



## Constructing Identity Through Negotiation for Cambodian Adult English Language Learners in East Oakland

This study engages with a participatory oral history project that explores 3 themes. First, Cambodian participants included in the study will narrate from their perspectives how the evolution of social engagement and identity among African American and Cambodian refugee communities residing in historically Black neighborhoods of Oakland, California, informed their English language development. Second, it is the author's intent through data collected for the study to explore participants' acquisition of English language as a mode of resistance and empowerment for Cambodian refugees in the US. Finally, in detailing the power of oral history to bridge generational, linguistic, and global divides, the participants in this study express the importance of learning *English as an additional language* for the promotion and preservation of Cambodian history and tradition. The themes of this study will be framed by the theories of microaggression and critical race theory in relation to English language construction.

### Introduction

This article uses the lenses of language and race and the medium of oral storytelling to address how the members of Cambodian refugee communities in the US develop their sense of identity in a historically Black neighborhood in Oakland, California. The study examines the sources of challenge and strength for a group of male Cambodian elders in Oakland as participants in a conversation course and in the context of an adult *English as an additional language* (EAL) class. The moniker of *English as an additional language* is used to intentionally distinguish learners who may be acquiring English

beyond a second language, including in the sociocultural as well as linguistic contexts. EAL represents distinct approaches to English language acquisition (Canagarajah, 2007; Knapp, 2015; Probyn, 2001) and acknowledges learners' capacity to retain and determine how and with what depth bilingual/multilingual knowledge is used.

Employing a participatory model of exchange and conversation, the narratives of the community elders in this study reveal how their voices are simultaneously sought and silenced within and beyond their Cambodian communities in Oakland. The study has several goals: first, to retell the purpose of greater English language acquisition as it applies to familial responsibility and generational cohesion, as well as how the hegemony of the English language interrupts that goal. Second, the study's participants will name how language illuminates the interplay of racial and ethnic identities among communities of color. Finally, by capturing conversations during the English language conversational class, the study will add to literature that seeks the voice of adult English language learners in exploring the limiting roles of translation and interpretation in advocacy.

The study was conducted with the participation of 20 male Cambodian elders who met once a week for an English language conversational class. With me as the facilitator, the meetings were structured to address and support language construction on topics determined by the learners. My relationship with the nonprofit organization that hosts and promotes support for the Cambodian refugee community in Oakland began in 2013. My original rationale for approaching the organization was based on a belief that I as a language teacher could play a role in continuing the support of the mission of the nonprofit. This rationale went beyond the act of teaching English and into my passion to contribute to the city of Oakland, to which I owe a great deal.

As an African American male who has lived in Oakland for 15 years, my own privilege as a university professor has challenged my understanding and left me in constant conflict with the dual investment and detachment I have with the city. It is that duality that has acutely impacted my perceived identity with the breadth of ethnic and racial tension among communities of color in Oakland, where the need or want of support in building relationships is based on trust. Yet there remains a lack of studies that focus on how trust intersects with race in TESOL in general, or teaching ESL classes in the US in particular (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). In addition to building upon themes of trust in EAL class dynamics, it will be equally important to discern how race, ethnicity, and identity are understood in a global rather than solely in an American context (Cho, 2016; Macedo & Gounari, 2016).

The origin of this study dates to my first interaction with the Cambodian refugee community in Oakland via email. In preparing to meet on how to continue what had been in place, I learned from the previous instructor that initial spaces for English classes had been based on oral communication through a review of current events. There were underlying assumptions about what the topics of discussion were, and what connoted current events. First, the medium of materials or resources was exclusively from US periodicals with stories that focused on global events. Based on the interpretation and sociopolitical perspective of the author, in addition to the presumed level of reading comprehension required to review the articles before speaking in class, the conceptualization of the class seemed challenging. Second, the class was set in a way to learn about the US. However, what that learning meant in terms of historical trajectory, current positioning, or personal connection was left to interpretation by the language learner.

What was clear is that though the sessions with the Cambodian community had been focused on the goal of learning to speak in English, there was little space for communication in the learners' first language (L1) that was intentional in informing the acquisition of the additional targeted language, what I would consider being the *L+*. It was this reflection that informed my approach to leading the class more than any other, as I was free to consider how the established cultural and oral traditions among the Cambodian elder participants could inform my planning to facilitate the process of acquiring the English language. Moreover, throughout my documentation and within this study, I learned that the word *elder* was used among younger members of the Cambodian community to identify the men I had the privilege of working with. This is important in my ability to build relationships with my class, as the term carries with it not only a measure of age, but also of stature and respect.

Before my first session with the men, I was warned of overt racial tension I might face as a Black man within the Cambodian community. From the perspective of the teacher transitioning from the organization, he had either seen through nonverbal expression or with the limited English the Cambodian men used what he described as blatant racist attitudes toward non-Cambodians in general, but in relation to African Americans in particular. The executive director of the organization would echo this sentiment not as a reprisal but out of support and guidance and in presenting an opportunity for the Cambodian community to become more race conscious and challenge its own prejudices.

For the first two sessions of the class, the executive director of the

support organization, along with a representative selected from the group of the Cambodian men, a Khmer/English bilingual, introduced me to the adult learners and sat in on the classes. After the second class, the director set me aside to explain there had been to some degree a continuation of traumatic experiences for the community of men in the US. She went on to explain that some of their most vivid experiences were confrontations with Black men from the African American communities in which they were resettled. Intent on checking my own assumptions on how prior interactions with the Black community might correlate with how I might be treated, I wanted to be prepared for the oral language production of this particular class and focusing on it without limiting myself to the mechanics of language acquisition.

## **Methods**

### ***Research Questions***

The following research questions framed the study as guides to accessing the data at multiple stages. The monthly periods at which these questions were revisited with the Cambodian elders were critical in determining to what degree the study was for my benefit in learning how to better serve an adult population of students engaged in EAL structured classes, versus for the benefit of the Cambodian elders in documenting and preserving the narratives of their histories. The questions were:

- How does the participants' community define language learning as meaningful?
- How does the participants' prior education inform their expectations of how and what to learn toward English language acquisition?
- How do the participants' interactions with neighbors and community influence/impact their engagement with the English language?
- How does my identity as both researcher and instructor support or disrupt the process of learning the targeted language?

### ***Research Design***

The narratives documented in this research address how language acquisition can be a tool for justice and advocacy among learners of English as an additional language. The study took place at a community center in Oakland, California, over a six-month period in 2014. The study's data were captured through audio recordings during weekly one-hour conversational English classes that encouraged the

use of the learners' first language (Khmer) to explore areas of continuity, difference, and intonation with the application of the targeted language (English). As a part of the participatory framework for the study, each recorded session began with a review of the previous class and playing back the audio captured. The purpose for this practice was to discuss not only what had been covered, but also to explore whether my interpretations of what had been said was accurate as determined by the participants. Although initially a strategy for data collection, the playback of audio recordings became an organic extension of the oral conversation class through participant-led listening and speech exercises.

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study are all men who were driven from Cambodia during the atrocities leveled during the genocide beginning in 1975. They represent five provinces and more than 11 individual towns, cities, and communities in Cambodia. As the class was offered as a voluntary component of a broader set of resources for the community, the number as well as the individuals who attended varied throughout the study. For each session reflected in the narratives for this research, there was a range of 20-25 participants in the group. As each class required a roll call for the purposes of the community support organization, I was able to track and confirm attendance along with my personal recollection from building relationships with each participant. When individual narratives are highlighted in the findings of the research, self-selected pseudonyms are used for the participants.

### **Review of the Literature**

This study primarily addresses two areas of literature that are limited in relation to the practice of instruction and support of adult English language learners. First, this study documents the experiences of a teacher of color in the global field of TESOL. Through their extensive scholarship and leadership in the field of TESOL, Kubota and Lin (2006) continue to build upon the foundation for the discussion of how the absence of a teacher's racial identity at the core of conversation in EAL, ESL, and EFL contexts has attributed to an increasingly narrow conceptualization of what teaching English as an additional language has come to mean, especially in comparison to other disciplines:

Such scholarship theorizes race, racialization, and racism, critiques racial inequalities in institutional structures, and explores

the relationship between these constructs and sociocultural and political processes, including identity formation, knowledge construction, nationalism, national and local policies on education and immigration, and so on. (p. 472)

It is with this lens, as a US citizen and TESOL instructor, that I approach this study. Moreover, this research addresses the complexity of racial structures by examining the narratives of refugee and immigrant communities in the US, and through an exploration of how their knowledge presents a space for English language discourse in relation to race and ethnicity in a global framework. At the same time, the uniqueness of the Cambodian participants' lived experience informs further the necessary components of a meaningful and effective EAL class. As Skilton-Sylvester (2002) states in a study capturing the experience of Cambodian women in adult ESL classes, the fact that refugees saw many of their relatives murdered, and that the justification in part for those atrocities was because they were educated, pointedly affects the conditions under which they continue to attend any space termed as educational. In my work with Cambodian men who have on average spent several decades in the US without the support for an English language acquisition space informed by their emotional and physical needs, Skilton-Sylvester's work underscores the need for a curriculum that is relevant in terms of topic, expectation, and accessibility.

Although my efforts during the first months with the elders were focused on meeting and learning the names and interests of the community, it was my own language learning that impeded the progress of the men I meant to serve. The weekly sessions were based on topics and themes determined by the community. It was my goal to explain my role in these conversations as a guide and a teacher as well as a learner. Initially, this concept and the quality of participatory action that would lead to what Smaling (1998) describes as a dialogical relationship was not accepted by the men. Questions arose regarding how they could individually or collectively lead conversations in a space where they felt their contribution through the medium of the English language would never be as beneficial as my own.

This concern was fully expressed by Mr. John, a survivor of the Cambodian genocide who spent more than a decade in Texas upon first moving to the US: "But how can I, how can we know? You know, the teacher is you." It was at this moment that we reflected upon the core of his inquiry: What does it look like to have the adult English language learner lead the class curriculum? In the context of our sessions, "communities as guides" meant not only the need for the par-

ticipants to question their English-language interactions with others in their neighborhoods, but also their understanding of the importance of using Cambodian language. This was an idea of great concern, as the group felt the encouragement of using Khmer in the class would greatly restrict their growth in acquiring the English language. It was at this point that we collectively were able to determine reasons why using Khmer would be critical toward further acquiring English. Among these reasons was the benefit of using the structure and grammar of their first language to compare or possibly predict the patterns of speech in the target language, deciphering the social context of expressions that have multiple meanings, and the significance of body language and nonverbal communication in connoting emotion and stature. Through these participatory conversations, we were able to identify that I as the guide was the only individual who would not grow in familiarity with both languages if I were not taught the basis of the construction and ideas they knew in Khmer.

The underlying assumption, however, was that my own capacity to act upon inherent racism (conscious or not) would either not be a factor in my communication with the adult learners, or that it was not a subject to be broached directly. The consequences for my own assumptions interplay with what has been established in the field of counseling and psychology as trauma and silence as it relates to historical narrative accounts of post-traumatic stress disorder for Cambodian refugees in US and global contexts (Blair, 2000; Hinton, Field, Nickerson, Bryant, & Simon, 2013; Sack et al., 2002; Wagner et. al, 2013). Yet existing literature is limited in expressing the ramifications of Cambodian refugee communities being relocated in US communities that have been historically disempowered and disenfranchised. Zhou's (1997) investigation of segmented assimilation theory does offer a means "for understanding the process by which the new second generation [of refugee families] ... becomes incorporated into the system of stratification in the host society" (p. 1).

Another of those assumptions was the understanding of what *refugee* meant to the Cambodian community, as well as to the organization that offered services to them. For the purposes of this study, Asgary and Segar's (2011) definition most closely aligned with the conversations I documented: "Individuals who are outside their country of origin and have been persecuted or fear they will be persecuted on account of race, religion, nationality, and/or membership in a particular social group or political opinion" (p. 1). The application of this definition is critical for this study, as the basis of Asgary and Segar's work reviews the impact of refugee status in the US regarding access to health care, an ongoing challenge for the participants of this study.

However, there remains a gap in research that relates how racial/ethnic association, English language capacity (often intertwined with assumptions of intelligence), and social interaction of refugee adults are instantaneously assigned by a power dynamic of the host nation through a narrative to which they are rarely, if ever, a willing contributor. Within the class discussions, how my physical presence, language production, and nonverbal queues filtered messaging remained inconclusive. It was my intent to offer support and contention while resisting the impulse that I somehow was the gatekeeper to the participation of the Cambodian men in the class. Again, Skilton-Sylvester (2002) underscores the multiplicity of conditions, known and unknown, that affect attendance and motivation:

Knowing generally that family roles, especially as spouses and parents, and roles as current or future workers are central to the participation of adult ESL students does not help us understand the myriad different ways that these roles influence participation or which aspects of students' lives outside of the classroom are most important in adult learners' decisions about attending or not attending class. (pp. 11-12)

### ***Analysis of Microaggression and Critical Race Theory via English Language Instruction***

The main theoretical framework used for this study includes Sue et al.'s (2007) examination of microaggression as "commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities ... that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (p. 271) and Liggett's (2014) view of critical race theory through the lens of teaching English to speakers of other languages. Sue et al.'s work is significant in addressing through the medical field how the question of culmination is not a reliable measurement to determine harm. Instances of racism that are neither conscious nor quantifiable result in a retort of microaggressions' being considered either trivial (what can one say that is not offensive) or dismissed as being representative of one moment in time (prove how often this happens). Such denials can result in further silencing the person(s) directly affected by the microaggression, and separate the aggressor from addressing her or his own prejudices and means of communication to elicit a narrative of dominance in the context of a given society. Racial structures and words related to the refugee experience of the US (Ong et al, 1996; Roy & Roxas, 2011) and ratings of self-worth based on the literal duration of how long one has lived in the US (Bankston & Zhou, 2002) have mainly fractured social interaction

within, between, and among communities of color.

Sue et al. (2007) and other studies that have addressed microaggressions have nearly exclusively focused on their implication from a Western-dominant sphere in which White people have directly flaunted ignorance and hostility toward persons of color, with a historical impetus toward its conceptualization of racism toward African Americans (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014). In the context of communities learning EAL, microaggressions can be viewed through social interactions and nonverbal communication including (but not limited to) loud halting speech that somehow is meant to account for the limitations of the receiver versus the speaker (Washington, 2007), the mimicking of how a supposed nonnative speaker's accent sounds (Kubota, 2001), or mocking what the learner's native language reveals about the manner and stature of an individual's intelligence (Burgest, 1973; Ee, 2013; Orbe, 1995, 1996).

Moreover, Huber (2011) and Liggett (2014) challenge the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) to consider the role of critical race theory (CRT) in EAL classrooms, as linguicism has successfully covered or navigated critical conversations from racism to focus on linguistic discrimination to a greater degree in isolation (Yoo, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2009). Critical race theory continues to be a foundation on how differences in ethnicity, gender, and language normalize practices of marginalization. I use CRT to expand upon the conversation of how the active acknowledgment of the role race plays in teacher/student dynamics affects learning and relationships in class environments (Chapman, 2007; Mitchell, 2013; Schroeter & James, 2015).

In each of the examples that lists how microaggressions can manifest through degrading an English language learner's manner of speech, it is important to consider how acts of linguistic and racial conflict affect relations among communities of color. To be clear, my intent is neither to argue against nor circumvent the construct of Whiteness as a root cause of historical and persistent racism, discrimination, and oppression (Lipsitz, 2006; Madden, 2016; Sleeter, 2001). Instead, I purposefully look at the impact of race and microaggressions through an analysis of communication and language construction among and within communities of color (Cleland, 2013; Condry, 2007; Dzidzienyo & Oboler, 2005; Levine-Rasky, 2002; Reappropriate, 2010) and by exploring the framework from an "actor versus the participant" perspective.

In relation to my work with the Cambodian elders and their lives in East Oakland, I assert that a participant maintains the abil-

ity or option to engage or disengage, determinant upon the impact of words and actions as it relates to her or his place in society. This further informs the participant's ability to cause harm through microaggressions. The actor, in gauging the visible and invisible barriers to accessing communication and advocacy, is often left to absorb the impact by the participant. In further learning from the narratives of the Cambodian population represented in this study, it is imperative to separate the assumption of passive responses to microaggressions (maintaining verbal silence) versus the active implications (forming mental determinations) of such interactions.

### **Data Analysis/Findings**

A consistent number of questions were asked of me beyond our scheduled time together that set the foundation for our collective racial consciousness in our sessions. For several months, it was my approach to be the receiver of areas of interests expressed by the men, including traffic laws, government applications, and merchant return policies. However, during this same span of time, the men wanted to express the importance of having a more unstructured time to learn more about each other. In the words of one of the elders, "In order to feel like a real school, we should have a lunchroom, or lunch time." I was unable to grasp the significance of this request, but I became aware that the lunchroom conversations were equal in time when compared with our scheduled sessions, and that the rate of participation among the men collectively increased. In addition, questions related to our discussions were more focused, not on the structure of the English language, but on the intent to understand and use specific words and phrases in their neighborhoods.

It was in the lunchroom discussions that the men specifically asked the intent and meaning of words that included *gat*, *nigga*, *hoodie*, *drop-top*, and *hella*. From what I could gather, all of these words and others had at some point been directed at them, and most often (though not exclusively) this included interactions with Black male youth and adults. The speech and use of English that I spent an hour per session in instructing was irrelevant in the context of daily interactions within the neighborhoods where they lived. The Cambodian men saw their interactions with the Black community as alarming and confusing, not only because their neighbors were predominantly African American, but also because they knew of many first- and second-generation Cambodian Americans who were beginning their own nuclear families with Black men. My own reaction was to further explore with the elders the histories of the individual words they identified as *Black* and to expand on the facts of when and why they might

be used, as well as learning more about their reflections on being part of a Black family of their own. Yet at this stage in the research, the manner in which this topic was to be approached and addressed and the reasons for doing so remained very subjective.

Through their narratives, the elders further detailed their concern about not being able to communicate with their grandchildren because of language and cultural barriers. They also faced the reality that the disconnect might extend to their great-grandchildren as well as their families whom they now considered exclusively “American” with a culture different from the elders’. My response, crafted over an extended time, was to acknowledge the men’s concerns but to carefully consider my place as an African American and educator in taking part in this new phase of our narratives. It was my resolve then and now to not become an embodiment or representative of the specific Black community of which they were a part, but to also resist the urge to disengage from a discussion that they had longed to bring to my attention but had hesitated in doing so for months out of fear of embarrassing or offending me.

My response was to not explain verbal and nonverbal interactions they remembered but rather to explore the rationale and purpose of those instances. We decided to develop a community map plan, in which we would take two sessions to explore the neighborhood through their eyes. The assumption that I had made was that the men considered where they lived to be their neighborhood. Rarely, if ever, had they actually walked a block down the street. Moreover, the places where we physically stopped were often in stores that were operated by Cambodians, interwoven with other general convenience stores owned by other immigrant communities and Black vendors (which were avoided). We also made the decision about the choice of language of use consistent with the physical space. Only Khmer was spoken beyond the physical space of our classroom. This was not out of a resistance to speaking English but due to a tendency to maintain and preserve their heritage and space in their society.

Yet there was another critical component to their development in language and interaction that had not been broached before the community map activity: Every example of English language production they experienced had at its foundation African American Vernacular English (AAVE) that went well beyond the citing of individual interactions or the structure of specific words. In his studies of immigrants to Canada, Ibrahim (1999) explains how African immigrant and refugee learners of EAL acquired English through AAVE because they were identified as Black upon entrance into Canada. Although they were identified based on their nations of origin and skin color, Ibrahim il-

luminates the fact that the manner in which they were perceived and “racially identified” directly affected how they learned the language. Often during the lunchroom conversations, the class participants identified the differences between the *real*, *Black* Cambodians versus the *White*, *mixed* Cambodians. The historical precedent for people of African American descent self-identifying as Black, a racial construct, and/or also acknowledging Black as synonymous with ethnic identity (Cross, Jr., 1991; Dawson, 2001) was a conversation we had in the context of two global histories and to what degree complexion determined perceptions of legitimacy as well as discrimination. There were multiple instances in the study in which the Cambodian men used the word *Black* to self-identify. To a degree, the Black neighborhood where they were relocated, as well as the sense of belonging in terms of race, affected their acquisition of English.

During the two sessions, we spent a great deal of time interpreting the meaning and manner of advertisements at bus stops and the purpose of images that accompanied the structures, the nonstandard use of English in billboards advertising films, and the misspelling and idiomatic functions of statements that were nonsensical without familiarity with popular media and iconic imagery. It was not that the Cambodian refugees had been void of acquisition or communication in English before my entrance into their community, but rather that they had made the natural and most direct link with language development in terms of oral literacy and speech patterns reflective of their environments.

### ***Narratives of Constructing Identity Through Negotiating Language***

Mr. Kim, who spent five years in what he terms a Thai concentration camp before being granted the ability to move to the US, details his narrative immediately following a class session about family titles:

We all fought, and try to forget, every day. We escape while the fighting was still going. ... When we get to the Thai border, we were in prison, no, more like the concentration camps. ... The Thai soldiers just kill anyone, everyone, but their enemies, only the normal people, and especially the Cambodian. We wrote to everybody, any country like New Zealand, the UK, the US to set us free. Some take two years, some take four or five, but then we go to Bataan, to the Philippines to learn English for four or six more months until we are ready, and then fly [to the US].

Mills's (1959) challenge to defining the global context of society in the re-creation of the Western World focused on the societal impli-

cations of dividing the individual from the greater community. Mills' sociological definition showed how he believed each individual would be powerless in action and limited in approach "to solve the troubles" of a nation-state system based on perpetual war (p. 10). Many scholars have sought to update Mills's sociological theory to more readily apply to the current status of global structural injustices (Fuller, 2006). Still, its central theme of transitioning troubles (personal and private) to issues (public and external) aid in defining the journey I accompanied many of the Cambodian refugees on in identifying the full impact of their lives through reimagining the expression of language, society, and neighborhood.

One of the most memorable expressions of the transition Mills details that I believe is reflected in this study occurred through the connection between family and history. In responding to an opening activity to discuss the nonverbal reactions and interactions of asking about an individual's age in Cambodia as compared to the US, one participant explained how his age was a reflection of how many older siblings that he had. We then began to write, translate, and compare a Khmer/English bilingual list of titles and names that identified family in terms of age, gender, and number.

It was at this point that I was asked about the number of siblings in my family. After sharing that I had three brothers, two of the men had an exchange in Khmer, pointing to their arms and neck in slicing motions followed by laughter. Noticing that I had paused and was looking their way, one of the participants, Mr. John, began what became a conversation everyone took part in: "Oh, I was explaining to my friend here that my [brother and mother], chopped, here [neck] and here [leg]. And he said to me, his [two sisters] the same thing." On this day, with more than 20 attendees in my class, the room filled with both English and Khmer narratives of how an untold number of family and friends were massacred, which they witnessed, along with life-threatening injuries many of them bore. The narratives had lasted for more than an hour, and all told with the visual expressions, smiles, and laughter. Acknowledging my own place as a learner and participant during the sessions, I instantly believed that I had erred to such a high level that my presence in the community would end that day.

Upon speaking with the director of the organization where I led the discussions with the Cambodian refugees, I was asked to consider whether these narratives were not only a measure of what I hoped regarding the learners' guiding the curriculum, but that the sessions were a nurturing place to have these conversations. Conversely, I felt unprepared and lacking in experience to hold a place for these narratives. It was at this moment that it crystallized for me that despite

the participatory framework I aimed to bring to the conversation sessions, I still greatly believed I had a centralized and exclusive role in dictating the structure of what a class under any description should look like. In addition, it became clearer that the lunchroom discussions signified a process initiated by the Cambodian refugees to build their contribution to the sessions that would ultimately be at the core of all future conversations, signaling their approach to greater dialogical relationships with me. Moreover, although the participants have access to and attend sessions focused on mental health services and post-traumatic stress, the full expression and cultural reflections of such experiences is not segmented from various other aspects of their lives (Lee, Lytle, Yang, & Lum, 2010), including my time with them.

### ***Bond Between Language and Culture***

As the participants continue to explore ways I can support their development and growth, there is a recurring request to document and archive their experiences in such a way that they can be shared with future Cambodian generations in the US. The concern expressed by many of the Cambodian refugees in the study is that their children and grandchildren do not want to hear their stories. This aspect of their narratives, more than others that were shared with me, was one that impeded their space within their communities as guides, mentors, and educators. It is a view confirmed by Lewis's (2009) respondents in his interviews with more than 30 Cambodian refugee elders in the US.

At the same time, the need to communicate only in English among younger generations as perceived by the elders hinders their access to speaking with extended family and teaching the traditions of their culture. The fears contained in the stories that Cambodian refugees shared with me are informed by their traumatic experiences during the period from 1970 to 1975 when they were immersed in the horrors of the Khmer Rouge. But there were also sentiments of hope that will continue to act as emotional and familial connections to future generations through languages, histories, and identity trajectories.

### **Limitations of the Study and Conclusion**

Though this study is based on the lives of Cambodian refugees in Oakland, California, their narratives capturing some of the work within the English conversational sessions during the year 2014 are not meant to be representative of the entire Cambodian community in Northern California, or in the US. The participants are identified as refugees because of their past involvement in fighting against the

Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, leading to their admittance to the US as a result of their cooperation with the American military and being threatened with murder in their homeland. Yet they have served to support and work with the diverse Cambodian community in Northern California, including those with refugee, immigrant, and first-generation Cambodian American status. Thus the lived and legal identities of the Cambodian community are interwoven and resist labels that attempt to incorporate the whole of their experiences.

While sources and data in the study contained information related to the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia in relation to the lives of the participants, the focus of the research was on the negotiation of their cultural and linguistic identity in Oakland. It is because of the continued role that violence and loss plays in the Cambodian refugees' lives and the lives of their children that the majority of the data captured are expressed through paraphrase rather than direct quotes. This includes detailed instances of attacks or murders, altered to protect the identities and out of respect for those who have passed, as uncertainty remains as to whether some perpetrators of those events are still active not only in Cambodia but also in the US.

Through a curriculum grounded in participatory engagement practices for English-language conversational sessions, I had the privilege to learn from as well as see the progression of a Cambodian refugee adult community using Khmer language to facilitate greater understanding in the targeted language. Throughout these sessions, there were echoes of conflict and anxiety embedded in the oral communication in both English and Khmer recounting memories of years past as narratives of present time. Language for the participants in this study had been a tool to determine absolute boundaries in power/distance relationships. However, in first exploring and then challenging the premise of language as boundary to differentiate communication based on race and culture, the participants highlighted their sense of identity as Cambodian people. The study underscored the role that this notion of belonging can play in constructing the identities of generations of Cambodian Americans.

Furthermore, in this research, the process by which members of a Cambodian refugee community acquire English was related to the relevance of language, race, and culture in their relationships within their neighborhoods. The full expression of dialogical relations led to empowering stages in the continued construction of English-language conversational sessions, leading to the interplay of identity and belonging in Phnom Penh as well as in present-day Oakland, California. A challenge was presented vis-à-vis the relevance of the language they were acquiring in our sessions, as well as the perceived value of

oral literacy in navigating when and how to engage with neighbors. However, by becoming more aware of their existing English language acquisition through the medium of African American Vernacular English (without being trivialized as slang or deficient), participants communicated a great desire to engage with their African American neighbors.

The level of scholarship, application, and praxis in challenging racial, gender, and economic class paradigms is long established within the global context of English language learning. This study is but one attempt in coming to grasp with how intentionally implementing discussions from the interests of the learners around society and race can be seen through English language development and practice. In doing so, the study explored the powerful and reflective steps of acknowledging educators' racial, gender, and socioeconomic experiences as core elements to consider in designing teaching practices. This process takes into account the instructor's and students' perceptions of each other.

The integration of Cambodian refugee voices in the US may be a point of inquiry to expand upon for future research. The Cambodian participants' ability to link their self-awareness as being pivotal to the historical growth and value of their current social structure in Oakland, including but not limited to family ties, may play a role in recapturing the stature they feel has been lost. It is with my humility as a learner and their roles as educators that I believe there is compelling evidence of how documenting oral history informed by race, culture, and language can be transformative.

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