English Literacy Acquisition: From Cultural Trauma to Learning Disabilities in Minority Students

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This is an 18-month ethnographic study of learning difficulties among linguistic minority children in grades 1–5. Twelve children (4 Hispanic, 3 Laotian, 3 Hmong, 1 Vietnamese, and 1 Sudanese) were followed across school and home settings. The study shows that cultural conflict may help explain problems in the acquisition of English literacy. English literacy school activities presuppose cultural knowledge and values which these children and their families have not acquired. Such cultural conflict can manifest itself as a "cultural trauma" that disables children's learning, and in specific, their literacy learning. As a result of the study, an argument is made (a) that at the heart of academic failure may be a profound cultural conflict, (b) that there are ways to socialize minority children for academic success, and (c) that culturally-based instructional models can help in the acquisition of English literacy for academic success.

The democratic fabric of American society is intimately related to its ethnically diverse and dynamic population (Spindler, 1977; Spindler & Spindler, 1983, 1987a, 1987b). Waves of immigrants and refugees enter this country joining other minorities in their quest for a better life. Their overall adjustment, and ultimate success or failure in mainstreaming, is determined both by people's prearrival experiences and by their ability to handle cultural conflict and change (Trueba, 1983, 1987a, 1987b, in press; Trueba & Delgado-Gaitan, in press).

Literacy in English plays a crucial role in the adjustment of immigrant, refugee, and other minority children. The school is often viewed as the primary social institution responsible for mainstreaming minorities. Yet, some schools are overwhelmed by the rapid and unexpected increase in minority populations to be served. To complicate matters, school administrators, teachers, psychologists, and educational researchers have typically paid little attention to cultural factors in determining the differential school achievement and long-term psychological adjustment of minority students (Goldman & Trueba, 1987; Trueba 1987a).
Failure to acquire literacy in English by speakers of other languages has become a key factor in the classification (or misclassification) of learning disabled students, as well as a key factor for dropping out of school (Rueda, 1987). Ethnographic studies of English literacy acquisition have shown that there is a significant relationship between cultural congruency in instructional practice (both in method and content) and children's progress (Au & Jordan, 1981; Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Duran, 1983; Erickson, 1986; Tharp & Gallimore, in press). However, there are many instances in which persistently low literacy levels cannot be explained exclusively by cultural incongruencies or language differences, or even by family socialization patterns. There seem to be structural factors in society, which are rooted in cultural value differences, which accentuate the differential response (including academic performance) in crosscultural encounters (Ogbu, 1974, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1987; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Suarez-Orozco, in press). Perhaps the nature of children's cultural conflict, and their experience of cultural discontinuities in this country, affect their response to school demands in some specific instructional contexts in which they feel disenfranchised. Thus, at the heart of literacy problems there may be serious and unresolved cultural conflicts and discontinuities in the transition from the home to the school culture (Spindler, 1974, 1982; Spindler & Spindler, 1983, 1987a, 1987b). Illiteracy in English, particularly as it affects the future educational level and productivity of large numbers of minority students (Trueba, 1987a, 1987b, in press) is a critical issue.

It is expected that linguistic minority enrollment in the public school will increase significantly in the next 15 years. While in 1970 there were 85% white students, this majority population in the schools decreased to 72% in 1980. It is expected that by the year 2000 white students will make up only 57%, and that one out of three students will be a minority (Dunn, 1987, p. 13).

The 1980 Census of Population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984) reports the presence of about 35 million linguistic minority persons in this country. Of them, 10.5 million are under the age of 17 and 19.5 million are not fluent in English. Almost half of this linguistic minority population, that is, 15.5 million (45%) is Hispanic; French, German, and Italian language speakers follow, totalling 8.4 million (24.2% of the linguistic minority population, with approximately 8.5% each). The Hispanic linguistic minority population is highly concentrated in the Southwestern states of California (6.9 million), Arizona (727,000), New Mexico (618,000), Colorado (475,000), and Texas (3.8 million), and in New York (4.5 million). The relative concentration of linguistic minorities in the Southwestern states is over 25% and in California is estimated near 30%.

This census further indicates that two-thirds of the Hispanic population, which constitutes 8% of the total U.S. population, resides in California, New York, and Texas. The overall academic attainment of Hispanics is extremely low in the nation: 18% of documented Hispanic adults aged 25 and over are illiterate in English (as compared with 10% blacks and 3% whites), and half of those
Hispanic adults have completed fewer than 11 years of schooling. Immigration from Mexico, Central America, Indochina, and the Philippines is bound to continue its rapid pace. The importance placed on educational attainment by all these groups is stressed by recent Rand Reports (McCarthy & Burciaga Valdez, 1985, 1986), which did find progress and upper mobility within Hispanic groups, and specifically discovered better education, higher levels of English proficiency, and better jobs among second- and third-generation Hispanics (McCarthy & Burciaga Valdez, 1986, p. 60–65).

California has some 22 million people 5 years of age and older; of them 6.3 million (28.8%) are linguistic minorities, with Hispanics accounting for 15% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984). Hispanics also form the largest “minority” student population in California and have the highest high school dropout rate of any group (45% between the 10th and the 12th grades, and 40% before the 10th grade). In California there were less than 200,000 Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students in 1970, but LEP students have increased to half a million in 1985. An unfortunate fact at present is that LEP students are overrepresented in the category of “learning disabled” (Rueda, 1987).

**DESIGN AND EXECUTION OF THE STUDY**

A series of modest ethnographic research projects have been conducted at the La Playa School since 1982, mostly as doctoral dissertations and field projects for ethnographic research methodology courses. In the last two years, however, special efforts have been made to analyze the data gathered more systematically, and to look at diachronic trends. This article, which reports findings on the analysis of part of the corpus of the data, attempts to develop a theoretical frame for answering some of the many questions that arose during fieldwork activities.

This study was conducted from September 1984 to March 1986. It was conceived as a focused ethnographic study along the lines of the work by Mohatt and Erickson (1981), Au and Jordan (1981), Moll and Diaz (1987), and Trueba (1983, in press). The team of researchers included two doctoral students and this author. Each one of us regularly visited the school and/or community two or three days a week, spending approximately twelve to fifteen hours per week either collecting data, observing, or verifying the interpretation of data during the analysis. A member of our research team has become fluent in Hmong, and two others are fluent in Spanish.

Our study focused on 12 minority children considered to be the most educationally needy cases among the 40 students classified as “learning disabled” in the La Playa Elementary School (pseudonym) in west central California. The purpose of the study was to understand the nature of reading and writing problems faced by children with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. We focused on English literacy issues which appeared to be theoretically and pragmatically significant across disciplines. In this article I report and discuss part of
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Aged 5-17</th>
<th>Aged 18 and Older</th>
<th>Other Home Speakers of NELs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;5(^2)</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Speak English</td>
<td>Speak NEL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>15,548</td>
<td>1,537</td>
<td>4,164</td>
<td>1,284</td>
<td>2,879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>2,937</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>2,834</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>2,627</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>1,285</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese languages</td>
<td>769</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino languages</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native languages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yiddish</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Indian languages</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1
Estimated Numbers of Language Minority People in the United States, by Age Group, English or Non-English Language Spoken at Home and Language: 1980 (Numbers in thousands)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Families</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Note:</th>
<th>Source:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbo-Croatian</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>814</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainian</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovak</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenian</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persian</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuanian</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other languages</td>
<td>1,726</td>
<td>108</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34,637</td>
<td>2,562</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NEL—a non-English language.

1Families in which one or more family members speak a non-English language at home.

2Children one or both of whose parents speak a language other than English at home.

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding.
the corpus of data collected through systematic observations, interviews, and tape recordings conducted over 18 months (September 1984 to March 1986).

The concern of this study was to explore the implications of the English-Only policy at the local school level, in an elementary school with over 50% LEP's and with 25 different languages represented in the student body. The school was atypical in many respects, but its ethnic and linguistic diversity brought into perspective important aspects of the English-Only policy and its implications for at least some LEP children. In a sense, the La Playa School represents an extreme case, used because it forces reflection about English-Only as a policy within the constraints of enormous ethnic and linguistic diversity.

One of the basic questions raised in our study was: What is the impact of the English-Only policy on refugee students (particularly Indochinese) and on low-status immigrant children (particularly Hispanic)? Specifically:

1. Did this policy increase stress and trauma levels in some students to the point of jeopardizing their participation in academic and social activities as well as their overall development?

2. Did this policy hinder the transfer of cognitive skills and slow the acquisition of English literacy?

3. Did this policy lead to social and psychological isolation of LEP children, thus hindering their overall long-term cultural adjustment and academic achievement?

The La Playa Elementary School is located within walking distance of a university and next to a beach community composed largely of students, transients, and low income and some mainstream families. The school attracts children of married students as well as of recent refugee populations. In 1986 La Playa served 591 students, half of whom spoke as a first language one of the following twenty-five languages: Spanish (101), Hmong (77), Lao (31), Vietnamese (28), Chinese (12: 7 Chinese proper, 3 Mandarin, & 2 Cantonese), Portuguese (7), Japanese (6), Hebrew (6), Arabic (5), Korean (5), Danish (3), Hindi (3), Croatian (2), Hungarian (2), Indonesian (2), and eight other language groups represented by a single student, Bengali, Dinka, French, Ilocano, Tagalog, Malaysian, Polish, and Punjabi. Our main concern was with the first four groups, not only because they were the most numerous (they were 237 out of the 298 LEP's, i.e., 82% of the LEPs), but also because they presented the most acute adjustment and achievement problems. A general examination of the files, along with the recommendations of school personnel, led us to observations of some children both in main classroom activities and in ESL classes or special education groups.

About forty children had been identified by the school psychologist, principal, and teachers as having serious adjustment and achievement problems in the English-language classroom. The researchers' task was to elicit nominations from principal and teacher to identify a small group with the more serious symptoms of maladjustment and underachievement. The entire school staff was
presented with the plan of observations, interviews, home visits, and general anthropological approach to the study of "learning disabilities." The sample in Table 2 was the result of the selection. We studied the files on each child carefully before beginning observations.

The children discussed in Table 2—4 Hispanic, 3 Laotian, 3 Hmong, 1 Vietnamese and 1 Sudanese—had in common the stigma of being perceived as the least well adjusted, and/or the lowest achieving. All but one of the Hispanics, David, along with the Sudanese child, Robert, were extremely limited in their

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex, Pseudonym, Birth Date/Place</th>
<th>Grade in 1985–1986</th>
<th>WISC-R I.Q.</th>
<th>Referral and Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 M 5–7–76 Carlos Ca. USA 3 75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unmotivated; living with disabled father. Slow English language development. &quot;Language impaired&quot; 2nd. grade. Deterioration of skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 F 1–18–75 Rosita Mexico 4 —</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low reading comprehension and low math. Slow English language development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 M 8–27–77 David Ca. USA 3 115</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Laotian</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 F 12–4–73(?) Douan Laos 5 92*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(continued)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
use of English during instructional activities. All but three of the children, Chou and Tou, Hmong boys, and the Sudanese boy, Robert, had enough command of the language to communicate.

Following methodological approaches used in previous studies (Trueba, 1983), members of the research team each selected specific students to be studied in class and at home. After becoming familiar with the student file, the initial efforts concentrated on systematically assessing the degree and nature of student participation in academic tasks, both in the general classroom activities as well as in small groups for specific tasks. Interviews with the student, the student’s teacher, the school psychologist, the principal, and the student’s parents followed. The research team would reconvene to discuss observed patterns of
participation, information gathered from interviews, and any materials gathered, such as student compositions and samples of homework. The fundamental assumption was that participation structures would reveal the degree of meaningful and active engagement in learning activities on the part of the student.

**FINDINGS**

For some of the 40 children identified as learning disabled or lowest achievers, their inadequate performance in school seemed to increase from year to year. For the twelve children of this study their learning problems were manifested in three forms: (a) Lack of overall participation in whole class activities, (b) lack of academic productivity in school and at home, and (c) the presence of vague and pervasive stress, fear, confusion, and other signs of ongoing emotional turmoil. For example, from our field notes we have the following observations.

Rosita, a 10-year-old quiet girl, sits quietly at the back of the class, rests her head on her hands and stays that way for the entire period. Once in a while she responds in Spanish to friends who tell her, “Mira, Rosita” (”Look Rosita”) pointing at a drawing, by saying, “Qué?” (“What?”).

Douan, an 11-year-old Laotian girl reading at the second grade level, is placed in 5th grade (The ESL teacher had warned me that Douan rarely talks, and, “When pushed, Douan talked in some complete sentences but her expressive language is still very weak.” The 5th grade classroom teacher had said, “Her attitude and attentiveness are good. I felt she was trying, but don’t really know, because I don’t remember her speaking at all!”) One morning, in a group of four children, the teacher presents a list of words needed for the reading lesson: “fuss, snooze, separate, rock garden, marigold, and zinnia.” Children are then asked to silently read the first paragraph. The teacher asks, “Is there anybody who did not finish?” The teacher quickly reads the passage and begins to discuss vocabulary. Douan avoids eye contact and persists in keeping her eyes down. Teacher: “Douan, what is ‘snooze?’” Douan does not move. After a short wait, the teacher gives the answer: “Like when you take a nap, you know, a sleep.” The lesson goes on like that. Douan continuously moves her feet and shakes all over. She looks terrified of being asked another question. Similar incidents go on as the teacher gets to the other parts of the lesson. At the end, Douan stands up, not having said a single word, runs to the side of another Laotian girl who is more fluent in English and whispers a brief comment. The math lesson is very similar but less stressful, partially because the teacher knows better and does not ask Douan to answer in public, but rather approaches Douan’s bench and asks her, “Do you know how to divide these fractions?”

Robert is an 11-year-old black Sudanese who speaks perfect English with a British accent, the son of a doctoral student working for the diplomatic service in his country. Robert’s mother, the first wife of Robert’s father, was left in Sudan,
while his stepmother (a younger black woman) came to the U.S. with the family. The reading lesson starts. Robert seems alert and aggressive. He pushes a kid who is crowding him. The lesson is about American rivers. The teacher has read a paragraph, two Israeli children have answered questions about the reading promptly and correctly. It is Robert’s turn. Teacher: “Where is the Mississippi?” Robert delays his answer for a while, and then, just about when the teacher is going to give the answer, Robert: “It is the largest American river, but I know the Nile, and it is enormous.” Robert surprises the whole group with his knowledge, but essentially is not interested in American rivers. The next day, in the context of a question related to some news about the President of the U.S., Robert recites by heart several names of presidents and explains who Tip O’Neill is. Yet, his tests and his regular participation are very limited. In math, he refuses to do some operations on the grounds that the method is wrong. He says, “Is not that way; you do it this way.” Over the academic year his participation in class decreases. His father comes to the teacher and says, “If you don’t want to hit him, tell him and I will.”

Oudin is a 12-year-old Laotian boy who came to school two-and-a-half years ago. He is sociable but has a volatile temper. He is constantly moving his feet, hands, and eyes. His restlessness increases during reading lessons, which require reading in front of the entire class. The teacher no longer asks him if he will try to read a brief sentence because he refuses and kicks the bench. He says he likes school, but that he does not like his teacher or the English language. The teacher notes in her report that Oudin is very low in math, “even counting beans and trading for 10 sticks is hard for him. Little visible progress in math. He learns words by rote, has no consonants or other phonic skills.” Oudin’s friends say that he has older siblings who yell at him and hit him often. His reading teacher writes in the monthly report, “Poor Oudin, he didn’t have a clue . . . , but he tried so hard with the less difficult materials I gave him; it was sad. . . . Excellent artist and superior motor skills, but something is not attached right.”

This perception of Oudin is in contrast with that of his ESL teacher who finds him smart and willing to learn. From the field notes taken during the ESL classes, the following will give the reader a feeling for the different learning environment in this class:

Oudin had great anxiety today about his homework assignment. He tries to read it and cannot understand it. The teacher keeps trying to explain. He is bored. Does not pay attention to directions any more. The teacher comes to talk to him, and he says, “I want to be in Laos. No. I don’t want to be anywhere.” Then he tells Richard (a child in the same class) “fuck you,” and gets into an argument. His face is red and the veins are clearly protruding. He cannot talk out of anger. Goes out of class and comes back shortly. He apologizes to Richard, and says to the teacher, “We’re friends now.” Then goes back to the theme “I don’t want to be here,” and adds “I had many animals in Laos—ten horses and many chickens.”
His writings show the turmoil and difficulties he was facing at the time. From my observations in the large classroom, however, I found him restrained and tense. Once, after a movie on Vietnam, he walked out angry, screaming something nobody understood. It was a clear case of insensitivity on the part of the teacher. She was asking the children to write about their fears "like being scared, with bombs," she said. Many students, including Oudin, had written nothing and were refusing to deal with such a composition. She decided to show them a picture on Vietnam. I will never forget some of the faces of Indochinese children in that class (perhaps as many as half of the group).

The above examples illustrate the differential (often minimal) participation patterns, but conceptually these patterns can be reduced to three, as I have argued elsewhere (Trueba, 1983): (a) Hypo-participation to the extreme of making efforts to be inconspicuous; (b) hyper-participation, often superficial and unproductive (as I will argue below); and (c) hostile/selective participation, as in the example of Oudin and Robert given above.

Carlos was born in the central west coast to a Mexican couple, and at the time of the study he was 11-years-old, in 3rd grade and the only child living at home. His father, a divorced and disabled ex-policeman, had a history of emotional problems. His older brother, now living elsewhere, had been classified as "communicatively handicapped," as was Carlos himself during preschool. This classification was removed at the request of his father in the 2nd grade. He was placed in a bilingual 2nd grade classroom and did very well. Then he was transferred to all English 3rd grade and both his attendance and his achievement went down. For several months he missed 50% of the school days. A new teacher referral for special education classes came with the teacher statement: "Cannot follow oral directions. Needs a great deal of help. Is easily distracted. He is depressed." My observations showed that Carlos could not concentrate on a task for more than a few seconds. I collected his work for a month and discovered that he was doing exercises from the year before, and that his writing (in content, productivity, and structure) was superior the year before. For example, he was repeating 3rd grade, and the year before had produced a composition about three pictures describing spacecraft on the surface of the earth. The first year he wrote:

The earth was going to is explod the world. And they made a spceship. And they had all ready gone to the other planet. They land already. The planted flowers and trees. And the trees grow with fod and they build ahose [a house]. And they went back to see oh [?] the plant is but it was not thir [there] so they went back home and it was already night so they all went buck [back] to sleep. And it was moring [morning] now und [and] it was breakfast now. And they ate oranges and corn flakes and they drank orang [orange] juice and grape and mil. And they all played a game called steal the bake.
The same composition a year later was turned back empty. He said he did not know what to write. I called him and asked him to look at his work from the year before and he looked surprised. There were serious family and personal problems which may explain Carlos's behavior, but the overall productivity was clearly down. In the interview with his father (which I found extremely difficult, because he pretended not to understand English first, and when I talked to him in
Spanish pretended not to understand Spanish) revealed that the father would justify keeping Carlos at home "just in case I need some water or something." The man was physically able to walk two miles every day, and he seemed to intimidate the child with veiled threats. There were some suspicions of child abuse. But even in the previous year's composition there was some fragmentation, and Carlos's composition was not as good as that of his peers.

The compositions from Douan show determination to succeed, regardless of the serious problems she was facing in school, as we saw above. November 19, 1985, she wrote:

**Figure 2.**

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when I am 18 I plan to get an car I am going to ride to school I will learn more I think I would go to college or UCSB I will learn and if I learn college all I will graduate.
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when I am 22 I will found a work to do or learn more english again or I will ask my brother to found me some work to do.
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These students described classroom activities and talks with the teacher as too fast and too difficult, and their homework as confusing and boring. Robert would
sit, yawn, and say quietly: “I don’t want to do it.” Carlos would just smile, look around, get up and, if the teacher or I were looking at him, pretend to write. Then, when asked how the task was progressing, he’d say, “I don’t know what to write.” Douan would say nothing and often copy from the book words or sentences that were not part of the assignment.

Douan’s performance deteriorated in two ways during the research period: (a) the written exercises she had done were more fragmented and less meaningful, and (b) her actual attempts to participate in academic tasks were reduced with the increase of fear to perform in public. Between September and December of 1985 she wrote a number of compositions (see compositions above) which showed syntactic cohesiveness and ability to communicate. Towards the end of the year, after much work, she wrote in almost illegible writing:

Today I was drawing a cat picture. My firend [friend] told me to ware dress. I eat orange yesterday. My bother [brother] have [has] a big map. Yesterday my mother make a sandwish [sandwhich]. Las night I call my firend [friend]. I was sit [sitting] on a big rock. Yesterday I see [saw] many star [stars].

A few months later, Douan wrote the following composition:

At my house we have 13 people in the house and we have three bed room [bedroom] my brother my brothe [brother’s] wife sleep in one bed room [bedroom] my brother have a lot of cloth and my bed room [bedroom] is environment [spacious] because we have 7 people in my bedroom and we have lot of cloth to and other bed room have 4 people [people] sleep in my house is environment.

After this period, between January and March of 1986 she started writing very short compositions and withdrawing more from classroom activities. She said, “Mrs. X [the math teacher] never speaks to me. I have lots of time with nothing to do.” One day she came and said, “I don’t want to be nothing when I grow up. . . . I loved my horses in Laos. We had a brown and a white one. Love my animals.” From that time to the end of the academic year, Douan just sat, copied simple sentences, and turned in assignments with the same errors, sometimes 15 to 20 (see compositions attached).

Oudin was emphatic saying, “I don’t want to be anywhere but in Laos.” He wrote a composition on Halloween (see copy of original handwriting attached):

I Buy A pumpkin and I Drow [draw] my punkin [pumpkin] face is gross: One boy came and trick or treat at my hous [house] and the punkin [pumpkin] (is took) [?]. The boy ran and throw the candy and the punpkin [pumpkin] laugh. The boy cry and go homes and tell his mother. Boy come [The boy came] trick or treat, can you give some candy and the pumpking said no and I will give the boy candy to you. The boy wan. . . .[?]
Figure 3.

Here is a Christmas story by Douan:

Christmas is come you get to get out the school 10 day [days] and you can play all they long [all day long]. And get preempts [presents]. You [Your] mother love you are [a] lot and she buy you a preemts [present] if [if] you is [are] a good boy [girl?].
While talking with these children about their compositions it became apparent that the content of many compositions (as well as of reading lessons), for example stories about holidays such as Halloween and other traditions, was at times meaningless, but the level of difficulty was not as great as in the study of taxonomic structures, for example in the flora and fauna peculiar to the U.S. This was the case with Oudin, Douan, and Robert, as well as with the Hmong children. Many objects and many taxonomic concepts about the organization of these objects were culturally foreign to them. The three Hmong children studied here had problems with those taxonomies. The Hmong have no written language, and since they had practiced slash-and-burn agriculture in China, Laos, and Vietnam, they had no reason to be concerned with plant classification. The exposure to English that their parents had during their stay in settlement camps in Thailand helped these children.

Chou, a 9-year-old Hmong boy, is the son of an educated Hmong who is fluent in English and works in a print shop as the manager. Chou’s family is considered by other Hmong to be the best educated and most affluent of all the Hmong in La Playa. Chou is alert and competent in school, but somewhat confused about his background, home culture, and his place in school. He is always distracted, daydreaming, and absorbed with the beautiful drawings he makes. His drawings are well known in the Hmong community. Some families come to his home just to admire them. Our classroom observations indicate that he is uninvolved and not very concerned with schoolwork. He tells the teacher he forgot to do his homework, but tells researchers he had planned to stay up late watching T.V. and to use an excuse he learned from his Anglo friends the next day, “I forgot.”

To Pao and Tou the language of instruction, English, was extremely difficult, and their families did not have a literacy tradition. Text was viewed by their parents as something generated by white Americans for other Americans. The content of the textbooks easily reinforced this belief.

There was quantitative evidence of less academic productivity on the part of the twelve children under study (in contrast with their peers), in the form of classroom tasks and homework assignments completed. Also the quality of the structure and penmanship (as can be seen from the samples given above) was much lower in comparison with mainstream and high-achieving minority children. This fact, however, needs to be qualified. While all children classified as “learning disabled” (the 40 children from which we selected our 12) were perceived to be unable to read or write at the same level or with the same skill as other children, Chou, Tou, David, and Robert often surprised their main teachers with unexpected amounts of text produced during ESL or special education classes, on subjects selected by the students themselves. And even the least involved students from our sample, Douan, Rosita, Narath, and Emilio, would sometimes bring pages of text and lists of words copied verbatim from books, dictionaries, and other sources without much regard for their meaning. When we
asked them why they did that while they had not completed the mandated homework, they answered that their parents forced them to do so. That exercise seemed to the researchers to be a rather mechanical exercise related to the physical production of text without processing it. This was the case with Douan. From the 40 children who were originally identified as having some learning difficulties, those who had been in this country for four or five years and were at the bottom of the achievement ladder (this includes most of the 12 children in the study) tended to be relatively passive during classroom activities and to produce homework or other text in a typically fragmented fashion, with grammatical problems of the type shown above. In many instances, the observer could find evidence that they were grasping the central meaning, or at times even the intended purpose of the task. Worse still, sometimes there was no participation whatsoever. Chou, for example, would keep his head down on the bench the entire class period, and Rosita would do likewise, but to a lesser extent; they just sat quietly, daydreaming as if they had given up entirely any attempts to make sense of the world around them. This was less frequently the case with Carlos, Oudin, Douan, and Robert in our study. There was one important exception to this lack of participation and lack of productivity. During small group sessions with tutors, or in ESL and special education sessions when children were encouraged individually to select the content of the task and were given assistance step by step, Oudin, Carlos, Douan, and Pao produced imaginative text (albeit full of error) describing experiences (real or fictitious) in their home countries.

From the long interviews with main classroom teachers, we realized that these teachers rarely saw the sample children as being actively involved in learning activities. In fact, their comments about Oudin, Douan, and the Hmong children were "Poor Oudin, he does not have a clue," and about Douan "she is like little vegetable," and about the Hmong children "hopeless." Other comments regarding these twelve and other minority children were very explicitly pointing at the presumed mental ability of these children, almost echoing the psychologist's written comments in the file.

The researchers have some evidence that the children were going from a state of deep depression and mental isolation to a state of panic. This was shown in the decreasing attempts to participate and respond to questions, and to their inability to focus on simple directions. Undefined fears, physical restlessness, unfocused changing gaze, uncontrolled feet and hand movements, frequent need to go to the bathroom, and other signs of emotional turmoil increased during times of performance in front of large groups and caused serious embarrassment to these children, especially if they were reprimanded for them. In my field notes on Rosita, Emilio, and David, there are instances in which the teacher asked specific questions about reading, math, or their homework which the children could not answer. Any time Rosita was asked to read in front of the class, she would be physically upset and had to excuse herself to go to the bathroom. During the break she would explain that she had stomach problems. Emilio would just lower
his head and wait till the teacher picked someone else. David and Oudin would respond “I don’t know” in an angry way that discouraged the teacher from asking them again. The teachers interpreted this response as a challenge to her authority and her control of the class. Carlos would typically lower his head, get red-faced, and smile. On one occasion, after an incident which resulted in being sent to the principal for not bringing his homework and for not paying attention to teacher directions, he failed to attend school for several days.

Narath, Tou, and Bou are very shy and hardly talk to anybody about their problems in school. But any observer can see how hard it is for them not to show competence in their work. In contrast with their usual response in the main classroom, that is, of frozen attitude and avoiding eye contact, in our experimental interventions in small group interaction during ESL and reading sessions, in which stress was minimized by allowing these children to select the areas and pace of activities as well as the level of skill associated with each activity, all three were communicative. Some music, an informal (almost casual) learning environment, and a consistently affectionate, personal approach, brought wonderful results. Oudin was often uncommunicative in the main class and more open in the small class (ESL). An example from my field notes about Oudin:

The ESL teacher is trying to help Oudin with his multiplication tables. He is very resistant after the 2s. Physically backed his chair away. He couldn’t look at the teacher. He had a great deal of trouble with the 3s and was embarrassed. The teacher talked about how important knowing multiplication tables is, and she offered to take as long as Oudin needed to study them. He said he could not come next week because he was going to die. They talked more outside and the teacher said smiling: “Don’t die; not just yet; we need to work together.” Oudin laughed, but he continued his great resistance.

We observed Narath and Pao saying in contexts similar to the one above, “I’m dumb, I’m dumb” and talking about killing themselves. I have mentioned the anger of Oudin when a Vietnamese movie was shown in his class and when he engaged in an argument during ESL class. I also mentioned how Douan preferred to remain quiet and resist passively when asked to answer questions about readings she did not understand. The same strategy was observed in Rosita, Narath, and Bou in reading classes which usually had materials unknown to them. Performing in another language, at a level of skill far above that yet reached, on areas and topics which required rather complex cultural knowledge, in the opinion of the participant observers, became a traumatic experience with detrimental psychological side effects.

We also saw children pretending to be unable to perform tasks they had already mastered in private or in a small group. A case in point was Oudin who, after he learned the multiplication tables, would refuse to answer by simply saying “I don’t know.” Difficulties in the use of the English language during instructional activities had a seemingly cumulative demoralizing effect on these
LEP children, to judge from the decreasing level of participation and productivity during written and oral assignments. The examples given earlier can illustrate this statement.

In summary, a close look at the compositions presented earlier would show that these children often could not distinguish semantic ranges in the use of words, that their syntax was incorrect (verb tenses, order, etc.), and that they could not articulate descriptions of incidents. Most importantly, they could neither understand nor generate concepts (environment vs. space), taxonomic differences between classes of objects (types of flowers), gifts and activities associated with diverse holidays (Christmas and Halloween), and other relationships expressed through text. Their knowledge of the language and/or the subject remained approximate, at the surface of the central issues and concepts. The quality of their communication for academic purposes was clearly set apart from their peers. In essence, these children could not for the most part communicate in English for academic purposes in ways that would demonstrate an ability to see logical relationships in specific language structures.

The most disturbing finding to the research team was that most of the children stopped trying to learn and accepted their "disabilities" as personal attributes, not as a consequence of dysfunctional instructional arrangements or lack of responsibility in our political, social, and educational leaders. Evidence of this fact were the statements made by Oudin and other Indochinese children regarding their inability to learn the math tables or to write compositions as good as those of their peers. The decrease in participation is another piece of evidence that some of these children did not see much hope of improving their performance. To confirm their conviction that "disabilities" were always a personal failure, the 12 children and others suspected of being "disabled" (the original 40 students which constituted the pool from which our small sample was taken) were tested by the school psychologist. All 12 were officially declared "handicapped" or special education cases in instances where the testing took place in a language most of the children did not understand (English), and even when the child's performance in domains not requiring sophisticated linguistic or cultural knowledge (for example, in art or mathematics) was above average (Robert in 5th grade has a math level of 4.9, David in 3rd grade has a math score of 3.4, Tou in 3rd grade has math score of 3.5; Chou is known in the community as an expert drawer of Hmong scenes).

**LEARNING TO SUCCEED AND FAIL IN SCHOOL: TOWARDS A CULTURALLY-BASED THEORY OF ACHIEVEMENT SOCIALIZATION**

Research on linguistic minorities' academic failure has attracted more attention than research on their success (McDermott, 1987a; Ogbu 1974, 1978, 1987; Trueba, 1983). Gradually, criticisms of such an emphasis has modified the focus
of the research to one of differential achievement across minorities and across all student populations (Ogbu, 1987; Trueba, in press). The liberal position of the earlier sociologists of education (Sorokin, 1927), who had questioned the "lev­eling" and "democratization" effects of schooling in the U.S., has been wel­comed by the radical reformist Neo-Marxist and liberal anthropologists who view success or failure as a function of structural societal factors, and less on the part of school treatment. This seems to have emphasized the focus on failure. More recently, the focus on success is consistent with an overall recent trend in the social sciences to look into the school treatment as a complementary explana­tion for success or failure. Bidwell & Friedkin state:

To take the U.S. as a case in point, one would expect that after so many years of public and professional debate about equality of educational opportunity, American elementary and high school would have taken effective steps against ascriptive biases in educational opportunities and achievement. Instead, American common schools seemingly transmit these biases, strengthening them in the process (in press).

McDermott goes a step further in his implied criticism of social science research:

Now I am trying to move beyond the problem of school failure that has grown into a small industry involving millions of people measuring, documenting, remediating, and explaining the habits, values, and skills of minority groups that contribute so heavily to their ranks of school failures. There is a preoccupation among us: Because we claim to offer good education to all and because many minority people seem to reject it, we are plagued with the questions of "What is with them anyway?" or "What is their situation that school seems to go so badly?" Their situation! . . . The breakthrough comes when we realize that their situation is not theirs alone; it is ours as well. We help to make failure possible by our successes. . . . Failure is a culturally necessary part of the American scene. We do not need to explain. We need to confront it. . . .; explaining it will only keep it at a distance, making us its slaves (1987b, p. 361–363).

Recognizing the intimate relationship between language, culture, and cognition, and the significance of socially and culturally based theories of cognitive development as proposed by the sociohistorical school of psychology (Diaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Wertsch, 1985), a number of important questions can be raised from this study: (a) Is the relationship between language and cognition mediated by the culturally based emotional response of students?; (b) what is the significance of symbolic interaction in the context of academic activities, which are instrumental for the overall adjustment of children to a new culture?; (c) is it enough to use the child’s mother tongue, or should there also be a culturally appropriate learning environment
(congruent with the values of home culture) in order to maximize cognitive
development of children?

If we are to take McDermott's advice seriously, one way of facing the cultur­ally based dichotomy of success and failure is to examine the organization of activities, which seems to create school failure, and suggest ways of changing it. Thus, we must face the practical issue of the role of language use in instruction (first- and/or second-language vis-à-vis the purpose and nature of instruction). The other deals with the role of language and culture in the acquisition of literacy skills:

1. What is the most effective use of language in the classroom, if the primary
good of instruction is to foster cognitive growth in children?
2. If some of the literacy problems faced by LEP children are related to their
different experiences, cultural knowledge, values, and overall background,
could the use of the native language facilitate the cultural adjustment of
children to school?

The English-Only movement reflects the political clouds that have obscured
the discussion of fundamental pedagogical principles that are applicable to all children. These principles must be stated and applied, even if political pressure and racial prejudice become an obstacle. One is prompted to ask: What has historically been behind such strong political movements which attempt to curtail the use of non-English languages in educational and other public institutions? From the early 1880s, when Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Wisconsin, and other states declared English as the mandatory school language, to the late 1960s, when the Bilingual Education Act was approved, there have been important changes. Yet the memory of jailing and subsequent trials for speaking other languages is still fresh in the memory of some older minority persons.

Racial prejudice, as manifested in the La Playa community and school by
mainstream teachers, parents, and children, may be best interpreted and under­stood as a conflict in cultural values, or even as genuine xenophobia, a profound anxiety about sharing physical space and engaging in social intercourse with people exhibiting different cultural, linguistic, and/or physical characteristics. The isolation of some ethnic groups in school may be related to emotional
responses and behavioral patterns on the part of mainstream teachers and chil­dren, rather than to some well articulated racist philosophy. Many mainstream Americans have felt in the past, and still feel, that this country cannot rapidly assimilate such large numbers of immigrants, refugees, and other minorities, and they see minorities' presence as a real threat to national unity and economic progress. A sad example of this position appears in history from time to time; the period between 1880 and 1930 was characterized by legislation intended to
curtail the voting rights and general participation of linguistic minorities in social, political, and economic institutions. The ongoing English-Only movement, which began in California two years ago, has now spread to twelve other states and repeats history.

One of the central issues raised by field-based studies such as the one reported here, is the importance that precise, logical, and sophisticated use of language has in effective classroom instruction and in the acquisition of literacy skills. One of the main goals in the education of linguistic minorities is to help students acquire high levels of literacy so they can process information and develop their thinking skills. The assumption (Cummins, 1986) is that cognitive skills (the ability to structure knowledge and to approach learning tasks effectively) can be best acquired through the native language and then easily transferred to a second language. Use of native language is best because critical thinking skills and cognitive structuring are conditioned by linguistic and cultural knowledge and experiences that children usually obtain in the home and bring with them to school (Cummins, 1986).

A second central issue, linked to the first, is that the nature of literacy problems faced by linguistic minorities is deeply related to their lack of the cultural knowledge that is presumed by the instructors and writers of textbook materials. There is a serious ignorance and pervasive insensitivity of school personnel and textbook writers regarding the inherent inaccessibility and confusion for minorities in text written with mainstream middle-class American children in mind. Such insensitivity to the obvious cultural and linguistic gap between minority home cultures and mainstream cultures paves the way for school personnel to stereotype and underestimate minority children’s learning potential.

If we were going to pursue a socialization approach whose main purpose was to understand the actual home cultural background and previous experiences of LEPs, in order to design interventions which would open the door to academic success, we must first understand better the social context of school failure and the conditions for failure, as well as the process itself of socialization for failure. Table 3 can help explore such process.

School children, particularly LEPs who are not achieving well in school, may need extra time and flexibility to place themselves in a new cultural ecology in which the interactional experiences they face daily in the home, school, and community, as well as their own intra-psychological processes, can permit them to make the transition to the new culture and language. Children’s adjustment to school is often impacted profoundly by the prearrival experiences they face, the loss and separation from relatives, the feeling of guilt associated with this loss and separation, as well as the many degrading and traumatic incidents (DeVos, 1984) experienced by many refugees and low-status immigrants. These experiences are often reinforced in school encounters and may easily lead to a profound anxiety about self-worth and personal safety.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactional Contexts</th>
<th>Antecedents</th>
<th>Construction of Failure</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Pre-arrival trauma, loss separation, degradation, and other critical incidents. Collective ethnic crisis and conflicting relationships.</td>
<td>Collective, systematic, and public abuse through “degradation events” internalized by ethnic group as “deserved.”</td>
<td>Patterns of marginality reinforced by racist practices. Less participation in public inter-ethnic activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Collective previous experiences in home cultural environment contrasting with value of academic work.</td>
<td>Increasing sociocultural and emotional distance from adults at home. Emancipatory behavior and partial economic, social, and emotional independence.</td>
<td>Alienation from home, culture, and mother tongue. Selective acculturation. Tension between home and dominant cultures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Confusion about self-identity and self-worth. Vague and pervasive fears and anxiety. Strong emotional need for peer support.</td>
<td>Identity crisis. Coping with stress and anxiety through withdrawal or uncommitted and unsuccessful participation in academic work.</td>
<td>Confusion, depression, and less ability to deal with stress and to establish a learning relationship with teachers and high-achieving peers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In each of the four main interactional layers (see Table 3), there are certain antecedents which seem to lead to experiences of individual and collective failure and which result in additional stress, ultimately creating a cumulative sense of impotence, isolation, and low self-esteem. Because the acquisition of academic knowledge, particularly towards the end of elementary school, requires a very sophisticated use of the instructional language, minorities are set up for failure, a failure which becomes devastating for some LEP children. Also, because learning, at least if viewed from a socially and culturally based perspective integral to the theory of learning postulated by the sociohistorical school of psychology led by Vygotsky (see Goldman & McDermott, 1987; McDermott 1987a, 1987b; Ogbu, 1978, 1987; Trueba, 1987a, 1987b, in press; Trueba & Delgado-Gaitan, in press), requires that the learner play an active role in determining the whats and hows of the learning process, LEP children, as shown in the study reported here, find themselves cognitively isolated and lost.

CONCLUSION

The fact that instruction was in English and was not tailored to the children’s cultural knowledge and experiences was a societal or structural failure, perhaps unavoidable, but still not the fault of the children. Learning to succeed in the school interactional context has a powerful effect for success in other contexts, especially for the intrapsychological process of personality integration and positive self-concept. School socialization for success would seem to require strategies such as the following:

1. Placement of students in learning environments in which there are opportunities to evaluate and analyze failure and embarrassing (degradation) incidents related to academic performance.
2. Identification of learning skills and levels students have achieved in specific subjects.
3. Construction of learning experiences which are more congruent with children’s cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and in which children play a major role in determining or negotiating the level and content of what they want to learn.
4. Consistent organization of learning activities with clear goals, well understood and internalized by children, and supported by a creative reward system. Both the organization and the reward system must be culturally congruent and negotiated with students.

The purpose of these strategies in school socialization for success is to break the vicious cycle of stress, poor performance, embarrassment, and depression. Stress is minimized by guaranteeing success, good performance is at the reach of the student’s skill, there is no embarrassment but instead pride and happiness, and learning becomes gratifying in itself, as well as rewarding socially, taking the form of stronger personal relationships with peers and teacher. Any prelimi-
nary step toward gaining an understanding of previous failures would have to be repeated until the child is confident.

One of the most important findings in other studies of interventions with low-achieving minority students (Trueba, in press) is that the development of dyadic teacher–student and student–student cooperative learning relationships is crucial during the period of resocialization. These relationships seem to minimize the perception of risk of failing, as well as to enhance the rewards of succeeding. Ultimately, the student must internalize the new "successful experiences" and develop a positive self-image that permits the taking of new risks. The goal is for the student to become self-sufficient and to internalize self-regulating mechanisms that keep stress down and self-esteem up.

Racial prejudice in schools, whether conscious or not, is deeply rooted in the misperception by mainstream persons that minorities are academically incompetent. Any demonstrated lack of competence, however, takes place in areas where complex linguistic and cultural knowledge is required to deal with deceptively simple tasks. Initial failure and ensuing stereotyping can create learning disabilities in minority students. The concept itself of disability as applied to culturally different persons must be defined in specific domains, otherwise further stereotyping will follow its inaccurate use. Indeed, at the present time, learning handicaps can range from a simple and temporary adjustment problem to a new setting (something the student will overcome without assistance in a few months), to the most severe psychic state of trauma (paralyzing, depressing, or overpressuring a student). Not all chronic reading problems of minority students are enough grounds to classify a child as learning disabled.

If indeed cultural conflict is at the heart of illiteracy among minority students, and if illiterate minority students have been socialized to fail by an insensitive educational system, there must be ways to (a) sensitize the school system to develop culturally based instructional models which are effective for minorities, and (b) socialize minority students to achieve academically. The resolution of cultural conflicts associated with school interactional contexts is deeply rooted in a better understanding of the opposition between the conflicting sociocultural systems which advocate different cultural values. In a very subtle but real fashion, these values affect students' ability to engage in literacy activities and draw meaning from text. Change in language and culture can be devastating in circumstances where the change was unexpected and/or unwanted. Socialization for academic success involves sensitive and creative approaches on the part of teachers and principals. It can be done, and it needs to be done soon.

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