literacy:

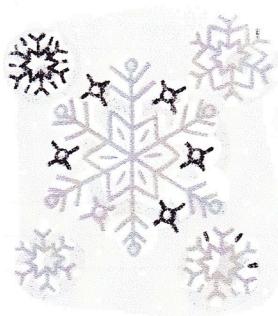
School Events Coming Up?

Recruitment and Retention:

Additional Topics:

## Appendix D

**PACT Time Journal** (The following weeks have the same format, only changing the dates)



# January 2013

## PACT Time

## Journal

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D (cont.)

Week OneMonday, January 14

What we did today:

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Something I learned:

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Wednesday, January 16

What we did today:

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Something I learned:

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Thursday, January 17

What we did today:

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Something I learned:

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**Appendix D (cont.)**

**Friday, January 18**

What we did today:

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Something I learned:

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**Week in Review**

New or Important Words:

Sentences with new or important words:

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Questions/Concerns I have:

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[illegible]