The International Research Foundation
for English Language Education

Title of Project:
Social Positioning in Refugee-Women's Education:
A Linguistic Ethnography of One English Class

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research

Today, over 60 million individuals are classified as refugees—more than at any time since World War II (United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, 2015). As refugee-background adults arrive in their new communities, learning the dominant local language(s) is a primary goal. However, access to language learning is unequal amongst adults who have experienced migration: women face additional challenges due to gendered demands and cultural expectations, such as prioritizing the care of children or other family members or shouldering much of the responsibility for household tasks (Menard-Warwick, 2009). Family literacy programs in the United States have been held up as one response to these barriers: bringing mothers and children together to learn obviates the need for childcare, while attempting to shape the language and literacy development of both (Nickse, 1990). Prior research has criticized U.S.-based family literacy programming for taking up deficit perspectives of immigrant- and refugee-background families' language and literacy practices (Auerbach, 1989, 1995; Luke 1996), yet research and practice in family literacy continue to center primarily on children's experiences and development. Few studies have investigated the classroom-based language learning experiences of refugee-background adults, or mothers, within U.S.-based family literacy programs (Edwards, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 2000). This study examined the ways that the language and literacy practices of one community-based English as a New Language (ENL) family literacy classroom socially positioned the refugee-background women enrolled, as well as how the women used language and other means (e.g., technology tools) to take up, resist, and create new subject positions (Davies & Harré, 1990) for themselves within the routines of their classroom.

Research Questions

1. What are the institutionally-valued language and literacy practices of an adult English class embedded within a community-based family literacy program for women who came to the U.S. as refugees? How do these practices socially position the learners?
2. What are the learners' language and literacy practices within the context of this classroom? How do these practices socially position the learners?

Methodology
This study utilized linguistic ethnography (Copland & Creese, 2015) to investigate the ways that social positioning of refugee-background mothers (self-positioning and other-positioning) unfolded on a moment-by-moment basis through the language and literacy practices of one community-based ENL family literacy classroom.

The focal classroom was beginning-level, taught by Joy (a pseudonym), a woman in her early 30s with an elementary teaching license, a master's degree in applied linguistics, and over 10 years of teaching experience. Learner participants included refugee-background women who identified with eight ethnolinguistic or national backgrounds: Burmese, Karen, Karenni, Kunama, Mandingo, Pashai, South Sudanese, and Tigrinya. Some of the women reported interruptions in formal, school-based learning; most were attending school for the first time in their lives and learning to read and write for the first time in *any* language. Daily attendance averaged 12 students.

Data were collected over the course of two years and included (1) eight months of thrice-weekly classroom-based participant observations; (2) classroom audio and video recordings; (3) photographs; (4) audio and video-recorded semi-structured interviews with the focal teacher, three focal students, and the main administrator; and (4) document collection.
For Research Question 1, data were analyzed utilizing thematic analysis, which entailed both descriptive and process coding (Saldaña, 2012), aligning codes with study constructs (language/literacy practices and social positioning) to seek patterns within the data. For Research Question 2 , I added one analytic layer, drawing on four analytical tools of microethnographic discourse analysis: turn-taking, thematic coherence, intertextuality, and intercontextuality (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, Shuart-Faris, 2006).

Summary of Findings
In response to Research Question 1, institutionally-valued language and literacy practices (evidenced through daily classroom routines) were not only a means for teaching reading, writing, or other technologies, but were also for teaching specific patterns of interaction that constitute socially-preferred norms and expectations for learners both inside and outside of class. This positioned the women within broader narratives in which newcomers have the duty to adopt these new norms in order to be considered legitimate community members and cultural insiders, thus reinforcing the erroneous notion that social inclusion (Allman, 2013) is a one-way street. The norms and expectations referenced above centered on four primary areas: (1) literacy practices in general (e.g., reading is the most important literacy practice in which one can engage); (2) being a mother in the United States (e.g., good mothers read to their children every day); (3) being a student (e.g., good students engage in record-keeping such as keeping a written calendar, attending class regularly, reporting absences, and marking their attendance on the wall each day); and (4) being a member of the local community (e.g., community members participate in local events).

In response to Research Question 2, learners' language and literacy practices were separated into two parts: (a) practices taken up during teacher-assigned activities and (b) practices taken up outside of teacher-assigned activities.

(a) Teacher-assigned activities (i.e., practices taken up without observable prompting from Joy during the interaction or event in question): By positioning themselves as "initiators" rather than "responders" in the well-documented classroom interactional pattern Initiation-Response-

Feedback, or IRF (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), the women created opportunities to mediate their own and other's learning as they made connections that centered their own questions, experiences, relationships, and knowledge, thus rendering class discourse, content, and activities more personally and culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Additionally, the women manipulated available technologies in innovative ways, not prompted or modeled by Joy, nor presumably envisioned by the creators of the technologies. For instance, learners used Google voice recognition as spelling model; mobile phone photography as a creator of mentor texts; and Google image search as a picture dictionary. In this way, the women disrupted narratives of formal schooling in which learners are expected to carry out language and literacy tasks in the ways prescribed to them by teachers and designers of textbooks and technologies.

(b) Outside of teacher-assigned activities: Here, the women positioned themselves as transnational language learners who interacted across national boundaries (i.e., U.S. and other countries) as well as across ethnolinguistic communities within the U.S. (e.g., Karenni, Fur, Tigrinya, etc.). Specifically, the women used specific moments in space and time (i.e., class break time; waiting for other classmates to complete their work) to initially make transnational and trans-ethnolinguistic connections for themselves and then to draw others into those connections with them via intertexual connections. This took place through showing pictures, videos, and news stories of people and places in other times and spaces, while engaging in oral storytelling in English to Joy, me, or other classmates (e.g., Facebook photos of family members displaced to Egypt, music videos of famous Burmese singers, YouTube videos of war in home villages). This storytelling further opened opportunities for language learning as the women negotiated meaning with interlocutors. Learners' choices to share these pictures and videos point to the possibility for their desire to establish more personal relationships with Joy and me, thus disrupting storylines of formal schooling in which students and teachers maintain professional distance.

Implications

Based on these findings, I provide implications for pedagogy, L2 teacher education, and policy, as well as for funding of community-based literacy and ENL programs.

Participatory and trauma-informed pedagogies. Along with previous scholars, I advocate for participatory L2 pedagogies that work against interventionist ideologies as they thoughtfully integrate–and thus attempt to legitimize–refugee-background women's experiences, knowledges, and concerns (Goldstein, 2001; Menard-Warwick, 2009; Norton & Pavlenko, 2004; Warriner, 2007b, 2007a, 2011). It should be noted that centering refugee-background learners' experiences and concerns in curriculum and instruction could bring up painful personal stories. Although these stories may emerge as classes unfold (Montero, 2018; Waterhouse, 2016), I do not suggest teachers directly ask refugee-background leaners to share personal accounts violence and trauma. At the same time, Nelson and Appleby (2015) specifically advocate for instruction that "equip(s) students (from conflict zones) for critical communicative engagement with events occurring in the world outside the classroom and in the wider sociopolitical sphere" (p. 323). The tensions between centering learners' experiences and knowledge (which may bring up painful content) while not directly asking for learners' stories of experiencing violence points to the need for trauma-informed classroom practices. Space does not permit an exhaustive review of such practice; rather, I offer the following small sampling of work in this area for readers' consideration: Bobrow Finn (2010), Medley (2012, 2017), Montero (2018), Phifer and Hull (2016), and Waterhouse (2016).

Teacher education. Teacher educators and teacher-learners can increase their awareness of the similarities, differences, and unique demands of teaching English in programs, such as the community-based non-profit in this study, in comparison to teaching English in higher education (e.g., intensive English programs in the U.S. or abroad) or in PK-12 settings, whether overseas or in the U.S. For instance, supporting adult L2 learners who are attending school for the first time and are emergent readers in any language (e.g., learning how, for the first time in their lives, to hold a pencil, form letters, make sound-symbol correlations, etc.) calls for training similar to, but different from, that offered to teacher-learners preparing to teach children how to read (i.e., early childhood education; Vinogradov & Liden, 2009). Of course, the training in question should differ in the themes, materials, and activities taken up, thus accounting for the fact that learners are adults and bring with them a myriad of life experiences, prior knowledge, and literacy practices that may not be recognized as such in traditional forms of schooling. Additionally, training for taking up trauma-informed practices should be central to development for teacher-learners who are preparing to work with refugee-background learners. As Nelson and Appleby (2015) note, "teachers located outside of high-conflict settings are often ill-prepared for the challenges of teaching refugees who arrive from war-torn countries" (pp. 13-14). Developing this awareness in teacher-learners, as well as expanding teacher-learners' practices for the context in question, is particularly important for teacher development programs that require or engage teacher-learners in carrying out practice teaching in community-based non-profit programs, such as the one in this study. Important ethical questions arise when L2 teacher development programs utilize field work placements out of convenience, while investing little, if any, university-based course time in preparing teacher-learners for those contexts.

Policy and funding implications. Teachers and administrators need support to take up the kinds of curriculum and instruction recommended here and in previous scholarship (cited above). One important means of support is public funding for 1. well- prepared teachers and 2. programs to run more than a few hours a few days a week, so that learners have more access to English classes and teachers have access to full-time jobs with benefits (as well as pay for prep and time spent in meetings); both are uncommon in community-based non-profit English programs.

Joy's example adds to existing evidence regarding important preparations for teachers in adult ENL contexts with learners who are emergent readers (Vinogradov & Liden, 2009). Joy's training in elementary teaching and her coursework in adult education uniquely equipped her to take up curricular innovations in a classroom of adult L2 learners who were emergent readers (i.e., learners who were learning to read for the first time in their lives in any language): many of the practices she took up she had learned during her elementary teacher licensure program. However, Joy's combination of training and experience is not commonplace across the U.S. due to current federal and state-level adult ENL/family literacy education policies. In the U.S., professional qualifications for adult ENL teachers (outside of higher education) vary from state-to-state, and many of the challenges in adult ENL professionalization that were presented by Crandall (1993) over 20 years ago continue today. At the time this study was conducted, the state where Joy worked required only that adult ENL instructors in publicly-funded programs hold a bachelor's degree in any field; programs that did not receive public monies (many of which operated entirely with volunteers) were not held to any teacher training requirements. Thus, some adult ENL/family literacy teachers may be underprepared for taking on innovations such as those recommended in this and previous scholarship, especially with beginning-level emergent readers. This may be particularly true for volunteer adult ENL/family literacy instructors who

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have not previously participated in teacher education programs and whose church-based or other community-based programs rely on packaged curricula and/or do not offer, or do not have access to, quality training (Perry & Hart, 2012). As stated above, policy and funding changes are needed to attract teachers who are well-prepared for this teaching context; well-prepared teachers are looking for full-time jobs with benefits. Calls for changes in curriculum and instruction will have little meaning or impact if they are not accompanied by such changes in policy and the allocation of additional funding.

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