Second language acquisition: The impacts on the culture of a Hmong refugee community in Australia

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SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: THE IMPACTS ON THE TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP OF A HMONG REFUGEE COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA

Introduction

There is no doubt education does play an important role in the social, cultural and political development of a nation. This role of education was demonstrated in no better way then in Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire discovered, among other things, that the educational system was one of the major instruments in oppressing the marginalised. In this paper, the role of education will be explored further by researching the impact of second language acquisition on an Australian immigrant community in north Queensland. It will be argued in this paper that second language acquisition has had major impacts on the traditional family and social structure of the Hmong. Anthropologist John Rex recognises this process of change is a characteristic of the complex nature of ethnicity. He states: “Ethnic groups are thought of as those whose behaviour might change (Rex 1986, p.17). It is the very nature of this change that will be examined in this paper. Although this research investigates a mere microcosm of this vast area of ethno-linguistic research, it will be argued that even very specific case studies such as this have academic merit given the increasing interest in ethnographic research and the importance of these issues on the broader community. For it is well recognised that to understand the evolution of language entails not just looking at the language but the aspects of the lives of people who speak the language (Nettle & Romaine 2000, p. 79). Hence this paper does not aim to look at the function or methodology of education, and more specifically second language acquisition, but will look at the products of education in a
social and ethnographic context. Consequently, this will be documented in
the form of an ethnographic research project.

Eller argues ethnicity captivates the world’s attention like perhaps no other
social phenomenon (1999, p.17). Ethnic problems exist on every inhabited
continent of the world today and impact people at all levels of society.
Because these problems often exist among obscure ethnic communities there
is a tendency to dismiss the importance of ethnic issues. But as Brown and
Ganguly contend:

Even in countries where ethnic minorities are minuscule in
demographic terms and unassertive in pursuing political self-
determination, ethnic problems have important social, economic and
political ramifications (1997, p. 4).

The case of the Hmong in Australia supports this statement. Most of the
Hmong have come to Australia as part of a United Nations refugee program
during the past 15 years. Although this program provided the Hmong with a
new way of life away from the threat of war, it has led to a new battle – a
battle to save their traditional family and social structure.

This paper will be divided into two parts. The first will outline the theoretical
and methodological framework in which the research has been conducted.
This will include the significance and relevance of the research, the
methodology and techniques used to collect the data, a review of relevant
research literature and an overview of the participants researched including
ethical considerations and the thesis to be examined. The second part of the
paper will include an interpretation and analysis of the data, including a
summary of the major findings and implications of the research conducted.
Part 1

Significance and Relevance of the Research

Language acquisition theorists have long contended that language and culture are intertwined. It is this theme that will be investigated in this paper, by examining how a minority culture is influenced when a second language, and in the case of this paper, dominant language, is introduced into their society. Fishman recognises:

Such a huge part of every ethnoculture is linguistically expressed, that it’s not wrong to say that most ethnoculture behaviours would be impossible without their expression via the particular language with which these behaviours have been traditionally associated (Fishman 2001, p. 3).

There is no doubt second language acquisition is generally considered a positive phenomenon and even a necessity when an ethnic group is relocated to a country where the dominant language is different from their mother tongue. This paper does not dispute that. However, it aims to examine the implications second language acquisition can have on the social aspects of an ethnic community. The 1992 United Nations commentary to the declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious or Linguistic Minorities said:

Experience has shown that in societies where different national, ethnic, religious or linguistic groups coexist, the culture, history and traditions of minority groups have often been neglected (2001, p. 14).

This has particular ramifications for Australia, which has adopted a multicultural immigration policy aimed at preserving ethnic diversity. It is these language issues and challenges that face the Hmong in Australia today. Melbourne-base Hmong leader Pao Saykao said the impacts of second
language acquisition bring ‘sadness’ to the Australian Hmong community. He says:

They (the Hmong) are happy and proud that their grandchildren and children are gaining an education and that materially the family is successful, but sad that it is difficult to maintain a belief system through regular ceremony and ritual (1994, p. 6).

The situation has been clearly exacerbated by the first language attrition among these ‘grandchildren and children’. This first language attrition has led to dramatic social and family issues for the Hmong in north Queensland. For example, several Hmong families in the north Queensland cities of Cairns and Innisfail have children who have all but lost their first language and speak only English, while their parents have struggled to acquire English as a second language and speak Hmong and limited ‘survival’ English. Many parents said their children had created a creole language which was colloquially known in the community as ‘Hmonglish’. The fruit of these transitional problems exist in the diaspora communities of Hmong that exist around the world today. Although the Australian Hmong community has its own uniqueness the words of a song penned by a 68-year-old Hmong refugee in the United States are no less relevant. His song says:

The people in this country have many great ideas
That’s why we have come here
Their knowledge is more and more, great and great
But we cannot talk
In our minds we think that we cannot learn all their methods
We feel angry
And we wish that we could change into a bird or insect
Flying and singing in the mountain forests’
Then we could fly back to visit our old villages and homes (1994, p. 3).

The problems associated with second language acquisition in an ethnic community can lead to serious ramifications and that is what makes this
research so important. No specific research on these issues has been conducted in Australia before, hence highlighting a clear need for this kind of ethnocultural, educational research.

**Literature Survey**

Information on Hmong communities around the world is varied and plentiful. Both Hmong and non-Hmong scholars in Australia have completed a variety of works on the relocation of Hmong refugees to Australia. The most recent addition to these, an edited volume entitled *The Hmong in Australia*, is an excellent overview of the Hmong relocation experience in Australia and features works from seven of Australia’s leading Hmong studies scholars. It is important to highlight that during the past decade there has been an increasing amount of scholarly work produced by ethnic Hmong scholars. Admittedly this work has been generated mainly in the United States but informative and crucial foundational works have also been completed in Australia by noted academics including Dr Gary Yia Lee. This research by ethnic Hmong scholars has stemmed largely from what Hmong community representatives have branded ‘misrepresentation’. In interviews with Hmong community members in Australia, it was revealed many felt that their ethnicity or ‘Hmongness’ had been inaccurately recorded by what they called ‘Western Hmong scholars’.

As a result much of the scholarly work contributed by ethnic Hmong scholars takes a participant observer format, based on observations and knowledge of the daily lives they witness. Interestingly much of the work produced by these
ethnic Hmong scholars is not published in traditional academic volumes or journals, but rather in anthropological and social science e-journals. Additionally their research is published on websites designed to actively promote and preserve Hmong ethnicity.

Most of the data and research conducted on the Hmong in Australia was conducted in the first decade after their arrival (1984-1994). However, during the past five years the amount of research conducted in Australia has somewhat declined. Despite this there are many excellent publications, including books, journal articles and conference papers on Hmong culture in Australia.

**Research Question**

The research question in this paper will be addressed in the context of Hmong communities living in north Queensland. The main research question to be addressed is:

How has second language acquisition affected the traditional leadership roles in the family and social structure of the Hmong?
Hypothesis

It will be argued in this paper that:

1. Second language acquisition can result in a breakdown of leadership roles in the traditional Hmong social structure, which is considered crucial in defining their ethnic identity.

2. This breakdown results in a reinvention of their ethnic identity.

Context and Research Participants

Because this research project will look at a Hmong community in north Queensland it is important to contextualise this community within the wider framework. The Hmong entered Australia as refugees. Most of the Hmong in north Queensland came to Australia from Thailand, but originally lived in Laos. Australia was one of about eight countries that received Hmong refugees in the years after the Communist takeover of Laos. However, it must be recognised that in the early days of Hmong immigration to Australia, the Hmong were considered ‘backward’ and likely to struggle in modern society (Falk 1994). Many of the Hmong I interviewed said they had never lived in anything resembling a ‘western-styled’ house before coming to Australia and none of them had driven a car. Hmong community leader Toua Her said: “We lived in the jungle for many years and then a refugee camp. We had to fight for life but living is easy in Australia” (Personal Communication November 2002). The 2001 Australian census revealed that there are now almost 2000 Hmong living in Australia. Of this, about 900 Hmong live in the north Queensland cities of Cairns, Innisfail and Atherton. Although most families have lived in north Queensland for more than seven years, many
Hmong remain unemployed, while those who are employed work traditional blue collar jobs such as cleaners, fruit-pickers, abattoir workers and kitchen hands, while many others are farmers. The first language of the Hmong in Australia is either the Hmong Daw (White Hmong) or Hmong Njua (Blue Hmong) dialect. Both are mutually intelligible dialects (Hattaway 2000, p. 200). The Hmong society is divided into clans, with the family or kinship group serving as the fundamental foundation in the clan structure. Hmong households in Australia are large with most containing three and sometimes four generations of family members. Pao argues the strong sense of identity Hmong gain from household membership has been affected by language issues in Australia. He says:

Many (older Hmong) do not speak English and also tend to be non-literate in the Hmong language. Not only do they lose respect in the eyes of the younger generation but they are also out of touch generally with the interest of the rest of the household (1994).

Within Australia, many of the older Hmong community members, who held significant positions of power and leadership have been stripped of this power and respect as a result of language change. This is important because it highlights second language acquisition is a crucial factor within the social structure of an ethnic community. This paper will examine this by drawing research and data from several members of the north Queensland Hmong community representing eight clans and over 50 families.
Methodology

Ethnographic research should always involve varied means of data collection in order to meet the challenges of this complex type of research. In this paper both qualitative and quantitative research techniques will be used. To overcome any research short-comings, a multi-pronged approach has been adopted including:

1. *Interviews:* This project has involved interviews with members of the Hmong community in Australia. Interviews were also conducted with resource providers such as educators, social workers and refugee advocates who have worked with members of the Hmong community. Through these interviews it is hoped a more grassroots approach has been achieved. The interviews with Hmong community members were conducted in English, although some required the use of Hmong leaders to translate information. The interview data was collected in either journals or was audio taped.

2. *Observation:* This research has involved the observation of Hmong families in Cairns, in north Queensland. This process also included data collection through anecdotal conversations and interaction. This research was aimed at replicating Louisa Schein’s comprehensive and successful research of the Hmong in China. Schein said although the techniques she used defied normal anthropological standards, they were highly effective in collecting accurate ethnographic data. Schein says:

   Shopping, incidental conversations on trains and buses, the stares and queries my fieldworker mode elicited, these kinds of things became vital components of what I have called itinerant ethnography (Schein 2001, p. 28).
3. **Hmong scholarly work:** There has been an increasing amount of material produced by Hmong academics in Australia. This paper has attempted to source as much of this research as possible. For example, Dr Gary Yia Lee and Dr Pao Saykao have produced a variety of research papers on the Hmong’s adaptation to the Australian way of life.

4. **Statistics and Government Policy:** Quantitative data will be used by means of the 2001 Australian census data and the use of Australian government policy regarding issues such as immigration and adult migrant education.

This data has been collected during ongoing interaction with the north Queensland Hmong community during the past year. This research involves obvious ethical considerations regarding privacy issues and as a consequence was subject to an ethical clearance by Griffith University’s Office of Research.

**Part II**

**Analysis**

Language is essentially powerless on its own. However, when people use language or it is used in the context of social structures such as a leadership system, it becomes an element of immense power (Corson 1996, p.4). It is this socially-constructed power of language that will be examined in this paper. It is estimated that there are more than 6000 languages spoken in the world today. Director-General of UNESCO Kochiro Matsuura said:

They (the languages) testify to humanities outstanding ability to create tools of communication, to its perception and reflection. They are the
mirror of the souls of the societies in which they are born and they reflect the history of their contacts (2000, p.1). However, when that mirror begins to reflect a different culture, manifested through a second language, the result is usually conflict and sometimes even assimilation. Before these issues can be related to the Hmong it is important to understand their family and societal traditions.

Hmong society is one of the most structured ethnic societies in the world (Pao 1994). The Hmong language features gender and social specific terms related to family, close family friends and clan leaders. These terms are intrinsic in maintaining a social hierarchy that aims to promote the core values of the Hmong such as accountability, kindness, diplomacy and respect. Perhaps the most important aspect of this hierarchy is the notion that the adherence to these traditional social and family norms is an irrevocable part of Hmong identity and ethnicity. The highest level of social structure for the Hmong is the community. The next level is the clan and sub clan. The clan is represented by a clan name and represents an ancestral lineage. Hence Hmong social structure stipulates people must marry outside the clan. The clan can be divided into smaller groups known as a sub-clan. This group usually includes different families that subscribe to particular religious or ritualistic practice. Sub-clans are further divided into family units which form the basic social unit of Hmong society. Pao argues that the leader of the family is the most powerful and influential in Hmong society (1994). The family unit is sometimes divided into smaller units called the nuclear family. This occurs when a member of a family marries and brings his wife to live with his family.
The structure of Hmong society allows for leaders to be installed at each social level. Pao says this is similar to the leadership structure of the armed services:

As in the army, if the sergeant has a problem with his rank, he cannot bypass his superior and go directly to the general. His responsibility is to report to the person in the next office above him. It is similar in the hmong structure. When there is a challenge in a nuclear family setting, it is best to be resolved within that unit. If it fails, the next level of hierarchy will take over. This process continues, if required, until the conflict is resolved (1994).

In this complex stratified society the male is the traditional leader and power broker. At each level of Hmong society, men have traditionally filled the leadership positions. The male leader of the nuclear family and family is ultimately responsible for the conduct and decision-making of those under his leadership. However, the leader of the nuclear family can have his decisions overturned or altered by clan, sub-clan or family leaders, if he has been deemed to have not acted appropriately. Conversely the family leader, although formally accountable to a sub-clan leader, has ultimate authority to preside over his family. As Pao recognises:

He is the man who can create, maintain or destroy the reputation of his members. In general, it is fair to say the stronger the leader, the better his group will become. Conversely, the family with no leader or a weak leader is more likely to be scattered, low profile, facing more challenges and the family’s standing in the Hmong community may be mediocre (1994).

Pao’s final point is crucial given the current position of the Hmong in Australia. North Queensland Hmong leader Toua Her said in an interview in November 2002 that many of the social and family problems encountered by the Hmong in north Queensland were the result of weak, faltering or non-existent traditional family leadership. He said:
They do not know who they are anymore. They want to be Hmong but they want to be Australian too. Their children want their parents to be like an Australian family. In the past the parents tell the child how to behave, now the child is the boss. Because the child speak English and goes to school they have the power. They have no respect for tradition and the culture is forgotten because everyone wants English and western traditions (Personal Communication November 2002).

In traditional Hmong society the cohesiveness of the social structure has important ramifications, with the credibility of all family members reliant on the family’s reputation and the ability of the leader.

Beyond family leadership sub-clan leaders may also be appointed. At this level two leaders are usually appointed. The leaders preside over a collection of families with one leader adopting a ‘legal’ role while the other adopts a ‘religious’ role. Technically these leaders may influence the decision of a family leader, but this rarely occurs. The final leadership position is the clan leader. This position is usually filled by several leaders or a council of a few sub-clan leaders. This group is responsible for political and judicial decisions. In north Queensland this level of leadership has been facilitated by the formation of the Queensland Hmong Society which is made up of a leader (president) and a council of leaders.

Lee states that being Hmong involves partaking in this social order. Birth, looks, descent, given names, adherence to certain religious practices and respect of traditional social structures are considered crucial elements that define Hmongness (1996, p. 3). However, Pao takes this even further. He argues the most important prerequisite for being Hmong is to be able to speak Hmong (2001). Because the Hmong language has intense pragmatic
elements several functions such as intention, relationship, position, role, rank, culture and respect are all conveyed through language. Once a second language is acquired and used, such as English in Australia, many of these pragmatic messages can no longer be conveyed. The aspects of naming and respect of social and family structure will now be examined in detail.

The Findings

Naming

Three days after a Hmong baby is born a soul-calling ceremony is conducted during which the baby is given a name for the first time (Lee 1996, p.5). A necklace is placed around the baby’s neck and the child is given a Hmong name. The baby will be called this name for the rest of its life if it is a male or until it is married if it is female. The use of Hmong names and the naming ceremony has traditionally been undertaken as a means of not only personal identification but also ethnic identification. The ceremony is also one of the traditional functions of the shaman or the spiritual leader, who would often contribute a name from the spirits of the family’s ancestors. However, one of the first significant manifestations of second language acquisition in Australia, resulted in significant changes to the traditional naming ceremony.

Social worker Bev Holland, who worked extensively with the Hmong during their initial relocation to Australia said the Hmong immediately applied ‘English’ names when they arrived in Australia. She said:

Whereas Vietnamese immigrants continued to give their children, Vietnamese names, all Hmong babies born in Australia were given English names. Often families would go through books of English names in their English classes sounding out names they thought
sounded nice, or finding out the meaning of words that symbolised strength or other symbolic purposes. In many ways the whole process motivated them and helped them to learn English (Personal Communication October 2001).

However, the widespread practice of giving Hmong children non-Hmong names in Australia has caused division in the community. In the north Queensland community several families said in interviews I conducted with them, that giving their children English names caused problems with the spiritual leader because it undermined the role of the shaman. Local community leader Toua Her said:

In the Hmong community the shaman traditionally had big power. When people change and no longer use him it makes him mad. He feels unwanted. He feels useless (Personal Communication November 2002).

Many of the families who chose to name their children using second language names said in interviews they did it simply because they liked the sound of the English names. One woman said: “We do not think a name makes you Hmong. It is what is inside you that matters. You are born Hmong not named Hmong” (Personal Communication November 2002). All those interviewed said their intention was not to undermine the shaman’s sub-clan or clan leadership position. However, whatever the intention of the parents, their decision has nevertheless challenged and undermined these important traditional social and spiritual leadership structures of the Hmong. What this situation demonstrates is how a simple aspect of second language acquisition can have far reaching impacts on the cultural fabric of an ethnic minority community. As Eller argues:

Ethnicity is no mere reflection or reflex of culture, especially of a traditional culture, but a complex reworking, remembering, sometimes reinvention and always the employment of culture in the light of present and future considerations (Eller 1995, p. 5).
This reworking and use of an acquired language has not only caused some within the Hmong community to readdress the question of ethnic identity, but it has challenged the traditional leadership model recognised by Lee as indelibly Hmong.

**Social Structure**

Many notions of ethnic Hmong solidarity have been drawn from cultural symbols, of which the social structure is fundamental (Lee 1996, p.6). Lee and Pao both argue that the Hmong like to see themselves as a collective known as “Peb Hmoob” which in English means “Us Hmong” (Lee 1996, p. 6). This viewpoint is cherished as a means of separating the Hmong from all other outsiders. However, when this notion of separation becomes blurred and is eroded, and the Hmong community members start to resemble outsiders, it has tremendous impacts. In Australia this model of collectivity and solidarity has been affected by second language acquisition in the Hmong community. The Hmong household has been the primary battleground for this linguistic and cultural revolution. For example, interviews with Hmong community members in north Queensland revealed that most believed the biggest cause of cultural breakdown was the acquisition of English. Community leader Toua Her said that today most of the Hmong children born in Australia no longer learnt ‘pure’ Hmong. He said although English was important for their ‘survival’ in Australia, it had been the single most important reason for Hmong cultural decline in Australia. He said:

> Once the language is gone, the love of being Hmong is gone too. It is like losing your soul. We have seen it happen but we can’t stop it. So
much of being Hmong is speaking Hmong (Personal Communication November 2002).

Lee agrees saying that many Hmong children in the west are no longer fluent in Hmong and many refuse to use it with their parents (Lee 1996, p. 6).

When this phenomenon is looked at in the context of the traditional Hmong family structure it is tremendously undermining, to not only the social structure, but the leadership role of the family leader. In north Queensland this language and social breakdown has resulted in teenagers developing social ties outside the Hmong community. Toua Her said:

   When they learn English and go to school they have a new life and a new identity. They lose respect for parents and other Hmong. The young people go to school and live with parents but they are strangers. They don’t talk to their parents. They stay away from home as much as possible and come home only to sleep and eat. Language problems have destroyed all the talking. It is destroying the Hmong (Personal Communication November 2002).

This breakdown in formal tradition has resulted in a new generation of young Hmong snubbing not only traditional cultural activities but the role of cultural leaders. This pattern is nothing new for the Hmong living in the West. Pao says when the respect and caring aspect of the Hmong is neglected the family falls a part (2001, p. 7). This demonstrates clearly how second language acquisition can influence an ethnic community’s traditional social structures. This grim outlook is also supported by Lee’s anthropological studies of Hmong communities throughout the West. Lee argues:

   The survival of the Hmong culture rests with Hmong children and the children have to know and take pride in that culture in order for them to adopt it, to pass it on to future generations. Hmong parents in the West face a most difficult task, and they need guidance and support to be effective parents as well as to be effective cultural carriers. They face an array of conflicting rules and values from their own culture and mainstream society (Lee 1996, p. 7).
It is important to recognise that second language acquisition is not the only reason for this breakdown in traditional Hmong society in Australia. However, its role can certainly not be under-emphasised. As Nettle and Romaine highlight:

A language can only thrive to the extent that there is a functioning community speaking it and passing it on from parents to child at home (Nettle & Romaine 2000, p. 79).

There are two crucial elements in this analysis. Firstly languages can only survive in a functioning community speaking the language. This notion is somewhat paradoxical in the case of the Hmong. Learning English as a second language has provided a more appealing means of communication for many first and second generation Hmong immigrants in north Queensland. Hence their refusal to speak Hmong to their parents, or anyone else for that matter, has resulted in a breakdown of the important social, cultural and pragmatic functions of communication in the mother tongue. Therefore, if Nettle and Romaine's analysis is correct, it would seem the future of the Hmong language in north Queensland is grim. The second point is that the relationship between the parent and the child is crucial in maintaining the mother tongue. The breakdown of these relationships among Hmong in north Queensland supports that notion. The breakdown of traditional family structure has not only resulted in the first language attrition of both first and second generation immigrants, but the breakdown of long-held traditional social order and structure. What this demonstrates is that language and culture cannot and do not exist in a vacuum. The result is that through the influence of a dominant culture a minority culture can change. However, it is how that change manifests that is of central importance to this paper.
Second language acquisition has provided the Hmong in Australia unprecedented opportunities to pursue higher levels of education. Prior to coming to Australia, almost all Hmong were relatively uneducated, subsistence farmers, who were generally illiterate with little formal education. But since coming to Australia, an increasing number of Hmong are pursuing university degree programs in fields as diverse as medicine, information technology and anthropology. However, this new-found opportunity, provided by acquiring English as a second language has led to one of the most dramatic changes in Hmong social order in Australia. Whereas in the past leaders at various levels of Hmong society were appointed based on reputation and spiritual and cultural knowledge, they are now appointed to these roles in Australia based on their professional qualifications. Within Australia, Hmong community members who have completed higher university degrees including honours, masters and PhD studies, are now considered to be worthy of leadership positions at either the clan or sub-clan level. This notion of leadership has only been introduced into Hmong society since the refugee exodus from Thailand and Laos in the 1980s and early 1990s. The assumption that education and academic qualifications equate to leadership qualities has caused much division in the Hmong community in Australia. Hmong scholar Pao Saykao says:

Many Hmong believe that once you earn a master or a PhD, by having a title, you are automatically a leader. This is far from the truth. A PhD makes one no wiser in Hmong traditions than someone who is illiterate. The only difference is that a professional has learned one small subject extremely well but this does not imply that this person would know as much in other areas (1994).
This view is backed by representatives in North Queensland, who argue that the change provides no incentive for young people to learn Hmong. Toua Her, who himself holds a bachelor degree, said education should play no role in leadership appointments. He said:

> Young people think they don’t need Hmong language now. All they need is English and they can be Australia and be Hmong and everything will be good. But it is much more complicated than this. The Hmong traditions are being replaced by Australian attitudes. First the language change and now the cultural change too. It should not matter if I speak eight languages, or if I am a doctor. Leadership is about understanding the Hmong. It is good to study but we should not change our tradition (Personal Communication November 2002).

In a bid to counter these changes to the culture Toua Her has written a book documenting the traditions of the Hmong. The book includes the correct methods of address between community members, as well as the traditions related to all levels of leadership. He said so many elements of the Hmong culture were currently under threat that an attempt needed to be made to preserve the culture. He said:

> We have only been here 10 years. Already our culture has changed forever. In 10 more years fewer people will speak Hmong. Those who do will be a minority within a minority (Personal Communication November 2002).

Corson explains these dramatic changes by arguing formal education looks after the interests of some social groups better than other social groups (Corson 1996, p. 5). There is no denying language acquisition can powerfully influence a minority community. Although second language acquisition and formal education have no doubt benefited the Hmong in their relocation to Australia, it has occurred at a cost to their traditional social and cultural beliefs. Within the 10 years the Hmong have lived in north Queensland it
would be fair to say many aspects of their family and social structure have been changed forever. As one elderly Hmong Cairns resident said:

For 300 years our culture did not change. Then we came to Australia. The 10 hour flight was travelling forward in time 300 years. Our culture has survived war, hunger and poverty but we don’t think it will survive the changes that have happened in Australia (Personal Communication November 2002).

Conclusion

This paper only touches the tip of an extremely complex cultural iceberg. However, it demonstrates that although second language acquisition does assist the integration of ethnic communities in Australia, there can be a subtle but destructive social and cultural price to pay. For the Hmong of north Queensland the extent of this price is still evolving. However, through the implementation and use of English as a second language, long held traditions have been rendered redundant and outdated. It is difficult to predict where this complex reinvention of Hmong culture in Australia will lead. The signs though are not good for those within the community wanting to hold firm to their 300-year-old traditions. Although second language acquisition is not the only factor responsible for these revolutionary-like social, family and leadership challenges, it has been revealed in this paper that it does play a significant role. Although ethnic groups do not live in a vacuum, it would seem many of the traditions have been sucked from the grasps of community leaders in north Queensland. Many of these tradtional cultural elements, such as speaking Hmong, are considered crucial elements for maintaining Hmong identity. English, as Glanville Price put it, is a killer language (Nettle & Romain 2000, p.5). Although that emotive view might be extreme, the case of the Hmong in north Queensland demonstrates English as a second language
can display killer qualities. English has for many first and second generation immigrants ‘killed’ the desire to speak Hmong. The spill-over effect of this has ‘killed’ knowledge of Hmong tradition and social structure, which is intrinsically linked to the structure and content of Hmong language. As has been argued in this paper, second language acquisition has provided many benefits for the Hmong, while at the same time contributing to an undermining of social leadership traditions. Given that linguistic diversity is considered a measure of cultural diversity the second language acquisition problems of the Hmong in north Queensland create serious issues for education, social and cultural policy-makers in a multicultural nation like Australia.
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