"Otherness" and Other Imponderables: Teaching Hmong Students Academic Writing

by

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Standing near the receptionist’s desk in our writing lab, we overhear Helen, one of our tutors, bidding good-bye to her learner.

"See you next week," says Helen, "and have a happy Groundhog Day!"

"Good-bye," replies Blond, a Hmong freshman who had been in the US only five years, "and Happy..." then there is a long pause "...just what is 'Groundhog Day,' anyway?"

Helen herself looks a little bewildered by the question. She turns to us, "Uh Mark...Laurie...?"

And thus began an hour-long discussion of strange customs and superstitions, a discussion which underscored the problems we face when tutoring learners who have practically no background knowledge in our culture, nor we in theirs. Fortunately this particular learner had a wonderful sense of the absurd, a capacity that served him well as we discussed Groundhog Day and other cultural oddities.

The HELP Program

The past decade has seen a large influx of South East Asian (SEA) permanent residents, particularly Hmong, into our state school system. Some of them have matriculated to our school, the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, where, unfortunately, they have not enjoyed a high success rate. Hoping to help them, faculty and staff from the Tutoring-Learning Center (TLC), the English department, and the Educational Support Program developed the Hmong English Literacy Program (HELP), a tutoring support program designed to provide assistance for those of our Hmong students most at risk. Our experience and research had informed us that academic essay writing would be difficult for Hmong students. Therefore, our short-term goal was to assist them in understanding, revising, and editing assignments in a required freshman composition class; long-term, we hoped to help students develop study and writing habits, as well as coping strategies that would lead to academic success.

The program we devised is not unique; certainly the staff of many small, primarily undergraduate state universities have responded similarly to sudden influxes of students with special needs. Thus, our emphasis in this article is not on the theoretical design or daily procedures of the program. Instead, we focus on the learners and tutors and the relationships they formed over the course of the year-long pilot program. After a brief description of how the program was conducted, we profile the academic difficulties of the learners and how tutors and staff responded, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. We also discuss the effect of this experience, not only on the learners as revealed in their evaluations of the program and final grades, but also on our young, cross-culturally inexperienced tutors.

How The Program Worked

In HELP, each of the Hmong students was matched with a specially selected and trained tutor. Tutor and learner met for at least an hour weekly to discuss current assignments in freshman English 101, clarifying reading assignments, brainstorming ideas, exam-
ining drafts. Four of the tutors, Melissa, Anne, Helen, and Marie, were student peers, upperclassmen who had successfully completed a three-credit tutoring practicum and were already employed by the TLC. The other tutor, Allan, was a highly-regarded emeritus professor. All five received additional training that included cultural and historical information on the Hmong, descriptions of the kinds of writing problems common to second-language writers, and methods for addressing these problems.

Two Challenges: Reading Comprehension and Background Knowledge

As we met biweekly with our tutors, a profile of the literacy problems of our SEA learners emerged. The first and most glaring deficit was the very low reading comprehension of the weakest learners, an inadequacy some of our tutors felt poorly equipped to handle. Melissa, for example, noted that one of her learners, Bee, came to the tutoring sessions wanting to discuss the extensive readings that paralleled the writing assignments. Grinning with enthusiasm, he would appear at each session with a long list of vocabulary words for his tutor to define. Though Melissa knew this was supposed to be a writing tutorial, she spent most of the hour defining terms and helping him understand the text. It took several minutes, she said, shaking her head, to explain the cultural significance of the phrase “a surge of patriotic pride on seeing the statue of liberty” in a reading about the dispute over ownership of Ellis Island. She wondered aloud how we could improve the writing of those who could not read college-level texts.

We suggested to Melissa and the others that they keep the reading comprehension work to a half hour and that they try to move learners away from studying lists of vocabulary out of context, instead limiting themselves to a few key discussions such as those of the “patriotic pride...” type, tying these key words to concepts within learners’ current background knowledge. We wanted tutors also to understand that their learners’ deficits weren’t simply a lack of vocabulary, but rather a lack of background knowledge, more particularly a mismatch between the background knowledge of their first culture and that of the United States. Finally, we regularly reminded tutors that they could not hope to make up their learners’ deficits in only 15 weeks, that it would only be with more time in this country and continued extensive reading that their clients would eventually fill in the more critical gaps of background knowledge.

Most tutors were assured and encouraged by this advice and limited vocabulary discussions to key terms and main ideas. Marie, for example, explained to us how she now first asked her learner Xiong to tell her what the reading was about. Given his mostly-accurate oral summary, she could quickly skim the two-to-three page text, deriving its gist. Then, after asking Xiong a few clarifying questions, Marie pinpointed the two or three key concepts he wasn’t getting and provided Xiong with the appropriate context. The whole thing took only about 15 minutes per reading, she claimed, and seemed to put Xiong at ease.

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But at least two tutors remained unconvinced by our advice to de-emphasize direct vocabulary study. Allan, the emeritus professor, requested an English-Hmong dictionary for use with his learners. How else, he exclaimed, could he define the word “stencil” encountered in one of their readings? Though we really doubted that any neat, direct translation for this word could be found since this device was unlikely to be relevant to traditional Hmong culture, we did provide him with a dictionary and the address of a Hmong-English language website. Likewise Melissa, though she followed our advice, remained skeptical of how her learners with such limited vocabularies could succeed.

Then tutors and learners made a discovery which lessened their anxiety. They realized that the readings in freshman English served primarily as models of acceptable writing, and that comprehension of the reading was not tested. At this point, reading comprehension became a lower priority, lack of background knowledge was no longer a major problem, and the tutorials turned back toward working on clients’ writing, as we had originally intended.
The Challenge of Classroom Discourse

Our tutors spent a lot of their time explaining professors' assignments and discussing appropriate responses with their clients. Most of our HELP learners came to the university with only the four to six years of exposure to classroom discourse they had experienced in junior high and high school, and much of this was in relatively nonacademic ESL classes. So, although they were, for the most part, fluent speakers of English, this fluency was of a conversational variety ill-suited to the abstract, impersonal discourse used in argumentative writing and discussions of literature. Likewise, the learning and perceptual styles of many Hmong was not suited to American classrooms. Traditional skills of memorization, repetition and formulaic response that have been features of their learning, do not suit the university classroom. Thus, it was not uncommon for learners to come to their tutors carrying copies of writing assignments they either did not understand at all, or understood, but had no idea how to complete.

For their part, the tutors were hesitant to direct their learners too firmly. Though tutors could, of course, understand the written assignment, they had not necessarily read the assigned readings and usually had not attended a lecture. Since instructors' directions often assume students' knowledge of both readings and lectures, tutors had to take extra pains to make sure they were directing their learners down the proper course.

Thai, the one Vietnamese student in the program, for example, found himself paralyzed when the first two-page essay of the semester was assigned on the topic of "otherness." For the previous two weeks, the class had been reading philosophical and speculative essays of writers' encounters with the natural world and their attempts to come to terms with it. Though Thai thought he had understood the readings and much of what his professor had said about them, he had no idea of what "otherness" meant or what it had to do with essays about people finding a whale on the beach, a weasel under a bush, or spiders on a desk. He knew how to write a paper with a thesis and topic sentences, he told Anne, his tutor, and he knew how to write stories, but neither seemed right for this paper on "otherness."

To better understand what Thai's professor wanted, Anne decided to examine one of the assigned readings, an essay by Annie Dillard about the author's chance meeting with a weasel. In relating the incident, Dillard speculates about what it is like to live as a wild creature and what the weasel's thoughts and concerns might be; in effect, what it is like to be the other.

Anne and Thai met a second time that week, and she was able to get him started on his paper. Because she knew from previous discussions that Thai was an avid angler, she asked him to bring in a photo of his biggest fish and to tell her the story of how he had caught it. He quite happily did this, showing up with a photo of a four-foot fish and a breathless 10-minute fish story of how he had caught it. Anne then asked him a
variety of questions: What was that fish thinking when it took your lure? What do you think was going on in its head while you were battling it? How did it feel after you caught it and were holding it in your hands? From their discussion emerged a rough draft that they discussed the following week and a final draft that earned Thai a ‘B.’

Though Thai had certainly written autobiographical essays before, probably even about fishing, and he had practiced writing five-paragraph argumentative papers on topical subjects in his ESL writing classes, he had never encountered the personal essay, a genre that though superficially autobiographical, actually addresses issues of common interest. His conversations with Anne introduced him to this added dimension of the personal essay and allowed him to apply previously acquired writing skills to this new mode of expression. It was clear to us that Anne had assisted her learner not just through her knowledge of college-level discourses, but just as importantly, through her knowledge of Thai. By knowing his strengths and interests, she was able to show him a way into the assignment.

Problems at the Sentence Level
By mid-semester, most learner-tutor pairs had settled into predictable patterns. Though a learner occasionally would show up asking for help on beginning the assignment, most came with a draft and the tutor and the learner spent the hour discussing rhetorical devices such as example, explanation and clarification, to improve it. Both tutors and learners were making progress. One problem that remained, however, concerned editing of grammar errors. The SEA learners in the program had continuing problems with subject-verb agreement, tense, and word forms. At first, we thought that if we recruited tutors with a background in grammar and linguistics, they could show learners how to edit their own writing. But this did not happen. Even tutors with a solid understanding of English grammar felt overwhelmed. Melissa, for example, wrote in her evaluation of the program at the end of the first semester, “I don’t feel my expertise lies in determining what the [grammer] problems of students are.” She noted that no matter what she said or which grammar exercises she assigned, “[my learner] had a great deal of trouble applying [what] he learned in his own writing.” Likewise, Allan, the other tutor with a background in English grammar saw little improvement with his learners. Not only did he not see fewer errors in their writing, but he questioned whether they understood his explanations in the first place since all three of his learners seemed to hold only hazy notions of such basic terminology as “subject,” “verb,” and “noun.”

Traditional skills of memorization, repetition and formulaic response that have been features of (the Hmong students’) learning do not suit the university classroom.

Given the limited success of the two tutors equipped with meta-grammatical knowledge, we instructed all tutors to just read through student papers, either pausing at ungrammatical passages or bracketing them. Our hope was that with repeated attention to recurrent grammar problems, learners would recognize patterns and learn to self-edit. Though some tutors claimed to have seen improvement in the editing skills of learners by the end of the semester, that may not have been true in all cases. For example, Anne claimed proudly at the midpoint of the semester that Thai was able to self-edit. She excitedly told the group of tutors and staff that as she read his paper out loud he would catch every error and correct it. Since Thai had been enrolled in remedial ESL writing courses the two semesters previous to this and was already known by us for his intractable grammatical problems, we were skeptical and asked Anne for more details.

It became clear that when she read Thai’s paper out loud, she would pause after every error and Thai, recognizing his cue, would then offer an alternative. Anne claimed that he almost always got it right on the first or second try. We suggested that instead of pausing after each error, that she read the problematic sentence to the end without a pause and see if Thai could identify the error. As we pointed out to her, if the error was an omitted ‘s’ on a noun as in the phrase “some boy,” for example, Thai had a 100% chance of getting it correct if he paused after “boy.”

Anne did not mention Thai’s self-editing prowess again that semester and there were no effusive statements to that effect in her written evaluation of the
program at the end of the semester. She did, however, state in the concluding paragraph that Thai was becoming "a better and better guesser all the time."

Cross-Cultural Issues

Though we had tried to inform ourselves about Hmong culture as best we could before this tutorial began, we wondered whether there would be any cross-cultural complications. Would familial priorities or differing ideas about deadlines and appointments disrupt weekly tutorial commitments? Or, given our largely young and female staff and our largely male (except for Mai learners), would cultural notions about gender and authority get in the way of professional relationships? Evidently, all our worries were misplaced. In regard to appointments, though learners were only required to make 10 of 13 appointments throughout the semester, they averaged 11. In addition, without exception all tutors developed friendly and professional working relationships with their learners. However, one relationship problem did arise — between two learners. Whether or not it can be attributed to cultural factors is not clear.

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Two of Marie's clients were a married couple, Kao and Mai. On the day of Mai's first scheduled session, she appeared with her husband, Kao. It quickly became obvious that Kao intended to remain beside his wife throughout the duration of the tutorial. "No problem," he said to Marie, "I won't bother you." Marie asked why he wanted to stay, but Kao had no reason. He simply stated that they "always did it this way." Mai said nothing and tried not to look at either Marie or her husband.

After checking with our secretary, Marie found that indeed, previous to the HELP program, Kao had always accompanied his wife to tutorial sessions. Marie, however, given her western sensibilities regarding the independence of women and her belief in what tutoring is about, could see no reason for Kao's presence at his wife's tutorial. She explained to Kao that since he and Mai had different teachers, they would have different writing assignments. Moreover, because they were different people, they were bound to have different tutorial needs, just the fact that the program was meant to address. We agreed with Marie and told her so, and after a discussion between Marie and Kao, the husband agreed to wait for his wife in the lobby.

Effects upon Tutors

Although we were generally satisfied with the progress learners were making, it was more difficult for some tutors to remain so sanguine. Two, in fact, became extremely discouraged and began to question the entire project. Melissa, as mentioned earlier, continued to doubt her effectiveness as a tutor and the likelihood that her clients would succeed. She thought that instead of a tutorial program, HELP students "would benefit from a back-to-basics course that would lead them through simple paper-writing techniques." Allan, though he praised his two learners, Por and Zong, as "intelligent and responsible workers," felt that their "grasp of English vocabulary and syntax [was] yet far from university level" and that "they should not have been registered in English 101" in the first place. We reminded them both that success should be judged less by increased accuracy in initial production, and more by the development of improved editing, revision, and discussion strategies. After all, we were there to help, not to work miracles. Unconvinced, these two tutors withdrew from the program at the end of one semester.

The other tutors had positive experiences, more personal than one might expect. Neither Anne nor Helen had ever had a sustained relationship with someone from a different culture prior to the tutorial program, and they both commented at the end of the semester about how much they had learned from their clients. Anne became particularly close to Thai. She told us how she had gained a profound respect for this learner. He told her about interracial dating, about teachers who had called him "stupid," and about a baseball bat he carried in his car for self-defense. Anne had a good look at what life is like for a refugee trying to succeed in America. Though it has been more than a year since Blong and Thai have been part of HELP, both continue to visit the tutoring center and their former HELP tutors for assistance with papers they are writing for other classes.
Effects upon Learners
All of the students passed English 101; in fact, the mean final grade of the nine was a solid 'C' (2.03/4.00). They told us they were more aware of what their writing problems were and what they could do about them.

Students realized that they continued to have problems with grammatical accuracy, and they understood that the grammar problems would not magically go away, but they believed that despite these problems they could succeed at the university. Brong, for example, wrote in his final evaluation of the tutorial that he knew his problems were not going to be addressed in English 101 as, “People in college are supposed to know grammar already.” He explained that his weak grammar was due to his missing “school at the early levels” and the fact that “[In American] high schools, they also did not teach grammar.”

A technical knowledge of English grammar is not the most accurate predictor of success (for tutors of) SEA permanent residents.

Working with our tutors, students also realized that past rhetorical approaches would not always be effective in college writing classrooms. Pao, asked by his professor to write a descriptive paper involving the senses of sight, hearing, and smell, wrote in his final evaluation of how he “described in a mixture type of way” all three senses within a single paragraph as he “had been taught to write in high school.” However, the teacher’s reaction to his draft was not what the student expected: “… the surprising part about it was that the instructor expected me to write a paper with separate paragraphs that contained different ideas!” Pao was able to take his draft to his tutor and together they transformed his “surprise” into an effective revision strategy that resulted in a draft that met the teacher’s expectations. The student concluded, “After I tried this different kind of writing technique, I felt that I have built a more effective way toward writing a descriptive paper.”

Finally, there was evidence of students’ developing attitudes and habits toward the writing process that would carry them far beyond freshman English. Shoua concluded his evaluation with advice for fellow Hmong students. The advice he gives applies to all students but particularly to second language learners: one must first be sure to understand the assignment before gathering information and writing a draft.

The first thing I do before I start my English paper is talk to my professor. I tell my professor to see if I have the correct ideas for my paper and ask to see what more things I should do to make my paper better. Then I look for the sources and write my paper. After I write the paper, I have my tutor see what I got and what more information do I need. It ... takes time to write out a good paper.

This conclusion is particularly relevant for the many SEA permanent residents who have not had twelve years of American education before beginning university study. It is only through a careful, methodical approach to the completion of writing assignments that they can succeed.

Conclusion
Though university faculty and staff initiated this project, its success rested squarely on the shoulders of the tutors and learners. The tutors, primarily undergraduate juniors and seniors with little relevant life experience and only two or three courses in ESL and refugee-related subjects, treated their tutoring responsibilities very professionally. They remained dedicated to their clients throughout the semester, often running over the allotted one-hour time slot and spending their own time seeking help either from TLC staff or by themselves in the resource room. Knowing very little about tutoring Hmong refugees before the program began, these university upperclassmen educated themselves about their clients’ needs and developed appropriate techniques to meet them. Indeed, it was their determination to help these learners that led two of them to become so discouraged over what they perceived as their clients’ lack of progress that they dropped out of the program.

That two of our most capable tutors left the program indicates that we must refocus tutor recruitment. Through the first year of the pilot project it had become clear that a technical knowledge of English grammar is not the most accurate predictor of success with SEA permanent residents. Rather the prospective tutor must show an interest in foreign languages.
and cultures and make a professional commitment to language teaching. In subsequent semesters, the only tutors brought into the program will be those who have consistently expressed an interest to work with nonnative speakers and who are already enrolled in programs granting degrees or certificates in language teaching, especially ESL.

As for the learners, their interest in the tutorial never wavered. In spite of commitments to family, job, and other classes, their attendance at scheduled tutorial sessions was, as mentioned before, nearly perfect. Evidently, they saw their HELP tutors as an important part of their education. Since we also see it that way, we will continue to offer the HELP program, and with continued support from the university, possibly expand it.

The low reading comprehension of the learners was one problem that the tutorial never adequately addressed, and though that was not an important factor for success in English 101, the students’ low reading comprehension is bound to become a factor in subsequent courses such as English 102, the second semester of freshman English which emphasizes research writing and requires the synthesizing of information from printed sources. However, the resourcefulness of our tutors and the determination of our SEA students will, we are sure, create a reading tutorial every bit as successful as our writing tutorial.

A Bibliography Relevant to Teaching Hmong Students


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