

A Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) for Hmong Students

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Abstract

Numerous studies (Goldstein, 1985; Rumbaut and Ima, 1988; Walker, 1989; Trueba, Jacobs, and Kirton, 1990 and Walker-Moffat, 1995) have found that the Hmong have extreme difficulties adjusting to the American educational system as compared with other language minority groups. Underlying this difficulty is a fundamental conflict between learning in traditional Hmong cultural settings and learning in American classroom settings. Despite this conflict, many Hmong students have successfully negotiated our school systems. Most of them did this, however, by compensation strategies, such as memorizing, repeating, spending extended periods of time attempting to master large amounts of material, and receiving extensive help from friends and siblings, rather than by mastering the requirements of successful learning in a formal educational setting. Shuter (1985) refers to this phenomenon as residual orality. This paper will demonstrate that success in our educational system constitutes a paradigm shift for the Hmong learner, a shift from the Hmong learner's paradigm to the formal educational learning paradigm. The position taken here is that active participation in formal education is itself an important part of the acculturation process, requiring the building of a cluster of formal schemata having to do with learning in a specific setting. The paper first examines the conditions, processes, and activities characteristic of each setting and then outlines how teachers can use their knowledge of these two conflicting paradigms to design a Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) that can help Hmong learners succeed academically. Classroom applications are included to demonstrate how the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm can be effective with Hmong learners.

A Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) for Hmong Students

Bright Future (Greenwood Players, 1991), an improvisational play developed in Menomonie, Wisconsin, tells the story of a Hmong boy learning how to play baseball. He thinks he understands the game, but once he is at bat, he hits the ball and runs to third base. Why? Is he a slow learner? No. There were already runners on first and on second, so he ran to the only empty base. This was very resourceful. It is symbolic of the problems the Hmong are having in our schools; they are coping without having the necessary schemata, and sometimes they head for third!

The point is that before one can learn something new, there must be a framework into which one can place the new material. A contrast between two activities will illustrate this. If a student is telling a Hmong folktale in Hmong, the language is familiar, the subject matter is familiar and the manner of organization and presentation is familiar. That is, the three schemata types--linguistic, content and formal--are all known to the learner. At the opposite end, if the student is writing a science report in English, all three types of schemata would be unfamiliar. When tasks like this involving all three unfamiliar schemata are given to Hmong students, it is extremely difficult for learning to take place.

Despite the lack of appropriate schemata, many of these students have successfully negotiated our school systems. Most of them have done this, however, by implementing compensation strategies, not by mastering the requirements of successful learning in a formal educational setting. Shuter (1985) calls this residual orality. Such students memorize, repeat, spend extended periods of time attempting to master large amounts of material, and receive extensive help

from friends and siblings. These strategies work up to a point, but to succeed beyond high school, one needs academic reading and study skills.

Rumbaut and Ima (1988) in a study of acculturation among Southeast Asian youth in San Diego, found that the Hmong

...despite their surprisingly high level of attainment at the high school level and the fact that they exhibit the lowest rates of juvenile deviance on all our indices, also have by far the greatest difficulties making the transition from high school to post-secondary schooling...(1988:72)

Others, including Goldstein (1985), Walker (1989), Trueba, Jacobs and Kirton (1990) and Walker-Moffat (1995), have examined the cultural factors in the adaptation of the Hmong to American schools, noting the difficulty of their adjustment as compared with other language minority groups.

This paper will demonstrate that success in our educational system necessitates for the Hmong learner, a paradigm shift from a familiar learning paradigm to the unfamiliar, formal educational learning paradigm. It will show that (a) active participation in formal education is itself an important part of the acculturation process, and (b) participation requires building a cluster of formal schemata having to do with learning in a specific setting.¹

This all-important aspect of instruction is often assumed or brought in alongside unfamiliar language and content, rather than isolated and highlighted because of the learner's urgent need to communicate and to master subject matter. Thus, the lack of English proficiency and the newness of subject matter actually serve to mask the underlying cultural problem and the need for a

paradigm shift. The irony is that without the tools of our formal schemata, the Hmong learner cannot successfully participate in acquiring the language and content because of how it is taught!

First, this paper will describe how the Hmong approach the task of learning and contrast it with teacher expectations. Then, the paper will present a Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) in which each "side," so to speak, recognizes the major priorities of the other. Finally, examples of a MALP activity used with Hmong learners in two different programs will be provided.

Two Conflicting Learning Paradigms

Figure 1 shows the inherent conflict between the way language and content are presented in formal educational settings and the way they are, or have been, typically presented in Hmong cultural settings. To understand the nature of learning in any society, we can examine: (1) conditions needed for learning to take place, (2) processes by which learning takes place, and (3) activities used to facilitate learning.

For the Hmong culture, as will be shown, all of these differ greatly from those assumed in our society. This chart is certainly simplified; in reality, formal education, the current American educational system in particular, moves the learner on a continuum, from kindergarten through the doctorate, that increasingly emphasizes the right side of the chart at the expense of the left, without ever completely abandoning the left side. Nonetheless, such depiction helps to highlight the contrasts between the two learning paradigms under consideration here.

We first examine the conditions necessary for learning according to the learning paradigm followed in traditional Hmong cultural settings.

Condition #1.

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The cornerstone of learning for any oral culture is the unity of people and knowledge. Learning must be interpersonal in that one normally learns directly from another person whom one already knows and with whom one has an established relationship. Dao (1992) describes this traditional education and how it continues today in the way Hmong transmit their cultural values and practices through elders and clan leaders.

Hmong students expect personal relationships with their teachers, often asking questions we consider to be inappropriate for the teacher-student roles in formal educational settings. "How many children do you have?" is a common first question. Hmong students do not apologize when calling an instructor at home because the relationships are not compartmentalized as personal vs. school vs. work, but rather, if one knows another person, it is assumed to be a 24-hour relationship.

In place of an interpersonal orientation, our system fosters a gradual separation of people and knowledge. Beginning in pre-school, where the teacher is almost a parent, the learner and teacher slowly become more distant, until in college the professor doesn't even have to know all the students.

Our system values independent study and research as a superior learning experience. Our goal is for students not to "need" each other, or the teacher, but rather to learn on their own. At that point, the focus is on the information, not the relationship between learner and teacher. We ask students to learn about something by studying it, an isolated activity, not an interpersonal one.

Condition #2.

Learning is immediately incorporated into daily life. Therefore, new knowledge is acquired at the time it can be applied by the person who is learning it. The learner observes, practices and

gets immediate feedback. This immediate relevance of learning means that learning parallels life. This applies in matters of religion, work, and family life and is characterized by Dao as "utilitarian" (1992:84).

In our system, learning is seen as a foundation for future experience. It precedes "real" life, rather than paralleling it. The "real life" for which the child is being prepared may come long after the learning takes place.

We now turn to the processes used in the Hmong learner's paradigm.

Process #1.

Learning is accomplished cooperatively; the memory load is shared. The Hmong see themselves as a group of learners, and everyone is included. You ask one Hmong, you ask all Hmong.

In Hmong villages, according to Shuter (1985), people would gather together to listen to the elder who would soon die, so that his knowledge could be passed along. There was a group responsibility, and the understanding that if even one person had retained a piece of information, then that piece would be preserved for the future.

Although we value cooperation, we offer a focus on individual achievement. In our institutions, students are isolated and everyone is expected to learn everything. The most powerful example of this view, and the most disorienting for the Hmong, is our preferred way of determining scholastic success, the standardized written test.

Process #2.

Learning is accomplished orally. This may seem quite obvious because there had historically been no generally accepted written Hmong language, but orally means more than just "not written."

Material presented to be learned orally contains a great deal of repetition, and what is called backlooping. Instead of moving forward in each sentence, some of the same material is given again in the next sentence. Ong (1982) uses a quote from the Douay version of the Bible (1610) based on the original Hebrew to illustrate the nature of oral language:

And God said: Be light made. And light was made. And God saw the light that it was good; and he divided the light from the darkness. (1982:37)

What makes the Bible so memorable is that it was designed for oral transmission. An editor would cut each verse down to one sentence.²

Our system is based on an evolving dependence on the written word, instead of oral transmission, for retention and mastery of subject matter. Through books, we have immediate access to infinitely more information than any one person could possibly retain.

As early as fourth grade a significant transition from learning to read to reading to learn has taken place. Hmong students have difficulty making this transition, as, for example, in following directions from textbooks instead of people and using books to learn by themselves outside of the classroom.

Here is a quote from one of Shuter's informants:

Hmong students used to learn by doing and if they went to school and learned just the theory, they have problems when they practice. For example,

myself--when I go to school and I learn something by reading, I could understand when I read, but if I was supposed to do it by hand, I didn't know how. So I had to get help from someone in order to be able to do it (1985:106).

Activities.

Finally, we come to the largest overall difference in schemata between Hmong cultural learning and formal education--the activities required of the learner. In Hmong culture, people learn by doing, by following a role model, operating within a context, and obtaining feedback from the results themselves or from people. The key activity is practice, preceded by observation and followed by monitoring.

In direct contrast to this, our system makes use of not only practice, but analytical tasks (such as defining, categorizing and classifying, and synthesizing) to develop understanding by students. These are not universally natural or necessary for learning, but they are the way people are expected to learn in formal educational settings. Furthermore, as a prerequisite for this analytical activity, the material to be examined is decontextualized. For the Hmong, learning activities have always taken place in a cultural context.

According to Denny (1991) the key factor that distinguishes such routines in oral and literate cultures is contextualization vs. decontextualization. Categorization is a revealing example. In our literate culture, most children begin with Sesame Street, singing, "Which of these is not like the others; which of these doesn't belong?" In a traditional Hmong cultural setting, no one would ever put four things together and then ask which one doesn't belong as part of a learning activity, yet our system requires this type of thinking. In an often cited experiment conducted by Luria (1932,

published in 1976) in the Soviet Union, nonliterate subjects with no formal education were shown four objects--a hammer, saw, hatchet and log-- and asked to remove the one that did not fit in the group. Instead of throwing out the log because it wasn't a tool, the subjects in this study kept the log, discarding one of the tools. By keeping the log, they were able to create some context, i.e. that of building something.

Similarly, Hvitfeldt (1986), in her microethnographic study of the classroom behavior of Hmong adults in an ESL program, found a resistance to categorization, such that a round object is labeled a ball rather than an orange even when appearing on a page of all fruits. Acceptance and mastery of decontextualized learning tasks, such as categorization, forces the Hmong learner to break away from traditional culturally contextualized learning tasks.

Returning now to the learning paradigm chart, it is evident what conditions, processes and activities will help the Hmong to learn. Initially, they need: a relationship, immediate application, oral transmission, cooperative tasks, and practice. Unfortunately, as can be seen from this chart, the key elements of formal education directly conflict with what the Hmong learner wants and needs.

Teachers make certain assumptions about their students, and they are usually correct. Learners who come from a society in which formal education is integral to the culture, share, even if they themselves have not participated in it, the same learning paradigm. These teachers and learners assume: (1) that the goals of K-12 instruction are (a) to produce an independent learner and (b) to prepare that learner for life after schooling and (2) that the learner brings along (a) an urge to compete and excel as an individual and (b) age-appropriate preparation for literacy development and for analysis tasks.

A Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm

Because the Hmong don't come from a society in which formal education is integral, they feel isolated, confused, and inadequate when they encounter formal education. What they need is not provided, and what is demanded of them is totally new.³

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It becomes clear that the Hmong learner needs an approach that avoids, initially and for the most part, the traditional formal educational learning paradigm in favor of one that more closely matches the way Hmong naturally learn best. What is called for, then, is a Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) that facilitates learning for the Hmong. To accomplish this goal, the following three steps are proposed.

Step 1: Accept the conditions the Hmong learners need: a relationship and immediate relevance. Infuse instruction with interpersonal elements and a curriculum that includes items closely linked to the learner's world.

Step 2: Design syllabi and materials that combine elements of Hmong learning processes with the new ones. Include both individual and cooperative components and use both oral and written modes.

Step 3: Create analysis activities that focus on how to do the activity, rather than on the language or the content involved. In order to isolate and teach decontextualization skills, make the language and content familiar by using either the native language, or English previously mastered, and material from the native culture.

Surveys: A Classroom Exercise to Bridge the Gap

A Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm

One activity that follows these three steps is the survey. The acts of creating, conducting, and analyzing a survey allow for an implementation of MALP.

The survey itself is by nature interpersonal and helps to establish or maintain relationships. With the learners choosing the topics, it can have immediate relevance. Therefore, the conditions for learning are in place.

Data can be collected orally, recorded on tape, or noted down, and, as skills increase, questionnaires can be used. Thus, there is an opportunity to move gradually from oral transmission to the written word. All three stages of the survey work can be completed either individually, in pairs, or in groups. Again, the transition from a cooperative process to individual achievement can be gradual.

The activities involved are heavily analytical, yet the difficulty level can be controlled very easily, so that surveys can consist of simple yes/no answers or can investigate complex viewpoints on controversial issues. Depending upon the informants selected for the surveys, learners can rely on the native language and/or familiar content to offset the complexity of the analytical skills required.

Here are two examples of surveys that were completed by Hmong students in Wisconsin, one in a bilingual adult literacy program and the other in a summer precollege program.⁴

The beginning level adults conducted a survey of how each of them had crossed the Mekong River. Crossing the Mekong is a very significant event in the Hmong saga, one that is commemorated in their art and described in their storytelling. It is a virtually universal experience

for adult Hmong refugees. Figure 2 recreates the chalkboard in the classroom on which the ESL instructor developed this activity.

It should be pointed out that the individual student's memory and recollection of their own crossing was often vague and that to complete this survey the students had to talk with family members, locate documents, and recover the details of their experience as refugees.

In this survey, adults with little or no prior literacy, or educational background, participated in generating this chart, using flags, pictures, names, numbers, and a few key vocabulary words to present their data.

For the pre-college students, a multigenerational family survey was conducted. They designed a set of questions, including such topics as priorities in life and typical daily activities. They then analyzed the results across families and by generation. Much of the interviewing of families was done in Hmong and on familiar topics; the focus was on the analytical tasks, which were new.

This survey generated a lot of data because the Hmong, for the most part, live in large, extended families. Although these students had some awareness of these conflicting viewpoints, they had not previously engaged in a formal analysis. This survey enabled them to see their own family's experiences from a new perspective, to untangle a multigenerational issue and to draw their own conclusions, as seen in Figure 3, a page reproduced from their program booklet.

Conclusion

It should now be evident how the application of MALP through this kind of activity helps Hmong learners make the learning paradigm shift. It accepts the two Hmong conditions for

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learning, makes transitions to individual achievement and the written word comfortably, and teaches analysis skills. Using MALP can prevent students from getting too far into their education using only compensation strategies, attempting to make up for a lack of familiarity with the formal educational learning paradigm. Instead, a MALP approach will result in an eventual mastery and full participation in formal education.

Moffat (1995) writes of the window of opportunity that now exists for educators to help the Hmong “integrate their old cultural scripts and norms of behavior with the new ones” (p. 122). Similarly, Boshier (1997), in her study of postsecondary Hmong students who have achieved a substantial degree of academic success, found in her data on dimensions of acculturation, support for “a bidirectional, multidimensional theory of acculturation in which orientation towards both cultures can exist simultaneously” (p. 599). A mutually adaptive approach to classroom instruction as outlined here is consistent with these findings and has the potential to enable Hmong students to become literate and formally educated without losing their cultural identity.

Footnotes

¹For the purposes of this paper, the entire learning paradigm used in formal educational settings is considered a cluster of formal schemata which must be developed in order for learners to succeed in that setting. This cluster of schemata recalls Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) as distinct from Basic Interpersonal Communications Skills (BICS) outlined by Cummins (1979).

²Gee (1986) examines the controversy over characterizing orality and literacy, pointing out that there is neither a dichotomy nor a continuum, but rather shared elements along with distinct elements. The intent here is to identify those distinct elements that make Hmong learners most comfortable.

³While it is certainly true that a mismatch of this type exists for many other linguistic minorities in our schools, the Hmong exemplify the phenomenon in its extreme form and help to provide insight into what is occurring to some degree for other groups.

⁴These examples are drawn from the following projects: the Green Bay Hmong/English Bilingual Adult Literacy Project, 1992-1993, funded by the National Institute of Literacy and the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Summer Precollege Program for Southeast Asian Students, 1990, funded by the Wisconsin Educational Opportunity Program. The adult literacy lesson illustrating the use of MALP was designed by Elizabeth Cicero; the pre-college project, by Margaret Davenport and Janice Galt.

LEARNING PARADIGMS FOR TWO DIFFERENT SETTINGS

	<i>Hmong Cultural Setting</i>	<i>U.S. Classroom Setting</i>
CONDITIONS for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship • Immediate Relevance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence • Future Relevance
PROCESSES for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration • Oral Transmission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual Achievement • Written Word
ACTIVITIES for learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis

Figure 1. A comparison and contrast of the conditions, processes and activities for learning in a familiar cultural setting and in an American classroom setting.

FAMILY RESEARCH
by
Tue Kong

On our first week at UWGB we found the important things of the older generation, parent generation, and younger generation. We have learned that they have many different goals.

The goals of the older generation are as follows:

- live a long time
- set a good example for children and grandchildren
- teach great manners, culture, history
- want children to have a good life
- encourage younger generations, finance
- return to Laos.

For the parent generation the goals are:

- hope children will succeed
- be good parents
- go back to Laos, be soldiers
- get better jobs, get off welfare
- become rich.

The younger generation has these goals:

- get a good job
- get highest degree possible
- get a good spouse
- finish high school, college
- be a lawyer
- get a good home and buy it
- missionary to Thailand
- travel around the world
- be a Congressman
- be a pilot
- set a good example for younger children
- get good pay and a stable job
- be nurse, doctor, surgeon

The American culture is causing problems between the older generation and the younger generation. The older generation is focused on the younger generation but the younger generation is focused on the dominant culture. This causes problems for the middle generation who struggles to keep the family together.

Figure 2. A sample activity using the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) from the Green Bay Hmong/English Bilingual Adult Literacy Project, 1993. Designed by Elizabeth Cicero, ESL Instructor.

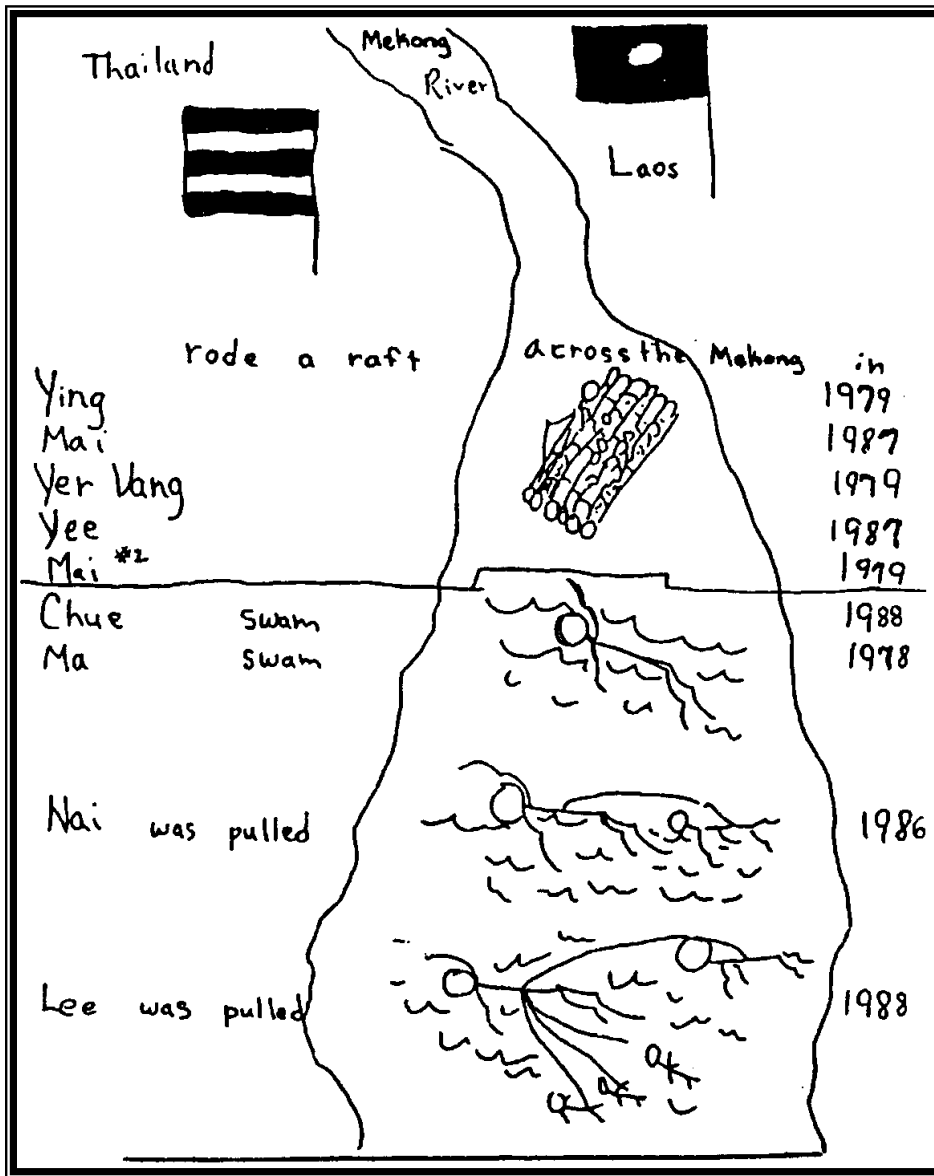


Figure 3. Results of a survey conducted by Hmong students in the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Pre-College Summer Program for Southeast Asian Students, 1990.

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