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Co-creating the Dialogic: How a Participatory Action Research Project Promoted Second Language Acquisition of Karen Youth

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Co-Creating the Dialogic: How a Participatory Action Research Project Promoted Second Language Acquisition of Karen Youth

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Abstract

The case under investigation explores how a participatory action research (PAR) project between three Karen adolescent brothers and their American tutor/co-researcher can effectively promote dialogic (Wong, 2006) second language acquisition by: (1) creating dialogic teacher-student relationships; (2) building second language confidence and; (3) providing a problem posing learning atmosphere that promotes participants' academic literacies and personal transformations. The findings from this study suggest that learning within what Paulo Freire refers to as a problem-posing educational project can promote language acquisition as well as critical consciousness, each of which are key in contributing to immigrant adaptation to the host culture. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how educators can begin to involve students in ways that make education personal, relevant and meaningful to groups who are often marginalized in school and communities.

Keywords: Refugee youth, English language acquisition, dialogic teaching, Karen education



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Introduction

The current study is a bi-product of the first author's collaboration with three ethnic Karen brothers living in rural Georgia. In that larger study, the research team collaboratively investigated Karen resettlement experiences in three U.S. cities via a participatory action research (PAR) project. Upon completion of that collaboration, certain themes related to the brothers' English language development began to emerge. This paper addresses the ways that larger PAR study impacted the brothers' English language development.

The first author met the three Sgaw Karen brothers who are the focus of this case study while working as a tutor for the Georgia Migrant Consortium, a branch of the state's education department that offers services to immigrant students. Their family's arrival in the United States in 2007 represents the first wave of resettled Karen and other Burmese refugees from Thai refugee camps.

Although the brothers' had lived in the United States for over 2 years prior to our first meeting in May 2010, it was evident that each lacked what Cummins (1991) refers to as basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) as well as cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). I was hired to help them "catch up." It was not long until I realized that the brothers had few opportunities to use English in their daily lives. Although they attended school and were mainstreamed in their History, Economics, Agriculture, English, and Science classes, they continually expressed frustration that they could not understand what their teachers were saying. It was also clear that they had few authentic language opportunities inside or out of school with Americans. I hoped to help fill both gaps via our collaborative work together. My two coauthors were invited to help with the writing in order to add depth to the theoretical and findings sections. Their input helped add an extra form of checks and balances against researcher gaze as well as ethnocentrism when writing about the Karen.

Purpose of Study

As the brothers' language tutor, I wanted to find ways to get them actively using English. Therefore, I conceived of a collaborative research project that would engage the brothers in all steps of the research process. I envisioned this project to be what Barbara Rogoff (1990) refers to as *apprenticeship*, where the brothers would learn English and research through the process of doing research. I, in turn, would be able to learn more about their culture and individual language needs. Thus, I began investigating theoretical and methodological frameworks that would inform my roles as teacher/researcher. This investigation led to my adopting participatory action research (PAR), which informed how I approached this study and the methods used.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project

The Research Team

At the outset of this study, the eldest brother, nicknamed Chit Poe¹, was 19 and a senior in high school; the middle brother, Narko, 17 was a Junior; and the youngest, Gola, was 15 and a freshman. I was 38 years old and had just completed my first year as a doctoral student at a large public

university in Georgia. I had over 10 years of English as a second language (ESOL) teaching experience in the United States and South Korea.

Each of the brothers was born in one of the Thai refugee camps until their resettlement to the United States. They originally settled with their parents and two other siblings in Phoenix, AZ. They lived in Phoenix for 17 months prior to moving to rural Georgia in January 2009.

I first met the brothers at their home in rural Sandville (pseudonym), Georgia where they had lived for 16 months and were all attending the local county high school. They relocated to Georgia with their parents, who were seeking to attain steadier employment in agriculture and to reconnect with extended family members who had been resettled in the area. They were amongst the first Karen families to move to the area.

Over the first months, we² built a friendship that developed into a shared desire to document the Karen experience in the United States. The research plan developed in an ad hoc fashion based on our questions and concerns about what I was observing and what the brothers and their community were expressing about their resettlement experiences. In the spring of 2011, we began to plan a research-road-trip to different Karen communities around the country. We wanted to compare the experiences of Karen communities so as to have a better idea where and how we might be able to help. We made questionnaires, listed interview questions, and practiced interviewing and filming in the months leading up to our trip.

In the summer of 2011 we traveled by car to Karen communities in Atlanta, GA; Milwaukee, WI; and Des Moines, IA to investigate how Karen communities were coping with resettlement. In total, our trip lasted 12 days and was a mix of research, reunions, sightseeing and long stretches of road travel.

The second and third authors participated in this research project at various times throughout and primarily assisted with organizing and coding data as well as writing this paper. The second author also provided our team practice with interviewing techniques and writing effective field notes while the third aided extensively with the theoretical and findings sections. They are both tenure track faculty members with extensive training and experience in qualitative research methodology and the field of second language acquisition.

Participatory Action Research

Though researchers offer varying conceptualizations of PAR, McIntyre (2008) offered five characteristics that are most commonly connected with PAR projects and guided our research collaboration. These included: (a) a collective commitment to investigating an issue or problem, (b) self- and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under consideration, (c) a reliance on indigenous knowledge to recognize and better understand the problem, (d) a commitment to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits stakeholders, and (e) the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process (McIntyre, 2008). These five tenets framed the organization and enactment of our PAR study as described below.

Our research was a “collective commitment” to better understanding the resettlement experiences of resettled Karen. In addition, we each had individual goals. The brothers used their personal experiences with school to inform their interview questions. For example, their difficulties with mandated state graduation tests led to their asking students from other states about graduation policies.

Our research was also guided by what McIntyre (2008) describes as collective and self-reflection. Our group meetings (field note dialogues) exemplify this collective process while our field notes reflect our individual reflections on topics of personal interest.

Three, we used the Karen notion of *tapoetethakot* (informal conversation) as presented by Karen scholar, Violet Cho (see Cho, 2011, p. 196) in our interviews. Such indigenous knowledge informed how we interviewed Karen participants. We also modified surveys based on the brothers' suggestions about what types of questions may work best for Karen participants.

Four, our collaboration inspired our shared and individual commitment to action. For example, the first author wrote various publications based on our findings (Gilhooly & Lynn, 2015). The brothers wrote letters to state officials regarding their experiences and information gleaned from our research. They also acted in ways meaningful to their lives. For example, Chit Poe advocated for the inclusion of Karen themed books in the school library and was very active sharing information learned from our research with the wider Karen community.

Finally, in accordance with McIntyre, we worked on all stages of the research process together. The brothers created research and survey questions, translated and distributed consent forms and questionnaires, accessed participants, wrote field notes, participated in daily meetings, photographed and took video, as well as conducted interviews. While none of the brothers was a trained translator, a bilingual cousin was consulted multiple times to ensure accuracy. The brothers also helped with data organization and analysis.

We also drew on Freire's notion of transformation as a sixth guiding principle. Transformation, according to Freire (1993), should be a process between teachers and students through the process of conscientização or critical consciousness. According to Freire (1993) transformation can result from actors' "intervention in the world as transformers of that world" (p. 73). This collaboration represents the brothers' intervention into the world of research with the intention of transforming their community via action. The authors transformed through the research process as discussed later in this paper.

PAR and Refugee Youth

Analogous studies between outside researcher(s) and refugee youth provided models for our PAR project. Three studies were located regarding work with refugees at refugee camps (Evans, 2013; Cooper, 2005; Save the Children UK, 2001), while two other studies described PAR projects with refugee youth post-resettlement in third countries (Rodriquez-Jimenez & Gifford, 2010; Van der Velde, 2009). Both studies conducted at research camps addressed issues and solutions identified by the youth researchers.

Rodriquez-Jimenez and Gifford's (2010) media project characterizes a collaborative project aimed at providing new Afghan immigrants in Australia a means to voicing their personal stories. The Afghan youth in their project were organized around telling stories via videography. Students created short films from their individual perspectives and some addressed the challenges and frustrations associated with resettlement. Similarly, Van Der Velde et al.'s (2009) PAR project addressed issues pertaining to the mental health of immigrants and refugee youth. Their research findings suggest that newcomers' motivations to participate in a PAR-oriented project might vary across ethno-cultural groups. This was also the case in the Save the Children (2001) study, which concluded that outside researchers must consider the often complex and traumatic experiences of their collaborating youth. Importantly, they conclude that practitioners working on community-based projects would do well to appeal to the diversity of motivational factors, while endorsing

individual and group strengths. There were no studies located that merged PAR and second language acquisition, this study hopes to fill that gap.

Issues of Power

Issues related to power are often a focus of consideration of PAR projects between vulnerable populations and outside researchers. Concerns regarding the ethics of working with refugee populations have focused on confidentiality and trust, potential harm to participants, consent, exploitation, and disempowerment (Pittaway et al., 2010). This PAR project mitigated these issues in five discrete ways.

First, the brothers' parents both provided consent from the outset. The purposes of the research project were explained to them with the help of family members who spoke Karen and English. Moreover, a consent letter in Karen was provided to all parents involved in our PAR project. Second, the brothers were willing participants in the research and were made aware from the outset that they could opt out of the collaboration at any time. The brothers were also responsible for explaining our research goals to all participants in Karen and notified all participants that we would use pseudonyms if they preferred and that anyone could stop participating at any time. We also made certain that participants consented to being photographed. Third, every attempt was made to use the brothers' indigenous knowledge, such as the incorporation of informal interviews (*tapoetethakot*). Fourth, the choice of potential solutions to address the identified issues was collaborative. While I introduced the idea of a letter writing campaign to officials, the brothers each found ways to use our findings to educate their family, friends, and the wider Karen community. Finally, every time I presented at a conference or wrote a manuscript about our project, the brothers were notified, consulted, and acknowledged.

A Dialogic Approach to Second Language Acquisition

Shelly Wong (2006) offered a dialogic approach to teaching English to students of other languages (TESOL) within the framework of critical theory that is commensurate with principles of PAR. Like Wong, I believe that language is best learned through authentic interactions. The following offers a brief overview of how Wong's notions of dialogic pedagogy framed this project.

First, our project involved what Wong refers to as *learning in community*, where "teachers learn from and with their students" (p. xix). Our learning community would include our research teams as well as the wider Karen and American community we interviewed and surveyed.

Second, our research was a *problem-posing* endeavor (Wong, 2006, p. xix). Our research was focused on identifying and trying to solve some of the problems of the Karen community as well as those issues faced by the brothers. Following Wong, I drew on the brothers' own linguistic and cultural awareness as resources. The brothers decided who, where, when, and how we conducted research.

Third, the project was predicated on the notion that we would all *learn by doing*. I envisioned our research to follow in the tradition of Freire and more contemporary language acquisition scholars like Barbara Rogoff and Elsa Auerbach, all of whom promote experiential learning. The brothers developed their research skills and language abilities while actively engaged in research, while I would become more informed about Karen resettlement and how such a project may promote second language development.

The final feature of a dialogic approach to language learning incorporates the question, *Knowledge for whom?* (p. xix). This feature was important in terms of staying committed to the project's goals of learning about Karen resettlement so as to help address issues in the Karen community, while also providing a forum for the brothers to engage in English. The knowledge gleaned from our research would provide the brothers and, by extension the wider Karen community, some agency in identifying and then addressing the issues that were most important to them. In the end, the brothers would gain in direct ways from the knowledge acquired from our collaboration. Our findings were also intended to inform a broader academic audience through articles such as this.

Data Collection and Analysis

This manuscript can best be described as what Nelson and Wright (1995) describe as “creative synthesis” when participant observation and participatory methods are both utilized. This study combines the tenets of PAR as described above and the authors’ 3.5 years of participant observations of the brothers as their tutor and research collaborator. This study in particular focused on findings related to data reflecting the brothers’ English language development.

My role as participant observer can best be described as “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998). In addition to tutoring the brothers and collaborating on research, we built friendships based on mutual interests. I *hung out* with the brothers in a variety of settings. We played basketball, cane ball and soccer at nearly every visit. I assisted at doctor and dentist visits and driver’s license exams. I also attended school events and church services with them. We visited museums, sporting events, the beach, and many tours of my university together. They took me fishing, squirrel hunting, swimming, and recounted stories from the refugee camps. Together we attended many Karen events like the annual Karen New Year celebration, weddings, and naturalization ceremonies. We ate countless meals and discussed everything from girls to our anxieties, fears, dreams and hopes for our futures. These participant observations in a variety of settings not only solidified our friendship but allowed me observe them in a variety of settings outside of their home.

Following Segal and Mayadas (2005), I gained rapport by educating myself on their culture and immigration experience. Their study on conducting social work with refugee families stresses the necessity of learning as much as possible about the culture of clients in order to best meet their needs in culturally appropriate ways. I also learned directly from the brothers about Karen culture, customs, and practices. They taught me much about Karen history, customs, culture, resettlement, and religion. We often had long discussions about their experiences as well as my observations. Most importantly, I gained rapport through my continued presence in the community and by assisting families as a tutor, driver, friend, advocate, and collaborator.

The data for this study were collected over 120 visits to the family home from May 2010 to May 2012 as well as from our research road trip from June 26, 2011 to July 6, 2011. Informal conversations generated rich data on topics related to the brothers’ daily routines, motivations, schooling, and overall opinions about their resettlement experiences. In addition, I conducted multiple interviews with the brothers and their parents. I formally interviewed each brother four times. These interviews spanned between 40 minutes and one hour and twenty minutes. I interviewed the brothers’ father, Brown, three times and their mother, Esther, twice. As a participant observer I collected an assortment of artifacts such as videos, photographs, letters, drawings, song lyrics, prayers, poetry, texts, and other digital creations. Though not all these data

variations were included in the findings of this paper they were important in gauging the brothers' English development.

In total, our collaborative research amassed a variety of other data. In addition to the surveys (n=87) and interviews (n=70) we video recorded over 40 hours of our discussions. Video and audio files were later organized, reviewed, and transcribed.

As a team, we, with the assistance of the second and third authors, organized and analyzed all questionnaires. We discussed emerging trends across all our data and held multiple meetings, what Lassiter (2005) calls *fieldwork dialogues*, to discuss our thoughts and ongoing impressions. These discussions became rich sources of data. Our analysis of the data was recursive and ongoing.

During transcription, I was interested in seeing what conclusions or perspectives the brothers were drawing from our collaboration. What were their thoughts and opinions about what we were learning from participants about Karen resettlement experiences? I also sought examples in the transcripts that demonstrated my growing belief that our project was helping them develop their English language repertoire. Thus, I had two separate sets of codes.

One set of codes was dedicated to issues germane to our research on Karen resettlement findings. These codes related to education, housing, language learning, employment, and other issues germane to refugee resettlement. The second list of themes related specifically to data related to their developing English language skills. For this second grouping we (with assistance from the second and third authors) looked at multiple sources including our field notes, written artifacts from the brothers, as well as the transcripts of our interviews and conversations.

The Karen Path to the United States

The Karen (kuh-REN) people are a large ethnic minority from Thailand and Burma. Interestingly, the Karen people have a long history with Americans. In 1813, the first American missionaries, Anne and Adoniram Judson, arrived in Burma and began converting Karen (Harriden, 2002). Karen conversion to Christianity and later ties with the British colonial enterprise in Burma cemented Karen-Western relations (Marshall, 1922).

Since independence from the British in 1948, some Karen and other minority groups have been fighting consecutive Burmese military regimes. Karen civilians have suffered directly from the fighting and the repressive policies employed by the Tatmadaw (Burmese military). The Tatmadaw has used forced labor and military conscription, rape as a weapon of war, the burning of villages, and torture against Karen and other ethnic minorities. Such abuses have led to both internal and external displacement with many Karen fleeing to neighboring Thailand.

The United States has led all third country resettlement of Burmese⁴ refugees from Thai-Burmese border camps to communities across the United States. As of October 2016, over 165,000 refugees from these camps have been resettled (WRAPS, 2017), representing the largest resettlement program to the United States over the past 20 years. Although multiple ethnic groups, namely ethnic Burmese, Chin, and Karenni have resettled under the designation *Burmese*, the majority of these refugees have been ethnic Karen.

In addition to proselytizing the Karen, American missionaries established western style schools for many Karen. Karen educational experiences prior to resettlement are seen as important considerations in light of this study. Relationships between students and teachers vary greatly but the brothers often spoke of their "fear of the teacher" in Mae La camp. The brothers also related anecdotes about various punishments they endured and often described how teachers in the camps

regularly used “the stick” as a form of discipline. Teachers were viewed as authority figures and not friends or confidants.

While English was taught in Mae La Camp, the brothers often derided their English classes. “They only teach A,B,C and hello,” was Chit Poe’s description of his English classes in the refugee camps. Oh & Van der Stouwe’s (2008) study of education in the camps found that classrooms were crowded with 60 students per class and that teachers were often provided limited training opportunities.

Watkins, Razee, and Richter’s (2012) study of resettled Karen in Australia, highlight some of the cultural mismatch between Karen culture and Western education. They describe how Karen students traditionally defer to adults out of respect and often remain silent in the face of authority figures like teachers. Service providers and teachers interviewed in their study often described their “frustration with trying to prompt social engagement and assertiveness’ amongst Karen students” (p. 134). The early months working with the brothers brought many of these issues to light. They were very shy and unwilling to speak in our initial weeks together and were very reticent with Americans. It wasn’t until months of building rapport and the enactment of our collaboration that the brothers began to express themselves. They often discussed their frustration with their American peers for their lack of respect for teachers and each of the brothers found American teachers lacking in control of their students, which they believed was due a lack of corporeal punishment.

Importantly, the boys often expressed their confusion about our collaboration. They would often say things like “why no study today Mr. Dan,” when we worked on writing interview questions. It took months for the brothers to accept the alternative form of pedagogy our collaboration reflects.

Findings

The case under investigation explores how a PAR project between three Karen adolescent brothers and their American tutor can effectively promote English language learning by: (a) creating dialogic teacher-student relationships; (b) building second language confidence and critical consciousness and; (c) providing *problem posing* learning atmosphere that promotes participants’ academic literacies. In addition, our findings relate how this project helped foster English language acquisition in speaking, writing, and reading.

Creating Dialogic Teacher-Student Relations

PAR is predicated on the premise that teaching and learning are dialogic. Freire continually championed the need for dialogue between teachers and students. He wrote of dialogic relations between teachers and students:

Consistent with the liberating purpose of dialogical education, the object of the investigation is not the persons (as if they were an anatomical figure), but rather the thought-language with which men and women refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive of that reality, and their view of the world, in which their generative themes are found (Freire, 1993, p. 97).

Likewise, the goals of this project stemmed from our collective interest in researching issues pertaining to Karen resettlement and our findings were the *issues* related to our participants. What made this project dialogic were the interactions between us. In the following excerpt taken from a discussion on literacy, we find a dialogic exchange that was indicative of our collaboration.

- 1 Dan: How is literacy important to your life?
 2 Narko: It's really important because you get to know the real world. By
 3 reading it's more complete, more right, more true statement. Speaking fly,
 4 it hard to keep in your brain. I like the way people speak because for me
 5 it's hard to speak the way I want to speak. In Karen it's easier. In English
 6 If I can't say it, I don't.
 7 Chit Poe: Word is power because the word comes out of your mouth here
 8 (points to his mouth). Like a king you have to respect the power.
 9 Dan: ... but is the word more important than action? For me action is more
 10 important. ... If I say something but don't do it then my words don't mean
 11 anything.
 12 Chit Poe: For me word is more important; my word, my promise. ... I copy
 13 my text messages to my girlfriend because I don't want to lose the word.
 14 She told me like that; she does it too.

This excerpt from our final *fieldwork dialogue* (September 3, 2012) highlights much about the process and findings of our research together. First, the excerpt exemplifies the type of dialogue that was a hallmark of this study. It also demonstrates the often-overlooked eloquence of second language learners' perceptions and understandings on heady topics such as the nature of language. After two years of such exchanges the brothers became savvier in using English to express their opinions about language, resettlement, and education to name a few.

For example, Chit Poe's use of simile in line 8 and Narko's metaphor in line 3 demonstrate a language repertoire replete with figurative language absent from earlier transcripts. Moreover, this exchange demonstrates the nature of our relationship and the dialectic that was often at work between us. Such animated teacher-student talk is considered important in developing students cultural and language repertoire (Ortega, 2014). Finally, such an exchange offers compelling perspectives about the brothers' lived experiences, providing insight into the ways they used language.

Chit Poe's anecdote about writing down his girlfriend's text messages demonstrates a personal literacy practice. For Chit Poe, the written word is "more important" and must be preserved and respected.

The enactment of our PAR project was conducive to dialogism in other ways. The primary dialogue existed between the members of our research team. However, other voices were continually present. In addition to the voices of the participants we interviewed (resettled Karen), I often invited cohorts of mine from the university to meet and talk with the brothers. Each of the brothers conducted mock interviews with them and engaged them in conversation. These exchanges provided them both formal and informal spoken language exchanges in English.

Promoting Learners' Home Language

The brothers also actively engaged in their native language during our research. All their interviews were conducted in Sgaw Karen and the brothers were relied on for assistance with translation and interpretation whenever I needed. As such, the brothers became the *experts* and I the student. Our roles, as Freire suggested, were reversed.

The brothers conducted interviews, wrote questionnaire questions, and solicited participant involvement at each of the sites visited. They were also relied on to translate all IRB forms in Sgaw Karen. Such duties kept them continually engaged in both English and Karen. While interaction in English contributed to their English development, the use of Karen validated their native language and gave them experience as translators and interpreters. Narko discusses his role as interpreter this way.

When you [the author] ask so many question it is not easy. I thinking about English and in Karen not easy. I think fast and speak. Sometimes I think my Karen not good but when I think I have to find right word to say in English. I think being interpreter is good for me speaking both Karen and English (Narko, interview transcript, April 2011).

Narko's assertion is supported in the literature. According to leading second language researchers like Lordes Ortega (2014) and Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada (2013), previous language knowledge is an important source of influence on L2 acquisition. Studies suggest that immigrant children who lose some of their L1 proficiency can have negative consequences. For example, loss of home language can widen the gap between children and their parents (Zhou & Bankston, 2000) and further distance children from their heritage culture, which may lead to "downward assimilation" (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Portes and Zhou found that some immigrant children were disengaging from their home culture and assimilating to the inner city underclass. In short, this PAR project was an effective way for these young men to actively engage in both their first language, Karen, and their second language, English, both of which are seen as beneficial.

Language Confidence and Transformations

In this study, transformation is viewed in relation to the brothers' attitudes toward English, their own language capabilities, their attitudes toward being researchers, and their growing critiques of refugee resettlement.

Watkins, Razee, and Richter's (2012) study on the "emotional and mental well-being" of Karen resettled Karen in Australia, found that a lack of English language confidence was a barrier of Karen learning English. In their study, they found that Karen cultural attitudes also impacted Karen language learning experiences after resettlement. They also describe a "culture of compliancy" to elders negatively impacting Karen educational experiences in Australia. Finally, their study also cites how shyness negatively impacted Karen learning experiences. Likewise, Narko and Gola were both near silent participants in the early months studying together.

Like the participants in Watkins, Razee, and Richter's (2012) study, the brothers lacked confidence speaking English. However, this PAR project engendered communicative confidence in both Karen and in English and increased their willingness to communicate in English (Ortega, 2014). This transformation was in part a byproduct of their new identities as researchers. Narko

was the first to express his newfound confidence as a researcher and expresses his language confidence in the following excerpt from a post-trip interview.

- 1 Narko: I feel good to speak [English] now and Karen too, you know? Before I don't know
- 2 what to say and I never speak. When I do research and interview, many people respect me.
- 3 In Milwaukee, many people want to talk with me to say a story, you know? With video
- 4 camera people think you important, like that.
- 5 Dan: So you feel people respect you as a researcher?
- 6 Narko: I don't know who respect me but I want to talk more because my job. Interview
- 7 people make you feel like that, like you want to ask more question and you should do.
(Narko, interview transcript, August 12, 2011)

It was clear from my own observations that Narko was gaining language confidence. After our return from our research trip he became more outspoken in English and became the most active critic of resettlement, schooling, the job market for Karen, and the overall experience of resettlement. Of all the brothers, Narko seemed to demonstrate a critical awareness of the kind of oppression he and his community faced as resettled refugees and English language learners (ELL). Narko had this to say about Karen resettlement in the United States:

We are refugee but many people think we have new life and everything better. New life but many new problem. In Mae La [refugee camp] [sic] nobody have money but here many people work many job and no money. The government help us come, people give clothes but now we alone. Many people we talk want to go back Thailand. Here no hope. (Narko, Interview transcript, December 2012)

In this excerpt, we see Narko challenging the notion that refugees only benefit from resettlement to countries like the U.S. Our research project, as well as his lived experience has made him critical of what he and his fellow refugees are facing. Within the problem-posing framework of our PAR project he became more willing to speak out about the difficulties of resettlement.

Narko also became more proactive as a family spokesman, a position that his older brother Chit Poe had held. Such language confidence was evidenced in his ability to handle a variety of language situations during and after the trip. He began ordering at fast food restaurants and engaging with clerks at gas stations. Upon our return he attained his driver's license, switched Internet providers by phone, and later applied for a part-time job in English.

Although the transformation was subtler, his younger brother Gola also developed more language confidence. As the younger brother, Gola invariably deferred to his brothers and seldom opted to conduct any interviews in English or Karen. In fact, his family often ridiculed him for his "bad Karen." However, during our research trip he began to become more involved in Karen. In Iowa, during one of our evening meetings Gola informed me, with an unfamiliar enthusiasm, that he had conducted his first interview. The following excerpt describes his experience.

- 1 Dan: (Directed to the group) Anything interesting to report boys?
- 2 (20 second pause while I leaf through my notebook)
- 3 Gola: yeah, I interview today.
- 4 Dan: Really? That's great. Who was it?

5 Gola: A lady I know.
6 Dan: Oh wow. From the camps?
7 Gola: Yeah from Mae La, I look at her and she see me and I surprise. She talking
8 to me so I interview.
9 Dan: Great job, man. Your first interview.
10 Gola: (smiles bashfully) Yeah man.
11 Dan: What did she say? Did you learn anything good?
12 Gola: Yeah she talk about job. She work at hotel. She like here but say
13 life not easy.
14 Dan: Oh yeah. Did you ask why?
15 Gola: I ask and she say she think her kid make problem at school but she
16 don't know. She want to speak English but she ... and she talk like that.
17 Dan: And how do you feel? Was it easy? Your fist interview.
18 Gola: I don't know ... yeah easy. I know her, so more easy, and I can talk.
19 (pause) She like to talk, man (laughs).
20 Dan: anything else?
21 Gola: yeah. I call for her to church. She ask me so I call [for] her and talk
22 pastor.
(Transcript, Milwaukee, June 29, 2011)

The importance of this exchange cannot be overstated. Over the previous 13 months working with the brothers, I had never observed Gola so enthusiastic about our research and had never seen him actively engaged in conversation with a Karen adult. As the youngest of the three brothers, he had few opportunities to speak and was often left out of family discussions. In this exchange, he twice offers responses (lines 3 and 21) to open-ended questions. Such contributions were never observed prior to this exchange. In the first 13 months together, Gola's voice is absent from most transcriptions except for the occasional wise-crack. My field notes from that period continually referred to him as the "listener," but I also misinterpreted his lack of participation as *disinterested, bored, and lazy*. Importantly, this exchange marked a turning point in my own perception of Gola.

As a project rooted in critical theory, such recognition on my part highlights my own growth as a critical ethnographer and practitioner of critical pedagogy. Such reflexivity and transformation is reflected in my field notes from that evening.

I am so happy with this evening's meeting. Gola conducted his first interview! Tonight was the first time he actually volunteered to contribute to one of our discussions. It seems he met a lady he knew from the camps and they talked. He actually seemed interested in what we are doing and seemed to be proud of himself. And he made a call for her! I worry about him as he stays home and doesn't go out like Chit Poe and Narko. He seems more comfortable talking with children but today he found some voice. Maybe he is actually more interested than I thought. It is clear he takes a backseat to his brothers and I wonder what I can do to draw him out more. My nagging doesn't help and I need to ease up on him. Need to get the details about his first interview. When? Where? Who is this lady? A relative? How did he know her from the camp?

(Field notes, Milwaukee, June 29, 2013)

This field note entry marked the first time I began to consider some explanation for his silence other than laziness and disinterest. I had misinterpreted his lack of involvement in our tutoring sessions and research collaboration as due to laziness. I began to consider my own culpability in his silence and recognized that nagging him wasn't helping draw him out.

Problem Posing Education and Action

The third component of Wong's dialogic approach to language learning involves what Freire refers to as problem posing education. Each phase of the project from preparation, enactment, and the action component were conducive to the brothers engaging in reading, writing, and speaking.

Reading and Writing

Initially, the brothers gained experience writing questions for interviews and surveys. During the research-road-trip, the brothers each kept field notes in English. Here they expressed their opinions and reflections from the day's research. Later, the brothers each participated in writing campaigns.

Writing became a means for us to express our collective and individual findings to a wider audience. Whereas the first author began writing academic papers (see Gilhooly 2015, 2016) and presenting at conferences, teacher groups, and pre-service teacher classes, the brothers began writing as well.

Chit Poe began contacting other Karen online and via texting about what he was finding. These online exchanges were always in English as "Karen not easy, I don't like the keyboard" (Chit Poe, transcript). This informal information sharing was an important way to share vital information about citizenship, state and national mandatory tests, taxes, and ways to respond to crime in the neighborhood. He also wrote a letter to his local Congressman (see Appendix A) and state school superintendent about his and his brother's difficulties passing state graduation exams as well as our research findings.

Narko also wrote letters to his local Congressman and state school Superintendent (see Appendix B), which led to his receiving a waiver of his graduation exams, which allowed him to graduate from high school⁴. Whereas his brothers wrote letters to self-advocate, Gola wrote a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in advance of her trip to Myanmar in 2011 (see Appendix C). This letter provided him a chance to write his personal story while advocating for Karen in Burma, the camps, and in third countries like the U.S.

Moreover, each of the brothers began to talk more about their native culture at school. Narko and Chit Poe worked on a PowerPoint presentation on Karen culture that they presented to their social studies class.

Speaking

The brothers became vocal advocates within the wider Karen diaspora community. They shared stories with other Karen face-to-face and online about the findings of our trip. Chit Poe successfully advocated at school to have a Karen biography, *Little Daughter* by Zoya Phan, included in the library collection.

Our fieldwork dialogues were an opportunity to engage in English dialogues on a range of topics related to our research and individual interests. For example, Chit Poe collected stories from older Karen we met about their beliefs in the supernatural. He was interested in Karen supernatural

stories and he was also motivated by my skepticism. His interviews with Karen adults who shared in his beliefs, supported his earlier claims to me about the power of amulets and the various ways to appease evil spirits. In addition to our discussions on our ongoing research, he continually related stories of demonic possessions, powerful amulets, and super human strength that were related to him. Importantly, he was agentive in his parallel research. He often posed his own questions and pursued his own research agenda. He recounted many of these tales in English to me at our meetings.

Conclusion

This PAR project is akin to the experiential learning or project based language learning advocated by second language theorists like Stephen Krashen (1983, 1985) and Barabra Rogoff (Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff et al., 2003) and Anne Burns (1999). This project was also a response to calls by critical second language advocates like Elsa Auerbach (1993, 1995, 1996, 2001), who contends that teachers need to engage learners in authentic language interactions. It is our belief that the brothers were able to acquire new language from the PAR process.

Throughout our collaboration the brothers were exposed to academic language and informal expressions related to our research. I spoke with them about Freire, critical theory, and Krashen's notion about language acquisition. It was evident that their academic vocabulary grew. In a final meeting I asked the brothers what they had learned from our research. After a long pause, Narko responded, "words." After a short discussion about what he meant, he explained that he learned new words. I then asked the brothers to list some of the words they felt they had learned from the process of our research (see Appendix D). Interestingly, they included academic vocabulary and expressions as well as more informal vocabulary. It was clear that they had acquired these words through our interactions and not through any formal "learning." Consequently, we believe that such collaborative research is an excellent means to vocabulary development in the L2.

Although the scope of this project is beyond the limitations of traditional ESL classrooms, we believe that our project has implications for teachers, learners, and the field of second language acquisition. We believe that our project can serve as a model for future projects of various scales that include students of all ages in every stage of the research process.

Our collaborative efforts are a means to the kind of dialogic environment described by Shelly Wong. The research process is inherently dialogic when outside researchers include participants in all stages of the research process. These dialogues are conducive to second language learning as well as the academic literacy related to research. We each became better interviewers, data collectors and analyzers through the research process. Moreover, we each gained skills in videography and editing software, which represent *new digital literacies*.

Such a project offers meaningful research data on important and controversial topics such as refugee resettlement. Gilhooly & Lynn (2015) have demonstrated the ways PAR can generate important data germane to refugee resettlement. The data collected and reviewed for this study provided information for each of us to reflect on and understand in our own ways. Thus, this project produced knowledge for us as individuals, as a research team, and for the broader public. As a research team we were able to find valuable information on a host of issues related to Karen resettlement that can inform policy makers, educators, and advocates working with Karen or other refugee populations. Our findings have been reported at conferences, teacher workshops, in

published papers as well as by word of mouth as we each shared our findings with friends, family, and other Karen.

Such a PAR project demonstrates how collaboration can be transformative for all participants. Gilhooly & Lee (2016) have demonstrated how a PAR project can help transform participants. These transformations can come in manifold ways. We all transformed in our views of what it means to teach and learn. Through collaboration the brothers began to legitimize new forms of education. Whereas they initially questioned how research could be an alternative to traditional schooling, by the end of our collaboration they valued the new form of learning we had co-created.

Whereas the brothers transformed through their roles as researchers and language users, the authors of this manuscript were transformed by the process. My perceptions of the brothers as well as the research process were transformed. As the brothers' tutor, I realized via our collaboration the many skills and talents the brothers brought to the research process. They each demonstrated skills using the video equipment, editing software, and other technologies. They also brought novel solutions to possible ways we could share our findings. As outside researchers, we also became aware of our own limitations as outsiders. The brothers provided access to participants and places that would have otherwise been denied without their involvement. They also taught some of the hidden meanings of Karen culture. Their insistence that we use more informal interviewing styles, led to much richer interactions with Karen participants. They also warned of the potential confusion of western standards of surveying when working with Karen participants. For example, they warned against the use of Likert scales when creating survey questions. As Narko pointed out, such forms of data collection could be confusing to Karen participants. In response, we revised our questionnaires so as to be more accessible to our Karen participants.

Finally, this project exemplifies the kind of critical awareness that can be gained by all participants. We all gained new awareness about our relationship and ourselves. In the end, this project built a bond that extended beyond that of students and teacher. We learned to respect each other's creativity, commitment, culture, hard work, personal styles, and sacrifice. In short, we became what Chit Poe coined, "research brothers."

Limitations

There is no way to verify the exact extent to which our collaboration influenced the brothers' English language acquisition and/or their transformations as described in this paper. Other factors were certainly influencing their language development and consciousness during the years we worked together. They attended school and attended weekly youth group meetings at a nearby American Baptist church. These and other interactions were certainly helping them.

Also, as the author of this and other papers the ultimate decision on what to include and exclude from publications was solely mine. Although I consulted with the brothers and shared my writings with them, they more often than not were disinterested in the writing of manuscripts. They opted for more informal ways of sharing information gleaned from our research. Importantly, every attempt has been made to incorporate the brothers' voices as much as possible in order to avoid the *false generosity* and paternalism that often emerge in such collaborations. The reader will judge the authors' success in this pursuit.

Notes

1. The author had permission from the three brothers' parents to use whatever names the brothers elected to use
2. Throughout this manuscript the use of the plural pronoun *we* refers to the first author and the three Karen brothers unless otherwise noted.
3. The term Burmese refers to all refugees from Burma.
4. Sadly, his older brother Chit Poe was denied the same waiver and was unable to graduate.

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Appendix A: Chit Poe's Letter to Congressman

March 26, 2011
The Honorable Paul C. Broun, M.D.
U.S House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Broun,

My name is Chit Poe, and I am a constituent and student at _____ High School, Carlton Ga. I am writing about the graduation test in Ga.

I am Karen refugee from Burma. I have been in the United State since 2007. Although I have tired and I cannot learn everything so fast. I cannot compare to an American student who has studied all his/ her life in a US school. I am Karen and I am a Second Language Student. I study at O.C.H.S and I have taken the test six times. I have passed Math and Writing but have failed the other subjects. I scored 179 in Social Studies. I scored 192 in Science. I scored 194 in English. I have tired very hard and have never given up. I have studied with a private tutor for the past 16 months. I also study after school to study for the test. However, I continue to fail the test. I want a high school Diploma but I don't think it is fair.

Sometime I want to quit school because I am struggling. In that struggle I am also losing my hope for the future. I am twenty one years old and worried. Many second language students quit the school because of their inability to pass the test. I am writing you in the hope that you may understand my situation and of Karen people. I know because I do research on Karen resettlement that other states don't have graduation test and student in my situation can get diploma. I believe that the requirement in GA is not fair for second language students. I suggest to different ideas. First, the state could lower the required scores on the GHGT. Second, maybe the test should not be mandatory for second language students.

I also had been done volunteer in my neighborhood. I helped them to mower the grasses, to rake the leaves around the house. I help cared children, and translated Karen to English. I had study English at UGA for one week. I also have been done studies at ABAC for summer camp two weeks. I have try very hard to make myself to improve more English.

Appendix B: Narko's Letter to Superintendent

September 15, 2011

Dear Superintendent,

My name is Narko, and I am a constituent and student at _____ High School, Garlton Ga. I am writing about my situation in school and my hopes for the future.

I am Karen refugee from Burma. I have been in the United State since 2007. Before I came to the U.S. I never studies English and school in the U.S. is difficult. Although I have tried I cannot learn every subject so fast. I cannot compare to American students who has studies all his/her life in a US school. I am Karen and I am second language student. I study at O.C.H.S and I have taken the test six times. I have passed Math and Writing but have failed the other subjects. I score 194 in Social Studies, English 181(GPS), and Science 176(GPS). I have tried very hard and have never given up. I have studies with private tutor for the past 16 months. I also study after school to study for the test. I have also participated in three summer programs for immigrant students. However, I continue to fail the test. I want a high school Diploma but I don't think it's fair.

Sometime I want to quit school because I am struggling. In that struggle I am also losing my hope for the future. I am 18 years old and worried. Many Second Language Students quit the school because of their inability to pass the test. With no diploma my life will be difficult and I will have no good job chance.

I am writing in the hope that you may understand my situation. I know that other state don't have graduation test and student in my situation can get diploma. I believe that the requirement in GA are not fair for Second Language Students. I suggest two different ideas. First, the state could lower the required scores and the HSGT. Second, maybe the test should not be mandatory for second language students. I have been a good student with 100% attendance and have made many efforts to prepare for the exams. I also had been done volunteer in my neighborhood. I helped them to mower the grasses, to rake the leave around the house. I also help cared children, and translate Karen to English. I have tried very hard to make myself to improve more English. I believe all my efforts show I am a good student who deserves a diploma.

At this time I am sad because I know my future is bad without a high school diploma. I hope that you will consider my situation and other immigrants who come to the U.S. without good education. I want a better life for me and my family and know a high school diploma is a first step of my future success.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to your response. Thank you for all your hard work

Appendix C: Gola's Letter to Secretary of State Hilary Clinton

November 27, 2011

Dear Madam Secretary,

My name is Gola, I'm 16 years old boy living in Georgia. I go to _____ High School. I came to the U.S from a refugee camp in Thailand. I am ethnic Karen. I am writing to you because you soon visiting Burma and I want you to speak with Burmese government about my people and family story.

The Karen experiences in Burma have been very difficult since 1962. We always have been in trouble because of Burmese soldiers. If Burmese came to their village, they must flee away from their place. If the Burmese catch them they have to force labor for Burmese. If they don't do it they will get killed or have to pay money. And the Burmese also burn the village and burn the food. My parent experience also the same way like this, so they escape from Burma to Thailand in the camp. My family escaped in 1990 with nothing but my brothers and my sister. They were lucky to keep family together and find safety. Many Karen and other ethnic minorities are not so lucky.

I was born in the refugee camp in Thailand. Life in camp is just like jail, you can't go anywhere out of the camp to find the job because if the Thai soldier catch you they put you in jail till someone bail you out. Because the people in camp don't have education they have no hope for a good future. The people who don't have education they have to go out of the camp to find a job but they have to sneak around the forest so the Thai soldiers don't see them. They have to find money for children to go to school and the food. People that have education they been a teacher and some of them are a doctor and nurse. Some people can't send their children to school because they have no money. But it is a little bit saver for them then living in Burma.

Many people in the camp came to America because they want their children to have a good education and it is free education. It is also easy to find a job for them. Like a chicken poultry, dish washer, house cleaner- but there was also a problem some of them don't have a job to get money and to pay the rent. It too expensive also and difficult to access service like health care, and language class. It not easy to find a job if you don't know how to speak English and understanding American culture. When I came here in 2007 I did not speak any English and feel very lonely and lost. Life in the US is safe and we have food but being in a strange country is not easy for me, my family and mostly my parents who work so hard.

I hope you can tell the Burmese Gov't to stop killing my people. Please help us to stop the forced labor, the burning villages, and forcing young people into the army. We hope for a new government in Burma that will allow Karen state to be autonomous and peaceful. All we want is peace.

Thank you for your time and hard work. I hope you have a nice visit to Burma. Your trip gives me hope for the future of a free Burma where my people can return to a peaceful world they love.

Appendix D

English Words and Expressions the Brothers Reported Learning During the Research Process

Academic Vocabulary

Researcher
Participants
Questionnaire
Interview
Zoom
Field notes
Waiver
Data
Interpret and translate (difference)
Rapport
Tripod
Edit

Informal Expressions

Pop the trunk
Get gas
Pump gas
Windshield
Wipers
Charge the battery
Pull over
Take a leak
Read map
Ask for directions
Drive-thru
Cole slaw
Big Mac
Get directions

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