The Rhetorical Making Of A Personhood: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey Into Literacies And Subjectivities

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THE RHETORICAL MAKING OF A PERSONHOOD:
A VIETNAMESE WOMAN’S JOURNEY INTO
LITERACIES AND SUBJECTIVITIES

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To my parents:

Mr. Phạm-Quang-Hiếu and Mrs. Đỗ-Thị-Khanh

And to my father’s birth year, Year of the Horse, and UTEP’s 100th anniversary, 2014
THE RHETORICAL MAKING OF A PERSONHOOD: A VIETNAMESE WOMAN’S JOURNEY INTO LITERACIES AND SUBJECTIVITIES

by

VIETHANG THI PHAM, Master of Arts in English and in Language and Linguistics

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
December 2014
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During my eighteen years in American academe, I have been so blessed to study with many professors who have taught me with their hearts, shown me the limitless horizon, and told me that I-M-POSSIBLE at times when my confidence was very thin and fragile. For their invaluable knowledge, teaching, advice, and support, I am profoundly grateful.

THANK YOU, the English Department’s Selection Committee at UTEP, for giving me a titanium chance to realize my daring dream of being a Ph.D. with my background as a mature ESL student.

THANK YOU, Dr. Maggy Smith, for warm-welcoming me when I was but a distant applicant. Your constant kindness and support stayed in my heart and fueled my efforts.

THANK YOU, Dr. Helen Foster, my dissertation director and a DREAM POSSIBILIZER, for being my colossal support. Your tireless assistance, mentorship, and devotion nurture me in full flourish.

THANK YOU, Dr. Kate Mangelsdorf, my dissertation second reader and a mine of resource, for helping me refine my voice, one class after another. Your heartful feedback, advice, and understanding energized my learning and research.

THANK YOU, Dr. Lex Williford, my dissertation third reader and a rescuer, for accepting the invitation to be on my committee long before we met. Your suggestions, coated in rich-layered knowledge, invited me to shine through highlights that reflected my true selves in my voice.

I am equally THANKFUL to Dr. Lucia Dura for her genuine kindness and heartful support and to ALL my professors in the Rhetoric and Composition Program at UTEP and at California State University, Long Beach, especially my English thesis committee--Dr. Melissa
Fiesta, Dr. Elisabeth Young, and Dr. Lori Smuthwaite--, my Linguistics project advisor, Dr. Malcolm Finney, and Dr. Robert Hertz and Dr. Helen Chau Hu, for opening my eyes and mind with your teaching, encouragement, and words of wisdom.

THANK YOU infinitely, Dr. Fiesta, for showing me the horizon and for helping me to find my voice, with which I have begun exploring the universe of possibilities. The doctoral program would have never been in my mind had you not introduced it to me; I thus keep thanking you. THANK YOU, Dr. Finney, your genuine heart and mentorship have brought me back to your office years after my graduation and made the Linguistics Department a place to learn, grow, and remember.

I very much appreciate the cohort-ship of my classmates and the helpfulness of the English Department’s staff and UTEP’s, as well. My cohort’s friendliness and collaboration have made learning enjoyable. THANK YOU, Byron and Lou, for helping me out when I needed, and, Lindsay and Betty, for embracing me into your family circle.

A very special THANK YOU is reserved for David Fabish, Dean of Liberal Arts at Cerritos College; your strong support throughout the years has helped me grow professionally. A hefty THANK YOU is saved for my godson/friend, Tom Hong Do, for your ALL TIME bestest godson-ship and friendship during our pursuit of higher education since we were classmates in Fall 2003 at California State University, Long Beach; your never-take-a-day-off support has smoothed every stage of my advance. Another hefty THANK YOU is for my childhood friend, Trần-Dinh-Hồng, for your super duper niceness; your over-half-of-a-century friendship and caring have sibling-nized us, and your cooking-from-the-heart has always brought me home. Another hefty THANK YOU is offered to Mr. and Mrs. Vũ-Ngọc-Tín and their children, Tuấn-Hoa, Hiền-Vinh, Tiến-Vân, Nga-Tuần, and Ngọc-Phú, for their warm embrace
and robust support; while your family’s history colorizes to my narrative, your largesse ensures
and sustains my support for scholarship and professional development-s. Another hefty THANK
YOU is for Lulu Flores and her beautiful-soul family; your kind embrace before, during, and
after my stay in El Paso and my schooling at UTEP has gilded my doctoral student’s experiences
and made them prized memories.

I would also like to thank all of my students; your struggles, efforts, and trust have
pushed me to strive, so I can be a good teacher whose perseverance and success inspire you to
keep dreaming, trying, and reaching.

And I gift-wrap a FABULOUS appreciation for my TERRIFIC tutees/godchildren,
Sylvia, Sophie, Vincent, Nicolas, and Spencer. Your love, embrace, and respect warm my heart,
whereas your hard work, responsibility, and willingness to learn confirm the value of my
teaching approach and invite me to soar. I’ve enjoyed assisting you during your pursuit of a
future profession, and witnessing your growth as a student and a person is such a privilege.
THANK YOU for decorating my life and my family’s with your love and gazillions laughter.

My as-immense-as-infinity THANK YOU is reserved for my parents, the home/nest of
my Vietnamese cultural self. Wherever you are, in this world and beyond, you are ALWAYS in
my GRATEFUL heart. THANK YOU for teaching me love, humanity, and equality. I have
been living every word of your teaching, “công Cha, nghĩa Mã, ơn Thầy,” [meaning one is
indebted to one’s father for his rearing, one’s mother for her nurturing, and one’s teacher for
his/her teaching]. THANK YOU for being the role models of sacrifice, patience, and
perseverance. I am EXTREMELY HONORED to be your daughter, and I am VERY PROUD to
carry your last name into American academia to be recognized as one of its scholars.
My as-thick-as-love-through-the-test-of-time THANK YOU goes to my husband/half, Đỗ-Vũ-Hoàng, and my son/prize, Đỗ-Vinh-Hoàng. Your immeasurable love, silent sacrifice, and ceaseless support have enabled me to reach my goal and to materialize my dreams, one at a time. None of my successes would be possible without you; because of you, I M POSSIBLE. Hence, all of my successes, the solid proofs of our endurance in all sizes, are OURS, indeed.

THANK YOU, each and all of you with every beat of my blissful heart.
ABSTRACT

In the form of an autoethnography, an examination of “the private troubles of individuals” and their connection to “public issues and to public responses to those troubles” (Denzin viii), this dissertation demonstrates the impact of a country’s history on its people’s lives. According to Bourdieu’s theory, changes in field trigger changes in habitus and capital; this interrelatedness “offers an epistemological and methodological approach to a historicized and particular understanding of social life” (Thomson 81). From an eyewitness’ perspective, this writer/ethnographer narrates her stories/experiences in Việt-Nam and in America to shed light on her cultural and linguistic struggles, her transitions through endurance, and her individual perseverance as a Vietnamese baby boomer immigrant in American society and especially in academia. While stories/experiences are personal, the historical background is not. This work contributes to the field of Rhetoric and Composition by introducing a voice/a writing that belongs to the Vietnamese baby boomer immigrants whose displacement experiences—social, academic, and personal—have not been heard as a voice of the first generation, in the first-person singular pronoun.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS...........................................................................................................v

ABSTRACT.................................................................................................................................ix

TABLE OF CONTENTS..............................................................................................................x

LIST OF FIGURES....................................................................................................................xii

Chapter

INTRODUCTION.........................................................................................................................1

1. LOOKING BACK, CONTEMPLATING, AND MOVING FORWARD: THE
   INTERWEAVING OF LIVES AND HISTORY.................................................................7
   1.1 Looking Back: My Eyes on History – Then .........................................................7
   1.2 Contemplating: Intellect in Pause..............................................................50
   1.3 Moving Forward – Rebuilding a New Start....................................................62

2. LIVING PRESENT IN PAST IMPRINTS......................................................................67
   2.1 My Academic Struggles in the Upper Secondary Level...............................80
   2.2 Santa Ana College (SAC): Introduction to English Academia....................98

3. STEPPING INTO THE ENGLISH WONDERLAND..............................................110
   3.1 In Academe: Stepping In.................................................................110
   3.2 In Academe: Stepping On.................................................................134
   3.3 In Academe: Stepping Up.................................................................159
   3.4 Of Special Interests...........................................................................169
4. THE TOGETHERNESS OF SELVES IN REACHING FOR THE STARS.................173
   4.1 Learning in Exploring.................................................................173
   4.2 Living Dreams..............................................................................185

5. GARDENERS AND GARDENS: SOWING AND REAPING..........................208
   5.1 Setting a Mark: A Teacher’s Guidance...........................................208
   5.2 Teaching in Spite of Linguistic Flaws..........................................214
   5.3 “Story as the Landscape of Knowing”: Autoethnography..............226

EPILOGUE.............................................................................................................230

NOTES..................................................................................................................233

WORKS CITED....................................................................................................239

APPENDIX..........................................................................................................253

CURRICULUM VITA............................................................................................262
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 0: Autoethnography continuum ................................................................. 3
Figure 1: Map of Việt-Nam ...................................................................................... 8
Figure 2: South Việt-Nam’s flag ............................................................................. 9
Figure 3a: Transferring refugees to Skagit from French LSM .............................. 15
Figure 3b: USS Montague (AKA-98) ..................................................................... 15
Figure 3c: A helping hand ....................................................................................... 16
Figure 4: Buddhist monks’ protest against religious discrimination .................. 19
Figure 5a: The Wooden Fish (Mồ) ....................................................................... 21
Figure 5b: The Mala Beads (Tràng hạt ) ............................................................... 21
Figure 6a: Áo bà ba: A female Vietnamese traditional and casual top ................ 22
Figure 6b: Xích lô/cyclo transportation in Saigon, South Viet-Nam .................... 22
Figure 7: Trái tim bất tử (An immortal heart) ..................................................... 25
Figure 8: Map of the Tet Offensive ....................................................................... 28
Figure 9a: Roof of American Embassy, Saigon R. South Vietnam ....................... 39
Figure 9b: Vietnamese evacuation from the Defense Attache Compound ............ 39
Figure 9c: Marines throwing Vietnamese back over the American Embassy wall, Saigon, R. South Vietnam ............................................................ 40
Figure 10a: Honda 50cc ....................................................................................... 43
Figure 10b: Honda 50cc ....................................................................................... 43
Figure 11a: The 10th grade female students at Gia-Long ....................................... 44
Figure 11b: Male students in school uniform ......................................................... 45
Figure 12a: Vietnamese Boat People 1982 .......................................................... 59
Figure 12b: Vietnamese Boat People .................................................................... 59
Figure 13a: Majestic Hotel in Saigon 1966 ........................................................... 73
Figure 13b: Continental Hotel in Saigon

Figure 13c: Givral Café/Restaurant

Figure 13d: Brodard Café/Restaurant

Figure 14a: The Saigon Sports Circle

Figure 14b: CSS logo Cercle Sportif Saigonnais

Figure 14c: Cigarette Advertisement

Figure 15a: Female Vietnamese students in their school uniform/outfit

Figure 15b: Female Vietnamese students in their school uniform/outfit

Figure 16a: California State University, Long Beach

Figure 16b: California State University, Long Beach

Figure 16c: Earl Burns Miller Japanese Garden of the California State University, Long Beach

Figure 16d: Earl Burns Miller Japanese Garden of the California State University, Long Beach

Figure 17: Robert Kaplan’s 1966 Diagram

Figure 18a: From “Bhuttan on the Border.”

Figure 18b: From “Bhuttan on the Border.”
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INTRODUCTION

Due to the invisibility of its presence and the absence of its voice, a lack of knowledge about the Vietnamese baby-boomer immigrant generation and its representatives exists in the history of rhetoric. Those who were born between “1946, the end of World War II, and 1964” are baby-boomers (CNN Library). The statistics regarding Cambodian, and Laotian refugees in 1975, indicates that of 130,000 Vietnamese refugees; “8 in 10 were under age 35,” and “48 percent were female,” leaving room for assumption, not assurance, that a large number of these Vietnamese refugees belonged to the baby-boomer generation (Marsh13, 14). This autoethnography, based on my knowledge and experiences of one of the baby-boomer immigrants and of the first generation, is meant to help remedy this situation, or at least raise awareness about it.

Standing in the academic world, awash in theories and perspectives, I have not only learned mainstream language behavior, but also my place/role in it. During this study and exposure, I have experienced growth in my English speaking/writing/reading/thinking abilities, which is always a layered and faceted process. I have also experienced the constant academic and cultural interferences/transfers/exchanges/negotiations between my Vietnamese academic and my American academic selves, between my Vietnamese cultural self and my naturalized American self, and between my private self and my professional self. These ceaseless interactions have shaped and nurtured the multiplicity of my subjectivity during my exposures.
and introductions to multiple literacies, informal and formal alike. I have noticed the uniqueness of each of my selves, but they are all inter-related/connected/dependent in their poly-self-ness. In fact, this formation and growth have captured my attention, interest, and study, presented in this research.

I have always been interested in people’s literacy narratives, but I have noted from years at school and pages of readings that research/study focused particularly on non-native speaking, adult students, especially the Vietnamese baby-boomer immigrants, and their English learning experiences, remains scarce. From my own experiences, I could not recall reading a series of articles or any longitudinal study focusing on this group’s members as its sole subject. Being a student of rhetoric, I have learned that the study of rhetoric gives us a way to practice meta-cognition regarding the realities we build and which simultaneously build us. Guided by this concept, this research, grounded in my own standpoint, I believe, contributes to the understanding of this particular group and testifies to the formation/shaping of their multiple self/subjectivity via their struggle/learning/striving in the American academic and socioeconomic settings.

Embracing Denzin’s assertion, “[a] life is a social context, a fictional, a narrative production” (ix), I choose autoethnography to present my dissertation because the texts in an authoethnography “are political, functional, collective, and committed” (2014, 78). Defining autoethnography based on its constituents, “auto, ethno, and graphy,” in order, an autoethnography is a “form of research [that] is conducted and represented from the point of view of the self, whether studying one’s own experiences or those of one’s community”; it examines “how culture shapes and is shaped by the personal”; and more than “the means of disseminating knowledge and experiences,” writing in this research method is to generate,
record, and analyze data (Carnagarajah 260). In using autoethnography, I aim at not only sharing my language learning experiences, but also examining and analyzing them for a deeper understanding of myself and those who have shared my social/cultural/political background. While “narrative may be wholly constitutive of personhood,” (MCilveen, 2), a narrative, as Denzin (2014) defines, is a life-in-words, spoken or written, and “the materials of the authoethnographic project resolve, in the final analysis, into the stories persons perform with and for one another” (4). In telling my stories, I “seek to find meaning for [myself] in the experiences [I] call [my own]” in different social, political contexts (6).

Moreover, autoethnography (see Figure 0), as Faith Wambura Ngunjiri et al. describe it, “is a qualitative research method that utilizes data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context. This research method is distinctive from others in three ways: it is qualitative, self-focused, and context-conscious.” My voice, one of the Vietnamese baby boomers’, “is on the continuum, […] and represents a mix of artistic representation, scientific inquiry, self-narration, and ethnography”; my writing reflecting “the point at which [I am] on [the] continuum could also be in flux, changing according to the particular writing project and [my] goals [as a] researcher,” as Ngunjiri et al. point out. And as a researcher, I try to make sense out of each point on the continuum in order to connect with my audience via effective communication.
In this five chapter dissertation, chapter One revisits Vietnamese history back to 1954 with the signing of the Geneva Accord and the southern immigration as the country’s significant historical events. I also address the Communists’ important attacks, which took place in the Tet Offensives of 1968, 1972, and April 1975, since these periods of the Vietnam War all led to the fall of Saigon in April 1975 and the Vietnamese historical exodus in the following decades. By recalling details of my life as a student in the Republic of Vietnam society, opportunities to leave Việt-Nam before April 1975, and my life in the communist society, I can explain the journey of some Vietnamese refugees and immigrants to America, including mine, and the mindset that has been constructed based on past and present experiences.

In chapter Two, “Living Presence in Past Imprints,” I discuss in detail my academic background, my struggles in the Vietnamese education system, my choice of foreign languages, first French and then English, as the academic requirements, and how knowing French has assisted my English learning. The chapter includes my experiences as a new California resident in 1990 and as an adult ESL student from 1990 to 1992 at Santa Ana College (SAC), where I studied to be a licensed pharmacy technician. I address the first stage of my academic quest for knowledge in higher education when I returned to SAC in the summer of 1996 to take classes required for transfer. The chapter concludes in notes about my transfer to California State University Long Beach in spring 2002, the second stage of my journey and the beginning of my getting-to-know rhetoric and my exploration of the world of rhetoric.

In chapter Three, “Stepping into the English Wonderland,” I talk about my experiences as a transfer student and my profound interest in grammar and vocabulary. I also discuss how the
awareness of my self and my subjectivity as an immigrant and a non-conventional English learner affected my decision of majoring in Rhetoric and Composition, and how this multiplicity adds to my English voice/self, expressed in my thinking/writing in the upper division and graduate courses at Long Beach California State University.

In chapter Four, “The Togetherness of Selves in Reaching for the Moon,” I discuss my growth, evolvement, collaboration, and/or conflict of my multiple subjectivities in the doctoral program at the University of Texas at El Paso, and my decision to address these issues as a member of the Vietnamese baby boomer immigrant generation. I also talk about the link between language acquisition and competency, self-empowerment and confidence. In this chapter, I explain the relevance of my dissertation and its contribution to Rhetoric and Writing Studies as a voice of a quiet group/the first generation.

In chapter Five, “Gardeners and Gardens: Sowing and Reaping,” I wrap up my learning experiences during a journey through which I have found/strengthened myself and my voice. I discuss how through each stage of being introduced to a variety of literacies, I have recognized my place in it as a lifetime student of rhetoric and as an essayist who continues to learn and be amazed by the value of language and its use through time and space. I focus on my recognition of the presence of my multiple selves and subjectivities and how they function in academe and society, at home and at work. In the conclusion of this chapter, I talk about how the multiplicity of my Vietnamese cultural, American academic, professional, personal subjectivities has been my fingerprints, evidenced in my thinking/writing/expressing/doing as I begin to share what I have learned and known about language and rhetoric with my students. It is a privilege to disseminate/sow the seeds of knowledge.
While divided into five chapters, the dissertation’s theme evolves around the three main periods of my literacy and language acquisition. The first took place in Viet-Nam as I was growing up into a young adult with the imprints of French and then English, my first and second foreign languages, on my Vietnamese cultural and private selves. The second theme involves my ESL immigrant experiences in America, when I was exposed to informal literacies. I call this my transitional phase, because it prepared me to acquire academic/formal literacies. And the third is about American academe when I notice the presence of my American/academic/professional self and the existence of my multiple subjectivities in my daily use of language to communicate, think, and write in various contexts and with different audiences.
CHAPTER ONE
LOOKING BACK, CONTEMPLATING, AND MOVING FORWARD:
THE INTERWEAVING OF LIVES AND HISTORY

1.1 Looking Back: My Eyes on History - Then

I was born in 1951, grew up, went to schools, and lived my childhood and part of my adulthood in Saigon, a southern city, which, up to April 30, 1975, was also the former capital of the Republic of Việt-Nam, RVN (Việt-Nam Cộng-hòa), a short-lived democratic regime (1954-1975). Since my maternal grandmother, my parents, their siblings and cousins all emigrated from the north to the south in the 1940s to seek better economic opportunities, their past experiences and lives in the north were indispensable ingredients of their daily all-topic conversations, casual or serious. Thus, from listening to those talks at home at an early age and later from studying history at school, I learned that in 1954, France and Việt-Nam signed the Geneva Accords, dividing Việt-Nam into two parts, north and south. To all Vietnamese, old and young, more than just “[a] provisional military demarcation line” (Appendix 1), the 17th parallel separated two ideologies, democracy and communism, and their practitioners. Further, the Geneva Accords also specified that “Vietnam would hold national elections in 1956 to reunify the country; the division at the seventeenth parallel, a temporary separation without cultural precedent, would vanish with the elections,” according to Professor Robert K. Brigham’s “Battlefield Vietnam: A Brief History,” a PBS’s document.

Figure 1 shows a map of which the purple part of is North Việt-Nam and part of the Middle that were occupied by the communists whose leader was Hồ-Chí-Minh, and the green
part of the map covering the lower part of the Middle and South Việt-Nam was governed by the non-communist/democratic regime, whose leader was Ngô-Dinh-Diệm.

Figure 1: Map of the dividing Việt-Nam in 1954; Web; 18 Dec. 2013

Growing up, I was taught to love and honor Việt-Nam in its S shape and the Vietnamese flag with its three red horizontal stripes on a yellow canvas. The yellow color represents the Vietnamese skin, the red Vietnamese blood, and the stripes three regions--the north, middle, and south--of the country and their people. During the research process for this writing, I have found information in “A Marine’s Guide to the Republic of Vietnam,” a Fleet Marine Corp Pacific’s document, confirming that the meaning of the Vietnamese flag that I grew up with was taught at school at a young age, and has ever since been embraced; according to this source: “[t]he flag of the Republic of Vietnam consists of three red stripes on a field of gold. Gold is an ancient imperial symbol and red represents the blood streams of the people in North, Central and South Vietnam.” The flag, in Figure 2, thus stands for Việt-Nam and the Vietnamese, and it symbolizes love for family, people, and country.
From Vietnamese legends and history, I have learned that Vietnamese people were children of King Lac-Long-Quân (also known as the "Dragon Lord of Lac" or the "Dragon Lord of the Seas") and Princess Âu-Co (a Chinese immortal descended from the High Mountains). This union brought Vietnamese people, 'Con Rồng cháu Tiên', (dragon’s children, fairy queen’s nieces/nephews), to life; “[a]ccording to the legend, Vietnamese were children of King Lạc-Long-Quân, Dragon of the Seas, and Princess Âu-Co,” in “From the Beginning” of the website Asian Nation. Despite the farfetched nature of the legend, the Vietnamese embrace their origin as much as Britons embrace King Arthur; it might be, as Michael Wood states, that “in the end it is perhaps his myth that is in any case more important than his history.”

Like the Britons and like my fellow Vietnamese, I am very proud of my country’s four thousand plus years of culture and its defiant history filled with resistance, struggles and victories. In his paper, “Vietnam: Cultural Background for ESL/EFL Teachers,” that offers foreign educators a synopsis of Vietnamese culture, Nguyễn-Tương-Hùng, a Ph.D. candidate of Applied Linguistics at Boston University, concisely and effectively condenses the thousands of years of history in several sentences:

During the course of its long history, Vietnam has successfully withstood a thousand
years of Chinese domination (111 BC - AD 939) and almost a century of French colonization (1858-1954) with a short period of Japanese occupation (1940-1945). The country was then devastated by a North-South war for two decades, ending with the fall of the American backed South in 1975 and the proclamation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976.

What Nguyễn-Trương-Hùng has left out of his sentences is the French intention to renew their colonial control over Indochina, including Việt-Nam, Laos, and Cambodia, after the Japanese surrender and withdrawal from Việt-Nam in 1945. French intention, however, faced fierce resistance from Hồ-Chí-Minh, the leader of the Communist Party and its army, Việt-Minh. According to the “Vietnamese Declaration of Independence_1945” (Tobias Rettig)⁴, “[o]n the afternoon of September 2, 1945, …, in Hanoi’s Ba Dinh Square,” Hồ-Chí-Minh, as “the president of the provisional government, …, proclaimed the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam” which has become “the “Socialist Republic of Vietnam” in the presence (1425).

As the Communist Party leader and the president of the North, Hồ-Chí-Minh led the fight from 1946 to 1954. In its document, “The Country: Vietnam,” PBS claimed,

[i]n 1954 Vietnamese forces defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu [a Vietnamese northwest region near Laos’ border]. The Geneva Convention [July 1954] followed, where it was agreed that North and South Vietnam would remain divided until free elections could be held to determine which government would lead the country.

To resolve conflicts, the Geneva Convention and its

[f]inal declaration, dated the 21st July, 1954, of the Geneva Conference on the problem of restoring peace in Indo-China, in which the representatives of Cambodia, the
Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam, France, Laos, the People's Republic of China, the State of Viet-Nam, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America took part [and reached a consensus], according to the online source, “Indochina - Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference on the Problem of Restoring Peace in Indo-China, July 21, 1954,” from The Avalon Project at Yale Law School. The same source also stated that most of the attending parties agreed upon choosing the Seventeenth Parallel, and the first sentence of #6 clearly confirmed its function: “the military demarcation line is provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary.”

Further, according to Vincent Ferraro, the Ruth C. Lawson Professor of International Politics at Mount Holyoke College, under the title, “Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet-Nam, July 20, 1954,” the Geneva Accords consisted of five chapters, I to V (Appendix I). Identified by a subtitle, each chapter includes a number of articles detailing specific responsibilities of and restrictions on both sides, the North and the South. In chapter II, Principles and Procedure Governing Implementation of the Present Agreement, the fourth and last point of Article 14 states, “[f]rom the date of entry into force of the present agreement until the movement of troops is completed, any civilians residing in a district controlled by one party who wish to go and live in the zone assigned to the other party shall be permitted and helped to do so by the authorities in that district.”

To the northerners who were unjustly threatened by the implementation of Nguyễn-Ái-Quốc/Hồ-Chí-Minh’s “Program for Communist of Indochina, 1930,” the content of Article 14 gave them a golden opportunity to migrate to the south where “many people in the south opposed communism and Ho-Chi-Minh,” as pointed out in “Vietnam – History.” Hồ-Chí-Minh’s
program consisted of ten slogans. Number 4 declared a goal “To confiscate the banks and other enterprises belonging to the imperialists and put them under the control of the worker, peasant and soldier government,” while the goal of number 5 was “To confiscate all of the plantations and property belonging to the imperialists and the Vietnamese reactionary capitalist class and distribute them to poor peasants,” as Paul Halsall’s online text, “Modern History Sourcebook: Ho Chi Minh: Program for Communist in Indochina, 1930,” shows.

The program’s slogans corresponded to and underscored the communist ideals which “required supporting the poor against the rich,” evidenced in the notorious Land Reform implementation, as Edwin Moise, a history professor at Clemson University, South Carolina, pointed out in The Vietnam Wars’ Section 3, “The First Indochina War.” Further, in Section 5, “The Aftermath of Geneva, 1954-1961,” the Communist’s 1953-1954 Land Reform campaign was described as a political movement that “[took] land away from the landlords and [gave] it to the peasants” to serve two purposes; the first was to “win peasant gratitude” and to “destroy the economic power of the landlord class, a class with a natural hostility to Communism,” while the second was “[to redistribute] the landlords’ land” and “[to weed] landlords and agents of the landlords out of the Communist Party and revolutionary organizations associated with it.” However, the execution was performed “in a remarkably paranoid and unrealistic fashion” by “[p]oorly trained cadres [who] were indoctrinated with stories of the fiendish cleverness of the landlords and counter-revolutionaries,” and as a result,

any of them became suspicious of everyone; they saw enemies everywhere.

Thousands of loyal Communists were falsely accused of being anti-Communist, expelled from revolutionary organizations, and even imprisoned. Tens of thousands of peasants were wrongly classified as landlords (Moise 1998).
Also on land reform, in his document, “Political and Economic Crisis in North Vietnam, 1955-56,” Balazs Szalontai claims that while China’s 1946-1953 Land Reform led to the execution of hundreds of thousands of landlords, identified as “counter-revolutionary elements,” in 1949, 1.29 millions were imprisoned, and 840,000 remained in jail in 1954. Modeled from that of China, the Land Reform in North Việt-Nam caused no fewer catastrophes, compared to its predecessor. Szalontai adds that “[i]f the number of North Vietnamese victims had been as high as 50,000, then the Chinese and North Vietnamese percentages would have been quite similar,” and laments that “the percentage of Chinese and North Vietnamese political prisoners” was similar to that of executions. Those statistics and other data expose “the extensiveness of the repressive measures the North Vietnamese dictatorship took in 1955–56,” Szalontai insists (402).

The number of 50,000 victims mentioned in Szalontai’s document is also seen in Vietnam: A Country Study, edited by Ronald Cima. Under the subtitle “North Vietnam” in the “Society in the 1954-75 Period” section, Cima indicated,

As a prelude to the socialist revolution, a land reform campaign and a harsh, systematic campaign to liquidate "feudal landlords" from rural society were launched concurrently in 1955. Reminiscent of the campaign undertaken by communists in China in earlier years, the liquidation of landlords cost the lives of an estimated 50,000 people and prompted the party to acknowledge and redress "a number of serious errors" committed by its zealous cadres (2nd par.).

The high cost of life loss associated with the communist cadres’ serious errors apparently led to and magnified the southward migration, Operation Passage to Freedom. In Section 4, “The Geneva Accords,”6 of The Vietnam Wars, Moise alleged, “[h]undreds of thousands of
North Vietnamese, mostly Catholics, did move from North to South Vietnam in 1954 and 1955”; Moise’s words are supported and confirmed by information, retrieved from *By Sea, Air, and Land: An Illustrated History of the U.S. Navy and the War in Southeast Asia*, the U.S. Navy’s document. Indeed, under “Passage to Freedom” in “Chapter 1: The Early Years, 1950-1959” of the document, the Department of the Navy acknowledged the American serious assistance/involvement in a “massive sea lift” migration during August 1954 to May 1955, which took place at Hải-Phòng, a northern port, and Saigon, a southern port and city, and

by 20 May 1955, the Navy had transported 293,000 immigrants, many of them Catholics, who soon formed the core of the anti-Communist segment of the population in South Vietnam. In addition to 17,800 Vietnamese military personnel, the American flotilla carried south 8,135 vehicles and 68,757 tons of cargo, much of it material provided to the French under the Mutual Defense Assistance Program (2nd par.).

The number of immigrants varies from one document and article to another. For instance, as Bryan Caplan points out, “[t]he article on ‘Operation Passage to Freedom’ states: Between 600,000 and one million northerners moved south, while between 14,000 and 45,000 civilians and approximately 100,000 Việt-Minh fighters moved in the opposite direction” (3rd & 4th pars.), yet “[t]he article on the 1954 Geneva Conference gives slightly different figures: 1,000,000 North Vietnamese, mostly Catholic, moved south of the Accords-mandated ceasefire line.... At the same time, 52,000 people from the South went North. Communist fighters were urged to remain in the South in case the election did not go their way” (6th par.).

Nevertheless, “USS Skagit and Operation Passage to Freedom” was known as “[t]he greatest mass evacuation by sea in world history,” and from its link, William R. Park’s pictures-
worth-thousand-words of the northern immigrants during such a journey, captured in Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c, have continued to testify the value of freedom.

Figure 3a:  Transferring refugees to Skagit from French LSM; Web; 15 Jan. 2014

Figure 3b:  USS Montague (AKA-98) – Unloading Refugees from French LSM – US National Archives Photo #(NWDNS-80-G-644449); Web; 15 Jan. 2014
In 1956, a fictional movie, Chúng Tôi Muốn Sống (We Want to Live), a Southern product, portraying the immigrants’ true experiences, was made to glorify the value of freedom and to condemn the atrocity of the communists and their Land Reform. Horrific scenes in the movie broke viewers’ hearts, provoked anger, and intensified opposition against the communists and their policy. For example, in one scene, a crocodile bit off a man’s right leg because he was too exhausted to pull his entire body inside a small boat, while he was crossing a river to escape the communists and was injured by their shots; in another, the accused landlords were stoned, buried in the ground up to their necks, and then beheaded alive. Such a monstrous act was authorized by a panel of communist officials and performed by a laborer who monitored an ox-pulled plow to terminate the victims’ lives. The movie was directed by Vĩnh-Noần, an engineer, and starred in by Lê-Quỳnh, Mai-Trâm, and Thu-Trang, none of whom had ever been in front of a camera. Despite its fictional nature, Chúng Tôi Muốn Sống produced a profound, lasting impact. More than a movie or an art-product, the movie was a political message, “thông điệp chính trị,” depicting events that had allegedly actually happened in North Việt-Nam during the Land Reform movement.
Years after the movie was shown in the southern theaters, my father’s friend who worked at Bộ Thông-tin (the Ministry of Information) in Saigon let him borrow the movie, reformatted and stored in an aluminum, round container to watch at home. When my father used a two-reel projector to show the film, the whole family, some friends, and neighbors wept during those scenes. The fictional characters acted on a fictional script, yet the brutality was real, as real as hundreds of thousands of immigrants, captured in Park’s photos, running to the south in 1954 in hope of living in freedom. Although I did not see the movie until I was ten or eleven and did not watch it again, I have retained its message: freedom was worth dying for, and freedom was a missing component under the communist regime. To many southerners, the movie has become the epitome of anti-communism.

The free general elections, supposedly to have taken place in July 1956, “under international supervision, to choose a government for Vietnam” (n. p.) never occurred. In his “The Geneva Accords,” Moise explains,

[t]he United States and the State of Vietnam had made it clear at the Geneva Conference that they did not like the results of the conference, which recognized Communist control of North Vietnam immediately, and created a likelihood that the Communists would take the South in two years. Both the US and the State of Vietnam conspicuously refused to promise that they would obey the Geneva Accords.

Without the general elections in 1956, Vĩ-tuyến 17 (the Seventeenth Parallel), chosen by the members of the Geneva Conference to be a temporary division, became an official demarcation line of the two political regimes, communist and non-communist, and two governments, the North and the South. The North-South war that Nguyễn-Trường-Hưng has
mentioned was the Viêt-Nam War, involved with and fought by the communist North and the democratic South.

The war, as Moise notes in “The Aftermath of Geneva, 1954-1961,” strengthened in 1959 when the American-backed government of the south, headed by Ngô-Đình-Diệm, the first president of the RVN, whose authority had begun May 1955, was transforming into dictatorship. Responding to such suppression, the National Liberation Front (NLF) resistance in the South was established in 1960. This organization and its members stayed in the countryside, received support from the communists of the North, and got into action inside the borders of the southern land. In his “Battlefield Vietnam: A Brief History,” posted on PBS, Professor Robert Brigham of Vassar College writes that the American government in Washing held Hà-Nội accountable for the presence of the NLF and its “violent attacks against the Saigon regime”; in their documents called “White Papers,” Washington insiders considered NLF “a puppet of Hanoi and that its non-Communist elements were Communist dupes.”

Also in the 1960s, the southern land and its inhabitants, especially the Buddhist monks and their followers, lived through a dark time and bore witness of Ngô-Đình-Diệm’s religious repression. In The Pentagon Papers-The Gravel Edition, Senator Mike Gravel reported,

The [pagoda] raids [on August 12, 1963], themselves, were carefully timed by Nhu to be carried out when the U.S. was without an Ambassador, and only after a decree placing the country under military martial law had been issued. They were conducted by combat police and special forces units taking orders directly from Nhu, not through the Army chain of command. The sweeping attacks resulted in the wounding of about 30 monks, the arrest of over 1,400 Buddhists and the closing of the pagodas (after they had been damaged and looted in the raids).
And Professor Brigham’s notes in “Battlefield Vietnam: A Brief History,” a PBS historical document, further confirmed such a crisis,

Diem’s brother, Ngo-Dinh-Nhu [Diem’s adviser], had raided the Buddhist pagodas of South Vietnam claiming that they had harbored the Communists that were creating the political instability. The result was massive protests on the streets of Saigon that led Buddhist monks to self-immolation. The pictures of the monks engulfed in flames made world headlines and caused considerable consternation in Washington.

In 1963, I was in lớp dè-lực (the seventh grade) at Nguyễn-Bá-Tòng, a well-known and well-established Catholic high school in Saigon. I was old enough to remember that 1963 was a year of suffering for Vietnamese Buddhism, its practitioners and followers. When Diệm’s troops fired at the crowd of Buddhists, gathered to celebrate Lễ Phật đản, Bouddha’s 2,507th Birthday Celebration, on May 8, 1963, in Huế, a central city in Việt-Nam, and killed nine persons, the news upset Buddhists in South Việt-Nam and resulted in countless protests, led by monks and students and joined and supported by innumerable laypeople. Saigon xuống đường [took the streets to protest], seen in Figure 4.

![Buddhist monks’ protest against religious discrimination – Private photo](Web; 15 Jan. 2014)
At twelve years old, I was too young to understand politics, but I did see my grandmother, my parents, and their relatives and friends, who practiced Buddhism, infuriated by the government’s oppression and use of force against the defenseless monks. To support the Buddhist monks and to voice their disagreement with Diệm’s government, my grandmother, my mother, and our neighbors started mustering at Chùa Xá-Lợi (Xá-Lợi Pagoda), a Buddhist pagoda approximately 300 to 400 feet from our house, in the evenings, a couple times a week, to join the monks to pray for a safe and free religious practice.

I remember that in the humid air of the evening and on the mirror-like, spotless tile-floor of the temple’s upper story, where a giant statue of Buddha was adorned in shimmering gold paint and was solemnly rested at the altar, the Buddhists gathered and prayed day after day during the crisis. Behind the Buddha’s head, multiple colored light bulbs, organized in circles going inward out and then outward in, were radiating to form the Buddha’s halo. All who sat on the pagoda’s cool, tiled floor chanted in the Pali language from the prayer books whose backs leaned on the brown painted wooden bookrests in front of them on the floor. They must have earnestly believed in the power of their prayers and in the silent Buddha, whose eyes looked down, not on the ground, but into infinity. My grandmother interpreted Buddha’s looking into infinity as corresponding to His teaching of the impermanent, transient nature of the material in human lives. Although neither I nor many others in the group understood the meaning of the Pali words, such as An Ma Ni Bat Di Hong (Om Mani Padme Hum) [Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus], which were ceaselessly repeated, we were all unified by the determination to fight injustice and to fight for the freedom of religious belief and practice.

The Buddhists’ devoutness, heard in their chants in the crisp, staccato tempo of the wooden fish (see Figure 5a), regularly struck by a mallet in a monk’s hand and seen on the
chanters’ index finger moving with steady intervals on a string of the mala beads\textsuperscript{11} (see Figure 5b), resounded throughout the ornate dome of the pagoda and in everyone’s heart. The monotonous rhythm of prayers, the rhetoric of the powerless, in time transformed into a mighty force of change that brought down the first presidency of South Vi\textec{c}t-Nam, headed by President Ngô Đình Diệm. Yet, it took awhile.

![Figure 5a: The Wooden Fish (Mõ)](image1) ![Figure 5b: the Mala Beads (Tràng hạt)](image2)


Meanwhile, my mother continued to sneak out of the house to be a protester herself. She dressed in a white batiste áo bà ba (see Figure 6a), a traditional, casual daily top and in a pair of smooth black satin pantaloons. She held a bamboo wicker basket in her hand and crossed Lê-Văn-Duyệt Street in front of our house as if she were going to the market as usual. However, from the market, she would call a xích-lô/cyclo (see Figure 6b), a three-wheeled pedaled transportation in Saigon, to take her to where the protesters gathered so she could join them. When she returned home hours later, the basket remained empty!

21
It must have been a miracle that my mother was neither arrested nor attacked by police officers for participating in the peaceful protests during those months. Years later, I learned that several times, my mother suffered tear-gas, but nearby residents took her and other protesters in their houses and let them use the back door to escape. Had my mother been arrested, my father would have bailed her out, yet her association with the protesters would have put my father’s business at risk, since many of his customers were the government’s high-ranking bureaucrats/officers. However, my father never complained about my mother’s involvement in those protests, and since he, too, condemned Diệm’s government for repressing Buddhism, I assume that he supported her fight for the cause.
Without telling my father where she went, my mother must have wanted to protect my father by being able to claim that he knew nothing about her involvement had she ever been captured and interrogated. Without stopping my mother from joining the protesters in her unusually long disappearances, my father must have accepted the risk of being questioned by the authority and losing some important and wealthy customers. With their own choices, my parents sided with the protesters to down the dictator and his dictatorship.

To the Buddhist monks and their followers, prayers and non-violent xuông duòng/protests were their rhetoric in response to violence, the rhetoric of the oppressors/the powerful. When the oppressed did not receive any break, their rhetoric got louder, desperately louder with the help of human life and gasoline.

On June 11, 1963, I walked home after school to see my street, Lê-Văn-Duyệt, filled with people sitting, crying, and chanting. As soon as I stepped out of my parents’ house and my feet touched the cemented sidewalk, I was head-struck and heart-wrenched as my skin crawled by the commotion of the grief-stricken and prolonged wailing of the crowd. The street was heavily packed by the crowd; it stopped me from moving further on either direction, right or left, to see what was going on. There were several young men who climbed on a cemented electric post where elevated, zigzagged steps could take them to the top of the post to see afar off. From their terrifying gasping and screaming, I learned that a monk was self-immolationing at the intersection of Lê-Văn-Duyệt and Phan-Đình-Phùng. Standing at my parents’ house, I was about 100 feet or so away from the intersection. I was close enough to see and smell the black smoke rising and twirling into the sky; a strong scent of gasoline and burning flesh dizzied me and churned my stomach and everyone’s. Dressed in the Buddhist outfit in a hue of smoky, light gray, Buddhist nuns covered the surface of the streets that led to the intersection to prevent the
authority’s intervention with the monk’s self-immolation. Sitting in the lotus position, they all chanted Buddhist prayers in unison. The blending of their crying and wailing with their chanting composed a symphony of despair filled with notes in choking, broken voices. The chanting, crying, and wailing amplified with the fire that was voraciously consuming the monk’s body, fixed in the lotus position, every nano second passing. All sobbed uncontrollably and all bodies convulsed as if they, too, were hurt and burned by that very fire.

The horrifying, shocking reality overloaded my senses’ receptors, and I felt as if goose bumps had coated my entire body and all of my internal vital organs. In the mid-day’s humid air and sultry heat of the 90 degrees Fahrenheit sun of June and with the salty taste of my teardrops on my lips, my eyes saw, my ears heard, and my heart sensed the power of the rhetoric of the oppressed in the unison of their Nam Mô Bồn sư Thích Ca Mâu Ni Phật/An Ma Ni Bat Di Hong (Om Mani Padme Hum). Powered by death and pain, the Buddhist believers were so willing to make the sacrifices to fight for their belief in religious freedom.

Later on, I learned that Thượng-tọa Thích-Quang-Dúc martyred himself to protest President Ngô-Dính-Diệm’s “religious persecution” (Biggs). The photo that captured the grisly scene of Thượng-tọa Thích-Quang-Dúc’s death (see Figure 7), taken by an American journalist Malcolm Browne, made the Vietnamese Buddhist Crisis world news and brought Browne the Pulitzer award. The monk’s choice of death became a model of protest: “[s]ince 1963, 85% of individuals have chosen burning. The imprint of Quang Duc’s action endures,” as Michael Biggs, a sociology professor at the University of Oxford writes in his article, “Self-Immolation in Context, 1963-2012.”
Addressing Diệm’s “religious persecution,” evidenced in his harsh oppression against the Buddhist monks, in his book, *The Vatican’s Holocaust: the sensational account of the most horrifying religious massacre of the 20th century*, Avro Manhattan discloses that Diệm, a Catholic president, and his two brothers, the head of the Secret Police and the Catholic Archbishop, “imposed the religious and political writ of the Church upon a non-Christian culture,” and this imposition led to the monks’ self-immolation; of the 15 million Vietnamese, only 1,500,000 were Catholics.

During the crisis, my father’s business was open as usual, and despite the fact that my parents and my family practiced Buddhism and that a large number of my father’s customers was Catholic, who came to my father’s shop on a Sunday morning after attending mass, my parents maintained a healthy business relationship with their customers. I never heard or witnessed any heated argument on those current issues between my father and those men.

Before President Ngô-Dinh-Diệm’s oppressive policy became the Buddhist population’s public antagonist that forced this population to rise and protest, my family and I had never experienced any religious conflict at home, at school, or in our neighborhood. Some of my parents’ best friends and mine were Catholic. The fact that my parents sent me to Nguyễn-Bá-
Tòng, a Catholic high school, and my kid brother, Mạnh, to Saint-Exupery and then Jean Jacques Rousseau to receive a French education, which was rooted in Catholicism12, clearly indicated my parents’ non-discriminating viewpoint about religions; my siblings and I were raised and grew up in that practice. At Nguyễn-Bá-Tòng, I learned all academic subjects like other students who went to public schools, and I did not even notice who among my classmates were Catholic or Buddhist. However, during the conflict, all schools in Saigon were closed and so was Nguyễn-Bá-Tòng. Twice it closed its door for a whole month to prevent physical damage that could have been carried out by the extremists.

When the city was boiling with clashes between pro-Buddhist protesters and the government, my father asked my mother to take me and Mạnh to Cáp, a beach town 120 kilometers northeast from Saigon, and stay there. While the city’s turmoil slowed down all businesses in the city, it provoked my mother’s mental instability, as her involvement in the protests became more personal to her. It became her religious freedom that President Diệm and his regime oppressed, so it became her fight to right his wrong. Thus the mid-school-year vacation in Cáp, where the turquoise blue ocean and the clear blue sky embraced each other in oneness at the horizon and the waves rushed in and out to play with the sandy shore, nursed my mother’s mind back to normal with nature’s pure beauties. One hundred and twenty kilometers away from Saigon, Cáp lay low like a quiet Buddhist monk wrapping himself in prayers, meditating, and seclusion.

During the daytime, while my kid brother and I enjoyed jumping the waves and running on the sand or baking ourselves on its grainy surface, my mother strolled on the wet sand in bare feet or soaked herself in the salty, cool water of the Pacific Ocean while reevaluating her role in the crisis and its effect on her. From her hazy look, I could never say whether she found an
answer or not. We often stayed at the beach long after the orange-dish sun inched down inside the water and darkness captured the ocean’s surface in its vast, transparent net. We always had dinner at the same restaurant, located on the beach, and then we walked back to the hotel under the starry sky, in the gentle sea breeze that caressed our skin, and in the soothing sound of the crashing waves that lullabied our souls into serenity. I was twelve, and I noticed that being away from Saigon with its warlike atmosphere and living in Càp, my mother found in nature the rhetoric of peace and tranquility, and such rhetoric nurtured her ultra-sensitive mind back to normal. Yet, 120 kilometers back to Saigon, where the clashes were heating up, a different kind of rhetoric, that of the oppressed, was clamoring.

At the peak of their seeking justice, the monks’ self-immolation, like their solemn prayers and non-violent protests, substantiated their rhetoric of the oppressed and eventually led to the coup d’etat that dethroned Diệm and killed him and his brother/adviser, Ngô-Dinh-Nhu, on November 1, 1963. Relying on their non-violent protest, the rhetoric of the oppressed proved to be “useful… because things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites…,” as Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) taught his students many centuries ago (Bizzell & Herzberg 180). And such rhetoric has earned a life of its own and lived on.

While the rhetoric of the oppressed hit a triumphant note in toppling a government, the subsequent change in authority fell flat. In the following years, Saigon and its citizens lived in political chaos. In his “Nguyen Van Thieu, 78; S. Vietnam’s President,” David Lamb revealed that within nineteen months following the coup d’etat that ousted Diệm, South Việt-Nam had ten governments. During that time, the country, especially Saigon, became a theatrical stage where politicians, like bad actors, failed to maintain people’s affection and support, so one after another took the stage only to be de-staged shortly after. Then came Nguyễn-Văn-Thiều, a colonel of the
Army of the Republic of Việt-Nam (ARVN) who, with American assistance, rose up to be a president of South Viet-Nam in October 1967. Meanwhile, outside Saigon, the communists never stopped planning the nation’s unification.

One of their plans of unification was the large scale attack on Tết Mậu-Thân [Year of the Monkey] in 1968. Tết is a Vietnamese traditional celebration of the coming of a lunar new year. Identified as the Tet Offensive 1968, the communist attacks were intended to “explode [South Vietnam] into unprecedented violence”\(^\text{13}\). Also, from Tim Page and John Pimlott’s information, “the planning and preparation for the Tet Offensive went back many months – to July 1967” (359). The plan was gavalnized “over 80,000 Vietcong (Vietnamese Communists) troops,” which emerged from their underground tunnels, to attack almost all metropolitan major cities in South Việt-Nam. American bases in big cities, such as Đà-Nẵng (a port city, northeast of Saigon), and “even the seemingly impenetrable American embassy in Saigon” were targeted.

An online document, *The Tet Offensive*, shows a map of the Tet Offensive attacks whose duration varied from one city to another. This following map (see figure 8) shows the routes of those attacks, led by North Vietnamese troops. In bright red, the routes look like human’s veins; in reality the troops’ advance left a trail of the southerners’ blood.

![Figure 8: Map of the Tet Offensive attack, led by the communists; Web. 01 Feb. 2014](image-url)
While the communist attacks hit many cities and killed many, Huế, the country’s former capital and the most important northern city of South Việt-Nam, received the hardest blow. From January 31 when the communists captured Hue until February 25 when the southern army reclaimed the city, “1892 administrative personnel, 38 policemen and 70 ‘tyrants’” were “eliminated”; and

[in the following 18 months 2800 bodies were discovered in mass graves. These were located in jungle clearings, river beds and coastal salt flats. Many of those who had been taken away for execution had been buried alive in these mass graves, while many others had been viciously mutilated…

These deaths were “attributed to the actions of the frustrated NVA troops in retreat. This hardly squared with the communist propaganda at the time. As late as September 1969, Radio Hanoi ridiculed the continuing search for the bodies of ‘hooligan lackeys who had owed blood debts’” (Tim Page and John Pimlott 371).

In the next to the last of three photos of the “Hue in Tet,” Page and Pimlott write that “The civilians, as always, came off worst. Many were killed in their homes by artillery and bombs. Others were killed by VC death squads” (371). In the photo, corpses were discarded in what appeared to be a shallow ditch; a man’s back, a woman’s left cheek, and a woman’s face all rested on dirt, tree’s roots, and leaves in the ditch. Under a different title, “The Massacre at Hue,” Time Magazine, published on October 31, 1969, described those horrors:

[about 150 corpses were exhumed from the first mass grave, many tied together with wire and bamboo strips. Some had been shot, others had apparently been buried alive. Most had been either government officials or employees of the Americans, picked up during a door-to-door hunt by Viet
Cong cadres who carried detailed blacklists. Similar graves were found inside
the city and to the southwest near the tombs where Viet Nam's emperors lie
buried. Among those dug out were the bodies of three German doctors who
had worked at the University of Hue (Web).

Tim Page and John Pimlott added, “The Tet Offensive [1968]” attack was “a stunning
surprise” (354) and “[t]oo little too late” (355) since “nothing coming across the desk in Foggy
Bottom [American authority] indicated its scope, motive or precise date” (355). The fact was
that “[a]t the lunar new year, the people in Vietnam would stop fighting and start partying with
their family and friends, and things on the Southeast Asia desk in the basement of the State
Department in Washington, DC, would slow to a crawl” (354). Tết was cease-fire time, or it was
supposed to be.

Like other Vietnamese students and all employees and workers, I had time off from
school for Tết. When the communist attack came on the second day of Tết Mậu-Thanh, “[b]efore
dawn on 30 January Vietnamese time,”¹⁴ my family and I woke up to listen to the government’s
announcement, made from a military helicopter hovering all over the city; the announcement
enforced martial law and an immediate curfew in the entire south came into effect at once. Việt-
Công forces attacked Saigon on February 1st, “along with 36 of 44 provincial capitals, five of six
autonomous cities and 64 of 242 district capitals. More than 84,000 communist fighters had
emerged, apparently from nowhere” (355); Saigon and its residents were shocked, panicked, and
paralyzed by fear.

I had just finished the first half of the 1967-1968 school year of the eleventh grade at
Nguyễn-Bá-Tòng when the communist attacks exploded. I cannot recall whether school closed
for a month or two, but students did have that big of a break, due to the attacks. Tết Mậu-Thanh
has become another evidence of the communist atrocity and callousness, planned or impromptu. A memoir, Giả Khả Sơn Cho Huế (Mourning Headband for Hue), written by Nhã-Cá and first published in 1969 in South Việt-Nam, is considered an ‘on-the-road war memoir’ ("Bút ký chạy loan") that captured the communist cruelty and the laypeople’s resilience when dealing with immeasurable loss and unfathomable pain. Decades later, thinking about those frantic days and the grisly photos continues to make the hair on the back of my neck stand up and make me believe in hell on earth.

Hell on earth, indeed, returned in 1972 when “the North Vietnam Army opened its offensive on 30 March 1972”. To deal with Richard Nixon’s decision to withdraw the American military personnel in an effort “to bring the boys back home and end direct US involvement in the war,” which took place at “the beginning of 1972 … [when] there were only about 156,800 US troops left in Vietnam…” (Page & Pimlott 486), and to continue fighting the war, the South government issued a draft, a general mobilization order, nationwide. Subjects of the draft included male students who failed to pass Tú-tài I at the end of the 11th grade, Tú-tài II at the end of the 12th grade, or those who took more than a year to finish any grade in high school or at a university.

Some friends of my older brother, Thảo, fell into these categories, so they were drafted and they joined the military. When they came back after boot camp training and before reporting to their new posts, my parents and Thảo invited them to have dinner with us. At dinner they made jokes and cracked up since we were all young, optimistic, and, most of all, we were safe in Saigon. But safe was not found where they were stationed. One day, Thảo told me, “Đùng [pronounced /zuŋ/] was killed.” In my brother’s voice, I heard sorrow. On his face, I saw sorrow. In my heart, I saw Dùng’s smiling eyes and face, and I could still hear his contagious
guffaw. Loss was a reality in which we were living, as we were helplessly watching the war 
viciously suction our friends in the prime of their youth. And the living became witness of the 
death, victims of the war’s atrocity.

When the Paris Peace Talks, which involved representatives of the United States, North 
and South Việt-Nam, and the Soviet Union\(^\text{19}\), were held in Paris in 1972 in an attempt to find a 
peaceful solution for Việt-Nam, the southerners must have seen a slight light of hope. However, 
when the North’s “full-scale invasion of the South” in March 1972\(^\text{20}\) and the “elusive” peace\(^\text{21}\) 
led to President Nixon’s order of Operation Linebacker II, using the Boeing B-52 Stratofortress 
aircrafts to drop 20,370 tons of bombs over Hà-Nội, the northern capital, and Hải-Phông, the 
important northern port, during the 12 day mission\(^\text{22}\) in April 1972\(^\text{23}\) to push signatures for a 
cease-fire agreement, the southerners, again, held on to such a glimpsed hope. With President 
Nguyễn-Vân-Thiệu in his second term, 1971-1975, 1975 arrived, full of surprises, very painful 
surprises.

To Vietnamese, especially the southerners who lived in the democratic society of the 
Republic of Viet-Nam (RVN/Việt-Nam Cộng-Hòa), the non-communist part of the country, 
1975 was a living-under-pressure year. 1975 reminded the southerners of 1954, 1968, and 1972, 
years of unforgettable turmoil, chaos, and for many, irreplaceable loss. Almost every day, the 
southerners were served with bad news at breakfast, lunch, dinner, and in-between times of the 
day. On January 6, the Phước-Long Province, a region that bordered Cambodia and was 
approximately seventy-five miles north of Saigon, fell to the communists. A week later, on 
January 13, the communists captured another town, Kiến-Tuông, southwest of Saigon. And the 
communists were closing in on Saigon as they consistently captured one city, one town after 
another in the following months of February, March, and April\(^\text{24}\).
In fact, during the first quarter of 1975, from the media, my family and I, like other southerners, learned of the communists’ growing control, as citizens in the defeated cities and towns left everything and ran for their lives. The president’s administration was crumbling and falling apart, and people with access left Việt-Nam for other countries. Every day, we saw pictures of fearful people in cities in the Middle of Việt-Nam abandon their properties, taking advantage of every possible means of transportation, from airplanes, cars, motorbikes, bicycles, to their own feet, fleeing to Saigon. Some of my friends told me of the death of their relatives during the escape. Left/right, up/down, the news was disheartening.

Outside Saigon, the RVN was withering; inside Saigon, regular daily activities went on, but in an irregular rhythm. From the city’s arrhythmic beats, speculation, like an influenza virus, twirled in the air before landing in the citizens’ minds to sicken them. Saigon was turning into the stage of a Hitchcock movie with suspense escalating each day. It seemed like everyone was holding her/his breath to live another day during those months. Schools, however, stayed open, and so were other offices, businesses, and activities. My brothers and I continued to go to school; my father continued to open his tailor shop every day, and we continued to read the daily newspapers and listen to the radio to be updated about the war and its effects on the citizens and the government. Everyone was wondering, “What if the communists win?” At school, at home, or on the streets, wherever I went, I heard and saw groups of perplexed friends, classmates, and my father’s customers talking about and analyzing the latest news and/or asking for tuyaux/connections to help them escape the country legally, since the communist grip was closing in. I saw that Saigon and its citizens were losing their composure, as the RVN was losing its ground to the communists, while its colossal ally, the American government, stopped providing military aid. In Nam – The VietNam Experience 1965-1975, Tim Page and John
Pimlott, report that “March 6: Henry Kissinger says that to deny money to South Vietnam would ‘deliberately destroy an ally by withholding aid in its moments of extremis.’ Ford rules out any US military intervention in Vietnam” (648). Early in 1975, this was an untold truth; the public was guessing, based on current events, but no one, neither Vietnamese nor American, confirmed this piece of information.

My father, too, knew nothing about the American hands-off decision, yet, he, too, must have felt the tension in the air and sensed the communists’ grip in reading the daily news. On the last day of March, my father came to talk to me about his plan. Standing outside my room, under the opaque plastic shingle roof which protected the terrace from the monsoon rain and the tropical sun, my father said [in Vietnamese], “Your paternal grandmother is still alive in the North; your maternal grandmother is still alive here [in Saigon], so I and your mother will stay here. You two [my eldest brother Thào and I] will accompany Mademoiselle Henry, Monsieur Morgan, and Mademoiselle Nguyệt to Paris. Once you arrive, you two will go back to school, graduate, and be useful human beings. Since Mạnh [my younger brother] is spoiled, I will keep him with us. Hopefully, the communists will educate him and transform him into a good citizen from a drug addict.” In the evening breeze, laced with the orchid flowers’ fragrance from my father’s favorite plant placed against the terrace wall, I listened to my father without asking him any questions. I did not know what to say and how to react to his plan, but thinking of leaving my parents and our home indefinitely troubled and frightened me, especially knowing that my parents would be living with the communists. After my father went back inside, I stayed on the terrace for a long time, sad, deeply puzzled and truly wordless.

The people that my father mentioned in his talk were the official representatives of the French government at the Service Social department, part of the Consulat de France, located on
Phan-Đình-Phùng Street in the Third District of Saigon. Since my father, who spoke French fluently, was the sole clothing provider to children of the French legionnaires, he received orders directly from Mademoiselle Henry and maintained a good relationship with her and her employees, Monsieur Morgan, Mademoiselle Nguyệt, and Mademoiselle Giang. Such a connection must have helped him bypass the regular censorship of the Vietnamese government in order to send us along with the French Service Social staff when they returned to France. I had no idea if it was my father’s money or his relationship with the staff that would lead to our free pass. Whether it was paid or gratuit, that trip did not take place, however!

Thảo and I did not sit down and talk about my father’s plan, but it appeared our avoidance of the issue spoke for us. Not planning to leave meant choosing to stay, and that decision was not at all atypical, since traditionally “[t]he family is the center of one individual’s life and the backbone of Vietnamese society…. [and] Vietnamese are strongly attached to their families and are deeply concerned with family welfare, prestige, reputation and pride” (2), as Nguyễn-Tưởng-Hùng noted. Such attachment became stronger when Saigon and the south were undergoing what could be an ideological change that would challenge and even erase/condemn “individual agency” that was birthed from “social structure” and nurtured into the “social practice” norm of the former political regime in which my brothers and I grew up (Maton 50).

I am trying to explain my life experiences using Boudieu’s theory/key concepts. Bourdieu defines cultural field as “a series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorize certain discourses and activities” (Webb et al. 21-2); habitus is “a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways” (qtd. in Bourdieu 12), and/or “[a] concept that expresses, on the one hand, the way in which individuals ‘become
themselves’ – develop attitudes and dispositions – and, on the other hand, the ways in which those individuals engage in practices” (Webb et al. xii-xiii); and capital refers to “material things…, as well as ‘untouchable’ but culturally significant attributes such as prestige, status and authority …, along with cultural capital…” (qtd. in Webb et al. 22). Since Bourdieu’s key concepts, cultural field/field, habitus, and capital “are necessarily interrelated, both conceptually and empirically” (Maton 61), this interrelation explains the chain reaction that started with the Fall of Saigon [field] and negated its social structure [habitus] and its residents’ values [capital] and practices.

In mid April, my best friend, Vượng-Thị-Tiệt, fought the afternoon’s after-work peak-hour traffic and rushed to my parents’ house only to give me her brother’s address in Paris and to say a quick good-bye before leaving Saigon. Tiệt shouted, “Write me!” before she and her turquoise blue Yamaha scooter sped away and disappeared in the crowd of people and vehicles. Her second older brother, a military pilot officer, flew the entire family out of Saigon shortly afterwards. Several days later, Thảo’s best friend, Vũ-Mạnh-Tuân, and his family left; Tuân’s father was a history/literature/theater professor at the Saigon Faculty of Letters and Đà-Lạt University. And then Mạnh’s best friend, who was nicknamed Tuấn mù (Tuân the Blind), due to his heavy nearsightedness, also left with his family; Tuấn mù’s father was a captain who had navigated foreign ships into the Port of Saigon (Cảng Saigon). In those days, without knowing how to react, my brothers and I became silent witnesses; we watched our friends and their families leaving Saigon, leaving us. The future was uncertain for those who left and for those who stayed, as well. With their brusque departure, we felt as if the city, as much as our lives and our hearts, was punctured and left with visible holes, and we wondered if we would see one another again, ever!!! But it was obvious for us that it would be a million times harder had we
been the ones who departed leaving our parents behind. Ignoring our sadness, the turbo speed of the communist current came crashing into the south, one destination at a time; Saigon was its final target!

The last chance to leave Saigon before the communists entered arrived in the evening of April 29, 1975. Shortly before 9:00 p.m., one of my classmates and friends, Nguyễn-Thị-Quỳnh-Nga, phoned to invite me and Thảo to join her and her sibling to leave Saigon on a cargo ship where her cousin was a chief mechanic. “The ship will leave tonight, so you and your brother must come to my house as soon as possible, before the 10:00 p.m. curfew! Please leave with us! You don’t want to marry a communist invalid, and your brother doesn’t want to be jailed due to his background as a government’s cast.” – “Do I need money?” – “Yes, have 100,000 đồng/piasters with each of you to bribe the guards at the port’s gate, so they’ll let us in to embark the ship. Hurry up!!!” And Nga hung up!

Marrying a communist invalid and being jailed for working with the non-communist government were what we had heard from the 1954 immigrants’ casual talks as we were growing up. According to those talks, the communist government encouraged female citizens to marry the invalids and take care of them to show support to those patriotic heroes. In the communist society, the government’s encouragement could be interpreted as a mandatory order, or so I heard. Those talks demonized the communists. Yet, when I told my brother about Nga’s invitation and asked if he would consider leaving, he smirked, “Go if you want! I stay!” Undecidedly, I entered my parents’ room and broke the news. It was past 9:00 p.m., and my father was about to sleep. At the end of my words, my father looked at me as I was staring at him; our eyes interlocked. In the thick-and-heavy-like-mud silence, uncertainty spiderwebbed us. Finally, my father said, “Up to you!” Gorgias (ca. 480-ca. 380 B.C.E.) argued, “Speech is a
powerful lord,” (Bizzell & Herzberg 45), yet that evening, April 29, 1975, even though my father
did speak, to me, his unspoken word was a more powerful lord; what he did not say sent a more
powerful message. It forced me to make a decision: to choose my future or my family. At that
moment, the choice of one cost me the other. The whole time, my mother stayed quiet, and I
could hear her nervous breathing. She, too, must have been entrapped in the spider web of
uncertainty.

Leaving my parents’ room, I went back to mine. My mind was busy interpreting my
father’s “up to you” message when I stopped to stare at my big wardrobe, proudly leaned against
the room on the left side of the entrance door. Behind the glass sliding doors were my clothes,
hung neatly in order. I wondered, “How could and how would I survive without my parents’
support?” I did not simply see clothing in the wardrobe; I saw my mental, emotional, and
financial dependence on my parents’ support. Such dependence made me scared of being on my
own and with my friends in a foreign country; up to that day, I had never been away from my
family even just for a day or two. Further, I was scared even more thinking about being away
from my parents/family and not knowing what could have happened to them. I could not
imagine how changes would happen and reshape our lives and perspectives, but I wanted to be
with my parents, especially when our future rested on incertitude. That thought solidified my
decision to stay in Saigon with my parents and siblings.

I cannot recall whether anyone knew how to react to the news that President Nguyễn-
Vân-Thiệu resigned on April 21 and left the country with his family; so did the former vice
president Nguyễn-Cao-Ký and his families, as well as many high ranking officers and people
who had connections. Those who worked for the RVN government and especially for the
Americans believed their stay in Việt-Nam would result in a death certificate; they were
desperately searching for *tuyaux* / means to leave the country while they still could. Ironically, those who wanted to leave and those who did not plan to leave were all perplexed and fearful, nevertheless. Fear could be smelled in the air, while uncertainty was red-stamped on everyone’s forehead and cast out of everyone’s eyes in their nonplussing looks.

People who worked for or were associated with the American government/personnel and even opportunists flocked to the American Embassy in hope of a last minute escape. The Embassy’s roof looked like a war-zone; indeed, it was a war-zone during the last days of April 1975. In his article, “The Last to Leave,” MGySgt [Mater Gunnery Sergeant] John J. Valdez, [a] Staff Non Commissioned Officer in charge the American Embassy, Saigon, presented several photos (see Figure 9a, 9b, and 9c), which captured Saigon’s chaos and citizens’ desperation.

Figure 9a: “Roof of American Embassy, Saigon, R. South Vietnam.” Web. 10 Feb. 2014
Fed by fear and confusion, April hastened to its end. A week after having taken President Thiệu’s place, President Trần-Văn-Hướng stepped down on April 28, and was replaced by President Dương-Văn-Minh, who surrendered to the North Viet-Nam Army/the communists at 10:15 a.m. on April 30, 1975, terminating the life of the RVN after twenty-one years of being a non-communist regime. The Việt-Nam Cộng-Hòa, the non-communist/democratic government in which my brothers and I were born and grew up, was defeated and replaced by the communist government starting on that sunless day of April 30, 1975.

By noon on April 30, 1975, after listening to President Dương-Văn-Minh’s surrender speech, broadcast at 10:15 a.m.25, my father locked the wrought-iron door of his shop with two big chains, whose ends were secured by two Vachette dead-bolt locks. We had never used those two chains during the day, only at night; my father later explained that he was afraid of possible unrest and looting after the president’s surrender. Inside our heavily-locked house, we felt safer; then the sound of commotion on the street drew us upstairs to observe. From the terrace on the first floor of my parents’ two-story house, my parents, my two brothers, and I stood staring at the
source of the commotion: the first communist soldiers were entering Saigon to claim the city as their prize. In their plain green military uniforms and hats, those soldiers marched in pairs, passing my street, Lê-Văn-Duyệt, to reach Dinh Độc-Lập, the President’s Palace. It was the first time I saw those soldiers in person. They, too, were Vietnamese like me, but to me, they were so different; they were communists, and I was not. Their ideology was not mine. In his *Language and Power*, Fairclough claims that

> [i]deologies are closely linked to power, because the nature of the ideological assumptions are embedded in particular conventions, and so the nature of those conventions themselves, depends on the power relations which underlie the conventions; and because they are a means of legitimizing existing social relations and differences of power, simply through the recurrence of ordinary, familiar ways of behaving which take these relations and power differences for granted (2).

When RVN and Saigon fell, the RVN government was dismantled and Saigon lost its name and became Hồ-Chí-Minh City. Its democratic ideology was nullified. Claiming that “[i]deologies are closely linked to power,” does Fairclough mean ideologies/ideology of the victors? Under the reign of communism, “the recurrence of ordinary, familiar ways of behaving” began with the foregoing of the democratic ideology and all its norms; democracy and communism were mutually exclusive.

I knew not Pierre Bourdieu and his key concepts, habitus\(^2\), cultural field, and cultural capital\(^2\), and hysteris\(^\), nor did I know of his famous equation: \([(\text{habitus}) (\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}\) (Maton 51), that demonstrated the interrelatedness/interconnectedness of habitus and field, indicating that “a change in one necessitates a change in the other” (Hardy 130). Yet, those concepts made perfect sense when the south and its residents shred their skin, one layer at a time,
as they lived under the communist regime which nourished different viewpoints/behaviors and embraced different values. Plugging the southern field, habitus, capital, and practice in Bourdieu’s à-la-communist equation, the southerners experienced hysteris.

From years of listening to my father’s cousin, my Uncle Vũ, and his cousins’ experiences with living in the North during Hồ- Chí-Minh’s Land Reform, I was appalled by the communists’ cruelty. In his pure Northern accent, Uncle Vũ told my mother, “They cleaned up everything. One day we had everything; the next we had nothing left. It’s hard to adjust to such a sudden change, but we didn’t have any other option. We either adjust or die.” He also recalled, “Had Gâu [my father’s younger brother] not come home on time, Anh Hiếu’s mom [my father’s mother/my grandmother] would have been beheaded since they [the communists] accused her of being a landlord.” And he always ended his anecdote with “I’m lucky to be here, Chi [sister].” His teary eyes and emotional tone made my mother tear up each and every time he talked about those horrific memories. From those adults’ small talks describing difficult and fearful living with the communists in the north before 1954, I learned that values, lifestyles, ways of doing business, and thinking [habitus/capital] that Saigon and its residents, or RVN’s citizens in general, held dear [practice] would be challenged, devalued, or even condemned in the communist society [field].

The presence of those communist soldiers on Saigon’s streets that day marked the end of democracy in the South Việt-Nam and portended radical changes in many, if not all, aspects of the southern life. Thus, as soon as I saw those soldiers on my street, I burst into tears. I sobbed as if one of my family’s members had just died a sudden, horrible death. I cried so hard that the thick veil of tears blinded me. Yet, through that veil, I still could clearly envision my future collapsed and crushed under the communist soldiers’ marching on the street’s asphalt in their
trademark Binh-Trí-Thiên sandals. I had never known that I could be that heart-broken in the death of an ideology. If “ideologies are closely linked to power,” as Fairclough asserts, the death of an ideology must completely de-power those who have embraced/practiced/lived it.

The following day, May 1st, 1975, Saigon radio, controlled by the communists, called all university students to report to school, so I did. Before 8:00 a.m., my friend and schoolmate, Nguyễn-Ngọc-Phượng, a French major freshman at Trường Đại-học Văn-khoa Saigon (Saigon Faculty of Letters), where I, too, was a freshman, majoring in English Language and Civilization, rode her grayish green Honda motorbike 50 cc (see Figure 10a and 10b) to school, with me on the back.


As we rode on a familiar street, Trần-Quy-Cáp, bordered by centennial, tall tamarind trees, whose crown canopy shaded the street and the passers-by, the street was unrecognizable. Everywhere on the sidewalks’ surface were uniforms, boots, belts, and hats, littered like trash, of the Army of the Republic of Viêt-Nam, traces of the ARVN soldiers trying to rid themselves of their military identification. The street became a landfill, and such a scene reaffirmed the less-than-twenty-four-hour death, the newly-death of the democracy and the Fall of Saigon. That was all it took to release our tear ducts. When we turned right on Duy-Tân Street and then left on
Hồng-Thấp-Tự Street to head to our school, we saw a landfill on each of them. In front of our eyes, Saigon was stripped of its identity and its beauty while Saigonais/Saigon’s residents struggled in confusion and fear to adjust. Heart broken, we wept and wept and wept all the way to school.

At school, our teary eyes met an ocean of students in white dresses and white shirts. The school yard was filled with bodies in motion in white outfits. Since university students were no longer required to wear a school uniform – Vietnamese traditional dress in white on white or black pantaloons for female students, and white dress shirt on dark navy blue trousers for male students (see Figure 11a and 11b) – students normally wore colored outfits to school on a regular school day.

Figure 11a: The 10th grade female students at Gia-Long, the Girl-Only High School in Saigon, in the traditional white dress, school uniform, in 1975. Web. 1 Feb. 2014
Many female students, like Ngọc-Phượng, who came to Đại-học Văn-Khoa from Saint Paul, a private Catholic high school that taught French program, or other French institutions, often dressed in western clothing to attend class. But not on that day, May 1st, 1975. Like other female students, Ngọc-Phượng wore a white traditional dress and a pair of black satin pantaloons, whereas, I put on a cream, press-style tunic and a black pair of pants, instead of my jeans as usual. I believe students chose white to wear that day because they did not know how the communists would treat them. In our choice of the standard color, I read fear of the communists and fear of the unknown future. Thirty-nine years later, these days, although I can still see the image of the schoolyard filled with students in an overwhelming number of white outfits and the students’ puzzled looks, I can no longer recall what happened on that very first day at Đại-học Văn-Khoa when it began transforming into one of the communists’ educational institutions.

After the first meeting at school on May 1st, 1975, all students were sent to học chính-trị (studying politics) at various theaters in the city. I was assigned to attend those political sessions
at Khải Hoàn (Triumph), a theater in Saigon’s First District, not too far from my house. During those all-day sessions, we listened to lectures on Karl Marx and Lenin’s doctrines and talks that praised the communist victory and condemned the RVN and its American ally. The majority of students, including me, suffered through those lectures; the topics were unfamiliar, the speakers were unwelcoming, and the approach was propagandist and thus unimpressive. Nonetheless, the theater remained full until the end. Again, the students’ consistent attendance indicated their fear of the new communist government and its personnel.

Those lectures in politics were only introductory changes. At the end of those lectures, we were allowed to return to school; however, those talks went on in the school’s đại giảng đường (large lecture hall). All speakers lauded the communist leaders, the Communist Party and its policy and accused the Americans and ARVN for the atrocious war crimes, tội ác Mỹ-Ngụy, they had committed. In the big lecture hall, students quietly listened to those propagandas; the only voice was that of the speaker. I did not recognize any of those speakers. I had no idea where the professors were, either. One day, during a lecture, a student standing behind me talked back, but in a low voice that only those who were close to him could hear, “Are you sure you didn’t have anything to do with the former government and the Americans? Your mouth must still have American food and drink. Betrayer!”

I stood still as if I had heard nothing. “What if that guy was a communist spy who said those defiant words to test others?” This thought raced through my mind, and I must have not been the only one thinking that since around me, not even one person, none, reacted to those words. When the session ended, I left the lecture hall without having a tiny bead of curiosity to find out who that person was. Since I had been back to school, except for talking to Ngọc-Phượng, I kept my opinions to myself and kept my mouth shut. I was well-aware of the fact that
I was a Saigonaise/Saigon’s resident; Saigon fell and the communists came into power, and I remained a Saigonaise. I adjusted to the new society by being very careful with my words and being very doubtful of others, strangers and the pro-communists.

Changes at school did not stop at adding those propagandas to the daily schedule. Under the communist popular slogan, “labor is glory”\(^3\), students were asked to sign up to be part of the irrigation teams going to various suburban areas to dig/make/create drainage ditches used in the local irrigation. Unexpectedly, southern students found themselves in the labor workforce, as true peasants, “in building or dredging thousands of kilometers of canals and ditches,” as Ronald Cima pointed out in “Vietnam after 1975.” Many students quit school to avoid such a task.

Ngọc-Phượng and I joined the distribution team to sell Đại-học Văn-Khoa’s first newspaper. Since gasoline could not be bought as freely as in the pre-April 30 era, Ngọc-Phượng left her Honda at home and rode a bicycle, instead. Every day, we rode our bikes to different universities in the city trying to sell as many copies of newspapers as we could. We went to all the universities, including those I had never entered before April 1975, and we even visited my parents’ friends to seek their financial support. Without wearing sunscreen or a hat, Ngọc-Phượng and I rode our bikes for long hours daily, from 8:00 a.m. until 1:00-2:00 p.m. The Saigon’s upper-80-degree sun baked our skin and turned it to the darkest hue of bronze. We became two papergirls by circumstance, yet also by choice, since we would rather ride our bikes for long hours under the scorching sun and the pouring rain to sell newspapers than join the irrigation teams or stay at school to meet and socialize with students who valued a different ideology than ours. I did not know any of those students, nor did I trust one.

Despite our laboring participation, in early 1976, neither Ngọc-Phượng nor I passed the re-entry exam, so we both left Đại-học Văn-Khoa for good. As a result, my schooling came to
an end, prematurely, and this academic closure saddened my hard-working parents. Up to April 1975, I had been a student. Several months after Saigon fell, I became my father’s tailor apprentice. Up to April 1975, my father often told us, his three children, “I and your mother work really hard to send you to school, so you can have a better job than being a tailor.” With the Fall of Saigon, for years, my parents saw me work as a seamstress in my father’s shop, and they must have seen the dreams of their children’s graduation disappear under my right foot operating the sewing machine’s pedal to alter customers’ clothes. My education was exchanged for labor – *capital* in the new *field* of the communists.

Although I was sad for not being able to continue my education and finish the bachelor’s degree in English Language and Civilization, I was fine with staying home and working for my father, especially when the communists ordered the southerners to incinerate all the books published under the RVN government. In “10 Years of Pre-Reform (1975-1985),” part of *Education in VietNam – Development History, Challenges, and Solutions*, a Worldbank’s pdf document, such an incineration, worded differently, “removal,” was one of the government’s two foci: to remove “leftover influences from the old education system” and to implement “anti-illiteracy activities for people in the age group of 12-50 years old” (7). The latter appeared to focus on the Vietnamese population, in general, but the former targeted the southerners who lived and received the Việt-Nam Cộng-Hòa’s education from 1954-1975, in particular.

Moreover, the communist government pushed for “the nationalization of private schools”, removal of school from religious influence and gradual bringing private schools under state management” (7).

While “the nationalization of private schools” clearly indicated the communists’ taking over all private schools, religious or not, the “removal of leftover influences from the old
education system” meant issuing a mandatory order to the southerners to either incinerate their own books or to turn them in to the local authority; the third option, understood, would mean being in trouble with the authority for resisting the government’s order. The book burning order from the communist authority brought me back to stories about Genghis Khan (c. 1162-c. 1227), a Mongolian conqueror, and his notorious act of burning books and killing students that my mother had told us when we were little. Yet, my mother was not the only one who condemned Genghis Khan’s acts, since “[m]any Westerners accept the stereotype of Chingis [Genghis Khan] as a barbaric plunderer intent on maiming, slaughtering, and destroying other people and civilizations,” according to “The Myths of Chinggis Khan.” Furthermore, the book burning order also resembled Hitler’s censorship. “Nazi Propaganda and Censorship” reveals the books’ massacre, executed by Nazis who “raided libraries and bookstores across Germany” and threw “more than 25,000” books into “huge bonfires” to burn and eliminate viewpoints that were different from the Nazi belief during the Third Reich on “the night of May 10, 1933.”

The communists’ practice of “symbolic domination,” defined as “a form of complicity which is neither passive submission to external constraint nor a free adherence to values” (Bourdieu 51), the book burning order clearly displayed the communists’ authority, “the dominant,” that imposed “symbolic violence,” on the southerners, “the dominated,” aka the defeated (Schubert 183). Symbolic violence or “intimidation,” in Bourdieu’s words (51), relates to symbolic domination as a child to her/his parent. Despite our reluctance to the communists’ symbolic domination, in response to such an order, or complicity as Bourdieu puts it, Thào and I chose to incinerate our own book collections ourselves. On the red brick floor of the terrace on the top of our house, my brother started a fire by letting a burning match lick some pages of a book, and then we kept tearing the books, separating the covers from their content, ripping
pages, and feeding them to the fire. Again, I wept and mourned for the knowledge in ideas and words that were burning mercilessly; my heart was crushed all over again. With pages twisted painfully in the fire’s red tongue before turning to black ashes, my future, colorful dreams and hopes of speaking English fluently and of being a high school English teacher disappeared into grayish smoke rising in the air to be blown away by the apathetic wind.

In compliance with the communist government’s order, we turned ourselves into Guy Montag, a fireman in Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451, whose task was to incinerate books. We became the book killers, yet we chose to burn our books rather than turn them in to the authority. In our hands, our books died a noble death; they died with the democratic ideology, whereas in the hands of the communists, our books would have been stripped of their true value and become just literacy trash. Afterwards, in silent objection, I stopped reading books published by the communists, and my intellect starved. At that time, my future, my brothers’, and that of my generation, those who stayed in Saigon after April 30, 1975, like grayish smoke, vanished. Sadness, however, lingered.

Almost four decades later, looking back teaches me some invaluable lessons: freedom is worth dying for, unity builds strength, ideology of the victors associates with power, and rhetoric parents/nurses such power, as well as its resistance.

1.2 Contemplating: Intellect in Pause

In retrospect, I have always thought of my life in Saigon after April 30, 1975, as a pause due to a string of abrupt, unseen, and unwanted changes that I experienced and dealt with. One of those significant changes was that all three of us, my two brothers and I, became workers. I worked for my father as an apprentice, and several years later my two brothers became workers.
in the government’s seafood companies. After April 1975, being aware of the government and its policies aimed at “eliminating the comprador capitalists as a class and doing away with all vestiges of feudal exploitation," and “radically realign[ing] the power elite so that the ruling machine was controlled collectively by the putative vanguard of the working class--the party--and by the senior cadres of the party who were mostly from the North,” clearly worded by Premier Phạm Văn Đồng, my father decided to de-fancy the appearance of his tailor shop to avoid attracting the government’s attention.

From having a space of 3.3x9 meters, with two lines of custom-made, built-in shelves, protected by transparent glass sliding doors, along the walls, my father bought an upright, four-fold panel curtain and placed it at the end of his 2 [L]x1[W]x1[H] meter cutting table to downsize the space. The curtain stopped curious eyes from seeing through the original length of the shop and made the shop smaller. My father also removed all the fresh white, pink, and purple orchid arrangements that used to be mounted and displayed at even intervals on the top of the shelves to enhance the look of the shop. Like beautiful smiles, those fresh orchid arrangements brightened up the shop and its shelves, filled with fabric rolls in different patterns, texture, and quality; without those colorful ornaments, the shop lost its vibrant, eye-catching ambiance. Twice a day, in the morning and in the afternoon, my father and I regularly dusted the shelves and the cutting table to keep them dust-free clean, but the fancy, sophisticated appearance of the shop before April 1975 was stripped and gone.

My father’s name, Pham Hieu, written in Ar Decode font, made in aluminum, painted in ocean blue, and bordered in white, was ordered to be taken down. Reason? None of the shops/stores could have a sign that stood out. To keep another sign, also his name, in a smaller sign and more simple Ar Julian font, pham hieu, my father had to fight with the local authority.
He argued, “If I can’t use my name for my business, I still can use my name for my house. My name indicates ‘this is Mr. Phạm Hiệu’s house,’ and there’s nothing wrong with it.” My father won, so he could keep his name for his shop which was also his house. My parents were, however, fortunate to have their business and to keep their house! Many other small business owners in the city not only lost their business, but also lost their house when they were ordered to relocate in the new economic zone. From being merchants, they were forced to be laborers.

As soon as the communists came in, they sealed and confiscated all the bank accounts, and since customers entrusted money to the RVN’s banking system, the communists were not responsible for those customers’ money. In other words, the account holders lost all of their savings/deposits, and my parents were among those account holders. Further, on September 22, 1975, the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), which ruled the South after April 30, issued a currency change using the 1/500 ratio: “the currency in South Vietnam [RVN currency] was changed to the liberation đồng [PRG currency], worth 500 old southern đồng”. According to the data, provided by *International Economics*, a website of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, in the first currency reform, taken place in the South on September 22, 1975, each southern family was allowed to exchange up to 200 liberation đồng. On May 3, 1978, in the second reform, applied to the entire country, the Southern/liberation đồng received 0.80, the Northern đồng received 1.00 of the money, issued by *Ngân hàng Nhà nước Việt nam* (NHNN VN) [State Bank of Viet Nam]. The third currency change took place on September 14, 1985 using the 10/1 ratio; 10 đồng of the old NHNN equaled 1 đồng of the new NHNN, “ngày 14/9/1985 Nhà nước lại phải công bố đổi tiền theo tỷ lệ 10 đồng tiền NHNN cũ ăn 1 đồng tiền NHNN mới”33.
Implemented at different time-frames, those currency changes all served the communists’ specific purpose: to eliminate capitalism and its practitioners, and at the same time, control the Chinese ethnic group in Viêt-Nam\textsuperscript{34}.

Unlike many of the Chinese ethnic group, who were forced to leave Saigon (then Hồ-Chí-Minh City) to resettle in the new economic zones (NEZs) after losing all their possessions/capital to the communist government, my parents were able to stay in their house, in Saigon. They survived, mentally, through the financial crises, even though their wealth did not. The field change put the Houdini’s black cape over my parents’ capital and made it disappear in front of their very eyes; countless other bourgeois in Saigon suffered the same fate. Having been sketched/drafted in 1930 and in 1975, more than four decades later, Hồ-Chí-Minh’s program, especially number 4, “To confiscate the banks and other enterprises belonging in to the imperialists and put them under the control of the worker, peasant, and soldier government,” and number 5 “to confiscate all of the plantations and property belonging to the imperialists and the Vietnamese reactionary capitalist class and distribute to them to poor peasants”\textsuperscript{35} remained in full effect. I could not fathom when and how my father, a handicraft, hard-working tailor, had become an imperialist or a reactionary capitalist, yet, “the exercise of power, in modern society, is increasingly achieved through ideology, and more particularly through the ideological workings of language” (Fairclough 2). And in the communist field and its lingo, the fruition of my father/parents’ sweat and pain was classified as some sorts of property of the imperialists/reactionary capitalists, the communists’ particular ideological workings of language, and thus was confiscated mercilessly.

On the day my father returned home after reporting to the local authority for being sued by three of his workers, who claimed he had exploited them, he said [in Vietnamese], “The one
in charge was a reasonable cadre, and his understanding eased me, but he told me, ‘I know your workers take advantage of the Party’s policy; however, giving them a small portion of your wealth won’t affect you at all’, so I’ll give them money as they’ve asked.” Empowered by his position [capital] and authorized by the communist regime/society [field], the cadres could afford what Thomas Huckin has called “the discourse of condescension” [practice], manifested in the reasoning and solution that he gave my father (18). And being categorized in the bourgeois class in the communist society, the new field, my father lost not only his wealth, his former capital, but also his power: “[capital] is the realization in specific forms of power in general” (Moore 105). In the changed field, my father definitely lost the specific form of power that would allow/support him to right injustice, imposed on him by the communist cadre! What comforted him was the loyalty of other workers. Later, those workers visited him to tell him that the trio who sued him had contacted them to invite them to join the lawsuit, but they refused, reasoning that my father was a good boss and that my parents were treating them very well. Those workers consoled my father with, “Cây ngay không sợ chết đứng” [an upright tree is not afraid of dying in the upright position], a popular Vietnamese proverb meaning a righteous person does not bend/yield under pressure.

My father was no longer a big boss of his own busy business. Toward the end of his life, up to the last days of his seventy years, every day, my father opened his shop at 8:00 a.m., stood at the same spot at the cutting table, held the same pair of his prized scissors in his right hand, and skillfully shaped pieces of fabric to patterns of trousers, shirts, or suits; later, he sat at a sewing machine, placed behind the big glass display window, next to the cutting table, to patiently and professionally sew those patterns together to earn a living, as if he had never passed
Outside my father’s shop, Saigon and its residents went through drastic transformations and adjustments, too. It seemed as though Saigon and its residents were forced to peel off their old skin and shred their old thinking for the new one to fit into the new society/field. Shortly after April 30, the communists required military and civilian personnel of the former government to report and bring along a ten day food supply. RVN military personnel were red-marked with the label *ngu vấn* (puppet military), and the RVN government with *ngu quyên* (puppet government). In *Vietnam: A Country Study*, Cima writes that

[i]n its quest for a new socialist order in the South, Hanoi relied on other techniques apart from socialist economic transformation and socialist education…. For the former elite of the Saigon regime, a more rigorous form of indoctrination was used; hundreds of thousands of former military officers, bureaucrats, politicians, religious and labor leaders, scholars, intellectuals, and lawyers, as well as critics of the new regime were ordered to "reeducation camps" for varying periods. In mid1985, the Hanoi government conceded that it still held about 10,000 inmates in the reeducation camps, but the actual number was believed to be at least 40,000. In 1982 there were about 120,000 Vietnamese in these camps.

Having been one of those inmates, Trương Quyên’s father recounted his experiences, disclosed under a subtitle, “Excerpts from My Father’s Oral History,”

“I was married for less than eight months before I had to go to re-education camp. Communists said one thing—only ten days! They wrote that we’d only need to pack clothing and food and money for ten days, so everyone believed. We all signed contracts
that said this! But after ten days, after three months, after six months, after being moved from place to place by the Communists, I knew we were in for the long haul…”36

The long haul that Trương Quyên’s father mentioned varied from one case to another. For him, it was a seven-year period, for Trần-Trí-Vũ, it was a four-and-a-half-years of confinement, while others were “told to pack enough clothes and personal effects to last ten days or two weeks. Many did not return for several years. Some remained until 1988, a period of fourteen years,” (Duffy 1996).

Among those who reported and were kept in the reeducation camps was one of Thảo’s close friends, Đỗ Vũ-Hoàng, who was a second lieutenant in the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Việt-Nam) when Saigon fell. Hoàng spent three years in the reeducation camps and was released on a condition of relocating to the new economic zone (NEZ), despite the fact that his family was living in Saigon. NEZ, or “internal exile,” possibly was best defined as “[p]opulation resettlement or redistribution,” according to Cima (1987).

Populations, subjected to NEZ, included small business owners/petit bourgeois/capitalists, many of them belonged to the Chinese ethnic group and families of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Việt-Nam) members who were confined in the reeducation camps. As soon as those men were released, they would join their families at the NEZ assigned. From her family’s experience, in her narrative, “TorchLady 1975,” Jessica Nguyễn recalled that “[a]ny and all measures, including the threat of jail and brainwashing, were used by the Communists to force people to leave the cities and relocate to New Economic Zones (NEZs) so the Communists could confiscate everyone’s property and assets. Refusal to move to the NEZs could easily mean imprisonment, torture or execution.”
Thus, for the captives, once released from the reeducation camps and returned to their families and society, they faced different kinds of hardships/struggles. One of the imminent hardships was living with the stigma, *nguy quân* (puppet military) and *nguy quyền* (puppet government), which reduced their existence to being Vietnamese without the eligibility of being citizens and being employed in the communist society. To survive, many picked up odd jobs, from being a *cyclo/xích lô* rider\(^{37}\) or a laborer, to being a swap meet or a street vendor. Such a form of “symbolic violence,” manifested in “the form of people being denied resources, treated as inferior or being limited in terms of realistic aspirations” (Web et al. xvi) was experienced by Hoàng and his group, and was no doubt a “more effective, and (in [many] instances) more brutal, means of oppression” (qtd. in Schubert 185). Bourdieu writes that such symbolic violence “can only be exerted on a person predisposed (in his habitus) to feel it, whereas others will ignore it” (51); the truth is that families of the stigmatized *nguy quân, nguy quyền* suffered as much as their loved ones. Those sufferings were materialized in their forced relocation in the New Economic Zones, and later those sufferings pushed them to risk their lives in extremely risky and dangerous escapes. While some left alone, others left with their entire family; together, they chose to either live free or die free, out of the communists’ iron grip.

Being an effective and more brutal means of oppression, symbolic violence was physically evidenced in the RVN military and civil personnel’s imprisonment; in the confiscation of the southerners’ bank accounts; in the currency reforms, one after another; and mentally evidenced in the discrimination and marginalization imposed on those people. A clash with China at the Vietnamese northern border in early 1979\(^{38}\) resulted in the communists’ “increasing political suspicion against ethnic Chinese”; besides

\[\text{[o]ther measures included the closing of businesses owned by ethnic Chinese}\]
Vietnamese, seizing control of farmland and redistributing it, and the mass relocation of citizens from urban to rural areas that were previously uncultivated or severely damaged during the war. Not surprisingly, these radical social and economic policies significantly disrupted the lives of many Vietnamese who increasingly became marginalized in the new communist regime (“The Voyage of the Boat People” – *Asian Nation*).

The Communists’ constant suppression eventually prompted the birth of secret/underground organizations that took gold pieces from the oppressed in exchange for an escape by boat and by land. In 1978, when those escapes began, the cost varied from ten to sixteen *lượng vàng*, the Vietnamese 24 karat gold unit, depending on the individual organization’s fee. Each *lượng vàng* weighs 37.5 grams, and 26.5 *lượng vàng* equals 1 kilogram. For a struggling laborer, possessing a *lượng vàng* meant having a small treasure, and because of the high cost, not everyone could afford an escape. However, the potential highest cost of escape was getting shot and killed or one’s indefinite imprisonment if caught. Therefore, all transactions were highly confidential and extremely secret. Successful transactions led to countless people escaping the country by boat or by land. People, who were former military personnel or linked to the former government, suffered tremendously under the communist regime, so they reached for the open sea in any size of sea transportation that was available to them. “Vietnamese ‘boat people’, 1982,” an online post, provided a photo of a small sampan, packed with escapees, seen in Figures 12a and 12b, to describe those frightful exoduses. The post claimed that in 1980 and 1981 “about 75,000” escapees fled Việt-Nam by boat each year.

In spite of the cost and the risk, escapees were willing to board “overcrowded, under-equipped, and dangerously constructed boats” and face a dreadful journey to reach the “nearby shores of Thailand, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, or Singapore in search of
freedom. Unfortunately, these boats became easy targets for pirates, starvation, and capsizing; furthermore, the sea swallowed countless escapees and their hope for freedom. In “The Voyage of the Boat People,” one reads “at least ten percent and possibly even half of all escapees lost their lives trying to flee Viêt-Nam.” This statistic included Hoàng’s second sister, Đỗ Lê-Dung, a pharmacist, and her seven-month old son, Cao Thanh-Tùng.


Figure 12b: From “The Voyage of the Boat People” in “A Modern Exodus.” Web. 3 Mar. 2014
In the communist society where one’s *capital* consisted of non-association with the RVN government in any shape or form, my decision to marry Hoàng, a nguy-quân and a laborer in the communists’ reeducation camps, severely roadblocked my future and de-capitalized my resume. In fact, Hoàng was Thào’s friend and I met him in January 1972, when he frequented my family to hang out with Thào before reporting for military training. Since Hoàng lost a year after finishing the 12th grade in deciding whether to study abroad or not, he was subject to the national draft. Therefore, at the end of his freshman year as a Politics/Economics major at Đà-Lạt University, Hoàng began his military career. Hoàng’s military background before April 1975 led to his confinement in the communist reeducation camps from May 1975 to August 1978. During his prison time, once a month, Hoàng and others were allowed to send a short letter to family; sometimes, he sent it to me, instead. In 1977, in a letter, Hoàng proposed and I accepted his proposal.

Without being deterred by the disadvantages, attached to marrying a nguy-quân [puppet military personnel], I chose Hoàng over a prospective brighter future of being an interpreter in the communist society. Fortunately, my parents always helped me out. They talked to their friends and I was admitted into a six-month program at Trường Sư-phẩm Mẫu-giao [School of Kindergarten Pedagogy] in January 1978 to learn and be trained as a kindergarten teacher, a modest, yet decent profession in the new communist *field*. In summer 1979, almost a year after his release and carrying the nguy-quân stigma on his resume, a certification of unfit-ness in the communist society, Hoàng remained unemployed. His constant struggle, shown on his skeleton frame and his unusual silence, led to our agreement on his escape as the last resort, despite the fact that I was pregnant with our first child. Thanks to his parents’ financial support, Hoàng could pay thirteen *liều vàng* for his trip. After the first unsuccessful attempt to help Hoàng flee
by boat in June 1979, the organization offered him an escape by land in April 1980. Escaping by land meant Hoàng would cross the Vietnam-Cambodia border and then the Cambodia-Thailand border by any available means of transportation and/or by foot with a guide. Since our son, Đỗ-Vinh-Hoàng, was then a four-month old baby who would have not survived such a dangerous, terrifying journey, we decided that Hoàng had to leave alone while I stayed home to take care of our son.

The evening when Hoàng stepped out of the back door of my parents’ house to merge into the dark alley taking him back to Trần-Quý-Cáp, a street that intersected Lê-Văn-Duyệt, my eyes followed him and my ears listened to his footsteps until darkness blocked my vision and distance shut down the familiar sound of his gait. Leaning against the back door’s frame, I felt as if my body/life/heart was cut into halves, and he took one half with him. Yet, I fought off crying for fear that my tears would be an ill omen foiling his trip. While sadness weighed me down, hope raised me up. I hoped and prayed for Hoàng’s safety and for a successful escape, so he could be a human being, not a stigmatized ngụ-quân, a free man, not an ex-prisoner, and he would have a future to build and color, not a past to be haunted and discriminated.

Hoàng left home on April 13, 1980 and arrived to Thailand approximately on April 23, 1980. A week later, his guide came back to give me his handwritten note: “Fourth has arrived!” in Vietnamese. From a crumpled piece of paper as small as the palm of my hand, I recognized Hoàng’s handwriting and the code he used. He was the fourth child of his parents’ seven children. We were countries apart, but I could hear his heartbeat in mine. Coincidentally, on the day Hoàng reached Thailand, at home, Baby Hoàng constantly cracked up every time he saw my friend’s face in a peekaboo game. Taking his crisp, sparkling laughter as a good sign, my mother assured me, “His dad must have safely arrived!” And Hoàng did arrive safely.
When I was young girl in the 1960’s, I watched *Chúng Tôi Muốn Sống*, a movie that condemned the Communists’ atrocity, and heard an earful of dreadful stories about the communist regime; when I was in my twenties, I witnessed the southerners and my husband reliving that movie and those stories when they risked their lives to escape the communists’ oppression in the form of material and symbolic domination and violence. After Hoàng had gone, I continued to be a kindergarten teacher, living at my parents’ house, and raising our son with their financial and emotional support. I had gathered countless life experiences since Saigon fell in April 30, 1975, as I was living in the new *field* and working as a kindergarten teacher. In this new *field* and among my 4-years-old students’ laughter, I laid the first bricks to found a home for my love for teaching. My intellect stopped growing; it paused! For many years, I neither saw, nor read/had access to a current book/magazine/journal in English or in French. And during this pause, I was intellectually impoverished and starved.

1.3 Moving Forward – Rebuilding a New Start

Hoàng’s status of having been a second lieutenant of the RVN until April 30, 1975 and being imprisoned in the communist reeducation camps from May 1975 to August 1978 qualified him a refugee status and granted him a resettlement in America in January 1981. Hoàng’s petition and the Orderly Departure Program allowed me and our son to come to America in July 1989 to reunite with Hoàng. After years of separation and struggle, I have considered us the lucky ones to be among over 500,000 [who] came through the Orderly Departure Program, including 80,000 under the Amerasian program and 165,000 under a special program for former reeducation camp detainees. The data can be confusing since the general
notions of who is a "refugee," the exact U.S. legal status given to specific individuals, and the U.N.'s reporting of "refugees" are often different. In particular, many counted as "refugees" by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) since they came through the Orderly Departure Program from Vietnam, actually arrive[d] in the United States as "immigrants" (The Southeast Asian Refugee Crisis).

Despite the fact that I arrived in the United States with a nine-year-old son, a $20 bill in a pocket of my son’s pants, a handful of English vocabulary that retained and remained from my time of learning English before April 1975, and no skills/degree, I filled my heart with dreams and hopes in sizes and shapes that went beyond measurement and imagination. The joy of being reunited with Hoàng and living in a free country clipped ginormous wings to my soul, and I was winging above reality, as I dressed my thinking in the rosy, splendid version of ‘ignorance is bliss.’ While socially, culturally, and mentally adjusting my eastern perception to the western outlook steadily tested my fortitude, personal and emotional issues unkindly jabbed my endurance. The fact that Hoàng and I had stayed together for 18 months and been separated for 9 years, 2 months, and 24 days made reunifying a combination of ecstasy and discomfort. Ecstasy described our overjoy of being whole again; discomfort existed because Hoàng and I no longer shared similar interpretations of life and its related issues. To Hoàng, the Vietnamese indirectness was difficult to understand; to me, the American directness was difficult to accept. The west and the east did not fare well together under the same roof, ours. How the twain collided! Our minds, like the two shores of the Pacific Ocean, were distanced from each other in those days.

During that challenging time, Vĩnh-Hoàng with his genuine and instant ‘click’ with Hoàng, the in-photo father of the past, like the Pacific Ocean’s body of water, held the shores/us
together. “Bố [Dad] is very kind!” added to his ear-to-ear grin was his very first remark of his father in flesh. Joy painted the boy’s face whenever he spent time with Hoàng, and he would ask, “Where’s Bố?” if he did not see him around when he opened his eyes and got up in the morning. Vinh-Hoàng’s attachment to Hoàng reminded us of our responsibility as parents, and this reminder smoothed roughness in our spousal relationship. Adjustments took time, willingness, and patience, but they were necessary, and true love/commitment conquered all, possibl-ized all; it has always been.

Equipped with multicolored dreams and kaleidoscopic hopes for a brighter future for all of us, I paddled through one emotional, personal challenge after another and survived! My heart was bruised, but motherhood strengthened me. I gained confidence when I realized that my humble English abled me to communicate quite effectively. In August 1989, a month after my arrival, Hoàng helped me find my childhood friend, Trần-Dinh-Hồng, who left Saigon by boat on New Year’s Eve in 1978 and came to America in 1980. Taking his advice and Hoàng’s, I agreed to attend a vocational program to be a manicurist so I could soon work and help Hoàng support our family of three. To enroll me, Hồng drove me to a school of cosmetology, located on the short, quaint Main Street in Garden Grove, where he had been trained and certified to be a manicurist and a hair stylist, to introduce me to his former instructors. At school, after exchanging a series of big, warm greeting hugs and gleeful shrieks with three instructors, he told them, “This is Hồng, my childhood friend. She just came here, but her English is very good, and she would like to enroll.” Before April 30, 1975, in the circle of friends and classmates, I was reckoned ‘very good’ in English. However, when I stood in front of Hồng’s instructors, my ‘very good’ in English was but a fourteen-year-old academic credit. I surprised myself when I was able to engage and maintain a good conversation with the instructors who were amazed by
my English ability, especially when they learned of my recent arrival. Nevertheless, I did live up
to my friends’ reckoning, and my English communicability earned me a seat in the 360 hour
manicurist training program at the public vocational school. Without English, I would have had
to borrow a loan to register at a private school where the same program was taught in
Vietnamese. Saved by speaking English!

Overall, my background of a freshman, majoring in English Language and Civilization at
Đại-học Văn-Khoa Saigon (Saigon Faculty of Letters) before April 30, 1975, helped me to be a
volunteer at Saint Joseph Hospital in Orange County in August 1989, a month after my arrival to
America, before becoming a manicurist student, but most of all, it helped me to be employed at
Saint Joseph Hospital as a GI Lab technician in June 1990. Once employed as a full-time
technician, I stopped working as Hồng’s assistant at a hair salon, even though I took the exam,
passed it, and was licensed.

Determined to best my settlement in America, I shared with Hoàng my desire to go back
to school, but since Hoàng needed me to work to support all of us, working topped the list and
studying was seconded. Therefore, being an employee at Saint Joseph Hospital brought me a
humble income that added stability to our family budget and relieved pressure on Hoàng as a
sole breadwinner. As I was getting to know the Americans and their culture one day, one person,
one TV night at a time, I held tight to my return-to-school dream and waited to be a California
permanent resident to go back to school and pay $11/unit tuition. During that time, taking advice
from Hoàng’s third sister, Đỗ Lệ-Hằng a pharmacist, I enrolled in the Pharmacy Technology
(PT) program at Santa Ana College (SAC) to become a certified pharmacy technician; it would
take a year and a half to two years to finish the program. It took me two.
In June 1990, when I was eligible to apply for the fall semester, I went to Santa Ana College to do so. At the Admissions’ window, a clerk took my application and read it; then she looked at me and said, “You won’t be a permanent resident until next month, in July.” As soon as the clerk finished her sentence, I promptly replied, “But I’ll be one when class begins in August!” Again, my English put me through since the clerk agreed with my explanation and accepted my application.

A placement test, including a Math test and an English test, taken at Santa Ana College before the Fall semester began, showed that I passed Elementary Algebra and Level Three English. At that time, the Pharmacy Technology (PT) program only required students to pass Level Two English. Thus, with those satisfactory results, I was eligible to enroll in the Pharmacy Technology program and become one of its students.

In August 1990, a year after resettling in the United States, fifteen years after my unfinished freshman year at Đại-học Văn-Khoa Saigon (Saigon Faculty of Letters), my academic journey resumed. Before 1975, English was my second foreign language but after my resettlement in 1989, English became my second language, the one that I have been using as much or sometimes even more than Vietnamese, my first/native language. And the joy of being able to go back to school to learn English was indescribable; it allowed me to dream again, this time in multiple English literacies and with my multiple subjectivities.

Reflecting the interweaving of lives and history, my mindset, like those of other Vietnamese immigrants and refugees, has been constructed and colored by historical, social, and personal experiences.
In this chapter, I discuss in detail my academic background, my struggles in the Vietnamese education system, my choice of foreign languages, first French and then English, as academic requirements, and how knowing French has assisted my English learning. The chapter includes my experiences as a new California resident in 1990 and as an ESL adult student in different time periods at Santa Ana College (SAC). From 1990 to 1992, I studied to be a licensed pharmacy technician at Santa Ana College and in the summer of 1996, I returned to take classes required for transfer and to begin my academic quest for knowledge in higher education. This was the first stage of my academic journey. The chapter concludes with notes about my transfer to California State University Long Beach in spring 2002, which was the second stage of my journey, and the beginning of my getting-to-know rhetoric and my exploration of the world of rhetoric.

The fourteen-year-old English academic credit that helped me to be a volunteer, a manicurist student, and, most important, an employee at Saint Joseph Hospital was, indeed, closely associated with my background of studying French as my first foreign language in the sixth grade in high school in Viet-Nam. This association has never stopped benefitting me, and as Charles Barber’s *The English Language A Historical Introduction* explains, there “is a close relationship between French and English” (61). This close relationship must have included identical words in both languages, such as international, education, or resemble, and similarities seen in French *peuple, bataille, or changer* and in English people, battle, and change, as Barber points out.
The French and English shared vocabulary has, in fact, made English a more familiar and friendly language to learn for me. I was introduced to French at a young age because my father had received a French education until the eighth grade in the 1930s in North Việt-Nam, when the country had been a French colony. From my history classes at school and from stories and experiences told by my grandmother, parents, uncles, and aunts who had lived through the French colonization in Việt-Nam, I have learned of the French presence in my country and its long-term influence on Vietnamese education and society. In one of his signature songs, Gia Tài Của Mẹ, [Mother’s Inheritance], Trịnh Công-Sơn, a Vietnamese inspirational singer/songwriter wrote,

Một ngàn năm nò lệ giấc tàu
một trăm năm đờ họ giấc tây
hai mươi năm nội chiến từng ngày
gia tài của mẹ, để lại cho con
gia tài của mẹ, là nước Việt buôn

My brothers and I and my generation, along with those who grew up before us, sang and memorized by heart these lyrics, which were a thumbnail summary of our history. In my own translation,

A thousand years of Chinese domination
A hundred years of French colonization
Twenty years of everyday civil war
Mother’s inheritance has left for me
Mother’s inheritance has been a sorrowful Việt-Nam

In his A Brief History of VietNam, under the subtitle, “The French in VietNam,” Tim Lambert wrote, “in 1883 North and Central Vietnam was forced to become a French
protectorate.” Dictionary.com defines protectorate, a noun, as “the relation of a strong state toward a weaker state or territory that it protects and partly controls”; this definition well-describes the Vietnamese political status in its relation with France and French in the past.

My father’s eight years in French schools colored his perspective in western hues and guided many of his decisions, especially those regarding his children’s education. For instance, at first he enrolled my brother Thào, in a French kindergarten, and then two years later, he sent me there to join Thào. While convenience and availability definitely explained my father’s choice, the program itself must have played the deciding factor. First of all, the kindergarten was only approximately 400 feet from our house; second, there were none of the Vietnamese kindergartens in our neighborhood in the early 1950s; third, the well-planned and nurturing program at the French kindergarten offered children a roomy, colorful, and toyful, fun environment to play and learn. Sixty years later, I still clearly remember the soothing rhythm of *Frere Jacques* (Brother Jack) with its simple wording that was so easy for the three and four year old children to memorize. Although I keep wondering what the message of the song is, *Frere Jacques* is one of the most popular French children’s songs/lullabies, not only taught at that French kindergarten but also at countless others.

Frere Jacques

*Frere Jacques, Frere Jacques,*

*Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?*

*Sonnez les matines, sonnez les matines*

*Ding dang dong, ding dang dong.*

English translation:

Brother John, Brother John,
Are you sleeping; are you sleeping?
Morning bells are ringing; morning bells are ringing
Ding dang dong, ding dang dong.

However, despite our French education debut, when the Geneva Accords concluded on July 20 and 21, 1954, marking the end of the French eighty years (1874-1954) of colonizing Vietnamese society, my father was so enraptured by the country’s promising future of being independent, which was reinforced by the official use of Vietnamese in education, that he switched us to a Vietnamese education. Hence, being signed in Geneva, Switzerland, more than six thousand north-west miles away from Saigon, Viet-Nam, the Geneva Accords directly impacted my father’s judgment and decision about his children’s education, which in turn would shape their future.

My father’s youth, living in a French colonized country/society and receiving a French education in grade-schools can be identified as “habitus,” or the “social structure” that shaped his “individual agency” (Maton 50). In other words, while my father’s decisions were his own, they were, indeed, guided by his past, since the “structured” structure of my father’s “habitus” helped structure his present and future practices: a “structuring structure” (51). Thus, there was no surprise in my father’s decision to send us to the French elementary and other schools, which he believed would best benefit us, his children; in each of his decisions, his “structured” structure surfaced.

Having lived under the French colonization, my father understood his countrymen’s humiliation at not having their own language officially and academically recognized; therefore, when the French withdrew from Việt-Nam and its program was replaced by the Vietnamese one, my father gave the latter his full support, wholeheartedly. His belief that “Vietnamese study
Vietnamese” was an unequivocal proof of his national pride, materialized in Tháo going in 1955 to Trường Tiểu học Phan-Đinh-Phùng [Phan-Đinh-Phùng Elementary School], a public school after two years in a French kindergarten, instead of going to Saint-Exupéry, a French elementary school in Saigon, to further his French education for which the French kindergarten had prepared him. Two years later, in 1957, my father enrolled me into Trường Tiểu học Trần-Quy-Cáp [Trần-Quy-Cáp Elementary School], also a public school.

Regarding the official use of Vietnamese in education, in his excerpt, “Nềng giáo dục ở miền nam 1954-1975” (Education in the South [Viet-Nam]1954-1975), Professor Nguyễn Thanh-Liêm writes that not until the mid-1950s, under the First Republic of the South Việt-Nam, did the Vietnamese program begin to replace the French program. Professor Liêm was a former principal of Pétrus Ký High School and deputy minister of Education in Saigon, South Việt-Nam, before 1975.

According to Professor Liêm, in 1917 the French implemented an educational system, called French colonial education that included the elementary, high school, and university levels to all three regions: South, Middle, and North Việt-Nam. In this program, French was the major language, whereas Vietnamese was the minor. The program, slightly modified from its French original version, was used in Vietnamese schools in the whole country until the end of World War II. After Việt-Nam declared its independence in 1945, a Vietnamese program, called the Hoàng Xuân Hãn program, was carried out, first in the North and then in the Middle; in the South, however, due to the French return, the French program continued to be in effect until the mid-1950s. Professor Liêm also claims that before French colonization, the Vietnamese education system was heavily influenced by the Chinese as Chinese textbooks, pedagogy, and assessment were used.
With the end of the French-Vietnamese program in 1949 as San attested, in the 1950s, Vietnamese became the main and only language of teaching and learning at schools at all levels, just as Professor Liêm affirmed. Yet, in 1958, when my brother Mạnh, four years my junior, was three years old, my father enrolled him into Caritas, a Catholic, private kindergarten where children learned French and were well-prepared for their future French education. Whether my father’s decision was a reality call or a nostalgia for French education, it was a good one! I consider my father’s giving Mạnh a French education a reality call since despite the demise of French colonization, French influence remained solid and apparent in many aspects of Vietnamese life. Literally, French was a beautiful language cloaked in a rich history; economically, my father’s French education had served him well. From his own experiences, my father must have acknowledged that his fluency in French had kept the doors of opportunity open for him. Until Saigon fell on April 30, 1975, my father had maintained significantly good businesses with the French personnel of the Consulat General de France, along with the French expatriates, such as, Dr. Boucheron, Dr. Fraude, Mr. Morgan, Mlle (Mademoiselle) Henrie, and the francophone population in Saigon, including Mlle Nguyệt, Mlle Giang, Mrs. Morgan; many of whom were my father’s friends as well as his customers. Also, many of my family’s physicians, from the family practice of Dr. Visit to my father’s pulmonologists, Dr. Fraude and Dr. Boucheron, were all French. Our dentists, husband and wife, DDS Nguyễn Bích-Lan, were Vietnamese but had received a French education and spoke French with each other and with patients who could speak French.

Every Sunday, my family dined at a French restaurant, Tài-Nam, Mỹ-Cạnh, or Ngân-Đinh, which, in spite of their Vietnamese names, served French influenced cuisine, such as Chateaubriand (Roasted Beef Tenderloin with Wine Sauce), coq au vin (chicken in red wine),
canard a l’orange (French roast duck with orange sauce), escargots au beurre (sautéed snails in butter and garlic), and pommes frites (French fries), which were some of our family’s familiar dishes. The restaurants’ owners were often my father’s customers, and we were their regulars, so regular that the owners and the servers remembered my father’s favorite orders. Every time my family showed up at one of these restaurants on a Sunday evening by 7:00 p.m., everyone greeted him with “Chào ông chủ!” (Hello Boss). There was no doubt in my mind that my father’s business success had a lot to do with his French fluency, since Saigon, the capital of South Việt-Nam, was marked with a hundred years of French colonization, evidenced in the city’s structure, business, entertainment, and taste, despite the fact that being colonized was a negative experience. The following pictures show the Majestic Hotel, Continental Hotel, Givral Café, and Brodard Café (see Figures 13a, 13b, 13c, and 13d), all located in Quản Nh黠t, Saigon’s First District. These well-known businesses were also Saigon’s pride signature before 1975. All of them have survived the communist regime and continue to stay in business.

Figure 13a: Majestic Hotel in Saigon1966; Web; 02 Feb. 2014
Figure 13b: Continental Hotel in Saigon; Web; 02 Feb. 2014
French imprints were included not only in the name of businesses in Saigon, but also in Saigon’s lifestyle, which is illustrated below with the joining of the imprints of the CSS athletic club and the French label in a package of cigarettes, seen in Figures 14a, 14b, and 14c, retrieved from saigon-vietnam, a website posting photos in Saigon’s past, before 1975.

Examining my father’s choices, on an individual level, I consider that it was his academic background, to a large extent, that influenced his choice of our schools, his taste for life, and even the circle of customers whom he served. Culturally, my father was Vietnamese; nationally,
he was patriotic; academically, his French education colored his subjectivity the way English has mine. My father must have shared with me the experiences of living in the multiplicity of subjectivities, which were built/reflect on the language we spoke/communicated. Since as Helen Foster insists, “[l]anguage is, …, the building-block of consciousness and thus of reality” and “[t]he nature of language also supports the notion that some aspect of the self is unique…” (108), we were our unique selves whose consciousness and reality were largely constructed through the ownership and identification of the languages we used to think in and speak with.

At home with us and during business with Vietnamese customers, my father acted/thought in and spoke Vietnamese with his Vietnamese subjectivity. However, his Vietnamese subjectivity had different versions, too. For instance, in the family/en famille, my father was a typical, reticent Vietnamese man, whose Vietnamese version consisted of self-control, inner reservation, and authority. From my father, I learned the value of communicating with non-verbal cues; an intense look could mean as powerfully as, or even more powerful than, clusters of rambling words. In “The Use of Eloquence: The Confucian Perspective,” George Q. Xu writes that “the Confucian devaluation of eloquence has had an especially pervasive, profound influence on communication among Chinese” (116), and in “Confucian Silence and Remonstration: A Basis for Deliberation?,” Arabella Lyon asserts that “[i]nherent in the elevating of [Confucian] silence is a distrust-s of speech and a fairly clear distinction between speaking and acting, between saying nonsense and showing what is important,” and that in this practice, “[d]eeds exceed speeches” (137).

Given that Viet-Nam was occupied by the Chinese for almost a thousand years, Vietnamese philosophy, culture, and traditions have been deeply rooted in those of the Chinese, and seen in Vietnemese practice, like my father’s, as Nguyễn-Tương-Hùng notes,
Due to a thousand years of Chinese rule and assimilation, it was inevitable that Vietnam would be affected by Chinese civilization. Despite this, Vietnamese culture is not without its own national identity. In effect, Chinese cultural practices tended to coexist with, rather than to replace, traditional Vietnamese culture and language (1).

Tướng-Hùng’s words explain my father’s embrace and practice of reticence in his Vietnamese subjectivity.

Yet, in business, my father’s Vietnamese subjectivity embraced words and eloquence in his daily interactions with his customers and other business owners. This business interactive version of my father’s Vietnamese subjectivity was very similar to that of his French. Every time he greeted French customers in his shop, or when he entered the Consulat General de France and talked with the French personnel at the Service Social Department, I saw in his western-influenced shrugs and expressions, “Mais, oui!” and “Mais si!” [Certainly/Indeed], and in his engagement of long conversations with French officials, lively version of French subjectivity, the western subjectivity of my Vietnamese father.

I wild-guess that my father’s giving Mạnh a French education was French nostalgia based on the fact that my father had not finished his high school, so he might have expected Mạnh to finish his and advance. In the family’s after-dinner talks, I detected regret in my father about his past and how he had wished to finish his schooling. Although my father excelled in his craftsmanship as a successful tailor, being a tailor must have been his plan B to compensate his unfinished schooling, his plan A! In other words, Mạnh’s studying French was my father’s reinvestment in French education.
Nonetheless, my father made a good decision when he sent Mạnh to Caritas, a small kindergarten that was located on Trương-Minh-Ký a small, short, and very quaint street with one of its ends meeting our street, Lê-Văn-Duyệt. Having begun learning French at three, Mạnh spoke French with what linguists, such as Ng Bee Chin and Gillian Wigglesworth, call “nativelike competence” (12), something that characterized his French as he grew up and helped his being employed by a French brewery company in Saigon in the 1990s, decades later.

For Mạnh to be a student at Saint-Exupéry, a prestigious boys-only French elementary school and a symbol of the official collaboration of the French government and the Vietnamese in education, my father had to pay a pricey, trimester tuition. Unlike Phan-Dinh-Phùng and Trần-Quý-Cáp elementary schools, which were public and, therefore, tuition free, Saint-Exupéry was not. Saint-Exupéry, Colette, Marie Curie, Jean Jaques Rousseau as well as other French institutions in South Việt-Nam before 1975 were sponsored/financed by the French government [có một số trường do chính phủ Pháp tài trợ như Marie-Curie, Colette, và Saint-Exupéry]\(^44\).

To help us with our homework, my father invited his old friend, whom we called Bác Quỳnh (Uncle Quỳnh) to tutor all three of us and a neighbor girl, Tuyết-Mai, at home. Tuyết-Mai was a year older than Mạnh and three years younger than me, and while Mạnh went to Saint Exupery, a boys-only French Elementary, she went to Collette, a girls-only French Elementary, and they were at the same grade level. Bác Quỳnh spoke French as if he were a Frenchman, and he tutored French for a living. All four of us studied with him three times a week for two hours each time. Thus, I was learning French before I was required to take it at sixth grade in high school.

I did not know, yet had never asked my parents or Thảo why he was at his school, but I knew well why I was at mine. My father enrolled me into Trần-Quý-Cáp since he
wholeheartedly admired the principal and a famed educator, Mr. Hà-Mai-Anh, one of his customers. He was profoundly impressed by Mr. Anh’s works.

I knew not when my father first read the wonderful literature of Hector Malot (1830-1907), a prolific French writer, but Mr. Anh’s Vietnamese translations of Malot’s Sans Famille [Vô gia đình – Without Family] (1878), En Famille [Trong gia đình – Amongst Family] (1893), and Romain Kalbris [Về với gia đình – Returning to Family] (1869) were first my father’s all-time favorites and then ours. I can hardly remember the content of the second and the third, yet the story of a boy from a wealthy family fallen victim to his uncle’s greed to become un petit vagabond [a little transient] and his journey in Sans Famille has stayed with me. At a young age, these readings introduced me to human qualities: courage, determination, and perseverance, depicted by the main characters Remi, Perrine, and Romain in each story and exhibited via their actions and choices.

The French books that Mr. Anh translated into Vietnamese conveyed values, such as family ties, family love, humanity, and gratitude for teachers, and these values were universal; they were prized, taught, and practiced in the Vietnamese household and society as well. Presenting western literacy with values that were also shared by the eastern audience, Mr. Anh brought the two cultures closer to each other in terms of commonality and humanity. Mr. Anh’s works, therefore, contributed to and enriched the Vietnamese education.

Being one of his readers, my father recognized his efforts and praised him for being a conscientious educator, who by my father’s standard educated, in addition to teaching, students and the Vietnamese population the value of moral traditions, virtues, and righteousness. In Confucianism, by which my father had been deeply influenced, moral tradition corresponded to “li (often translated as ‘rites’) – the traditions and conventions that carried the power of
unwritten law:” virtues stood for ren, “the core of Confucius’s philosophy, which signified
goodness, virtue, benevolence, and was ultimately what differentiated humans from animals”
(Xu 117) and yi, “righteousness” (124). In other words, my father respected Mr. Anh and his
literary contributions for bringing Western and Eastern values together to educate and enlighten
Vietnamese readers.

Thoroughly influenced by French, Vietnamese education, however, displayed noticeable
differences from its French model, especially at the primary level. The first difference rested on
the fact that Viet-Nam selected lớp năm to lớp nhất as the cut-off number on the list of its ordinal
number system to label its primary classes, not la douzieme a la septieme (the twelfth to seventh)
like French. As a result of this selection, the lowest class in a Vietnamese elementary was lớp
năm (fifth class), and students progressed to lớp tư (fourth), lớp ba (third), lớp nhị (second), and
lớp nhất (first), which was the highest class. The second difference was that Vietnamese
students who received a Vietnamese education would normally finish elementary in five years,
yet those who studied French would take six years, “Bắc Tiểu Học 6 năm” [Primary 6 years], to
finish their primary education as San mentioned.

What distinguished the upper secondary education from its lower counterpart was the
additional foreign language and a student’s academic emphasis. This meant that in lớp dè-tam
(10th grade), if a student had French as her/his first foreign language, s/he would select English to
be the second, and vice versa. Although I did vaguely hear of German, Italian, or Spanish being
other foreign languages offered, none of them could compete with the popularity that French and
English had earned until 1975. Moreover, at Nguyễn-Bá-Tòng, my high school, and at Chu-
Vân-An, Thảo’s high school, only French and English were offered. Thus, during our grade
school years, the first/major/foreign and second/minor/foreign languages in high school were French and English for Thảo and for me.

2.1 My Academic Struggles in the Upper Secondary Level

While I found learning foreign languages, both French and English, enjoyable, I struggled to pass Tú-Tài I and Tú-Tài II. When I began lôp đệ-tứ (10th grade), at Nguyễn-Bá-Tông, only Ban B and C were offered, so I chose Ban B to be with my friends, even though Math had never been my strength. I survived that year. However, when I began lôp đệ-nhi, Nguyễn-Bá-Tông only offered đệ-nhi A and đệ-nhi C, so again, I changed my emphasis and enrolled in đệ-nhi A in order to stay at Nguyễn-Bá-Tông with my friends. In đệ-nhi A, with Natural Science weighing 3, Physics and Chemistry 3, and Math 2, I began losing my footing in those subjects, although I had a tutor at home to help me with Math, Physics, and Chemistry, and I learned every word/page in my Natural Science textbook by rote.

I started taking the Tú-Tài I exam in summer 1968, the same year of Tết Mậu-Thân, notoriously known as the Tet Offensive, but my constant struggles with Math, Physics, and Chemistry resulted in my recurrent failures. The third time I flunked, Bác Bành, a genuine bookworm and one of my father’s close friends, on his weekly visit, summoned me. That was unusual! Bác Bành was a reticent man, like my father, but unlike my father’s businessman look, Bác Bành looked like a nerd. He was a very nice man, but his look shooed us away. We politely greeted him with our arms folded in front of our abdomen and our head bowed; “Thưa Bác!” (Hello Uncle), we said, every time he showed up, but we instantly disappeared afterwards. Bác Bành was a government employee, and he stopped by our house every week, left his bicycle outside my father’s shop, and walked to Trần-Quý-Cáp, approximately fifty or sixty feet away,
to be totally captivated in overlapping rows of old books, which were displayed on a dark grey or ocean blue plastic sheet laid on the street’s cement sidewalk. Within a short distance, one sidewalk of Trần-Quý-Cáp became an old book shopping mecca, and old book lovers/collectors like Bác Bành frequented that sidewalk and brought business to those old book sellers.

Bác Bành only loved and was interested in old books and he had never talked to me more than two sentences up to that day. His first sentence always was, “How’s your studying?” – “It’s fine!” and his second, “Is your dad home?” was said only if he saw me by myself in the shop and my father was not there. Yet, that reticent, out-of-this-world nerd Bác Bành wanted to talk to me after I had failed Tú-Tài I the third time! Bác Bành’s first-born daughter, who was a year older than I was, failed Tú-Tài I once, but she passed it the second time.

When I greeted Bác Bành, he sat in one of the two armchairs, separated by a small, round table placed against the wall and next to my father’s desk; my father was at the cutting table focusing his scissors on a piece of fabric to shape it into pant patterns. I stood at my father’s desk, refusing to sit in the other armchair as Bác Bành suggested. Bác Bành stared at my face for a while as if trying to find a solid support for his speech; then he addressed me in his normal baritone voice.

“You don’t look stupid! Why you’re so stupid? What’s wrong with you and your brain? How old are you? What year, what month, and what hour that you were born? Give me all those dates and time. I need them.” Shifting his look toward my father, Bác Bành added, “I’ll have my friend, who is an expert in astrology, look into your horoscope to see what goes wrong. Yes, that’s all.” He must have wanted to inform and explain to my father his reasons for asking those details of my life.
Bác Bành’s speech ended in a minute or so and included a couple of brief pauses. I surely did not take his first sentence, “You don’t look stupid,” as a compliment, since it was not, but I accepted the second and the third sentences based on their face value. It would be difficult to find a decent word to describe the third failure of the same exam. Initially, I was quite shocked to be called “stupid” right to my face from Bác Bành, but he was not a mean-spirited person; on the contrary, he was thoughtful and nice, although eccentric. He did not raise his voice and he looked toward my father while talking to me, but that was normal for him. He always tilted his head on the right side while speaking to someone and eye contact appeared to be optional. In his talk, I recognized a dose of frustration and concern, not a delivery of insult and accusation. Therefore, at the end, I was not mad at Bác Bành; I appreciated his concern, but in my head, I was strongly convinced, “He’s so weird!” as I was listening to him.

Working at the cutting table, several steps away, my father heard everything that Bác Bành had said, but he did not say anything. I took my father’s silence as “do what he’s told you!” so I pulled out a piece of paper and wrote down the year, month, and hour I was born and gave it to Bác Bành and let go of his bizarre request.

About a month later, Bác Bành handed me two pieces of 8.5 x 14 paper, filled with beautiful handwriting on both sides, called lá số tử-vi, which was a summary/prediction of my life’s process/events from birth to death. He explained to my father, “She was born under a star that was covered by dark cloud; the dark cloud was so big that it also covered the sun and the moon, so she’ll continue to struggle until the dark cloud is gone, and her star comes out again and she’ll shine.”

A lá số tử-vi, an astrologer’s time-consuming and detailed-written work, is done based on the ancient Chinese “scientific knowledge” of “heavenly bodies” and “star charts” to predict
one’s future and to speculate on her/his personality⁴⁶. While rhetoric has been defined as “the use of language, written or spoken, to inform or persuade” (Bizzell and Herzberg 1), and “to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, or to influence the will,” as Campbell argued (902), the use of written language/rhetoric in lá số tứ-vi of the East to predict, like in Nostradamus’ western writing, has not been mentioned in mainstream rhetoric studies.

Even though I was impressed by the claims in my lá số tứ-vi, coming from a total stranger, I did not consider it a life’s prophecy that claimed my academic struggles would persist. However, I did not pass Tú-Tài I until summer 1971, four years after I first entered lớp đệ-nhi A in 1967. I was not sure if my star started coming out to shine that year. When my parents learned of my success on the fourth try, at the lunch table that day, my father commended me, “How persistent she has been! Others who failed that many times all quit, but she’s the only one who didn’t!” My father’s statement was based on the fact that one of my next door neighbors, two years my senior, quit school after failing Tú-Tài I two times, so she stayed home to assist her father with his herbal medicine business, and another neighbor, two years my junior, also quit after two attempts to join the work force. It was true that in the neighborhood, I was the only one who kept trying until I passed it the fourth time.

In spite of my efforts, I did not credit myself for being persistent! Instead, I credited my parents for being beyond patient with me, for giving me a lifestyle that allowed me plentiful resources which my neighbors did not have; their families were not as comfortable as mine, and their father had not received a French education like mine.

In all the years when I retook classes before taking the exam at the end of a school year, I asked my father every time for money to enroll in a class, albeit English, French, or flower
arranging, snack cooking, or crocheting. My father simply gave me a key chain; one of the keys opened the safe, and I could get the amount of money that I needed. Never once did he question my choice or refuse my request. Further, despite my continuous academic failures, at home, neither my parents nor my brothers ever used that flaw to criticize me or to compare me with those who had passed.

In reexamining those factors, I agree with Fiona Devine, whose *Class Practices* discusses middle-class parenting. She has found that “middle-class parents mobilize a variety of resources in an effort to secure educational and occupational success for their children” (Crossley 95). My parents were neither doctors nor teachers; they belonged to the middle-class in Việ̂t-Nam, yet what they did for their children was the same as those in Devine’s research. In his paper, “Vietnam: Cultural Background for ESL/EFL Teachers,” Nguyễn-Tướng-Hùng notes that “Vietnamese people are famous for their respect for education and love for learning. Parents have a heavy responsibility for their children’s education, even at their own expense” (4). Written and presented in 2002, three decades later from the time frame of my experiences, Tướng-Hùng’s note truly captures the norm of the Vietnamese culture in which parents’ responsibility and dedication to their children’s education remain their top priorities, regardless of the family’s social class, which is a significant difference from Devine’s study.

In my youth, I had also seen struggling parents who sacrificed everything to “mobilize a variety of resources in an effort to secure educational and occupational success for their children,” and as a result, some of those children, who were Tháo’s friends and classmates, received a scholarship for studying engineering abroad in Germany. Those parents’ efforts challenge not only the conclusion of Devine’s review but also Bourdieu’s suggestion that “poverty negates the potential for imagination and cultural innovation;” perhaps, Bourdieu’s
perspective is limited due to “his failure to recognize [the] vibrancy and creativity [of the working class culture]” (Crossley 94), for Vietnamese cultural practices serve as a counter argument to Bourdieu’s claim.

While my parents’ undeniable dedication and responsibility to their children’s academic development remained solid, their joy for my pass of Tú-Tài I on the fourth try in 1971 was shortened. In the following year, 1972, the Minister of Education decided to waive Tú-Tài I, so students could attend lớp dề-nhạt (12th grade) after finishing lớp dề-nhi (11th grade). That change turned Tú-Tài I into an academic relic, but I held on to that diploma as a souvenir to remind me of my struggles and my parents’ patience. Since Nguyễn-Bá-Tòng did not offer lớp dề-nhạt A [Natural Science & Physics & Chemistry], only lớp dề-nhạt C [Philosophy & Foreign Languages], I went to Trường-Sơn, a private, small high school where lớp dề-nhạt A was one of its strongest features, and many of its staff were my father’s customers.

Despite the fact that I could not digest Math equations and Physics, and Chemistry formulas and that I deeply loved studying English, I stayed in Ban A. I was very good at rote learning, a common learning method in Việt-Nam. In his document, Professor Liêm mentions the Vietnamese learning formula “sôi kinh nau su” [boil the text; stew the history]47 that was deeply influenced by Chinese teaching and continued to be practiced into the twentieth century48.

Thus, rote learning was my learning method. I always began with reciting aloud the first sentence and then the following one; then I recited both sentences before adding another one to my memory and then reciting all sentences in sequence. I remember pacing back and forth on the terrace outside my bedroom in the afternoon and reciting aloud for hours, until the text was boiled and the history was stewed. I memorized every single word in the Natural Science book and other texts; as for Math, Physics, and Chemistry with formulas that couldn’t be read aloud, I
repeatedly wrote them on paper until I internalized them. However, relying on rote learning to pass Tú tài II A was only one reason for not changing my emphasis to another; another was that I could not change my emphasis without my father’s approval, which relied on Thảo’s opinion, even though Thảo was only two years older than I was.

Among countless reasons explaining my love, admiration, and attachment to my father is how he equally treated all three of us, his children, and I have been FOREVER EVER grateful and loved him for it. My father taking Thảo’s advice regarding my schooling came from the reality that Thảo was a good student with a decent academic record, not because he was the eldest son in the family. However, with my mother, it would have been a totally different scenario and outcome; she would have listened to Thảo simply based on the fact that he was the first son. In my youth, I often credited my father’s French education for his fairness, and I blamed my mother’s favoritism on her lack of education and her fixed deep-rootedness in the Vietnamese/Chinese tradition. My mother had never gone to school, and she learned to read and write at home with her uncles; and since she was raised in Confucianism, she strongly believed in quyền huynh Thế phủ, [authoritative brother in place of the father], an over-emphasized privilege that nurtured Thảo into being a bully toward his younger siblings. Quyền huynh Thế phủ was my mother’s most favorite maxim and, obviously, my least.

Even though Thảo was a good student, he was ignorant of my struggles with the subjects that he handled well. He maintained that I must stay in Ban A; “Study like others do!” was his advice, which was approved by my father. I do not have any other reason to explain my father’s behavior than that Thảo did well at school while I did not. In recollecting, I am unsure whether my experience taught me a valuable lesson, ‘success is power’! Thảo’s academic success, year after year, brought him cultural capital and the possession of cultural resources. This capital was
realized in power by my father’s seeking and agreeing with his academic advice, since “[p]ower and dominance derive not only from possession of material resources but also from possession of cultural and social resources” (Crossley 88). Conversely, my continuous failures in the academic field de-capital-ed me to the point that I could not even have a say about my own academic future. In Crossley’s words, I did not possess cultural resources in order to validate an academic opinion.

At the end of the 1971-1972 schoolyear at Trường-Sơn, I took Tú-tài II with high hopes, since the joy of passing Tú-tài I had pushed me to study harder to experience the ecstasy of achieving again. Moreover, my parents invited a famed published Physics and Chemistry teacher, who was teaching at Võ-Trưởng-Toản, a well-established boys-only public high school in Saigon, to tutor me at home. At that time my father gave me a monthly allowance of 3,000 dong [Vietnamese money unit], a handsome amount for a high school student, and he paid the teacher 14,000 dong/a month to tutor me two hours, twice a week. The teacher was good and his teaching was grab-able, but I was often stuck in the first or the second step of a three-step Math or Physics problem, until he gave me a hint. Nevertheless, I improved enough to meet the minimum passing point of 8/10 in those hard-chewed subjects.

After the exam and a day before the result was officially posted, my father’s friend, Bác Phạm (Uncle Phạm)⁴⁹, a veteran Physics and Chemistry high school teacher, who was assigned to be the head of the evaluation/grading center, told my parents and me that I failed because my Natural Science paper, which weighed 4, was zeroed for having the same mistake as another contestant’s paper. The rule was that if two papers contained the same mistake, both would be considered cheating and thus zeroed; if two papers contained the same correct point, both would not be penalized and would thus pass.
In fact, the same mistake happened because a student sitting on my right side copied an incorrect drawing of the brain anatomy from my four-double-paged-exam paper, and I saw it on her paper when I gathered my papers to submit. Since I was ecstatic that I knew the answers to all five questions, I was so wrapped up in filling the pages that I did not pay attention to anything or to anyone else in the exam room. Therefore, I missed the neighboring student copying my work. So, when I saw my incorrect drawing on her page, I panicked! My eyes instantly wetted, not because of my crying. No! I did not cry; my eyes were sweating fear in drops. Stress and anxiety attacked every single cell in my entire body, from the hair on top of my head to the calluses on my heels. I tried my hardest to convince the student that my drawing was just to fill the space. I was so desperate that I even promised to let her copy my answer in the afternoon exam if she erased that sketch. Miraculously, my promise worked! The student grabbed an eraser and erased her pencil drawing. The entire conversation took place in only a couple of minutes through my whispering; every word squeezed itself out of my front teeth, for I kept my lips as still as possible, so the two teacher supervisors could not see or hear me talking in the exam room. Otherwise, the student and I would have been immediately expelled for violating the rules prohibiting word/information exchange and requiring absolute silence in the exam room.

When the drawing disappeared on the student’s page, I felt so relieved, and I submitted my exam and left the room, twenty-minutes before time was up. I was enraptured by the triumphant feeling of being able to answer all five questions correctly and to be the first to submit. It was such a silently prized moment for me, a flunk-er, who took four years to pass Tú-Tài I, when many only took a year or two. As I approached and crossed the school gate, I received some cheers, “Giỏi quá! Chúc mừng nghề!” [Very good! Congratulations!] from the
parents, family, and friends of contestants who remained in the classrooms and were rushing to finish the exam on time. That day, the cheers from those strangers warmed my heart more than usual, due to the scare that I had just experienced in the exam room.

Had I controlled my vanity not to be the first to leave the exam room and had I missed those strangers’ cheers by staying until the end of the session to make sure that student did not redraw what she had copied from my paper, I could have saved myself two more years in lớp đệ-nhất A. I had a strong paper with all the correct answers; the only mistake was the drawing of a part of the brain that was not asked for in the exam. But my Natural Science teacher had told us that a complete, well-written, and well-presented paper would leave a good impression, which could be transformed into a good score from the graders. My four double-paged submission was complete, well-written, and well-presented. Despite the terrible experience, I was cuddling a big hope to pass Tú- Tài II on the first try that year.

I neither received a good score for my complete, well-written, and well-presented paper, nor did I pass the exam. I had failed in the past, but never because of cheating. Bác Phạm’s revelation crushed me. Since the other student’s identification number ended with 6 and mine with 8, the graders read her paper before reading mine. The obvious mistake not only stood out to the graders’ eyes, but also stood out as a proof of contestants challenging authority; cheating had happened in spite of close supervising and tight security, and cheaters made authority look bad/incompetent. Hence, as a result, the graders applied the rules and mercilessly zeroed my Natural Science paper, the most important and the major paper in Ban A, since it weighed 4. Also, according to the rules, students whose papers had received a zero for cheating failed the exam, regardless the scores of their other papers. I, therefore, failed, one more time.
Being humiliated and hurt but unable to self-defend, I buried myself in studying and improving my English and French, all the while staying in đệ nhất A. The third year, somehow, I gathered enough courage to ask my father for his permission to change the emphasis from A to C. I still could not tell whether my father was mentally exhausted by my failures, which obviously did not make him proud, so he let me choose my path, or he finally understood my struggles; nevertheless, I received his approval which marked a turning point in my academic life.

It was the 1973-1974 school year. I took a friend’s recommendation to enroll in lòp đệ nhất C Anh-Văn (12th grade with English emphasis) at Phúc-Hưng (Renaissance), which was an upper secondary high school, small and private, and owned by two famed Math teachers, one of whom was Nguyên Văn Kỳ-Cương. Phúc-Hưng also had a very strong number of Ban B [Math/Physics/Chemistry] and Ban C [foreign language and Philosophy] teachers. Tuition at Phúc-Hưng was very high and had to be paid in trimester, similarly to Saint-Exupéry or Jean Jaques Rousseau and other French institutions. In return, the class size was decent with 40 or 50 students, instead of the 80 or 90 like at Nguyên-Bá-Tòng. What I brought to lòp đệ nhất C Anh-Văn at Phúc-Hưng was my English, which had been significantly improved through the six years that I was struggling to pass both Tu-Tai I and Tu-Tai II exams.

At home, that year, for the first time ever, my tutor was no longer a Physics and Chemistry teacher, but a devoted English teacher, who graduated from Trường Đại-học Sư-Pham Saigon [Saigon University of Pedagogy] and was very strong in English Grammar. Being liberated from Math equations and Physics and Chemistry formulas to embrace Philosophy and English and French literature, and receiving the good teaching and support from my English tutor, I cruised through the school year, stress-free. In 1968, when I first took the Tú- Tài I Ban
A exam, I could not answer, “what is the opposite of ‘top’?” In 1974, when I took Tú- Tài II Ban C, whose English test weighed 3 and was heavier than that of Ban A, I had no problem finishing it, so for the first time in my life, I passed the exam at once. It took me four years to pass Tú- Tài I and three years to pass Tú- Tài II. Compared to my academic record in the past, that success not only elated my parents and me, but also brought me my father’s approval of my choice to enroll in Đại-học Văn-Khoa to be a high school English teacher. No one at home questioned or challenged my choice. The fact that I passed Tú-Tài II Ban C on the first try spoke volumes about my ability in English, especially when it was my second, not first, foreign language. By then, among the three of us, I was the one with the strongest grab in English and my French was decent, too.

At the beginning of the school year 1974-1975, in Saigon’s monsoon rain, I entered the courtyard of Trường Đại-học Văn-Khoa, Saigon, (Saigon Faculty of Letters) as one of its freshman, majoring in English Language and Civilization. The yearly pouring rain in September only refreshed my joy the same way it washed off smoke and dust on the leaves of the city’s trees after six months of the dry season. I entered Đại-học Văn-Khoa with full hope and a sense of revival, for despite years of struggling, I had finally become a university student because I persisted!

The path to be a major in English Language and Civilization at Đại-học Văn-Khoa, in fact, began with my enrollment in an English class for beginners at Trường Anh-Văn Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh (Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh English School) in summer 1966 to prepare myself for the second foreign language requirement in the 10th grade at Nguyễn-Bá-Tòng.

In recalling my three evenings per week at Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh to begin learning English, I think Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh was a popular school for students who sought to learn and improve
English, because it was one of the first English private schools in the 1960s; in addition, Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh’s instructors consisted of many Americans. Those American/English teachers either worked for the American government and its affiliates, or they were American GIs, officers, or civil personnel. Whether those teachers held a Bachelor’s degree in Teaching English as a Second [or Foreign] Language or not was not that important to Vietnamese students who were hungry for learning English/American pronunciations from the native speakers. Therefore, the presence of an American/English instructor in an English classroom enticed Vietnamese students, who usually studied foreign languages with only Vietnamese teachers in high school and who usually practiced their English with only their Vietnamese classmates. Gass and Selinker identify the “teacher, materials, and other learners” as the “three sources of input” that students need to be exposed to in order to learn a second language (311). And about the quality of those inputs in a second language classroom, Gass and Selinker comment that

[f]or learners in a foreign language setting – that is, those learning another language in their home environment – there is not only limited input, but a large part of the input comes from classmates whose knowledge of the foreign language is restricted.

Interactional opportunities are also severely restricted in a foreign language environment (310).

Since Vietnamese students learning English at high school with Vietnamese teachers, they did not have many “interactional opportunities” to practice their speaking skills with an English teacher; this lack of interactional opportunities prompted many Vietnamese students to attend private English schools, such as Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh, for unrestricted interactional opportunities to practice and improve their listening and speaking skills. Hence, having an
opportunity to frequently converse with an American or English teacher was a reason big enough to enroll at Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh.

At the very first meeting, other students and I met an instructor who introduced himself as one of the American servicemen; his name has long escaped my memory. He talked to us in English, which I did not understand, but when he wrote his name in the English alphabet, along with some words, “a book, a cat, a car,” in white chalk on the blackboard and read each word aloud, I figured out the context of his talk. To remember the sounds of the alphabet and the words, I copied them on a notebook and wrote a somewhat equivalent Vietnamese sound right next to the English counterpart to study them after class. This translation technique helped me retain and remember the unfamiliar English sounds then and has continued to be helpful.

In my very first English class that summer of 1966, I learned that out of the twenty-six English alphabets, only m and n sounded similar to French and Vietnamese. The other twenty-four did not share any common sound with French or Vietnamese, and therefore they were what I must learn and memorize in order to pronounce a word correctly. A, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, and z did not sound the same as French or Vietnamese. I learned that when I wrote down a, I had to remember to pronounce /ei/, not /a/, as in French and Vietnamese. What confused me the most was the sound of the English g /dʒi/ and j /dʒi/, since I was so accustomed to the French pronunciation with g /ʒi/ and j /ʒi/. It took me a long time to get used to this switch and to get both sounds right, yet until today, I still make mistakes sometimes. Regarding difficulties that Vietnamese students face in learning English pronunciation, Trương-Hùng writes that

Some common problems facing Vietnamese learning English are: dropping of final consonant sounds; difficulty in pronouncing some consonant sounds such as /ð/, /θ/, /z/,
/dʒ/, /s/ and /tʃ/ as well as some initial consonant clusters such as sp-, dr-, br-, fr-, pl-, and str-; inability to express stress; non-use of be in sentences consisting of subject and adjective (She beautiful); and word-by-word translation, among others (3).

Despite differences from French and challenges in English pronunciation, I loved learning English at that very first alphabet lesson. I felt as if my curiosity in English compensated for the differences.

From the first lesson, the American instructor wrote English sentences on the board:

“I study English” (I = Tôi; study = học; English = Anh-Vân) [Tôi học Anh-Vân];

“You study English” (you = Bạn) [Bạn học Anh-Vân];

“We study English” (we = Chúng tôi) [Chúng tôi học Anh-Vân];

“They study English” (they = Họ) [Họ học Anh-Vân];

“He or she studies English” (he = Anh ấy; she = Cô ấy; or = hay) [Anh ấy hay Cô ấy học Anh-Vân].

He stressed the change of verb form when the subject was the third person, but English, which has an S-V-O [Subject – Verb – Object] structure, to me, aligned with the Vietnamese chủ tục [Subject] – động tục [Verb] – tục tử [Object] structure, and such a similarity between the two languages, illustrated in those examples, created a very positive first impression that stayed with me. Being a neophyte of English learning, when I noticed that English was a Subject (S) – Verb (V) – Object (O) language like Vietnamese, I loved English even more. I quickly assumed that learning English would be easier than learning French. While French is also a Subject – Verb – Object language, not all of its sentences are in this structure.

Initially, I took the English course to prepare myself for an academic requirement, and at the basic level, English was introduced to me as a simple structured language with a small
number of verb tenses and a small number of verb form inflections. Since I had never fully mastered French verb tenses, I wholeheartedly embraced the simplicities in English verb tenses [present, future, and past] and verb forms [inflection applies to the third person in singular]. A class at Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh was three-months long with three two-hour meetings a week. Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh’s student population was comprised of adult Vietnamese who needed English to find a job with the American government or companies or to improve their spoken skills. I cannot recall the study program for the three classes I took, but I do remember that one year later when I stopped taking English classes at Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh, I was able to read, understand, and pronounce many English words. Decades later, I learned that I had assumed too early that English was easy, since English was not as simple as I had initially thought, but my passion for the language and my eagerness to master it have remained solid.

After attending Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh through lớp đê-tam [10th grade], when I was in lớp đê-nhị [11th grade], I followed my friend, Lâm Thị Thu-Hồng, who was also my neighbor and schoolmate, to take English classes at Hội Việt-Mỹ [Vietnamese American Association - VAA]. Thu-Hồng was two years younger than I was, and English was her first foreign language. Thu-Hồng started Lớp [Class] 7 when I entered Lớp 1.

At Vietnamese American Association, Lớp 1 [Class 1] was the lowest class/level, and the center offered 16 classes, from Lớp 1 to Lớp 16. Each class lasted ten weeks. Vietnamese American Association used English for Today, written or edited by Lê-Bá-Kông, a well-known English teacher in Saigon, Viet-Nam, who also owned an English school named after him, Trường Anh-Văn Lê-Bá-Kông [Lê-Bá-Kông’s English School]. At the Vietnamese American Association, the end-of-the-course’s quizzes and the exam determined whether a student would advance to the next class or stay over. At the end of Lớp 12, students took a proficiency exam.
and progressed to Lớp 13. Those who failed this exam twice went back to Lớp 11. I did fail twice and re-enrolled in Lớp 11 and passed it. Yet, instead of entering Lớp 12, I left Vietnamese American Association, because I was so afraid of failing Lớp 12 the third time. I still remember that I failed for not being able to answer many grammar questions in the exam. The textbook offered plenty of drill exercises, and I did many of them, but the exam asked questions that I did not know, and I was unable to recall them. However, I remember that since I was too shy in a classroom filled with working adults, and I was so afraid to sound awkward/stupid, I never asked clarifying questions or explanations and always stayed silent during all the three years I studied at the Vietnamese American Association.

Until I failed Lớp 12 at the end of my third year at the Vietnamese American Association, I had never failed any class at that center, and my parents knew that. I consider myself very fortunate to be my parents’ child since they had never scolded, reprimanded, or punished me for failing a class or an exam. My father simply gave me money to enroll in any class, whenever I asked him. I told my mother why I left the Vietnamese American Association, so I assumed she would tell my father, and neither objected my decision; I did not tell them that I never asked questions and always stayed very quiet in my class at the Vietnamese American Association.

My silent behavior in the academic realm, however, was the norm in Viet-Nam, then and now. In his review, Trường-Hùng stressed some specific characteristics of Vietnamese students and I see myself as one of them.

- Vietnamese students tend to copy down, and hence rely on, everything written on the board. Free lecturing would handicap many students who have not familiarized themselves with listening and note-taking skills. On the whole, their written English is better than their spoken English.
Some Vietnamese students may not look in the eyes of the teacher; this is not because of disrespect, but out of fear or reverence, so to speak (3-4).

In addition, Trương-Hùng also mentioned the fact that Vietnamese students would often be quiet in class and listen to their teachers. To the Vietnamese students, and I was one of them, that was how they were raised and that was their learning method, and staying quiet in class also means showing respect to teachers.

Since at home my father, a French student and a Confucian practitioner, taught me, “Tiến trách kỷ, hữu trách bi” [blame yourself first; blame others last], I always blamed myself for every failure on my record. While self-blaming eroded my confidence, it did push me to study harder. I could not remember whether it was in volume IV or V of the series English for Today that I was introduced to Alatook, an Eskimo boy, who was on his first day of seal hunting. Being inexperienced, he failed with every attempt, yet when he was discouraged and thinking of quitting, he remembered his mom telling him, “Try, try, and try again, Alatook!” So, the boy kept trying until he finally succeeded in catching a seal. If each volume of English for Today contained twenty or twenty-five lessons/lectures/exercises, Alatook’s story has been the one that I have embraced and practiced the most, especially when my academic efforts returned fruitless.

A year at Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh and three years at the Vietnamese American Association enriched and strengthened my English ability that, in turn, helped me pass the Tú-tài II C and enroll in Đại-học Văn-Khoa, majoring in English Language and Civilization in the 1974-1975 school year. Fourteen years later, despite the wear-and-tear process, my English ability that was once graded ‘very good’ by my friends and classmates ensured me a seat in the manicurist training program at the cosmetology public school and then another seat in the Pharmacy Technology (PT) program at Santa Ana College (SAC) in 1990. I did not realize that similar to
my enrollment at Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh in summer 1966, a starting point of my English learning that lasted until April 1975, my schooling at Santa Ana College was just a beginning of an enduring yet enlightening academic journey.

2.2 Santa Ana College (SAC): Introduction to English Academia

When I came to Santa Ana College for its Pharmacy Technology (PT) program, I knew absolutely nothing about American academics or about American teaching and learning styles, so I was anxiously waiting for class to start. In late August, when the fall semester officially began at Santa Ana College, to many students, it was just another semester to take and finish; to me, it was an exciting beginning, a starting-all-over. I selected the Pharmacy Technician program for three reasons: first, it was a short program which could be finished within two years; second, I could handle the program with my English; third, for a new comer immigrant, spending two years at school to be a pharmacy technician was a short time, and pharmacy technician was a decent job with a decent income.

Two months early, in June 1990, I started working full-time as a GI Lab (Gastrointestinal Laboratory) technician at Saint Joseph Hospital (SJH) in Orange County. It only took fifteen minutes to drive from Saint Joseph Hospital to Santa Ana College; proximity was the deciding factor that made Santa Ana College an ideal school for me. In the first semester, I took four required classes: Introduction to Pharmacy Technology, Communication, Typing, and a PE (Physical Education) class. Each class met once a week: three hours for the first two, two hours for the third and one hour on Saturdays for the fourth.

The first class meeting was in the Introduction to Pharmacy Technology class. I was extremely nervous before class began since I could not stop worrying about my English. I came
to class twenty minutes before 7:00 p.m., but the instructor was already seated at her desk when I entered the classroom. Two thirds of the classroom remained empty, but I chose to sit in the last row of the room. Closer to 7:00 p.m., more students came and they quickly occupied the empty seats. Among thirty students in class, one third of them were Vietnamese, and the Vietnamese students chose to sit next to one another.

At 7:00 p.m., the instructor rose from her desk, approached the first row, and introduced herself: “Hi everyone! I am Carol [+ Last Name] (which I forget), and welcome to Medical Terminology.” After the introduction, syllabus distribution, and rules explanations, Carol began teaching. Carol must have been in her sixties. Her short grey hair, reading glasses, and a smiling face without a smile, in addition to her friendly approach, made the first meeting more enjoyable and much less scary than I had imagined.

From my seat, I paid my 100% attention to Carol and her teaching. My eyes followed her every move; my ears absorbed her every word. I felt my eyes, ears, and brain were using their maximum capacity to register and retain information. There were words in her sentences that I did not know, but overall, I could guess the meaning; further, students asked one another if they missed something, and I just listened to those Q & A and filled myself in. Along with my efforts, the instructor’s distinctive enunciation reminded me of the Vietnamese students who flocked Nguyễn-Ngọc-Linh’s classes in the evening several decades ago for opportunities to listen to and speak with the American/English instructors. The instructor’s enunciation facilitated my understanding, which convinced me that I was capable.

After the first class meeting of the first week of the first semester, I gradually picked up my speed in learning; that meant I was doing well in all the classes. Except for the communication course, which was a requirement, I did not take any other English class. The
Pharmacy Technician classes, such as Medical Terminology, required memorization, while Operation, a compounding class, and Pharmacy Calculation required Basic Math, including addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Since in those classes, my papers were not graded based on grammar/structure but on content to see whether I could match the generic name of a drug with its brand name – for instance, Acetaminophen /əˌsiˈtəmnəfən/ for Tylenol /ˈtaɪləˌnəl/, or Ibuprofen /ˌɪbəˈprufoʊn/ for Advil /ˈædvɪl/ – and I did well. Although rote learning was my expertise, and matching the long, unspellable drug names was quite challenging, the nightmare actually came from learning to pronounce those long, unspellable names correctly so that they were comprehensible and recognizable. All Pharmacy Technician students received a pocket handbook, like a pocket dictionary, listing the generic and brand names of all the drugs to help with memorization; yet struggling with pronouncing them remained a hurdle for many, especially for Vietnamese students, to overcome.

For two years, during the day, my duty as a Lab technician at Saint Joseph Hospital was to clean and disinfect all the scopes, which are very expensive medical devices that are inserted into a patient’s body to examine and detect any abnormality in her/his respiratory and/or digestive system. In the evening, I was in class at Santa Ana College. Since Hoàng, who also worked at Saint Joseph Hospital, and I only had one car, and I had not learned to drive, we picked the same shift and carpooled. Our shift started at 7:00 a.m. and ended at 3:30 p.m., so Hoàng dropped me off at school after work, and I had enough time to reach my 4:00 p.m. class. When the 4:00 p.m. class ended, I went to the 7:00 p.m. class which ended before 10:00 p.m. Since it was late, Hoàng often waited for me outside my class and drove me home.

For years, hope for a brighter future as a result of our investment in education energized and carried us on. As for me, in particular, being able to go back to school to learn everything in
English was an indescribable joy, analogous to the feeling of lost-and-found. Through the entire Pharmacy Technician program, as well as working at Saint Joseph Hospital, I always thought that I was actually getting paid to learn English with American teachers, and I truly enjoyed this thinking.

When I was at work, I paid attention to the nurses’ and the doctors’ pronunciations of medical terms that I had never heard of, for instance, procedure /prəˈsidʒər/, colonoscopy /ˌkəʊloʊˈnɒskəpɪ/, or formaldehyde /fɔrˈmeɪldəˌhaid, fər-/. In a conversation with my boss, Janet Bailey, as we were walking in the hospital’s hallway, I told her that “I played badminton in the past, but not anymore.” Janet said, “You used to play it in Vietnam?” – “Yes, when I was a teenager.” From Janet’s question, I figured out that ‘used to’ was used in a sentence to describe/express a past action. Later, I learned that ‘used to’ and ‘used’ were not the same; the former was an idiom; the latter was a past tense.

By listening to professional conversations and to the news and music from a radio in the cleaning room where I spent 80-90% of my eight-hour shift, and through engaging in small talk with the Lab’s personnel, I gradually picked up pieces in English and added them to my language repertoire. I considered the Lab a different kind of English classroom where I learned to improve my pronunciation, to collect new vocabulary, and to apply idioms in my speaking. When I began working at Lab in June 1990, I had been in America for 11 months, and everyone in the Lab knew that. For several months, I could not speak English on Mondays. Since I spoke Vietnamese at home on the weekend, when I went back to work on Monday, I could not code-switch quick enough. At the early stage of my English learning in America, I always thought in Vietnamese and then translated my thoughts into English. I told Janet and the nurses about my issue, so they were informed of my speech limitation. On Mondays, they brought me a scope,
which had just been used in the procedure room, and then left the cleaning room after telling me when they would need it again. I completely understood what they had said, but I had a problem answering them at once. My slow response, however, did not affect the speed and effectiveness of my work as a technician, who cleaned and disinfected all the expensive scopes.

The disinfecting and sterilizing process took thirty minutes to complete. Once a nurse brought a scope to the cleaning room after the procedure, the scope was first submerged in a big, blue plastic bin, filled with warm water and enzymatic cleaner to be cleaned manually. For the scope cleaning, I used a small cleaning brush, which had a tip of a flexible wire that was much longer than the length of a scope, to thoroughly clean the wall of the scope’s internal channels to rid the debris that remained after a procedure. After cleaning the scope in the enzymatic solution, I removed and placed the scope in a clean water bin and, again, I pushed the brush through all channels to rinse them before hooking and securing the scope in an Olympus disinfector to be sanitized. In the disinfector, formaldehyde filled the bin in which the scope rested, and in twenty minutes, the fluid ran through the scope’s channels to disinfect them. The cleaning room had two disinfectors, but the Lab had at least ten scopes to serve three procedure rooms, so during a weekday, the two machines were kept busy. The cleaning room had a radio which was set on K.EARTH 101, an oldie station as the nurses called it, so as I was cleaning the scopes, I listened to Mariah Carey’s *Hero*, Whitney Houston’s *Greatest Love of All*, and Celine Dion’s *All By Myself* and other song lyrics, and I continued learning new words, pronunciations, and an American perspective from music, a social literacy in my definition.

Several months later, I could speak English even on Mondays, and the more fluently I spoke, the less often I thought in Vietnamese and then translated into English. Instead, I was able to form and process my thoughts in English and communicate them effectively.
One day, while I was on break in the department’s lounge to study for my Medical Terminology class, Craig, a respiratory specialist, took a break and entered the lounge. In my reading, I saw the word ‘flatulent’ /ˈflætələnt/ and did not know its meaning, and since Craig sat there, doing nothing, I asked him, “Craig, what does flatulent mean?” The poor man did not answer me right away; his face turned tomato red, and I was absolutely clueless, so I kept looking at him waiting for an answer. Craig saw me waiting for him and I had a textbook in front of me, so he answered, “It’s gas in the intestines!” After Craig’s answer, it was my turn to be embarrassed. How I wished I had not asked him! From that experience, I only asked the female nurses for the words’ meaning, just to be safe.

I completed the Pharmacy Technician program at the end of the Spring semester 1992 and was hired to work per diem on weekends at Westside Hospital in Los Angeles. In 1993, I left the GI Lab to work as a licensed pharmacy technician at Children’s Hospital in Orange County (CHOC). It was another dream come true. I loved being a pharmacy technician who worked in a clean, disinfected environment and could help translate for Vietnamese patients’ families. My income gave our family budget some space to flex, and I could afford a used car and earn a driver’s license. Meanwhile, my son was going to school, speaking English more fluently, and growing up.

In 1996, at 45 years of age and after years of contemplating what I wanted for my future and my family’s, I decided to go back to school, aiming at higher education. I had left the Vietnamese American Association before April 1975, and my dream of being an English teacher was crushed on April 30, 1975. However, living in America revived my dream. I shared my desire with Hoàng and told him, “Vinh-Hoàng is in 11th grade now; he’s a very good kid, and he doesn’t need me as much, so I’d like to go back to school. I give myself 10 years to get a
master’s degree in English, so I can teach at a community college and later retire from that job.” Hoàng has known my lasting love for English and my undying dream of being an English teacher, so he supported my plan and suggested that I enroll in summer 1996, instead of in fall that year to avoid a crowd of new high school graduates.

I have considered my return to Santa Ana College to prepare for transfer to California State University Long Beach a golden second chance. The pharmacy technician program helped me get a job, but I had always wanted to speak English fluently and to gain knowledge; my decision to pursue higher education would satisfy and materialize all my wishes.

Thus, in summer 1996, my ten year academic journey began and would end in 2006 with a Master’s degree in English. I continued to work full-time at Children Hospital of Orange County and to attend the evening classes at Santa Ana College. Taking my age and my health into serious consideration, Hoàng and I agreed that I would proceed in steps; the first would be to finish the AA degree in Pharmacy Technology, the second to take classes to transfer to Long Beach California State University to finish the BA in English, and the third to finish the MA in English. Having those clear goals, I met with a counselor, Dennis Gilmore, at Santa Ana College to seek advice based on the classes that I had chosen, and I went on.

In Summer 1996, the first class was English 50, Introduction to Written Communication; I did well with writing paragraphs and basic grammar such as parts of speech and subject/verb agreement. Yet, as I progressed and advanced in all the English classes that I took at Santa Ana College, I was told that I wrote my Vietnamese thoughts/ideas in English words, and my Vietnamese writing patterns transferred into my English writing. Miss Stephenson, my English 61 instructor, told me “You’re a natural writer, but you must learn English grammar rules, so your ideas will be clearly presented to the American audience.” But it was in English 101 with
Mr. William Blake that I learned to do something with my ESL errors, so I began to focus on learning grammar rules. Mr. Blake required students to submit 60 pages of grammar logs, in which students identified their writing issues and found a solution to include in the log. Students submitted 30 pages of logs at midterm and the remaining 30 pages before the final to be graded. I received an A for my research paper and another for the grammar logs, yet Mr. Blake said, “I know you’ve been working very hard, but your paper has many ESL errors, so I can’t give it an A. An A paper can’t have those errors.” He gave me a B, and I was happy, but his comment about my paper, my ESL errors, and an impossible A stuck in my head. More than a good grade, an A, to me, was a confirmation of competence, and in my thinking, being a competent English user was not only my solid goal, but also an unyielding requirement for a college English instructor.

The turning point of my academic journey came neither from Mr. Blake’s comment nor from my missing an A for the final grade, but unexpectedly from Vĩnh-Hoàng’s decision to join the U.S. Navy in March 1999. When he announced his decision at the dinner table, I was totally in shock, and I immediately lost my appetite. My ears listened to his plan for the future in the Navy, but my eyes were burning. I swallowed a big lump in my throat and tried hard not to cry in front of my son, so I would not discourage him with my pain. At the end of his talk, Vĩnh-Hoàng asked me, “Are you ok, Mẹ [Mom]?” – “Yes!” – “Why are your hands shaking?” – Silence! I did not know what to tell him and I could not lie either. “I’ll be ok Mẹ. Since you love school so much, now that you don’t have to take care of me, why don’t you go to school full-time? You should, Mẹ!”

Listening to my son’s plan for his future in the Navy and looking at the brochures that he cheerfully showed me, I tried my hardest to hold my heart in whole, for I was breaking into
uneven pieces inside. All of a sudden, I could feel pain in every inch of my body, and I felt as if air was solidifying since it became so difficult for me to breathe. My irises were hardened in fighting a crying outburst. I stared at Vĩnh-Hoàng’s fingers as he flipped the pages since I could not look at his face, or I would have not been able to maintain my composure. I pretended I was ok. After assuring me that he would be fine in the Navy, my son gathered all the brochures, patted my back, and went upstairs to his room.

That night, lying on the sofa in the living room, I recalled our arrival to America in 1989, before Vịnh-Hoàng celebrated his 10th birthday, and his first meeting with his father, and my heart was pierced by the sharpness of pain as I melted into my own tears. I felt as if I had failed, since Vịnh-Hoàng had not finished college; he was in his third semester. Several days later, when Hoàng and I took our son to a train station in Santa Ana the following Saturday, and Vịnh-Hoàng hopped on a train heading to San Diego to report before going to the Great Lakes in Chicago for the boot camp, I looked at his smiling face and his hand waving at the train’s window. I knew he had made efforts to comfort me, but I was so much in pain to feel comfort, and I wished I could vanish in the air so I could accompany him. I relived every painful feeling in every nano second of the evening when I stood against my parents’ back door, listened to my husband’s footsteps fading into the dark alley, and felt incomplete. I felt as if the train had taken my soul, and when I followed Hoàng back to the car, my body and my heart became a boulder of sadness, heavy and stoic. Since his birth and because Hoàng was not at home with us, Vịnh-Hoàng and I had been inseparable, and he had always been my strength and reasoning

At home, I missed Vịnh-Hoàng even more, and I felt my parents’ pain when I had informed them of my decision to go to America. Somehow, I learned not to torture myself with yesterdays and their unchangeable contents, so I could go on. One more time, I leaned on
education for comfort and I found it. Listening to my son’s advice and my husband’s, I quit my job as a pharmacy technician in January 2001 to be a full-time student. No longer working, I could take more classes and being busy consoled me. Not being able to get an A in an English class led me to reconsider my choice. In Fall 2001, the last semester at Santa Ana College, I had to take the last two classes, English 184, Composition and Literature, and English 250A, Survey of English Literature. I told myself that those last two English classes would be my last attempt, and if I failed to receive an A from those classes, I would change my major to Education from English. In my interpretation, not getting an A in the English classes meant I did not get it and English was above my grasp.

Since Santa Ana College only offered English 250A and did not have English 184, I had to take this class at the Rancho Santiago Campus, Santa Ana College’s younger sibling, in Orange City. On the first day of class, the instructor, Mr. Jason Witt, told his students, “In this class, I don’t grade grammar. As long as you show me you understand the reading and you reflect upon it, I’m okay.” In Mr. Witt’s class, I learned American literature and read William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” among other readings. On September 11, I drove to school, parked my car, and walked to class to see an empty classroom. Mr. Witt looked distressed. When he saw me, he told me about the Twin Towers and said, “Class is cancelled today. You should go home and watch the news.” Listening to him, I went home.

The 55 North and 22 West freeways were unusually deserted and eerily quiet, as Americans were paralyzed in shock. At home, I watched the news and felt as if I had gone through another April 30 experience, yet this time, I felt so American as I identified myself with other Americans who were pained and who suffered from the attacks. Vĩnh-Hoàng was stationed in Japan. Since our arrival to America, to my family, this country has been ours: a
godmotherland, and Americans, our godmother’s children, our people. In my head, the national anthem’s lyrics, “And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave; O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave” repeated itself in reassuring and comforting notes; the American flag has become so beautiful from that day onward since I have stood under it and honored it. And I came to realize that my one and only son was serving the country that has embraced him and his family, and the sadness of not having my son around magically evaporated and disappeared. I was so proud of my son’s decision and courage and so proud to be his mother.

Life went on as class resumed. Toward the end of the semester, Mr. Witt asked the whole class to submit two questions to be selected for the final, which would include five questions. If a student’s question was chosen, s/he could skip her/his own question and another one of her/his choice and answer only three questions in the paragraph format. I did submit two questions, and one of mine was selected to be included in the final. Thus, as Mr. Witt explained, I only needed to write three answers for the final, and I received an A for that class. For English 250A, I got a B. However, the A from Mr. Witt’s class gave me hope and convinced me that I could handle the English major, and I thus stayed with English.

December 2001, after 5 years + 1 semester at Santa Ana College, I had finished and passed all the courses required for transferring and was on my way to California State University Long Beach (CSULB). In December in Orange County, the weather often stayed in the 60s during daytime and in the low 50s at night, and I always needed a thick sweater to keep my bony body warm; that winter, the realness of transferring to CSULB in the following spring to continue my higher education pursuit tendered my soul, the same way Christmas carols warm winter and people’s hearts; in mine, hope grew bigger and bigger. Filled with hope, I felt as if my life became more colorful and more beautiful.
Before the 2002 spring semester began, because I had been registered with the SOAR (Student Orientation, Advising & Registration) program, I was able to meet with an undergrad adviser from the English Department for advice before enrolling for my classes. In a brief meeting that day with Dr. Mimi Hotchkiss, an English professor, I confirmed my choice of majoring in English Literacy and Composition and received her advice of which classes to take. To answer Dr. Hotchkiss’ questions, “Why do you choose English? What is your interest after graduation?” I said, “Other students choose English because they’re good at it. I choose English because I want to be good at it, and after my graduation, I’d like to be an English teacher at a community college.” I still can vividly envision my shyness and hesitation before telling Dr. Hotchkiss about my goal. While shyness was rooted in my cultural practice of keeping my thoughts/dreams for myself, hesitation was no doubt a byproduct of lacking confidence; I was unsure how far I could reach – “Great! You’ll be!” Dr. Hotchkiss answer was very encouraging, and I was surprised, yet delighted to receive it. I needed and treasured every bit of encouragement that helped me reach my goal.

In Spring 2002, I transferred to Long Beach State University and the second stage of my journey began taking shape. I was about to be introduced to rhetoric, an alien word that I had never, ever heard of and known of, yet being a student of rhetoric, I was soon mesmerized and captivated by the multi-dimensional splendors of its infinity.
3.1 In Academe: Stepping In

As indicated in an old Chinese proverb, “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a small step.” My small steps at Santa Ana College (SAC) helped me finish all the courses required for transfer and took me to the following stage of my thousand mile academic journey. When I came to California State University Long Beach (CSULB) in spring 2002, I entered the second year with the status of a full-time student; my heart crimsoned in determination to persevere and ocean-blued in hope to reach my goal of being an English instructor at a community college.

In fact, teaching English was a dream that had begun seeding in my mind in 1967, when I took the second English course at the Vietnamese American Association (VAA) in Saigon, Việt-Nam. I can still visualize that first day of school, when I was sitting on the outmost part of the first row, facing the hunter green board from aside, and was astounded to see my instructor, in a Vietnamese traditional white dress and white wide-legged pantaloons (see Figure 15a and 15b), enter the classroom and begin speaking in English. To me, it was a most dazzling, poetic, and harmonious combination of East and West and a perfect model of practice. Being an English instructor, who spoke English fluently, did not strip my instructor of any layer of her Vietnameseness, splendidly illustrated in the Vietnamese traditional ensemble she wore to class each day. It was the culmination of my dream to be an English teacher, as I began to be aware of the co-existence of one’s cultural self and academic self. Such awareness has tiled the foundation of my understanding of the multiplicity of selves and guided me throughout the years.
Almost four decades later, as a naturalized American citizen and an English learner, I have lived the poetic and harmonious East-West combination, which dazzled and captivated me in the distant past, when I wholeheartedly embraced a second chance to materialize my dream. I identify the Vietnamese traditional dress with my cultural self and my academic self with being an English learner, and later a Rhetoric and Composition student, and an English instructor. My focus on reaching the finish line stayed solid and was strengthened with every passing academic semester. And although I was unaware of the depth and breadth of my future explorations in the wonderland of English in the years to come, I was excited to discover the content of the upper division classes at California State University, Long Beach, a big, green, and beautiful campus where cherry blossoms and light purple flowers confetti the campus walkways in pinkish colors during spring and summer. The beauty of nature in the campus, shown in Figures 16a, 16b, 16c, and 16d, must have been a stress minimizer to many students, including myself, of course.
Yet, having left Santa Ana College to attend classes at California State University, Long Beach, a 323-acre campus that offered 203 undergraduate academic programs to 33,259 students, including 27,305 undergrads in 2001-2002\textsuperscript{52}, I felt as if I had reached the Pacific Ocean from the Santa Ana River in my full-time-student swim suit. This image, in fact, was my husband’s analogy between schooling and swimming. He has often said, “When a semester begins, it’s like you dive into the academic ocean; assignments like waves hit you constantly and you must deal with them. At the end of the semester, you get some time off; that’s when you get out of the
water, simply to recuperate and the swimming restarts with every semester.” Viewing academe as an ocean or as a selva /ˈsɛlvə/, a tropical rain forest, I knew that the further I progressed, the deeper the ocean and the thicker the selva became, yet I chose to keep advancing.

By 2002, I had been living in America for thirteen years, working side by side with the Americans for twelve years, and I had spent seven years in academe, so I had become familiarized with and, to some extent, influenced by the American perspective. From that familiarization, I learned and I made some adjustments in my small talk, casual conversation, and social interaction; for instance, in notions about an American’s weight, gain or loss. While weight loss was not at all a compliment in Viet-Nam, its counterpart, weight gain, definitely was. In the Viet-Nam culture and society, it was a big compliment to tell a person, female and male, young and old alike, that she or he had gained weight. But, from my friend Hong and the nurses with whom I worked, I learned that saying “You gained weight” was a how-to-lose-an-interlocutor-in-three-words in America. I added this American cultural trait on my do’s-and-don’ts list, under the don’ts column and I have never forgotten those taboos. And while I never ate in class, for it was a classroom interdict in Vietnamese schools and interpreted as disrespect to one’s teacher, I became accustomed to and understanding of that choice. From years of living, working, and schooling, I saw and knew many students rushing to class after work; they did not have time for food, so a quick bite in class helped them recharge and stay focused.

As I opened up my cultural self to understand American behaviors and adjust mine at the interpersonal level, at the personal level, I, however, maintained and continued to practice the core values that I was taught and raised with; such practice represents my Vietnamese cultural self. For example, unlike many American students who are very comfortable with a professor’s first-name basis offer, I have often addressed mine by their last name, Mr. Blake (my Freshman
Composition instructor at Santa Ana College), or by their title, Dr. Murphy (my Political Science at Santa Ana College), out of respect. Also out of respect for my professors, throughout many years at schools and in all of my classes, I have never challenged any of them about my grades, regardless how I felt about them; I trusted my professors’ judgment and their intention. And out of self-respect, I have kept pushing myself to earn the grades that I wanted to receive.

Tương-Hùng has noted in his article, “[r]espect is another key factor in the Vietnamese value system. One is expected to show respect to people senior in age, status or position, whether within or without the family. Respectful attitudes are expressed through politeness, obedience and a descriptive system of terms of address” (2). Respect for teachers has been highlighted in the Vietnamese cultural tradition. Even though the order ‘Quân-Sư-Phụ’--[Quân: King; Sư: Teacher; Phụ: Father], meaning one’s respect would first be given to one’s king, second to one’s teacher, and third to one’s father--died out with the end of the Vietnamese monarchy in the mid nineteenth century53, respect for teachers has remained a strong practice. The Vietnamese believe--“Không thày dố mà làm nên” [Không: no/without; thày: teacher; dố: dare; mà: you; làm nên: succeed]--meaning “Without the teacher, you sure can’t be successful,” as Tương-Hùng quoted at the beginning of his article “Vietnamese Cultural Background for ESL/EFL Teachers.”

In the mindset that has adopted traits of the American outlook, I enrolled in four classes, English Grammar (ENGL 320), English Proficiency (ENGL 301E), Case International Social Conflict (I/ST 318I), and American Religious Diversity (R/ST 302I) in the 2002 spring semester at CSULB. While the first two satisfied my Literacy and Composition major, the other two satisfied the nine-unit-upper-division requirement. As a SOAR (Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration) member, I could enroll before other transfer students who did not sign up with SOAR, but current CSULB students got priority. SOAR and non-SOAR transfer students chose
classes from what remained open at the time of their enrollment. Not everyone was fine with that restriction in the first semester, but for my part, I was very pleased to have four classes, since every class was an English class to me. If it was not an English writing, grammar, or linguistics class, it was one introducing me to American social and cultural aspects. Since I was very interested in the what, why, and how of American thinking and doing, so as to understand the gap between East and West and to make appropriate adjustments, the every-class-was-an-English-class mentality allowed me to enjoy every class in which I enrolled.

On my first day at CSULB, my first class was English Proficiency which did not begin until 2:00 p.m.; nonetheless, I came to school early to make sure I could find a spot to park my car. I was well aware of the parking issue in the first couple of weeks of school, but at CSULB an hour early was not at all enough. That day, parking was a nightmare even though my eyes were wide open and my hands were on the driving wheel. For half an hour, I circled Parking 11 as if I were possessed by the circle spirit. Cars, like sardines, were neatly lined up and filled the parking to its maximum capacity. Not even one spot was left. When I could feel my stomach in my throat, since the clock pointed to 1:30 p.m., which meant I had half an hour or less to find my class on an unfamiliar campus, my luck angel rescued me. Finally, I saw a student leaving, and I was only two cars away; she had enough space to pull out, and I had enough room to make a 90 degree pull in turn and park my car like a valet parking pro. I gave that unknown student the friendliest hand wave that I could have ever gestured, and seconds later, I sprang out of my car and started running.

At CSULB, with the spring semester beginning in the third tier of January, the 60s degree beach weather would have normally chilled my bones, but my worries about the parking for half an hour had left me perspiring like a marathon runner, especially as I scurried on the brick-paved
path of the northeast lower campus to the cement steps of the north upper campus to my first
class in the Education 2 building. Heat filled my body, and I felt like summer inside out. As I
darted through the tree-adorned campus in the cold air, I was overwhelmed by the campus’s
physical bigness as much as I was by the excitement of being a transfer student, a solid proof of
my progress.

I could feel the tension in my body instantly evaporate when I found my English
Proficiency class, located on the second floor of the Education 2 building. At the end of the
parking nightmare and the out-of-mind-and-out-of-breath running, I was comforted to see the
classroom’s open door, like a welcoming grin. The room was filled with students when I
entered, but I still found a vacant seat against the wall by the entrance/exit door. Haphazardly, I
sat next to a Vietnamese male student. While waiting for the instructor, students chatted, and
from their words, I learned that English Proficiency was a class for those who had taken the
Writing Proficiency Examination (WPE) and failed several times. Enrolling in English
Proficiency, those students would receive help to strengthen their writing skills enough to pass
the writing exam. When the instructor, Miss Leanne Langton, showed up with a friendly smile
and was greeted by some of her former students, the small dose of the-first-meeting worry
quietly disappeared. I felt comfortable and was happy that I had listened to my English instinct
to pick that class; English Proficiency was the name of the course, but to me it was the bull’s-eye
of my reach.

I often stayed quiet in the first class meetings, unless I was asked a question. “Is this the
first time you have this class?” was the conversation’s starter of the Vietnamese male student
sitting on my right. “Yes, it is! This is my first semester. I’m a transfer student.” – “I need to
pass the Writing Proficiency Exam to graduate since this is my last semester!” he said. A female
student on my left joined us: “Me, too. I have one more semester after this one to pass the exam. It’s hard.” I could hear a deep note of worry in both students’ voices. Later, they told me that they had failed the exam twice, and their experiences scared me. I had just arrived and had two more years before graduation, yet many of my classmates were about to graduate; regardless, they were struggling to pass the exam. I had no understanding of how difficult the exam could be, but since I identified myself with those ESL students, their disappointing experiences worried me.

After all the first class meeting rituals, and after Miss Langton reminded everyone to schedule to work with a writing specialist at the Learning Assistance Center (LAC), she let us go. On my way back to the parking lot, the question, “Will I pass WPE in one shot?” was super-glued in my head. The answer might have hung in midair, but the determination to pass the test was as real as my steps on the campus’ grass-bordered walkways, taking me back to Parking 11. On the way home, as my car was moving at 20-miles-per-hour on the 65-miles-speed-limit of the 405 South freeway due to the after-hour traffic congestion, I considered the parking nightmare and the Writing Proficiency Exam challenge as ‘parts of the game,’ parts that needed to be taken care of in order to move on. My joy of being a transfer student was so big that neither those parts of the game, nor the writing exam worry, could dampen it.

The following day, I had Dr. Helen Chau Hu for the English Grammar class, which would meet from 10:00 a.m. to 11:40 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. After all of my struggles with English writing at Santa Ana College, I had developed a significant attention to English grammar, and my grammar interest brought me into Dr. Hu’s class. For her course, Dr. Hu selected English Grammar – Language as Human Behavior, 2nd edition, written by Anita K. Barry, a professor at the University of Michigan-Flint, and published in 2002. When I read the
book’s preface, the author’s words, “[i]t is addressed primarily to the native speaker of English, and so it is not designed to teach English. Rather, it builds on what students already know to develop an appreciation for how the language works” (xi), made me wonder whether I had chosen the wrong class.

However, as the course progressed, the class became one of my excellent choices. The course content fit perfectly into my strong desire to have a firm grip on English grammar. And for the purpose of informing students of the interrelatedness of grammar, an academic subject, and its social and community context, Barry’s textbook turned out to be one of the best grammar books that I ever had, while Dr. Hu, with her teaching approach, was the best grammar teacher that I ever studied with, as she helped students not only learn grammar but also understand the value of their learning and its application in real life. Information in her first handouts, “Supporting Material for Class Meeting (to accompany pp. … of Barry),” fed my starvation for grammar knowledge by instructing me on concepts and words that were unheard/unknown to me up to that day.

Inflection by suffixing

“English has eight inflectional morphemes and they are always suffixes: two for nouns, four for verbs, two for adjectives and adverbs. All other affixes are derivational[,]”

taught me that a word could be identified by

- the plural-making morpheme: cats, dogs;
- the possessive-making morpheme: Jim’s, cat’s;
- the present-tense, third-person, singular morpheme: (he) likes, (he) calls;
- the past-tense morpheme: liked, called;
• the present-participle or present-progressive morpheme: laughing;
• the past-participle morpheme: taken, broken;
• the comparative morpheme: John is the older student.
• the superlative morpheme: John is the oldest student.
• Irregular comparatives: bad, worse, worst;

I had learned English plural and possessive, along with verb tenses and various forms of adjectives, but words’ multiple identifications were new concepts that enriched and expanded my understanding of the English language in its multiple applications: academic, social, and personal. It was in Dr. Hu’s class that I came to realize that, up to then, my writing mistakes rested on the lack of vocabulary, sentence structure, and correct use of verb tenses. Apparently, those mistakes hindered the effectiveness and clarity of my communication and created a barrier between me as a writer/speaker and my audience, especially when I thought in Vietnamese and wrote in English to communicate with an American audience, just as Miss Stephenson, my English instructor in Santa Ana College had cautioned me about.

Aiming at being a college English instructor, I could not afford to be short on communication skills. I studied and wanted to master English grammar not only for my personal use, but also for my professional use. Hence, Barry’s notes, “’[k]nowing a language so that you can use it is not the same as ‘knowing’ a language so that you can explain how it works…. Once you know that, you can explain it to others, or you can use it as a way of understanding and evaluating your own writing and speech” (1), kept sinking in and making so much sense to me. Indeed, explaining English to others was exactly what I planned to do as an English instructor, and using it to understand and evaluate my own writing and speech was my very motive of
learning English grammar. And, for my immediate goal, I believed understanding English grammar well would help me pass the Writing Proficiency Exam.

Driven by my personal and professional goals, I began paying more attention to the arrangement of words in my sentences since I learned that “meaning is affected by moving elements within a sentence” and “knowing a language entails knowing a set of rules with which we can produce an infinite set of sentences” (Gass and Selinker 8-9). The difference between the following two sentences,

1) “911! My neighbor’s dog is mauling my sister!”

2) “911! My sister is being mauled by my neighbor’s dog!”

as Dr. Hu explained, was the focus; the first focused on “my neighbor dog” and the second on “my sister.”

Like a dry sponge, I absorbed Dr. Hu’s teaching. In her class, I learned the richness of English grammar and my understanding, in turn, added depth to my writing as I continued advancing. Although Barry’s claim that her English Grammar book was “addressed primarily to the native speaker of English” (xi), being a non-native speaker, I handled the class very well, while some native speakers of English could not say the same about their performance. In other words, it was studying English grammar with native speaker students in Dr. Hu’s class that I found out that not all Americans knew grammar well; they spoke/used English, but not many of them could “explain how it works.” On the contrary, being an English language learner, who wanted to speak English fluently, I learned English grammar, viewed as a language structure, to produce meaningful sentences and utterances. So, despite my ESL status in the grammar class full of native speakers, I did know more English grammar rules than some of them. That small
piece of reality, confirmed by my scores of 19/20 or 20/20 for the quizzes, boosted my confidence.

Having learned English in 1967, I was taught “explicit grammar instruction,” reinforced by drills. But, teaching grammar as a set of rules runs a risk of students knowing the rules, but not being able to apply them, as I came to realize. About this drawback, in their *Grammar Matters – Teaching Grammar in Adult ESL programs*, K. Lynn Savage, Gretchen Bitterlin, and Donna Price comment that “[m]ost of us are familiar with the phenomenon of students who know the rules of grammar but who are nonetheless unable to ask for simple directions,” and while recognizing “the importance of grammar in adult ESL education,” these authors promoted teaching grammar as “an enabling skill,” “a motivator,” and “a means to self-sufficiency” (2).

As an enabling skill, Savage et al. insisted that “[e]fficient communication cannot take place without correct grammar”; as a motivator, they explained that “knowledge of grammar is essential to [ESL students’] being able to acquire a new language,” which leads to getting “a good job”; and as a mean to self-sufficiency, grammar knowledge offered English language learners “[t]he ability to self-correct [which leads] to self-sufficiency” (3-4). As a student in Dr. Hu’s English Grammar class, I believe I learned grammar as an enabling skill, a motivator, and a mean to self-sufficiency from her lectures and approach, although the course textbook was “addressed primarily to the native speaker of English.”

In Dr. Hu’s class, where I learned the interrelatedness of grammar rules, meaning, and use in her lectures, all expressed in new words and concepts, I befriended Jaime, an American student whose major was Criminal Justice and Amy, a Taiwanese international student, majoring in Technology Design or the like; both were in their mid-twenties. I had the International Studies class at 2:00 p.m., and this window gave me some free time, so when any or all three of
us had questions about a lecture, we visited Dr. Hu after class in her office between 11:55 a.m. to 1:10 p.m., as written in the class syllabus, to seek help. Afterward, we group-studied at a table in the library, and I explained and helped clarify what Jaime and Amy did not understand, even after receiving Dr. Hu’s further teaching at her office.

Once I was done, either Jaime or Amy would say,

“Viet! Thank you very much. Dr. Hu is right. You do know a lot about grammar and I think because you’re using student language to explain these grammar concepts, it’s easier for me and Amy to understand. Dr. Hu’s great, but she’s been teaching for a really long time, so she might have forgotten the student language and how little students know. Her scholar language is way over my head! She lost me since I didn’t understand the lecture and was confused.”

I was unsure whether ‘student language’ and ‘scholar language’ were real concepts, or whether they solely were Jaime’s expressions, but I totally understood what he meant. With ‘student language,’ Jaime referred to the use of simple vocabulary to explain/describe a complicate grammar concept; for example, he preferred ‘a smallest unit of a word’ over ‘a morpheme.’ In Jamie’s interpretation, ‘scholar language’ was imbued with unfamiliar terminology and thus could be burdensome to novice grammar learners, like himself and Amy.

Jaime’s “Dr. Hu is right!” referred to Dr. Hu’s comment, given to me at her office, when I thanked her for her big help at the end of one of our frequent visits. Dr. Hu said,

“No! Viet! You’ve brought a wealth of grammar to my class.”

What Dr. Hu called a wealth of grammar, to me, was a bag of uneven grammar crumbs, including grammar components that I had learned several decades ago. That meant my English grammar knowledge was very fragmented, and I had not been able to align what I knew about English grammar with effective writing. As a result, my writing was plagued with comma
splices, run-ons, fragments, and the lack of transitions; in other words, I violated or broke many English writing conventions. I knew not that my problem was universal; Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman point out that “the common problem of students’ [is their] not being able to activate their knowledge of grammar when they are engaged in communication” (4). To the students whom Savage et al. and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman mention, their problem was applying grammar knowledge in casual conversation, “to ask for direction” and to engage “in conversation”; to me, mine was to apply my grammar knowledge in my writing.

My struggle with writing did not support the existence of my wealth of grammar, or so I thought, but receiving such a compliment from the one I regarded as a Grammar Queen was truly flattering and encouraging. Nevertheless, my wealth of grammar, put in size or weight, would have been 1/10,000 of Dr. Hu’s. Yet, the fact that I was able to effectively help Jaime and Amy with my limited ability must have also come out of the rapport that we had among one another, as classmates. Long before I learned in one of my classes that “sensitivity, flexibility, and an open mind will make [tutoring] sessions productive and maybe even enjoyable” (Gillespie & Lerner 185), I embraced and practiced those characteristics in interacting with my classmates, especially those who needed my help, because that was how I wanted to be treated, also.

In helping Jaime and Amy, I was very sensitive, flexible, and open-minded, as I tried to connect with them on a student-to-student level to understand their struggles, and through listening, exchanging, and negotiating information of the new concepts, we helped, not judged, one another. When I did not have words to describe/express, I would use examples for illustration, and it often worked in my favor, surprisingly. Their level of comfort, founded on the rapport that we were creating, facilitated their learning with me. In addition, the student
language that Jaime and Amy thought I was using, in reality, was the use of simple, unsophisticated words, a reflection of my level of competency and theirs.

And at my level of competency, I really paid attention to Dr. Hu’s lectures and, in particular, to the terms, presented in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1: Grammar Terms and Meaning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammar terms</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constituent</td>
<td>“Words in a sequence that group together and function as a grammatical unit” (Barry 1998, 286).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morpheme Ex: Cat</td>
<td>A smallest meaning per unit, cannot be broken any further [my notes taken from Dr. Hu’s in-class lecture, 1/31/2002]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound morpheme Ex: Cats (plural) [from Homework 1, 2/7/2002]</td>
<td>“A morpheme that must be attached to another morpheme; also called an affix” (Barry 285).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free morpheme Ex: Apple [from Homework 1, 2/7/2002]</td>
<td>“A morpheme that can stand alone as a word” (287).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allomorphs Ex: in-; im- (237)</td>
<td>“Variations of the same morpheme” (284).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoneme Ex: P is a phoneme of English (239)</td>
<td>“An abstract idea of a particular speech sound in a language” (290).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allophones Ex: p in pear versus apple (239)</td>
<td>“Variations of the same phoneme” (284).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finite verb form Ex: talk [present]; talked [past] (46)</td>
<td>“A form of the verb that is marked for tense” (287).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-finite verb form Ex: To see [infinitive]; listening [present participle]; consulted [past participle] (45)</td>
<td>“A form of the verb that carries no tense on its own (289).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive aspect Ex: As I speak, Mary is writing her letter of resignation (56).</td>
<td>A feature “allows us to describe actions as backgrounds to other actions, or actions in progress” (56).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfect aspect Ex: I have seen that movie already.</td>
<td>A feature “which serves to associate an action with a later time” (57).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphology</td>
<td>“The study of how words are constructed from Morphemes” (289).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonology</td>
<td>“The study of how individual languages organize and use speech sounds” (290).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntax</td>
<td>“The organization of words, phrases and clauses into sentences; also the study of that organization” (292).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To me, learning these new terms and their meanings was particularly useful; it has taken me further into the English Wonderland where I have learned not only to think, speak, and write, but also to understand English in its breadth and depth and to explore its linguistic wholeness and richness. For example, understanding finite verb forms and non-finite verb forms has helped me recognize whether my sentence has a verb that shows time (a finite verb) and agrees with its subject, or it has a verb form (non-finite verb). When I understand the difference between ‘I study for a test’ and ‘studying for a test’, I can better express my thoughts and ideas in speaking and in writing.

Further, when I tried to help Jaime and Amy understand the application of these concepts, I tried to help myself, too. The group studying benefitted us all; it helped Jaime and Amy understand unfamiliar grammar words, concepts, and applications, and it helped me practice efficient communication in academic discourse. Jaime’s notion of ‘the student language’ and ‘the scholar language’ sparked my thinking about the relationship among language, communication, learning environment, and status.

Like Jaime, Amy, and other classmates, I was learning, and in order to retain information, I would go over it in reading and homework, so I could understand and memorize it. Like them, the grammar terminology was new to me, but unlike them, I was not intimidated by the new terms; on the contrary, I found them fascinating. Further, being conscious of my status as a mature, ESL student, I worked very hard and was driven by the determination to have a firm grasp on Standard American English, so I would be admitted to graduate school. Studying English grammar with Dr. Hu, to me, was not simply finishing a course for credit; it was preparing me for my future in the English spoken world in which I wanted to be a participant, not a bystander.
With Dr. Hu’s teaching, I came to understand grammar in a new light, as an academic subject including rules and patterns and as linguistic constituents that changed over time to make “correct English a moving target,” for “change is inherent to all languages; without the flexibility to change, languages would not be able to serve the continuously evolving needs of the people who use them” (Barry 12, 13). That new understanding positioned grammar in context, academic and social, to serve communicative purposes: personal, social, and professional. What has stayed with me years after I finished Dr. Hu’s class is that I view English as a living creature, whose life depends on people’s usage.

From her class, I learned that language was inseparable from usage. I also learned to treat and think of English grammar as part of “human behavior,” beyond an academic subject to be graded as correct or incorrect. It was in studying with Dr. Hu that I was introduced to the existence that Standard American English had variation, and “like forms of dress, different forms of English are appropriate for different circumstances” (Barry 8). Teaching me these concepts, Dr. Hu had sown healthy English grammar seeds into the rich soil of my brain, and the seeds grew and propagated, and I noticed improvements in my weekly writing practice to prepare for the Writing Proficiency Exam.

Before the 2002 spring semester at California State University, Long Beach, and before English Proficiency, I knew nothing about the Writing Proficiency Exam, and from my classmates’ conversations and Miss Langton’s, I learned that it was a required exam in which students would have 75 minutes to write a five-paragraph essay addressing a prompt. The essays were graded by three graders; the maximum points a paper could receive was 6; the minimum was 1. While 6, 5, and 4 were the passing scores, 3, 2, and 1 were the failing ones; a horizontal line was drawn, separating these two groups of scores⁵⁴. However, if two graders gave a paper 4
points, and the other grader gave it 3 points, the paper still passed with the total of 11 points; whereas, receiving 3 points from two graders and 4 points from the third one would give the paper the total of 10 points, the failing score.

In fact, from its website, “Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement” (GWAR), CSULB clearly explained the exam’s purpose: “[t]o meet the GWAR, undergraduate students must first take the Writing Proficiency Examination (WPE). The WPE assesses analytical writing ability and determines whether further coursework in intensive writing is required.” Without passing the Writing Proficiency Exam, a student who finished all the required courses still would not receive her/his diploma and could not advance. On the website, James Neal, the director of testing and evaluation services, disclosed a quite stunning fact to stress the importance of passing the Writing Proficiency Exam: “students have been known to repeat the WPE as many as 21 times.”

CSULB offered the examination five times a year, twice in spring and fall and once in summer. In spring 2002, California State University, Long Beach recommended transfer students with up to 75 units take the Writing Proficiency Exam within their first year. Although a passing grade was 89.3%, as Vergara pointed out, the Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR) website noted that “[w]hile most students satisfy the GWAR by scoring 11 or higher on the Writing Proficiency Exam (WPE) on their first attempt, students for whom English is a second language face special challenges in meeting this CSU requirement.”

I fit perfectly into the requirement for Graduation Writing Assessment “students for whom English is a second language”; at Santa Ana College, Miss Stephenson, my Introduction to Composition instructor, and Mr. Blake, my Freshman Composition instructor had told me, “You’re a natural writer, and I understand what you’ve meant, but your writing has many ESL
errors, such as comma splices, run-ons, and fragments, and your sentences are too long, which makes it hard for a reader to follow you; therefore, I can’t give you an A.” And the fact that all students in English Proficiency were speakers of Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese, who struggled so much to pass the writing exam, appeared to confirm the gap between ESL students and English writing.

In spring 2002, after failing the exam once, twice, or three times, those students had to enroll in English Proficiency. In addition, they had to schedule to study writing with a writing specialist at the campus’ Learning Assistance Center (LAC), a requirement, as Miss Langton had mentioned in class. In fact, all students’ in English Proficiency were abiding by that requirement. Thus, I, too, was scheduled to study writing with a writing specialist at the Learning Assistance Center, even though I had not taken, much less failed the Writing Proficiency Exam.

At the Learning Assistance Center, I met with Marshall Thomas, a Linguistics graduate student who was in charge of matching English Proficiency students, namely ESL students, with writing specialists. The specialists were currently enrolled graduates or senior students with strong writing skills. Before matching me with a specialist, Marshall gave me an appointment to come back and take an unofficial Writing Proficiency Exam with him, and based on the quality of my writing, Marshall would be able to identify and evaluate my writing needs and have me work with a specialist. Despite the big number of ESL students who needed assistance, Marshall was extremely helpful in scheduling them to work with the writing specialists.

On the day scheduled, another student and I received a prompt from Marshall and had 75 minutes to write an essay addressing the prompt. I have totally forgotten the content of the prompt and a big chunk of the conversation that I had with Marshall afterwards, but I do clearly
remember one of his comments, “You could pass the Writing Proficiency Exam, but you could also fail it,” he said, after he read my paper and pointed out the lack of support in some of my claims. Marshall’s comment stuck in my head with its neutral evaluative value, which neither effectively informed me nor educated me on the quality of my writing. However, I took it as a warning to push myself harder to be ready for the exam.

On a weekly basis and as scheduled, I had my paper when I met with my tutor, a psychology graduate student, who read and commented on my weaknesses. This interactive learning was helpful because the tutor worked with me one-on-one; my writing was her focus and the learning was practical, because I learned to correct my writing errors and apply the correct forms in my writing. Several weeks later, due to the disproportionate ESL student/writing specialist ratio, Marshall added another student to the session. That student, too, had failed the writing exam twice. The new two-on-one, two students with one specialist, session remained very helpful since the other student and I were exposed to a different writing style, and we could learn from each other’s writing mistakes.

In my recollection, the tutor was capable and her tutoring was clear as she went over the five-paragraph essay format of the Writing Proficiency Exam. With frequent discussions and reviews of my writing, I recognized the meaning and necessity of having a thesis statement, topic sentences, specific support, and transitions, namely American basic writing conventions. Half way into the spring semester, I registered to take the Writing Proficiency Exam in the summer, when I would enroll in two classes, Introduction to Language Acquisition (LING 329) and Technical Writing (ENGL 317).

Before the exam took place, CSULB offered some workshops, where an English professor detailed the do’s and don’ts in the exam. In a big lecture hall, filled with the Writing
Proficiency Exam hopefuls, an English professor with long hair, tied in a rubber band, gave students some terrific writing and exam-taking tips. For example,

Tip # 1: Time yourself – Intro: 5-10 minutes, 3 body paragraphs: 50-55 minutes, conclusion: 7-10 minutes, revising/editing: 5-8 minutes;

Tip # 2: Read the prompt CAREFULLY;

Tip # 3: Directly answer the prompt in the introduction to save your time;

Tip # 4: Provide specific details in the support. Not “my neighbor was a lawyer,” but “Jim Smith, my neighbor, was a lawyer.”

Tip # 5: Describe yourself, so the graders can ‘see’ you.

Tip # 6: One-sentence conclusion is better than no conclusion.

Tip # 7: Write as much as you can to fill the four-page limit. Two-page papers will surely fail; three-page papers must be extraordinary in order to pass. A long paper might have more chances to pass than a short one.

I carefully took note of those tips, memorized them, and used them in the exam. While I had tried to learn and apply American writing conventions into my papers, to me, WPE served as a gate keeper; those who know the rules would pass the gate and become insiders, and those who did not would remain outsiders. I witnessed my Chinese, international classmates struggle with understanding and grasping English writing conventions and rules to pass the exam, yet they continued struggling and failing, one try after another. From their experiences, I learned that one cannot just learn a language’s rules without engaging oneself in living the language. That is to say, being familiar with American reasoning, culturally and socially, makes understanding and applying American writing conventions easier. The problem for the international students is that they only stay in America for several years to finish their studies, so they do not have that much
time to learn the American life and style, which are attached to those academic rules, as do American citizens, immigrants, and refugees who permanently reside in the country.

As for me, prior to the workshop, I talked to my Technical Writing professor, Mr. Howard Willison. In addition to giving me some basic advice, which was mentioned at the workshop by the other professor, Mr. Willison told me,

“Don’t worry too much. Students make it sound difficult, but it’s only a basic five-paragraph essay. You’ll pass, but if you don’t, come see me with your paper, and I’ll tell you why you failed.”

I took the exam on Saturday morning and I applied as many tips as I could. For instance, I answered the prompt in the introduction to frame my writing, and to save time, I wrote down the time for each of the five parts of the essay and included time for revising/editing. The prompt asked about reasons leading to the disconnection between teenagers and their parents/guardian and required students to provide support using media, observation, and experience. Since I had written the time down on my paper in pencil and kept checking it, I finished writing the essay and spent the last five minutes revising and editing. Within 75 minutes, I wrote a five-paragraph essay advocating communication as a means to connect parents/guardians to their children, filled up all four pages of the examination blue book, and used media, observation, and experience to support my claims. In the third body paragraph, I wrote about my personal experience as an immigrant mother of a teenager, about my conversations with my son, Vịnh-Hoàng, in which I explained the importance of my going back to school after work for a brighter future for us all. I said that my son rewarded me with his understanding, collaboration, and support. That meant I described myself so the graders could ‘see’ me from my writing, as the professor suggested at the workshop. When I left the exam
room after submitting my essay, I felt so good about my essay that I wanted to jump really high and to sing really loud to celebrate. I did neither, but I grinned ear to ear when I saw my husband, who had come to pick me up.

However, as I was waiting for the result, I became skeptical of my essay’s quality. As the wait stretched in time, my worry grew in size, and my confidence eroded. By the fifth week or so, I dropped down to 100% unsure if my essay was good enough just to receive 11 points to pass. I could not recall whether I had to wait six or eight weeks before receiving the exam result. When it finally arrived, I opened the letter and read, “Congratulations…” and “your score is 15.” I choked up in tears and in disbelief. Such unbelievable reality spun me around as if I were a yo yo. Like other ESL students in English Proficiency, I would have been over the moon had I passed with 11 points, because I thought that was all I could do. In the back of my head, Mr. Blake’s comment, “Your paper has so many ESL mistakes that I can’t give it an A,” never quieted, but it challenged me to break the spell. That was why I put my heart in studying grammar; in my understanding and from my experiences, good writing skills are associated with academic success, the kind of success that I have aimed for. The more I read scholars’ error-free essays, where well-expressed thoughts in well-selected words flowed like a silky river, the stronger my aspiration of being a good writer became.

Later, when I saw Mr. Willison in class, I told him that I had passed and thanked him for the tips. He asked, “What’s your score?” – “I got 15!” – “15?? That’s a solid score. Your essay must be very good to receive the same score from all three graders. They don’t do that that often. Normally, it would be two 5’s and one 4, or two 4’s and one 5, for example. Three 5’s is definitely a solid score.”

In fact, “A solid score” sounded heavenly sweet to me after Mr. Willison’s confirmation!
A week or two later, I ran into the professor who gave the workshop. I did not know his name, but I approached him,

“Hi! I’m Viet. I attended your most recent workshop. Thank you very much for your tips. They were very helpful. I did use them and passed the WPE, and I thank you very much for the workshop and the tips.”

“You’re very welcome. What did you get?”

“I got 15!”

“15? No! You don’t need to thank me. I didn’t do anything for you. With that score, thank yourself. Good job! Congratulations!” And he parted.

The second confirmation coming from another English professor really sent me to the top of the trees under whose canopies I walked to and from my class every day at CSULB.

Yet the sweetest moment had yet to come. In the fall semester, when I happened to stand in line right behind Marshall to order lunch in the campus’ dining area, I greeted him and broke the fantastic news,

“Thank you for all your help, Marshall! I passed the exam. I got 15 points!”

Marshall reacted exactly like Mr. Willison and the workshop professor, but stronger.

“15 points? Nooo way! I got 15!”

“So did I.” In Marshall’s sentence, I heard disbelief. In my answer, I heard ESL pride, sweet and big ESL pride.

I remember listening to Miss. Langton telling us, her students, in her English Proficiency class, that she had to take the Writing Proficiency Exam when she applied for her teaching job at CSULB, and she received 18 points, the maximum score. To all students who were struggling one semester after another to pass the writing exam with a minimum 11 points, 18 points
sounded like a too-good-to-exist, out-of-this-world score. Thus for me, her ESL student, to receive 15 points after the first try, I had 15 reasons to stay over the moon and on top of the trees for a while to cherish that triumphant score. When I front-doored into reality, my belief in the association of good writing and academic success stainless-steel-ed inside out.

When I studied my Writing Proficiency Exam paper over and over, I caught some incomplete thoughts [fragments], but overall, my essay had a good thesis statement, three clear topic sentences, specific detailed support, and a conclusion. Further, at the end of each body paragraph, I had a concluding sentence, and I guess that technique, along with other writing conventions in my essay, brought me that 15 points. At that time, I was unaware of the fact that in the application to the Master’s program, applicants were asked to disclose the Writing Proficiency Exam points and the time when they took the exam. When I filled in those pieces of information on the application, the score, my new-earned academic capital, in Bourdieu’s concepts, stood as a handsome proof of do-ability.

3.2 In Academe: Stepping On

Coupled with hard work, determination to reach my goal transformed do-ability to done-ness; standing alone, determination pushed me through obstacles to keep advancing. Ironically, being a mature student was one of my obstacles. It seemed to me that I was noticed as an Asian/Vietnamese older student more than I was as an ESL/immigrant one. In the majority of my classes at CSULB, more than at Santa Ana College, I was the oldest person in the room, older than many of my professors. From my observation, the student population at CSULB appeared to be younger than that at Santa Ana College.
In the university campus’s bookstore, when I approached a cashier to pay for a purchase, I was often asked, “Are you a faculty?” – “I wish!” Time and time over, I heard the same question in the campus’ convenient store, where I grabbed a quick bite; in the library, where I checked out books; or in the classroom, where students mistook me for their professor on the first day.

Several weeks into a new semester, the campus courtyard was colored and packed by different groups setting up tables and handing out candies, pens, pins, or plastic cups to advertise their purposes, such as inviting students to join a free speech, Bible reading, or dance club, for example. One time, walking through the crowd to class, I ran into a Vietnamese student, whom I met on Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration (SOAR) day at CSULB; as a SOAR volunteer, he offered a campus tour and assisted students in searching for available classes listed on long lines of typed papers pinned on a bulletin board. “Hi, cô! Could you be able to enroll in the classes of your choice? How are you doing?” – “Hi, Hùng [his name]! Yes, I could! Thank you! What’s your group about?” – “Inviting Vietnamese students to join our club and recruiting Vietnamese cast for a play.”

At that point, other Vietnamese female students sitting at the table, listening to our conversation joined in, “Hùng! Invite cô to join us!” – “Thank you! But I don’t think I could help!” – “Join us to play the role of the mother, cô!” The youngsters unison-ed their invitation which I nicely turned down; “Thank you for inviting me! I got to go! Good luck and best wishes!” and I headed to my class feeling somewhat amused by those students’ honest yet blunt invitation.

Age-confirmations, generation gaps, and even cultural differences were also obvious in small group discussions. Very often I just enjoyed listening to my classmates to learn about
American students’ lifestyles and viewpoints. For instance, if the topic was about what students preferred to do on weekend/break, why they chose to do so, and how those choices of entertainment affected their academic performance, younger group members would talk about their last-weekend-happy-hour, wild-river-rafting, or Big-Bear-skiing adventures, and I just laughed along. I sat among the group as a learner more than as a participant; I had no experience in any of those forms of enjoyment not only because of my age and my limited time, but also because none of them existed in Viêt-Nam when I was growing up.

Again, up to that time, I had heard an earful of comments about my choice of education at my age, so I believed I was well-trained for those remarks, which were never strong enough for me to reconsider my direction. Years of being out of school helped me wholeheartedly appreciate and be thankful for being able to go back to school.

I became extremely thankful after reading an assignment for the International Studies class, which was about a Pakistani young woman who was abused in an arranged marriage, but her parents, especially her mother, who was a physician and her husband’s aunt, did not approve her return home to end the relationship with the abusive husband. The lady suffered but obeyed her mother, stayed with her husband, and endured his abuse. But after being beaten and kicked down the stairs during her pregnancy, which resulted in a miscarriage, the lady went home and begged her mother again for permission to divorce. Despite her daughter’s horrific experience, the mother insisted her daughter stay married. Being desperate and hurt, physically and mentally, the lady escaped and went to a shelter in the city where two female lawyers, siblings and owners, offered refuge to domestically abused Pakistani women. At the center, the lady presented her case, besought, and was granted permission to stay.
One of the two lawyers agreed to talk with her mother to seek her approval for her daughter’s divorce. After several unfruitful talks, the lawyer finally told the lady that her parents would come see her at the shelter to give her their consent; as soon as the lawyer ended her sentence, the lady froze in fear; she looked at the lawyer with despair, “My mother will kill me!” The lawyer consoled her, insisting that the center had guards to protect her, but the lady remained terrified. On the day of the meeting, before summoning the lady to meet with her mother, the lawyer asked the lady’s father and a man, who accompanied the mother, to leave the room, but the mother requested the man to stay, reasoning that she could not walk without his assistance. The moment the lady appeared at the door, the man pulled out a gun and shot her to death, in front of the lawyer, the mother, and the guard. The killing happened in a blink of an eye; it was so quick that the lawyer could not react. At the end, the man was only sentenced for a short time; the mother walked free, the lady was dead, and the lawyer lived with deep remorse for not listening to the victim’s warning.

The tragic death of that Pakistani young lady, which took place at the very end of the twentieth century, in a city unknown to me, was not in vain, however. Her story splashed icy water on my face and forced me to open my eyes and my mind to prize my Vietnamese cultural background, but most of all, my second chance in academe in America. After that reading, on the daily drive to school and back home, I chose to discard my luggage: the boulders on my back that burdened my steps, out of the car windows and with the wind they went, and I replaced them with dreams and hopes. I learned that it was all about choice, as Melissa Fiesta has written:

> everyone carries some commonplace, some prejudice, some luggage from home out into the world with her. What we do with this luggage, whether we discard its contents entirely, whether it becomes our baggage, whether we keep the same nametags and hold
on tight or whether we share items that seem useful during the journey, is a question that we can only ask ourselves (197).

At the end of the spring semester at CSULB, I began embracing a new outlook, which invited me to look forward more often; this outlook has been a choice, an answer to my own question.

The following semester, Fall 2002, I enrolled in four classes: Survey of English Literature (ENGL 250B), Advanced Composition (ENGL 300), Essentials of English Language (LING 327), and Personality (PSY 356), and in the classes’ lectures and readings, I always found valuable messages that added colorful threads to my academic self, which I had been long unaware of. In the Survey of English Literature class with Dr. Hotchkiss, I not only learned new vocabulary, but also about Christianity and its influence on western philosophy. On the first day of class, Dr. Hotchkiss wrote some questions on the board and asked students to write down the answers. One of the questions was, “What was a grammar school? What did students learn in grammar school?” which knocked me right off the rings; I had absolutely no clue. So I guessed, “Grammar school was where student learned grammar!” and my answer was so far from describing a grammar school and its teaching; the correct answer was, “[g]rammar schools were usually civic foundations going back to Tudor times or earlier, and in most cases had been endowed from the fortunes of merchants. Newer foundations copied the older grammar school, took fees, and were run on commercial lines, advertising their services in newspapers” ("Schooling before the 19th Century").

And not knowing the definition and function of a grammar school was only the beginning of my upper division learning. During her lecture, Dr. Hotchkiss kept repeating, “since Genesis…,” or adding “Genesis” into her talk. It took me a long while before I understood that
the word, in general, implied a/the beginning and was rooted in the name of the first chapter of the Bible. Such a small detail informed me of the difference of my Vietnamese/Eastern background in American academia. For me, learning the meaning of words, such as genesis, was more than about enlarging my vocabulary repertoire; it took me inside the American culture to understand such use in context.

Within 3052 pages of the course textbook, *The Longman Anthology British Literature*, ISBN 0-321-10669-5, I recognized only two names, Sir Winston Churchill from his role in World War II, and D. H. Lawrence from some of his works, translated in Vietnamese before 1975. I felt so Vietnamese with British literature and its authors that I decided to visit Dr. Hotchkiss before meeting her in class, and I told her that I felt somewhat uneasy with my Confucius-influenced interpretation of the British readings. “I’m afraid to misinterpret Shakespeare’s work with my Confucian background,” I said. I did not expect Dr. Hotchkiss’ answer, “It’s perfectly fine, Viet! Might be it’s time for us to learn Shakespeare interpretation from Confucian philosophy!” From Dr. Hotchkiss’ words, I learned that there were always multiple interpretations of every thought and/or idea, interpretations that would bridge, not further separate, the West and the East.

It turned out Dr. Hotchkiss’ class studied Volume Two, which covered “The Romantics and Their Contemporaries,” “The Victorian Age,” and “The Twentieth Century”; Shakespeare was covered in Volume One. Further, the general editor, David Damrosh, included plenty of biographical and companion readings that facilitated the understanding of an author’s works even with my Vietnamese/Confucian background.

Also in Dr. Hotchkiss’ class, I sat next to Kitt, an American ex-military serviceman and a fine young man. Kitt was interested in teaching English in Japan after graduation and he had
many ESL friends, so he was very friendly and supportive of my experiences with difficulties in expressing my thoughts. He impressed me each and every time we talked. I was amazed by his wealth of vocabulary, which he said was the result of his father’s encouragement. Since he was a child, he said, his father had asked him to use different words to communicate the same idea twice, and his father frequently gave him new words during a word game that they played quite often throughout his childhood into his adulthood. Thus from word games came his vocabulary richness.

When I shared with Kitt my worry about the mismatch between my will to advance in academe and my actual ability, he said, “You can do it, Viet! Think about it this way; you don’t have to come up with something new to prove its value; you just have to research what others have done or have said about the topic that you work with and present those findings in your writing. Explain why you chose them and their link to yours.” Listening to Kitt, the master’s program sounded manageable, and I sounded capable; through my academic struggles and successes, I have always remembered Kitt’s words to encourage myself.

There was a female student in Dr. Hotchkiss class who often roller-bladed into the classroom, which was located on the third floor of the LA (Liberal Arts) building. British literature must have been in her blood and cells since she could answer 95% of Dr. Hotchkiss’ questions. To me, as long as someone answered the professor, it was fine; Kitt disagreed with me, so he met with Dr. Hotchkiss to voice his complaint: “She makes me feel so inadequate!” I did not know how many students, besides Kitt, had talked to Dr. Hotchkiss. But, Dr. Hotchkiss talked to that student, and she became quieter; consequently, other students could participate. By paying attention to native speakers’ use of vocabulary, like Kitt’s, I learned to approximate their uses of words for effective communication, for “pragmatic inferencing is required along with
real-world knowledge” (Gass & Selinker 376), and it is only in direct contact with and exposure to native speakers that language learners do recognize and experience those pragmatic inferences.

My experience with the word ‘adequate’ was captured in one of Gass and Selinker’s examples, “learners may know the meaning of break as in break a leg or break a pencil, and only with time do they learn the full range of meanings and such collocations as His voice broke at age 13” (375). In their examples, “break a leg” and “break a pencil” meant fracture; however, only from contact with American culture as from watching TV commercials and movies, The Producers, in particular, would English learners learn that there was no fracture in “break a leg”; in fact, it was to wish actors “good luck before they go on stage, especially on an opening night.” While English learners could find the meaning of the verb “break” in any dictionary, online or in a hard copy, it might take them a bit of time to learn the meaning of “break a leg,” an idiom, used in a theatrical setting, which was a very specific context.

Generally, as I continued to pay attention to native speakers’ speech, in and outside the classroom, I was aware of the effect my lack of vocabulary and understanding of idioms placed on my speaking expression and reading comprehension. Regarding the role of words in learning English as a second language, Gass and Selinker write that “lexicon may be the most important language component for [English language] learners” since “there is good reason to believe that the lexicon is an important factor, if not the most important factor, in accounting for the bulk of second language data, in that the lexicon mediates language production” (372-73). Further, comparing the interference of grammar mistakes and vocabulary mistakes, the authors note that “native speakers find lexical errors to be more disruptive than grammatical errors,” since in communication, whether spoken or written, “grammatical errors generally result in structures
that are understood, whereas lexical errors may interfere with communication” (372). Adding to Gass and Selinker’s emphasis are Paul Nation’s remarks: “[f]or most second language learners, language-focused vocabulary is an essential part of a language course” and “[o]ne of the major barriers to reading in the second language is vocabulary size” (267-68).

Being aware of my own barrier and needs, I began studying vocabulary and grammar intensively. It was just a nice coincidence that in Mrs. Monika Bellhumeur’s Essentials of English Language class, she adopted *English Grammar – Language As Human Behavior*, the same textbook that Dr. Hu had used in her English Grammar class. However, Mrs. Bellhumeur’s approach was different; she let students do the teaching. At the beginning of the course, Mrs. Bellhumeur asked students to sign up in pairs. Each pair were to select a chapter of the book, except Chapter I, II, and XIII, which addressed the why and how of grammar study. Chapter III to XII covered all grammar topics, from Noun and Noun Phrases in Chapter III to Combining Clauses into Sentence: Subordination in Chapter XII. Paired student teachers were in charge of distributing handouts to the class, presenting clear information with supporting examples, giving short exercises to the class for practice, and being ready for question-and-answer time at the end. Mrs. Bellhumeur’s approach pushed students to study the textbook as if they were instructors. Placing me on both sides of the textbook to learn its content as a student and to teach it as a teacher, Mrs. Bellhumeur’s method prepared me for my English teaching future.

Moreover, spending another semester studying Barry’s book deepened my interest in grammar, which to my own understanding and interpretation, was the twin of language, especially academic language, and my in-depth interest in grammar began mapping my future. In an office visit, I asked Mrs. Bellhumeur some grammar questions, and she recommended Betty Schrampfer Azar’s *Understanding and Using English Grammar*, adding, “I sleep with this
book under my pillow!” I took her at her word, bought the book, and studied it from cover to cover.

In studying the book, I noticed that within 437 pages, the twenty-chapter book covered basic grammar concepts. For each chapter, Azar provided plenty of examples, exercises, and sometimes, activities, depending on the chapter’s topic. Yet, except for the “Preface to the Third Edition,” in which Azar introduced her book as “a developmental skills text for intermediate to advanced students of English as a second and foreign language” and insisted that “[w]hile focusing on grammar, [the book] promotes the development of all language skills in a variety of ways” (xiii), Azar did not explain or share her concerns for why a certain application, not another, was appropriate in a certain context, as Barry did.

The number of exercises in Azar’s book reminded me of the exercises in English for Today (EfT), the textbook I used when I learned English at the Vietnamese American Association (VAA) in Viet-Nam in 1967 and several years later. English for Today was translated by a Lê Bá Kông. Unlike Azar’s book, English for Today included readings, yet both textbooks provided many exercises for students to practice. For instance, on page 87 in Azar’s book, in

Exercise 8. Preview: subject-verb agreement (Charts 6-2 → 6-5)

Directions: Choose the correct answer in parentheses.

1. The results of Dr. Noll’s experiment (was, were) published in a scientific journal.

2. The weather in the southern states (gets, get) very hot during the summer.

Students would circle the correct answers, exactly as I did with the exercises for my English classes at the Vietnamese American Association. Yet, I cannot recall whether activities were included in English for Today. Although the activities and exercises that Azar provided
allowed students to apply learned grammar components in context, as a user, I like to ‘hear’ the author ‘talk’ to me and explain the flexibility and arbitrariness of English, even in the application of grammar components. Nonetheless, I valued Azar’s textbook and considered it a how-to toolbox for illustrating neat and easy to understand examples. At the same time, I found in Barry’s textbook guidance for my adventure in the English world, where language reflects human behavior, and “[t]here is no part of language that is wholly separate from the other parts: it is an organic system in which the parts are interrelated and function together to perform the highly complex task of communicating human thought” (xii). Furthermore, as Barry noted, [a]rbitrary judgments about correctness shut down discussion and have the potential to generate anxiety and resentment. On the other hand, recognition of change and fluctuation opens up a conversation and invites all users of language to participate. That doesn’t mean that anything goes and there are no standards; we all know there are. It does mean that sometimes they are negotiable and sometimes they change (220).

However, it was in Dr. Melissa Fiesta’s Advanced Composition (ENGL 300) that I experienced a break-through in writing, when I learned to embrace written communication as taught in Richard Coe’s textbook, “Process, Form, and Substance,” and I developed my role as a writer. It was in this class that I applied my understanding of grammar, learned from Dr. Hu’s class and Mrs. Bellhumeur’s, into academic writing as I revisited my experiences, those of an eyewitness, before and after April 1975. Dr. Hu said, “Grammar has a latent effect; it might take you a while before you totally understand it and effectively use it to serve your purposes,” and she could not have been righter. Even though I continued making grammar mistakes/errors in my writing and missing a handful of them in my revised drafts, I grew more confident in writing when I saw thoughts in my mind transform into words, symmetrically. In Dr. Fiesta’s class, for
the first time, I learned words, such as Classical and New Rhetoric, rhetorical principles,
rhetorical structures, heuristics, Aristotle’s topoi, and discourse communities, and I familiarized
myself with these old yet new concepts to me.

In addition to Richard M. Coe’s *Process, Form, and Substance A Rhetoric for Advanced
Writers*, the 2nd edition, as a resource for learning writing, Dr. Fiesta also used Sonia Maasik and
Jack Solomon’s *California Dreams and Realities – Readings for Critical Thinkers and Writers*,
also the 2nd edition, for class reading. As soon as I read Coe’s first chapter, the author instantly
received my full attention with his statements, “[b]ecause both learning and writing begin with
motivation, this chapter begins with a discussion of motives – both practical and humanistic, for
you have much to gain by treating writing not as a technical skill but as a humanistic discipline”
(4), and “[a]t its highest development, writing is the creation and communication of insight” (6).
While Coe’s claims aligned with my value of the humanistic role in writing, and his advice, “[t]o
develop your ability to write excellently in any area, or to write even competently as a generalist,
you must also develop your mind and heart” (7) fast-laned into my head, it was his remark,
“writing is very personal” (8) that gave me an understanding and a confirmation of my own
writing and its heading in the vast territory of rhetoric.

Also with Coe’s book, I was introduced to Corax, Gorgias, Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero,
Quintilian, and Augustine, colossal names of the forefathers of Classical Rhetoric when rhetoric
was defined as “using words persuasively” (14). More than just being new words, the Latin
terms and their Greek equivalents, *inventio/heuresis, disposition/taxis,* and *elocution/lexis,*
*hermeneia,* or *phrasis,* which represented the three emphases of classical rhetoric, according to
Coe, informed me of a writing process. The writing process was a practice that I learned in
Introduction to Composition with Miss Stephenson and in Freshman Composition with Mr.
Blake at Santa Ana College. However, in Coe’s description, the writing process was transformed from an academic procedure into personal engagement and growth. Through repetitive practice, I came to find my voice, persona as a writer, whose writing aimed at communicating and self-expressing while satisfying an academic task.

It was in Advanced Composition with Dr. Fiesta’s teaching and Coe’s textbook that I barefootedly explored the English Wonderland, and with every step, I was astounded by the meaning, structure, content, and application of the English wonders. My learning of invention started with Coe’s covering five heuristic techniques, with heuristics being defined as “a guide that increases the probability of discovery and decreases the likelihood of overlooking relevant material” (78). The journalists’ 5W was the first heuristic, which included who, what, where, when, why, and even how to “discover the information needed to begin a news story”; this technique offered “a large number of question heuristics that [were] available to writers for various purposes” (79-80). The second heuristic technique that Coe covered was Burke’s Pentad; each of its terms Scene, Agent, Act, Purpose, and Agency occupied one of the five triangular parts of a star, “ultimately aimed at discovering motivation, at answering the question why?” (83). The third heuristic technique I learned was Kenneth Pike’s Tagmemic Grid: “Tagmemic invention includes a number of heuristic devices, and the grid allows writers access to all of them” (86). Aristotle’s topoi or “general lines of argument,” believed to help writers “discover additional arguments in support of [their] position” (89), as Coe clarified, was the fourth heuristic technique that I learned in those early exposures to rhetoric.

I also, for the first time, heard of and learned Aristotle’s classification of three types of appeals, ethos/ethical, pathos/emotional, and logos/logical, which are to be used “to invent and to analyze persuasive discourse” (323-324), as well as other rhetoricians’ viewpoints and their
rhetorical approaches, which were unknown to me up to that time. In other words, rhetoric was a new, fascinating, and unlimited territory for me to explore, and I have not stopped exploring it ever since.

What remains memorable, to me, was how Coe treated and taught writing as an entity, in which meaning, structure, content, and application coexisted and collaborated to serve the writers’ purpose: personally, socially, and academically. With Dr. Fiesta’s teaching and Coe’s textbook, I came to envision writing as an entity that requires my attention to details as a writer, from being aware of audience to choosing words, style, and form to convey and express my thoughts to serve my communicative purposes. Coe’s words spoke to me; “[t]o articulate an idea is usually also to refine it. Your ability to think is to some degree dependent on the quality of your vocabulary. Your ability to think critically is to some degree dependent on your appreciation of the power of words,” and “the search for the right word often becomes a search for a more precise and accurate idea” which clarified his point that “[l]anguage and thought interpenetrate; they animate each other,” and supported W. H. Auden’s saying that “language is the mother of thought” (210-211).

Furthermore, I reflected on Aristotle’s take of logos/ethical appeals, which are “based on a writer/speaker’s ability to project her/himself

1. as a sensible person who understands the subject,
2. as a good and forthright person who would not lie to [her/his] readers, and
3. as an unselfish and benevolent person who has the readers’ best interests at heart”;

Coe also asserts that “[o]n a trivial level, this might mean that poor spelling could convince some readers that you are not intelligent, a minor consistency that you are being dishonest, and a few
unfortunate word choices that you do not understand them. On the most exalted level, this means that effective persuasion is honest, truthful, and loving” (383).

Throughout my academic journey, Coe’s words continue resounding in my head and prompt me to keep learning vocabulary, one new word at a time.

Being an English learner who has determined to learn and acquire strong communicative skills, written and spoken, to be part of American society, I have taken Coe’s teaching to my heart, since I have firsthand experienced constraints due to poor vocabulary and feeble grammar knowledge, which translated into the B’s on my essays, no matter how hard I had tried. In my interpretation, the grades I received for my assignments were “[e]valuative feedback [that] provides students with information concerning the correctness of responses. It represents a judgment that often carries a connotation of social comparison (e.g., letter grades, percentile scores, number of solved items, etc.” (2), as Anastasiya A. Lipnevich and Jeffrey K. Smith attest. While professors’ feedback helped me see what was missing and what needed improvement in my writing, the B’s on my writing assignments seemed to confirm my lack of competency in word control and thought expression. My interpretation of and feeling about my grades were not exclusively mine, for “[l]etter grades or numeric scores, being evaluative in nature and carrying a notion of social comparison, tend to turn students’ attention away from the task and toward the self, thus leading to negative effects on performance” (Lipnevich & Smith 34). Yet, at the same time, those B’s pushed me to try harder. And I kept trying.

If I had paid 100% attention to studying grammar in-depth with Dr. Hu and Mrs. Bellhumeur, my attention grew to 120% in studying writing with Dr. Fiesta. The virtual 20% came from my burning desire and devotion to improve the quality of my writing, since I have
learned from Coe and agree with him that “[a]t its highest development, writing is the creation and communication of insight;” Coe adds,

‘When Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote, “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” he was asserting the creative power of language to shape perceptions – and hence to influence the actions – of readers (was well as writers). That is the ultimate power of writing. Here the practical and humanistic reasons for learning to write well merge (7). Coe’s approach to teaching/learning writing has ever since been my guidance.

Also in Dr. Fiesta’s class, I began reading Mike Rose’s works. In “A Visit to Edwin Markham Intermediate School [EMIS],” in Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon’s California Dreams and Realities – Readings for Critical Thinkers and Writers, Rose tells a story of the school, its students, and its principal, whose dedication de-border-ed and transformed students’ lives. Being located in Watts, an area with 50% unemployment, where the average household income was $12,700 in 1990 (126), EMIS housed students, who were described by their principal, Yvonne Divans Hutchinson, as “slow, poor, impoverished, deprived, oppressed”; however, Hutchinson stressed, “[w]e get so busy looking at children in terms of labels that we fail to look for the potential – and to demand that kids live up to that potential. I tell these teachers, ‘Do not think that because a child cannot read a text, he cannot read you” (128).

Reading stories like this one and learning writing with Coe’s book and the like have enlightened me and paved my path toward the future of my choice.

However, what I considered a real breakthrough in Dr. Fiesta’s class, Advanced Composition, was a research paper, “The Historical Trail of the Vietnamese Exodus to America” which addressed the Vietnamese presence in America since April 1975 and which brought me an A, the first one ever from all those years and from all of my writing classes. Even though both of
my group-mates had given me an A when we peer-reviewed one another’s papers, receiving that grade from Dr. Fiesta and, especially, giving her permission, upon her request, to present my paper at a conference, which she would later attend, shocked my writer’s heart to its ventricles, right and left. Like the 15 points that I had received for the WPE, an A for my research paper in Dr. Fiesta’s class and her presentation of my writing in a roomful of scholars told me that I could write well and allowed me to hope for further academic advancement. Before I had enrolled in the class, its name, Advanced Composition, scared me. At some point, in just thinking about the class and questioning myself as to whether I would survive it to study another semester, my anxiety hit the top of the McCintosh nine-story building, the tallest one on campus and home of the College of Liberal Arts. And, it did take a while for my anxiety to get back to the normal-on-the-ground level from that height.

After having finished two semesters, Spring 2002 and Fall 2002, at CSULB as a transfer student, I felt as if I were wearing magic boots, which every step crossed a thousand miles. I felt the growth of my academic self at the end of each class. More exposure to grammar broadened and deepened my interest in it; more readings for the International Studies (IS) class, as well as reading Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon’s *California Dreams and Realities – Readings for Critical Thinkers and Writers* in Dr. Fiesta’s class, took me to places where many lived in suppression and oppression, where voices were muted and valueless, where children lived without basic needs. Those virtual outings opened my eyes, my mind, and my heart to embrace my second chance treasure, which, to countless women in different parts of the world, must be a non-existent hope or an afterlife dream. Similarly, I learned to hope that numerous children in communities like Watts might have teachers who enter a classroom without “preconceived notions about” (Massik & Solomon 127) them, which could be enough of a chance to help them
“rise to whatever expectations are set” or even to “great expectations” (129) to turn a new page in their lives, as Rose insisted.

Just like that, with heart and mind opened, I further ventured into the English Wonderland and devoured all subjects in all classes. In Lives on the Boundary, Mike Rose describes his friends, two graduate students, Rich McBiar and Steve Drinkard, and their excitement with poems: “[l]anguage washed over them” (75). He would have told me that, too, had he known me and my excitement with English. My main focus rested on English composition, yet I was also deeply interested in Linguistics, which covered different aspects, such as grammar, syntax, and semantics of the English language. While those linguistics classes could also be counted for English credits, I did not take them just for credit. In my own reasoning, like body and mind, form and content were inseparable; one strengthened and substantiated the other, and I loved learning both English form and content.

My love for the English language and my need to learn and improve English pronunciation and language structure let me to English Phonology (Linguistics 420) and English Syntax (Linguistics 421) in the Spring 2003 semester. I believed those classes would give me answers about rules, applications, and clarifications to exceptions. Understanding Phonology, written by Carlos Gussenhoven and Haike Jacobs, was the course textbook in English Phonology, and Describing Morphosyntax – A Guide for Field Linguists, written by Thomas Payne, was used in English Syntax. In the former, I learned that “[p]honology is a thriving field of linguistic research that tries to understand the structure behind [the languages’ sound] systems” (xi), and in the latter, “[a] morphosyntactic operation is a relation between one linguistic form and another that correlates with a conventionalized meaning distinction” (7).
Since I also enrolled in History of English Language (English/Linguistics 426), it was a pleasant surprise for me to notice how one course complemented and enriched all of the others. In the phonology and syntax courses, I not only learned new terminology, but also new concepts. Although I recognized some similar terms, such as morphology, morpheme, bound morpheme, affix, root, and the like, which I learned from Barry’s *English Grammar – Language as Human Behavior* in Dr. Hu and Mrs. Bellhumeur’s classes, new terms in new contexts took me to the breadth and depth of the English language where I explored, learned, and was amazed by its wonders. In *Understanding Phonology*, I learned the relationship between language and human’s physical features. Enrolled in the course, I thought I would learn English pronunciation, and I quickly learned of my hasty assumption. From the book’s preface, I learned that “[t]here are about 6,000 languages in the world today,” and “all these languages show striking similarities in the way they structure their sound systems,” and that “[p]honology is a thriving field of linguistic research that tries to understand the structure behind these systems” (xi). I also learned the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcription to capture the sound of a word, and I continue to use it; this feature helps me remember the pronunciation of an unfamiliar or difficult to pronounce word. Overall, being introduced to phonology, physical features’ sound production, and similarities among different languages has brought me to an awareness of linguistic differences between Vietnamese and English, and this awareness facilitates my efforts toward improvement.

My knowledge of the English Syntax’s course content was as narrow as that of English Phonology. Since English Syntax was the course’s name, I had assumed the course would be about “(a) the study of the rules for the formation of grammatical sentences in a language; (b) the study of the patterns of formation of sentences and phrases from words,” as syntax is defined by

“[a]s a linguistic researcher, my understanding of the formal systematic properties of language must be informed by an understanding of the purposes language serves and the human environment in which it exists. Similarly, my understanding of the functions of particular morphosyntactic forms in communication must be informed by an understanding of the ways in which those forms relate to one another in the formal system of language. My understanding on either front is enriched as I concentrate on understanding the other (11-12).

Payne’s words confirmed the interrelatedness of linguistics components, of structure and of meaning in social contexts. While readings for English Phonology filled my head with words, specific terms identified all organs of speech—glottis, larynx, vocal folds/vocal cords and the like—those in English Syntax offered me specific terms to describe functions of parts of speech. For instance, the indefinite article *a* and the definite article *the* were examined and presented under a light that had been totally foreign to me.

From the texts, filled with unfamiliar terms, I immersed myself into learning new words as much as I did the functions of English language components that they represented. Being aware of new concepts, such as “[c]opula is a verb” and “copular verbs are ‘empty’, and of their little or no semantic content other than whatever is involved in converting a noun phrase into a predicate, helped me reconsider the use of those verbs in my sentences to substantiate the content of my writing.

Those learning really added a large panel of colors to my understanding of how English is used and why. Such understanding helped me differentiate fox-hunting, meaning “hunting
with foxes as the object” from “hunting that foxes do” (144) and guided my arrangement of words to ensure a match between the phrases and sentences in my papers and my thoughts, ideas, and opinions. This match reinforced my belief in the interrelatedness of language structure and the meaning it carries.

Another concept that was helpful was diacritics. To some, it might just be another new word to memorize; to me, I embraced diacritics and its meaning into my word account. Understand the meaning of diacritics helped me describe those important features in my language. In Vietnamese, a diacritical mark is an inherent and indispensable feature of the majority of Vietnamese vocabulary. In the following except for the word “Nam,” all other words carry a diacritical mark, as in Việt Nam: xăng giảm 350 đồng mỗi lít. [Vietnam: the gas price drops 350 piaster/liter]. Word by word translation: xăng: gasoline; giảm: decreases/drops/downs; đồng: Vietnamese monetary unit/piaster; mỗi: each/every; lít: liter.

Even though I struggled to memorize a new lexicon and its new concepts, I embraced the learning in those two classes. To me, Vietnamese is a very poetic language due to its heavy use of similes and metaphors. As I was exploring academia and coming to know my American academic self, any similarity between my mother tongue and the English language attracted my attention and I sought to study that similarity and others for clarification and understanding. Yet, at the undergrad level, I was too busy learning the English language with its conventional spoken and written rules to recognize and acknowledge the co-existence of my American academic self.

My engagement in Linguistics must have ‘red-flagged’ my academic advisor, Dr. Hotchkiss, so she wanted to talk to me. At her office, she asked, “Viet! Do you want to change your major to Language and Linguistics?” – “No, Dr. Hotchkiss! Why?” – “You seem to be very interested in Linguistics since you’ve enrolled in many Linguistics classes!” – “Yeah!
Because I think I learn more about English language in those classes, but I don’t want to major in Linguistics.” – “Would you like to double major?” – “Yes! I’m more than happy to do that!”

According to Dr. Hotchkiss, on top of my classes taken, I only needed 5 more units to double-major in Literacy and Composition and Language and Linguistics. And so I did.

From the linguistics courses, I learned to notice details in language use, and the further I stepped into the English Wonderland, the more I was captivated by the details/wonders of grammar, for “grammar is concerned with how the constituent units of sentences (morphemes, words, phrases, and clauses) are put together to form sentences” (Carter & McCarthy 3). I could not agree with Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman more, since I was one of the ESL students that they referred to in their statement, “ESL/EFL students need to know not simply how a structure is formed and what it means; they need to know why speakers of English choose to use one form rather than another when both forms have more or less the same grammatical or lexical meaning” (5). Yes! I have always wanted to know the answers to those whys, and I have believed that studying morphosyntax and grammar would bring me explanations. I also noticed that NONE of the writing textbooks downplayed or ignored the role of grammar in writing; explicitly or implicitly, grammar was addressed. Grammar’s presence in writing textbooks emphasized its place in language use, particularly in the written form, and correlating to its vital role was my interest.

In his Writing with Power Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process, Peter Elbow writes in Chapter 15, “The Last Step: Getting Rid of Mistakes in Grammar,” that he will “talk crudely about grammar and right and wrong since that is the way most of us experience this whole business and that is the way we are going to have to come to terms with it” (167). In fact, Elbow did talk crudely about grammar in asserting that “grammar was glamour. If you knew
grammar you were special. You had prestige, power, access to magic; you understood a mystery; you were like a nuclear physicist. But now, with respect to grammar, you are only special if you lack it” (167). Elbow’s use of past tense “was; knew; had; understood” depict the benefits of knowing grammar well in the past, while his present tense “are” illustrates the current cost of not knowing grammar well. Moreover, “special” in his context is sarcastic and ironic, since there is nothing special about having grammar mistakes/errors in one’s writing.

From my interpretation, a firm grasp in grammar might not be as glorious as it once was, yet a weak one surely discredits a writer’s ability/competency. Being glorious or not, a writer must know her/his grammar well, for “writing with errors – if you give it to other people – makes you a hick, a boob, a bumpkin,” as Elbow insisted (167). At that time, I did not know the meanings of those words, but I did not need a dictionary to denote their negative connotations, which were transparent and absolute in that context.

From Spring 2002 to December 2003, in both of Dr. Fiesta’s classes, Advanced Composition (English 300), using Coe’s Process, Form, and Substance – A Rhetoric for Advanced Writers, and Theories of Writing and Literacy (English 410), using Literacy – A Critical Sourcebook, edited by Ellen Cushman et al, I was jetskiing on big waves in the ocean of literacy information. From David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University,” Peter Elbow’s “Writing without Teachers” and “Writing with Power,” Donald Murray’s “Teaching Writing as a Process Not Product” and “Write before Writing,” to name just a few, I discovered some of the hows of writing. From F. Niyi Akinnaso’s “Literacy and Individual Consciousness,” Lisa Delpit’s “The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse,” Paulo Freire’s “The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom and Education and Conscientizacao,” and Lalita Ramdas’ “Women and Literacy: A Quest for Justice,” I unearthed the whats of writing and from
these *whats*, I unmasked the *whys* of writing. I also learned the elusive boundary between personal and public in academic/social/political discussions. In presenting, discussing, and exchanging their personal viewpoints on an academic, social, and political issue, the aforementioned scholars made their viewpoints public in their discussions and examinations. In studying English, my academic self quietly took shape and chose sides.

One of the *hows* of writing that I discovered came from Bartholomae’s suggestion of “Inventing the University,” or students’ appropriation of the authority/scholar’s voice/language since “[t]his act of appropriation constitutes [a student’s] authority” (518). Bartholomae’s audience includes a general population of writers, presumably native speakers. In my thinking, if this population has problems with speaking and writing with authority, even the invented/imagined one, the task would be more daunting, especially for basic writers, both native and non-native speakers. For writers in the latter group, with whom I identify, struggles rest on both fronts: limited lexicon and weak voice, neither of which promotes the writer’s authority. For me, Bartholomae’s reading offered a *how to* tool to be used in academic writing. Thus, more than “a narrative of courage and conquest,” students’ inventing the university or their “story of appropriation” (520) was a determination to obtain authority for their own voice in order to participate in the ongoing academic conversation. Bartholomae was talking to me with his message.

In Elbow’s *Writing with Power*, I found his words encouraging: “I am talking to that person inside everyone who has ever written or tried to write: that someone who has wrestled with words, who seeks power in words, who has often gotten discouraged, but who also senses the possibility of achieving real writing power” (6). By inviting writers to embrace process, not
product, Elbow also reminded them to put weight on grammar, a must do, not a should do; the former, an obligation; the latter, an option.

His advice to “learn grammar” reinforced his point that “writing with errors… makes you a hick, a boob, a bumpkin”; in fact, incompetence was the synonym for Elbow’s trio. I took Elbow’s words and focused more on grammar, for like him, I was convinced that an error-free or a paper with only few errors “makes [one’s] writing easy to read,” and it was obvious that “[t]he physical appearance of [one’s] writing has a big effect on how people experience your words” (170). In addition, I recognized a resonance between Elbow’s suggestion to writers “to treat words as though they are potentially able to grow” (24), and Coe’s “writing promotes insight” (6), since only in carefully nourished words would a writer’s insight traverse to reach an audience. My experiences with writing in Introduction to Written Composition (English 061) and Freshmen Composition (English 101) at Santa Ana College supported every word in Elbow’s statements and in Coe’s, as well.

My small yet steady steps took me from one class to another. October 2003 came! While finishing the last four classes of the Bachelor’s degree, I applied for the Master’s degree with an emphasis in Rhetoric and Composition, which would begin in Spring 2004. On the last day of the Fall 2003 semester, after submitting my final to Dr. Lori Smuthwaite, the professor of Theories and Practices Reading (English 436) class, I walked to the parking lot and was drenched with mixed emotions. I remembered my son’s encouragement and that of my husband. While their financial and emotional support made being a full-time student possible for me, their love and sacrifice fueled and impelled me along. So, almost three decades after leaving Đại-học Văn-Khoa in early 1976, I finally materialized my dream of obtaining a Bachelor’s degree in English, and I was speechless.
Yet, memories of my academic struggles in the 11th and 12th grades in high school and my parents’ patience and support during all those years pained me; just thinking about their absence on my graduation after all those years choked me up. A full-lined, wool coat and a merino mock turtle-neck sweater were not enough to keep me warm in the cold air of that December evening. Nostalgia chilled my bones and churned my stomach, and I missed my parents beyond words. They would have been elated had they known of my graduation, the very first in the family to materialize their dreams of their children’s success.

Before Spring semester began at CSULB in 2004, I received a letter from the English Department congratulating me on my admission to the Rhetoric and Composition program. The GPA minimum requirement was 3.300; mine was 3.364 at the time I submitted my application. The fact that I barely met the requirement made the admission the sweetest gift and gave me hope, a sizable one.

3.3 In Academe: Stepping Up

The joy of being accepted in the Rhetoric and Composition Master’s Program at California State University, Long Beach, was humongous, and I think I was so happy that not only my face but also my every cell smiled. Although I was anxious about the program, I thought and believed that hard work would help me through, as it had in the BA program. In the first semester of the MA, to brace myself for new challenges, instead of taking four classes as usual, I only enrolled in three: (1) Literacy Criticism Research (English 696), a prerequisite for other classes in the program; (2) TESL Composition (Linguistics 460), and Intermediate French (French 201A). This decision turned out to be the wisest that I had ever made.
On the first day of class, to celebrate my little achievement, I exchanged my casual all-weather jeans and thick cotton sweater for a chocolate merino turtle-neck, a suede skirt in caramel color with gentle lines of embroidery on the hem line, and a pair of knee-high boots made of patched suede in various hues of earth tone colors. In a dressed-up outfit, I felt sooo ready for rhetorical theories, which until then were but indistinct shades and forms in my understanding of rhetoric.

My literacies criticism class was in the last room on the ground floor of the LA-2 building. A wide, cemented walkway that ran through uneven square and rectangular blocks of grass along the campus’ West University Drive was not wide enough to muffle the frequent traffic’s noise, and sometimes the noise could be very annoying. However, I was immune to the noise, since I was too comfortable in my bubble of joy to notice it. When I opened the door and stepped inside the classroom, I saw several students sitting in school chairs with writing pads, and those chairs were set-up in a u-shape, so that everyone could see others. I picked a vacant seat that was close to the door and was very excited for the first meeting. The fantastic I-did-it feeling kept trampoline-ing inside me, but the 2624-plus-page textbook worried me. When the professor came in, introducing himself as Dr. Paul Gilmore, and began the first-day-of-school talk, I counted twenty-one students in class. All of them were young and cheerful and spoke English flawlessly; there were equipped with the skills that I was ceaselessly honing, in and out of school, and wished to possess one day. As usual, to not be intimidated by my classmates’ speaking skills, I had a bit of silent self-talk to assure myself that I would make it, despite all my linguistics imperfections.

The reading list comprised readings from *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*; three Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, from different editions, including Norton, ed. J. Paul Hunter,
Bedford, 2nd ed., ed. Johanna M. Smith, and Longman, ed. Susan Wolfson; and Raymond Williams’ *Marxism and Literature*. Weighed at 25% and 30% of the total grade were reading responses, and the final paper carried almost 69% of the B/80% passing grade.

Since having gone back to school, I always went to class with a positive, hopeful, and open-minded attitude for learning. I had worked very hard in every single class in order to be admitted to the Master’s program, so I assumed that I was capable of handling its challenges. I skimmed through 14 pages of the book’s table of contents, covering 140 scholars/rhetoricians from Gorgias of Leontini (ca. 483-376 B.C.E.) of Classical Rhetoric to Stuart Moulthrop (b. 1957) of today’s rhetoric, and I recognized the total of six names that were familiar to me. As an immigrant, I recognized Karl Marx, since the Vietnamese communists embraced Marxism; I had learned about Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud in my philosophy classes in high school; I also recognized Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir from some readings in the French courses that I took at Centre Culturel Francais/French Cultural Center in Viet-Nam before April 1975, but I could not recall specifically which readings of theirs that I had read; and I had read bell hooks and Jean-Paul Sartre’s writings in one of Dr. Fiesta’s undergrad classes. That was all I knew about the book.

Such unfamiliarity with the course’s material was not uncommon to me. Throughout the undergraduate level, even though the courses’ textbooks and readings were often completely unknown to me, I enjoyed studying them, one after another, and noticed the growth of my academic background, one vocabulary, one grammar rule, and one class at a time. After years in academe, I had gotten used to being the oldest person in class, but, despite my age, so often I managed to be among the B-ranking students. But not in English 696, where I felt floored, defeated, and humiliated by my limited English expression and ESL writing. The number of the
course’s foreign theories and theorists frightened me and overwhelmed me with a feeling of inadequacy and awkwardness, as if I were sitting in a wrong class, as if I did not belong.

Mike Rose’s words, “I knew from my own early struggles that students who have not had a privileged education often freeze up when they see [heavily sophisticated, theory-driven] readings […]” and his words that “they don’t have the background knowledge or the conceptual grab bag of received phrases to make connections between [theoretical discussions] and [realistic applications]” (145) explained how I felt. And his description that

[p]eople are taking notes and you are taking notes. You are taking notes on a lecture you don’t understand. You get a phrase, a sentence, then the next loses you. It’s as though you’re hearing a conversation in a crowd or from another room – out of phase, muted. The man on the stage concludes his lecture and everyone rustles and you close your notebook and prepare to leave. You feel a little strange. Maybe tomorrow this stuff will clear up. Maybe by tomorrow this will be easier. But by the time you’re in the hallway, you don’t think it will be easier at all (168),
described how I felt in Dr. Gilmore’s class. Like the students in Rose’s Lives on the Boundary – The Struggles and Achievements of America’s Underprepared, I felt equally, desperately underprepared and “intellectually deficient” (the book’s front flap) for Dr. Gilmore’s class.

I did not know whom to turn, so I visited Dr. Gilmore at the beginning of the semester to seek advice. At his office, I showed him my first response and waited for his feedback. “You’ve plagiarized!” – “How come? I have the page number right next to those points!” – “If you borrow the exact word, you have to put it into quotation marks to avoid plagiarism.” – So, Dr. Gilmore taught me about paraphrases and direct quotes without explicitly addressing them. When I told him that I felt so inadequate in his class, he said, “You shouldn’t. Other students in
class have been previously exposed to the material, and that’s why they can talk a lot about it.” I took Dr. Gilmore’s words, “You have interesting and thoughtful things to say; let them be heard,” and “I know this was a tough assignment for you and that you work hard. With more hard work, you’ll do even better,” and I kept pushing myself.

Yet in fourteen out of sixteen weeks of the semester, every time my right hand grabbed the classroom’s doorknob, my mind told me to turn around and go home. My confident composure in Dr. Hu’s class, in Dr. Bellhumeur’s and in all the other classes crumbled, one class meeting after another in Dr. Gilmore’s class. And despite Dr. Gilmore’s explanation, my classmates’ thoroughness in sharing their interpretations and responses of a reading and their sûr de soi/self-assured manner continued defusing my desire to participate. Understanding that participation was a vital activity in a graduate class, staying quiet in class bothered me, yet fear of misinterpreting and misrepresenting a reading silenced me. And I sat in class, minimizing my verbal expressions and feeling totally defeated.

Since I often finished a reading without thoroughly understanding its meaning well enough to respond to/reflect upon it in order to write an in-depth review, the required one full page, single-spaced response became mind torturing. Never had writing a page produced such excruciating pain; never letting go of an article had been that difficult. When I wrote those reading responses, I relied on every single article and punctuation mark in my response just to fill up the page, which contained only a whisper of my voice as a writer, with a handful of writing errors, enough to hurt Dr. Gilmore’s eyes.

Re-reading those papers, I can categorize some of my errors in Dr. Gilmore’s class in the following Table 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response &amp; Date</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>Dr. Gilmore’s Correction</th>
<th>Type of Errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Reflecting on Syntagmatic and Associative Relations” – 2/4/04</td>
<td>“Saussure defines language which is ‘a system of interdependent...the others’ (969) and the importance of language in the human’s lives is undeniable.”</td>
<td>“Saussure defines language as ‘a system...’ (969), and the importance of language in the human live is undeniable.”</td>
<td>Word choice (untreatable) &amp; Punctuation (treatable).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“From Reading Derrida’s ‘The Exorbitant. Question of Method’”” – 2/11/04</td>
<td>“I wonder whether I could understand ‘system, laws, and life’ (1825) as external factors that to a certain degree do affect the language that the writer employs in his writing.”</td>
<td>“… as external factors that, to a certain degree, affect the language which writer employs in his writing....”</td>
<td>Punctuation (treatable) &amp; Word choice (untreatable).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Karl Marx &amp; Friedrich Engels &amp; the Communism in Vietnam” – 3/17/04</td>
<td>“Their ideology has created an immense effect...”</td>
<td>“Their ideology has had an immense effect...”</td>
<td>Incorrect use of the definite article (treatable).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“New Historicism” – 4/19/14</td>
<td>“New Historicist as Hayden White uses the term ‘metahistory’ (1712) to describe....”</td>
<td>“New Historicists as Hayden White use....”</td>
<td>Replaced a singular subject with a plural subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“For example, hundreds of thousand of the Vietnamese refugees....”</td>
<td>“For example, hundreds of thousands of the Vietnamese refugees....”</td>
<td>Incorrect use of a word (untreatable).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I was also aware of what Kaplan has called a circular thought pattern common in writing by speakers of Asian languages in his 1996 diagram of cultural thought patterns (see in Figure 17).

![Figure 17: Robert Kaplan’s 1966 Diagram; Web; 15 Apr. 2014](image)

Dr. Gilmore’s corrections on my papers and his comment, “every sentence needs a subject,” next to my long, confusing sentences haunted me for a very long time. Those corrections and such a comment forced me to constantly question my ability as a graduate student, and the word ‘inadequate’, like a big white flag, kept flapping in my head every time I entered Dr. Gilmore’s Literacy Criticism Research class.

To get help, I dragged myself, my worries, and my discouragement to Dr. Susan Carlile’s office to talk to her. Graduate students were encouraged to meet with their graduate advisor regularly, but I had not visited Dr. Carlile until I felt crushed under the unbearable weight of English 696. Dr. Carlile’s friendly greetings and her sympathetic nods told me that I was not the only graduate student coming to see her for support. She said, “English 696 is the most difficult course in the entire program. Everyone suffers in that class, but I’ve seen smart students drop out, and I’ve seen mediocre students graduate. Keep going, finish the class, and move on.” And
I held on tight to her advice to stay and finish English 696. At the end, I received a C for the class. I received an A in French 201 A, but the 200 level class was not counted toward the graduate record. Since English 696 was a four-unit class, an A in the TESL Composition three-unit class could not help me to maintain the 3.0 GPA, as required. My GPA dropped to 2.857, and I was placed on academic probation, without being aware of it. The grade broke my tear ducts, but the tears dried up after a while. The C stayed on my transcript and became a solid pusher, and the pusher pushed me hard throughout the rest of the program.

Nonetheless, the C in Dr. Gilmore’s class instantly frightened and bruised me, so the following semester, Fall 2004, I gave myself time to recover by shying away from other 600 level classes to enroll in Directed Studies Composition (English 497), Semantics (English/Linguistics 523), and Intermediate French (201B). In Dr. Hu’s Semantics class, I devoured the material as if it were a palatable dish. It was, indeed, nutritious food for my English insatiable appetite.

At the beginning of my transfer, I found Barry’s words, “’[k]nowing’ a language so that you can use it is not the same as ‘knowing’ a language so that you can explain how it works’” (1), true and convincing. My determination to have a firm grasp on English so I would be able to explain to students how it worked drove me into every English and Linguistics class that CSULB offered and that I could squeeze into my schedule. With my goal of being an English instructor at a community college, I was extremely conscious of my own ability as a non-native speaker instructor in an English classroom. I believed that in understanding the various hues of English I would always be aware of the audience’s presence, as I made constant efforts to improve my writing and speaking skills for effective communication.
Receiving an A in Semantics, a B in English 498 where I studied tutoring, and another A for my French class, I was freed from academic probation, so I continued to enroll in other 600-level required courses in the program. Being in the Rhetoric and Composition program, my shallow pocket understanding of theories always bothered me. Yet, as I steadily progressed through the program, one course after another, I slowly gathered rhetorical knowledge and information to fill some of those pockets. And as I added more layers to my English ability, my confidence grew, correspondingly to my fluency. When I enrolled in Special Topics Literature/Autobiography with Dr. Elizabeth Young in the following semester, Fall 2005, I felt right at home. Reading Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I found encouragement and hope in it, and I filled the blank pages with words from my stories, using pseudonyms. Unlike in Dr. Gilmore’s Literacy Criticism Research, where I reflected upon and wrote about rhetorical theories, which I had trouble understanding thoroughly, in Dr. Young’s Autobiography class, I wrote as easily as I breathed, and as easily as if I had written those words in Vietnamese. Through those words, I became a story teller who used “expressive writing” to “communicate [her] thoughts, feelings, and personal history” with an audience (Mangelsdorf 5).

My audience included Dr. Young and twelve students in class, and one of them, Judy, was finishing her last semester, and she had been offered an editor position. Class meetings took place in room 315, a conference room on the third floor of the MCintosh Building, house of the Liberal Arts Division. The room had a big, rectangular table; Dr. Young sat at one end, and students sat along both sides of the table’s length. Judy sat on one side and I sat on the other. Students would take turns, handing a copy of their writing to classmates, selecting a paragraph in their writing to read aloud in class, and seeking feedback/advice from their classmates.
When it was my turn, I chose a part in my writing, “… For Love, … It May,” a love story of a former South Việt-Nam officer/a North Việt-Nam prisoner and his friend’s sister, and began reading,

“At night, during the rainy season, she loved to sit under the canopy of her balcony listening to the music of the rain, the shouting of thunders, the conversation of trees and flowers, the budging of streets and houses… and submerged herself in the souvenirs filled with his face, his talks, and his smile. She missed his smiling face, the smile that conveyed openness and generosity. When the rain was gone, above, the night sky became clear again. Sparkling stars glittered like the winces, and the crescent moon looked like a smile on the face of the evening sky. “The smile is in jail!” Now and then, she wondered how he was doing. Vòng did not realize that sometimes the absence speaks louder than the presence. She wished he had said something before he left. She wished! (25)

When I finished reading, Judy told me, “You’ll be the next Amy Tan, and once your work gets published, don’t let anyone read the audio version; read it yourself.” I did not expect to receive such feedback, especially publically, but I was very delighted to hear those words. Shortly after, on one of my visits to Dr. Young’s office, she insisted that I share my stories with the American audience. She told me, “Your strength lies on the historical facts that you’ve included in your stories. Many Americans don’t know anything about Vietnam, so as a writer, educate them with your stories.” At the end of the semester, Dr. Young gave me an A, and later, she agreed to be the second reader on my thesis committee. Dr. Young no longer teaches at CSULB, but I have not forgotten her, her teaching, and her encouraging words.

When I finally finished all the courses required, with Dr. Fiesta’s approval and encouragement, my thesis, “A Cloud Rider,” was a biography, mine, but all the names were
changed to protect the characters’ privacy. The thesis was about my experiences in my first year living in America. I promised Dr. Fiesta that I would keep writing and publish my book, yet my decision to pursue the doctoral program delayed the revising process. However, the revision will resume after my Ph. D. graduation.

Being a student of Rhetoric and Composition, I enjoyed every class in the CSULB program. After my experience in Dr. Gilmore’s class, I came to realize that my lack of confidence hindered my learning. Dr. Gilmore helped me by pointing out my writing errors, so I could learn to correct them; instead, lacking confidence, I panicked and I questioned my ability and was intimidated by my classmates’ fluency. I had measured my able-ness by their standards, not by my improvements. In fact, my native speaker classmates did not have my experiences nor did they use “the language of intersection, of crossed boundaries” (Rose 241) as I did. Being able to handle other classes in the program and finishing it bolstered my academic self. The support that my professors and classmates gave me allowed me to hope, and in Rose’s words, “[it is hope, everyday heroics, the power of the common play of the human mind” that “fosters learning” (242).

It is hope that has fueled my ten-year academic journey and stretched it to a thirteen-year learning quest, which paused but has resumed. In learning English, I have found a bountifulness of words, meanings, and applications, in which my academic self, voice, and subjectivity surface and strengthen. And I keep learning and stepping up in academe.

3.4 Of Special Interests

And I am glad that I keep learning grammar and pronunciation. While knowing grammar rules and principles helps clarify my expressions in writing, pronouncing words correctly helps
conversation and communication flow. My English learning in Vietnam in 1967 until 1975 helped me speak and understand English when I had just come to America in 1989, and with each class that I finished, I added new vocabulary to my word account. My English class, indeed, went beyond the classroom’s walls to take place at home from the TV and the radio, at work from individual or group conversations, on the streets from overhearing passersby’s talking, and on stores’ window advertising in the shopping malls. Through exposure to multiple literacies, my English learning expands, enriches, and layers.

At home, when I watch the daily news, I listen to the anchorwomen/men’s pronunciation of words that are unfamiliar to me or to those that I do not pronounce correctly. Various shows/programs on TV, such as “Everybody Loves Raymond,” “Friends,” “The Big Bang Theory,” “Chopped,” or “Property Brothers” provide me an understanding of American culture in social and private practices and a large variety of vocabulary. And although it is difficult to retain words without using them, being exposed to them makes me aware of their existence, so I can find them when needed. Before I stopped working as a pharmacy technician, every day at work, to me, was English learning time. I learned to use subjunctive from listening to my co-workers’ before I read and understood its use in a grammar book.

I continue to use Betty Schrampfer Azar’s Understanding and Using English Grammar, recommended by Mrs. Bellhumeur, as a reference. While native speakers might consider grammar information formulaic, such information offers guidance to non-native/ESL learners. As I memorize grammar rules, such as when to apply a comma, or when to use a verb in past perfect instead of simple past, I can express my thoughts with clarity. Scholars’ error-free writing reinforces my personal belief that mastering grammar opens doors to higher education.
Adding to the pro-grammar teaching conversation is Mary J. Schleppegrell’s viewpoint in her article, “Challenges of the Science Register for ESL students: Errors and Meaning-Making.” Based on the results from analyzing errors in the written reports of ESL students “in an upper-division Chemical Engineering course” (120), Schleppegrell concludes,

[p]resentation of disciplinary knowledge is at risk for ESL writers without the full range of resources of the grammar…. As students who lack a range of grammatical resources focus on presenting disciplinary knowledge in their writing assignments, their infelicitous grammatical choices sometimes present a stance that may be inappropriate or create a text that lacks cohesion or fails to represent intended meanings (140).

Readings like these reinforce the value of grammar in writing, especially in ESL’s, and when I study grammar using different textbooks, I realize that grammar is more than structure/form that is needed for correct and effective written communication. It is a label distinguishing the know from the know-not; it is a gatekeeper separating insiders from outsiders, literally.

At the beginning of my grammar learning quest, I just wanted to have a good command on English writing conventions in order to express my thoughts clearly, but the more I engage in learning grammar, the more I understand the interrelatedness of language components and the flexibility/exception in usage. Consequently, I simply cannot stop learning grammar and pronunciation, my special interests, and the further my journey takes me into the field of rhetoric, the more I value grammar. From my experiences, grammar provides foundation/structure, the base on which content is enhanced and enriched.

As an English learner, understanding nuances in English grammar allows me to express myself more effectively, in speech and in prose, and as an English user, such an understanding
underscores my confidence, knowing for sure that I am neither a hick, a boob, nor a bumpkin in Elbow’s warning (167). To my personal taste, “[g]rammar is glamour” (Elbow 167), since it lightens up the English Wonderland where my American academic self, voice, and subjectivity have been cultivated, nurtured, and strengthened, side by side, with my Vietnamese cultural self, voice, and subjectivity.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE TOGETHERNESS OF SELVES IN REACHING FOR THE STARS

4.1 Learning in Exploring

In 2010, after twenty-one years living in America and sixteen-plus years being in its academia, I have steadily experienced negotiation, adjustment, interference, and collaboration of various versions of my selves alongside my cultural, social, academic, and professional growth.

Before 2010, the University of Texas at El Paso was an unknown university and El Paso was an unknown place to me. Since my arrival to America in 1989, I have been rooted in Orange County, California, where I have lived, schooled, and worked. When Tom Hong Do, my godson and an English lecturer at CSULB, gave me the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition, a long list of all the universities housing Rhetoric and Composition in the entire nation, I went through the list and meticulously checked out every single school to learn about its program, location, and environment. Like me, Tom was interested in being a doctoral student, but unlike me, his handsome 3.89 GPA gave him plenty of options; however, he only had his eyes on the University of Arizona where some of our brilliant Rhetoric and Composition professors at CSULB came from.

Up to that time, I had never, ever lived a day by myself without the presence of my family members or close friends; hence, the school location was one of my biggest concerns, besides its program. I wanted to go to a school, which, if it was not close to my city, at least it was in California, so I would not be too burdened by being far from home and by the out-of-state tuition.
I was slightly disheartened to find none of the universities in California was compatible with my 3.348 GPA and my Rhetoric and Composition emphasis. Either my GPA did not meet a school’s requirement or the school’s program/location did not fit my search. At some point, I was willing to settle for the Linguistics emphasis just to be close to home during schooling. However, the more time I spent considering Linguistics, the more my heart pulled me toward Rhetoric and Composition.

In fact, my learning of rhetoric and composition for the Master’s degree has satisfied and nurtured my English learning needs, not only for words and meaning, but also for usage and purposes. By writing countless assignments, I have grown one delicate layer of knowledge at a time and have been familiarized with English, despite being an English learner. From an ESL student with zero knowledge of American writing conventions and with a handful of vocabulary to an English writing instructor, whose teaching has been approved by students, supervisors, and colleagues, I have become a competent English user. Along with competency comes a good sense of *sur de soi* /self-assurance that I have enjoyed embracing. Along with self-assurance comes loving life, one that can be bettered in sharing and servicing. Thus came the search for a PhD program. As Tom kept telling me, “There’s a program for each and everyone,” I wanted to believe I would find one, the one that would approve my qualifications and strengthen and enrich my understanding of rhetoric and language use.

During the search, I found the doctoral program in Composition and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Indiana University of Pennsylvania has described its program as “one of the oldest and largest in the United States and one of only a few programs in the world that gives students the option of exploring first and second language literacy in English.” With the Teaching English as Second
Language Master’s degree in my academic profile, I was very much attracted to this program, which seemed to be a good match of what I had with what Indiana University of Pennsylvania offered.

However, after many long talks with Hoàng to weigh the pros and cons, my age and health became the top concerns. The 2498.30 mile distance between home and Indiana University of Pennsylvania and the low 17-18 degree and high 36-40 degree winter weather were issues that I could not overlook, especially as I was reaching the sixty-year old mark in my 5.4 inch and 90ish pound frame. And I was not at all convinced by the “60 is the new 40” thinking trend.

Then I discovered a perfect match with the University of Texas at El Paso. AHA.

Compared to Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) was much closer with its 792.75 mile distance from my home. Further, the low 33-37 and high 58-63 degrees of El Paso’s winter weather appeared to be friendlier to my body and thus more inviting to me.

Choosing UTEP was the result of serious consideration. It turned out to be one of the best decisions that I ever made in my life. I informed Dr. Fiesta, Dr. Finney, and David Fabish of my decision and requested a letter recommendation from each of them. All three gladly gave me their best words. From 2002, the first year of my transfer, to the last semester of my Master’s in 2006, I had frequently taken Dr. Fiesta’s classes, and Dr. Fiesta became my mentor and thesis chair. Similarly, Dr. Finney was not only my professor in many linguistics classes, but also my graduate advisor and then my project advisor, whose advice and guidance helped me finish and graduate with the second Master’s degree in Teaching English as a Second Language. David Fabish was the English Chair and my supervisor at Cerritos College; during one semester, he
came to my class to observe and evaluate my teaching. Further, as the English Chair, he offered me a teaching assignment, approved my tutoring hours at the Writing Center, and signed my request for a student’s late admission. Thus, David was familiar with my teaching approach and philosophy. I thought submitting letters of recommendation from those who knew me and my academic and professional performance would increase my chance to be accepted into the Rhetoric and Composition doctoral program at UTEP.

In addition to applying to UTEP, my first choice, I also applied to New Mexico State University as a second choice, just to be safe. Ironically, the school of my second choice rejected me first. Sometime in March 2011, I received a rejection letter from New Mexico State University. That rejection made me nervous, and I began asking, “What would I do if UTEP rejected me?” I did not have an answer for myself. The deadline to apply to any program had long passed, and that meant if UTEP rejected me, I would just keep teaching at Cerritos and would reapply in the following year. The idea of not making it to UTEP at sixty, as planned, like a fly, bugged me with its buzzing. Shooing away all the what-if’s out of my head was quite tiring, especially when I was clueless of what to expect, but except for waiting, I had no other option. And time stretched itself in waiting.

When my former classmate and friend, Estefania, and her husband, Geoff, came from Pennsylvania for an Easter vacation in late March that year, they shared terrific news: Estefania had been accepted into the City University of New York for the Comparative Literature doctoral program, and they asked whether I had heard from UTEP.

“No! I’m still waiting.” – “No news is good news,” Geoff assured me with a smile accompanying his words.
I must have given him the most skeptical look that I possessed. “You’re kidding me, right?” – “No! The schools will first reject the disqualified, so if you haven’t received UTEP’s rejection, your application is being reviewed.”

Since Geoff finished his PhD in Engineering decades ago, I trusted his explanation as one from the been-there-done-that. Geoff’s words kept the wick of hope lightning inside me.

2011 was such an eventful year. As Hoàng’s mom was fighting with cancer in the third year, she was frequently in-and-out of the emergency room, so Hoàng and I took turns visiting her more often. Sometimes, when I held one of her legs in my lap and lotioned it, she gave me compliments for my academic endeavors and achievements.

“You’re very good. Being graduated at your age is rare, and being a Vietnamese teaching English is even rarer.”

Having been a learning lover, Hoàng’s mom, at eighty-eight years old, spoke English and was going to school until she could no longer walk and was wheel-chaired. However, one time, when I happened to talk to her about my plan for the doctoral program at sixty years old, she reacted as if she were sitting on burning coal.

“So who’s going to take care of Hoàng? Don’t! At this age, you should not consider it. Having a master’s degree is extremely good; you don’t need a PhD to be better. Everyone has known that you’re very good.”

Respecting her opinion and without further troubling her, I took that topic out of our conversation. In the Vietnamese traditional perspective, going to school is always a good practice. However, pursuing a PhD at sixty years old was an uncommon practice, and Hoàng’s mom did not want to see us apart at that age, after having been apart at the beginning of our marriage for more than nine years.
No one seemed to understand my drive and I did not explain; to me, education was a panacea, which has healed all cuts and fixed all things broken; further, education has allowed me to live life with hope and dreams. No one seemed to understand my fondness for knowledge and I stayed quiet; knowledge has empowered and bettered me as I have been patiently learning and gathering one new vocabulary, one unfamiliar punctuation mark, one rigid grammar rule, and one ambiguous theoretical understanding at a time.

The third week into March, when I still had not heard from UTEP, I decided to call the English department and ask. I have learned from living in America that ‘it doesn’t hurt to ask.’ So I did. A clerk who answered my call told me that it was the committee’s decision and suggested that I contact Dr. Smith for an answer, since Dr. Smith was the program’s director. I found Dr. Smith’s email on the UTEP website, so I emailed her, yet another week went by and UTEP remained silent. I called the department again and asked for the clerk with whom I had spoken the last time. The person who picked up the phone and answered my call told me that the clerk was at a meeting, and she initiated a conversation with, “Is anything that I can help you with?”

The second person who talked to me was Lulu, the department’s administrative secretary. She sounded so caring that I poured all of my questions out to her. I told her about waiting for the department’s decision, emailing Dr. Smith, and more waiting. Lulu impressed me at once with her thoroughness. She confirmed my contact information and promised she would check and let me know as soon as possible. She kept her word. Minutes later, I received her email in my Cerritos mailbox and then her call to make sure that I was contactable. Lulu began cc-ing me in emails sent to Dr. Smith, the new director; to Dr. Mangelsdorf, the former director; and to the graduate school.
When Lulu called me the second time and said, “Viet! I talked to Dr. Smith, and she said that your name doesn’t ring a bell!” my heart sank. “What’s happened?” – “I don’t know, but I’ll ask and let you know.” I had only waited for a very brief time since Lulu emailed and let me know that she had gone to the Graduate School herself to pick up my application and take it back to the department. Thanks to Lulu’s involvement, all doors started opening as I began receiving Dr. Smith’s and Dr. Mangelsdorf’s email informing me of my admission status. Lulu’s enthusiasm and Dr. Smith’s, along with Dr. Mangelsdorf’s warm words in their emails quadrupled my desire to be in the program. None of them knew me or had seen me in person, but all of them made me feel embraced, and that was comforting. Having been a student of rhetoric, I have often considered the importance of delivery, which, to me, is as important as, or more important than, a message itself. I was very impressed by Lulu’s delivery and that of Dr. Smith and Dr. Mangelsdorf.

On April 14, after teaching and having a meeting at Cerritos, I came home around 3ish in the afternoon. I had not changed when I sat down at my desk to check my mailbox, and I immediately noticed an email from Dr. Maggy Smith, the director of the Rhetoric and Composition doctoral program at UTEP.

From: Smith, Maggy [msmith@utep.edu]
Sent: Wednesday, April 13, 2011 12:26 PM
To: Viethang, Pham
Cc: Mangelsdorf, Kate
Subject: RE: Application Status

Dear Pham

The Rhetoric faculty met this morning and enthusiastically voted to offer you a spot in the PhD program for Fall 2011. I wanted to convey this news to you immediately as I said I would. I will be sending you an official letter with all of the pertinent information later today.
I hope that you will be joining us in the Fall!
Maggy Smith

Director--Rhetoric & Writing Studies
Department of English, 215 Hudspeth Hall
The University of Texas at El Paso
El Paso, TX 79968
Phone: 915-747-5542
Email: msmith@utep.edu

As soon as my brain absorbed the content of Dr. Smith’s email, I broke into tears, relieved and overjoyed. I would NEVER have envisioned I was on my way to be a doctoral student, especially at sixty years of age. The sense of disbelief and surrealness enveloped my body at that very moment and for months later, every single time I reread Dr. Smith’s email to savor the tenderly sweet taste of the dream-comes-true reality. On my taste buds, fruition tasted like honey, sweet, tender and fragrant.

In the peak of high emotion, I paged Hoàng, yet when he called back, I could hardly break the good news. “I’m in!” was all my shaky voice could word. However, Hoàng did not need more to understand; he came home at once. His bright smile and upbeat reaction completely erased his skepticism about and hesitation in my decision of going back to school at sixty. He was ecstatic as if he, himself, were accepted. Adding to UTEP’s offer, Hoàng and Kevin’s full support sustained, strengthened, and empowered me; I felt able/capable, and being able/capable was often a missing link in my mentality in the past, even when I entered the first semester of the master’s degree in Rhetoric and Composition at CSULB. Nevertheless, I kept the greater-than-great news of my admission within family and close friends, but I did not share it with Hoàng’s mom. As her days were numbered, she deserved every good day when she truly
enjoyed seeing her children’s happy marriage in togetherness, and my greater-than-great news did not have a place in her room; thus, outside it stayed.

Toward the end of April, she passed. At the end of May, after her funeral and my final grade submission to Cerritos, Hoàng and I flew to UTEP to meet with the program’s faculty and look for an apartment where I would stay for four years to finish the program. I had informed Dr. Smith and Lulu of our arrival, so I was very excited to meet them.

On the plane and then off the plane to step on El Paso’s soil, the surreal feeling intensified. I could not recall how many times in my life I was at the top scale of happiness, if it could be put on a scale, but coming to UTEP that day must have been among the top five. Unlike the humid, tropical heat in Viet-Nam, El Paso’s heat was dry, like Orange County’s summer heat. I was so head-over-heels with the acceptance and with the thirteen-hour-drive distance between UTEP and home that the heat could not bother me any tiny bit.

Every first was so memorable due to new feelings, perceptions, and experiences attached to it. As Hoàng drove the rental car, a white, Nissan sedan, toward UTEP on the 1-10W freeway, I was reliving the very similar feeling when our son, Vĩnh-Hoàng, and I stepped on LAX’s soil at the end of our trip to be reunited with Hoàng in the summer of 1989. It was the first time I came to America, and long before and long after the trip, I remained in the dream-like/trancelike state of mind. When joy is humongous, a mind and a heart have a really hard time squeezing that humongous-ness into reality. And that was how I felt on that very first day visiting UTEP, the school of my top choice, and the place where one of my biggest dreams in my life would be materialized.

What Hoàng and I were looking at on a computer’s screen at home unfolded before our eyes as we approached downtown and the university. The realness of the scenery and the air that
caressed our faces wowed us and made me speechless. The brick color on the façade of its buildings instantly reminded me of the Buddhist temples that I grew up visiting, and I felt at once attached to the place. Its architecture had been shaped by the buildings of Bhutan (see Figures 18a and 18b) and described as “the image of an ancienct and mysterious Himalaya Kingdom.”

To me, ever since May 2011 when Hoàng and I first visited the place, UTEP has been the true Modern Knowledge Kingdom where I have been welcomed and taught.

From the visitor parking on the ground level of the parking garage to the English department was only a short walk. When I entered the English department’s office, I met Ceci and then I saw Lulu. “It must have been her,” I thought, so I asked, “Lulu? It’s Việt.” And she gave me a beautiful smile. “Hi! I thought so when I just saw you.” In person, Lulu was as warm as her words and her help. As I had just started talking about our arrival, a woman entered, and Lulu lowered her voice, “That’s Dr. Smith!” When I approached Dr. Smith to greet her and introduce myself, she said, “This is the one who sent me big bear hugs? You’re tiny for those bear hugs.” – “But it’s a real bear hug,” I insisted.
After that brief visit, Hoàng drove me around to get to know UTEP. I still have no idea how being a strange place, UTEP, could give me such a sense of comfort when I was actually strolling around, exploring its territory for the very first time. It was all in my mind. The almost last minute acceptance, Lulu’s wholehearted helpfulness, Dr. Smith’s welcoming words, and Dr. Mangelsdorf’s nice greeting made me feel at home at UTEP.

The next day, we stopped at some places that Vĩnh-Hoàng had already put on the must-see list. The Crest on Shadow Mountain seemed to be a nice, small apartment complex, but the moment we entered Colinas del Sol on Mesa Hills, which was Kevin’s top choice, we found what we had been looking for. The manicured lawn and fountain next to the large entrance boasted the complex’s resort-lifestyle appearance. Inside the complex, the streets were wide and clean; the landscape was well-kept, and the apartments’ walls looked new and well-maintained under layers of cream colored paint. Overall, the openness and brightness of the whole complex were inviting; another plus was that it was only steps away from Target, Office Depot, and restaurants. Further, the freeway’s entrance and exit were conveniently close, too. Yet, it was the presence of the military personnel living inside the complex that gave me a sense of security. As with UTEP, my first impression about Colinas del Sol was amazingly positive.

Driven by curiosity, we drove around to explore the West side surroundings and arrived at two other apartments, but stopped short at the entrance of both places; the narrow, shabby entrances failed to provide an image of a safe haven. Afterward, we had dinner at Denny’s, next to La Quinta, where we stayed and spent the second night in the motel in El Paso. The third day, we went back to UTEP to meet Dr. Smith, who had arranged with Lucia to take us to lunch where we met Dr. Foster. Dr. Smith also introduced us to Dr. Brunk-Chavez, whose Comp Camp would start two weeks before school officially began. Dr. Mangelsdorf was on vacation
with her husband, so we did not meet her. We flew back home on the fourth day. In such a short trip, we met with Lulu, Ceci, and some VIPs of the English Department and also rented an apartment at Colinas del Sol. The place would be ready-to-move-in on July 16, 2011. On the flight back, I felt as if I could feel big dreams becoming livable reality, so real, so touchable in the palms of my hands. It was a memorable, life-turning-page trip.

When we came home, our lives went back to normal, except that Hoang’s mom was no longer with us. Shortly after our trip, Hoang arranged a sea trip to scatter his mom’s ashes. As my eyes followed the waves rocking the urn and taking it downward into the sea’s bed, my mind thought about King James Bible’s “all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” as a reminder and a comfort. 2011 was truly an eventful year for all of us. My coming to UTEP for four years was a true adventure and exploration that I had never experienced in the entire sixty-years of my life. Yet, I do not know why I was not afraid of being by myself in El Paso. I think the ginormous joy superseded my shyness, worries, and fear. Being accepted in the Rhetoric and Composition doctoral program was something bigger than big, so when it happened, I was wrapped in a surreal joy that downplayed other challenges. My body was petite, but my joy was mammoth. More than being a happy announcement, “I’m in” also meant a proud display of being an insider. Yet to be in, I stepped out of my comfort zone, conquered my fear, and toughed up to be by myself in exploring higher education in great length and depth. To me, since day one, learning English has always been exploring, experiencing, and experimenting. Somehow, in the fluidity and changeability of language, I have learned to adapt and adopt in order to grow as an English learner and user.
4.2 Living Dreams

Before applying and being accepted to UTEP, at home, a casual conversation between Hoàng and I was often steered toward my deep desire, my robust wish, “If I ever get accepted into the PhD program, I will…”; in my subjunctive sentence, I only had one “if” clause, but I had a dozen of what Azar called the “result clause” to express my wish in the future (413).

Hoàng cautioned me, “It’ll be very difficult,” but I reasoned, “I know, but it can’t be more difficult than when I was just transferred to California State University, Long Beach. Then, I knew very little about English. Now I know a little bit about grammar, rhetoric, and composition, so I’ll be fine.” And I did believe that the two master’s degrees had equipped me with some knowledge and prepared me for the PhD program. In addition, I had been teaching Basic Writing and Introduction to College Composition since Fall 2007, and several years of teaching writing had allowed me to bolster my understanding of grammar and writing, so I could explain and assist my students effectively.

Therefore, coming to UTEP as a doctoral student in Fall 2011, I was anxious and excited, but I was not at all afraid as I had been in Spring 2004, when I began the Rhetoric and Composition Master’s degree and studied with Dr. Gilmore at CSULB. The further I engaged in my academic journey, the more Dr. Gilmore’s advice, “You have interesting and thoughtful things to say; let them be heard,” made sense. I remained nervous, but no longer fearful, and I have credited education for such growth, academically and personally.

Being newcomers, all doctoral students who were assistant instructors, as I was, needed to participate in Comp Camp, identified as English 5346: Composition Theory and Pedagogy, “a teacher-education seminar that prepares newly selected teaching assistants and assistant
instructors to work and teach in the First-Year Composition program,” led by Dr. Beth Brunk-Chavez.

The class’ reading was quite intensive for a condensed, less-than-two-week-class-meeting time, but by the end of April, Dr. Brunk-Chavez had sent a welcome letter including the list of books needed for the course, and in May the class’ syllabus. Her early contact gave me plenty of time to get the books and read them in advance.


Despite the number of their pages, the books were easy to read, due to their practicality and applicability in a college writing classroom. Those books clearly supported the course’s title and its contents.

For two weeks, class met daily for six hours, from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Thursday. The first two days, breakfast and lunch were served, and students in small groups took turns in providing lunch for all for the rest of the camp. I felt comfortable in the big group of graduate and doctoral students on that first day. Whomever I talked to was warm and friendly. The group’s dynamic helped daily discussions flow smoothly and made learning enjoyable. I was fascinated with the course’s planning and proceedings. I liked the idea of spending a bit shy of two weeks to learn all the course material and then meeting and submitting
other assignments periodically throughout the semester. With a big chunk of readings finished, I felt less stressful when other courses would begin and I must study for them. To me, the minds behind the Comp Camp planning were brilliant and thoughtful.

The course lectures, those of the guests, reading content, group discussions and networking made Comp Camp an ideal prep course and a memorable learning experience. Posting reading responses online initiated group conversations in which one’s perspective could be enriched by others’s.

I learned something from each of the course’s required books. For instance, in *First Time Up – An Insider’s Guide for New Composition Teachers*, the author, Brock Dethier, shared his “positive aspects” (xii) of his teaching experiences from a veteran’s standpoint.

His fifteen reasons to have fun teaching echoed in my head. While some mirrored my teacher-mind, others helped me reassess my student-mind. In “About Learning,” for instance, his assertion, “[i]f you’ve gotten this far in the educational system, you probably enjoy learning, not because you get to become some kind of ‘better person’ in the abstract, but because you enjoy doing things you’ve never done and being places you’ve never been” (3), reflected learning’s cause and effect that have always captured my interest, teaching and learning, alike. And about “Having an effect,” Dethier’s point, “[w]hen you see students’ attitudes and writing and even colon use changing, you will get a sense of efficacy that is one of the main antidotes to burnout… and it will in turn make you an even more effective teacher” (5), was well-made. Yet, again, I think the effect travels back and forth, like two-way traffic. As a graduate student, I experienced that effect/epiphany when it became crystal clear to me where to insert a comma in a complex sentence. As a teacher, I have noticed that while students’ eureka moments gave me
reasons to try harder to be more effective, those very moments excited students and pushed them to try harder to improve, too.

At the end of Comp Camp, what I had learned about teaching writing in the graduate courses was reinforced and enriched.

In addition to Comp Camp, I enrolled in Introduction to Rhetoric and Writing Studies – English 5309, a graduate course, and Composition Studies – English 6319, a doctoral core course. The fact that all the first semester’s courses focused on teaching writing assured me that I was in the program of my choice/interest, and this recognition mothered a really good feeling that accompanied me to class and back to my apartment. I continued to live with a surreal/disbelief mindset even when my feet, in red sandals, stepped on the school’s asphalt roads and cement sidewalks leading to my classrooms.

Having arrived in El Paso more than three weeks earlier to settle down, I gave myself plenty of time to prepare for school and to adapt to the new living environment. Hoàng drove me to El Paso, helped me move into the new apartment on the third floor, took care of all set-ups, and flew back home for work. For two weeks, in his absence, I was on my own for the first time ever in my life, and every time I heard a strange noise outside the apartment’s door or on the roof, I was frightened. To toughen myself up, I thought about Vịnh-Hoàng and his leaving home at nineteen and a half to join the US Navy. If I did not go out for food, I stayed in the apartment and read as much as I could. At night, I slept on a comforter on the living room floor, next to my desk and in front of a TV. I left a light on so every time I opened my eyes during the night, I could see the surroundings. Surprisingly, a strange noise or a loud wind could scare me and make me jump, but not the doctoral program. As Tom often said, “we’re growing, personally, academically, and professionally.” I believed I had grown to think I could handle the program.
It was a completely different scenario to that in Spring 2004, my first semester as a graduate student at CSULB; I got scared every day on the way to Dr. Gilmore’s class, where I was crushed under the heavy weight of inadequacy.

Seven years later, in a strange city where I did not have friends and was away from family and home, even though I was a bit afraid of being by myself, I was not at all afraid of the program or doubtful of my ability. I have learned and believed in Orison Swett Marden’s famous assertion, “a will finds a way.” Besides, I found goodness in Lulu and her family’s niceness, in Dr. Smith’s support, and in the friendliness of my classmates and cohort members. I considered my admission into the Rhetoric and Composition doctoral program at UTEP a privilege and blessing, so I geared up to meet all the requirements to graduate and cross the finish line.

In Dr. Smith’s class, Introduction to Rhetoric and Writing Studies, I read Sharon Crowley’s *Toward a Civil Discourse – Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*. The book’s first chapter, “On (Not) Arguing about Religion and Politics” reminded me of the obedient practice that I was taught and was practicing. Only a handful of Vietnamese women of the 1951 generation publically argued about religion and politics, and I was definitely not among them. My parents, grandparents, and ancestors practiced Buddhism, so I grew up embracing that belief. I went to a Catholic high school and converted to Catholicism when I married Hoang; during our separation, I attended mass and read the Bible daily; however, I have remained rooted in Buddhism, which I have always valued as a philosophy of life/living.

In American academia, where Christianity has been the foundation of belief, I have been an English learner, who stands listening and learning from Americans; I was an outsider if insider-ness was judged, based on religious belief. Crowley’s perspective and argument
educated me on an unfamiliar topic. The issues that she raised, “How can outsiders discuss insiders’ belief with anything like fairness and accuracy? How can believers converse with unbelievers? And finally, is it possible to persuade people who subscribe to [an] intensely resonant belief system to adopt different positions?” (ix), while addressing outsiders/insiders, a universal us-versus-them, in a different scale with a different audience, all of which invited serious considerations. Crowley’s questions taught my Vietnamese self an American practice, the use of rhetoric to raise awareness, like the Medieval Chirstine de Pizan, the Renaissance Margaret Fell, the Nineteenth-century Frederick Douglas, and the Contemporary Gloria Anzaldua and numerous other rhetors throughout human history. Their use of eloquent rhetoric to serve their purpose has not stopped amazing me and has confirmed the importance of competent/effective language use, albeit one’s first or second/third/n language.

In Dr. Smith’s class, along with issues raised in Crowley’s book, I became increasingly aware of the tie between rhetoric and politics from reading The Rhetorical Tradition – Readings from Classical Times to the Present, edited by Bizzell and Herzberg: “[r]hetoric was, first and foremost, the art of persuasive speaking. In civil disputes, persuasion established claims where no clear truth was available. Persuasive speech, too, could depose or empower tyrants, determine public policy, and administer laws” (1-2). In Crowley’s assertion, “[w]hat is missing from America’s civic discourse at this moment, then, it seems to me, is a willingness to acknowledge difference while remaining open to the necessity of respectful address to others and to their positions” (22). Her use of rhetoric to challenge the status quo reminded me of the conflict between the Buddhist monks and the Ngô-Dinh-Diệm’s administration in 1963, which resulted in Diệm being ousted and assassinated in November of 1963⁶⁰. In her questions, I learned that effectively used, rhetoric can bridge participants, since “well-prepared rhetors can find
openings within situations where disagreement occurs, openings that can help participants to conceive of themselves and their relation to events in new ways” (23) – ways that would facilitate outsiders and insiders’ discussion with the use of “civil discourse” in which insult and indelicacy (1) were excluded.

Further, I learned from Crowley that “[o]pposing claims are ignored rather than engaged” (28) and have taken place at all levels: personal and professional, private and public, social and academic. This learning reinforced my understanding of the link between language behavior and language’s user. In Crowley’s claim that “people who are single-minded are less likely to change their beliefs” (193), I detected a warning in social interactions, as language reflects its user’s perspective, which in turn anchors the user’s actions.

What has stayed in my head long after the course ended is the universality of her issues revolving around what she called “civil discourse” and its widespread absence in reality, in different settings: personal, social, internationally, private, and public. Also in Dr. Smith’s class I learned to be an agent of change, and for me that was a novel concept, but just as my mind had done with Dr. Fiesta’s words, “Think about it!” I have kept pondering upon it.

In preparing for a group presentation with two classmates, who had chosen Morris Young’s Minor Re/Visions, I began embracing the idea of presenting my dissertation in the narrative literacy format. With Young’s definition that “literacy narratives are those stories […] that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy” (32), I could see my own literacy narrative. The points that Young made, “the demonstration of a person’s literacy […] has been key in the construction of a person’s identity, legitimacy, and citizenship when that person is racially marked as Other” and “ideology and literacy are connected and are deeply embedded in our culture” (2) are somewhat similar to my own experiences, and I therefore was attracted to his
narrative. Among Asian American authors that Young included in his narrative, I have recognized some similarities between my experiences with the American literacy and those of Carlos Bulosan, an immigrant who became “the first important literary voice for Filipinos in the United States,” more than I have with others. Like Bulosan, I was an immigrant who has struggled with English language acquisition. Like other authors, I have experienced and lived through “stereotypes of Latinos and Asians often construct[ing] them as non-English speaking or of limited English proficiency and literacy” (57).

I continued to incubate and contemplate my choice of narrative literacy, autoethnography, for my dissertation, especially when I learned that “a life is a social text, a fictional, narrative production,” as Denzin (1989) wrote in *Interpretive Interactionism* (ix). I have visualized in writing my experiences as an English learner/user. I have become a living proof of “how culture and cultural meanings are not external to the life and meanings of the self but constitutive of it,” as David W. Plath noted (Denzin 2014, 45). I have come to understand Dr. Fiesta’s insistence on me sharing my stories with others; she suggested that I use a pseudonym if I did not feel comfortable revealing my identity. Similar to Young’s “encounters with language” (1), Rodriguez’s embodiment of “the American Dream” (54), Bulosan’s “personal and political struggle against racism and other forms of oppression,” Villanueva’s “complicated acquisition of school literacy” journey, and Kingston’s identity “in continual creation” (55), my experiences have been situated in American society and culture, social and academic, and my writing, dressed in my academic subjectivity, describes them. And in his *Interpretive Biography*, Denzin asserted, “[w]hen a writer writes a biography, he or she writes him – or herself into the life of the subject written about. When the reader reads a biographical text, that text is read through the life of the reader. Hence, writers and readers conspire to create
the lives they write and read about” (26), and via such a creation, I believe writers and readers make social, political, and/or academic contributions and new meanings.

Also in Fall 2011, in the doctoral core course, Composition Studies, English 6319 with Dr. Foster, I recognized some familiar names/concepts/practices, such as James Berlin, Donald Murray, Nancy Sommers, Linda Flowers and John Hayes, along with Burke’s Pentad, invention, and other issues. Being familiar with those names did not necessarily mean that I knew their concepts inside out, but such a familiarity assured me that I knew something that could serve as a base for further knowledge construction. In this class, I learned invention more in-depth, by associating it with exploration, stepping out of the box as Lauer suggested, for example.

Together, previously exposed ideas/theories and the new ones occupied my head when I sat at a desk in my quiet apartment trying to fill information into the reading grid. It was brain squeezing [a brand new practice to me]. I came to realize what I understood and what I did not.

Learning with the grid was a novel approach to me.

Composition Studies – Reading Grid

Article Name:

Journal/Year of Production:

Writer:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Knowledge</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose for Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question for Inquiry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Knowledge (Thesis &amp; Majors Points)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodologies Used</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In filling these grids, I recognized similarities/differences and support for agreement/opposition of old and new knowledge; such critical thinking deepened and broadened
my understanding of each reading. In the doctoral program, from one class to another, I learned
to knit ideas/concepts to form an information network, in which what I had learned in the past,
especially the hard-to-digest theories in the graduate courses at CSULB, began to make sense to
me. Knitting ideas and concepts together brought me thinking in wholeness and interrelatedness.
When I read Bizzell and Herzberg’s *The Rhetorical Tradition*, the book became more than just a
textbook; it was a continuum of time in which definitions and practices of rhetoric have evolved
in a continuous conversation. Each speaker brought in what s/he had and shared with others.
The conversation has not stopped and I have found it fascinating.

While I was captivated by all material in the three classes and I greatly enjoyed learning
them in my first semester at UTEP, I constantly struggled to catch up with the grading that was a
major part of my teaching assistantship. The lack of technology knowledge hurt me severely.
For instance, without knowing how to use the “copy & paste” feature, I spent hours rewriting to
repost after losing my comments at the first attempt. During the grading sessions, called
norming at UTEP, I often went to bed at 5 or 6:00 a.m., slept for a couple hours and then got up
and headed to school. I was frustrated, stressed, and exhausted, but I endured and pushed myself
forward.

Compared to the whole team, I must have been the least techno savvy; my knowledge in
technology was hardly even rudimentary. Before UTEP, I had used a computer to
add/drop/contact students, post final grades, renew books borrowed from the CSULB library,
email, read news, and shop. In order words, technology was not a significant part in my life.
However, the lack of knowledge in not knowing some features listed on a computer’s tab, such
as ‘page layout’, ‘references’, ‘review’, and others, slowed me down and devoured my time. I
took double or triple the time to finish commenting on twenty-ish essays, the same number of
essays that all the first-year graduates had to take care of. My technology inadequacy stressed me out and left me with a sense of being out-of-date.

During the first semester, Hoàng came to visit me every month to make sure I was doing fine, and he saw traces of my struggles in my weight loss. Half way in the semester, Hoàng voiced his concern, “You’re supposed to study 70% and work 30%, but I’ve seen you work 70% and study 30%. Pretty much throughout the semester, every time I called and asked how you were doing, you’ve often said that you were grading. That’s not why you’re here. You should reconsider your priorities.”

I agreed with Hoàng, but I was totally unaware of other options, except for being an assistant instructor in order to stay in the program. Toward Thanksgiving, when Hoàng came to spend the holiday with me, and as the end of the first semester drew near, I was burnt out in trying to finish all tasks: grading, tutoring, and studying. One morning, I went to bed at almost 7:00 a.m., slept past 8:00 a.m., woke up, and had a small bowl of rice with dry shredded pork before Hoàng took me to class. Witnessing my struggle, Hoàng felt stressed as well, and he was very unhappy with helplessness. He knew what could have waited at the end of my self-punishing choice. Several times in the past, he was the one who had carried me to the hospital’s emergency room when under tremendous stress, my stomach knotted, cramped, and my body was crippled in excruciating pain. The ER doctor had to give me intravenous morphine, a powerful pain reliever medication, to help my muscles relax.

That evening, after dinner, Hoàng said, “I know you and I don’t think you’ll be able to finish the program if you continue to work and study like this. Look at you. How much weight you can lose? No, there must be another option. I can borrow money for you to study, but I can’t borrow health for you. You left everything to come here to pursue your dreams, but if you
collapse and are hospitalized, you will lose everything, and I can’t do anything about it. You came here to study, so that should be your sole focus. You don’t have physical strength to do everything, so I think you should talk with Dr. Smith and ask her permission to stay in the program to study without receiving scholarship and working as an assistant instructor.”

As I listened to my husband, I stared at his face and saw stress lace his face as much as it did mine. His eye sockets sank; the laugh lines on his face deepened even when he did not laugh. Behind the progressive lenses of his glasses, his eyes looked tired and full of concern. Visiting me in El Paso burdened his full-time job schedule. From July to November, a monthly twenty-six hour driving roundtrip to visit me in El Paso eventually took a toll on him. He had lost his mother in April and was living alone at home, while his wife went back to school, out-of-state, and his son was working and living in San Diego. Through all bumpers on the road of life, Hoàng has stayed positive and supportive, nonetheless. Yet that evening, the urgency in his voice forced me to reevaluate my choice which not only affected me, but also him. When I agreed to meet with Dr. Smith to talk to her and seek her approval, Hoàng sighed in relief. I felt as if I had just removed a boulder from his shoulder.

My husband’s advice came like a wake-up call. Yes, at sixty, my well-being could be a deciding factor; I would not be able to reach my goals and materialize my dreams without being in good health, and I was only in the first semester of the four-year program at UTEP. Thus, asking me to reassess my priorities, Hoàng hit all the right notes.

As I was stewing Hoàng’s advice and waiting for a meeting with Dr. Smith, Byron Sun, a graduate student and a kind young man, who became my friend during Comp Camp, kept teaching me some features on the computer and in the program to help me save time on grading
and commenting on students’ papers to meet the requirements of my responsibilities as an assistant instructor.

I cannot and never will be able to fully express my thankfulness to Dr. Foster for listening to my problems each time I came to talk to her. Being a mature student who had attended the Rhetoric and Composition at Purdue University, an out-of-state institution, Dr. Foster understood so well my issues. One time, I told her, “Dr. Foster, if other students can grade and study, so can I.” She promptly replied, “But they’re young.” Truth was told, and so truth I must face.

After talking to Hoàng that day, when I washed my face, I looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror; my wrinkled, small face, and tired eyes stared back at me. I matched what Hoàng had said and Dr. Foster’s words with my aging face and my shrinking body frame, and they made perfect sense. I came to UTEP to study and to graduate, not to get sick and to fail, so I must stick to my plan. When I left Cerritos to study at UTEP, it was the third time I downsized or walked out of an income to go back to school. The first time, I went from being a full-time pharmacy technician to a part-time one during my lower division schooling at Santa Ana College; the second time, I left my part-time position to be a full-time student to finish the last year at Santa Ana College before transferring to CSULB. Knowing how much I have loved schooling, Hoàng and Kevin have always supported me, financially and mentally.

In the Vietnamese traditional mentality, a woman at sixty-years old is an old woman, and there is no other way to say, view, or address it. I have tried not to let my age interfere with my dreams, goals, and process, but age has been an important factor in my planning and execution.

When I presented my request to Dr. Smith and received her approval, I felt as light as a feather and as free as a bird. Allowing me to relinquish a scholarship and be liberated from all
assistant instructor’s duties, Dr. Smith gave me back all the time that I would need for studying, and how I embraced that titanium opportunity.

Two days before my final, Hoàng flew to El Paso to drive me home after I submitted the finals for all of my classes and the work I did for my assistant instructorship. None of the joys could compare to that of going home. As our car rolled its tires on I-10W, snow in droplets meagerly bordered both sides of the freeway in winter white layers. El Paso was colder than Orange County in winter, but on the trip home, I felt cuddling warm in my heart and droplets of happiness filled every single cell of my body. I had been in El Paso since mid-July, and it seemed the longest time ever, being away from home. The thought that I had just finished the first semester at UTEP was huge to grab, and the reality that I was on my way home for the winter break tendered my soul. Hoang drove all the way back, so I could doze off when the trip tired me. As soon as I saw the sign, “Welcome to California,” and Blythe, a small California town on I-10W, three hours from home, my heart began rock-an-roll-ing in bliss. As soon as our car entered freeway 57-South, I already felt at home in the familiar surroundings. At the end of our trip and before entering our townhome complex, Hoang stopped by Phở 54 Restaurant where we treated ourselves to a hot bowl of phở, the Vietnamese famous beef noodles, for dinner. In the homey aroma of star anise, cinnamon, coriander, cloves, fennel, cardamom, and ginger of the broth, I was right back in my element. In my mouth, every spoon of broth, every bite of noodle wrapping around a piece of thin slice of beef filled me with Vietnamese-ness, wholly.

That night, sleeping in my bed, in my room, and resuming all normal activities at home after being away for five months, I loved every nano second of my being.

I did enjoy every day of the winter break, but I was excited to go back to finish the first year, too. During the break, whichever book I could buy to prepare for my class in Spring 2012,
I got it and read it in advance. No longer being an assistant instructor, I did not have to go to UTEP early for meetings, so I stayed home until two days before the Spring semester started.

I was amazed and I wholeheartedly loved how the program was well-thought, designed, and structured. Weeks before the semester ended, Dr. Smith, as the program director, emailed all doctoral students to inform them of the core courses that they would be taking, along with various graduate courses for them to choose from. For Spring 2012, I had two doctoral courses, Advanced Critical Theory, English 6320 and Rhetoric and Technology, English 6321; and one graduate course, Special Topics in Rhetoric and Composition, English 5328.

Each course had its own demands, yet I pushed myself to meet those demands. In the Rhetoric and Technology class, I finished all the assignments and the content of four digital journals. From the first to the fourth, I steadily presented my progress in learning and using technology in my life, in and out of school. It was in this class that I familiarized myself with technology. For the first two journals, I was able to do them on my own using the copy and paste feature to get and present information in my journal. For the remaining two, Hoàng and another student, Byron, helped me frame the journal’s contents in a more advanced technical format with the use of a camera. Being an assistant instructor in one semester and taking Rhetoric and Technology class in the following one, my knowledge in technology, like bread dough, rose noticeably. From Byron and other younger classmates, I learned to use a flash drive, to insert and safely remove it from a computer, to push ‘Ctrl and C’ on the keyboard at the same time to copy and ‘Ctrl and V’ to paste, to use ‘Review’ to add a ‘New Comment’, and to create a video clip. To those who were familiar with computer use and technology, these basic features were insignificant; to me, they were game changing factors. What pleased me the most was the fact that despite my limited knowledge in technology and its use/practice, all of my techno-based
submissions met Dr. John Scenters-Zapico’s standards, thanks to Byron’s big help and Hoàng’s, too.

Nonetheless, there were many features that remained mysterious to me. For instance, I did not know how to highlight a paragraph in a reading; therefore, I printed all readings. The fact that I was the only student who carried hard copies to class showed my lack of technology knowledge on the one hand, and the lack of technology appreciation on the other. While the former was factual, the latter was fictional. I chose to print the readings so in addition to using different colors, which could be done on the computer, as I later learned, I could flip back and forth between different pages and read/compare/contrast them at the same time. I did not know how to read different pages on the computer screen simultaneously. However, one very important learning application that I could do with hard copies was to translate a word pronunciation in International Phonetic Alphabets (IPA) to help me remember how to pronounce it each time I saw or needed to use that word. I have filled my books, reading handouts, and vocabulary lists with IPA next to a word or close to it, and I have continued to use this learning approach since it works so well for me.

To me, writing essays in Dr. Scenters-Zapico’s class meant applying writing conventions; a clear thesis statement, topic sentences, transitions, specific support, and a well-thought conclusion were necessary writing components. In spite of my dedication to grammar learning through the years, I continued to struggle with the use of articles in my essays, and Dr. Scenters-Zapico suggested that I see Craig, a 2010 cohort member, for help. I saw Craig three times, and he was extremely nice and helpful each time. Craig had something that I did not: the native’s ear. He quickly recognized a misuse or missing article in my essay, whereas, I totally relied on set rules. Those rules, under “Brief Guide for ESL Students” in their Paragraphs and Essays
with *Integrated Readings*, which Lee Brandon and Kelly Brandon identified as “special help to writers who are learning English as a second language (ESL),” included rules instructing how to use articles.

From my experiences, understanding these rules requires frequent practice to ensure correct application of them in writing. For example, in my second essay, “Computer, Quo Vadis?” which covered the use of technology in the 1980’s, I wrote, “Davison’s statement clarifies the impact of computer in education and the teachers’ limited computer knowledge in 1984. Thus, computer finds itself in the hands of both teachers and students”; in my judgment, “computer” represented all computers and therefore was a non-specific count noun, as “zero [article] signals general” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 281). I was wrong! From the feedback, my sentence became “… the impact of the computer in education…” and “Thus, the computer finds itself….”

To my reader, “computer in education” must be very specific, and the definite article *the* marked this specific-ness, as was the second *the* in the following sentence. Although I knew the rules, it was my reasoning that led to my making mistakes. However, when I could not figure it out, I learned to comply with the native-ear rule.

In reading Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s assertion, “[a]rticles are understandably problematic from a cross-linguistic perspective: most Asian and Slavic languages and many African languages have no articles” (271), I recognize the universality of making mistakes in using articles among ESL students. Yet, since Vietnamese does have articles con, cái for general terms, such as con chó (a dog); cái nhà (a house), and nỗi, niệm for more specific terms, for example: nỗi nhớ (nostalgia); niệm thương (affection), I continue pondering upon my
mistakes; between my misinterpretation of the rules and my L1-to-L2 transfer, I would go with the former.

After Dr. Scenters-Zapico’s class, I promised myself that I would keep learning to improve my knowledge in technology and its application due to its practicality and benefits in teaching and learning, and I have been keeping my promise.

Also in Spring 2012, in Advanced Critical Theory with Dr. Mangelsdorf, I learned of discrimination and oppression in language, issues that I was unaware of until then. Among those issues, English-only immediately captured my attention. I read Min-Zhan-Lu’s “Living-English Work” and realized that I had never thought of English-only in light of “geopolitical, economic, and cultural transactions” (605). While being an English instructor had been my dream since 1967, determining to master English with the political background of an immigrant has been a pride and a choice.

Mastering English as pride has stemmed from my immigrant’s perspective. I have often considered that being a Vietnamese in Việt-Nam, I represented my parents via my acts. That means other Vietnamese would hold my parents accountable for my acts. Whereas, in living in America, I represent my country and people; my acts are identified as those of a Vietnamese or an Asian before further personal identification is exposed. Like Morris Young and his “a bit of a regional Hawai‘i accent” (3), Ronald Tanaki and his body with “Asian markings” (4), and John Lee’s accent in his “fly lice” for fried rice or “loose pork” for roast pork (19) that Villanueva mentioned in his book, Bootstraps From an American Academic of Color, I have always been identified with “the assignment of foreignness,” displayed on my body and in my Vietnamese-English accent. And in becoming a competent and fluent English language user, I honor my Vietnamese-ness by imbuing it with knowledge and able-ness.
Mastering English as a choice was rooted in my teenage dream of being an English instructor, and I have considered living in America and going back to school a golden second-chance, and I have embraced it. This personal choice, however, is closely related to my point of mastering English as an immigrant’s pride. Somewhat similar to Villanueva’s experiences, his “obsession” with school and “in getting a degree,…, just a degree, just because he thinks he can, despite all that has said he could not” (71), my passion for education and for getting a degree has been to empower myself with knowledge and language ability, to redefine the Vietnamese traditional perspective on being old, especially of women’s being old, and to remap my life’s boundary. Also like Villanueva, I have received an earful of negative comments about my choice of education; about the difficulty in finding a writing teaching job in my Vietnamese skin, the “Asian markings” of my identity; and especially about my age of fifty-five upon my graduation. Unlike Villanueva, I did not think that I could, but I wanted to see whether I could; I was curious to find out how far I could go and how high I could reach. Therefore, I kept exploring academia.

In the second semester at UTEP, I felt more comfortable with school and with living a student’s life. A short distance of a bit more than 6 miles from my apartment to UTEP took the stress factor out of my daily commute. I brought my car to El Paso, so I could go to Sam’s Club, Walmart, or Target for what I needed, or to Applebee’s, Olive Garden, or Carlos & Mickey’s for food. With time, I was feeling at ease during my stay in El Paso. With my feeling more comfortable, Hoàng could focus on his job and come visit me during Spring Break and return at the end of the semester to drive me home. In spite of loads of readings, I appreciated my chance of being a full-time student without working, so I focused solely on studying. I was well aware
of the fact that I always needed more time than my cohort members to read and understand a reading, so I gave myself that extra time to digest the reading’s content.

To my pleasant surprise, theory-based readings, such as Kenneth Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives*, Michael Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, or Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s *Discourse in the Novel*, which used to fret and frighten me when I was in the Rhetoric and Composition Master’s program at CSULB, slowly made sense to me, and I felt as if I had won a lottery, each time I could say “Oh! Ok! I kinda got it!” at the end of a reading. Becoming familiar with those theories through more reading and class discussions helped me understand them, one layer at a time. Further, mustering more vocabulary also facilitated my apperception of the texts.

Except for going to school or to buy food, I stayed in my apartment and studied. Once in a while, I had lunch with Dr. Foster, Lulu, or some of my classmates in Comp Camp. Accustomed to a quiet, non-party lifestyle, I preferred to stay home watching TV or listening to French and Vietnamese music than to go out. In El Paso, I boxed my student life in the apartment’s 575 square feet on the days when I did not have class or go for errands and focused on studying. Sitting at my desk, facing a wide glass window, I enjoyed observing time come and go with the sunrise on Shadow Mountain. On windy days, I saw the mountain disappear behind the thick layer of dust, and dust also limited the panorama view from my window. Living by myself allowed me to spend 90% of my time in El Paso to study, and this focus was my goal and Hoàng’s.

When I went home in May 2012 for a summer break after surviving the first year in academia and on my own, I felt much stronger, mentally and academically. As I continued to put all of my efforts in each and every single class of the program’s second year, I could feel my intellectual growth, slowly but steadily. While relinquishing the scholarship cost me out-of-state
tuition, it gave me time to study, and best of all, I could go home after finishing the two-year coursework and work on my dissertation at home. Having more time to study and spending less time away from home were priceless. From Dr. Foster and Dr. Smith, I learned that without receiving the scholarship and after finishing the coursework, I could work on my dissertation without physically being at UTEP. This news, like one of the best gifts, energized me to the max and shortened the second year. Up to that time, my graduate background in Rhetoric and Composition and Teaching English as a Second Language at CSULB served me well at UTEP.

In the Fall 2012 semester, in English 5328, Special Topics: Rhetoric and Composition – Global Rhetoric, I enjoyed many readings and Braj Kachru’s “World Englishes: Agony and Ecstasy” was one of them. Based on Kachru’s “Three Concentric Circles of English,” Viet-Nam would belong in the “Expanding Circle,” where English gained its popularity with the American presence and involvement in the Viet-Nam War in the 1960’s. In the “Expanding Circle,” English is treated as a foreign language.

From my interpretation, considering English as a foreign language results in treating English as a language of business, albeit, academic or social, whereas using English as a second language makes it a part of a speaker’s language repertoire and life. Being an immigrant who has been educated in English throughout college and graduate study, I have developed an American academic self and subjectivity which co-exist alongside my Vietnamese cultural self and subjectivity. At a glance, my selves look similar to Fan Shen’s ideological and logical identities (459), yet, distinction is also apparent. Shen explains,

By "ideological identity" I mean the system of values that I acquired (consciously and unconsciously) from my social and cultural background. And by "logical identity" I mean the natural (or Oriental) way I organize and express my thoughts in writing. Both had to
be modified or redefined in learning English composition. Becoming aware of the process of redefinition of these different identities is a mode of learning that has helped me in my efforts to write in English, and, I hope, will be of help to teachers of English composition in this country (459).

While Shen distinguished “ideology identity” from “logical identity,” I have considered both of them my cultural selves. These selves have been nurtured by the Vietnamese culture, tradition, and logic. Since I was born and grew up in a democratic society, I did not share Shen and Lu’s experience with adjusting ideologies. At twenty-four, when Saigon fell to the communists of the North on April 30, 1975, I was mature enough to embrace democracy and not be brainwashed by communism to think “Down with the word ‘I’,” or “Trust in masses and the [Communist] Party,” or “Against Individualism” (459) like Shen experienced, or to suffer “the internal conflict between the two discourses” in reading and writing like Lu did (445).

I have agreed with Shen’s notion of learning English writing since “learning the rules of English composition is, to a certain extent, learning the values of Anglo- American society” (460). However, my exposure to western culture in learning French at a young age and having a father with impeccable French somewhat prepared me for adapting American values into my thinking, first, and then into my writing. Shen’s experiences, “[i]n writing classes in the United States I found that I had to re-program my mind, to redefine some of the basic concepts and values that I had about myself, about society, and about the universe, values that had been imprinted and reinforced in my mind by my cultural background, and that had been part of me all my life” (460), were somehow universal. All language learners carry with them their home “voices that may seem irrelevant to the [school] discourse” (Lu 447), their “lived languages” (Mangelsdorf 124) that more or less emerge in their English writing.
While some of my experiences were similar to Shen’s, Lu’s, and Bulosan’s, I have never thought of Vietnamese as a minor language, compared to English. With the United States being an ally of Việt-Nam, and as first an immigrant and then a naturalized citizen, I value my mother tongue as much as English and French, not as a major/dominant or a minor language; to me, they have been my languages. In my definition, the former is the one with more uses, not with more power or force, and the latter with fewer uses, not with weaker power or force. Although I have come to be a competent English user and my American self and subjectivity are growing stronger and more distinct in my thought and speech patterns, they have never been completely separated from my Vietnamese cultural self and subjectivity. They are interrelated and coexist, and one takes charge depending on a setting or audience. At UTEP, in the doctoral program, I have come to recognize my various selves, or in other words, the multiplicity of my self and subjectivity, as I hear my voice, clear and loud, in each version in a proper context or setting. Together, my selves and subjectivities have been possibl-ing my reach for the stars.
5.1 Setting a Mark: A Teacher’s Guidance

In his book, *Lives on the Boundaries – The Struggles and Achievements of America’s Underprepared*, Mike Rose writes that “[s]tudents will float to the mark you set” (26). Dr. Fiesta must have agreed with him when she set the PhD mark for me, one of her students, to float to, and I am reaching that mark.

As I am completing the last chapter of my dissertation to meet all requirements for December graduation, September is racing by. With countless strokes to concretize my thoughts on the pages, and under the pressure of time shrinking, even my fingers feel stressed; sometimes they hit several wrong keys in a row. Or, I look at the screen, read what has just been written, and see nonsense staring back at me. To deal with writer’s block and stress, I have often thought about Eleanor Roosevelt’s quotes, “[t]he future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams” and “[a] woman is like a teabag; you never know how strong it is until it’s in hot water,” to encourage myself and to endure.

While it took more than MacFarland, Rose’s mentor, to help Rose float beyond the mark that was set for him as a student, he was a catalyst whose concerns triggered a series of positive reactions in Rose’s life. Dr. Fiesta did for me what MacFarland did for Rose, and I have often rewound in my mind the conversation that I had with her in her office at CSULB in Fall 2003 when I was an undergraduate. In retrospect, I recognize my strong rejection to her just-think-about-it invitation to the PhD program as that of a dear lack-of-confident child to a dear confident parent.
Through the limited expression and communication, due to my limited ability in English, I had thought I would be incapable of advancing beyond the master’s degree. I think my thought and action have been processed following the domino effect: language limited → limited expression/communication → limited advance → limited confidence. Sometimes during summer 2013, when I was revising a syllabus for my English 52, Introduction to College Composition course at Cerritos, I had an idea of inserting some good quotes into the syllabus to encourage students, and my search led me to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s assertion, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world," and I embraced the quote at once. I felt as if I had found not only a good quote to encourage students but also an explanation to my strong rejection to further academic study then and a reason for my pursuit of higher education later. I do not want my world to be limited by the limits of my language, and at every level, from every class, I have always learned something to illuminate my understanding of the world I live in, of how language is used and how language connects to human behavior. Class after class, education has helped me broaden and deepen my world and enrich, layer by layer, my perspective.

Since I moved to America, I have often times heard a joke from some of my Vietnamese friends who have said, “Many of us coming to America become disabled; we lose our speech when we can’t speak English; we lose our hearing when we don’t understand what is said in English; and we lose our mobility when we don’t have a car or don’t know how to drive. With all this losses, we become mute, deaf, and crippled despite being physically healthy in America.” While this well-depicted joke makes me and my friends laugh, the wryness of its content is not at all a laughable matter. Every time I hear this joke, it reaffirms my choice of education.

I still remember how much I have admired my professors and envied their language ability. I have often comforted myself that if I keep learning one new word at a time, one day, I
will have a robust word bank account at my disposal. The longer I have been on my academic journey, the stronger I feel, and despite the significant growth of my word bank account, I have not reached the point where I feel I have enough words to express myself eloquently.

In practice, even though I continue to mispronounce a word or two, and if I do not carefully revise/edit my writing, I still make mistakes, especially with words that are somewhat similar, such as present and presence, or flight and fly, and with homonyms like here and hear. I am still trying to master the use of articles, following the rules: for instance, using the definite article the for a “specific referent” as in “Can I have the car?” and indefinite articles a and an for “nonspecific referents” as in “I saw a funny looking dog today” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 282).

As a transfer student at CSULB in Spring 2002, finishing the master’s degree in English Literacy and Composition was my biggest and ultimate goal. During my conversation with Dr. Fiesta, she asked,

“What is your plan after graduation, Viet?”

“I’ll apply for the Master’s program since I want to be an English instructor in a community college.”

“Why not the PhD?”

“Nooo. Dr. Fiesta! Don’t you see that I’m struggling to speak and write English correctly. Nooo! I won’t be able to handle the PhD? Nooo.”

I strongly rejected Dr. Fiesta’s question not only with my words, but also with my body language. I constantly shook my head while my mouth stretched a no as long as my breath could hold, but Dr. Fiesta handled my strong rejection very well. Still maintaining eye contact with me, she simply said, “Think about it.”
Her voice was soft; her smile was soft; but her look told me that her intention was firm, and that she kidded me not.

And that was how it all began. A seed was sown. Initially, the soil rejected it by ignoring it. Still, the seed stayed in the soil. And, then it slowly opened up to hold the seed, and then to embrace it, and then to fertilize it. As the seed grew, it embellished the soil which fed it, and they became one.

Eleven years, two Master’s degrees, six years experience of teaching English writing at community colleges, and a PhD later, Mike Rose’s words and Dr. Fiesta’s question make perfect sense to me. I must have been a replica of Rose’s experience. Like Rose, whose “reality of higher education wasn’t in [his] scheme of things” because his grades “stank” (34-5), I censured my dreams and goals since I thought I was short of ability, and my grades reflected such a shortness. Like Rose, I think students need more than teaching; they need guidance and someone who believes in them and their can-do-it.

Rose was fortunate to have Jack MacFarland and many teachers, such as Don Johnson, Dr. Frank Carothers, Dr. Ted Erlandson, and Father Albertson (Rose 48-58), whose assistance broke boundaries between him and the logical reasoning that was “very foreign” (47) to him, who helped him perceive “knowledge gained through our five senses” (51), and who were patient with his “linguistic growth” via his making writing errors (54). I have also been fortunate to have Dr. Fiesta and a similarly long list of teachers, for instance, Dr. Hertz, Dr. Finney, Dr. Foster, Dr. Smith, and Dr. Mangelsdorf, whose teaching, encouragement, and support have helped me believe in myself and my ability. And I, too, believe that the presence of each of the aforementioned figures--a MacFarland, a Fiesta, a Johnson, a Foster--in a student’s life can
change her/his life for the best, the same way MacFarland changed Rose’s and Dr. Fiesta changed mine.

When I told Dr. Hertz about Dr. Fiesta’s suggestion of my advancement to the PhD program, I explained my reasons not to do so: “I’ll be fifty-five when I graduate with the Master’s degree. Since I’ve come to America, I’ve constantly worked and gone to school, so I’d like to have a job after graduation and start enjoying life. I’ll be old for school and my eyes will be blurry at fifty-five.” The wise man simply said, “If you stay home and don’t go to school, you’ll get old anyway. For your blurry eyes, that’s why they make glasses.” His words were simple, clear, and totally logical.

Like super glue, the logic of Dr. Hertz’s words adhered in my head, and the thought of going into the PhD program grew more distinct. In a meeting with Dr. Finney, again, I told him about Dr. Fiesta’s suggestion and expressed a different concern: “Dr. Finney, I don’t have the perfect pronunciation for the PhD” – “You don’t need perfect pronunciation to be in the PhD program. You need dedication, hard work, and persistence, and you have them.” Dr. Finney replied. Dr. Finney did not ask me, but I read a big “so, why not?” in his eyes and his gentle smile.

Dr. Fiesta’s words, along with Dr. Hertz and Dr. Finney’s advice, had not stopped dancing in my head; sometimes, it was just a slow dance while at other times, it paso-dobled on the floor made of if-you-want-it-so-bad-and-you-can material. Dr. Fiesta showed me a way to horizon; Dr. Hertz and Dr. Finney convinced me to pursue it, despite my age and my flaws in language use, but I would be the one who nurtured their convincing words into a blossoming. At the end of the decision making, there was me, myself, and I, who finalized it. When I went on to finish the TESL master’s degree, my second one, the idea of going into the PhD program was
slowly solidifying until I decided to apply in 2011 when I would be sixty years old. I thought if I
were accepted, the PhD admission would be the best birthday present that I had ever given to
myself. Along the way, I have always credited those professors, Dr. Fiesta, in particular, for
opening the door to a new horizon for me, for listening, talking to me, and inviting me to keep
reaching and to float to the higher mark. And I have also learned that ability and capability can
always be improved with determination, a factor that I have held in my head, heart, and hands.

To me, the Vietnamese saying, “without the teacher, you sure can’t be successful” [không
thầy dỗ mà làm nên – không: no/without; thầy: teacher; dỗ: dare/bet; mà: you; làm nên: succeed], remains indisputable; it has been a valuable teaching. With their guidance, my
professors have bolstered such value. I was raised and taught to respect teachers, to be grateful
to their teaching and guidance; this thinking/behavior is the highlight of my Vietnamese cultural
self. Throughout my sixteen-years-and-counting academic journey, I have noticed the presence
of my American academic-self maturing alongside my existing Vietnamese cultural-self.

As I have absorbed American teaching and been influenced by American perspectives
while applying American writing conventions into my writing in Vietnamese, my mind and
thoughts have constantly shifted from Vietnamese to American and back and forth. In the
territory of my mind, my American academic-self has been a shared-resident with my
Vietnamese cultural-self and the two live in peace.

Thanks to my professors’ guidance, my family’s ceaseless support, and my efforts, my
life-long dream has come true, and I have been teaching English writing at Cerritos College since
Spring 2008. Being a teacher is a privilege, yet a Vietnamese being an English writing instructor
tenfolds that privilege. I think of my professors as the gardeners who disseminated knowledge in
the garden of my mind, and those seeds of knowledge keep growing. Now in my role as a
teacher, it is my turn to share knowledge and offer guidance and support, as my professors have done for me, I keep sowing good seeds of knowledge in my students’ mind gardens.

Most important, I set the marks for my students to float to. Encouraging all to do class assignments to pass the class has been a universal mark that many students have floated to. However, there is always a Mike or a Viet in my class who needs an individual mark. For example, when a student with depression and a mid-semester-quitting routine stayed in my class until the end to finish and pass the course, or when a student with a learning disability hardly ever missed a class meeting and always spoke up in class while everyone else was quiet and passed the class, I know they have floated to the mark that I have set for them, and I feel I have done my part as a teacher.

5.2 Teaching in Spite of Linguistic Flaws

Since I have been a teacher, at the end of each semester, I give my students a list with some questions, asking for their feedback to improve my overall teaching approach. In Fall 2008, in answering “Weakness(es) of this course?” a non-native speaker student commented on my Vietnamese-accented English for being difficult to understand sometimes. Thus far, it was the only written comment given on my accented English. In the ratio of 1/13 semester (fall, spring, and summer) and of 1/670 students (approximately), one unfavorable comment appears to be minuscule, but I have not taken it lightly. As a student of rhetoric and composition, I believe in the power of language use as a reflection of “knowledge gained through our five senses” (Rose 51) in all forms of communication. Therefore, a student’s complaint invited me to review the effectiveness of my use of language as a language user and as a teacher.
Overall, the majority of students have not had a problem with my accented English and my students have given my teaching their approval and support. In their Spring 2014 comments, “shows her passion for teaching and that inspires the students to work hard in completing their objectives,” “makes shy students feel comfortable,” and “very encouraging and supportive,” I have seen appreciation and recognition of my efforts. While positive feedback warms my heart and fuels my hard work for further improvements, a negative one challenges me to be more effective and more mindful of students’ various academic needs.

I began teaching at Cerritos College in Spring 2008 and have resumed my teaching there since Fall 2013, after a two-year break, 2011-2013, to attend the Rhetoric and Composition doctoral program at UTEP. Hispanic/Latino students make up 64.6% of the student population, whereas White students comprise 10.6% and Asian students 10% (Cerritos). Many of the Hispanic/Latino students are bilingual; they speak Spanish and English fluently. Since these students were either born or grew up in America, they are eligible to enroll in English, not ESL classes. Yet, the English speaking fluency that many of my students have does not quite correspond to, and sometimes even interferes with, the academic fluency needed in a college writing/composition class. For instance, in my Basic Writing (English 20) and Introduction to College Composition (English 52) courses, many Hispanic/Latino students write, “especial” and “inusual” when they mean “special” and “unusual,” evidence of “transfer phenomena” that are generally defined as ‘the incorporation of features of the L1 into the knowledge system of the L2 which the learner is trying to build’” (Rasier & Hiligsmann 2). Although these words are insignificant ‘errors’ and they do not impair communication, I have often pointed them out to these writers, so they would be aware of them in their writing.
The non-native speaker student population and their misspellings remind me of my own academic struggles. Similarly to me when I was in the same class, they cannot distinguish coordinating conjunctions from subordinating ones. Similarly to my writing then, theirs is filled with run-ons, comma splices, fragments, and unnecessary shifts in person and in verb tense. In Christine Casanave’s *Controversies in Second Language Writing: Dilemmas and Decisions in Research and Instruction (The Michigan Series on Teaching Multilingual Writers)*, I have found her notes stating that “teacher choices and behaviors in the classroom reflect underlying beliefs and assumptions” and her strong belief claiming that “teachers benefit from bringing underlying beliefs into conscious awareness by articulating those beliefs, reflecting on them, and modifying them as needed” (9) true and inviting. In fact, being aware of and reflecting on my own writing errors and the similarities between my students’ errors and mine drive me to offer them a learning-friendly classroom where they are encouraged to explore and invent ideas and to transform them into words. They are learning to improve their writing skills without being fearful of violating American writing conventions. From my experience, writing errors, albeit treatable or untreatable, need time to be understood and corrected, and just as my professors have given me time to figure it out, I give my students time as well.

While I have not tried to rid myself of my Vietnamese accent/identity, I continue to pay attention to native speakers’ pronunciation and learn from them. As Nguyễn-Tưởng-Hùng writes,

Some common problems facing Vietnamese learning English are: dropping of final consonant sounds; difficulty in pronouncing some consonant sounds such as /ð/, /θ/, /z/, /dз/, /S/ and /tS/ as well as some initial consonant clusters such as sp-, dr-, br-, fr-, pl-, and str-; inability to express stress; non-use of *be* in sentences consisting of subject and
adjective (She beautiful); and word-by-word translation, among others (3).

I have often remembered Dr. Hu telling me about her paying attention to her enunciation when she was in class. For me, I must pay attention to the –s endings; otherwise, I can easily miss them. And, in writing, the correct use of articles continues to slip through my fingers although I know the rules, and in speaking, the arbitrariness of English pronunciation keeps teasing me. In her article, “English Instruction for High Achievement in the Twenty-First Century: A Vietnamese-American Perspective,” Mai Dao begins with a poem “of anonymous composition, [that] depicts with humor one Vietnamese-American’s perspective on the English language” (201); the poem brilliantly illustrates the difficulties in speech that Vietnamese speakers encounter.

The English Language

When the English tongue we speak,

Why is “break” not rhymed with “freak”? 

Will you tell me why it’s true

We say “sew” but likewise “few”;

And the maker of verse

Cannot cap his “horse” with “worse” 

“Beard” sounds not the same as “heard”;

“Cord” is different from “word”;

Cow is “cow”, but low is “low”;

“Show” is never rhymed with “foe”;

Think of “hose” and “dose” and “lose”;

And think of “goose” and yet of “choose.”
Think of “comb” and “tomb” and “bomb”;
“Doll” and “roll” and “home” and “some,”
And since “pay” is rhymed with “say,”
Why not “paid” with “said,” I pray?
We have “blood” and “food” and “good”;
“Mould” is not pronounced like “could.”
Wherefore “done” but “gone” and “lone?”
Is there any reason know?
And, in short, it seems to me,
Sounds and letters disagree.

(Anonymous, 1987)

While familiarizing myself with English arbitraries and learning to use them properly in context, I have noticed my issue with missing the –s endings when I speak fast and not pay attention to my enunciation, but when I speak slowly, I could hear my s’s.

From the beginning of my English learning, I have aimed at learning a language, especially the one “in harmony with a way of living” (Mangelsdorf 116), to satisfy a wide range of purposes, albeit “to [gain] freedom” (Bizzell & Herzberg 1070), “to overcome the tradition of silence” or “to recover and reshape [one’s] spiritual identity” (Bizzell & Herzberg 1588, 1603).

And reading Barry’s notes,

“[s]ometimes we react to regional differences, which are largely differences in pronunciation and vocabulary. Some may think it curious that many speakers of English, including some New Yorkers and Bostonians, leave out rs when they speak, or that some southerners pronounce pin and pen alike. It may strike some of us as odd that
people from other areas of the country pronounce *cot* and *caught* alike, or stress the first syllable of *insurance* (2),
it becomes clear to me that language has variations, and difference is not a synonym of violation or of mistake. Yet more and most importantly,

“English, as a supranational language, provides peoples with divergent linguistic backgrounds an opportunity to come together in the celebration of national identities. Thus, instead of holding the language in high esteem because it can function as a gateway to Western lifestyles and ideologies, ESL speakers can instead focus on the expediency of the tongue and its various functions as a lingua franca” (Modiano 29).

Furthermore, my viewpoint of language as a living, fluid, and changeable creature drives me to keep improving. In Fall 1967, when I started studying English at the Vietnamese American Association with my friend and neighbor, Thu-Hông, I used to tell her, “I’ll study English until I have enough words to argue (at that time, I meant ‘discuss’) with an American/English about pretty much all subjects.” In Summer 1996, almost thirty years later, I returned to school and held in my palm a dream of being an English instructor at a community college after my graduation in 2006, yet the bigger dream that I have held in my heart is an ardent desire that one day, I will be competent enough to convey the beauty of my mother tongue in English. During the Việt-Nam War, Phảm-Duy, a famed song writer and singer, wrote *Giọt Mưa Trên Lá* (The rain on the leaves) to describe feelings of pain and loss; in 1956, the lyrics were translated into English by Steve Addiss (web). The sad, yet beautiful lyrics have proudly displayes Phảm-Duy’s excellent use of words.

*The rain on the leaves*

*is the tears of joy*
of the girl whose boy
returns from the war;
the rain on the leaves
is the bitter tears
when a mother hears
her son is no more…
The rain on the leaves
is the cry that is torn
from a baby just born
as life is begun;
the rain on the leaves
is an old couple’s love
much greater now
than when they were young…

I do not know why the English words in the same rhythm cannot move me the same way
that the Vietnamese words do, but if putting language in context, I can then answer this question.
When I listened to that song, the Việt-Nam War was a reality; with the lyrics, I could visualize a
long line of family members of fallen military personnel dragging themselves behind a carriage
in which their beloved son rested in a wooden coffin. I could hear the mother’s and wife’s
wailing in grief, and I could see their bodies collapsed under the irreplaceable loss. And those
images intensify the meaning of the song, whose lyrics fell into my heart, as raindrops soaked
my hair and body during Saigon’s monsoon season and reminded me of the reality of a cycle of
life, in which dead and rebirth, loss and love, and suffering and joy exist only to be replaced, as the cycle of life keeps moving on and around, and the monsoon rain keeps returning and leaving.

The different feelings that I have in response to the song lyrics in different languages must be due to the difference between my Vietnamese cultural self and my American academic self, which Shen identifies as the ideological and logical selves. I consider my Vietnamese cultural self my past and my American academic self my present and future. In Bourdieu’s theories, my past has structured my present. When I have sat in a classroom as a student, or I stand in front of my students as an instructor, my American academic self takes charge, and my Vietnamese cultural self stays quiet. When I go home and speak Vietnamese with my husband, my son, and my friends, my Vietnamese cultural self is in charge. The two, however, are always interconnected. My thought of autonomy is definitely the product of American academic English language acquisition. Without being a competent English language user, I could not be this independent, in life, in thoughts, and in action.

I have never stopped loving French; it was the language my father spoke fluently and which he chose to introduce to his children. More than being my first foreign language, French always reminds me of my family’s bon vieux temps/good old days and of love, as I was growing up listening to French love songs, some of whose lyrics stayed young in my head and in my heart. Salvatore Adamo’s Ton Nom [Your Name], “Ton nom resonne dans ma tete, aussi beau qu’un poeme, aussi doux qu’un je t’aime…” [your name resonates in my head as beautiful as a poem, as tender as I love you…], brings back my golden past each time I listen to it. I have always embraced French linguistic romantic features, and to my notion, the more fluent I become as an English learner, the more I prize the linguistic poetic features in Vietnamese and in French.
Along my academic journey, in addition to the vast amount of information that I have gathered, I have also made friends.

In Summer 2006, I began tutoring a Vietnamese girl. At ten years old, Sylvia was about to start sixth grade in the GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) program and was holding onto a dream of being a pediatrician. Since I was not able to say no to a friend’s request for assistance, I agreed to tutor Sylvia twice a week, an hour and a half each time. At that time, I was busy finishing my Master’s thesis while tutoring at Golden West College’s Writing Center. Since I had quit a full-time job to be a full-time student with a loan, I intended to pay 100% of my time to studying.

However, Sylvia charmed me after the first week, and her responsible, hard-working mentality kept me tutoring her until I left for UTEP for my program starting in Fall 2011. Sylvia entered the eleventh grade that year. With technology, I stayed in touch with my one and only tutee through Skype and helped her whenever she needed it. In 2012, as Sylvia prepared to apply to the university, her grandfather was fighting Stage 4 lung cancer. His condition grew severe, so Sylvia spent after school time with him, first at home and then in the hospital. Her 4.4 GPA dropped to 4.2. Sylvia applied to several universities with medical schools, such as University of California at Irvine, University of California San Diego, University of California Davis, and St. Bonaventure University. The Catholic, private school was the first to accept her, conditionally, to join its D.O, not M.D. program.

While some family members encouraged her to accept St. Bonaventure’s admission, Sylvia answered, “I haven’t tried the M.D. program. How do I know whether I can handle it or not?” So, she turned down that offer and kept waiting. She made it to University of California Davis. Being a freshman at a new school, away from home, Sylvia got homesick, yet she
endured and finished her first year in summer, 2014. Faced with unexpected academic difficulties, at some points, Sylvia began questioning her ability and wondered whether she would be cut from the M.D. program she had always dreamt of. Finishing the third quarter of the first year, Sylvia seemed to regain partial confidence and gradually headed back to her dream of being a physician with a plan B, heading to pharmacy school, in her pocket.

I stay in touch with Sylvia and give her advice when she needs it, but I let her choose her path, like MacFarland let Rose choose his and Dr. Fiesta let me choose mine.

Since I have come home, I have been helping Sylvia’s three cousins: two eleventh graders, and one third grader. Seeing the kids enjoy studying with me has been a big joy. I see myself as a gardener who is disseminating the seeds of knowledge. This school year, Nicolas is in fourth grade and learning grammar and writing; Sophie and Vincent are in twelfth grade and are applying to universities. Nicolas is decisive and straightforward; Sophie smart and sharp, Vincent responsible and hardworking. Being nice and being thoughtful are the common denominators that these children share. Nicolas aims at being an A student; Sophie and Vincent plan to attend pharmacy school. In presenting them with readings, essay prompts and asking them to brainstorm, explore, and draft their ideas, I have seen them grow, one sentence, one paragraph, one prompt, one draft, one grammar rule at a time, and I am pleased with my choice of being an educator who disseminates the seeds of knowledge onto the children’s mind garden.

Like me, my tutees are multilingual speakers, and like me, they think in two and three languages. The ability to control language will empower them the same way it has for Rose, Villanueva, Bulosan, Shen, Lu, Frederick Douglass, Gloria Anzaldua, and countless others. My tutees will develop multiple subjectivities as they grow up being bi/trilingual, and this multiplicity will strengthen their mind and its thinking process. Language ability allows one to
“[enter] the conversation” (39), as Rose and I have experienced. They, too, will enter the conversation.

My deep interest in grammar remains solid. After several years of teaching, I have noticed how little my Basic Writing students know about grammar, and thus I decided to write *Grammar Within Reach – A Grammar Book for Freshmen and All Grammarphobes*, with just them as my audience. The book has stayed in its work-in-progress status during my studies at UTEP, but it will be on the must-do-list after my graduation. In the book’s foreword, I have written,

This book is to introduce and present grammar in a ‘formulaic’ approach by identifying the fundamental components of English language, Parts of Speech, based on their Form – Identification (what they are), Function (what they do), and Location (where they are). Each chapter proceeds in the same order. First, a part of speech is recognized by its unique, unchanged characteristics; second, its role(s) in a sentence is explained; third, the place where the part of speech is located is mentioned. With this order and construction, as the authors, we hope to assist college freshmen and all, who have been struggling with grammar, understand how grammar works in writing, in particular. The name of the book, *Grammar Within Reach*, conveys the authors’ intention to facilitate the learning of Basic English Grammar and to discover the truth about it – Grammar [is] Within Reach.

The purpose of writing this book is to share my grammar understanding with students, using current technology to offer access to students who enroll in my class without charging them. Though in a different format, I consider this book a handout, similar to those I received during my academic journey, before technology facilitated online access and diminished hard copy distribution.
This devotion comes from my experiences as an English learner who struggled with English writing conventions and format. Reading the writing of my Basic Writing students, I have come to realize that my struggle with writing was not unique. In the past, when I read Young’s *Minor Re/Visions*, Villanueva’s *Bootstraps*, or Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoires of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, I was more interested in learning of their struggles, yet I could not identify with their hardships due to the fact that all of them were born in America and learned English at a young age, and thus none struggled with English the same way I did.

Yet reading Frederick Douglas’ narrative, I could relate to his struggle to learn to read and write. English learning rewarded Douglas with his freedom, and he used his English ability to help his fellows when he “soon found that the Negro had still a cause, and that he needed my voice and pen with others to plead for it” (Bizzell & Hertzberg 1084); writing and speaking well empowered Douglas, his voice, and his thoughts. I could also relate to Gloria Anzaldua’s multilingual experiences. Although Vietnamese speakers did not have similar experiences with Spanish speakers like Anzaldua and her people, who were coerced into downplaying the value of their mother tongue, I can relate to the points she made, “[r]epeated attacks on our native tongue diminish[es] our sense of self” and “[e]thnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language” (1588). Anzaldua shares Shen’s viewpoint of different identities in the use of different languages, particularly for those who speak English as a second/third language, the non-mother-tongue language.

To me, English has never been a dominant language; I am not sure whether this is due to my initial legal status in America as a naturalized immigrant, or to the fact that America was Việt-Nam’s ally during the Việt-Nam War. I consider myself a bi/trilingual speaker and while I
embrace some good qualities of American culture, such as independence and fearlessness, the main characteristics of my Vietnameseness remain. I also consider myself assimilated to American culture, but not so much acculturated to it. Like Anzaldua, I enjoy code switching and code meshing. To me, code switching and code meshing, “provide a continuity in speech,” facilitate conversation, and “increase the impact of [my] speech and use in an effective manner” (Skiba 2). With these practices, I bring English to Vietnamese and the two complement each other. When I lived in Việt-Nam, I code-switched and code-meshed Vietnamese and French, as these practices were common in a country heavily influenced by almost a hundred years of French colonization. While others might have code-switched and code-meshed to facilitate their conversation, as Sikba has noted, at the young age, my friends and I used those techniques just for fun to show off our little foreign language knowledge.

5.3 “Story as the Landscape of Knowing”: Autoethnography

Kathy G. Short has written, “[s]tory is the landscape within which we map the significance of experience and build towers of knowledge,” and “[s]tories of the past are significant in framing our thinking about the world and providing a sense of our humanity,” and “[s]tories is the landscape within which we live as teachers and researchers – our knowledge is ordered by story and understood by story” (NCTE Annual Convention, Washington, D. C. 2014).

In sharing the same perspective on “story as the landscape or knowing,” I chose autoethnography to convey my experiences and my narrative in this dissertation, since I think “[t]he telling of a life is an artful and selective endeavor” (qtd. in Denzin 1989, 5) and “[a]utoethnographies and biographies are conventionalized, narrative expressions of life experiences” (Denzin 2014, 7). In Denzin’s words, [i]nterpretative performance ethnography
allows the researcher to take up each person’s life in its immediate particularity and to ground the life in its historical moment” and “[p]erformance and interpretation work outward from turning-point events in a person’s life. The sting of memory defines these events. They become parts of the person’s mystery, part of his or her interpretative autoethnography” (x). And this format fit the presentation of my English learning experiences. Having a good grasp of English and being a competent English user, I understand that “language, in both written and spoken forms, is always inherently unstable, in flux and made up of the traces of other signs and symbolic statements. Hence there can never be a clear, unambiguous statement of anything, including an intention or a meaning,” as Denzin maintains (2). This understanding anchors my focus on clearness/perspicuity as much as I can in my writing.

Further, in choosing this methodology to narrate my experiences/academic story, “I [have] recreate[d] the conditions for discovering the meanings of a past sequence of events” (28). In revisiting the “biographically meaningful event[s] or moment[s]” (28) in my life and sharing them in this dissertation, I offer a “writing space” to others to “[discover] new meanings and new understandings” from what they read (28). Learning from Denzin and agreeing with him that “[s]elf-stories simultaneously deal with the past, the present, and the future [and that] personal experience stories deal with the past” (Denzin 1989, 38), I link them in a narrative which is open for interpretation and examination.

Each autoethnography has its own limitations due to the writer’s individual perspective in presenting the narrative of her own experiences. However, despite being subjective, I think other writers can recognize from my academic experiences a point or two to do or not to do in their teaching approach, especially for ESL students. If this happens, I consider that I have brought an issue to the field that requires further research to find an answer.
On my academic journey, I have received tremendous support and I have also offered support to others. Through formal and informal literacies that I have experienced on a daily basis, from letting Taylor Swift’s “Love Story” lyrics, “This love is difficult but it’s real” in “Love Story” and Pink’s “But just because it burns – Doesn’t mean you’re gonna die – You’ve got to get up and try try try” in “Try” enter my heart as sweet reminding messages, to listening to the latest or breaking news, national and international, on CBS Evening News with Scott Pelly, to reading *The Rhetorical Tradition* and *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* heavy textbooks [I mean literally and figuratively], or to learning that BOGO means “buy one get one 50% off” from an advertisement posted on a store’s window in a shopping mall, I have picked up American social, academic, and professional subjectivities from my exposure to these literacies. Yet, I am my plural subjectivities, and language empowers each one; during my academic journey, my perspective has been enriched with layers of colors and richness that speak to the multiplicity of literacies that I have learned and acquired.

If life were an essay/a composition, I would think of this work of mine as a body paragraph, added to the existing paragraphs. As I will dedicate my post-doctoral time to finish all of my writing projects and hope they will reach audiences in hard copies and in motion pictures as well, I consider adding more body paragraphs to my life essay/composition. Being a student of rhetoric and a writer, I prefer to identify myself as an essayist. In French, essayer /ˈɛs ɛʁ jɛʁ/, as a verb, means ‘to try’, and since every piece of writing is marked by continuous trials and constant efforts, the word ‘essayist’ well-describes my learning writing process and my writing practice through which I have not stopped trying [*Je n’ai pas cesse d’essayer*] to add more meanings to my life essay/composition.
Indeed, I have not only added my learning and experiences, but also my students’ to my life essay/composition. At the end of the Spring semester 2009, Shaun, a non-native speaker student, in my English 20 course at Cerritos College, wrote on the board, “I M POSSIBLE,” with a piece of white chalk, and he told me, “We should all think of ourselves this way, Mrs. Pham.” Ever since, Shaun’s words have not stopped echoing in my head.

In the Spring 2014 semester, twice a week, on Monday and Wednesday, I met and taught students in my English 52, Introduction to College Composition course, and I had the honor of assisting an ex-Navy firefighter to help him improve his writing skills. Despite losing a leg in a motorcycle accident, where he was rear-ended by a drunk driver in a car, leading him into depression, suicidal thoughts, and addiction to pain killers, Steve recovered and decided to go back to school. Seeing Steve with his prosthetic left leg enter the classroom every day in good spirits, trying to get thesis statements and topic sentences correctly written, I was humbled to learn of his battle within and witness his hard working and effort to define ‘I M POSSIBLE’.

While I teach my students grammar and writing conventions and encourage them to be their best in my class, they also teach me to be an effective and caring educator, as they show up to class before or at 7:00 a.m. every class meeting to study with me and persist through learning unfamiliar writing concepts. They, too, are writing another body paragraph of their life essay/composition, and we all continue to revise/edit our writing, one sentence, one paragraph, and one draft at a time. Together, my students and I engage in “education [as] a process by which students and teachers help each other become ‘more fully human’ and, at the same time, ‘transform reality’” (Ferry 11). In exploring teaching and learning, we do become more fully human, and our efforts are transforming our own reality of being a better version of our own self.
EPILOGUE

In Spring 2013, the last semester of my coursework at UTEP, Professor Victor Villanueva came to visit and gave two talks, on Thursday, February 7 and on Friday, February 8. I attended both since I was burning with questions: “Throughout the years in academia, have you ever met another Puerto Rican professor of Rhetoric like you?” and “How do you feel about being a foreigner in the academic world?”

When I met with Professor Villanueva at the end of the Thursday talk, I asked him both and received his reply, “No!” for the first one, and “I feel good,” for the second one. He used the word ‘uniqueness’ to explain how he felt being the only Puerto Rican-American in the field of Rhetoric. My questions were rooted in my feeling of being an unconventional student in Rhetoric. For years, I have searched for other Vietnamese immigrant, baby boomers who returned to school and pursued higher education, but my search has not been fruitful.

Instead, I have found two Vietnamese-American professors, Trịnh Thị Minh-Hà, an accomplished professor/writer/filmmaker/composer who has taught Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley, and Hoàng Hải-Vân, an associate professor of Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies, Composition and Rhetoric, Critical Race and Ethnic Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. From Trịnh’s biography, “Trinh T. Minh-ha was born in Vietnam in 1952, and immigrated to the United States in 1970 after studying in both Vietnam and the Philippines,” and from Hoàng’s vita, she was born on February 13, 1976 in Los Angeles, California. I am not sure whether Trịnh and Hoàng faced similar struggles with language barriers the way I did when I had just arrived to America as an immigrant at the age of thirty-eight. Yet, their presence in the field of Rhetoric and Composition makes me feel good that I am not alone, the way Professor Villanueva has been.
With this autoethnography/dissertation, I have shared with the audience my learning experiences, my benefit from being exposed to multiple literacies at school, at work, and on the streets, and my bringing together the multiplicity of my self/subjectivity/voice to use each according to each context. Dr. Fiesta invited me to speak up and talk about my generation and my eyewitness experiences during and after the Viêt-Nam War, and so comes this writing.

I do believe my work brings a quiet voice of the first Vietamese baby-boomer generation to the history of rhetoric, and whether I speak up on behalf of my generation or I simply speak up for myself, I am no longer silent, thanks to education and rhetoric, the cradles of knowledge, understanding, humanity, dream-ability, hope-ability, and realize-ability. Like any other generation, mine needs to be heard. In Paulo Freire’s words, “[a]ll educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator’s part. This stance in turn implies – sometimes more, sometimes less explicit – an interpretation of [wo]man and the world. It could not be otherwise” (Cushman et al. 616). This writing and my pursuit of higher education, as a student and as an educator, reflect an interpretation of myself and the world, rhetoric and democracy, all in “the land of the free” and “the home of the brave,” where I have found and refined my voice.

During my academic journey and through my exposure to the multiplicity of literacies and subjectivities, my personhood has been formed and solidified; my Vietnamese cultural and private self and my American academic and professional self are but all-in-one body, heart, and soul: mine. My story, too, contributes to “the landscape of [our] knowing.”

And since “A writer’s work is never done,...,” as K. Sean Harris said, and “[w]riting consists of pre-writing, drafting, and re-writing,” as Coe alleged (115), and as a student of Rhetoric and Composition, I will keep writing, re-writing, and rewriting this body paragraph and
many others as well. And with my use of language to communicate, to express myself, and to share knowledge, the rhetorical making of my personhood goes on.
NOTES

1. Despite these statistics and exhausted research, the exact number to account for the headcount of the Vietnamese baby-boomer immigrants who arrived to America in the following decades has not been found. Nevertheless, this search will continue to provide solid supports for future works of mine.

2. I have selected this map, borrowed from Professor Gayle Olsen-Raymer’s course, History 111: Vietnam, offered at the California State University Humboldt, because it best illustrates the division of the North and South Viet-Nam in 1954.

3. This website is created by C.N. Le, a Senior Lecturer Professor in the Sociology Department and Director of the Asian & Asian American Studies Certificate Program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (“Summary,” Asian Nation).

4. Tobias Rettig, a researcher who declares Southeast Asia issues as one of his interests, uploaded this document on Academia.edu

5. Appendix II

6. Appendix III

7. Appendix IV, shows the movie’s foreword.

8. According to Geoffrey Barborka, “Pali is the name that has been given to the language spoken in the north of India, from and before the 7th century b. c. to about the 5th century of the Christian Era. It is still the literary sacred language of Burma, Siam, and Ceylon, although its use is said to be decreasing. In other words, in the lands where Southern Buddhism flourishes (to use the term in a geographical sense), the language now known by the name of Pali is still used in the religious observances of the Buddhists, as their canon was written in this language.”
9. According to Tripitaka Master Hsuan Hua in his 1971 lecture, “there will be six paths of light changing the darkness of the six destinies into brightness” through the constant reciting of OM MANI PADME HUM, also known as “The Six-Character Great Bright Mantra.”

10. Meaning: "I invoke this path to experience the universality, so the jewel-like luminosity of my immortal mind will be unfolded within the depths of the lotus-center of awakened consciousness and I be wafted by ecstasy of breaking through all bonds and horizons," in Jeffrey Hays’ notes.

11. “A Japa mala or mala (Sanskrit: mālā, meaning garland) (Tib. threngwa) is a set of beads commonly used by Hindus and Buddhists. Malas are used for keeping count while reciting, chanting, or mentally repeating a mantra or the name or names of a deity.” Web; 19 Dec. 2014.

12. From “Roman Catholicism in South Vietnam,” in “1650: Alexandre de Rhodes urges the Society of Congregation for Propagation of the Faith to send Bishops to Vietnam in order to establish churches and train Vietnamese clergy.”

13. In Tim Page and John Pimlott’s “Planning and Scope of Tet” (355).


15. “Vietnam, January, 1968. As the citizens of Huế are preparing to celebrate Tet, the start of the Lunar New Year, Nhã Ca arrives in the city to attend her father’s funeral. Without warning, war erupts all around them, drastically changing or cutting short their lives. After a month of fighting, their beautiful city lies in ruins and thousands of people are dead. Mourning Headband for Huế tells the story of what happened during the fierce North Vietnamese offensive and is an unvarnished and riveting account of war as experienced by ordinary people caught up in the violence.”
16. From “Giải Khẩn Sơ Cho Huế, RFA phong văn Nhà Ca” – Mặc Lâm, phóng viên đài RFA (Mac Lam, RFA reporter)

17. Same as 15.

18. In Tim Page & John Pimlott’s “Why Did the ARVN Stand Firm?” (500).


20. From Digital History.


22. Same as above.

23. From Digital History.


25. From Tim Page & John Pimlott’s “War ’75,” (649).

26. “Bourdieu defines habitus as a property of social agents (whether individuals, groups or constitutions) that comprises a ‘structured and structuring structure’.” (qtd. in Maton 51).

27. “Cultural field, …, are not made up simply of institutions and rules, but of the interactions between institutions, rules and practices” Webb, Jen, et al. (22).

“Cultural capital – A form of value associated with culturally authorized tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills, and awards….“ (x).

28. “Hysteris [is] an invaluable technical term to highlight the disruption between habitus and field and the consequences of this over time” (Hardy 132).

29. Those sandals were handmade of old, worn tires and were only worn by the communists. Thus, Bình-Trị-Thiền sandals became known as the communist soldiers’ trademark/identification.
30. From Hoang Vuong My’s “Lao dong la vinh quang” [labor is glory].

31. From the footnote of the Worldbank’s document, in verbatim, “In the old regime, there were 2,500 private schools, half of which opened by religious organizations.”

32. From Ronald Cima’s “Vietnam after 1975.”

33. “Lịch sử hơn 600 năm của tiền giấy Việt-Nam” [History of more than 600 years of the Vietnamese currency].

34. Information, retrieved from the Online Archive of California’s “Vietnam and the ethnic Chinese after 1975,” explains,

   In March, 1978, the Vietnamese government implemented the first part of its plan to eliminate capitalist trade: it announced that the two currencies in North and South Vietnam were to be called in, and replaced with a single unified currency. This exchange involved the raiding of some 30,000 businesses in the Saigon-Cholon business area, and the confiscation of stock. Those who had been in trade could get their property back in the new currency, but only on approval from local government committees, and only for use in approved areas; in other words, businessmen had their capital confiscated, and were expected to become farmers or workers.

35. From Halsall’s Modern History Sourcebook, “Ho Chi Minh (1890-1968) drafted the following program on February 18, 1930, for a conference of Vietnamese Communists who met in the British colony of Hong Kong.”

36. Trương Quyên/Quyen Truong’s “Vietnamese Re-Education Camps: A Brief History”

37. Figure 6b, page 21.

38. From “The Southeast Asian Refugee Crisis.”
39. According to Vũ-Ngọc-Tuấn, a computer engineer, whose parents owned a jewelry store, Bảo-Thịnh in Bà Rịa County since 1969 until escaping Việt-Nam in 1981 to resettle in France in 1982 and then in America since 1995.

40. “Geneva Conference of 1954” listed the Soviet Union, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, China and the Việt-Minh as the parties involved.


42. Same as above – Line 6-9. Par. 8.

43. Translated from Professor Nguyễn-Thanh-Liêm’s excerpt. Line 1-8. Par. 10.

44. According to Nguyễn-Phượng-Văn’s “Các trường, viên ngoài công lập ở miền nam trước 1975 – Tổng hợp”

[Private schools, institution in South before 1975 – General]

45. Information about Hector Malot’s books is found on Barnes and Noble’s website.

46. According to “Astrology: Is it scientific?”

47. In my understanding, when used together in Vietnamese, kinh sữ means academic texts.

48. Professor Nguyễn-Thanh-Liêm explained in his excerpt.

49. In the Vietnamese culture, my brothers and I, as all Vietnamese children, call my parents’ male friends ‘Bác’ (uncle); one of its meanings is an older father’s brother. This greeting, a common practice in the Vietnamese tradition, is to show respect to the parents’ friends and to the adults.

50. While French Interactif of the University of Texas at Austin includes eleven French verb tenses: present, passé compose, imperatif, aller+infinitif, imparfait, future, conditionnel,
conditionnel passe, subjonctif, subjonctif passe, and imparfait, the website leaves out many tenses. Appendix V provides a more complete list with twenty six tenses, including ‘future proche = aller + infinitif’ that is not included in the list above.

51. All the International Phonetic Alphabet of the words mentioned were taken from http://dictionary.reference.com/.

52. Based on the information, provided by CSULB gallery and “University Facts Fall 2001”


54. From “Workshops & the WPE Scoring Guide” on CSULB website.

55. According to the information retrieved from CSULB, “Writing Proficiency Exam (WPE),” website.

56. A Vietnamese address to a female who would be old enough to be a speaker’ mother or aunt.

57. Released in 2005, starring by Nathan Lane, Matthew Broderick, and Uma Thurman, as shown on the DVD cover.

58. According to Gussenhoven & Jacobs, the “two thickish flaps that run from back to front inside the larynx… to prevent food or saliva from entering the lungs, but because they also have a function in speech, they are known as the vocal folds or the vocal cords” (2).

59. “Oprah Winfrey on Aging: ’60 is the new 40’.

60. As Moise wrote in his “The Fall of Ngo-Dinh-Diem.”

61. According to the Annerberg Learners website.
WORKS CITED


Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Department of English – English, PhD: Composition and


246


APPENDIX I

Partial of the Geneva Agreement

AGREEMENT ON THE CESSATION OF HOSTILITIES IN VIET-NAM, JULY 20, 1954

(The Geneva Agreements theoretically ended the war between French Union forces and the Vietminh in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. These states were to become fully independent countries, with the last-named partitioned near the 17th parallel into two states pending reunification through “free elections” to be held by July 20, 1956. The United States and Vietnam are not signatories to these agreements.)

CHAPTER I-PROVISIONAL MILITARY DEMARCATION LINE AND DEMILITARIZED ZONE

Article 1

A provisional military demarcation line shall be fixed, on either side of which the forces of the two parties shall be regrouped after their withdrawal, the forces of the People’s Army of Viet-Nam to the north of the line and the forces of the French Union to the south.

The provisional military demarcation line is fixed as shown on the map attached (omitted).

It is also agreed that a demilitarized zone shall be established on either side of the demarcation line, to a width of not more than 5 kms. From it, to act. As a buffer zone and avoid any incidents which might result in the resumption of hostilities.


Web. 5 December 2013.
Ho Chi Minh (1890-1968) drafted the following program on February 18, 1930, for a conference of Vietnamese Communists who met in the British colony of Hong Kong.

Workers, peasants, soldiers, youth, pupils!

Oppressed and exploited compatriots!

The Communist Party of Indochina is founded. It is the party of the working class. It will help the proletarian class lead the revolution in order to struggle for all the oppressed and exploited people. From now on we must pin the Party, help it and follow it in order to implement the following slogans:

1. To overthrow French imperialism, feudalism, and the reactionary Vietnamese capitalist class.

2. To make Indochina completely independent.

3. To establish a worker peasant and soldier government.

4. To confiscate the banks and other enterprises belonging to the imperialists and put them under the control of the worker peasant and soldier government.

5. To confiscate all of the plantations and property belonging to the imperialists and the Vietnamese reactionary capitalist class and distribute them to poor peasants.

6. To implement the eight hour working day.

7. To abolish public loans and poll tax. To waive unjust taxes hitting the poor people.

8. To bring back all freedom to the masses.

9. To carry out universal education.

10. To implement equality between man and woman.

Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh)
APPENDIX III

C: Partial of Edwin E. Moïse’s *The Vietnam Wars*

**The Vietnam Wars, Section 4**

**The Geneva Accords**

By the middle of 1954, the French realized that they had lost. The US, which by this time was paying most of France’s war expenses, was unable to persuade the French to fight on. An international conference was held in Geneva, Switzerland to discuss the problems of Indochina. On July 20 and 21, 1954, this conference produced a number of agreements that were supposed to settle the war.

The Geneva Accords stated that Vietnam was to become an independent nation. Elections were to be held in July 1956, under international supervision, to choose a government for Vietnam. During the two-year interval until the elections, the country would be split into two parts; the North and the South. The dividing line chosen, at the seventeenth parallel a little north of the city of Hue, was quite close to the line that had separated the two halves of Vietnam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but this was purely a coincidence. This line no longer corresponded to any natural division in Vietnamese society, in economy, political structure, religion, or dialect. It was an arbitrary compromise between French proposals for a line further north and Viet Minh proposals for a line further south.

All Viet Minh soldiers were to go to the North; all soldiers who had fought for the French were to go to the South. Civilians would also be able to move if they wished to do so. (Hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese, mostly Catholics, did move from North to South Vietnam in 1954 and 1955. A smaller number of Viet Minh sympathisers moved from South to North.)

For the Viet Minh the Geneva Accords were a gamble. The Viet Minh controlled much more than half of Vietnam in 1954; when it allowed the country to be divided approximately in half, it was giving up a great deal of territory south of the seventeenth parallel that had been under Viet Minh control for years, exchanging this for only a small area under French control north of the seventeenth parallel. On the other hand, if the elections were actually held as promised in 1956, the Viet Minh appeared certain to win; it had far more political strength than all other political groups in Vietnam put together.

Under considerable pressure from China and the Soviet Union, both of which wanted to reduce international tension at this time, the Viet Minh decided to accept the Geneva Accords, and gamble by giving up territory in the short run in order to win control of all of Vietnam in 1956. The division of Vietnam was supposed to be purely temporary. Who was likely to prevent the two sections from being rejoined in 1956? The French had given up hope of retaining control in any part of Vietnam. The United States and the State of Vietnam had made it clear at the Geneva Conference that they did not like the results of the conference, which recognized Communist control of North Vietnam immediately, and created a likelihood that the Communists would take the South in two years. Both the US and the State of Vietnam conspicuously refused to promise
that they would obey the Geneva Accords. (A great many books say that the US promised that it would not violate the Accords. This is an error based on careless misreading of the US declaration at the final session of the Geneva Conference, July 21, 1954). However, the State of Vietnam was virtually powerless, and the influence of the United States was quite limited. The American leaders themselves were by no means confident that they would be able to prevent the reunification of Vietnam from occurring on schedule in 1956.
APPENDIX IV


“The story you are about to see is based on true events that took place in north Viet-Nam in 1952-54, unseen by the outside world, Ho-Chi-Minh’s communists imposed a reign of terror throughout the countryside to eliminate the opposition. This led to the massive exodus of one million refugees to the Republic of South VietNam. All actors and extras in the film are actual refugees, portraying their own tragic story. In recent years, after the Fall of Saigon, more than one million boat people in search of freedom have continued to flee VietNam. Nearly half have died at sea. Their desperate journeys confirm the tyranny that still exists under communist rule, and the urgent need for the people of the free world to learn from their experience.”
Tableau de verbes français

Ce tableau vous aidera à comprendre les temps et les modes de verbes français. [This table helps you understand the tenses and modes of the French verbs.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSONNEL*</th>
<th>IMPERSONNEL*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicatif</td>
<td>Subjonctif</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>futur</td>
<td>(subjonctif)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRÉSENT</th>
<th></th>
<th>impératif</th>
<th>conditionnel</th>
<th>infinitif</th>
<th>part. présent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>imparfait</td>
<td>[imparfait du subjonctif]</td>
<td>imp. passé</td>
<td>cond. passé</td>
<td>inf. passé</td>
<td>participe passé</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PASSÉ</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>passé composé</td>
<td>subjonctif passé</td>
<td></td>
<td>cond. passé</td>
<td>inf. passé</td>
<td>participe passé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[passé simple]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plus-que-parfait</td>
<td>[plus-que-parfait du subjonctif]</td>
<td></td>
<td>[cond. passé 2]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[passé antérieur]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Les modes personnels se conjuguent pour les différents sujets, tandis que les modes impersonnels n'ont qu'une seule forme.

Les (parenthèses) indiquent des formes au présent qui peuvent aussi marquer le futur.

Les formes en [crochets] sont l'équivalent littéraire du verbe dans la boîte en dessus (par exemple, le passé simple est l'équivalent littéraire du passé composé).
APPENDIX VI

Map of California State University, Long Beach.
APPENDIX VII

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22 Sept 1975</td>
<td>A currency reform was decreed for the conquered area, whereby 500 old South Viet Nam Piastre were exchanged for one new South Viet Nam Dong (SD) and issued by the Bank of Viet Nam, resulting in an Official Rate of SD1.51 per U.S. Dollar, which was announced on October 2nd. (WCY 1984, p.814)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Jul 1976</td>
<td>North and South Viet Nam were officially united under the name of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. The dual currency structure was continued, but separated at the demarcation line located at the cities of Hue-Da Nang. The exchange rate established between the North Viet Nam Dong and the South Viet Nam Dong was ND1=SD0.8, and was applicable only to the authorized trade transactions and travel between the two regions. (WCY 1984, p.814)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second currency change occurred on May 3, 1978.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 May 1978</td>
<td>A uniform currency, the Viet Nam Dong (D) was introduced, with an Official Rate of D2.66358=SDR1, equivalent to D2.17=US$1. The conversion rate for the North Viet Nam Dong and the South Viet Nam Dong into new currency was ND1=D1 and SD0.80=D1, respectively.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data were provided by International Economics, a website of The Chinese University of Hong Kong.
CURRICULUM VITA

VietHang Thi Pham was born, grew up, and finished high school in Saigon, the former capital of the Republic of South Viet-Nam. Having been relocated to America in 1989 as an immigrant, she fully committed to higher education starting in 1996. In December 2003, VietHang received a Bachelor’s degree, double majoring in Literacy and Composition and in Language and Linguistics at California State University, Long Beach. In December 2006, she earned a Master’s degree in Rhetoric and Composition, and in May 2009, a Master’s degree in Teaching English as a Second Language at California State University, Long Beach. VietHang was admitted to the Rhetoric and Composition doctoral program at the University of Texas at El Paso in Fall 2011. In May 2013, after finishing the program’s coursework, she returned home in Orange County, California, and has resumed her teaching at Cerritos College, Norwalk. VietHang’s time has been dedicated to her studying, researching, and teaching. After her graduation, she will resume her writing projects to finish Grammar Within Reach, a grammar textbook for fresh(wo)man and grammar phobes, A Cloud Rider, an immigrant’s biography capturing her life in America in the first year of her resettlement, A Non-Existent Angle, story of a Vietnamese mother who lived and raised her children in the thickness of her detrimental mental illness, An Apparel Community, a fiction reflecting human live, thoughts, and behaviors, and Bestbarking Friends, a fiction dedicated to dog and human friendship.

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This dissertation was typed by: VietHang Thi Pham/ Phạm Thị Việt-Hằng, the author.