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AUTHOR Allendoerfer, Cheryl
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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study examined how learning English and becoming more literate in the dominant discourse affects the identity or self-concept of Vietnamese immigrant students, and how new discourse may be created as students negotiate multiple literacies. It was conducted in a Seattle area high school and focused on 22 Vietnamese students in an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) program, all of whom had lived in the United States for one to four years. Data were gathered using observation, informal conversations, a photography and writing project undertaken with the students, and formal interviews with students, teachers, and administrators. Analysis explored several issues: how students perceived their ethnic identities; what "Americanization" means to the students, their parents, and their teachers; how definitions of the concept differ among the groups, and the conflicts that may arise therefrom; and whether immigrant students need to identify with the dominant discourse or majority culture to succeed in American schools. Results challenge the assumption that assimilation means adopting elements of the new culture alongside the native culture, and suggest that a third culture is constructed with elements resembling elements of the first two but fundamentally different from either. Contains 18 references. (MSE)

CREATING "VIETNAMERICAN" DISCOURSE: ETHNIC IDENTITY IN THE ESL CLASROOM

Cheryl Allendoerfer
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Since the early years of public education in the United States, issues of language and education have been discussed and debated, particularly in regard to immigrant students. It is generally agreed that proficiency in English is crucial for success in our society; however, for non-native-English speakers, the path to such proficiency is a complicated one. Various groups of immigrants have come to the United States over the years, bringing with them a wide range of experiences and language skills. For these groups, English proficiency has been and continues to be an immediate and very visible hurdle to their adjustment and success in society. When viewed in a broad sense, proficiency or literacy in the dominant language involves not only learning vocabulary and grammar, but also being able to move fluently within and against the dominant culture. Language use or mastery can indicate and define one's position in society, marking individuals who are able to successfully manipulate the dominant language, modes of speaking, and cultural forms. From this perspective, it becomes important to take into consideration the ways in which children from immigrant families position themselves in society, construct their identities in these positions, and how these factors are related to their literacy development and overall academic achievement.

As immigrant students become more proficient in English and the mainstream culture their sense of ethnic identity often becomes complicated, creating internal conflicts as well as barriers to their achievement and overall success. The educational system requires fluency in the dominant language and culture for success, and teachers often assume that immigrant students need to assimilate into the mainstream culture, identifying as Americans, in order to succeed in school and society. However, the students do not necessarily make the same assumptions, and the idea of becoming completely "American," at the cost of losing their native identity, is troubling to both the students and their parents.

Because our schools, as reflections of the larger society, place so much value on the correct usage of the majority group's language, culture, and ways of being in the world -- or the dominant discourse, immigrant students do need to master this discourse in order to succeed. The question, then, is whether they have to *identify* with the culture that accompanies that discourse. That is, must they call themselves "American" in order to participate fully and succeed in our society? Can one truly be fluent in a discourse without identifying with it? Will the hierarchy of our race-conscious society pose barriers to their access to the mainstream discourse, since they will always appear as outsiders to the white mainstream culture? Most discussions of these questions, and of immigrant students' adjustments, revolve around examinations of the process and degree of assimilation. Even studies which reject the inevitability of complete assimilation and focus instead on other strategies of adaptation are for the most part still built upon the assumption that adjustment to a new society and culture is a relatively linear process with a clear end point: people move from Culture A to Culture B, and they adopt certain parts of Culture B while retaining certain parts of Culture A, as best fits their needs. However, in this study I will question this assumption and propose some alternate ways of viewing and discussing such adaptation processes.

Theoretical Framework

To explore language and identity, I attempt to look at these concepts in a way which captures their broad cultural meanings, interrelations, and roles in social hierarchies. Language learning and literacy should be seen not solely as the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar rules, but also as the mastery over or fluency in the appropriate ways of using a language within a particular setting. Becoming literate requires mastering the appropriate behaviors, ways of being, and cultural knowledge which facilitate communication. Communicating fluently in a language involves presenting oneself in a manner which is

both understandable and appropriate for a particular context. Context determines how one should speak, and turn how one speaks presents a particular version of one's identity.

My discussion of these issues is framed by the theories of James Gee (1989a, 1989b, 1992), Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986, 1993; Dentith, 1995; Gardiner, 1992), and Pierre Bourdieu (Fowler, 1997; Thompson, 1991). Gee's concept of "discourses," Bakhtin's "speech genres," and Bourdieu's concepts of "linguistic capital" and "official language" all address the culturally- and socially-embedded nature of language and literacy.

Gee (1989a) states that "what is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but *saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations*," which he calls "discourses" (p. 6, italics in original). He further defines discourses as "ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (1989a, p. 6-7; see also Gee, 1992). Certain discourses have more societal status than others, and Gee (1989b, 1992) calls these "dominant discourses," which correspond to the dominant groups in society. Using the concept of discourses makes it possible, even necessary, to view language learning, literacy (or literacies), and identity issues as integrated components of a complex whole.

The importance of context and an individual's place within that context in regard to language use is addressed by Bakhtin's notion of "speech genres." Bakhtin (1986) writes that, "Each separate utterance is individual of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*" (p. 61, italics in original). Each setting contains a unique set of speech genres available for use. However, an individual may not be able to use the most appropriate speech genre because she has not had the opportunity to learn it, or to become fluent enough to use it properly. We have a relative amount of freedom in our speech and in our

choice of genre, but to some extent our expression in constrained by social settings and our positions within those settings.

Bourdieu (Fowler, 1997; Thompson, 1991) also views language as a social phenomenon, and emphasizes the power relations inherent in language use. He focuses on how modes of speech serve as "capital" in society's "linguistic market," and calls the most prestigious or "profitable" linguistic form the "official language." Much like Gee's "dominant discourse," this official language becomes legitimized and normalized by societal forces, and is a significant key to success in mainstream society.

The students in my study arrived in the United States with no, or in some cases very little, knowledge of English. They entered school here without having had the opportunity to develop "legitimate competence" in the official language, dominant discourses, or appropriate speech genres, putting them at a great disadvantage in the academic and social hierarchies. These students' initial lack of legitimate competence may exclude them from the culture of the school, and many consequently block their access to the paths to success.

As they become more proficient in English and more fluent in the necessary discourses, they should have a greater ability to move into and engage in the school environment. Using new speech genres or manipulating new discourses will give them new positions in the social context, both in term of their chances of academic success and their sense of identity. In regard to identity, being positioned differently in the school setting may give them a new perspective of themselves, and others may also view them or define them in new ways. As their language use changes, so do their identities in particular settings. As students begin to gain a better grasp on the appropriate speech genres, they will be able to shed the "unsuccessful" labels given to them by other, and they can begin to express their identities in ways which others can understand. These identities themselves may change, however, because becoming more fluent in a new genre or discourse does not

simply provide a neutral vehicle for expressing an existing identity. Rather, the use of new modes of speech repositions the individual within the setting, creating a new set of possibilities or parameters for the identity/ies which may be expressed through each genre. This repositioning and reconstructing of identities is central to this study, particularly as this process is experienced by this particular population.

Research Questions and Methodology

In this study, I examine how learning English and becoming more literate in the dominant discourse affects the identity or self-concept of Vietnamese immigrant students, and how new discourses may be created as students negotiate multiple literacies. In order to understand these issues, I ask the following questions: How do the students perceive their ethnic identities? What does "Americanization" mean to the students, their parents, and their teachers? How do the definitions of this concept differ among these groups, and what conflicts might be caused by such incongruities? Do immigrant students need to identify with the dominant discourse or majority culture in order to succeed in American schools?

The perceptions of others, such as teachers and peers, may not always correspond to the students' own perceptions of themselves, and this has a significant impact on how the students are positioned in school and other social settings. Taking this factor into consideration, my primary interest is in the students' own definitions of themselves, how and why these definitions may change in connection to language learning, and how such changes can affect the students' academic and social success.

In order to answer these questions, I conducted an ethnographic study in a high school, which I call Northside, near Seattle, Washington, during the 1997-98 school year. I focused on a group of twenty-two Vietnamese students in the English-as-a-second-language (ESL) program, all of whom had lived in the United States for between one and four years. This research included classroom observations, both in ESL and mainstream

classes. I also conducted formal, tape-recorded interviews with students, teachers, and administrators, and took notes on several house of informal conversations with students and teachers. In addition, I conducted a photography project, for which the students were given disposable cameras and were asked to show me "their worlds" and "who they are" through photos. I discussed each student's photographs with him or her individually, and I also asked them each to do a more in-depth writing exercise about one of their photos. The intention of this project was to provide the students with a non-verbal means of conveying their perceptions of identity, since the English language was perhaps not their most comfortable form of communication.

The data for this study consist of notes from my observations, transcripts of interviews, the students' photographs, and academic "artifacts" such as the students' report cards and writing samples. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded in order to find significant patterns. The photographs and the students' discussions of them were also coded in the same way. Academic records were analyzed in regard to overall academic achievement and as indicators of engagement in or alienation from ESL and mainstream classes.

For this paper, I will highlight the photography component of the research, exploring how the combination of this methodology with more traditional methods, such as observations and interviews, added a dimension to my understanding of the students' experiences not possible with any one of these methods alone. Photographs have long been used in ethnographies, but in a rather different manner. Ethnographies often include photographs as illustrations, showing the reader "typical" scenes from the cultures under study. These photos are usually taken by the researcher, intended for an audience of readers in the researcher's own society. Photographs such as these are used as supplements to the written text, meant to add visual details to descriptions of people or settings. The underlying assumption at work is that photographs are neutral windows through which reality can be seen. However, photos taken by a researcher, an outsider to

the context with a specific perspective and agenda, are not at all neutral. Indeed, no photos are simply straightforward replications of reality; rather, they contain multiple layers of meaning which must be extracted and examined.

In conducting this photography project with the students, my intention was to change the traditional position and function of photographs in ethnographic texts. Rather than using photos taken by myself to show people and events as seen through my eyes, the photos included and referred to in this study were created by the students themselves. I have attempted to let the students show me the significant parts of their lives, instead of making assumptions about what was important and meaningful.

The intended audience of these photos is also different than that of photographs used as illustrations. Just as spoken utterances are shaped by their intended audiences (Bakhtin, 1986), the creation of these "photographic utterances" was influenced by the students' knowledge that I would see every photo. Although the students did enjoy having the photos for themselves and sharing them with their friends, the structure of the project and my instructions to "show me who you are" are likely to have affected the composition and creation of the resulting photographic narratives.

As sources of data, the students' photographs contain many layers, which I have attempted to uncover in my analysis. These photographs are not simply illustrations to accompany the written text, nor are they clear, unambiguous representations of the students and their worlds. Rather, these photos, what they depict, the circumstances surrounding their creation, and their meanings to the photographers are rich sources of information.

In analyzing photographs, some of the same terminology used to discuss language and speech can be applied. Although they are non-verbal, photographs do constitute a form of expression, or a "mode of discourse." Photographic images can be interpreted as discursive practices which, like spoken or acted discourses, are situated within social structures and are shaped by societal and cultural forces.

The standard perception of photographs is that they are direct representations of reality. In taking photos, we assume that we are capturing exact likenesses of people or objects. As Shapiro (1988) observes, the photograph

> is thought to be an unmediated simulacrum, a copy of what we consider the 'real.' Indeed, the photograph is usually treated as so unproblematically 'real' that the grammar of discussions of photographs tends to approximate the grammar of face-to-face encounters: 'this is John' is an intelligible and appropriate utterance whether one is introducing someone to John or showing them a picture of John (p. 124).

It is easy to think of photographic images as objective, "true" representations, or exact duplicates in a miniature, two-dimensional form. In fact, people have been perceiving photographs in this way since the nineteenth century, when the discovery of photography provided the means for the mechanical reproduction of the "real" (Crary, 1990; Missac, 1995). These reproductions became very popular, and as Walter Benjamin wrote in 1931, "Every day the need to possess the object in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes more imperative" ("A Short History of Photography," quoted in Rochlitz, 1996, p. 152). Today, photographs have become increasingly commonplace in our society, and we continue to understand and respond to these reproductions as if they were in fact indistinguishable from the "real."

However, stopping at this type of interpretation misses several important layers of meaning held by photographs. The images of the "real" which are conveyed through photographs are mediated by the practice of photography, which necessarily alters reality both in the taking of the photo and in the viewing of it by others. Shapiro (1988) asserts that we must recognize "the institutions, actions, and episodes through which the real has been fashioned"(p. xii). The photos taken by the students would not have been produced without the combination of certain factors, and each image should be seen as representing the end product of a chain of events and circumstances unique to a particular setting and moment in time.

The students' photographs provided information which often enhanced, or at times contradicted, the understandings gained from interviews and observations. The

contradictions in particular highlighted for me the value of adding this method of inquiry to my research process and giving the students an additional medium for telling their stories. By not only hearing what the students said and watching what they did, but also seeing what they wanted me to see, I feel that I gained a more comprehensive picture of the complex ways in which various elements of the students' lives fit together, and the ways in which these elements worked to create the discourse within which the students functioned.

Ethnic Identification

Ethnic identification, although difficult to define concisely, in central to one's understanding of oneself. A wide range of concepts of ethnicity can be found in the literature on this topic, including the static, strictly bounded notion of ethnicity as biologically inherited traits; a conflation of ethnicity and nationalism; emphases on political groupings; and views of ethnicity as a dynamic, changing set of symbols and strategies. Many perspectives on ethnicity are rather narrow in scope and do not allow for rich, multidimensional understandings of ethnic identity. As Proschan (1997) asserts, "scholars and analysts ought to be able to conceive of ethnicity and ethnic identity as both subtle and supple, simultaneously primordial and situational, at once fixed and fluid"(p. 106). Along similar lines, Nagata (1981) argues that, "Ethnic identity then is a unique blend of affective, expressive and basic ties, sentiments and loyalties with (sometimes blatantly) instrumental, calculated, political interests, and the latter are explained and given meaning by the former"(p. 112).

In this study, a dynamic, fluid view of ethnicity will be used, emphasizing a sense of connectedness to a larger group, as well as the ongoing processes of identity construction and the ways in which people understand and position themselves within their cultural contexts. In short, ethnicity is dynamic and fluid, and is constantly under construction. This type of broad, flexible view of ethnicity will hopefully provide the

space for the multiple possible ways in which the students may perceive and present their identities.

Because this concept is not easy to pin down, it was not surprising that the students had difficulty articulating exactly how they felt about their identities. Nevertheless, I attempted to understand the students' own perceptions of their ethnic identities as clearly as possible through both explicit and implicit expressions. In our interviews, I specifically asked the students how they would describe themselves: as Vietnamese, American, or both. The terms "Vietnamese" and "American" are loaded with multiple, divergent meanings; therefore, I used these terms without defining them and let the students tell me what the terms meant to them, and why they chose particular identifications.

In addition to these explicit statements, the students' ethnic identities, or identifications with particular ethnic groups, were often revealed in their actions and in their photographs. Both in and out of the classroom, I observed numerous behaviors and interactions which could be interpreted as expressions, whether conscious or unconscious, of identity or identification with particular groups or cultures. In addition, the photographs taken by the students showed how they wished to portray themselves to me, and these portrayals often included elements which associated them with certain groups or cultures.

In the interviews, about two-thirds of the students stated that they identified as Vietnamese, while the remaining third said that they were some combination of Vietnamese and American. The Vietnamese-identifying students felt quite strongly about their ethnicity, and most gave several reasons why they would always remain Vietnamese and would never feel that they were completely American, despite the fact that they were making certain adjustments in order to live in the United States. The other students, however, had more difficulty articulating how they felt about their ethnicities. In describing themselves, these students discussed ways in which they felt that they had changed since moving to the United States, ways that they felt different from Vietnamese people living in Vietnam, anxieties about things they were forgetting or losing, as well as

desires to change even further. Whatever their feelings of identification, the students' words and actions expressed the complexity of their ethnic identities and the impossibility of summarizing their ethnicities with simple labels.

Vietnamese Ethnic Identification

Many of the students felt very strongly about their Vietnamese ethnic identity, which they often expressed to me verbally in interviews and conversations, as well as in their actions and in their photographs. In the interviews, I asked the students direct questions about their ethnic identities, and many of them responded along the lines of the following excerpts:

> *I always feel like Vietnamese. I still feel Vietnamese in my heart.* Always *Vietnamese.*
> - 11th grade girl, 2 years in the U.S.

> *English, I can know it better, but my language is Vietnamese language. I can't forget the language. I am Vietnamese person, it is my country.*
> - 10th grade boy, 2 years in the U.S.

> *I consider myself as all Vietnamese. I think it's because I love my culture, and I want everybody to know that I'm a Vietnamese person.*
> - 10th grade girl, 3 years in the U.S.

In their photographs, the Vietnamese-identifying students repeatedly showed me Vietnamese elements of their worlds. For example, in the photographs, whether taken in or out of school, almost all of the faces that appear are Vietnamese, indicating that the students socialized with other Vietnamese students quite frequently, in various settings, and that they were comfortable enough in these social groups to bring along their cameras and take pictures.

Another symbol of Vietnamese culture which seemed to be a prominent part of many students' lives was the Buddhist altar. Photo after photo showed these altars in the students' homes, either as the intentional subjects of photos or, more frequently, appearing in the background, in living room corners or above bookshelves or fireplaces. Behind

families posed on couches, students doing homework, or parents eating dinner, the groupings of thin candles, small golden Buddha statues, and photos of ancestors can be seen. These altars were perhaps relatively invisible to the students taking the photos, as they have become part of the familiar, everyday environment. However, to me, an outsider to their home worlds, the altars immediately caught my eye as something not often seen in mainstream, Anglo American households.

The students also showed me their identification with Vietnamese culture by photographing other recognizably Vietnamese things, such as food or clothing. Fuzzy close-ups of plates of vegetables and rice, shots of long tables spread with bowls and platters in preparation for a party, and photos of families gathered around dinner tables all illustrated the importance of Vietnamese food in their daily lives.

Traditional Vietnamese clothing also appeared frequently in photos. This type of clothing was not an everyday part of the students' lives, and in fact, dressing in the latest American styles was very important to them, as one would expect of any American high school student. However, when asked to tell me about themselves, several of them showed me photos of themselves or family members dressed in the traditional Vietnamese style. Frequently, traditional Vietnamese clothing means the *ao dai*, which is the traditional clothing for women over the age of about thirteen. An *ao dai* is a mid-calf-length tunic, often made of silk, with long sleeves and a high neck, which is worn over long, loose, white pants. It fits the body closely around the torso, and is slit on both sides up to the waist. Some of the girls had photos taken of themselves wearing *ao dai*'s, dressed up specifically for these photos, and one boy took a photo of his parents dressed up for a special occasion, with his father wearing a Western-style suit and his mother wearing a blue silk *ao dai*. Because this type of clothing is not part of the students' daily lives, especially at school, they apparently made special efforts to present *ao dai*'s in their photographs, indicating a desire to highlight their Vietnamese identification.

As evidenced by the frequent appearance of Vietnamese symbols in these students' photos, their feelings of identification as Vietnamese and their ties to that culture were quite strong, and important enough to them for them to want to express those feelings to me. The value of the photos is highlighted when one considers that these symbols were never present in the school context, and without the photographs the students would not have been able to convey their Vietnamese identification in such a vivid manner.

The students' own explanations of their photographs also suggested their identification with the Vietnamese culture and community. When I asked them to choose one photo and write about what it meant to them, several of the students chose photos which showed elements of Vietnamese culture, and in their paragraphs they discussed the importance of their families' backgrounds and traditions.

One student, a tenth-grade girl named Thanh, chose to write about a photo of an ornate statue inside the local Buddhist temple. She had talked to me earlier about how her religion always made her feel strongly Vietnamese rather than American, because most Americans are not Buddhist. About the photo, she wrote:

> This picture symbolize for my religion. That was Buddhism. When I go to the temple I have strange feeling. Like I feel pure and I shouldn't make a mistake or something bad. And that place is a place for repent something you did. The Buddha teaches us: If you did something bad you should repent and stop that. If you didn't something bad that happens to you in the future. Someone didn't believe that so they keep doing but I always believe what the Buddha teach me.

For Thanh, choosing this photo and briefly explaining what Buddhism meant to her may have been a way of showing me a part of her self or her life that was important to her, and which distinguished her from the majority American culture. Although Buddhism is not an exclusively Vietnamese tradition, Buddhist practices were an inseparable part of the culture in which many of the students, like Thanh, grew up, and they strongly associated this religion with their lives in Vietnam.

In one case, a symbol of Vietnamese culture became the subject of a photo as well as a starting point for a narrative on life in Vietnam. Xuy, an eleventh-grade boy, chose to

write about a photo of a Vietnamese hat. In the photo, the hat sits upturned on the kitchen table in Xuy's family's home. The wide, cone-shaped hat is woven of straw, and colorful strips of cloth are attached on each side to be tied beneath the chin. By choosing this photo, Xuy emphasized the importance of Vietnamese culture in his life, and made an effort to convey these feelings to me.

In Xuy's written explanation of the photo, its meaning to him comes across even more clearly. He wrote:

> When you go somewhere to make a new life, do you remember some thing have pass in your life? I do have. The reason I chose this picture because it made me remember all the peasant. In Vietnam everyone wear this hat. I don't know what is English language call it. But that very close to every peasant. Why is important to them? Because it can keep out of sun burn. When you at the farm, the sun so hot, they used this hat to keep out of it. Another reason this hat is special hat, I think only Vietnam have. In Vietnam everyone can wear it, doesn't matter male or female. When we went to U.S.A. we took one with us to remember the peasant, or to remember home, how they look like, and what were our work like.

The hat is clearly out of its usual context, and has become more symbolic than functional for Xuy and his family. Yet it is this symbolism which is important for Xuy, and provides a tangible reminder of his past life in Vietnam and his present Vietnamese identity.

In contrast to the "Vietnamese-looking" hat, the photo chosen by another student looked at first glance like a typical "American" scene. However, after reading the student's written explanation, it became apparent that for him it was a representation of his ties to Vietnam. Vuc, a tenth-grade boy, chose a photo of himself sitting on a chair in his family's apartment, holding a guitar. To me, looking through my mainstream American eyes, this looked like any American teenager playing around with a guitar, and I thought that maybe Vuc was trying to look American. However, Vuc's paragraph told a different story:

> Although my country is a small country in Asia, but the music of this country is not small. Everybody can sing, even a five years old kid. That's why beside my school time, I practice my singing, try to write my own songs, play guitar or do something that relate to music. In Vietnam, music is the best thing to do for my people after school time or working hard.

In choosing this photo and writing this paragraph, Vuc revealed a piece of himself which he considered to be very Vietnamese and which tied him to Vietnam, but which was not obviously Vietnamese to the casual observer.

Paragraphs like Vuc's caused me to realize that expressions of Vietnamese identification may not look exactly the way that I, as a mainstream American, expect them to look. I was reminded once again to re-examine my assumptions and let the students tell me what it meant to be Vietnamese through the words, actions, and images that made up their narratives of identity.

Vietnamese and American Identification

Although all of the students identified as Vietnamese to some extent, many of them emphasized that they were not "just Vietnamese," and thought of themselves as some combination of Vietnamese and American. For example:

> *I'm say Vietnamese and American both. Because right now I live in American, but I am from Vietnamese. So I am Vietnamese and American both.*
> - 9th grade boy, 1 year in the U.S.

> *Half-half. Because I was born in Vietnam, and I live there for, like, twelve years. And I been here, like, three years, and I get used to it, and I know that I am going to live here forever.*
> - 10th grade girl, 3 years in the U.S.

> *I think I have three parts. Two parts Vietnamese, and one part is American.*
> - 10th grade girl, 2 years in the U.S.

For these students, claiming some amount of identification with American society and culture was important, more so than for the Vietnamese-identifying students. This sort of hybrid identification is called "Vietnamese and American" here rather than "Vietnamese-American" because of a distinction made by the students themselves. To the students, "Vietnamese-American" meant someone of Vietnamese descent who had been born in the United States. Vietnamese-Americans were perceived as being fluent in English and in the mainstream American culture, which distinguished them from the immigrant students. The

students felt a division between themselves and American-born Vietnamese people which was difficult to define. More than just language proficiency, they felt that there was a vague difference in behavior or personality between American-born and Vietnamese-born people, which kept them from feeling like a unified, homogeneous group. Thus, rather than using the simple but inaccurate Vietnamese-American label, these students gave longer explanations of their identities, discussing how they felt Vietnamese in some ways but American in other ways.

As with the Vietnamese-identifying students, the Vietnamese-and-American-identifying students expressed their identities through their photographs in various ways. For example, they showed their desires to identify in part as "American" by highlighting cultural symbols such as clothing, sports, or other material objects associated with the United States. In one photo, two boys are posed in one boy's bedroom, tangled around each other in friendly headlocks. They are both dressed in styles currently popular among American teenagers, and similar outfits were often seen in the halls at Northside High. For example, one boy wears a baseball cap turned backwards on his head, baggy khaki pants, and a t-shirt bearing the red, white, and blue "Tommy Hilfiger" logo (a very popular brand at Northside High School that year). In another photo, a boy is caught in mid-air, leaping off of a rock wall. He is wearing a red basketball jersey, shorts, and big, white gym shoes, and is holding a basketball up with one hand as if he were going for a slam dunk. A third photo shows two boys in a shopping center garage, posed next to a shiny, white BMW. I was told that this car did not belong to either of the boys, but it was their "dream car." All of these photos portray the students fluently using symbols of the dominant discourse found at school and in popular American culture. Trendy clothing, popular sports, and expensive cars all have a certain status in the dominant discourse, and by portraying themselves connected to these symbols, the students demonstrated their knowledge of this discourse, and expressed a desire to identify with it in certain ways.

The case of one girl, Linh, illustrates some of the patterns common among this group of students. In our interview she identified as Vietnamese and American, acknowledging the permanency of her Vietnamese side, but also expressing feelings of having changed in certain ways since moving to America, as well as desires to change further and become even more American. Linh referred to physical characteristics which would always mark her as Vietnamese, stating that, "You go where you will come, but you still be the Vietnamese. You have the black hair and yellow skin. So you always be the Vietnamese." However, despite the finality of this remark, she went on to say, "I *really want* to change. But my parents and my grandparents just say, like, I have to keep doing what I'm doing in Vietnamese." I then asked her how she would change if she could, and she responded, "The way I dress. And speak English." Evidently proficiency in English, as well as fluency in the non-verbal aspects of the mainstream discourse, e.g., clothing, were among the most important symbols of American identity to Linh.

Linh's ideas of how to augment her American identity also came across in her photographs. For one photo, she had a friend take a picture of her in the dressing room at a department store. In this photo Linh is wearing a short, sleeveless dress and black sandals. She is posed in front of a three-way mirror and is surrounded by reflections of herself from all angles. This outfit fit the current mainstream, teenage fashion trend, and similar outfits were often seen in the halls of Northside High. When we discussed Linh's photos, she told me that she and her friends liked to go to the mall and try on "American" clothes and "try to look like Americans." However, they rarely bought these clothes, partly because of the cost, and partly because they knew that their parents would disapprove. According to Linh, many Vietnamese parents are traditional and rather conservative, and they think that the way American teenagers dress is too revealing, too adult, or just tasteless. However, like any teenagers, Vietnamese teenagers apparently do not always agree with their parents, and they often want to dress like their peers.

This photo gains significance when Linh's comments during one interview are taken into consideration. While discussing the differences she perceived between Vietnamese people in the United States and people in Vietnam, Linh used the example of clothing:

> In here we always wear the new clothes, and just change all the time. In my country they wearing every day, they just, like, wearing cotton clothes. But here, you know, sometimes they wear the shirt, like, doesn't have the sleeve, you know? And my parents, they say, 'No, you don't wear that!' And they say, 'Bad! Bad! Don't wear that!' They make me really hurt!

For Linh and her parents, American-style clothing -- and especially sleeveless clothing -- symbolizes some of the differences between Vietnamese and American cultures. In her parents' eyes these differences are negative, and they do not want her to adopt "bad" aspects of American culture.

However, when Linh had a photo taken of herself, which was intended to show me who she was, she dressed in a sleeveless, American-style dress. This photo seems to make the statement that she wanted to be more American, and clothing was one way in which she felt she could make herself look more American on the surface. The fact that the photo is taken in the store dressing room is also significant. Linh can try on the dress, but she cannot buy it and make it part of her everyday wardrobe. She can try it on, but she cannot own it, just as she can try on parts of American culture but cannot at this time really own that identity.

The Vietnamese-and-American identifying students seemed to be very aware of the ways in which others labeled them based on their fluency in visible aspects of the dominant discourse. The students intentionally pointed out their burgeoning cultural fluency to me through their photos, emphasizing the ways that elements of what they perceived as the American world were claimed, adapted, and incorporated into their own worlds.

Whether the students identified as Vietnamese or as Vietnamese and American, the message conveyed most strongly by their statements, actions, and photographs was that ethnic identity is complex and constantly developing, and that simple ethnic labels do not

address the web of thoughts and feelings involved in defining and understanding one's position in the world. The students' expressions of identity also supported the notion that ethnic identity is something which is always under construction, and is significantly affected by one's context. Living in the United States has not only added certain American elements to the students' identities; it has also changed the fundamental nature of their Vietnamese identities. Being "Vietnamese" in the United States is somehow different than being Vietnamese in Vietnam, and being "Vietnamese and American" is more complicated than simply being a mainstream American with Vietnamese heritage. Whatever labels are used in discussing these complex identities, the important point is that these students were defining and naming themselves in ways which did not follow the assumed pattern of linear assimilation, or the mythical path from immigrant to American.

What is "Americanization"?

The concept of "Americanization" emerged as a point where the perspectives of different groups came into conflict. For immigrants to the United States, "Americanization" is a substantial part of adjustment to life in this society. One side of this issue involves the desires of the immigrants themselves to become "American" in certain ways in order to facilitate their entry into society. The other side involves the pressures imposed by mainstream society and the efforts made by institutions such as the school to "Americanize" newcomers. The very concept of "American" is problematic, and the numerous contradictory assumptions surrounding this term can easily cause misunderstandings and conflicts.

For those who immigrate as children, this issue is particularly important. Their identities are still in the early stages of formation and are subject to many influences. Young immigrants are immediately immersed in the school system, where they are surrounded by images of what it means to be American. They are pressured to learn and conform to the dominant discourse, including language and behaviors. At the same time,

they feel pressure from their families to construct identities which may be at odds with what is valued at school. On top of this, like most children and adolescents, they usually want to fit in with their peers, which may match one, both, or neither of the above identities.

In the course of this study, the idea of Americanization arose frequently, brought up by the students as well as by the teachers and administrators. Also, according to the students, their parents were quite concerned with this topic as well. Although these groups used the same terminology in talking about how the students should become "more American" or "Americanized," it became apparent that the definitions or assumptions behind the terms varied significantly. Students, parents, and educators had quite different, often conflicting perspectives on these issues. However, the real problem seemed to be that people were not aware that such a wide range of perspectives existed. Each group operated under the assumption that their definition of "Americanization" was the only possible one, and that everyone shared this view, causing educators, parents, and students to work at cross-purposes. This ultimately left the students caught in the middle, with their families, teachers, and friends pushing and pulling them in different directions as they attempted to figure out who they wanted to be and determine their positions in their new contexts.

Parents' Definitions of Americanization

Since children's first ideas about identity and their positions in the world are likely to come from their families, it is important to consider the students' parents' perceptions of "Americanization" and how these notions were passed on to the students. Although I attempted to interview parents, this was more difficult than I had anticipated, due to the extremely busy work schedules of the parents. Because of these logistical difficulties, my primary information about the parents' perspectives came from the students' comments and their interpretations of their parents' feelings and beliefs.

The students frequently referred to their parents' expectations for them, which included learning English and doing well in school. This was generally the extent of the parents' definition of Americanization, and beyond learning the language, they did not want their children to change in any significant ways. In fact, most parents were very adamant that their children should not lose the Vietnamese language, culture, or ways of behaving, particularly if this meant adopting "inferior" American ways.

Educators' Definitions of Americanization

Like the parents, the teachers and administrators wanted the students to learn English and do well in school. However, their idea of how the students should, or must, change in order to become Americanized was much broader. At the district, school, and classroom levels, educators were concerned not only with the students' English acquisition, but also with their cultural adjustments, assuming that the students needed to look like, act like, and identify as mainstream Americans in order to successfully participate in American society.

According to the District Director of Secondary Learning Support Programs, who oversaw all of the ESL programs in the district, the district's goals for ESL students were English proficiency and "assimilation," "as best they can" and "with the least amount of pain." The Northside High School principal made similar statements about the school's goals for the ESL students, listing English proficiency and "general academic success" as goals, as well as a hope for the students "to be successful citizens, and to be able to survive in American society."

Like the administrators, the ESL teachers were concerned with the students' acquisition of English and their overall success in school and society, equating success with quick and complete assimilation into the dominant culture. However, because the teachers were more directly involved in the students' daily lives and adjustments, they had more specific ideas about what Americanization entailed. In our interviews the teachers

discussed goals such as independence, self-esteem, and "acclimation to American culture," and through their explicit statements and their actions in the classroom they expressed in more detail -- both to me and to the students -- how they believed the students needed to change in order to achieve these goals.

All three teachers valued the students' native languages and cultures and stated that they wished that the students could retain these aspects of their former lives. Nevertheless, the teachers seemed to believe that adjustment to life in the United States required setting aside native identities and fully embracing the mainstream American culture or discourse. As illustrated by one teacher's comment, they seemed to view mainstream American ethnic identity as invisible, and therefore assimilation meant erasing any ethnic identity and becoming "ethnic-less":

> The longer you're here and the better you learn the language, the more you assimilate. Probably it takes many generations to really lose an ethnic identity. . . . Probably the students will always have a lot of ethnic identity. But the longer they're here, the more they'll adopt American customs.

Here, ethnic identity seems to be perceived as something quantifiable, which will (or should) gradually fade away, like an accent or a bad habit.

In short, the educators in this context seemed to have the ESL students' best interests at heart, and in their view the best thing for these students was for them to become as "American," or as "non-ethnic" as possible. The underlying assumption seemed to be that in order for the students to succeed in mainstream society they needed to adopt outward characteristics of the dominant discourse *and* identify with that discourse on a personal level, rather than considering the possibility of changing outwardly without changing inwardly, or the validity of alternate ways of achieving success.

Students' Definitions of Americanization

The students' own views of Americanization were strongly influenced by many factors in their worlds, including the expectations of their parents, the explicit requirements

and implicit expectations of the school, and the models of acceptability promoted by the social worlds in which they moved. The students mentioned numerous characteristics which they associated with being American, including English proficiency, physical and behavioral traits, and cultural symbols. Although these lists of what made a person American were extensive, the students' notions of how they themselves would become Americanized were much more restricted, and they had definite ideas of how they should or should not change.

The students' definition of Americanization fell somewhere between that of the parents and that of the educators. Contradictory to their parents' desires, the students did wish to change in certain ways beyond mastering the English language. However, these changes were not as extensive as those encouraged by the teachers. Unlike the teachers, the students seemed to make a distinction between the personal and public, or internal and external spheres of their lives. They believed that it was possible to adopt American characteristics on the surface for others to see, in order to facilitate entry into mainstream society, without completely changing their inner selves. While the parents were hoping that their children would remain completely Vietnamese, and the educators were trying to help the students become completely American, the students were working on their own type of Americanization which fit neither of these models. Rather, the students' notion of Americanization is consistent with their expressions of ethnic identity, and corresponds to a new way of being in American society that is neither totally Vietnamese nor totally American, but is a new creation which can perhaps be called "Vietnamerican," for lack of a more accurate term.

"Vietnamerican" Discourse

Most discussions of immigrant students' adjustments build on the assumption that adjustment to a new society and culture is a relatively linear process with a clear end point: people move from Culture A to Culture B, and they adopt certain parts of Culture B while

retaining certain parts of Culture A, as best fits their needs (see Clifford, 1997). However, what I have seen in the course of this study appears to tell a different story. A more accurate model might be that people come from Culture A to Culture B, and then create Culture C. Culture C has elements resembling parts of both A and B, but these elements are fundamentally different in C than they are in A or B. Elements from A must be altered in order to exist within the new context, and elements from B are always changed in the process of their incorporation into C.

As members of Culture C, people themselves are also different in certain ways from members of Cultures A or B. Natives of Culture B distinguish newcomers from those who are native-born, basing these distinctions on a variety of physical and behavioral attributes. Newcomers are not accepted as true members of Culture B, nor are they any longer true members of Culture A. If these immigrants were to return to their native Culture A, people there would sense that the returnees were somehow changed by their time spent in Culture B, distinguishing them from those who remained in Culture A (a sentiment expressed repeatedly by my informants). In regard to ethnic identification, members of Culture C may feel ties to both Culture A and Culture B, but their "home" identity, and their most fluent discourse, are based in Culture C.

Applied to this study, Culture A would be the traditional Vietnamese culture as practiced in Vietnam; Culture B would be the mainstream, dominant culture in the United States; and Culture C would be the new, "Vietnamerican" culture or discourse created by Vietnamese immigrants. The existence of a "Culture C" became apparent to me as I studied the students' photographs in combination with the interviews and observations. At times the students' statements to me were not congruent with their everyday actions and interactions, and I had difficulty placing their ethnic identifications into neatly defined "Vietnamese," "American," or even "Vietnamese-American" boxes. What I saw did not seem to be simply a hybrid of Vietnamese and American cultures and/or identities, or a straight adoption of parts of Culture B into Culture A. Although pieces of Vietnamese and

mainstream American culture were represented, often in the same photograph, they were somehow altered and used together to construct a new, distinct way of being in and interacting with the world. In other words, there appeared to be a new, "Vietnamerican" discourse at work, in which the students were fluent, and which provided an alternate, yet valid way of moving through American society.

Both Vietnamese and mainstream American cultural symbols appear in the photos; however, these symbols carry a different significance and meaning within the Vietnamerican discourse than in their original contexts. For example, the Vietnamese hat featured in one photo is physically the same hat that it was in Vietnam. However, in the context of a Vietnamese family's apartment in the United States, the hat no longer functions as a practical accessory which is known and used throughout society. Instead, it has become a signifier of Vietnamese culture and a reminder of a past way of life. Similarly, wearing trendy clothing is not necessarily a conscious statement of American ethnic identity for mainstream American teenagers; however, for Vietnamese teenagers in America, these same clothing styles are clear markers of American, as opposed to Vietnamese, identity, and wearing such clothing makes a strong statement about an individual's fluency in the mainstream discourse. Cultural symbols such as these are not merely objects which can be removed intact from one culture or discourse and implanted into another, and, along the same lines, adaptation to a new context is not simply a matter of cutting and pasting bits of discourses. Rather, the process of adaptation involves a fundamental transformation of elements from various discourses and the construction of a new, legitimate discourse.

All of the cultural elements discussed here, whether they originated in Vietnamese or mainstream American discourse, are now pieces of a Vietnamerican discourse, and contain meanings based on their positions in that discourse. As such, these elements are not quite Vietnamese, nor quite mainstream American. The students' identities can also be described in this way, since even the most strongly Vietnamese-identifying students stated that they felt somehow different from Vietnamese people in Vietnam, and those students

most interested in identifying as American claimed some amount of Vietnamese identification.

A common assumption has been that people in positions like that of these students are in a transitory stage, or a state of "becoming." Members of C-type discourses are often perceived as being "no longer A," but "not yet B." However, I argue that C-type identities and/or discourses are in fact legitimate ways of being, and are ends in themselves. Rather than viewing members of these discourses as being in some sort of identity limbo, or lacking full literacy in a "real" discourse, we should instead recognize that they do indeed have fully valid identities which correspond to a legitimate, even if unfamiliar, discourse. Rather than assuming that individuals must identify, both internally and externally, with the dominant discourse in order to succeed in society and to be considered literate, perhaps we should consider the possibility of simultaneous literacy in multiple discourses, or the notion that identifying with one discourse does not exclude the possibility of successful participation in another discourse.

The findings presented here have significant implications for teachers who work with immigrant and/or limited-English-proficient students. As discussed earlier, the assumptions of educators and immigrant students in regard to how the students must change in order to succeed in mainstream American society are often contradictory, causing tensions and conflicts as the students negotiate their identities in their home and school worlds. These divergent assumptions seem to stem from different understandings of what it means to be literate in the dominant discourse. While teachers are pushing students to "lose their ethnicity" in order to become successful Americans, students are resisting this pressure and learning to manipulate the dominant discourse on their own terms. The students do need to be given the opportunity to develop linguistic and cultural fluency; however, this does not appear to require a personal identification with the dominant culture and discourse.

Perhaps some tensions could be eased if educators were to re-examine their assumptions about what it means to be American and what it means to succeed in American schools, and recognize the legitimacy of alternate ways of being literate in the dominant discourse. Rather than focusing on the failure of students to meet socially-constructed and biased ideals, or match arbitrary models, educators should examine their own perceptions and search for the sources of the assumptions, stereotypes, and cultural models which shape the learning environment and frame the students' constructions of themselves. The question may not be why immigrant students struggle in the American school system, but rather why the school system fails to see these students as legitimate, successful participants.

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