

# Case Study Research in Applied Linguistics



Patricia A. Duff

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## PREFACE

As a graduate student at the University of Hawaii, I learned a great deal about important advances made in the field of second-language acquisition (SLA) on the basis of a relatively small number of well-documented cases of learners of English as a second language (ESL) by scholars there and at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), where I later studied. The researchers included Evelyn Hatch, Roger Andersen, Thom Huebner, John Schumann, Richard Schmidt, Charlene Sato, and their colleagues and students. Their case studies were accessible, intriguing accounts of individual language learners that had a huge impact on the young subfield of SLA within applied linguistics. Vivid, complex, and theoretically interesting, the case studies were a valuable means of illustrating developmental issues connected with learning another language.

Although my master's degree research was a large cross-sectional study of the syntactic development of English language learners from Mandarin and Japanese backgrounds that did not involve the in-depth analysis of any particular case, I began a study of a Cambodian learner of English in 1986 (see Chapter 1). The impetus for this book came from that research and my earlier graduate studies. My first publication on case study research methods in SLA (Duff, 1990) convinced me that some of the complexities of applied linguistic research can be studied and presented meaningfully within the fullness of cases, and that an introductory text on case study research was needed in our field. Despite the many intervening years and delays in completing this manuscript, no other applied linguistics textbooks on this method have been written.

Yet, increasing numbers of case studies have been conducted by graduate students and established scholars without coursework or dedicated



applied linguistics research methods texts to guide the process. This book does not argue that case studies or other qualitative approaches to applied linguistics research are the best or most valid approaches. The research methods one employs may be a matter of personal preference, but choice of method is also determined in large part by the questions one seeks answers to, the body of knowledge that already exists on that topic, the domain of inquiry and context, and the methods the questions lend themselves to. I learned from Brian Lynch at UCLA that all research has an underlying epistemology and ontology as well as methodology. Researchers using case study may approach it from different philosophical positions and may also favor different approaches to data analysis, accordingly.

This book is intended for undergraduate and graduate students and other scholars wishing to understand more about case study methods and also about their application in research on language learners and language users in a variety of contexts. Since the number of case studies conducted each year is growing steadily, this book provides an overview, but is not a comprehensive survey of all significant existing case studies. In addition, although I have tried to include case studies of people's encounters with languages other than English, most of the research reported involves teachers and learners of English in Canada and the United States, since I am most familiar with that work. Finally, applied linguistics is more than language teaching and learning, but most of my examples are related to these topics. The book should contribute to our understanding of the complexities, difficulties, and discoveries of how people learn or are taught another language. However, it is my hope that applied linguists working in other subfields will find the book useful as they undertake their own studies and evaluate those by others.

This book could not have been published without the supreme patience and goodwill of the series editor, Susan Gass, and the publishing team at Lawrence Erlbaum, especially Cathleen Petree. Sue and Cathleen have prodded me along for many years, since I first started — and stopped — then restarted this project (many times over). I also acknowledge the inspiration of my former professors and their own case study research, referred to earlier. However, my interest in case studies was piqued even before that, by the celebrated urban researcher and anthropologist Oscar Lewis. His 1961 book *The Children of Sanchez*, an “autobiographical” account of five



members of a poor family in a Mexico City slum, had an enormous impact on me as a young teenager and convinced me of the power of case study.

To my many graduate students over the years (and particularly my Amigos group), and to colleagues near and far, friends and family, I give big thanks not only for putting up with me while I talked endlessly about this project, but also for giving me excellent examples of case studies to draw upon. I thank Kathi Bailey, Wayne Wright, and especially Lourdes Ortega for their helpful comments on an earlier version of the manuscript. My wonderful research assistant, Sandra Zappa-Hollman, helped me with library and editorial tasks, and provided some graphic support as well, for which I am very grateful. To my former case study participants and research collaborators, I also extend my deep gratitude. Additional special thanks go to Nancy Duff, Jane Duff, Nelly and Bonnie Duff, Linda Corrigan, Maria Andersson, and Duanduan Li for helping me to keep a balanced perspective and for allowing me to drone on, far too often, about my fears that I would never finish. As an indication of just how long its incubation has been, I started the manuscript using WordStar, later migrated to WordPerfect, and in more recent years switched to Microsoft Word. In the meantime, I have acquired multiple revised editions of the same case study and qualitative research methods textbooks, which have been updated every few years. My own research epistemologies have also shifted in the interim, from (post)positivist to interpretive.

Funding for my research and for the writing of this book has been provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the (U.S.) National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation. I am very grateful to both organizations.

Finally, I dedicate this book to my loving parents, Lawrence and Elizabeth Duff, who have looked forward to its completion perhaps most of all. I also acknowledge, with deep thanks, their unwavering encouragement and support over the years, and my father's assistance with my case study of the Cambodian learner of English presented in Chapter 1.

Patsy Duff

*Vancouver, Canada*

# 1

## CASE STUDY RESEARCH IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

### *1.1 Introduction*

The goal of this book is threefold: (1) to help readers understand the methodological foundations of case study research as one type of qualitative research, (2) to examine seminal case studies in the area of second-language (L2) teaching, learning, and use, in order to illustrate the approach across thematic areas, and (3) to provide some guidance, on a more practical level, about how to conduct, evaluate, and write up case studies in applied linguistics. The book expands on the overviews provided in other methods textbooks and also draws on the burgeoning literature on qualitative research, and case study in particular, from the fields of psychology, sociology, and education primarily (e.g., Bromley, 1986; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003a, 2003b).

I begin, as many case studies do, with a concrete example, a narrative description of a language learner named “Jim,” with short interspersed excerpts of his oral English language production at different stages in time. Details are provided about my original analysis of Jim’s L2 development and the rationale for that focus. Then, for the more general purposes of this book, a fuller description of Jim’s life and circumstances is provided, including his experiences learning English and his challenges in Canada as a government-assisted refugee, a new immigrant, and an English as a second language (ESL) student with a wife and young children to support.

Later in this chapter and elsewhere in the book, I reflect on other kinds of analysis that could be conducted with an individual such as Jim, especially given current directions in our field related to language and literacy socialization, family multiliteracies, identity and language learning, and sociopolitical and economic aspects of immigration. I also consider the strengths and limitations of case studies such as this one.

Although the case presented here is that of a language learner, many of the same principles of case study research apply when conducting other kinds of case studies within the realm of applied linguistics, including descriptions and analyses of an individual language teacher or learner, a school, or a country's language policies, communication in a multilingual workplace setting, language shift in a postcolonial small-scale society, and so on.

## 1.2 *Case Study of a Language Learner: "Jim"*

In February 1986, Jim\* was a 28-year-old Cambodian man who had just been granted refugee status in Canada, where he and his family had lived for two months.† The experiences leading up to that significant milestone in his life included harrowing years of being on the run in Cambodia and later living and working at refugee camps in Thailand, while seeking opportunities to immigrate to North America. Two years earlier, in 1984, as the following excerpt reveals, he had married a Cambodian woman who had already obtained a United Nations refugee number that would allow her and her (first) husband and their two infants to leave Thailand. However, before their immigration could be finalized, her husband was killed by Thai soldiers, a tragedy that had a positive outcome for Jim. By marrying this young widow, Jim gained refugee status in the place of her late husband, and thus the chance of a new life in Canada. His wife's chances of immigration were increased because Jim knew some English, which was rewarded by the Canadian Embassy interviewers at the time, according to Jim. In Excerpt 1, Jim describes some of this background:

\* In previous publications I referred to Jim as "JDB," my abbreviation for the Cambodian king, Jayavarman the Seventh (pronounced Jayavarman Dibrombul in Khmer), who built Angkor Wat (e.g., Duff, 1993a, 1993b).

† Approximately 18,600 Cambodians entered Canada in this way between 1980 and 1992, according to one Canadian source ([http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/ecp/content/cambodians\\_khmer.html](http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/ecp/content/cambodians_khmer.html)).

**Excerpt 1\***

Four person [in my family]. My wife, her husband die. I was arri(ve) in Thailand on [1984] so I haven't raison [food rations] and UN number ... and impossible interviews other embassy, so I must to live with my wife. Because my wife, her husband die by Thai soldier, and my wife has the UN number and raison [rations] ... So now I no + children but my wi(fe) has two children ... four year and two year ... After that I was to + examination at IRC + International Committee Red Cross + after that and + was pass a + examination and + teacher Cambodian-Cambodian teacher at school + in Thailand ... In Cambodian, when I stop study, because my fatherland has big fighting, so I must stop ...

*[There are four people in my family. My wife's husband died. I arrived in Thailand in 1984 and I didn't have food rations or a United Nations number, and it was impossible to get interviews at other embassies, so I had to live with [marry] my wife. Because my wife's husband, who was killed by a Thai soldier, had a UN number and rations. So I have no children but my wife has two children, a four-year-old and two-year-old. After that I had an examination at the International Red Cross and passed and became a Cambodian teacher at school in Thailand. In Cambodia, I had to stop studying because of the war ...]*

Jim's story was a fascinating but sad one that over the next 20 years would take various twists and turns, not unlike those of others who immigrate under similar circumstances. During his first winter in Canada, Jim began to take intensive English courses five hours a day at a government-sponsored adult education center and had just begun to deliver newspapers in my neighborhood, a new job for him and his first in Canada. I myself had just moved back to Canada from Asia and had a new job as well, teaching university courses on L2 education and acquisition. Jim's wife and young children spoke no English. I met Jim a few times that January and February, and asked whether he would agree to participate in this research about his English language learning. I would pay him to discuss various

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\* Transcription conventions: + is a short untimed pause; ... denotes talk I have ellipsed; commas mark sharp rising intonation; timed pauses appear as numbers, in seconds, for example (1.0); (x) denotes unclear word; (xx) denotes two unclear words. Words in square brackets are provided by the researcher to aid interpretation of the utterance or excerpt; a half-attached dash represents a false-start or self-correction; a colon represents lengthening of a sound or syllable. For other conventions, see Chapter 5, Table 5.2.

topics and he would have a chance to practice his English. He was very willing to comply. I had other interactions with him outside of this study as well, taking his family grocery shopping sometimes, helping them in emergencies, offering Jim additional paid employment (e.g., gardening), and attending Cambodian cultural events with his family. He was part of a small, rather fragile community of Cambodian refugees who had recently arrived in Canada. Like many of them, he was anxious about not having had any contact with, or news from, relatives in Cambodia for nearly 15 years, despite many attempts to locate them.\*

At that stage in Jim's life, it was unclear how his oral English would develop over time, with his daily exposure to English in classes and his encounters with a range of English speakers in the community, such as government agencies, charities, neighbors, church members, and the general English-speaking public. Would he exhibit developmental patterns similar to those reported in Huebner's (1979, 1983) influential case study of a Hmong-speaking Laotian immigrant (refugee) in Hawaii named Ge? Whereas Ge had received no formal English instruction in either Laos or Hawaii, Jim had studied some English. Would he therefore make more rapid progress in his acquisition of English based on his intensive language courses and contact in the community?

Huebner's longitudinal study focused mainly on Ge's evolving nominal reference system, which involved learning to use appropriate articles with nouns and supplying required sentence subjects in English (e.g., with specific/definite nouns or with information known to the hearer). For example, he tended to produce utterances of the following type (with the sentence topics, minus the definite article *the*, shown in italics):

*chainis* tertii—tertii fai. bat *jaepanii* isa twentii eit. (1-224)

[*The Chinese man* is thirty-five. But *the Japanese* is twenty-eight.]

en *beibii*, isa in da moder, en da owder broder. (1-115)

[And *the babies* were placed between the adults.]

(Huebner, 1979, p. 27)

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\* He received his first news from Cambodia a few months later, in 1986, when he received a letter and a small, wrinkled black-and-white photo that his parents had sent of his family. Although they had survived the war, several of them were in need of medical treatment and Jim began sending them medical supplies. Jim subsequently (in the 1990s) made two trips back to Cambodia.

Huebner detected several traits in Ge's interlanguage (his developing second-language system) that reflected the topic prominence of his first language (L1), Hmong, especially in his earliest stages of development (see Chapter 3 for more details). The traits were similar to those I observed in Jim and among Chinese and Japanese learners of English in other studies I was conducting (Duff, 1985, 1988): the use of *have* constructions that functioned as existentials and introducers of new information/noun phrases (e.g., *Have four man in my family* [There are four people in my family] and *On hill have much man* [There are many people on the hill]); the omission of subjects that could be guessed from context; and the frequent use of a topicalizing device (e.g., *As for me*, I am a student).<sup>\*</sup> In Ge's case, the topic marker was the invented (but copula-like) form "isa," as in *gow howm, isa plei da gerl* [When we went home, we would visit with the girls] (Huebner, 1979, p. 27).

Thus, Ge and Jim had rather similar personal and linguistic backgrounds, with topic-prominent L1s that influenced their English. My research was not meant to be a replication of Huebner's study examining the exact same sets of structures. I had two goals: (1) to examine Jim's English as it became less topic prominent and more subject prominent over time (Duff, 1993a), and (2) to consider task-related variation in his performance (Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Duff, 1993b). Here I mainly discuss observations related to the first goal. The study, which took place over a 2.5-year period, yielded about 36 hours of interviews and hundreds of narratives about Jim's personal experiences, and other kinds of elicited language production, including picture descriptions, picture-sequence narratives, and Cambodian folktale narratives (Duff, 1993a, 1993b).

A brief sketch of Jim's background as an English language learner helps to contextualize his observed language development. The son of a school principal, Jim had started studying English at a public school in Cambodia at the age of 15. Six months later, the Khmer Rouge, under Pol Pot's leadership, closed all schools and began a campaign of genocide that resulted in the killing of more than a million Cambodians and the devastation of the country. Some years later, Jim had studied English for about six months in refugee camps and had also attended a teacher-training course

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<sup>\*</sup> Duff (1985) and Sasaki (1990) reported similar findings with Japanese learners of English.

offered partly in English in order to learn how to teach Cambodian\* to Cambodian children in the camps. He was also briefly involved in developing materials for English teaching, just prior to his emigration. Along the way he had learned some Thai and Vietnamese as well.

At the time we met, Jim was able to communicate in English at a fairly basic level, as Excerpt 1 illustrates, able to convey information about his family, the politics and history of Cambodia and Thailand, and aspects of his education and prior training. His English was heavily accented phonologically, influenced by his L1, Khmer (Cambodian). His English grammar also bore the traces of his L1 and other developmental factors, and certain recurring patterns were evident. Many aspects of his English interlanguage, as in *My wife, her husband die* and *I no children*, reflected topic-comment constructions found in many topic-prominent languages, including Khmer (Duff, 1985, 1993a; Givón, 1979; Huebner, 1983; Li & Thompson, 1976; Rutherford, 1983; see Mitchell & Miles, 2004, for a recent review of some of this work).† As described above with respect to Hmong, Chinese, and Japanese, these languages often feature the use of a sentence-initial noun phrase (e.g., *My wife*) or locative representing “old information” (e.g., *In Cambodia*) that is followed by a topic marker or a pause and rising intonation, and then an expression (comment) containing “new information” related to the first semantically or pragmatically, but not necessarily linked to the topic syntactically (e.g., *her husband die*). Word order is somewhat flexible and pragmatic, determined by the focus of the sentence, and unambiguous grammatical subjects are often omitted. Grammatical morphology is minimal. English and other subject-prominent languages, on the other hand, generally have syntactic devices for connecting subjects to predicates (e.g., subject-verb agreement) and have subordinate clauses, complex verb phrases, passives, and other constructions that either do not exist or are not as widely used in topic-prominent languages (Li & Thompson, 1976). As a result, those elements are

\* I use the terms Cambodian and Khmer interchangeably here to refer to the language.

† As reported in Duff (1993a), Khmer (Cambodian) belongs to the Mon-Khmer family. It is a non-tonal, isolating language with flexible, pragmatic word order reflecting topic-comment sentence organization (Ehrman, 1972). A typical topic-comment sentence is *kasaet nih kee lú? craen cbap* (*newspaper this, they sell many copy* = “they sell many copies of this newspaper”). The unflected word *mian* marks both existence and possession in the affirmative: *niv nih mian menuh craen peek* (at here have people too many) [*menuh* = people, *craen* = many, *peek* = too (excessive), *craen peek* = too many].



often challenging for speakers of other types of languages, such as Khmer, when learning English.

Although there were definite signs of progress in Jim's English over time (Duff, 1993a, 1993b), certain structures had not fully developed (yet), such as his use of the existential expression *there is/are ...*, as in *There are a lot of people on the beach*. Early on, he frequently used the verb *has* (or *has-a*) instead, in the following ways: *Has many people on the beach*, *On beach has many people*, and *Hasa many people on beach*. Over time, he began to use a new form, *they has*, productively, as in *In the countryside they has no fruit* or *In the refugee camp they has a university*; this usage revealed a greater grammatical sensitivity to providing a subject before *has*, and not just locative phrases like *In the countryside* or *In the refugee camp*. Finally, by the end of the study he began to use *has* less in this ambiguous existential/possessive manner and more with animate subjects as a possessive verb (e.g., *the man has glasses*). In the last interview, a new sort of existential construction, somewhat more like a colloquial English form, also appeared: *'S many people on the beach*, with the initial *'S* functioning like the remnant of an ellipted *There's* (or *They has?*), but Jim never really articulated the “dummy” subject *there*. His former usage of *has* (*In Phnom Penh now hasa international ban(k)*) had not disappeared, however. Subject-verb agreement and other verb morphology (tense-aspect) and syntax were still inconsistent or nontarget-like, although developments were evident within some systems, such as negation, auxiliary verbs, and the copula (*is*) (Duff, 1993a, 1993b; Coughlan & Duff, 1994).

Excerpts below illustrate Jim's general English development from 1986 to 1988. Excerpt 2, within three months of his arrival in Canada, reveals his pervasive use of topic-comment constructions (main sentence topics are shown in boldface) and an interlanguage possessive/existential *has* in this description of a beach scene with a man sitting in a chair with some children playing nearby and other activities depicted (see Duff, 1993a). The expression *has-a NP\** (shown in italics below) was often used to introduce new noun phrases into the discussion, as in “*Has a lot of bird* flying on the sky” (Duff, 1993a).

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\* NP = noun phrase.

### Excerpt 2 (February 1986)

**The old man** is- the old man who + has the glasses and + with- and with hat + they sitting on the chair. **They** reading a newspaper, and **behinds him** *has the three children*, one girl and two s- two boy. Maybe **they** dancing because the radios turn ons- turn ons about music. And **they** happy. **They** dancing. And **over his head** *has a + ball?* Maybe ball yes. And **behinds far away + him** *has a + a lot of people*. Some peo- uh **some people** + they sitting + on the chair, and **some people** they standing ... And + **right-his-hand beside + at the sea**, *has the: + six bot*. Yeah six bot, + and (3.0) **a big boat** *has people sitting a lot of* and **some people** they - jum- uh they jum + into- the water and swimming. Maybe **they** very happy. + And **over the sea** *has + alot of bird* + flying on the sky. + And he is uh + **cameraman**, + they take un: potogross to (a/the) strongman + run into the sea ...

*[The old man with the glasses and hat is sitting on the chair. He's reading a newspaper. And behind him there are three children, one girl and two boys. Maybe they were dancing because the radio was playing music. And they were happy and were dancing. And there was a ball over his head. And far behind him there were many people, some sitting on chairs and some standing. And to his right, there were six boats at sea. And a lot of people were sitting in the big boat. And some people were jumping into the sea and swimming. Maybe they were very happy. And there were a lot of birds flying in the sky over the sea. And a cameraman takes photographs of a muscular man running into the sea ...]*

When describing the same picture two and a half years later (in 1988), after more than two years of nearly full-time English instruction and residence in Canada, Jim produced the text in Excerpt 3:

### Excerpt 3 (June 1988)

**The picture** on (x) on the beach (9.0). ((laugh)). I don't know what's happen. Maybe **the people** they go to - on vacation. (4.0) ... (8.0) (x) **cameraman?** ... Yeah. He's take- he:: he took a picture. I think maybe **the lady** (4.0) she's going drown on- in the water, and he (1.0) need(s) some help. (4.8) ... (11.0) Ah **this man** I thin(k) he- he's not happy I think because **all the children** play (0.6) to make a noisy. (3.0) Ah I dunno ...

*[The picture is on a beach. I don't know what's happening. Maybe the people are on vacation. There's a cameraman taking a picture. I think maybe the lady is going to drown in the water and she needs some help. I think this man is not happy because all the children are playing noisily. I don't know ...]*

In this excerpt, there are no uses of the existential *has* but still many topic-comment expressions (e.g., *this man I think he's not happy*). A few other verb forms are included, though they are not grammatically correct: *the lady, she's going [to] drown and [s]he need some help*. The excerpt is marked by many very long pauses, limited information about the content of the picture, and relatively simple grammar.

One of the aspects of the study I was interested in, beyond basic grammatical development, was how well the tasks themselves served as tools for eliciting language and demonstrating developmental patterns. Coughlan and Duff (1994) attributed Jim's apparent reticence on this particular task, as judged by his hesitations and lack of description of the picture, to its artificiality. It was the duplication of a description of exactly the same picture two years earlier (what we called "same task, different activity"). However, the picture description task was now recontextualized in an extended interview during which much more significant matters were discussed, such as Jim's latest employment, family matters, current politics in Cambodia and traditional Cambodian values and tales. In that discursive context, this simple, repeated picture description task seemed to catch him off guard, to trivialize the discussion.

Consider, for example, Jim's much more fluent and ample narration of a traditional Cambodian story about "the good wife" later in the same interview, as shown in Excerpt 4. He had just skimmed the short story (in Khmer) in a Cambodian library book I showed him, which contained traditional folk tales, and then told me the following story; it was therefore quite a different task from the repeated picture description just before.

#### **Excerpt 4 (June 1988)**

Many years ago has two families a rich family and one family has one daughter. An another one has one son and when their chil- child grow up, they marrieds. And then's uh the- that's parent is uh die- dead. Yeah

but + the wife is a + very good she is very good wife. But the husband is not good. He spends lot money he is still- because their parent has + many thing the rich family has many land and too much- lot money, and he + he didn't find other job or or make other money. No just stay home or for a walk. And then's a they are going to uh they are poor because uh something that their parent gave, is noth- is he- he spend + + at all. But his wife is a good wife and + she she still have some + some uh gold that she hides. She never let her husband. If- if she give to her husband or she told her husband maybe her husband + took them to sell to make money and spend. And them . . . she hides some gold and some money and after her husband said "Oh we have no more money and then we have to go to a countryside and make a farm." And his wife + she- she didn't tell her husband yet until the husband work in the farms very hard and maybe he sick and then his wife sold some gold and get the money but some medicine some food- good food for her husband. And her husband said "How can you make money from?" And first time she she- she didn't tell her husband yet. Just- just tell him "You don't want to know about that." And her husband still ask her and she said "That money if I sold the gold." And she [=he] said "How can we still have the gold?" And she said she hides some gold that her husband + they- he- he didn't know. And then her husband think oh he's fault because uh . . . he- before he's a rich family. After his parent and now he's poor. But . . . his wife's good wife. She still keep some money on her. And then next time he- he- he won't go he won't do like that before anymore and she work hard- and he work hard yeah and then + he become a rich man again.

Here, then, in contrast to his fragmented description of the beach scene in Excerpt 3, Jim is able to introduce a number of characters and present a sequence of events in this story: parents in two rich families, whose children got married; the lazy husband squandering his inheritance after his parents died; the man was therefore forced to move his family to the countryside to farm the land; but he then demonstrated that he could actually work hard for a living—so much so that he got sick. Jim also uses reported speech between the husband and wife about the wife's secret stash of money (gold) she had kept hidden from him but produced after he proved he could work hard, and when the money was genuinely needed to feed the family. The story then concludes with a "happy ending": that the husband has now changed his ways and works hard, thanks to his wife's

careful planning, and in this way he becomes rich again—not from his parents’ riches but his own labor.

The next two paired excerpts, again more than two years apart, illustrate features of Jim’s morphology (e.g., tense-aspect marking) and phonology as well as his topic-comment structures. Excerpt 5 took place in March, four months after Jim’s arrival in Canada. He was describing Cambodia’s recent history of war and colonization.

#### Excerpt 5 (March 1986)

I think in Cambodian when the Japan into Cambodian all the people gets + they don’t likes. And then the Vietnam they don’t like too. But French, *no problem* because French big country, they don’t up pick up + everything for people- from people. *No problem*. And then the soldier backs and has embassy in Cambodian *no problem*. Until- until United State into Cambodian + *no problem* for people Cam- the Cambodian people. Because the United State has a big country. They don’t worry about + Cambodian people. *No problem*. And United State + give a lot of + special thing. Car airplane and alot of gun in Cambodian. (From Duff, 1993a)

*[I think when Japan came to (invaded) Cambodia, Cambodians didn’t like them. And they didn’t like the Vietnamese either. But with the earlier French (colonizers), there was no problem because France is a big country and they didn’t take everything from the Cambodian people. And then the soldiers returned [to France] and had an embassy in Cambodia and there was no problem. Then the United States came into Cambodia but that was no problem. Because the United States is a big country. They didn’t worry about Cambodian people. And the United States gave Cambodia a lot of special things: cars, airplanes, and a lot of guns.]*

In Excerpt 5, Jim did not use past tense inflections and he used very few verbs. In their place were prepositions like *into* and *back* for actions, such as invading, entering, or returning to a country. The chunk phrase *no problem* (shown in italics) was used very frequently as well—five times in this short excerpt. (When I later learned there was a restaurant in Phnom Penh called Café No Problem, I realized that Jim was not the only Cambodian to use this expression so freely.) Topic noun phrases and comment

phrases were loosely collocated to show their association, for example, *French big country* [France is a big country or The French have a big country]; *French, no problem* [The French weren't a problem].

In Excerpt 6, more than two years later, Jim explained how he now sent money back to his family in Cambodia. This explanation is also linked to the narrative in Excerpt 4 about how wives in the countryside customarily kept family assets (money, gold) at home, rather than at a bank.

#### Excerpt 6 (June 1988)

Yeah becau(se) uh in + Cambodian in the countrysi(de) 'z no ban(k). No, money or go(ld) jus(t) keep on their wice [wife]. No ban(k). If we has money + jus(t) keep in the hou(se) + an + an the wi(fe) stay home ... but I don('t) have mo- money in the ban(k) ... if I has my 's lot of money I keep in the international ban(k) ... because in Phnom Penh hasa- now hasa international ban(k). Yeah, one- one two two national ban(k) in Phnom Penh an(d) + then my brother tol(d) me + if I has money in international ban(k), I jus(t) go to + national ban(k) an tell them I wanto give money to my parent ... (Adapted from Duff, 1993a)

*[Because in the Cambodian countryside there are no banks. Wives keep money or gold. If we have money we just keep it in the house and the wife stays home ... but I don't have money in the bank ... If I have a lot of money I keep it in the international bank ... because Phnom Penh now has one. There are two national banks in Phnom Penh, and then my brother told me that if I have money in an international bank, I just go to the national bank and tell them I want to give money to my parents ... ]*

Two and a half years after his immigration, as shown in Excerpt 6 (and earlier in Excerpt 4), Jim still did not demonstrate the development of the existential construction *there is/are*. Instead, he produced *in the countrysi(de) 'z no ban(k)* [There are no banks in the countryside], and *in Phnom Penh hasa- now hasa international ban(k)* [There is an international bank in Phnom Penh]. He generated several verbs (*go*, *keep*, *have*, and the irregular past *tol(d)* and negative verb phrases), but his pronunciation—especially the deletion of word-final stops or the plural *-s*—made it difficult to determine the extent of his word-final morphology. Later in the same interview, he produced utterances like: *Last year I live on [x]th avenue and then I move to front of [x]th avenue* and *That guy live near*

*the [hospital] he work at a factory. Another guy live in southwest he go to school he has twin children.* Thus, past tense and other inflectional morphology (e.g., third-person *-s*) were mostly missing.

The simple transcription system I use in Excerpt 6 shows Jim's omission of final consonants (especially the stops *d*, *t*, and *k*, shown in parentheses), something Sato (1984, 1990) also found in her study of the English development of two Vietnamese brothers in Philadelphia. Because English morphemes tend to fall in consonant clusters word-finally, for many learners whose L1 reflects the universal tendency for open-syllable structure (a consonant followed by a vowel), the nonproduction of morphemes does not necessarily indicate the nonacquisition of those morphemes, but that there is a *production* problem (see also Lardiere, 2006). It shows how phonology interacts with, or may mask, morphology.\* Sato reported similar kinds of crossover or "level-leaking" in the encoding of past tense morphology. She also found that, because learners could unambiguously establish time reference through preposed adverbials like *Yesterday I go*, they omitted many tense-aspect markers. Thus, topicalizing, scene-setting adverbial phrases interact with or reduce the need for tense-aspect morphology. These observations underscore the importance of incorporating multiple levels of linguistic analysis—phonological, morphological, syntactic, and discursive—in second-language acquisition (SLA) research of this nature.

### 1.3 *Some Reflections on this Case Study*

At the end of my analysis of Jim's L2 development in the early 1990s, it became clear to me just how lengthy and challenging it can be for an adult refugee whose education has been interrupted in his teenage years to become fully proficient in English and gainfully employed—even without significant health problems or trauma. A comparison of Excerpts 2 and 3, or 5 and 6 did not immediately reveal a substantial change in Jim's proficiency. Had his English become fossilized?

My original analysis and interpretations were that many linguistic factors, not to mention social and historical ones, conspired against Jim's rapid acquisition of English syntax:

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\* Writing samples from the same speaker or written error detection tasks would help clarify the situation.



- Language universals related to the syntactic and semantic conflation of forms for possession and existentials in many languages, encoding both in just one *be*-like or *have*-like form
- Transfer from his L1, with one *has*-like form serving both functions, and topic prominence
- The functionality of certain chunks he had adopted, such as *no problem*, and his topic-comment constructions, however simple, which made clear what he was talking about
- The redundancy in English that tolerates the deletion of grammatically necessary morphology without obscuring meaning too much, when temporal adverbs are used, for example
- The existence of semantically empty forms like dummy subject *it* or *there* in English (*It's raining* and *There's a child on the beach*), which are not salient in speech and therefore tended to be dropped and perhaps unnoticed by him (Duff, 1993a)

However, I could not conclude that there was across-the-board fossilization in his English development, as his English did seem to be slowly improving in various ways (see Han, 2004; Long, 2003).

On the basis of this single longitudinal case study of Jim, I could not predict whether other Cambodian learners in a similar situation would exhibit the exact same developmental patterns or difficulties as Jim because I do not know how linguistically typical Jim was as a Cambodian learner of English (see Chapter 2).<sup>\*</sup> Yet there is reason to believe that other Cambodian learners of English might also manifest similar syntactic patterns related to the conflation of the possessive *has/have* and the existential use of *has/have* for the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic reasons given above, and in Duff (1993a), and certainly would share some of the same phonological and grammatical influences from Khmer. To understand the uniqueness or typicality of Jim's development, a larger study would be necessary, such as a cross-sectional study of many Cambodian learners of English or additional in-depth longitudinal case studies of several learners. With supplementary studies (not necessarily longitudinal or as in-depth)

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<sup>\*</sup> I acknowledge, with thanks, Wayne Wright's (personal communication, September 28, 2006) recent examination of Jim's utterances to help me answer this question. Based on his extensive knowledge of Khmer and the Cambodian community in the United States, Wayne observed that Jim's utterances were "absolutely" typical of Cambodian ESL and "translated to perfectly acceptable Khmer."

with learners from the same background, it might be possible to assert that specific interlanguage structures (e.g., the use of *have* vs. *has* as the default generic existential verb) were typically shared by Cambodian ESL learners in their earliest stages of development. If similar developmental trends were reported across even three Cambodian learners of English in a multiple-case study—a refugee with interrupted education, an instructed university student, and a child learner—or even three people in circumstances similar to Jim’s, it would add to the robustness of the original observations. Conversely, if their development exhibited different patterns, that would beg the question: Why *those* patterns and not the ones Jim produced?

Most qualitative SLA research conducted in the 1970s to the 1990s, and especially SLA case studies such as mine, reflected a rather narrowly linguistic, positivist, or postpositivist orientation to research.\* Although qualitative, the analyses were fairly unidimensional and less holistic than case studies in the social sciences and education generally are now, but they did look at clusters of related structures in learners’ language (e.g., related to topic prominence), and not single features in isolation or outside of their discourse contexts. Microcontextual features such as task environment or discourse context were in some studies examined carefully, but larger macrocontextual social, political, and cultural factors were often minimized. My study of Jim fits this characterization, as a functional analysis of his oral production (and inferred development or acquisition) of particular constructions or forms over time, and the relationship between the elicitation tasks used in the longitudinal study and the types of language that were generated. Multiple perspectives of his language development or of his settlement in Canada (e.g., mine, his teachers’ or children’s, his own, or his government case worker’s), different types of data (e.g., not only his oral language data but written production or grammaticality judgment tasks too), and his language use across a variety of natural contexts (e.g., when interacting with newspaper customers, social

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\* According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), positivism is “the epistemological doctrine that physical and social reality is independent of those who observe it, and that observations of this reality, if unbiased, constitute scientific knowledge” (p. 632). In contrast, postpositivism is “the epistemological doctrine that social reality is a construction, and that it is constructed differently by different individuals” (p. 632). Palys (1997) notes that the latter is “less rigidly realist” (p. 422) than positivism, and it acknowledges that verbal reports can contain valid and reliable data.