

# Teachers as Language Students: Hmong, Lesson 1

Annie C. Jaisser  
University of California, Berkeley

This paper reports on an introductory, competency-based Hmong language lesson given to instructors of students of Southeast Asian origin. The goal of the presentation was to give teachers first-hand experience at being language students so as to enhance their understanding of what their own students were going through while learning English, and to discuss a few linguistic and cultural features Hmong shares with other languages of the region as well as the participants' reactions to the lesson. The motivating factor underlying the format of this presentation was the fact that teachers typically get lectured at during teacher conferences, and are not reminded often enough of what it's like to be "on the other side."

## I. Hmong lesson.

In order to simulate the real life situations students of English have to cope with, I asked the instructors to put their pens down and to rely solely on auditory and visual channels for comprehension. I then started the presentation in Hmong:

- (1) Nyob zoo. Kuv lub npe hu ua Annie Jaisser. Kuv tuaj tim California tuaj.

[nɔ<sup>55</sup>zɔ̃ŋ<sup>33</sup>ku<sup>24</sup>lu<sup>55</sup>mbe<sup>33</sup>hu<sup>33</sup>ua<sup>33</sup>anizeseɛɐ  
ku<sup>24</sup>tua<sup>52</sup>ti<sup>31</sup>?kælifɔ̃ɲiətua<sup>52</sup>]

Ideally I would have liked to continue in Hmong exclusively, but in order get the audience to participate, I had to quickly explain the format of the presentation in English. After doing so, I proceeded with the lesson. There were three members in the audience by the names of Judy, Marybeth, and Carol who had studied Hmong previously, so the total immersion approach was facilitated by the fact that I could use them as guinea pigs to act out the lesson with me before turning to participants with no previous exposure to Hmong.<sup>1</sup> I turned to Judy, and motioned her to join me in front of the audience, saying *Los ntawm no*<sup>2</sup> accompanied by the typical Southeast Asian beckoning hand motion.

After she joined me, we had the interchange given in (2a):

(2) a.

Annie: Kuv lub npe hu ua Annie. Koj lub npe hu li cas?

Judy: Kuv lub npe hu ua Judy.

Annie: [toward the audience] Nws lub npe hu ua Judy.

I repeated the same interchange with Marybeth (MB) and Carol as seen in (2b-c), and then tried it on several non-initiated participants as exemplified in (2d). With repetition where necessary and positive reinforcement in the form of *Zoo heev!*,<sup>3</sup> the participants readily became competent at stating their names.

b.

Annie: Koj lub npe hu li cas?

MB: Kuv lub npe hu ua Marybeth.

Annie: [toward the audience] Nws lub npe hu ua Marybeth.

c.

Annie: Koj lub npe hu li cas?

Carol: Kuv lub npe hu ua Carol.

Annie: [toward the audience] Nws lub npe hu ua Carol.

d.

Annie: Koj lub npe hu li cas?

Jim: Kuv lub npe hu ua Jim.

Annie: Zoo heev!

[toward the audience] Nws lub npe hu ua Jim.

After enough participants had developed competency in stating their names I turned to my three guinea pigs again, and exchanged (3a-c) in turn with each of them:

(3) a.

Annie: Kuv tuaj tim Berkeley, California tuaj. Koj tuaj qhov twg tuaj?

Judy: (Kuv)<sup>4</sup> tuaj tim Sacramento tuaj.

Annie: [toward the audience] (Nws) tuaj tim Sacramento tuaj.

b.

Annie: Koj tuaj qhov twg tuaj?

MB: (Kuv) tuaj tim San Diego tuaj.

Annie: [toward the audience] (Nws) tuaj tim San Diego tuaj.

c.

Annie: Koj tuaj qhov twg tuaj?

Carol: (Kuv) tuaj tim Madison, Wisconsin tuaj.

Annie: [toward the audience] (Nws) tuaj tim Madison tuaj.

Then I asked non-initiated participants the question, and practiced developing competency in stating their place of origin with them, which they achieved, as exemplified in (3d):

d.

Annie: Koj tuaj qhov twg tuaj?

Jim: (Kuv) tuaj tim New Jersey tuaj.

Annie: [toward the audience] (Nws) tuaj tim New Jersey tuaj.

For the next two competencies I used a set of overhead projector transparencies (reproduced as A1-6 and B1-3 below) in addition to the three guinea pigs. Pointing at one of the two children on transparency A1 and saying *me nyuam* to illustrate the child concept, I had the following interchange with Judy:

(4) a.

Annie: Judy, koj muaj pes tsawg tus me nyuam?

Judy: (Kuv) Muaj ob tug me nyuam, Paul thiab Sandi.

Annie: [toward the audience, pointing at the two children in A1]  
(Nws) Muaj ob tug me nyuam, Paul thiab Sandi.

#### Transparency A1

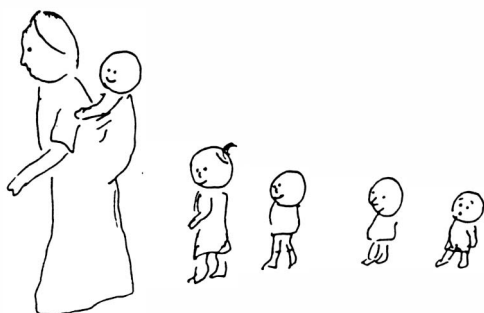


To expose the participants to the first five numerals, I pointed at the woman and her five children in A2 below, and counted outloud several times à la Southeast Asian, i.e. starting with the little finger and working up to the thumb, as seen in (4b):

b.

Annie: [pointing at the woman in A2, counting her children]  
(Nws) Muaj ib, ob, peb, plaub, tsib tug me nyuam.

## Transparency A2



Then I went back to practicing inquiring about number of offspring as I had done with Judy in (4a), this time with Marybeth and Carol. While the interchange with the former provided the opportunity to introduce negative statements (4c, illustrated in transparency A3), the one with the latter allowed for a cultural value to be humorously conveyed (4d-e):

c.

Annie: Marybeth, koj muaj pes tsawg tus me nyuam?

MB: (Kuv) Tsis muaj.

Annie: [toward the audience and pointing at A3]  
(Nws) Tsis muaj.

## Transparency A3



d.

Annie: Carol, koj muaj pes tsawg tus me nyuam?

Carol: (Kuv) Muaj ob tug me nyuam, Melissa thiab John.

Annie: [toward the audience and pointing at A1 again]:  
(Nws) Muaj ob tug me nyuam, Melissa thiab John.

e.

Annie: Judy muaj ob tug me nyuam,  
Carol muaj ob tug me nyuam:  
nyob hauv Asmeslivkas teb, sawv daws muaj ob  
tug me nyuam!<sup>5</sup>

Via transparencies A1-3 above and A4-6 below and repetition where warranted, the non-initiated audience members readily developed competency at manipulating low numbers in the context of stating how many children they had, or at answering with a negative statement, as the case may be.

Transparency A4



Transparency A5

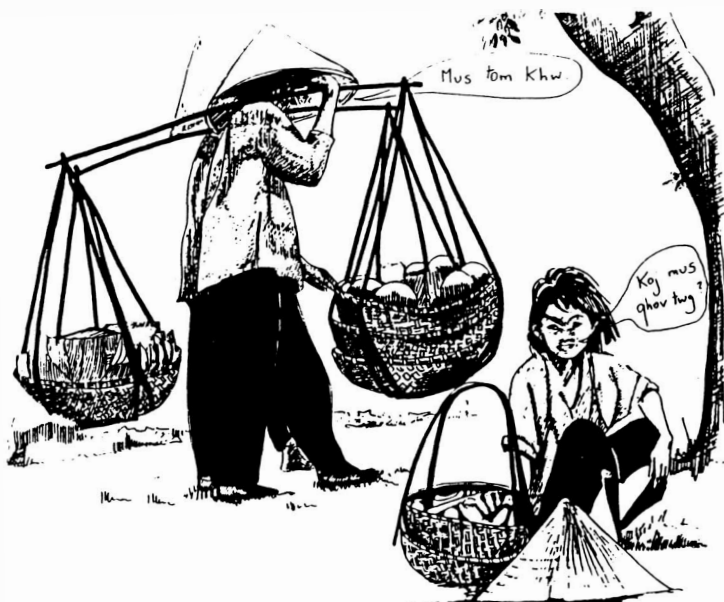


Transparency A6

The final competency involved practicing a formulaic greeting routine found throughout Southeast Asia (see discussion in II), and did not rely on the use of guinea pigs. To illustrate it I used transparencies B1-3 below, and pointed at the relevant characters and places as I went along. To enhance understanding, I pretended to leave the room and go home for (5a), and pointed at B3 to convey the market concept for (5b).

- (5) a. Koj mus qhov twg?  
 [pointing at the house in B1] (Kuv) Mus tsev.  
 [toward the audience] (Nws) mus tsev.
- b. Koj mus qhov twg?  
 [pointing at B3] (Kuv) Mus tom khw  
 [toward the audience] (Nws) Mus tom khw.





Transparency B2



Transparency B3

Throughout the lesson the instructors espoused their “instructees” role wholeheartedly. One of them went as far as replying ‘I wasn’t listening’ when called upon, which provided me with another opportunity to practice negative statements: I substituted *Tsis zoo* for the positive reinforcement phrase *Zoo heev* I used the rest of the time. The concept of *Tsis zoo* was grasped instantaneously.

## II. Discussion of lesson and participants’ reactions.

The audience gave me immediate assurance that, albeit on a small scale, they had *vividly* experienced what their students go through on a much larger scale, and that I had thus achieved the first goal of the presentation. To accomplish the second one, namely to discuss areal features Hmong shares with other languages of the Southeast Asian Sprachbund, I handed out a summary of the data in (1-5) accompanied by a set of questions designed for individual, dyadic, or small group reflection. These questions, along with a summary of the responses to them as well as pedagogical implications, appear below.

### *Question 1:*

What do you notice about the way the language is written down as opposed to the way you remember hearing it?

### *Summary of discussion:*

There are “silent” final consonants, i.e. there are consonant letters at the end of words that the participants had not heard pronounced during the lesson. With some prodding the group figured out that these were actually tone marks which needed to be converted to tonal values.<sup>6</sup> This realization stimulated reflection on the relationship between spoken and written English, and led to the conclusion that, aside from the challenging tone marking in Hmong, the relationship between sound and grapheme had a much better one-to-one correspondence in the latter than in the former. Thus relating the spoken and the written (in both directions) would be a great challenge for students of English.

### *Question 2:*

How are negative statements formed?



*Summary of discussion:*

By inserting the negative marker *tsis* before the verb to be negated, as illustrated in (4c). Other Southeast Asian languages have negative markers which work in the same fashion, and are easily acquired by non-native speakers. Raising the issue of negation led to an awareness of the intricacies of negation in English, and a better understanding as to why this is a difficult point to master for speakers of Southeast Asian languages.

*Question 3:*

How are wh- questions formed? Where are the question word and the answer located in relation to each other?

*Summary of discussion:*

The wh- question word appears in the same slot as the answer, as seen in (4a, d) which translates literally as 'You have *how many* children?', 'I have *two* children.' The pattern is also illustrated in (2a-d) where the name of the person appears in the same position as *li cas* 'how?',<sup>7</sup> as well as in (3a-d) and (5a-b) where the location phrase appears in the same slot as *qhov twg* 'where?'

This way of forming wh- questions is another feature Hmong shares with neighboring languages. Since the question word and the response to it appear in the same slot, speakers of Southeast Asian languages may experience word order difficulties in mastering English wh- questions, which are characterized by a fronting of the wh- question word.

*Question 4:*

What do you notice about the pronouns in the data?

*Summary of discussion:*

The participants made the three desired observations, namely,

a) that the same pronouns can fulfill the subject role and the possessive pronoun role as seen in 'my, your, his/her name is X' in (2) and 'I, you, s/he come(s) from X' in (3) where *kuv*, *koj*, and *nws* are used in both cases. I supplemented this observation with the fact that the same set of pronouns can also be used to fulfill the object function, as seen in *Judy pom kuv, koj, nws* 'Judy sees me, you, him/her.' Again, this is an areal feature so that speakers of Southeast Asian languages will often

experience difficulties in acquiring the three different sets of pronouns English has.

b) that gender differences are not coded in the third person singular pronoun, as they are in English, so that *nws* is used for 'he', 'she', and 'it'.

c) that subject pronouns are optional when understood from the context, as seen in the interchanges in (3-5). The same is true of object pronouns, as seen in *Judy pom (kuv, koj, nws.)* 'Judy sees me, you, him/her.' Speakers of neighboring Southeast Asian languages also have the option of leaving out subject and object pronouns when they are recoverable from the context. This accounts for the fact that, for instance, 'I like it.' may be rendered as 'I like.', and 'I don't have any.' as 'I don't have.' by speakers of Southeast Asian languages.

#### *Question 5:*

Communication in a foreign language involves more than words and grammatical structures; what did you notice in this respect during the lesson?

#### *Summary of discussion:*

Again, the participants made the desired observations, namely,

a) that the body language used to count and to beckon someone over to one's side is not the same in the two languages. I pointed out that the body language I used during the lesson was not only typical of Hmong, but of other languages of the region as well, thus reinforcing the need to do cross-cultural body language exercises in class in order to heighten students' awareness of the differences, and to reduce the countless occasions for misunderstanding (or worse).

b) that there was more to the interchange in (4) than practicing numbers, namely that asking questions about children and family reflected an important cultural value in Southeast Asia. In the same vein, I explained that 'Where are you going?' in (5) was not merely a way of introducing location words, but rather represented the greeting of choice throughout Southeast Asia when encountering someone along the way. This points to the need to ask questions which are not only culturally relevant, but also appropriate.

Equally important is the study of the answers to these questions; just as speakers of English know not to get into the intricate details of their lives when greeted with 'How

are you?', speakers of Southeast Asian languages have a small set of standard answers to the seemingly intrusive 'Where are you going?': '(I'm going) home, to the market, to run errands, out for fun.'

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I wish to emphasize the fact that trained guinea pigs are not necessary to carry out this lesson. A total immersion, competency-based lesson can be carried out successfully with novices.

<sup>2</sup> 'Come over here.'

<sup>3</sup> 'Very good!'

<sup>4</sup> The parentheses here and subsequently indicate that the subject pronoun is optional.

<sup>5</sup> 'Judy has two children, Carol has two children: in America everybody has two children!'

<sup>6</sup> In the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) writing system, the final consonants symbolize the tones as follows:

<i>Final RPA Consonant</i>	<i>Tone Value</i>	<i>Tone description</i>	<i>Examples in RPA + translation</i>
-b	55	high level	pob 'lump'
-j	52	high falling	poj 'female'
-v	24	mid rising	pov 'to throw'
-	33	mid level	po 'pancreas'
-s	22	low level	pos 'thorn'
-m	31?	checked, short low falling	pom 'to see'
-g	42	breathy falling	pog 'grandmother'

<sup>7</sup> The *wh-* question in (2) translates literally as 'Your name is called *how*?'

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