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Taboo Language and the ESL Learner : An Ethnographic Study

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Taboo Language and the ESL Learner: An Ethnographic Study

by

Monica Waterhouse

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Arts degree in Education

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To those who nurtured...

INSPIRATION

BODY

MIND

SPIRIT

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Abstract

Taboo language (essentially ‘bad’ language) is a fixture of many aspects of contemporary English communication. Yet frank discussions regarding this topic are typically absent from ESL (English Second Language) classrooms. This ethnographic study, guided by a conceptual framework layering Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice with insights from a multiple literacies perspective, seeks to understand something of the complex interplay of ESL learner/user identities and power relationships they experience as they relate to English taboo language. Findings indicate that taboo language literacy practices are taken up in hybrid and sometimes contradictory ways as ESL learners/users cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. Identities-in-transition become sites of tension and struggle, situated within the structures of symbolic domination, as ESL learners/users resist and appropriate different literacy practices in strategic struggles for legitimacy and symbolic power. By raising awareness of the social implications of taboo language, this research encourages ESL praxis more in tune with the identities and empowerment of ESL learners.

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Taboo Language and the ESL Learner: An Ethnographic Study

Chapter 1: Introduction

This research story began long before I started my thesis proposal, long before I embarked on the Master's program even. It began with Sally.

In the late 1990s I was teaching English as a foreign language in a high school in Beijing, China and Sally was one of my most promising grade twelve students. Like many of her classmates, this bright, cheerful young woman tacitly carried the hopes of her entire family on her shoulders. All the family's resources (financial and otherwise) were poured into Sally's education so that she would excel academically, gain acceptance to a university abroad, and ultimately, after graduating, have the means to support her family. The key to unlocking all of their dreams was the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), gateway to higher education for the international student abroad. In her grade twelve year, Sally's life was consumed by her efforts to prepare for the TOEFL and her need to achieve a high score this crucial test, thus leaping the first hurdle en route to her admission to a foreign university.

In the late winter of that year, Sally decided to try a "practice" TOEFL exam. Part of this mock-exam was a question that required her to write a persuasive essay. She chose to argue the position that high school students should not have boyfriends or girlfriends. Several weeks later, Sally showed up at my office distraught. She was in tears and she could hardly tell me what was wrong between her sobs. Eventually, she managed to explain that one of the arguments she had made in her persuasive essay was that students should not have romantic relationships because they might be distracted from their studies by pressure to engage in sexual relations. Unfortunately, instead of "sexual relations", she had used a new word she had acquired – "fuck".

I was stunned to hear this word, even as it was whispered, from sweet, little Sally. However, she had used this taboo word quite innocently, having inferred its meaning from seeing it used in context in an English film. She honestly thought it was an appropriate word to use in a formal essay and was horrified when she had learned the real connotation of the word. Despite my best efforts, Sally was inconsolable. I reminded her that it was merely a practice exam and would not affect her chances of getting into university, but this did little to help. Sally worried that she might again unwittingly make such an error when the stakes were much higher. I empathized with Sally and wished there was something I could do to save her, and others like her, from such traumatic experiences with English taboo language. This is where my research story began.

I became more and more aware of instances where my students, who were studying English as a second language (henceforth ESL), used English taboo language. How should I react when my ESL student playing the handsome prince in the class production of Cinderella tells the wicked stepsister, “Fuck you, bitch!”? And what of the ESL student who breaks her pencil and exclaims, “Oh, Jesus Christ!”?

It seems most any seasoned ESL instructor has anecdotes like these ones drawn from my own teaching experience that tell a tale of ‘bad’ language’s intrusion into the classroom setting. This ‘taboo’ language, whether in the form of vulgarity, swearing, or one of its many other guises, crops up time and again. If students do not bring it into the classroom themselves, then teaching resources, when using authentic materials, do.

Just how to deal with this subject can be a dilemma for ESL educators and some might choose to avoid the issue altogether. However, this may be doing their students a disservice. Consider the following excerpt taken from Ogulnick’s (2000) collection of essays describing personal accounts of the intersection of language and identity. This story

of marginalization is told by Rita E. Negrón Maslanek, a Puerto Rican immigrant to New York, and an ESL learner:

My mother, who strongly disapproved on my father's teaching method, would certainly have been disappointed had she heard me exchange curses several years later with a fourth-grade classmate in a heated argument. Tired of being taunted, I armed myself with a grown-up curse I had heard my father use several times. "You sonamonbeech," I proudly yelled. "You what?" she asked. I repeated, "You sonamonbeech." The girl and a small crowd of spectators began to laugh at me. "You dumb spic, you mean *son of a bitch*," she said. It was then that I realized that the grown-up curse I had been saving for a special occasion was not one long word, but four separate words. I was humiliated, but felt more anger toward my father for his stupid pronunciation and the embarrassment it had caused me. (p.36)

The reality is that we, as members of a society with very strict rules of engagement, do not dissociate people from the language they use. We make very definite judgment calls about people based on what they say and how they say it (Andersson & Trudgill, 1992). Crooks (1999) echoes this opinion saying "By neglecting to address Taboo English, students are ultimately put at a disadvantage. . . . They are not being sufficiently prepared as empowered communicators in their target language" (p. 27). As educators, we have a responsibility to guide our students' development both academically and socially. As researchers we would be remiss if we ignored such an important issue. That said, I would like to embark on this thesis with the caveat that it is certainly *not* my position that ESL teachers should attempt to teach their students to swear fluently or that they start building their courses around a taboo language lexical syllabus. However, I do believe we should not

‘not teach’ taboo language and that we should avoid casting ourselves in the role of the moralist who forbids our students access to this particular genre of language.

Using an ethnographic approach, this study seeks to gain a better understanding of the role of taboo language, in its various guises, within the community of adult ESL learners. It questions the social meanings English linguistic taboo may have for the adult ESL learner, the power relationships they experience, and the impact it might have on a learner’s identities as they cross linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

While there has been some linguistic investigation of the phenomenon of taboo language in first language research contexts, a review of the literature reveals that relatively few studies have been done in second language and even fewer in English second language specifically. Even so, several significant findings have emerged. Here I begin by demonstrating how I am using the terms ‘ESL learner’ and ‘taboo language’ in relation to past research. I then go on to review the literature describing the link between taboo language and culture, the current roles of taboo language in the ESL classroom, and the sociological implications of English taboo language use. I conclude with an overview of second language acquisition research that demonstrates a recent turn towards a concern for the construction of the learner’s multiple identities within broader social structures and relations of power.

2.1 - *Problematizing the Native Speaker*

As soon as one begins reading literature in linguistics or second language research it is immediately apparent that the term *native speaker* is often used unproblematically. Its meaning is assumed in a common-sense way. Yet, this term never sat quite right with me and I hesitated to use the terms *native speaker* and *non-native speaker* in my own writing. This uneasiness was not unwarranted. Working within a Bourdieuan framework, we should “beware of words” (Bourdieu as cited in Grenfell & James, 1998, p.158) and “the language we use in research itself should be viewed with suspicion” (p.158). This healthy suspicion “of the language which is used ... draws attention to the inequalities of class, status, gender, race, and age which are expressed in it” (p.180). Here I wish to make the common-sense view of the so-called ‘native speaker’ unfamiliar by outlining the academic debate surrounding these terms and why they are so controversial.

First, the very definition of the native speaker is problematic. Just what it means to be a native speaker is highly contested. The lack of clarity arises in part from a plethora of definitions coming from various perspectives in language study, such as psycholinguistics, linguistics, and sociolinguistics, which highlight various aspects of the NS in attempt to meet their respective needs. One of the earliest offerings comes from Bloomfield where the native speaker definition is misleadingly straightforward: the first language a person learns is their native language and so they are a native speaker of that language (Christopherson, 1988; Cook, 1999; A. Davies, 1991a). Yet linguists find the native speaker elusive as they seek an authentic representative of the “native language” since there are variations even between native speakers of the same language (Coulmas, 1981). Another popular definition is drawn from Chomsky where a native speaker of a language is “someone who has an intuitive sense of what is grammatical and ungrammatical in the language” (Kramsch, 1997, p.362). However, Kramsch (1997) adds to this by writing that “it is not enough to have intuitions about grammaticality and linguistic acceptability and to communicate fluently and with full competence; one must also be recognized as a native speaker by the relevant speech community” (p.363). In her opinion, the native speaker is nothing more than an ideal, an “imaginary construct” that “corresponds less and less to reality” (p.363). It is this sociolinguistic position, which understands the notion of native speaker as merely a social construction that has managed to gain and maintain a great deal of legitimacy. Along with other researchers interested in investigating language and identity issues (Amin, 2002; Marx, 2002), I feel this conception of native speaker is most useful to understand the social ramifications of language.

Yet even as I successfully pinned down operationalized definitions of the native speaker and the non-native speaker, by virtue of having invoked Bourdieu’s conceptual

apparatus to frame my study, it would be incommensurate to actually utilize one. I present Bourdieu's framework in some detail in Chapter 3, but for now sufficed to say that his way of thinking adamantly rejects categorizations and seeks to overcome the politics inherent in binary oppositions (Mahar, 1990). Because it is implicit to the term native speaker that people either are or are not a native speaker (Rampton, 1990), a politicized binary is set up where there is an unequal distribution of linguistic power. Furthermore, reducing a discussion of power relationships to only two groups, native or non-native speaker, precludes any consideration of how there may be unequal power relationships within the ESL speaker/users community itself.

The issue of the native speaker is further complicated by A. Davies (2002). He brings in the post-colonial idea of "world Englishes" and initiating a frank yet highly political discussion of whether speakers of English as their first language in former colonies (e.g. India) are also native speakers. It becomes increasingly clear that reducing the options down to just two categories, native speaker or non-native speaker, is a blatant oversimplification in a linguistically complex, globalized reality. Although he explores a number of perspectives, A. Davies focuses his attentions on a sociolinguistic understanding of the native speaker because in this way a "reconciliation of the different uses of the native speaker idea can be achieved" (A. Davies, 1991a, p.8-9). He concludes "that native speakerness is an issue of self-identification [and] social affiliation, integrated with high quality fluency as demonstrated in the usage of idioms, curses, [and] jokes" (1991b), and that ultimately one is a native speaker of one's own code, but the decision of what to call that

code lies with the speaker (1992). Thus, the notion of native speaker is bound together, at least in part, with *self-identification*¹ as well as proficiency.

Similarly, Rampton (1990) points out that the very words “native speaker” have a number of connotations which tend to mix up ‘what the speaker knows’ with ‘who the speaker is’. He proposes what he feels are more exacting terms: *expertise* (to describe language proficiency), and *inheritance* and *affiliation* (to describe linguistic social group identification). Quite obviously these terms have not managed to usurp the legitimacy and general acceptance of the traditional term *native speaker*. And I will not be helping the coup in this thesis by substituting Rampton’s new terminology, but neither will I use the traditional terms. Instead, I will call the co-participants in my study exactly what they are: ESL learners and *ESL users* (this term I appropriated from Cook, 1999) who are, at least in my mind, speakers in their own right.

2.2 - The Nature of Taboo Language

In Robinson’s (1996) discussion of taboo in the translation of texts, he asks: How do we learn, as children, what is taboo? The answer seems quite straight forward in first language acquisition; an “etiquette of dirty words” (Jay, 1992, p.30) is learned as a function of our primary cultural socialization through family, and educational and religious institutions. But what of the second language learner? The question is now far more provocative and of great concern to those in the ESL teaching profession. How do ESL learners discover what is taboo in English? And what exactly is meant by the term *taboo language* anyway? In this section I provide a brief overview of the way taboo language has

¹ Here I write “in part” because this process of self-identification cannot be assumed to be completely autonomous, outside of the existing social structures and relations of power. So, through I invite the co-participants to self-proclaim their linguistic status, it is understood that this process is not entirely up to the co-participants themselves to decide. Many factors, external to the individual, inevitably influence any self-identification choice.

been defined in other research and then explain why I problematize such attempts to narrowly define the notion of taboo language.

The adoption into the English language of the word *taboo* can be traced back to Polynesia and the explorer Cook's interaction with the people of the Island of Tonga and came into use to describe "a sociocultural phenomenon associated with superstition, custom, and hierarchical power" (Hongxu & Guisen, 1990, p.63). Taboos originate from any socially disallowed topics and these social taboos lead to sanctions against certain linguistic expressions. Typically these taboo subjects are associated with "the creator of life, the beginning of life, and the end of life; that is God, sex, and death" (Shipley, 1977, p.153).

In fact, linguistic taboo is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of types of so-called 'bad' language. In its broadest interpretation the sources of taboo language include not only expressions associated with religion, sex, and death, but also a range of body functions (particularly excreta), negative epithets, and in some languages such as Arabic, even matters deemed "unpleasant" (e.g. crime) within the particular culture (Al-Khatib, 1995).

My stance in this thesis resists fixed definitions and neat categorizations of taboo language; however it is worth mentioning that much of the literature on the topic seeks to do just this. In one such example, Mercury (1995) makes an attempt to produce a taxonomy of taboo or offensive language and distinguishes between six types based on the intended function of the expression. These are cursing, profanity, blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarisms, and expletives. Here I provide a brief explanation of each. Curse expressions are used as verbal assaults with malicious intent that harm should come to the targeted individual (e.g. *Eat shit and die!*). Profanities are those words and phrases that use religious terminology in a secular or flippant way (e.g. *Jesus, it's hot!*), while blasphemous expressions use the same

“to denigrate God, religious icons, and religious institutions” (p.30) outright (e.g. Salman Rushdie was labeled a blasphemer by the Islamic clergy for his novel *The Satanic Verses*). Obscenities are expressions that are restricted by the general public (e.g. *fuck*, *damn*) and vulgarisms are similar expressions that are restricted because they are considered crude (e.g. *piss*, *crap*). Finally, expletives are emotionally charged interjections (e.g. *Shit!* I stubbed my toe!).

Similarly the generic term *swearing* begs some clarification because it is used in two different ways. Traditionally it has meant “the act of adding a linguistic formula ... as a formal appeal to God (or to a deity or something held in reverence or regard) in witness to the truth of the statement” (Abd el-Jawad, 2000, p.217), for example swearing on the Bible in a court of law. However swearing is also understood to have a second meaning, that is essentially any act of using ‘bad’ or tabooed language. It is this second definition of swearing that is of concern in this study.

For my purposes, I am hesitant to narrowly define taboo. After all, what may be taboo for me, may not be taboo for others participating in the study. According to Crooks (1998), “a great deal of relativity surrounds taboo language” and Jay (1977) corroborates writing, “regardless of how we or others attempt to define dirty words, the ultimate decision of the dirtiness of words relies on the communication context itself, i.e., the speaker, the listener, the social-physical setting, and the topic of discussion” (p.236). He cautions researchers of taboo language against “considering dirty words in an inflexible way” (p.245). Thus, by dictating the meaning of taboo for co-participants in this study, I feared limiting the richness of the empirical materials that might be collected. Therefore, I employed the term taboo language in the broadest sense possible, allowing any of its many interpretations to enter into the discussion.

2.3 - *The Language – Culture Connection*

Theorists in various fields of language study are well aware of the interconnectedness of language and culture (Al-Khatib, 1995). As Brøgger (1992) boldly puts it “culture, it repeatedly turns out, is language, and language is culture” (p.135), and furthermore, language and culture are reflective of dominant values and ideologies of a society. Taboo language is similarly married to culture. Therefore, linguistic taboo or swearing also mirrors the cultural patterns, values, and ideology of a language community (Burgen as cited in Crooks, 1998) and reveals cultural norms of how a given speech “act is/should/can be interpreted” (Abd el-Jawad, 2000, p.237). From these notions has grown an increasing concern for the teaching of language set within the context of culture recognizing that language proficiency requires both grammatical and communicative competencies. I pick up this thread of thought again in the section entitled *Taboo Language: Sociological Aspects* below.

The intertwining of taboo language and culture is certainly not solely a contemporary phenomenon. Language watchers recognize that linguistic taboo has a long history which is closely tied to social taboo. Thus, not only is taboo socially situated in its connection to culture, it is also historically and geographically situated, dynamic in time and space (Al-Khatib, 1995; Crooks, 1998; Hongxu & Guisen, 1990; Jay, 1977; Shipley, 1977; Wachal, 2002). In my mind this dynamic nature greatly problematizes any attempt to include this sort of vocabulary in the ESL teaching and yet at the same time necessitates it. To demonstrate this point, consider this example taken from Crooks’s (1998) thesis introduction: in the United States there has been a shift in the acceptability/taboo-ness of the following terms *Coloured, Negro, Black*, to the currently acceptable *African-American*. Confusing the issue further is the continued presence in some cultural texts and discourses of the highly tabooed racial epithet *Nigger*. In certain communities the word *Nigger* has been reclaimed,

legitimated, and in this process, has come into common use and lost its 'tabooness'.

Similarly, Wachal (2002) notes that the twenty dictionaries he surveyed are inconsistent in their descriptors of the degree of taboo-ness of swear words, so that relatively strong words in some dictionaries are listed as merely 'slang' in others. Addressing such subtleties of language with ESL learners is a daunting challenge to meet, yet ESL educators like Crooks are hopeful and believe it is possible.

Taboo language exists in some form in almost all languages (Al-Khatib, 1995). It has become "a pervasive part of conversational English in the latter half of the 20th century in North America ... [and] an important aspect of contemporary communication" (Mercury, 1995, p.29). It has inundated not only our daily conversation, but also our popular culture media. Whether in books, magazines, newspapers, music, radio, television, movies or on the Internet, taboo language repeatedly finds its way into the text (Crooks, 1998; Mercury, 1995; Shipley, 1977; Wachal, 2002). Jay states (as cited in Crooks, 1998), "Taboo language is an integral part of popular culture, and one cannot understand popular culture without knowledge about unconventional language". Left to their own devices to puzzle out these various manifestations of taboo language, it is little wonder that ESL learners often get a distorted idea of its appropriate use. This, in turn, has the potential to lead to embarrassing situations and marginalization of the ESL speaker. Of equal concern is the powerful impact popular culture texts can have on identity (Mackie, 2003). This is demonstrated specifically in relation to swearing in an example drawn from data collected in 2002 during my pilot-study (Waterhouse, 2003) where francophone CÉGEP students had a strong identification with the stars of English rap music and a desire to emulate the 'street language' and fashion of the rap music culture.

2.4 - Taboo Language in the ESL Classroom

The ubiquitous nature of taboo language in modern times is irrefutable and demands the attention of the ESL teaching community. Yet, typically frank discussion of taboo language is absent from the ESL classroom and is certainly not included in ESL curricula. Gareis (1997) observes that educators often completely avoid controversial topics, such as swearing in movies, which denies the use of a wide range of authentic English materials in the classroom. Accepting the premise that a lack of taboo language knowledge (not necessarily for use but for comprehension purposes) leaves ESL speakers in a somehow marginalized or disempowered position, she and others (Claire, 1998; Crooks, 1999) suggest that taboo language can and should be addressed in a pedagogically sound manner to effect a linguistic empowerment of ESL learners; going so far as to offer guidelines as to how this might be accomplished.

One empirical study which investigated how taboo language might be incorporated into a school's ESL program is Crooks's (1999) action research study which offered an elective course in Taboo English to a group of adult Asian ESL students, using guidelines set out by Claire (1998), and then attempted to gauge their reactions. He found that the participants were interested and enthusiastic about studying taboo because they recognized the value it had; offering them a broader understanding of the host culture, increasing their sensitivity to English linguistic taboo, and thereby improving their communicative competence with native speakers. There appears to be tension between the learners' needs and desires regarding taboo language learning and the willingness of instructors and administrators to address these. In my own pilot-study conducted in the fall of 2002 (Waterhouse, 2003) conversations with a university ESL student and her instructor revealed a similar discord. This resistance on the part of educators, likely stems from a number of

factors. Local educational policy can be restrictive in this regard (Andersson & Trudgill, 1992), and of course the affective nature of taboo language is undeniable, thus some instructors may not be comfortable discussing taboo language with their students. Yet, imagining that ESL learners will never need to deal with taboo language is a naïve point of view.

Given that some learners will appropriate this genre of language into their own English vocabulary, and given Crooks' (1998, 1999) strong arguments that ESL learners need to comprehend the taboo language they encounter, it is time ESL research addressed these issues. Taboo language is important because it serves a variety of sociological functions as well as communicative functions. It is a mistake to suggest that swearing and other forms of taboo language are simply affectively neutral "routine fillers" (Abd el-Jawad, 2000). It is these sociological functions that I turn to now.

2.5 - Taboo Language: Sociological Aspects

Since the 1980s, the field of second language education has been preoccupied with the communicative language teaching movement. In their discussion of the theory of language underlying the communicative language teaching approach, Richards and Rodgers (2001) cite several researchers who forged the paradigmatic shift from a focus from linguistic competence to a focus on communicative competence. In doing so, the elements of awareness of and attention to the social *context* of language in use were brought to the forefront.

The work of Hymes's, who coined the term 'communicative competence', is seen in sharp contrast to Chomsky's theory of competence which draws a clear distinction between linguistic knowledge and the ability to use language within a certain context (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). One communicative competence dimension Hymes identified is "whether

(and to what degree) something is *appropriate* (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated” (Hymes, 1979, p.19). This drives home my earlier point that language is value-laden and ESL speakers require a sensitivity to register, particularly with respect to taboo language. However, in addition to having a command of the ‘rules of use’ (Hymes, 1979), Norton (2000) also draws attention to the tacit power relations in such rules. She argues:

It is equally important for [language learners] to explore whose interests these rules serve. What is considered appropriate usage is not self-evident (Bourne, 1988), but must be understood with reference to inequitable relations of power between interlocutors. (p.15)

Moreover, her research with immigrant women in Canada, demonstrates the necessity to understand these power relationships not only in terms of language proficiency differences, but along the lines of gender, class, and ethnicity as well. I revisit Norton’s work in greater detail in a later section of this chapter entitled *Identities & Power in ESL Research*.

Canale and Swain describe communicative competence, identifying four dimensions, namely; grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). In particular, sociolinguistic competence is especially relevant to a discussion of taboo language use by ESL learners. In this case, “sociolinguistic competence refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationships, the shared information of the participants, and the communicative purpose for their interaction” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.160). However, Canale and Swain’s model does not place the power dynamics implicit in these “role relationships” at the centre of the issue. It assumes an equal relationship between interlocutors based on an idealized native speaker. Alptekin (2002) offers a similar critique of this traditional model suggesting that

because sociolinguistic competence is based on the myth of an idealized native speaker and an awareness of social context (i.e. “norms, values, beliefs, and behaviour patters of a culture” (p.58)), then “learning a foreign language becomes a kind of *enculturation* [emphasis added], where one acquires new cultural frames of reference and a new world view, reflecting those of the target language and culture” (p.58). Yet I would argue that Alptekin’s position elides the possibilities of *how* this sociolinguistic competence gets taken up by learners. Complete enculturation to the target language/culture and destruction of the first language/culture is not inevitable if a foreign language learner expects to achieve sociolinguistic competence. Learners create a *third* culture position as they reinvent themselves through a new language, a new language, and a new voice².

In addition to communicative competence, Halliday (1975) suggests that language learning involves gaining an awareness of the particular *functions* language serves. He describes seven basic functions of language that young children use as they learn a first language. Of these, I see the “*personal*” function as particularly relevant to a discussion of taboo language. The personal function of language is “to express [one’s] own uniqueness ... [and] ... expressions of personal feelings, of participation and withdrawal, of interest, pleasure, disgust, and so forth We might call this the ‘here I come’ function of language” (Halliday, 1975, p.20).

While swearing in one’s first language can be used for a variety of communicative functions such as, adding emphasis, verifying the truth of a statement, insulting, and expressing a range of strong emotions; there is some indication that taboo language use may

² For examples of this renegotiation of self across languages and cultures, see Allendoerfer’s (1999) study describing the creation of “Vietnamerican discourse” by Vietnamese immigrants in the United States or Marx’s (2002) self-study of her identity “*revolution*”, as opposed to evolution, as she moved between English/American and German/Germany contexts. Immigrants Roumiana Ilieva (2001) and Mari Haneda (2002) also share personal accounts of reinventing their identities and voice in cross-cultural interactions.

serve a more specialized sociological function for ESL speakers. In a study of linguistic taboo in Jordanian Arabic, Al-Khatib (1995) observed code-switching and code-mixing served a euphemistic function for those speakers who spoke English. Substituting English for an Arabic linguistic taboo was a way to reduce embarrassment for both the speaker and the hearer. Similarly, this “distancing function” of code-switching also seemed to allow Chinese students studied by Bond and Lai (1985) to discuss affectively sensitive topics more freely in their second language than in their first. These findings are preliminary and both researchers recommend replication of their studies to better understand the complexities of this phenomenon. As Cook notes, the distinctive process of code switching “has complex rules, partly at the pragmatic level of the speaker’s and listener’s roles, partly at the discourse level for topic, and partly at the syntactic level” (1999, p.193). Still, these studies certainly reinforce the case for the affective aspect of taboo language and how a lack of appreciation for the emotive power of these words in the target language may create cross-cultural difficulties for language learners.

Another sociological function of using English taboo language competently may be to give ESL users a sense of belonging in the native speaker group, recalling from the earlier discussion of the concept of the native speaker that membership in the native speaker group can be seen from the ESL learner’s perspective as an act of affiliation and self-identification with a particular linguistic social group (A. Davies, 1991b; Rampton, 1990). According to A. Davies, “such acts of cursing, & doing it properly, are proof of a high degree of fluency in any language” (1992). However, becoming a member of any social group is not only a matter of proving one’s worthiness and choosing to affiliate with it. There is also the question of acceptance into the group by existing members. I now turn to a discussion of how group membership and swearing seem to be related in this respect.

Swearing has been shown in a several studies to act as a linguistic device that identifies in-group membership (Abd el Jawad, 2000; Beers-Fagersten, 2000). I would suggest that the corollary is that if swearing can be used to mark some people for inclusion in a certain group or community, then there are necessarily 'Others' who are left excluded. Bolinger (1980) discusses various forms of "secret language" which promote solidarity "and intra-communication while excluding outsiders ... EVERY language is a secret language when it is used to exclude people who do not understand it" (p.47). Though the word "fool" in the following example is a rather mildly tabooed word in English, it still serves as a poignant demonstration of the way in which language can isolate the second language speaker. This story is again told by Rita E. Negrón Maslanek (In Ogulnick, 2000):

One of a few early memories I have of my school days occurred in the second grade. We were learning the poem 'Trees' by Joyce Kilmer. I was to read the line, 'Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree.' I did not know what 'fool' meant, so I raised my hand and asked the teacher. For some reason unknown to me, my teacher scolded me without answering my question. Then all the kids broke out in laughter. I can still remember the public humiliation and sense of isolation I felt when I was trying so hard to fit in. That episode taught me not to ask questions when I did not understand a word. It also taught me that being funny was a ticket to being popular. Apparently the other children were not laughing at me, they laughed because I had made the teacher angry by asking her to define a 'bad' word. To them I was a hero for being a smart alek, and unlike my teacher, they believed this to be a positive characteristic. So I embarked on my new mission – to be accepted and liked by making others laugh. In this way, I thought, I could shed my 'spiciness,' that part of me which separated me from the rest. (p.37)

The notion of achieving in-group membership is an intriguing notion when applied to taboo language. I posit that English taboo language may also be a “secret language” which serves to identify some speakers for inclusion and others, like ESL learners, for exclusion.

Findings of my pilot-study (Waterhouse, 2003) seem to support this social use of swear words, but also hinted that the mystery of the “secret language” of English linguistic taboo is carefully guarded by the so-called “native speaker” group. This alluded to a sense of ownership on their part, and suggests that even when ESL learners understand taboo language or use it correctly, there is no guarantee of acceptance into the in-group. The threat of rejection still exists. Beers-Fagersten (2000) also found that “a speech community imposes restrictions and standards on the swearing behavior of out-group members”. This is in keeping with Janicki (as cited in R. Ellis, 1994) and Mercury (1995) who both state that there are permission rules associated with the use of taboo language by ESL speakers which are imposed by the in-group. As Bolinger (1980) notes, “the powerful make the rules” (p.114) about what is the polite or correct thing to say or do. Also, violation of these rules has social consequences in which the ESL speaker may be judged negatively (Bond & Lai, 1985; Mercury, 1995). The concepts of permission rules, passing judgment, and the power relationships involved with these are further complicated by the characteristics of the interlocutors including such factors as education level, age (Al-Khatib, 1995; Waterhouse, 2003), gender (Beers-Fagersten, 2000; Jay, 1980, 1992), home region (J. Johnson, 1991), and race (Beers-Fagersten, 2000).

2.6 - Identities & Power in ESL Research

These preliminary findings have led a number of first (Abd el-Jawad, 2000; Hongxu & Guisen, 1990) and second (Al-Khatib, 1995; Bond & Lai, 1985; Mercury, 1995) language researchers to recognize that various issues, particularly sociocultural issues, associated with

taboo language warrant further investigation. Indeed, despite the lack of empirical studies, taboo language is a popular topic of discussion and debate in the areas of language studies and language education. However, to date the focus has largely been of the sociolinguistic ‘nuts and bolts’ of taboo: What is it? How is it used? How can this be taught? Inquiries have not addressed concerns related to social identities and taboo language. With this study I sought to move beyond the simple pragmatics of how to teach taboo and attempted to get at the deeper social *meanings* of linguistic taboo for ESL learners.

The importance of language use situated in *social context* has also been marginalized by traditional structuralist investigations of language. Critics take issue with the fundamental distinction drawn between language and social context by such linguistic theories as Saussure’s *langue* and *parole* or Chomsky’s *competence* and *performance* and hold that language cannot be understood independently from social context, nor linguistic skill independently from practical competence (Bourdieu, 1982/1991; Brøgger, 1992). In his sociological critique of linguistics, Bourdieu (1977) summarizes the needed shift in thinking, thus:

In place of *grammaticalness* it [namely, Bourdieu’s sociological perspective on linguistics] puts the notion of *acceptability*, or, to put it another way, in place of “the” language (*langue*), the notion of the *legitimate* language. In place of *relations of communication* (or symbolic interaction) it puts *relations of symbolic power*, and so replaces the question of *meaning* of speech with the question of the *value* and *power* of speech. Lastly, in place of specifically linguistic competence, it puts *symbolic capital*, which is inseparable from the speaker’s position in the social structure.

(p.646)

Norton-Peirce (1995) echoes the critique of a dichotomous approach to language study, insisting that this distinction elides the interdependence of the social world (including the power structures embedded within it) and the learner as a socially and historically situated being. She holds that the complex interaction of these elements has been seriously neglected in second language acquisition (henceforth SLA) research in the past. Similarly, voices from critical literacy theory have advocated a move in ESL research towards a greater concern for the intersection of identities and power relationships both within and *without* the classroom (Mackie, 2003).

Thus recently, themes of identities and the notion of *subjectivities* have appeared with increasing frequency in theoretical literature dealing with ESL teaching and learning (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001; Hansen & Liu, 1997; McNamara, 1997; Norton, 1997, 2000; Norton-Peirce, 1995). SLA is beginning to turn its attention to the learner as socially and historically situated, and has embraced a poststructuralist “conception of social identity as multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change” (Norton-Peirce, 1995, p.9). Furthermore, there is an acknowledgement of the multiple identities students have *simultaneously* which shift in importance with the social context (e.g. parent, friend, student, employee, etc.) (de Pourbaix, 2000). For researchers, these revelations are raising questions about the relationship between language and the construction of identities and subjectivities. Specifically this trend is evident in Allendoerfer’s (1999) study of ethnic identity with Vietnamese immigrants in America, Mackie’s (2003) personal exploration of the construction of racial identity within ESL teaching, Ogulnick’s (2000) collection of essays on the intersection of language and identity, Masny and Ghahremani-Ghajar’s (1999) ethnographic case study of Somali children’s weaving of multiple literacies, and Bonny Norton-Peirce’s (1995) work on social identity with Canadian immigrant women.

Interestingly, Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001) note that “traditionally, the key linguistic means of negotiation of identities discussed in the bilingualism literature [was] codeswitching” (p.250), a phenomenon discussed earlier in relation to sociological functions of taboo language. However, to the best of my knowledge, no research has yet considered the role taboo language specifically might have in the formation of ESL learner identities.

As identity discourses have come to the forefront of second language research, also highlighted are questions about power relations that exist within ESL institutions. We begin to see “the classroom as a kind of microcosm of broader society, representing both its ideology and its power structure” (James, 2000, p.40). Yet at the same time, Norton (2000) draws traditional SLA research out of the classroom and calls for theorists “to address the inequitable relations of power which structure opportunities for language learners to practice the target *outside* [italics added] the classroom” (p.18). Even as early as 1980, Bolinger, in his book *Language – The Loaded Weapon*, builds a powerful argument for the unfettered interrogation of language. In his opinion, we must be free to “talk about language” without fear, without limits because a frank examination of language is essential to understand how it influences our thinking and behaviour, how it is used as a tool for building our lifeworlds, and its roles in control, manipulation and structuring of wider social contexts of correctness, truth, class and dialect, and the maintenance of power relationships. Also, Brøgger (1992) writes that certain “lexical, and stylistic uses may, for example, serve as a means of social control – a way in which elite groups may underscore their authority and assert their power” (p.48). This led me to question the influences, in particular, of taboo language and what part it might play in mediating the day-to-day interactions that ESL learners experience and what power relationships are implicated in that interaction. While some research (Beers-Fagersten, 2000; Crooks, 1998) has begun this interrogation of taboo language, the issue has

been merely touched on in passing. A focused investigation to build on this preliminary work was needed.

For the ESL learner, language and identities are bound together within the wider relations of power within society. This study tries to understand something of the complex interplay of this triad as it relates specifically to taboo language.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

In this chapter I present the conceptual framework that guided my thesis research. Selecting a paradigm was an important first step because it frames not only the ontological and epistemological assumptions made, but also the inquiry strategies and vocabulary to be used. Here, I will explain my rationale for selecting Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual framework and offer a brief overview *Theory of Practice*. Then I demonstrate the relevance of his thinking to a study of the intersection of taboo language, identities, and power while at the same time explicating in greater detail his specific concepts. I conclude with a description of how I layered aspects of a multiple literacies perspective with Bourdieu's conceptual tools to gain a better understanding of the meanings taboo language may have for ESL learners. The final section of this chapter reveals the specific research questions that are central to this research inquiry.

3.1 - Rationale and Overview of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

I am certainly not the first to consider Bourdieu's theories, methods, or models to frame second language research concerned with issues of identities, power, and the reproduction of hierarchical power structures within society. Lin's (1999) study drew on Bourdieu's notions of *cultural capital*, *habitus*, and *symbolic violence* to discuss the role of English lessons in Hong Kong schools "reproducing or transforming" the social worlds of students. Also, Bourdieu's constructs of *symbolic power*, strategic language use, and struggle for *legitimate language competence* helped Maxim (1998) to illustrate an alternative, critical German second language pedagogy designed to authorize the foreign language student. Finally, the classic example of a SLA researcher invoking the work of Bourdieu is Bonny Norton-Peirce (1995, 1997) in her explorations of the link between

language learning and the social identity of ESL learners³. This thesis also situates itself within the Bourdieu's conceptual framework.

Bourdieu's thinking resonates with me for two reasons. Firstly, I admired his resistance to being pigeon-holed into any one particular paradigm himself. He draws on a wide range of intellectual traditions and has been variously named, amongst other labels, a Marxist and a poststructuralist, yet he contends that this classification of academic thinking "may slow or even inhibit intellectual invention" (Mahar, 1990, p.32). However, when pushed to describe Bourdieu's academic endeavors, Mahar, Harker, and Wilkes (1990) borrow Bourdieu's own term, *generative structuralism*. This brings me to the second and more important reason I felt an immediate affiliation with Bourdieu's framework when I encountered it for the first time in Norton-Peirce's work. As a novice researcher, I wrestled at length with the epistemological problem of reconciling structure and agency. Generative structuralism offers a way to resolve these apparently diametrically opposed positions. It is Bourdieu's effort to reconcile purely subjectivist perspectives (that characterize constructivism), which give primacy to the *agency* of the individual, with objectivist perspectives (that characterize structuralism), which emphasize the key importance of societal *structures*. Thus, ontologically, generative structuralism accepts the role of the individual subjectively constructing their own social worlds, but also acknowledges this reality construction happens within the constraints imposed by the historical and social structures of society (Mahar, et al., 1990). This seemed of particular relevance to this research project where participants were likely to be limited by more than one subordinate societal status as ESL speaker, immigrant, visible minority, or as women. More recently,

³ I elaborate some of Norton-Peirce's findings below as they relate to my explanation of Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus and the current study.

Grenfell & James (1998) write that Bourdieu labels his own work ‘constructivist structuralism or structuralist constructivism’ and he explains his position thus:

By structuralism or structuralist, I mean that there exist, within the social world itself and not only within symbolic systems (language, myth, etc.), objective structures independent of the consciousness and will of agents, which are capable of guiding and constraining their practices or their representations. By constructivism, I mean that there is a twofold social genesis, on the one hand of the schemes of perception, thought, and action which are constitutive of what I call *habitus* [italics added], and on the other hand of social structures, and particularly of what I call field and of groups, notably those we ordinarily call social classes. (ibid.). (p.156)

The concept of *habitus*, as the critical generative structure in the reproduction of social structures has led critics to view Bourdieu’s theories as purely “reproductionist” (Collins, 1993; Giroux as cited in Harker, 1990; Lin, 1999). However, *habitus* should also be viewed as “a power of adaptation” to the outside world (Reay in Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 141) that also opens possibilities for agency, resistant strategies, and the transformation of social worlds. By introducing this component to his conceptual apparatus, Bourdieu has discovered a middle ground between two epistemological extremes by simultaneously taking up subjective and objective positions in a dialectical relationship and considering both agency and structure, but giving primacy to neither.

Bourdieu’s worldview is actualized in his empirical research through a conceptual apparatus he calls the *Theory of Practice*. A key to understanding Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice is that it is not so much a theory per se, but rather a method or a way of thinking (Mahar, et al., 1990). The key elements of his method are summarized in the *generative formula* (Mahar, et al., 1990, p.7) which reads: (Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice.

He cautions us however not to apply this formula generally, rather to use it as a heuristic device which must be uniquely applied to each *field*⁴ with its own historical circumstances. Furthermore, for Bourdieu, the way to understand the habitus of an individual and the field itself is to read the generative formula from right to left; in other words to start empirical research by attempting to understand practices which will, in turn, point to strategies chosen by the habitus in the struggle for capital within the particular historical conditions of the field in question (Mahar, et al., 1990).

3.2 - Conceptualizing Language, Power, and Identities

Bourdieu (1982/1991) uses an economic analogy to conceptualize the way language and power coexist in the world. Within this framework, linguistic expressions are considered *linguistic products* that have a certain value within a given *linguistic market* or social context. This means that practical competence for ESL learners involves knowing which linguistic products will be valued in certain linguistic markets. As previously stated, taboo expressions are clearly value-laden and can thus be considered a type of linguistic product in Bourdieu's terms. Moreover, within linguistic markets or fields, there is always a struggle for resources or *capital* which exists in a variety of forms such as economic capital (material wealth), cultural capital (style, ways of speaking, knowledge), or social capital (status, authority, connections) (Bourdieu, 1983/1986). Thus language, and an understanding of taboo language in this case, can be seen as a kind of cultural capital or *linguistic capital* that

⁴ Here *field* is understood as a dynamic site of strategy and struggle for symbolic power. "Each field is semi-autonomous, characterized by its own determinate agents..., its own accumulation of history, its own logic of action, and its own forms of capital" (Postone, LiPuma, & Calhoun, 1993, p.5). It is "a structured system of social relations at a micro and macro level" (Grenfell & James, 1998, p.16). Taken together, all overlapping fields make up the *social space* or overall *social world* (Mahar, Harker, Wilkes, 1990, p.9).

an ESL learner brings to any given field, recalling that the value of that capital can vary with the specific linguistic field in question.

Bourdieu also suggests that all language use is *strategic* (1982/1991). In Norton's research (1995) this strategic use of language helped expand our understanding of ESL learner motivation to speak by including the social world and factors external to the learner, resulting in the idea of *investment* rather than simply motivation. In doing so, she sheds light on the complex relationship between language learning, identities, and power. For my purposes I asked what kinds of investment ESL learners have in English taboo language.

Power, or as Bourdieu would call it, *symbolic power*, results from the legitimating of the dominant group's language and discourse, and it is imposed through acts of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 1977, 1982/1991). This power is achieved through a shared belief in the legitimacy by both the dominant and oppressed groups. Hegemonic consent to the authority of those whose discourse is legitimated and naturalized is obtained through the *active complicity* of the subordinated, though it is important to note that this point does not preclude the possibility of resistant language strategies at the level of an individual agent's habitus (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001). To demonstrate, Norton-Peirce (1995) discusses the empowerment of ESL learners as they claim the *right to speak* and gain the *power to impose reception* (Bourdieu, 1977, p.648). In doing so they demand the legitimization of their discourse and achieve the "capacity to make oneself heard, believed, obeyed" (Bourdieu, 1982/1991, p.8). I now come full circle by returning to Bourdieu's key conceptual tool, habitus, and its relationship to an understanding of ESL learner identities.

I conceptualize an individual's social identity, or indeed *identities*, as it is embodied within Bourdieu's generative structure called *habitus*. This key element of his method and theoretical base collectively "refers to language use, skills, and orientations, dispositions,

attitudes, and schemes of perception ... that children are endowed with by virtue of socialization in their families and communities” (Lin, 1999, p.394). Seen as the sum of one’s cultural capital (Lin, 1999), habitus is a set of dispositions which are “both durable (inscribed in the social construction of the self) and transposable (from one field to another), and function on the unconscious plane” (Postone, LiPuma, & Calhoun, 1993, p.4). It represents incorporated strategic possibilities in the struggle for capital and symbolic power (i.e. legitimacy) in the social world. In short, habitus as ways of being in the world (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001) are tantamount to identities. While habitus is a set of naturalized tendencies that guide agents to act and react in certain ways (Bourdieu, 1982/1991), it is important to note that it is by no means a fixed product of primary socialization. Although Bourdieu’s theory tends to underplay the potential modification of habitus (Bartlett & Holland, 2002), it still remains that the nature of habitus is dynamic and malleable through learning as a result of the life experiences of an individual’s trajectory as they participate in the social practices of various groups in various contexts (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001). Yet the subsequent formation of any habitus is still based on this primary habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 42). While Bourdieu’s concept of habitus shares many characteristics of the notion of *subjectivity* (Norton, 1997), it actually goes beyond subjectivity and becomes a “dynamic intersection of structure and action, society and the individual” (Postone, et al., 1993, p.4). The objective (structured field) and the subjective (habitus) become mutually constitutive.

Finally, the relationship between habitus and language is also value-mediated in the following way:

Just as at the level of relations between groups, a language is worth what those who speak it are worth, so too, at the level of interactions between individuals, speech

always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it.

(Bourdieu, 1977, p. 652)

Thus to return to an earlier point, the value of an ESL speaker's linguistic products, and especially taboo utterances, are greatly dependent on her/his position in the field. So I argue that the significance of a dominated position in construction of self and social identities for ESL learners is potentially tied in to their linguistic capital in terms of taboo language.

This particular research project centered on the habitus and linguistic capital that ESL learners bring to social practice involving taboo language as it plays out between them and members of more dominant linguistic groups. I also questioned how habitus, social structures and practice may constitute one another within this social world.

3.3 - Conceptual Insights from a Multiple Literacies Perspective

A multiple literacies perspective, hand-in-hand with Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, shaped this research project's design, the inquiry strategies used and, in particular, the kinds of questions asked and the discussions I had with co-participants. As I attempted to analyze and make sense of the empirical materials, it is this lens through which I gazed. Because my conceptual journey has been a messy one, with many twists and turns, here I begin by clarifying my conceptualization of *literacies* in the plural as it is initially informed by the "New Literacy Studies" and then expanded by Masny's Multiple Literacies Theory (Masny, 2005). I then go on to describe in more detail the basic tenets of a multiple literacies perspective and in doing so I also show how this perspective is commensurate with Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus, already outlined previously. I conclude by explicating why I find this conceptual framework appropriate for this particular study of taboo language and the ESL learner.

Conceptualizing literacies. Today, the traditional notion of literacy has been broadened beyond simply the ability to read and write to include virtually any form of communication (Wood, 2002). It is at the same time multimodal and multilingual. This conceptual shift resulted from the recognition of the multiple skills or *multiliteracies* required to understand and interpret language (conceived as not only texts, but events as well) in a wide range of contexts and genres. Multiple literacies are needed to negotiate a “multiplicity of discourses” in a time of global connectedness (The New London Group, 1996, p.61). Furthermore, Street (2003, p.1) identifies alternative, “ideological” models of literacy that stand in sharp contrast to more traditional “autonomous” models. An ideological understanding of literacies rejects the old binary of literacy/illiteracy and the naive view of literacy as nothing more than a neutral, universal skill set sure to have benign effects for “illiterate” people. These conventional notions of literacy ignore the ramifications of literacies as they are actualized in the social worlds of the people who use them. Instead, the alternative, ideological models contextualize literacy practices in that they are “always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. ... [Literacy acts are participation in social practices] rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being” (Street, 2003, p.1-2). However, the movements in thinking discussed here, mean that the nature of literacy has become a highly contested term, continually in flux, and impossible to definitively define (Barton, 2001; Masny, 2005; Street, 2003).

The conceptualization of literacy retained in this research project is drawn from what has come to be known as the New Literacy Studies (henceforth NLS) which views *literacies*, in the plural, as historically situated social practice. Street (2003) succinctly describes this

new tradition in the following way:

[The New Literacy Studies] think of literacy as social practice (Street, 1985). This entails the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested relations of power. NLS, then, takes nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking “whose literacies” are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant. (p.1)

This view considers the meaning of literacies for people as they attempt to make sense of their social world and their own place in it. Within this framework, Barton (2001) calls for new directions for literacy research that encourage a meshing of psychological (e.g. issues of identity, self, subjectivity and experience) and sociological (e.g. culture and power relationships) approaches to language. In relation to ESL research specifically, Allendoerfer (1999) states, “Becoming literate requires mastering appropriate behaviors, ways of being, and cultural knowledge which facilitate communication” (p.2).

These ideas are expanded within Masny’s Multiple Literacies Theory (henceforth MLT). This perspective also suggests that meaning making is simultaneously social and subjective. Literacies are understood as a social construct (Masny, 2005, p.2), yet at the same time, at a subjective level, “an individual engages literacies as s/he reads the world, reads the word, and reads her/him self [while simultaneously being read by the text itself]” (p.3). Furthermore, MLT, situated within a postmodern paradigm, uses Deleuze and Guattari’s image of a rhizome to introduce a destabilizing element where “the movement of multiple literacies as constant transformation and the flow of movement of multiple literacies creates a sense of becoming” (p.2). In sum, literacies are more than communication tools,

more even than acts of meaning making. They are social practice, ways of *being* in the world, and are inherently *who we are* and *who we are becoming*.

Commensurability of theoretical frameworks. Whenever researchers call upon aspects of several theoretical frameworks at once, it is crucial that the underlying paradigmatic assumptions and the corresponding conceptual understanding of the terms employed are commensurate. The key justification for my approach, which simultaneously invokes Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and a multiple literacies perspective, is that both these viewpoints are informed by theories that consider language and literacies⁵ as *historically situated social practice*. Furthermore these perspectives hold that such an approach points to "how learners construct for themselves a linguistic and social identity" (Kramsch, 1997, p.360). Both Bourdieu and the New Literacy Studies are concerned with language as individual subjective social practices situated within objective social structures and unique historical contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2000).

In fact several researchers have also found Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus and the concept of habitus useful in linking NLS to broader social theory (see Bartlett & Holland, 2002; and Pahl as cited in Street, 2003).

In locating literacy theory within these broader debates in social theory, they build, especially on the concern of Bourdieu to characterize the relationship between social structures (history brought to the present in institutions) and "habitus" (history brought to the present in person). (Street, 2003, p. 5)

This linking of local literacy practices to social theory, identity, and power is an important response to the criticism often brought against the NLS, namely that "there is a danger of

⁵ The underlying supposition that I work with throughout this discussion is that Bourdieu's broad conceptualization of *language use*, can be understood similarly to the New Literacy Studies' notion of *literacies*.

simply piling up more descriptions of local literacies without addressing general questions of both theory and practice” (Street, 2003, p. 4).

To further demonstrate the strong connections between these two theoretical frameworks, I will discuss each of the six basic principles underlying NLS, as outlined by Barton and Hamilton (2000), drawing parallels to Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice.

1. “*Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts* [italics added]” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.8).

Language use as social practice is also central to Bourdieu’s thinking, where speech acts are seen as much more than a simple acts of communication, but are in fact interested social acts, in which users of language can take up multiple positions (e.g. dominant, resistant, marginalized).

2. “*There are different literacies associated with different domains of life* [italics added]” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.8). Akin to the multiple literacies’ conceptualization of domain is Bourdieu’s notion of *field*, also known as a *linguistic market* when specifically discussing language use. Both seek to spatially contextualize language and literacies, situating them both locally and within the wider structures of society. It is the sum of these domains or fields that make up the social worlds of individuals. Bourdieu also notes that any given *linguistic product* (i.e. literacy) will be differently valued across various fields. In the same way, a multiple literacies perspective engages the value-laden nature of literacies.

3. “*Literacy is historically situated* [italics added]” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.8). Not only are literacies contextualized spatially, they are also situated in terms of time (i.e. historical situatedness). Likewise, for Bourdieu, each field is characterized by its own unique set of historical conditions (including economic, political, ideological, etc.).

4. “*Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others* [italics added]” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.8). This principle of NLS is reflected in Bourdieu’s preoccupation with access to *symbolic power* and the *symbolic violence* that is enacted in the legitimation of dominant language forms and discourses. Furthermore, he too recognizes the role of objective social structures and social institutions in shaping the dominant language use norms, particularly in the French context, where he identifies the education system as the penultimate normalizing force, second only to family socialization⁶ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). At this point it is important to note Barton and Hamilton (2000) hold that not only are literacy acts, at the subjective level, linked to the broader social structures (and therefore the historically situated context) within which they are embedded, but they in fact help to shape these structures at the objective level. Masny also states that literacies “constitute texts ... that interweave with religion, gender, race, ideology, and power” (2005, p. 2). In a similar way, Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice takes an epistemological middle ground where both the subjective (i.e. agency) and the objective (i.e. social structures) exist in a dialectical, mutually constitutive relationship. This is a key point as it opens up the possibility for transformations, a point I will return to in the discussion of principle five which follows.

5. “*Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices* [italics added]” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.8). Gee (2000) is careful to point out that in a discussion of the mutually constitutive nature of context and literacy practices, the subjective agenda of the agent of the literacy act must not be forgotten. For

⁶ For an empirical example in a North American context see Lewis (2001). Her study of literacy practices in a fifth and sixth grade classroom demonstrates how the norms of the larger culture helped to shape the norms of the local culture. Yet she still observed possibilities to “accept, reject, or reinvent” these norms of social practice, opening a space for transformation.

Gee, agents of literacy practices have their own purposes and do *enactive work* in an effort to have their particular *configuration* (view of a literacy act in context) *recognized* by others. Likewise, Bourdieu insists that all language use is strategic as agents struggle to have their own discourse legitimated and to gain symbolic power. According to Bourdieu, these multiple strategies of possibility are seated within an individual's *habitus*, and thus Bourdieu considers this the critical generative structure in the reproduction and potential transformation of social worlds.

6. "*Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making* [italics added]" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.8). Within the NLS, literacy practices are by no means fixed. Because literacy practices are historically situated, they are subject to change in tandem with the context (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Literacy practices also vary from one sociocultural group to another based on specific social expectations, values, ideologies, and ways of meaning making (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Masny, 2005). They are "the sayings, doings, thinkings, feelings, and valuings within a specific group" (Wood, 2002). In order to argue that Bourdieu would also agree with this final principle, it is necessary to first realize that, according to Bourdieu's understanding of *habitus* (i.e. "language use, skills, and orientations, dispositions, attitudes, and schemes of perception" (Lin, 1999, p.394)) discussed earlier, we can see literacy practices as a component of it. So, if *habitus* is a generative structure, dynamic in nature, then literacy practices, embedded within the *habitus*, are also changeable. I would suggest that the "informal learning and sense making" processes that Barton and Hamilton (2000) describe are echoed in Bourdieu's notion of *trajectory*. Our trajectory is the sum of our life history experiences and learning which shape our *habitus*. As Haneda puts it: "the sociopolitical histories of the multiple communities to which students [and teachers, I would

argue] have belonged are coalesced in individuals' repertoires of practices, beliefs, and values" (p.95-96).

Appropriateness of this dual conceptual framework. To this point I have made clear how Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and multiple literacies perspectives are complimentary, but the appropriateness and utility of such a dual, layered conceptual apparatus to this *particular* research endeavor remains to be explicitly shown. To do this I return to the central concerns of the inquiry. At the heart of the research questions⁷ guiding this project are three key elements: taboo language, identities and power. In this section I relate each of these, in turn, to the overall conceptual framework described above.

Firstly, there is the question of how I can conceive of taboo language and the associated meaning making of ESL learners as a form of literacy at all. This is possible using multiple literacies' broad interpretation of what counts as literacy. More specifically, I would argue that taboo language is a form of "vernacular" literacy in the sense that Barton and Hamilton (1998) understand this term. They draw a contrast, through not a clear-cut distinction, between *dominant* and *vernacular* literacies. While the former are legitimized within social institutions, the latter tend to arise from informal learning rooted in everyday life. These vernacular literacies are often "less valued by society and are not particularly supported, nor regulated, by external social institutions" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p.252) and manifest themselves in complex "hybrid practices" (p.247). They go on to identify six kinds of vernacular literacy practices in everyday life: organizing life, personal communication, private leisure, documenting life, sense making, and social participation, though they recognize that these are overlapping and that even more kinds possibly exist. Within this framework, I understand taboo language practices most often as a kind of "social

⁷ These are presented in the following and final section of this chapter.

participation". These kinds of literacy practices are involved whenever people participate in a particular social group, club, or organization. Although these might be practices associated with attending meetings, designing posters, or reading electronic mail, here I have a less structured social group in mind as ESL learners use taboo language to participate in informal peer social groups. These practices might include swearing as an emotional release, teasing friends, sharing dirty jokes, or as Barton & Hamilton suggest, even writing graffiti.

Language learning as social participation is about "a process of becoming a member of a certain community" (Sfard as cited in Marx, 2002, p.3) and joining a community of practice. It is "a way of both absorbing this new community and being absorbed into it" (Marx, 2002, p.3).

Bourdieu's notion of strategic language use helps me understand these taboo language literacy/social practices for ESL learners, but this is complicated by the fact that literacies are also situated and context specific. "People engage differently with a given text depending on the context in which they encounter or produce it, their motivations, and the cultural resources they bring to it" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p.247), and literacies "take on meaning according to the way a sociocultural group appropriates them" (Masny, 2005, p.2). I believe this will help me to delve into the taboo language literacy experiences of ESL learners as they cross linguistic and cultural boundaries.

These crossings are also associated with identity crossings (see Ogulnick, 2000). Barton and Hamilton (1998) found that "reading and writing are used by some people in [their] study for understanding the self and the world, for exploring identity and working

ideas out when change is in process”(p.235)⁸. Similarly, MLT focuses attention on literacies as ways of becoming (Masny, 2005). Gee’s notion of *Discourse* as displays of social identities (as cited in Bartlett & Holland, 2002), and Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as ways of being, echo these ideas. These conceptualizations allow me to think about language learning and taboo language literacies in relation to ESL learners’ social identities in transformation as they seek to negotiate the dominant discourses of an ESL context.

Lastly, I return to the research endeavor’s concern with issues of power. In terms of the macro power relations at the level of societal structures, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) insist that educational institutions are one of the most influential forces of reproduction in societies. Considering the ESL classroom is embedded in an educational system that is part of the wider societal structures and institutions, it seems likely that this may come into play in the analysis, although it is not the focus of this research inquiry. Also, MLT draws distinctions (albeit with blurred boundaries) between personal-, home-, community-, and school-based literacies (Masny, 2000) which are differently valued and legitimized depending on the context. I believe Bourdieu would suggest, school-based literacies tend to be legitimized by various state institutions as the dominant literacy. This is a useful way to shape my thinking about the role of English taboo language in classrooms. As mentioned in earlier, it is rare indeed that English taboo language finds its way into ESL institutionalized school-based literacies, yet it is undoubtedly present in the social worlds that ESL learners encounter outside the classroom environment.

⁸ I take issue with Barton and Hamilton’s wording here “when change is in process”, which seems to imply that identity change is sporadic, starting and *stopping* in turns. Although I would agree that identity change does not necessarily happen in a continuous, steady progression, it never comes to a complete halt. As previously discussed, I retain Norton-Pierce’s notion of identities in second language research where identities are understood as multiple and dynamic. Identities are in a constant state of becoming. Similarly, Bourdieu’s conceptual tools of habitus and trajectory imply an ongoing transformation of self, though the rate of this transformation may vary over time and space.

These macro power structures also translate into micro power struggles at the level of interactions between individual members of society. This translation begs a number of questions: What kind of shifting power relations are at play when ESL learners attempt to appropriate the English taboo language literacies generally reserved for more proficient speakers? What legitimation (if any) are the English taboo language utterances of ESL users afforded by the dominant group of proficient speakers across various contexts? And again, what does it mean, from an identities point of view, if ESL learners are “able and willing to affiliate” (Gee in forward to Lewis, 2001, p.xviii) with this particular taboo language literacy practice and “the sort of identity the practice demands” (Gee in forward to Lewis, 2001, p.xviii)? As an immigrant ESL teacher in Amin’s (2002) study states, her students “want to identify with this native (Canadian) completely. Some of them even imitate their way of talking ... even if it doesn’t suit them” (p.86).

To conclude, melding elements of a multiple literacies perspective with Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice, facilitates my understanding of how taboo language literacy practices evolve for ESL learners both within and without the ESL classroom. Secondly, the conceptual framework points the way to interpreting the complex ways ESL learner identities change and how this may be linked to their English taboo language literary practices. Finally, it offers a way to conceive what value this communicative resource may have for the learner in terms of gaining access to symbolic power and achieving their own social and linguistic goals.

3.4 - Research Questions

The apparent paucity of research on taboo language and the ESL learner, coupled with my own ESL teaching experience and language learning experience, were the impetus

for this study. I examined the following research questions guided by Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus melded with elements of a multiple literacies perspective.

1. In what ways do ESL learners' understandings of English taboo language impact their identities?
2. In what ways is English taboo language implicated in power relationships experienced by ESL learners?
3. What critical incidents of taboo language seem significant in relation to ESL learner identities and the power relationships experienced by them?

Chapter 4: Inquiry Strategies

It has been recommended repeatedly that research which hopes to gain insights into the sociocultural meanings of literacy and language learning necessitates the use of qualitative inquiry strategies (Abd el-Jawad, 2000; Barton, 2001; Crooks, 1999). Also, in keeping with Bourdieu's Theory of Practice as a methodology, an ethnographic approach is called for (Barnard, 1990). With this advice in mind I began the design of this ethnographic study of taboo language and the ESL learner.

4.1 - Co-Participants & Setting

I have chosen to avoid strongly positivist terms such as 'sample' and 'subjects' and in favour 'research group' and 'co-participants'. The logic for this is drawn, from a collaborative, reciprocal, reflexive research philosophy (C. A. Davies, 1999; Denzin, 1997; C. Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The notion of co-participant acknowledges that those taking part in the study are not merely subjects being observed, and that they also have an investment in the project as stakeholders. It attempts to minimize the relationship hierarchy of 'researcher' and 'researched' and blurs the line between these roles. Furthermore, it indicates not only a shift in thinking from participants to co-participant-researchers, but also encompasses the idea that *I myself* am not only researcher, but a co-participant in the research process. It recognizes that I too am "equally positioned, interconnected, and involved in the social and cultural relations under study" (Cook & Crang, 1995, p.7).

Initially, it was intended that ESL student co-participants be recruited on a volunteer basis from the two most advanced levels of an English Intensive Program at a university affiliated Second Language Institute, with the permission of the Program Coordinator (for an example of the recruitment text see Appendix A). These levels were chosen because it was crucial that co-participants were proficient enough in English to communicate their thoughts,

feelings, and experience, as well as to listen and respond to the stories of others. However, because only three co-participants (forming “Focus Group 1”) came forward after the first round of recruitment, a second recruitment effort became necessary. This time the same university’s Faculty of Education was approached. All Education graduate students, whose first language was not English, were invited to participate via a list-serve message. From this recruitment, the final three co-participants (forming “Focus Group 2”) volunteered to join the project. Ultimately the research group consisted of me and six ESL learners/users with a diversity of life histories, in terms of first language background, ethnicity, gender, age, length of residency in Canada, and age of arrival in Canada, yielding a rich corpus of data from many perspectives. Detailed profiles of each co-participant are found in Chapter 5.

4.2 - Collection of Empirical Materials

I endeavored to keep the entire research process as transparent as possible where the co-participants were also “to be treated as coresearchers, to share authority, and to author their own lives in their own voice” (C. Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.742). In order to attempt to do this, the inquiry strategies included not only an initial questionnaire, but also video recorded group and one-on-one meetings, over an approximately six week period. I opted to use video since the habitus is accessible not only in what one says, but also in one’s *bodily hexis*, the physical manifestation of the habitus and one’s relation to the social world (Bourdieu, 1977, 1982/1991). Although typically an ethnographic approach also calls for naturalistic observations done over an extended period of time, this was not possible due to the sporadic occurrence of taboo events and the time constraints of this project.

First meeting. To begin, I held an informal ‘meet and greet’ with each of the two focus groups separately⁹, lasting approximately one hour, during which co-participants had a chance to meet each other and me. This was largely an effort to set a more personal, interactive tone for the research project. I also ran the video camera during this gathering, not for the purpose of collecting empirical material, but simply as a way to help all co-participants feel more at ease in front of a camera. A ‘test-run’ of this recording tool, new to me as a researcher, also proved a valuable learning experience. During this time we went over the consent form (for an example of the consent form see Appendix B) and I invited the co-participants to sign them. We then scheduled the focus group meetings to take place approximately three weeks hence. Next, each participant was asked to begin keeping a reflective personal record of taboo language encounters during the course of the research project since reflexivity is “crucial to the constructions of identity” (Barton, 2000, p. 168) and reflection is also “a way of empowering researched people by assisting them to see the significance of their own actions” (Grenfell & James, 1998, p.123) (for reflective journal guidelines given to co-participants see Appendix C). I informed the co-participants that it should be kept in English if they wished to share their journal with me or other co-participants. Alternatively they could choose not to share their journal directly with the research group and in this case could use their first language to make their entries. The journals could take any form that the individual co-participants were comfortable with: E-mail journal entries, a personal written journal, an audio or video-taped journal, a photo-journal, or any combination of the above. To this end I provided each participant with a

⁹ Note that at no time did the three co-participants of Focus Group 1 meet the three co-participants of Focus Group 2. Although this happened consequently because of a delay created by the need for a second round of co-participant recruitment, it turned out to be an additional insurance of the anonymity all six co-participants and the confidentiality of the stories they shared.

disposable camera, and offered to cover the cost of photofinishing. However, by the end of the collection of empirical materials, five of the six participants had opted to use a traditional, written, notebook style journal and one decided not to keep a journal at all. None of the co-participants chose to use their cameras, but preferred to bring in actual physical examples of taboo language they encountered instead.

Like the co-participants, I too kept a reflective journal throughout the research process. While at times this was a place where I could record my own thoughts about taboo experiences, it was/is more precisely a venue for me, as researcher, to interrogate the process of representation and to wrestle with the tensions apparent at all stages of the research project. Here I grapple with such questions as: How am I positioned as ‘researcher’? What is the nature of my relationship with the co-participants? How are these implicated in our interactions and my interpretations? How may my interpretations be juxtaposed with those of the co-participants? What strategies underlie my coding of the data? What is it that makes some themes appear relevant to me? What others am I *not* seeing or legitimizing? I also used my research journal to record both *descriptive* and *reflective* fieldnotes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) immediately following each meeting with the co-participants.

Before leaving the initial ‘meet and greet’, co-participants were given a questionnaire (see Appendix D) to complete and return by mail within two weeks¹⁰. The questionnaire is an original research tool that I developed using guidelines for questionnaires in second language research presented in Dörnyei (2003) and input from fellow graduate students, who were also ESL users and graciously agreed to pilot the questionnaire for me. The main purpose of this data collection tool was to obtain biographical information (e.g. brief life

¹⁰ Co-participants were provided with a stamped, pre-addressed envelope for the purpose of returning the questionnaire.

history and language learning background) to prepare a written profile of each co-participant. They were later asked to verify the accuracy of their profile and were encouraged to add any relevant information that may have been missed. The questionnaire was also used to help co-participants begin thinking about their own experiences with English taboo, both past and present, and the meanings these may have for them.

Focus groups. The second meeting was divided into two video recorded focus groups, each involving only three of the co-participants and lasting approximately one and a half hours. Given that qualitative research is inductive, that the research design is an “evolving process” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.77) and that Bourdieu’s research philosophy indicates no question should be asked that does not come from the co-participants themselves (Grenfell & James, 1998, p.174); I prepared topics for discussion during the focus group in light of issues that became evident in the questionnaires (for an example of a focus group guide and reflective notes chart see Appendix E). These suggested topics were sent out to the co-participants via electronic mail prior to the meetings so that they could begin to mull over their thoughts before coming to the focus group. The focus group was also a time for co-participants to share any experiences they wished from their reflective journals. I also brought in a number of examples of taboo language in the media (from film and television) and ESL learning materials, to serve as springboards for discussion. These examples included:

- A short DVD clip from the film *The Guru* (von Scherler Mayer & Jackson, 2003) in which an ESL user unwittingly auditions to act in a pornographic movie
- A short DVD clip from season two, episode 15 of the television sit-com *Friends* (Curtis, Malins, & Lembeck, 1996) in which the actors repeatedly use the term “butt” and also “ass”

- Four cartoon images from the book *Dangerous English 2000* (Claire, 1998) depicting ESL users encountering English taboo language

Individual interviews. The culmination of the collection of empirical materials were one-on-one, semi-structured, flexible interviews (this time audio-taped only) to allow co-participants to react more privately to issues discussed at the focus group (for an example of the interview guide see Appendix F). I feel this was a crucial step to ensure that all co-participants had a chance to be heard, even those who did not share during their focus group. These interviews were an opportunity to tease out some of the deeper social meanings of the co-participants' experiences with taboo on an individual basis. Also, the participant's questionnaire responses were clarified and/or verified. Finally, I shared selected clips from their focus group video footage with each co-participant and invited them to give *their* interpretations and then respond to my own. It was a chance for me to "try out ideas and themes on" the co-participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.159) and seek their input into the text that I would be creating around their experiences (C. A. Davies, 1999). Again, these meetings were approximately one and a half hours in duration.

A final, *optional*, follow-up gathering for the entire research group at a local restaurant was scheduled at the end of the project. Here I hoped co-participants would offer any final thoughts and input on the research topic, as well as reflect on the research process itself. Unfortunately, busy schedules at the end of the academic session made this final gathering impossible.

4.3 - Analysis and Interpretation

While I have presented each stage of the research process as if it occurred in a neatly chronological sequence, this writing style elides the fact that in inductive, ethnographic studies, "reading, doing, and writing should be [and were] thoroughly mixed up" (Cook &

Crang, 1995, p.4). Likewise the data analysis did not take place in a discrete time period following the data collection, but rather was ongoing throughout the research process from the moment I met the first co-participant.

In addition, following each focus group meeting, I reviewed the video-tapes and prepared observation notes in my research journal. These were later typed up in a more structured format. In addition, all individual interviews were transcribed. Data from the transcripts and video footage were also triangulated with empirical materials from the co-participants journals. I then read and re-read each of these secondary sources, “memoing” them in the margins as I went along¹¹. Next, I revisited the research questions, the conceptual framework, and my own initial assumptions before beginning to systematically group similar annotations into *initial themes*. At the same time, I made additional memos regarding the broader discourse of our discussions and interviews, including such aspects as: critical moments; unique words that co-participants raised repeatedly; specific examples of taboo language that were brought up; voice tone that seemed indicative of feeling and meaning; and the pattern of dialogue, for example, corroborating another’s statement, adding emphasis, or asking for clarification or more information.

According to LeCompte and Schensul (1999), the process of *inscription* is “to notice what is important to other people and what one has not been trained to see, and then to write it down” (p.14). They outline a number of ways that this ‘noticing’ of patterns takes place (p.98) including: frequency (items are recurrent), declaration (co-participants state that something is important), omission (what is not present, done, or said), similarity (items seem the same), co-occurrence (items happen at the same time), and corroboration (an item is reinforced by other co-participants). Using this guideline to look for patterns, as well as

¹¹ This is an analysis strategy I borrowed from Barton & Hamilton’s (1998) study of *Local Literacies*.

overlaps and connections, I reorganized the numerous initial themes into *secondary themes* under two broad keywords: *identities* and *power*. At this point I developed a visual representation of these themes using *Inspiration 6.0b* software. A bottom-up, inductive process of cycling between re-reading the memoed data and re-working the visual representation eventually gave rise to relevant emergent¹² themes discussed at length in sections 6.1 (*Identities*) and 6.2 (*Power*) of the final chapter.

Here I wish to recognize that my interpretation of what counted as a “relevant” theme was influenced by *how* and *what* data was collected (D. Masny, personal communication, June 21, 2004; Norton, 2000), as well as the conceptual framework I used to understand the research questions (Lewis, 2001) – briefly, the view that language use is social practice situated within wider relations of power and is inherently linked to identities. These researcher-produced themes are termed *etic*, while “*emic* [italics added] ... are those which have been used by the people studied to describe their own words” (Cook & Crang, 1995, p.82). Seeking a balance between these two perspectives, whenever feasible, my interpretations of the empirical materials were brought back to the research group (either in the individual interviews or by Email correspondence following the data collection sessions). My words and understandings are presented along side those of the co-participants’. This juxtaposed approach recognizes that my reading of their experiences is simply one possible version and seeks to make our perspectives equally present in the text I create (Grenfell & James, 1998). At last, the results are written up in a narrative form, drawing heavily on the

¹² The sense here is not that these are *emerging* themes, which have been pre-existing in an obscured condition and simply required dis-covering to become manifest, but rather that they are *emergent* themes, which are newly formed and may arise unexpectedly. This distinction between the definition of *emerging* and *emergent* is drawn from the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary.

co-participants' own words in order to give voice to the co-participants themselves, albeit a voice necessarily mediated by me (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

4.4 - Reflections on the Research Design

Even the most carefully designed research project will be subject to some inherent difficulties that I wish to acknowledge here. In this study, I am particularly concerned with the procedures used to recruit co-participants and my own positioning as I play the role of researcher/interpreter of the co-participants' experiences. I address these in turn.

One self-critique I would make is that the recruitment process may have resulted in the involvement of only those students who were willing to come forward and volunteer based on their proficiency and ability to communicate with the research group in English. I am aware and regretful of how such a solicitation of co-participants, necessary given the limited scope of this Master's level research project, may have left the stories of less proficient ESL learners untold and thus been culpable in the continued silencing and marginalization of these learners.

Secondly, my own habitus and positioning within the field is worthy of concern. During the data collection, I found my self continually questioning how I might be leading the co-participants' discussions as I attempted to get at the issues of the research questions and fearing that I was unconsciously manipulating them into saying what I wanted to hear. During the analysis and interpretation phases, I was even more acutely aware that my own predispositions, values, and agendas were affecting my understandings of the co-participants' stories. I worried that I only noticed the statements that supported my initial, though tacit, preconceptions. In the following section I elaborate this issue in a critical discussion of *reflexivity*.

4.5 - Reflexivity & Legitimacy

Here, I critically address the ‘crisis of representation’, “how to represent, and interpret, with some degree of certainty the multiple meanings that circulate in an ethnographic text” (Denzin, 1997, p.234) and the ‘crisis of legitimation’ which “asks how a reader can authorize any given reading” (p.234). I begin by presenting my own understanding of the research process using an analogy of a weave on a loom in order to highlight the ‘crisis of representation’, which all researchers, particularly those doing qualitative research, face. In response to this crisis, I go on to explicate the position of a number of poststructural and postmodern theorists on the notion of *reflexivity*. After stating the stance that I am taking up, I conclude by addressing how the legitimacy of this particular research project should be judged.

Researcher/Weaver. I conceive of the research endeavor as a largely creative process which will yield a complex weave. I find myself cast in the role of researcher and weaver. Within this analogy, the research process is represented by the warp on the loom as a static, solid, reliable base. The research endeavor seems orderly if this view is taken up: neatly packaged theories inform background research, a methodological design, data collection, an objective (i.e. unbiased) analysis, and a final ‘truth’ is revealed in the writing up of the findings. But this is only half of what it means to do research. From this naïve perspective, these elements of the research process are as unconnected as the separate threads of the warp left incomplete on the loom.

What is missing then? It is the dynamic weft of the weave: the subjective positionings of the researcher, her thesis supervisor and committee members, the co-participants, and the audience, not to mention the positionings of past researchers and the research field itself. These threads, carried on the ever-changing shuttle of time and space,

cut across and interlace with the warp of the research process, touching it at various points. It would be a master weaver indeed who could see, at a glance, all the intricacies and overlapping threads of the bias (interpreted in both the literal and figurative senses here) of the final product. In fact, such a master weaver does not exist. It is an impossibility for a researcher, no matter how adept, to step outside themselves and see all the possible threads of subjectivity, particularly their own.

Theoretical perspectives on reflexivity. This brings us to the ‘crisis of representation’. In qualitative research, the criteria for judging the legitimacy of a study is typically based less on the generalizability of the findings and more on how ‘accurate’ and richly descriptive an interpretation is achieved. The trustworthiness of the work is the key to its ‘validity’. However, the conundrum is that every interpretation is inevitably affected by the situatedness of the researcher and the accuracy¹³ of any description is highly suspect as it is always written, to a greater or lesser extent, through the lens of the researcher.

Both Bourdieu, and C. Ellis and Bochner (2000) take the crisis of representation in ethnography seriously, and in response they place great emphasis on the notion of *reflexivity*. C. Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that, “the investigator would always be implicated in the product. So why not observe the observer” (p.747). Bourdieu also holds that a critical self-reflective stance “is achieved by subjecting the *position* of the observer to the same critical analysis as that of the constructed object at hand” (Barnard, 1990, p.74) at all stages of the research process. “Reflection-in-action” and “reflection-on-action” (Grenfell & James, 1998, p.123) are keys to reflexive research. Besides, researchers in language and literacy

¹³ Insights from Haraway later in this section raise ontological doubts about the appropriateness of a term such as “accuracy” because it presumes the existence of a ‘true’ reality that is attainable and that we strive to represent.

have found reflexivity, a critical engagement with the personal or subjective position, an essential tool to link theory and practice (Barnard, 1990; Barton, 2000; Mackie, 2003).

However we must recognize that Bourdieu's reflexive approach is still incomplete in some ways and question how much Bourdieu himself underestimated his own *méconnaissance* or misrecognition of naturalized ideologies (Grenfell & James, 1998). While rigorously analyzing one's position in a field is one thing, habitus is quite another because it is only partially accessible to us. Postmodern thinkers remind us to be wary of realist narrativity that is a "return to the ethnographer's I/eye to the writing surface" (Clough, 2000, p.172). Haraway argues that "reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere" (1997, p.16) and so self-vision is not a cure for self-invisibility. Furthermore she turns an epistemological crisis into an ontological one by suggesting that these notions are "bad tropes" that indicate a continuing preoccupation with "the search for the authentic and really real" (Haraway, 1997, p.16).

Similarly, filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha advocates that epistemologically, all ethnographic writing should be "ghosted by the unknowable" (Clough, 2000, p.168). Drawing from Trinh's book *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1991), Denzin, (1997) offers these insights about what constitutes a responsible, reflexive text:

- It announces its own politics and evidences a political consciousness.
- It interrogates the realities it represents.
- It invokes the teller's story in the history that is told.
- It makes the audience responsible for interpretation.
- It resists the temptation to become an object of consumption.
- It resists all dichotomies (male-female, etc.)

- It foregrounds difference, not conflict.
- It uses multiple voices, emphasizing language as silence, the grain of the voice, tone, inflection, pauses, silences, and repetitions.
- Silence is presented as a form of resistance. (p.77)

These elements are also evident in Trinh's own comments as she discusses her films in a series of interviews in *Framer Framed* (1992). In one of these she states, "The reflexive question asked ... is no longer: *Who* am I? but *When, where, how* am I (so and so)?" (Trinh, 1992, p.157). In the following section I take up these insights along with Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity.

My stance on reflexivity. In Bourdieu's terms, at all stages of the research process I take a highly reflexive stance and continue to "objectify the objectifying subject (i.e. the researcher)" (Bourdieu & Wacquant as cited in Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 176). This is undertaken specifically in the personal reflexion I present in Chapter 5. Certainly I am not falling into the trap of narcissism that is often a critique of reflexive approaches (C. A. Davies, 1999). Instead, the reflexion is meant to recognize and make manifest my own involvement and investments with the objects of study (taboo language and ESL users) as well as my own status as co-participant. It seeks to bring to light the values I hold as a result of my personal, intellectual, and professional trajectories (Grenfell & James, 1998). Just as I intend to write a profile of each co-participant to give some insight into their life trajectories, so too I offer the same of myself.

That said, in terms of the interpretations I put forth, I understand that there will always be that which I do not see due to the inescapable blinders of my own unconscious subjectivity. This makes it essential to be cognizant of the unknowable and to continually question: What is it that I am *not* noticing and *why*? I recognize that I selected the stories

that are recounted and these are told through my own lens, coloured by my habitus and my own subconscious hopes, fears, and agendas. In fact, “the original meaning of a told experience can never be recovered. There are only [evocative] retellings” (Denzin, 1997, p.61). This hybrid narrative, where the co-participants’ voices and my own interact, will then be relinquished to the audience, who in turn will interpret, explicate, expand the story and in doing so, make it their own (Denzin, 1997, 244; Dufresne, 2002, p.i). In the end I hope I have managed to create a narrative that *shows* rather than *tells* the co-participants’ experiences (Denzin, 1997, p. 40) and that they are pleased by the stories I have written on their behalf.

Conclusion. To conclude I wish to return to the ‘crisis of legitimation’ as it relates to this research project. Taking together the points discussed above, it becomes clear that the criteria to judge the legitimacy or trustworthiness of this study should certainly *not* be conceived in terms of objectivity, accuracy, or even descriptiveness. Neither should it be conceived in terms of the generalizability of the results because, as Bourdieu would contend, each field is unique in its own historical circumstances and should be studied as such (Harker, 1990). Rather the value of this research endeavor should be judged by the criteria of how well it takes a critical self-reflective stance, voices multiple perspectives (Denzin, 1997, p.253), and is an ‘evocation’, rather than a representation (Tyler as cited in Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 154) of the co-participants’ stories.

Chapter 5: Findings and Initial Discussion

This chapter reports the findings of all empirical materials collected (questionnaires, journals, focus groups, and interviews). I begin by historically situating each co-participant, including myself, as well as our relationships to each other. I then detail my approach to the presentation of the findings before moving into a re-telling of each co-participant's experiences with English taboo language. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of a discourse level analysis.

5.1 - Co-participant profiles

These profiles (using self-selected pseudonyms) attempt to give a sense of each co-participant as a situated individual with a unique life history trajectory so that their experiences (see sections 5.5 and 5.6) can be understood in these terms. The biographical information used to prepare the profiles is drawn from their questionnaires and I have often directly quoted the words and phrases they used to describe themselves. Each co-participant was also given the opportunity to confirm the content of their own profile and edit it as they saw fit.

Generally, the six co-participants comprise a fairly young demographic (ages 22 to 32 years), all whom are unmarried and without children. All were students at the time of the study, although three were in ESL classes full-time while the remaining three were in graduate studies full-time. All six co-participants spoke English as a second language and considered themselves "ESL" learners/speakers. The co-participants were all very competent users of English during our discussions, and several seemed highly proficient in English. Even so, without exception, they all indicated they felt most comfortable when speaking in their self-identified first language rather than English.

The first focus group, Focus Group 1, was comprised of Kyu-Kwan, Poupak, and Eun-Ju. These first three co-participants were all taking advanced level intensive ESL classes at the time of their participation in the study and were relative new-comers to Canada.

Kyu-kwan is a 24 year-old man, born in South Korea, who had been living in Canada for about 8 months at the time of his participation in this study. He is unique in that he is the sole male co-participant, so he brings a particular perspective to the study. He self-identifies socio-economically as “middle”, ethnically as “Korean”, and considers “Korean” his first language. He did not feel he had a religious background of any kind. He has a younger sister (22 years old) in Korea. Kyu-Kwan plans to return to Korea soon to complete his final semester of university undergraduate studies in Electrical Engineering there. Although currently a student, Kyu-Kwan also had full-time employment through mandatory military service in Korea for a period of two years and two months.

His exposure to English before coming to Canada was largely in formal education settings in Korea beginning in middle school around the age of thirteen. While this education was mainly grammar-based instruction, he also took a three-month conversational English course during the winter of 2002 in preparation for studying abroad in Canada. His informal learning of English in Korea was through “a little” exposure to English radio, English websites, and the TV series *Friends* that he bought on DVD.

Poupak is a 22 year-old woman, born in Iran, who had been living in Canada for 19 months when we held our discussions. She lives with her parents and her 20 year-old brother. She self-identifies socio-economically as “mid-high”, ethnically as “Persian (Iranian)”, religiously as “Muslim”, and considers “Farsi (Persian)” her first language. As a new immigrant to Canada, she is currently taking intensive ESL courses at the advanced

level in preparation to begin undergraduate university studies in Computer Science (to which she has already gained a conditional acceptance).

Her exposure to English before coming to Canada was mainly in formal learning situations in her English classes in Iran that she began around the age of fifteen. Her teachers came from a wide range of countries including India, the Philippines, the United States, and England. She also suggested that she had “a little” additional exposure to the English language through news programs, documentaries, movies, and the Internet while still in Iran. Here in Canada, Poupak studied for one year at a local college before continuing her studies at the language institute affiliated with the university. She also highlighted her informal English language learning situations with her boyfriend and in her workplace, a fast-food restaurant where she used to work on a part-time basis (she left this position during the research project).

Eun-Ju, like *Kyu-Kwan*, is also South Korean. When I met with her, she was 22 years-old and had been living in Canada for 7 months. She self-identifies socio-economically as between “low-mid and middle”, ethnically as “Korean”, religiously as “Buddhist”, and considers “Korean” her first language. She has a 19 year-old sister in Korea and expects to return there to complete the final semester of her Bachelor’s degree with a major in English Literature. While still a student, she has had part-time work experience in her family’s food retail business.

Eun-Ju’s first English language learning experience was in Korean middle school at the age of fourteen and she had “little” informal exposure to English media while in Korea. She began to pursue her English language studies in earnest at the age of 20, before coming to Canada in the summer of 2003. In addition to her formal ESL classes, *Eun-Ju* identified

her informal learning in Canada citing English practice with her home-stay family, her Japanese roommate, and through watching movies and reading books in English.

The members of the second focus group, Focus Group 2, included Joyce, Xochilt, and Chelsea, all of whom were enrolled in graduate studies in Education. Unlike the previous three co-participants, none of the individuals in Focus Group 2 were *formally* (i.e. in an ESL classroom context) studying English at the time they participated in the study. Because each of these participants had at least some experience as a language instructors (Joyce and Xochilt have taught English, while Chelsea has taught French), they bring not only the learner perspective to the study, but also the teacher perspective.

Joyce is a 27 year-old woman, born in mainland China. She is an only-child who self-identifies ethnically as “Chinese” and considers Mandarin Chinese (“Putonghua”) her first language. She does not identify with any particular religion. Socio-economically, Joyce notes that her status has dropped from “middle” to “low” since she moved to Canada to study. At the time of our meetings, she had already been living in Canada for approximately two and a half years during which time she achieved her Master’s degree in Education. She is currently pursuing doctorate level studies, after which she intends to return home to China to continue her teaching career.

Her first English language learning experiences were in middle school at the age of twelve. She continued her formal English studies throughout middle school and her Bachelor’s Degree (majoring in English) without interruption. Some of her university instructors were “native speakers” who came from Canada, the United States, and England. However, she had only “a little” exposure to English media outside the classroom before coming to Canada. This was most commonly English websites, but also included *The China Daily* (an English language newspaper edited and published by the Chinese); some journals,

with Chinese editors, of “authentic materials” (articles, speeches, poems, movie descriptions, etc.); audio tapes; and DVD movies with the original English soundtrack and Chinese subtitles. This kind of informal learning opportunity increased to “a lot” when she moved to Canada. She also mentioned her informal language learning as result of activities involved in following her Master’s program.

The final two co-participants had somewhat different language learning experiences than the previous four. While Kyu-Kwan, Eun-Ju, Poupak, and Joyce had never lived an English speaking country before coming to Canada from their home countries, Xochilt and Chelsea had both lived in an English speaking milieu at some point before coming to Canada as adults.

Xochilt, born in a northern city of Mexico near the U.S. border, is the oldest co-participant (with the exception of the researcher herself) at the age of 31. She self-identifies socio-economically as “mid-high”, ethnically as “Hispanic”, religiously as “non-practicing Catholic”, and considers “Spanish” her first language. At the time of the study she had been living in Canada for 17 months and was planning to return home to Mexico in approximately four months. Her career background is in administration and educational psychology, although currently she is following her own Master’s program.

Xochilt began basic English studies in Mexico (with Mexican teachers) at the age of 12, and two years later her family (including two younger half-brothers) moved to the United States for a period of four years. During her first two years in the U.S., Xochilt took ESL classes, but then, for her final two years of high school, joined the mainstream English writing and lab classes. Here she had both “native speaker” and “non-native speaker” teachers. Following graduation, in 1990, her family returned to Mexico. Then in 1995/96 she took her COTE (Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English) offered by the British

Council. Throughout her lifetime, she has had “a lot” of exposure to English media, particularly through television, as a form of informal learning. Here in Canada, she continues to have “some” exposure to English media, but also recognizes that she has learned a great deal informally in Canada through her graduate coursework, her boyfriend, and her Canadian friends.

Chelsea, a 25 year-old woman, was born in Canada, but was raised in France from the age of 2 ½. She returned to Canada at the age of 20, approximately four and a half years ago. She self-identifies socio-economically as “middle”, ethnically as “Caucasian (European)”, ideologically and religiously as “Roman Catholic”, and considers “French” her first language. Although her family (including her older sister) remains in France, Chelsea is engaged to be married to a Canadian and is settling permanently in Canada. Besides Poupak, she is the only co-participant with a desire to remain in Canada as a permanent resident.

Although Chelsea learned a few English words as a baby in Canada (e.g. “cookie”), her formal English language training began at the age of ten in France. She studied English as a foreign language from that point on, and had the opportunity to take a two-week school trip to England for an immersion experience. After completing high school, she continued her English language studies in a Bachelor of Arts in English program at a French university. Typically her professors were French, but had spent several years abroad in an English speaking culture. Again during this time she had a chance to spend a three-week holiday with an English-speaking family in England. Besides her two trips to England, Chelsea had “a little” informal exposure to English through various media including old subtitled movie rentals and popular music on the radio. When she moved to Canada in 1999 this informal input increased to “a lot” as she received input from “radio, movies, TV, Internet, and ... books”. In addition, Chelsea notes the informal learning she had in everyday interactions

with Anglophone roommates and classmates in both her Canadian undergraduate and graduate studies.

5.2 - Reflexion

I am a 32 year-old woman, born and raised in Canada. I self-identify socio-economically as middle-class, ethnically as Caucasian of British ancestry, religiously as non-practicing Protestant (United Church of Canada), and English is my first language. I am the only-child of my retired, army-officer father and my mother who is a cashier. I was brought up on various military bases located in Southern Ontario and Eastern Canada. Also, I recently spent four years living in Beijing, China as an English teacher.

In terms of language learning, I studied French as a second language in the core French program from kindergarten through until my early university studies; however, during this time I had very little exposure to French outside of the classroom. The bulk of my French language acquisition happened during a one year period I spent living and teaching in a French community in northern New Brunswick. In addition to French, I had four years of informal input of Mandarin Chinese while living in Beijing, but I acquired very little of this language.

My professional career has taken me on a journey from high school biology teacher, to ESL teacher with Francophone students in New Brunswick, to EFL instructor in Beijing, China, and home again to Canada to become a graduate student in Education.

Here, I soon found myself intellectually influenced by the writings of Bonny Norton which are preoccupied with feminist poststructuralist conceptualizations of identity and power in second language learning and teaching. Through Norton I also became familiar with the sociological theories of Bourdieu. His conceptual apparatus immediately resonated

with me¹⁴ as it sings with poststructural undertones and strikes an epistemological balance between subjective and objective forces in societies, a crucial element which I had felt was lacking in the constructivist paradigms popular amongst my fellow graduate students. Finally, my intellectual development was undeniably shaped by my thesis director, Dr. Masny, whose interests lie in literacies research. This vein of thinking brought me full circle through the work of Bartlett and Holland (2002) which again uses Bourdieu's theories to situate local literacies within broader social structures.

It is the sum of these personal, professional, and intellectual life histories that I bring to this research endeavor.

5.3 - Intersubjective Relations

Here I wish to recognize that our experiences as we participated in this research are not isolated. On the contrary, our relationships to each other, to the topic of taboo language, and our respective investments in this research project are sure to impact the kinds of information that were shared and those that remained in silence.

Firstly, I question how context interpersonal dynamics play out between co-participants (in terms of gender, age, ethnic differences) that may affect the openness of discussion (Cook & Crang, 1995, p.57). It is also significant that Eun-Ju and Kyu-Kwan were the only two co-participants in Focus Group 1 who shared a nationality and were friends outside of the research group. Thus, they often offered interpretations of each other's experiences. I feared this would leave Poupak feeling left out; however, she too seemed to actively participate in our discussions and also freely speculated on the meaning of the comments of others.

¹⁴ For further discussion see Chapter 3, Section 3.1 – Rationale and Overview of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice.

Secondly, my own relationship to the co-participants is multi-dimensional. At various points, for various co-participants I was: stranger, researcher, co-participant, teacher, colleague, friend, and trusted taboo language expert-confidante. Although the authority associated with some of these roles may have impeded establishing a rapport with some co-participants, conversely my familiarity with others is significant to the intersubjective relations inherent in this research project. Here, I am thinking specifically of the fact that all the members of Focus Group 2 participated, at least partly, as a favour to me as a fellow graduate student. This meant that before I had solicited their participation, all three of them had apriori knowledge of the project.

Furthermore, the members of Focus Group 2 were all acquainted with one another as graduate student colleagues. Since they were also qualitative researchers in their own right, they tended to be particularly adept at responding to my initial interpretations as well as offering their own unsolicited, on-the-fly analysis, speculations, and interpretations of other's comments.

Finally, the relation between the co-participants and the topic itself, English taboo language, warrants consideration. While co-participants seemed to hold a range of stances, from decidedly liberal to rather conservative, and had varying degrees of knowledge about English taboo language, I felt all of them were still able to discuss the issues in a frank manner. I must admit that I am a fairly frequent user of a rather broad range of English taboo language in various domains of my life. Though I am careful not to swear *at* others, I do not hesitate to use it to express my anger and frustration about certain situations when speaking with trusted peers. English taboo language also figures prominently in a running club I belong to which is characterized by its unabashed love of singing bawdy songs. Joining in with gusto affords me a sense of participation and membership in this particular

circle of friends. As an ESL educator, I do not hesitate to address my students' questions about English taboo language in what I hope is an honest and compassionate way. Although I have not gone so far as to purposely work it into my course outline, I can recall several occasions of being 'caught' by school principals with 'naughty' words written boldly across the chalkboard. No doubt, my own views of English taboo language, which tend to the liberal, were quickly noticed by the co-participants. I wonder how knowing this affected the kinds of interaction we had and the stories they were willing to share with me.

5.4 - Approach to the Re-presentation of Findings

In this section, I first return briefly to the crises in ethnographic studies of interpretation and representation. I then deal with some practicalities regarding the co-participants' journals, critical incidents, the nature of the English taboo expressions discussed, and the organization of the findings. I feel these are important considerations to address before turning to the co-participants' actual stories (see section 5.5).

Throughout the gathering and interpretation of the empirical materials, I wrestled with my role in this process. The crisis of interpretation has already been discussed at length in Chapter 4, but this excerpt from my own research journal, written just after the first interview ended, epitomizes these uncertainties of conducting qualitative research.

I noticed how – frustrated? annoyed? worried? – I was that she [Poupak] wasn't speaking to the research questions. Was I not asking the 'right' questions? Was I not allowing her story to emerge? Is her silence with respect to the research questions significant? Was I scaffolding her into what I wanted her to say? Maybe my questions aren't that important to the co-participants at all! What questions are they asking/implying?

Even in the very early stages of the analysis, it became clear to me that my initial ideas and assumptions¹⁵ about how English taboo language would figure in the co-participants' social worlds was a gross oversimplification.

As I move into the representation phase of this project, I am reminded that each co-participant is uniquely situated in the telling of their stories. This has resulted in six distinctive narratives of lived experience that are fraught with contradictions which must be embraced for all their messiness. Yet at the same time, some themes in these narratives do recur and overlap. I have selected an approach that I hope will show these commonalities and relationships between stories, while still recognizing the exceptionality of each individual's experience. I am loathe to essentialize them into a homogeneous group of 'ESL users' and make sweeping generalizations that suggests 'this is how it is for them'. Denzin (1997, p. 38) writes that "in discourse, cultural values are enacted and social structures come alive. The self, a constantly shifting process, is always the incomplete sum of its discursive practices". Bearing this in mind helps account the fragmentation, as well as the solidarity, within the diversity of experiences of this group of ESL learner/users.

A Note Regarding Co-participants' Journals. As previously mentioned, of the six co-participants, only five of them kept journals, and only two decided to share these with me. Joyce, who did not keep a journal at all, said she preferred to just keep the ideas in her head. She insisted she thought about them, but did not feel it was necessary to record this reflective process on paper. Eun-Ju kept a journal, but felt it was too messy and confusing to be useful to me. Despite my assurances that neatness and organization did not 'count' and I would still like to read it, she declined to share her journal, a decision I respected. Xochilt did not share

¹⁵ Despite my best efforts to avoid the positivist research endeavor of hypothesizing, I found that I tacitly held certain assumptions about what the co-participants would tell me, what I would find. This is the only explanation for the surprise and occasional bewilderment I felt as the co-participants' stories unfolded.

her journal because she had kept in her first language, Spanish, which I cannot read. However, she was careful to review her journal entries before concluding our final interview to be sure she had nothing additional to tell me. I regret that in the excitement of my interview with Poupak, the first individual interview I had, I forgot to close the meeting by requesting her journal. By the time I realized this error, I was unable to follow-up on this with her. Initially I was disappointed that I was only able to read the journals of two co-participants, Chelsea and Kyu-Kwan. However, I found that both of these journals were relatively brief and largely consisted of point form notes, questions, and examples they wished to share at the focus group and/or in their interview. In a triangulation of these data sources, it seems that the journals were used largely as reminders of issues to be brought up during meetings as they tended to repeat and corroborate what had already been expressed orally in focus groups and/or individual interviews. Thus information from the journals is included in the overall analysis that follows.

A Note Regarding Critical Incidents. The third research question guiding this research endeavor revolved around critical incidents of taboo language. Initially, I intended to simply ask participants directly to identify their critical incident, but in practicality this did not prove to be an effective way to pin-point critical incidents. Only Eun-Ju was very clear about the story she most needed to tell and that she wanted to be sure was told in the final report; more often though, co-participants found it difficult to single out one pivotal event. In this case, I have taken the liberty of selecting several examples or incidents that seemed to stand out for each individual. These were chosen either because they explicitly told me it stood out in their mind or because I noticed that they seemed to have a particular emotional investment in it, initiating its discussion or returning to the subject several times during our meetings.

A Note Regarding the Nature of Taboo Language. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, I was hesitant to define what counted as English taboo language for the co-participants. Rather, I let them bring any examples they wished to our discussions that they felt fit the bill. It quickly became evident that taboo language and slang are not easily differentiated by ESL users. They told me that they know there is a difference, but because the affective aspect of English taboo language is typically very much down-played for them, it becomes difficult to practically recognize the various levels of taboo expressions and mere slang. A list of so-called ‘taboo’ expressions raised by the co-participants in our meetings that shows this conflation of slang and taboo expressions clearly is included in Appendix G.

Organization of Findings. The organization of the findings is inspired by an approach used by Norton (2000) in her book *Identity and Language Learning – Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change*. It attempts to re-present, each co-participant’s story individually, highlighting specific critical incidents they experienced. Juxtaposed with these re-tellings are my own initial analytic and interpretative comments. The task of connecting these results and overarching emergent themes to the conceptual framework is addressed primarily in Chapter 6 – *Concluding Discussion*.

In the following sections, I have quoted the co-participants extensively. Wherever I have done this, her/his words are set aside in italics and identified by the first letter of her/his pseudonym. My words are identified by the letter *M* for Monica. It was necessary to shorten some quotes, although when this was done I made every effort to leave enough context to avoid intentionally skewing the possible meanings of an utterance. These omissions are indicated by an ellipsis (...), while hesitations and pauses are indicated by three dashes (---). Words that were spoken with particular emphasis are typed in uppercase letters. Finally, occasionally I have embedded my own comments within a co-participant’s words to identify

pronouns separated from their antecedents or to indicate a non-verbal gesture or pause. These are indicated using square brackets.

5.5 – Findings: Members of Focus Group 1

Kyu-Kwan. The stories of all six co-participants put forth unique stances on the issues of identities, power, and English taboo language and these revolve around their personal critical incidents. I have chosen to begin with Kyu-Kwan because, as the only man participating, he alone was able to bring a first-hand male perspective to the study, (although many of the women speculated on taboo language use by the men in their lives).

Kyu-Kwan believed strongly that English taboo language is a necessary part of his language learning. His two main reasons for this seem related to gaining full proficiency in English and building friendly relationships with English first language speakers. I will attempt to explicate these reasons through his words and then conclude this section by presenting an example which highlights why it is extremely difficult for ESL learners to obtain this particular vocabulary, this linguistic capital.

Kyu-Kwan began by explaining that for him and his male peer group of ESL users, which included other Koreans as well as Mexican and Arabic friends, the ability to understand and also use English taboo language is an important marker of language proficiency.

K: We try to speak taboo language a lot because it looks speak English better. ... If we learn slang and taboo language and we practice to my friend and he also like it. And he learns another slang and he uses another slang to me. Actually we are the men so that's what we would like to say. Not just a very smooth language. We'd like to say taboo language, rough language. Not like a woman.

Kyu-Kwan repeated this theme frequently in the focus group discussions and Eun-Ju corroborated.

Having suggested that using English taboo language signals proficiency in his second language, I pressed Kyu-Kwan to clarify how appearing proficient was related to identities. In the previous comment he alluded that using taboo language is something men need to do. I had also suspected, erroneously, that it has something to do with identifying with the local culture. Kyu-Kwan quickly corrected me, even chuckling at such a suggestion. He clarified, drawing a distinction between his linguistic identities and his cultural or national identities.

M: Is it more about who you are and your person and your identity?

K: I think, just language. Not like--- personal. ... So they can recognize I'm Korean man, I want to show my English good.

He repeatedly reminded me that he is not trying to look like a Canadian when he uses taboo language; rather he is mainly hoping to appear proficient. My conceptualizations of language and identities retained in this paper suggest that these can not be understood as separate from each other. Language use and literacies (i.e. linguistic habitus) are part-and-parcel of the habitus (i.e. ways of thinking, valuing, and being in the world) which describes identities. Thus, any change in language use is bound to be reflected in our identities and vice versa. Furthermore, our multiple identities themselves tend to overlap in messy indistinguishable ways. But for Kyu-Kwan at least, he separates aspects in his mind.

I then attempted to ask him directly about how English taboo language might be related to his identities-in-transition.

M: Can using it [English taboo language] make you feel like a different kind of person? Or understanding it makes you feel like a different kind of person?

K: Not very.

This vague answer hinted that in some ways taboo language might “*help*” make you feel like a different kind of person. Even so, this was not his reason for wanting to study it.

K: I think really something make people different kind of person is pronunciation. Accent. But taboo language also help that kind of thing, but because of that we... don't want to study taboo language. Just, we wanna speak English fluently like Canadian and real English speaking person. So, we wanna know taboo language.

Again, Kyu-Kwan returns to the notion of proficiency and fluency in English through the *knowledge* of taboo language.

In his next comment, Kyu-Kwan goes a step further, implying that he believes Canadians typically know and *use* taboo language. Unfortunately, I did not realize this implication during our conversations and did not pursue it with him. It remains unclear where he gets this idea, though I speculate that it arises from the fact that he has been in Canada only a short time (eight months) and has had relatively few experiences interacting with locals. Thus, his preconceived notions of ‘how Canadians really talk’ were drawn in part from stereotypical Hollywood representations in the American television programs and films he watched in Korea. It seems he is just beginning to realize that taboo language use in film is not necessarily a mirror for the reality of all North Americans.

K: I don't wanna get disadvantage because I speak differently. ... When I see, like in here Canadian person, they don't use real polite language many time. ... I wanna change my language to real another Canadian; same as another Canadian. It's the same as taboo language. Although the usual Canadian speak taboo language, so I wanna speak taboo language too.

Because he perceives “*real Canadians*” as users of English taboo language, it follows that he feels his positioning as an ESL user is signaled by his use of overly polite, formal language

(which precludes taboo language use). This is an idea also shared by the other members of Focus Group 1 as we shall see. For Kyu-Kwan, this othering on the basis of taboo-free language is problematic because he worries that he might be “*disadvantaged*”. To avoid this he clearly is anxious to change the kind of language he uses in English. He seeks to take up English taboo language literacy practices, despite the fact they are in conflict with his Korean linguistic habitus which places great importance on the use of polite language.

More than just resisting being positioned as Other, Kyu-Kwan explained how both understanding and speaking English taboo language helps him actually fit-in with “*Canadian native speakers*”. He initiated a conversation about how taboo language helps men in particular to build “*friendly*” relationships.

K: But, I think sometimes taboo language is very good way to be friendly with Canadian. ... First I will learn these languages something and we can be friendly more and more.

He agreed with Poupak that:

K: Like, just for business if I study English I think taboo language is not necessary for. If we want to make foreign friend, taboo language is really necessary.

An ironic contradiction is that although Kyu-Kwan wants access to English taboo language as a way to build friendly relationships with Canadians and first language speakers, in fact, he is hesitant to use this kind of language in the presence of a “*native speaker*” and only uses it within his ESL user peer group.

K: When I speak taboo language I very--- I thought maybe another Korean, not like a native speaker, another Korean or another like second language English student, they thought maybe he speak English well. Something like that. ... I thought like second language student, their English is not perfect. So they don't know if I mistake

when I speak slang, like taboo language. But I think the native speaker, they know about slang. Everything I think. Because it's their language.

I asked him again, during his individual interview, to elaborate why he does not use English taboo language with “*native speakers*”.

K: Maybe nervous, nervous. I know their--- their English is perfect.

He does not want his mistakes to be noticed and risk being laughed at by “*native speakers*” when he experiments with English taboo language literacy practices. Only fellow ESL speakers see his taboo language use as a mark of proficiency and fluency in English. At this point he also emphasized that “*it's their language*”. Does this mean he is accepting that English (and its associated taboo language) belongs exclusively to these so-called native speakers? Does he then, as an ESL speaker, forfeit his ownership of this linguistic capital?

Furthermore he is reluctant to ask “*native speakers*” to clarify their taboo language that he doesn't understand.

K: Sometimes when I talk with, like, real Canadian person, and--- not like one-on-one, like, two or three native speaker and if I join them. And they speak a little bit differently, and actually I don't understand what they say. Sometimes. But I can't ask.

Surprised, I asked him to explain why he could not ask them.

K: If I don't understand this language and I ask again, actually conversation is not continued. Conversation is not continued. Maybe, they don't want to speak many time with me if I stop and “What is the meaning?” Whenever I don't know I ask something, maybe they don't like.

Rather than “*irritating*” the native speakers with his questions about taboo language, he resorts to guessing the meanings and/or feigning understanding. In this way, he becomes

complicit in the process of his own marginalization and reifies the structures of symbolic power associated with English taboo language.

Even though Kyu-Kwan wishes to learn English taboo language, this presents a challenge. He talked about the difficulty of learning the level of tabooeness of various words and expressions (e.g. buttocks versus butt versus ass) in various contexts. Double meanings were also problematic; a taboo expression can be used to swear in one context, but to make a joke in another.

It became evident that all the co-participants seek reliable sources of taboo language information and employ various strategies. Kyu-Kwan, unlike the women in this study, attended a private school in Korea where the conversation teacher, a Korean-American woman, freely shared English taboo language with students.

K: And we wanna try to learn that kind of thing. Maybe she thought, like, she wanna teach natural English. Actually she was very good. And after school we went to bar together. She was very friendly.

Kyu-Kwan was obviously pleased by this teacher and her candidness. He continued to use this 'ask-the-teacher' strategy in his first Canadian private school. However, since coming to the university ESL program, Kyu-Kwan has found his teachers more reticent regarding taboo language. He gives this example when he asked his teacher about the word "*cum*" that he first saw on the Internet.

K: He also couldn't explain. He said it's bad words or sexual or something. He didn't explain.

M: He couldn't or he...

K: He didn't! He didn't want to explain. And I couldn't find in the dictionary. And how do I know what does this mean?

Kyu-Kwan is now forced to fall back on a strategy common to all co-participants, namely *context guessing*. From examples he sees in television sit-coms, in movies, on the internet, and in joke books, he deduces the semantics and pragmatics of English taboo language expressions from their contextualized use. But he finds pit-falls in this approach, for example, at first he erroneously assumed that all expressions he heard on television were “okay” to say, not realizing that Canadian television is much more permissive than Korean TV in terms of the level of taboo language that makes it to air.

Given the frequency with which he asked me to clarify both semantic and pragmatic aspects of various English taboo language expressions for him, it seemed he had a vested interest in participating in this research study. Based on my English first language status, I represented a sort of ‘taboo language expert’ who was likely frank and safe to ask given my own interest in conducting such a study. Undoubtedly, my more liberal leanings on the subject of taboo language were quickly picked up on by the co-participants.

Kyu-Kwan did not seem to have a single critical incident that stood out in his mind, but I did notice that he repeatedly returned to an example which demonstrates the struggles ESL learners face when trying to learn English taboo language. He wanted to ask me about the word “*Jackass*” because he heard it in a children’s movie and yet his ESL teacher told him it was a bad word that he should not use.

K: Yeah, I said when I watching Shrek. I heard the taboo language in the children movie. It makes me very confused. Yeah. Which one is real taboo and which--- how taboo languages, like, level? Strong? And some taboo language people make fun and kidding. Just kidding they use taboo language. Sometime I have to recognize it’s kidding or it’s real - they swear.

It is clear from this example that double meanings and complex pragmatic use of English taboo language in humour are beyond scope of the context guessing strategy so often employed by ESL users in this study.

For Kyu-Kwan his linguistic empowerment through full English language proficiency necessarily includes taboo language. He hopes this form of linguistic capital will open the door to forming friendly relationships with “*real Canadians*”. However, in reality, this conversion of linguistic or cultural capital into social capital is denied him through acts of symbolic violence which silence him in the presence of “*native speakers*”. Consequently he is marginalized and denied symbolic power.

Poupak. Given Poupak’s positioning as a young Iranian immigrant of Muslim background, I had made certain assumptions about her attitudes towards taboo language use. I was admittedly surprised when she insisted on the importance of knowing, and even using, taboo language. As I had suspected, her early socialization in Iran, within the family and in her schooling (including her English language education), did inculcate a primary habitus that did not offer taboo language literacy practices as an option for her.

P: In Eastern countries usually swearing is for men. They say that women are supposed to be more polite.

However, Poupak found this value system challenged in Canada on two fronts: in her peer group and in her workplace.

Like many of the participants, Poupak reflects on her progress in English. As she remembers her early ESL experiences in the Canadian context were quite different from her current situation.

P: Six months ago ... the way I was talking was totally different from now. You know, the level. I came down from being over-polite to like normal. And that was

what I had in my mind. I never forgot that. I always remember at the beginning I was REALLY polite. That I didn't really need to be that much polite.

More importantly, she suggested that it is “*not good to be over polite*” because it sounds “*odd*” to speak this way to “*native speakers*”. It seems that she is aware of the way the language she uses marks her as ‘other’ and an outsider. It follows that taboo language offers a way to belong and participate in her peer group.

Poupak’s peer group became an important source of information about taboo language as well as a socializing force that altered her taboo language habits. She explains that she learned to use “*everyday English*”, including taboo language and slang language, from a Russian female friend and her boyfriend. She stated that she never swore before coming to Canada, but now she does because her boyfriend uses a lot of taboo language. In her opinion, sometimes you need to use it.

P: You need to be like the person you are talking to.

At the very least it seems that understanding the taboo language she hears is essential to peer group participation.

P: People are talking. They are in the same age as you, and you don't get what they're saying.

M: And how does it make you feel?

P: You feel that you left out or you just pretend that you're understanding. ... But really you don't understand. And when you don't understand, you can't join the conversation.

Despite this apparent need, Poupak explains that it is very difficult to access reliable information about taboo language. Television and the Internet offer contextualized models, but still require guesswork on her part. Mainstream dictionaries have also failed her. This

perhaps accounts for the great deal of interest she showed in my copy of *Dangerous English 2000!*. I offered to loan it too her, but she preferred to buy her own copy and we photocopied the order form for her. So, when I asked her where she has been getting her English taboo language information, she told me she relies on her boyfriend. Unfortunately, she complains that he is not very good at explaining the words clearly and patiently to her. At times he even uses her naivety of English taboo language to tease her.

P: He asked me "What do you eat in your New Year?" And I said, "Well, we go to each other house and we offer nuts. And we eat nuts." And he's like, "Who's nuts?" So I'm like, well [pauses, expresses uncertainty]. And he's like, "Oh, well never mind." And I'm like, "No! Tell me. What you meant." And then he explained to me.

M: And how did you feel at that time?

P: Oh, I'm used to it.

I was struck by the resignation in her voice in this last sentence. It seems to me that she has normalized her subordinate position and legitimized his right to exercise symbolic power over her through what I suggest is the symbolic violence of taboo language teasing. I found this interesting because, as I gathered from Poupak's comments, her boyfriend was also an ESL user, albeit essentially bilingual. I had expected this kind of teasing behaviour by English *first* language speakers, but not *between* ESL users of varying proficiencies. Suddenly, my initial assumptions about the power structures associated with English taboo language use became naïve and oversimplified because they had (very wrongly) collapsed all ESL users in to a single, homogeneous group, all similarly endowed in terms of linguistic capital and symbolic power. Such is not the case.

I went on to ask Poupak about the possibility of using English first language speakers as sources of information.

P: Some people, like you or my teacher, their first language is English, but I'm comfortable to ask if I don't understand. Some people are tolerant with that. Some people are not.

Here I draw attention to Poupak's use of the word "tolerant". This wording signals that she sees her questions about English taboo language as somehow an annoyance, something to be tolerated. She herself marginalizes her right to access this genre of language, this form of linguistic capital.

Taboo language is not solely relegated to use between friends in informal settings as demonstrated by Poupak's stories of taboo language in her place of work (a fast food restaurant where she worked part-time during our study, but that she has since left to focus on her studies). Poupak seemed to attribute less importance to gaining a sense of belonging in this social setting compared to her peer group. She hesitated to say that she wanted to "fit-in" at her workplace. Even so, she did suggest that it was sometimes difficult for her to participate fully in staff camaraderie.

P: A lot of times when they [co-workers] were talking I found that I'm not understanding what they were saying. They use a lot of slang and taboo language as well. ... So sometimes when they were talking I just left because I didn't get anything from their conversation. So I went to do something else. And it was difficult at the beginning to fit in taboo because I couldn't speak English well. Especially at that time. And I couldn't go in the conversation with them. But I'm trying to fit-in? ... Not somewhere special like that.

While her desire to belong are different in her peer group and work settings, there is still a common element of wishing to participate in social relationships in both contexts; participation that is hampered by her ignorance of English taboo language. *Participation* is a key notion that I will return to in subsequent stories from other co-participants.

Poupak recounted two critical incidents in her workplace that convinced her that it is essential to understand English taboo language. In the first instance, Poupak overheard an argument between her manager and another co-worker that involved swearing, some of which she could understand, but other expressions she did not know at that time.

P: So then I felt, you know, what if she had told me that? How would I react, if I had heard that? I didn't know the meaning. So what was my reaction? You know he got mad and he swore back, but if it was me I don't even know what would be my reaction.

Unfortunately, this is exactly the situation she faced in a second critical incident in which her manager used a taboo expression in anger towards her.

P: I really didn't get what he said. There was another girl who was standing right beside me and she got what he said. She's not Canadian, but she speaks English fluent. And I just smiled and I went away. And I could see the expression on her face that she was SO shocked why I smiled and I went away. Then I found out that he said something bad.

These experiences showed Poupak that “*you need to have the right reaction*” and sometimes this can help you to avoid becoming “*trapped in a situation*”. In retrospect, she seemed to very much regret her naïve reaction in that particular situation because she felt she ought to be spoken to politely by her boss and treated with respect in her workplace. She went on to criticize the swearing behaviour of unhappy customers, particularly fellow ESL users, whom

she thinks needlessly swear in English (sometimes at her) as a strategy to have their complaints heard and recognized. They attempt to show that language is not a “barrier” for them.

P: I know even if I won't swear it will work. But probably they don't know and they think if they don't swear they won't get their rights.

She went on to stress the importance for ESL speakers of having the pragmatic skills to express their displeasure without resorting to taboo language.

P: Even using, not taboo language. ... These are things I think very important for ESL speakers to know. ... You want to express yourself. You are unhappy but you want to say that in a polite way. So you need to know that.

Moving to Canada exposed Poupak to a secondary socialization process, through her peers and in her workplace, which altered her habitus and offered different taboo language literacy possibilities. She herself is aware of this process.

P: I came from Iran, from my parents if you want to compare. I came to this society and I started learning. And you learn language as you are taught, as you hear it. So I heard it in that way [with taboo language use] and I learned it in that way. So I felt it's perfectly alright because I learn it with that way.

Suddenly in this new social setting, a new linguistic market with a different system of values, different literacy practices were available to her as a woman that were not in her native Iran. Yet the appropriation of these taboo language literacy possibilities is not without tension because, according to Bourdieu, it is constrained by limits determined by the primary habitus. Even so, Poupak's experiences bring to light how her identities-in-transition offer spaces for her to engage in different taboo language practices in her second language as a means of social participation and peer group belonging.

Eun-Ju. I found Eun-Ju's insights especially valuable because she was able to speak quite directly about her identities-in-transition and power relationships she had experienced. She couched these discussions within repeated reflections on her English taboo language critical incident; in my opinion, perhaps the most poignant story told. Based on this pivotal event, it turned out that Eun-Ju had a specific agenda for participating in this research project.

Before interpreting Eun-Ju's experiences, it is first necessary to engage Eun-Ju's notion of "*community*". She described the close relationship with her small circle of Korean friends here in Canada as her "*community*", "*a kind of family*". It is clear that this is an important support network for Eun-Ju with whom she shares a similar life history.

E: Japanese friend, Chinese friend, or Arabic friend, they are friends, but cannot be part of my--- of our community here.

The critical incident, around which our discussions revolved more often than not, actually happened to another member of her community and not Eun-Ju herself. Yet I still felt it was crucial to focus on this event given the intimate and close knit nature of this community, and given the obviously profound effect it had on Eun-Ju. She describes it as a "*turning point*" in her thinking about English taboo language. She is so close to this experience, that it is almost as if she was there. I note how in the telling of it, she repeatedly makes pronoun errors, saying "*I*" or "*we*" and quickly correcting to "*she*" or "*they*" respectively. Although these could be simply grammar errors, they do hint that Eun-Ju feels this experience as keenly as though it actually happened to her.

However, before sharing this fascinating story, I would like to offer some of Eun-Ju's comments regarding her sense of identities and identities-in-transition. Like Poupak and Kyu-Kwan, Eun-Ju was conscious of the way her formalized language marks her as Other.

E: Sometimes I feel very---. We're separate. Separated from the real Canadian society because we use other languages. We use very formal languages, very kind languages. So sometimes we don't understand what they are saying or we can't guess any meanings from the taboo languages and sometimes it makes me, not frustrated, but very disappointed. ... Sometimes I try to get into this society equally, but sometimes it really makes me dis--- frustrated sometimes. Taboo language or some kind of situations because we use, you know, we use very different languages than the real Canadian use.

Again, it seems that taboo language can help place ESL learners on an more equal linguistic footing with their English first language speakers, but Eun-Ju is not seeking to 'pass' for an English first language speaker and does not seem to place great importance on fitting-in with English first language speakers. However, taboo language does have a link to her identities-in-transition.

Eun-Ju describes the way her taboo language literacy practices change as she moves between contexts. Her socially constructed gendered identity is key in this transition.

E: They [people she meets in Canada] don't know about me. The real Eun-Ju in Korea. Because in Korea I am a very nice human being and I am not going to use any taboo languages, even in Korean. And I am a girl. And to be a girl in Korea, it means to be very --- . To be a very nice woman. So even if I have very stressed out situation I can't use any taboo languages. But here, situation is very different because I don't have people who recognize my--- I would say past when I was in Korea. But I can use taboo languages.

She sees her-self "totally different" in Korea, in her university class in Canada, or in her community of friends, and her language, including taboo language, is consequently very

different as well. Like Poupak, Eun-Ju finds different social roles and literacy practices open to her in some Canadian contexts which at times run contrary to her habitus and early socialization. In other words, she becomes able to adopt, in part at least, English taboo language literacy practices within the social context of her community.

Eun-Ju's emerging English taboo language literacy practices suggest some inherent contradictions. On the one hand, she downplays the importance of taboo language vocabulary to her ESL proficiency. In her opinion, she is an "*ESL student*" and "*newcomer*" and so has more to learn than taboo language. She also describes how men who use taboo language "*affect*" her making her "*nervous*" and "*uncomfortable*". Although there is not space to detail them all here, over the course of our meetings, she cited three examples of being upset and "*disgusted*" by her male classmates' use of English taboo language in their university ESL classes. She corroborated Kyu-Kwan's comments that Korean men use English taboo language to appear proficient in English and to be included in male peer groups. She judged this behaviour harshly saying:

E: I think really it's stupid

Eun-Ju added that her comments regarding men might not be useful to our study because her viewpoint may be affected by a kind of psychological "*complex*".

E: Sometimes I feel, to be honest, I have a complex about men because I am the youngest in my whole family in Korea. And I'm the first child in our family, so I must be a boy. But I'm a girl.

While, Eun-Ju may question the value of her contributions to the study, I believe they are vital because they highlight the powerful impact instances of English taboo language can have on ESL users.

On the other hand, Eun-Ju actually admits to *using* English taboo words to joke and tease with others in her community. She also told me about a time she had experimented with using English taboo language with a “*Canadian speaker*”. In this instance she followed the example of her landlady and the landlady’s son, who jokingly call their whining cat a “*bad bitch*”. Eun-Ju was shocked to find that when she tried this, she angered her landlady. I asked her if she had tried to discuss this with the landlady and explain herself, but despite feeling deeply regretful, she did not wish to make excuses for her behaviour and preferred not to bring it up.

E: Whenever I remember that again, I want to run away from my landlady. It’s very ashamed memory.

She remains confused about why she caused such a negative reaction. She was sure, given the frequency with which she hears this word, from television, the landlady, and the landlady’s son, that it would have been “*okay*” to make such a joke. She is further confounded by the fact that she hears a great deal of taboo language in the real world, even from “*sophisticated people*”. Eun-Ju’s strategy to get reliable information about the meaning and pragmatics of English taboo language is to bring her questions to her community or to ask a Spanish friend, a highly proficient ESL user who, being a fellow international student, is willing to “*explain very kindly*”. Part of the challenge that ESL learners face is the lack of socialization to taboo expressions in their second language; something we pick up in our first languages through socialization in our early education in the home, school, and in places of worship. Interestingly, both Poupak and Eun-Ju expressed a sense of this. That parental guidance was missing for them in their second language.

E: We’re like a baby. We need a filter to collect bad words, good words, like--- we don’t have any parents to collect that words for us.

Unfortunately, such a “*filter*” and reliable source of information seems difficult for these ESL users to access. They often turn to fellow ESL users who are seen as empathetic.

So how is it that Eun-Ju can be strongly opposed to the taboo language used by others around her, in particular, men, and yet still express a desire to learn and in some cases use English taboo language herself? This contradiction becomes clearer if it is understood in terms of the following critical incident of English taboo language that she shared with me during her one-on-one interview.

E: My best friend has a really, really terrible experience with that. My friend and--- two of my friends [Korean women] were sitting in the Tim Horton on [Downtown] street and they were drinking coffee and--- They were sitting like this [demonstrates with her hands] and beyond that there was a black guy. ... And then the black guy was started to approach to one of my friend and he asked her about something, like very bad languages, but she couldn't understand him properly because he spoke very fast. And then she misunderstood him, because she thought he spoke to her a very bad languages because we don't underst--- they couldn't understand what the black guy really speak. So my friend was so upset about it, so she just started to pretend like, 'I'm very upset so please don't bother me anymore'. That kind of thing. And what happened next is the black guy just hit my friend twice. Her cheek. ... When I visit her house later because she needed a kind of a--- how can I say pills to relax her down? So I brought that pills with me to her house, so. Wow! It was serious because she, her cheeks were swollen like this. So at that time I was so angry with that.

This incident was enough to send Eun-Ju's friend, already suffering from homesickness, packing back to Korea. The effects of this event rippled out and had a deep impact on Eun-Ju and others in her community.

E: And after that we're all close in my community. We're so afraid of that kind of situation.

After I heard this story from Eun-Ju, it became clearer to me why, in the focus group discussions, she reinforced Poupak's comment about the need to have appropriate reactions to taboo language with: "*to protect myself*". She did not elaborate at the time, so I broached this subject again during her interview and asked her to explain what she meant.

E: I'm the visitor so I can't understand you very well, so I can't understand perfectly like native speakers so I think I need to defend myself to other people, against other people if they have--- If they just try to insult me with taboo languages I think I have to react properly to them. Not that I mean I want to use taboo language to them, but I need to know what they are saying to me because I don't want to be ignored by that kind of language in here and especially I--- my, my best friend has a really, really terrible experience with that.

This gives some insight into why she so desired to gain knowledge of English taboo language and the stake she had in participating in this research project. It offered her a chance to process this traumatic experience and to learn new English taboo expressions that she could bring back to her community. In the same way, other members of her community are actively seeking out English taboo language knowledge that they can share with their peers.

E: My friend's experience, after that I just--- we just, all the people in our community, think about the taboo languages seriously. Before that we didn't consider taboo languages as, you know, necessary part of learning English. But after that we just decided to bring some kind of experiences from their school or other real life experiences because we needed to learn it to survive. If you're staying

here forever or for more five years it could be really important when we express ourselves. Express our emotions to other people what we're really feeling about their taboo languages. If they--- even though they use a lot of taboo languages and then we just didn't react anything after that we're just so--- we're just so DEPRESSED. We need to, yeah. We're not just a visitor. We're not just ESL learners. We're here to learn English, but we're still a human being here. We're same in the status in Canada. So it's really important.

In a bold, proactive move Eun-Ju and her community have demanded access to this linguistic capital and have begun to re-interpret¹⁶ this “disaster”.

E: Before I studied your research project, I thought the disaster that happened to my friend is only a disaster. I didn't know that because we didn't understand the taboo languages it happened. We just--- I just thought it was a disaster. It was the guy's fault.

Eun-Ju is beginning to recognize the relations of power hidden within her experiences involving taboo language. In doing so, she is taking the first subversive steps to tear down the mechanisms of symbolic power that inhere in her taboo language interactions.

5.6 – Findings: Members of Focus Group 2

Joyce. Joyce's comments focused on her need to know, though not use, taboo language as a way to understand the local culture, participate in it, and protect herself from being the victim of insults or looking foolish. This last reason becomes clearer in her critical incident, presented at the end of this section.

¹⁶ Weedon's (1997) feminist poststructuralist theory suggests that “it is possible to transform the meaning of experience by bringing a different set of assumptions to bear on it” (p. 82). It opens possibilities of re-interpreting experience in terms of socially produced power structures.

Joyce was initially hesitant to become a participant in this research project because she had not had much exposure to English taboo language and she knows very little of it. She did not think that her insights would be very useful to me. I assured her that actually having English taboo language knowledge was certainly not a prerequisite for participation and her contributions to our discussions as an ‘unenlightened’ learner would be significant as well.

Although her exposure to English taboo language has dramatically increased in Canada (compared to China), through television, movies, and on the Internet, she still finds this genre of language completely absent from the formal education settings where she spends much of her time. Thus she also finds she has few opportunities to get access to English taboo language.

J: At parties and when you become familiar with those English native speakers, they maybe taught you or mentioned something like this [English taboo language].

Otherwise, like in our lab or in the office in classrooms they'll never mention something like this. So, that's why for myself, I'm thinking just I seldom encounter such situation.

To help her make sense of these examples she encounters, Joyce often turns to her roommate. Although she too is an ESL user (from Hong Kong), she proves a useful source of information about English taboo language because, according to Joyce, she has been living in Canada for three years and has had more opportunities to acquire this language at parties and other informal settings during her undergraduate studies.

Paradoxically, Joyce still expressed reservations about the extensive knowledge and use of English taboo language by her roommate. This contradiction can be better understood in relation to the tension between the taboo language practices of the roommate and Joyce's

primary socialization in China. Joyce explained that her education from her parents formed a linguistic habitus that did not include taboo language use by women, particularly educated women. For this reason, she finds the frequent swearing (in both English and Chinese) by her roommate disconcerting.

J: So sometimes I feel not very good when she [roommate] speaks so. I just feel--- That's kind of, I'm not sure if I need to explain it to you clearly, in China if some people--- GIRLS should be very cautious when they speak some taboo language. It's really not good if you say some taboo language in public situation. Other people will not, will think, 'Oh, you may probably not be well educated.' That kind of feelings in China. That kind of culture or cultural issue in China. So, like, here in Canada, I know that people are more open so they may pay less attention to people's first language if people say some first language taboo language here. But I, for myself, I still feel it's not so good when you, as girls, you may be, you should be cautious or about yourself, about your own behaviour.

Even in Canada, she continues to feel this way. She resists English taboo language, attempting to maintain a “match” between her first and second language taboo language practices. That is, she “*seldom speaks taboo language*” in either her first or her second language.

Based on these comments, I was taken aback when Joyce told me: “*But if you don't understand it, you know, you will regret sometimes*”. Intrigued, I asked Joyce more about why she needed to understand the English taboo language she encounters. At first, when I suggested a possible link between her identity and English taboo language, she laughed. She has no desire to become “*fully integrated*” into Canadian society, through taboo language or otherwise.

J: I myself may achieve certain level that I know more about this community, the group of people. But it's not like I myself to this part of commun--- I still am myself. I have my own identity in the sense you mean.

While she does not seek to identify as Canadian, she does express a desire to understand and participate in Canadian society, at least to a certain degree. Telling me that taboo language is “connected deeply to the culture” of the target language, she views English taboo language knowledge as a means to satisfy her curiosity about Canadian culture. This is a curiosity that has increased as her English language proficiency improved. However, she was careful to clarify that she disagrees with Kyu-Kwan’s position in that she does not see the ability to use English taboo language as a signaler of language proficiency.

Joyce finds that an understanding of English taboo language leads to a deeper understanding of the local culture and consequently she is better prepared to participate more fully in informal, social situations with Canadians.

J: I just felt that sometimes you can understand, that's enough for you to be, to participant in the conversation. ... But, you are not necessary to show them that you can also use this kind of language. For me, I probably will not speak the same taboo language as others.

She elaborated how understanding English taboo language really helps her fit-in with others. She poignantly describes the isolation she has felt in social settings with English first language speakers.

J: I want to understand all the words they say and their jokes. You really hope that you can understand and be part of the whole group. But if you don't understand I will feel so isolated. And all the people laugh, but you sit there. Like, you know, looks foolish. Sometimes I don't feel comfortable.

By gaining an understanding of English taboo language she is better able to “*share*” with them and “*have fun*” with them in informal situations. She also felt that if people are comfortable enough around her to use English taboo language, then she had already gained a level of belonging.

J: They do not hesitate to speak such kind of taboo language which means that you are already being part of them.

It seems strange to me that Joyce appears to have completely separated this sense of belonging in English first language social settings from her identity. At this point in her identities-in-transition, it may still be obscured for Joyce herself and so she is less able to articulate it consciously.

Besides fostering friendly social interactions, Joyce sees English taboo language knowledge as a valuable resource to help her avoid undesirable kinds of social interactions. In the first case, she wants to be sure that she is not unwittingly insulted or discriminated against by others through English taboo language.

J: If someone says some taboo language to ME, it will really make me feel bad. Cuz, you know, they may be rude to you and they--- because of ideas, probably discrimination or something like that. ... Maybe young man or if they say something in a public situation, I mean to you, which means that's really not good.

Joyce, Eun-Ju, and other women participating in this study are especially concerned about rude comments that may be directed at them by men. On a related topic, Joyce also wants to steer clear of people she views as threatening based on their use of taboo language.

J: If people really, like young people, they say something bad to you, you should be conscious of that and probably they are very dangerous. ... And you probably go away and get away from.

She also gauges whether strangers are “trouble” based on their taboo language use. This is yet another reason she needs to understand English taboo language.

Finally, Joyce is anxious to avoid looking “foolish” because she is naïve of certain taboo language expressions.

J: Maybe you don't know about it [taboo language], so somebody else who know it, they make fun of you or they laugh at you or--- so maybe sometimes make you very embarrassed.

This is a crucial point for Joyce, particularly in light of her Chinese background and the importance of maintaining her ‘face’. This next story was so vital for Joyce to tell, that she added it at the end of Focus Group 2, even after the recording equipment was packed away. When we met again for her individual interview, I asked her to recount this critical incident once more so that I would have a taped record of it. She graciously agreed. It took place at her previous university that she attended when she first arrived in Canada.

J: So when I and another CBC (Canadian born Chinese), a boy, we go together to don, you know don, in the residence? There's a don. Yeah to don's room. And she give us some information and some help she can afford to every residence, the students living in the residence. And she also mentioned that there's a box in her desk, and she mentioned, 'Oh, you want some condoms you can take it away from here.' And then I ask her, 'Oh, what is that?' And so both of, you know, the boy and she laughed, 'Oh! You don't know that!' So, which made me feel very foolish and then I explained, 'Oh, I probably don't know how to say this, but I know what it is.'

She was embarrassed in this situation because she did not want the don and her friend to question her knowledge about condoms. It was simply a word she was never taught in English due to its “sensitive” nature.

As stated earlier, Joyce suggested that she “*seldom*” uses taboo language, but she does not avoid it completely. I asked her to talk about these rare occasions when she might try saying an English taboo expression for “*venting*” her feelings, even though she finds the emotive power of English swear words is somewhat diminished for her. These shifting taboo language practices reflect changing identities, though she herself is not necessarily aware of it and may resist acknowledging her identities-in-transition.

Interestingly, Joyce is very aware of taboo language as a register that can only be used in certain contexts with certain people. In fact, she even has a special etiquette for taboo language in her second language.

J: I may also, you know, be very cautious when I speak a taboo language in second language. Especially, it's different, like, I talk to myself as in front of other people or in front of other friends who are also Chinese in a group of Chinese, you know, I may not feel too careful when I speak out. But if you stay together with some Canadian people you maybe cautious about this.

She worries she will be judged negatively and seen as uneducated by Canadians who overhear her use of English taboo language. She suggests they will think: “*How you use this special word?! You are a graduate student!*”

Joyce may have thought she would not have much to add to this study, but her perspective brings to light that even ESL users who do not wish to engage in English taboo language literacy practices, have reasons for this that are tied together with their identities-in-transition and the tensions associated with this process of change. More importantly, she still has a vested interest in knowing and embracing the English taboo language practices of others as she negotiates her cross-linguistic and cross-cultural social worlds.

Xochilt. The final two co-participants, both highly reflective about their language learning and identities, were able to articulate more explicit links between English taboo language and their shifting identities. In Xochilt's case, she is pulled in two directions; wishing to "*fit-in*" with the local English culture in Canada, yet still resisting integration because she feels she would lose something of her Mexican-ness. She expresses her desires this way:

X: I question my identity all the time. ... I always feel that if I integrate fully I lose some of my culture, so that's always for me, like--- I'm jeopardizing something. So I do want to at some level, but I don't at another.

Her story is fraught with tensions and contradictions. English taboo language forms a backdrop against which Xochilt's larger identity struggles play out as she prepares to return home to Mexico after spending nearly two years in Canada. Although the poststructuralist understanding of identity retained in this thesis holds that identity is always in a state of becoming, it seems that Xochilt is in a particularly tumultuous phase.

By and large, the co-participants' first language taboo literacy practices (and identities) tended to be reflected in their second language. Xochilt was the exception, describing her use of taboo language in English as "*very minimal compared to Spanish*". In some ways this makes it challenging for her to realize her identities across linguistic boundaries. While Xochilt feels a need to express her-self in the same "*colourful*" way she does in Spanish, she is limited in English by her lack of English taboo language knowledge.

X: I think that that's my problem because I've been immersed so much in Spanish, that I can't find to use the equivalent.

She goes on to explain that:

X: I have a hard time expressing emotionally in English, although I'm a very outspoken person.

Also, part of her motivation to limit her English taboo language use may be to avoid portraying an undesirable image. Although she does not agree with the stereotype, she feels that taboo language is a register sometimes associated with people who are uneducated or of lower socio-economic class.

Even though she resists fully engaging in English taboo language practices, Xochilt holds that it is very important to know, to “*signal*” or “*identify*” taboo expressions in English. In our conversations, she offered a number of reasons for this.

First of all, English taboo language knowledge is necessary for Xochilt to participate in conversations within the local communities she encounters. She was anxious to make it clear that she did not feel any peer pressure to actually use English taboo language, but that understanding it did make it easier for her to feel included in informal social settings as she gradually acquired some knowledge ‘bad’ language. Before that, in the first few months after her arrival in Canada, she mentions that she really did not fit-in to the local culture. She used the word “*displaced*” to describe her feeling at that time when she did not seem to have anything in common with the people she socialized with, she did not get their jokes, and she could not add to conversations that involved English taboo vocabulary. This last point was particularly disturbing for her because in her first language she capably and readily discusses topics involving taboo language. Still, when it comes to adopting English taboo language, she is torn between participating on the margins of Canadian culture and allowing herself to gain a sense of belonging.

X: It's partial. Because we're never fully--- I don't feel like I'm ever fully gonna accomplish it. Because there's still a lot things that I don't know or I don't know where to use. So, for me it's difficult. Like, I wanna be--- I wanna participate, but to be fully part of? I find that hard.

Ultimately she sees the level of belonging she can possibly hope to attain as partial.

Like the others, Xochilt has developed a kind of English taboo language etiquette that is based on an awareness of her own “*identity as a second language speaker*”. She quite freely experiments with English taboo language literacy practices with her close friends who are also ESL users. However, she differs from the previous four co-participants in that she occasionally speaks English taboo language in the presence of “*native speakers*” if she is “*comfortable*” around them. Yet, despite having carefully selected her native-speaking interlocutors for such interactions, and taken care to clarify her meaning so as not to offend, she later explains that these individuals still make her uncomfortable by laughing at her.

X: I do get the laughs. Like, and I get it from people that are close to me that are native speakers.

Xochilt seeks to save her own English as a foreign language students from such embarrassing and marginalizing interactions with more proficient speakers. Her belief that English taboo language is an important part of language learning is reflected in her own teaching practices, for example, she once explained the phrase “*to jump into bed with*” to her students.

X: I would point out things like that. Not that they were bad, but they [Xochilt's students] just have to be careful if they make the sentence. People might laugh at them.

Unfortunately, the idea of being ridiculed comes from Xochilt's own uncomfortable experiences.

Another reason Xochilt desires to gain English taboo language knowledge is to be aware of situations where she is being teased or even insulted by English first language speakers.

X: The person who speaks the language has a more dominant role because he or she knows where to use it. And, yeah, you are at a disadvantage there. And like I said, I'm not a person that would take offence on being teased. But then, if you don't know what you're being teased about. ... Because it's part of not knowing and just feeling at a disadvantage I guess. And yeah, and that's where your role as or your identity as a non-native speaker sticks out the most.

Xochilt shared Eun-Ju and Joyce's concerns about being unwittingly teased; however, she was particularly wary of how *she* might inadvertently insult others by using taboo language in the wrong context or as she put it "*crossing that barrier*". It also became apparent that Xochilt is conscious of how that barrier of acceptability is more restrictive for women.

X: That's why I use it more in Spanish too. Because I'm more used to being with men. And in English, I remember that I have said certain swear words like 'fuck', I think sometimes when I'm angry, and I fear people's reactions.

She also believes that it is more acceptable for men to have taboo language literacy practices than for women and she finds herself "*apologetic*" when she happens to use an English taboo expression.

Focusing our attention on issues of power, Xochilt speculated that the native speakers who laugh at her are unaware of the impact of this on her self-esteem and that they quite unconsciously assume a dominant role in interactions involving English taboo language. She

explained that her friend who seemed “*sarcastic*” when she asked her about the word “*vagina*”, does not laugh at her on purpose or with malicious intent.

X: I think she does it naturally. ... I don't think she really means to be nasty when she laughs. But it's something that comes natural. Although I think most of the time I will feel uncomfortable because I'm learning it and I don't want to be put on the spot.

Xochilt was left feeling nervous about asking her friend about such words. This offers insights into the ways in which symbolic power is misrecognized as such and how power roles are normalized by both the dominant and the subordinate groups. I believe that English first language speakers, through these kinds of marginalizing behaviours, enact a form of symbolic violence that undermines the legitimacy of the ESL speakers taboo language utterances as well as their quest for this knowledge. Worse yet, it seems that Xochilt is complicit in her own marginalization by invalidating her own feelings about these experiences, suggesting that they “*sound childish*”.

Before concluding our interview, I asked Xochilt to talk about how she gains access to English taboo language knowledge. She explained that English taboo language was largely absent from her experiences in formal education settings except on occasions when she overheard swearing in arguments between students and her teacher at her high school in the United States. In her Canadian university studies, she found that the Spanish taboo language she heard from her professor in Mexico did not occur in the English context.

X: He [Mexican psychology prof] would smoke all the time and swear a lot [in Spanish]. ... But in English, no, I haven't. I haven't. Not even here at the M.A.. That's a shame [laughs].

Recently her exposure to English swearing has increased through “*going to bars*”, “*meeting native speakers*”, listening to “*rap hip-hop*” music, reading the sex advice column in a local newspaper, and watching movies. Reluctant to “*disrupt*” the conversation to ask others to explain unfamiliar taboo expressions, she usually checks her dictionary and/or she context-guesses. However, as she gains more proficiency in English, she also feels more comfortable asking English first language users to explain themselves.

X: If you're a proficient speaker and you're using them, and then I ask you, "Why? What does that mean?" And then you [proficient speaker] don't want to say it!

She now requests that a “*native speaker*” write down the expression they have used so that she might double-check the semantic and pragmatic information with another trusted “*native speaker*”. Her current boyfriend is an English first language speaker and so she turns to him for confirmation of her context-guesses.

Xochilt also expressed her frustration at being unable to learn appropriately euphemistic phrases for English taboo language. She cited an example where she was forced to use the phrase “*kiss ass*” in a correspondence with a fellow graduate student when she would have rather said “*brown-noser*” or “*teacher's pet*”. As she put it:

X: He's gonna find it hilarious that I couldn't think of these synonyms. Cuz then again: Do you click on the right, on the word processor when you write a word like that? No because it's not that accessible to you.

This again highlights a form of symbolic violence that ESL users face that denies them access to English taboo language as a form of linguistic capital.

The multifarious reasons for Xochilt's desire to understand English taboo language literacy practices coalesce in her telling of the following critical incident which took place soon after she had moved to Canada.

X: This always sticks in my mind. The Mexican flag has an eagle in the centre, so when I did my first poster presentation in this university, I did the colours of the Mexican flag. And I was standing next to my poster, so I think I said twice, 'I'm the eagle in the middle'. And my friend who was in my class said, 'Do you mean, are you a spread-eagle?' And that's when she said. And I'm like, 'What's that?' She's like, 'All afternoon you've been saying you're the eagle in the middle and spread-eagle means, you know, open up your legs.' And I was like, 'Oh my God! I said that! What must people have thought of me?' But you know it was just, in that moment I felt embarrassed but then again, it was, what, five months after moving here for the first time. So then there's another situation where you think, you know, I'd rather know what the word is so I don't have that problem that I'm using in the wrong context.

The very icon of Xochilt's national identity became the object of her marginalization. This story poignantly captures how ESL users' naivety of English taboo language can create the conditions for the marginalization of their language and identities.

Finally, I would like to close by returning to Xochilt's awareness of her identities-in-transition. For the first time in her life she is "*dating an English native speaker*" and this further complicates her sense of being caught between two languages and two cultures. Eventually, she says this may lead her to actively take up different English taboo language literacy practices. She says "*that would be another state or period in my life*". In speaking of her identities, Xochilt says "*but now, something is re-emerging*". It remains to be seen exactly what that 'something' will be.

Chelsea. Chelsea reminded me early in our interview that her story is distinct from the other co-participants because she is a permanent immigrant to Canada. She indicated

that she has a greater investment in learning English (including taboo language) than someone who is only sojourning in Canada. It has a greater impact on her identities and her explicit desire to integrate into Canadian society and be recognized as legitimate speaker of English.

C: The focus is different for me because I am trying to be part of the community ... and participate in everything else for the rest of my life so--- I think there will be a point where I will define myself as Canadian. ... And I might someday define myself as bilingual, which I don't yet. ... I always felt like I wanted to belong here because I was born here. I always felt like I had, you know, in some way, I should be Canadian.

As we will see, for Chelsea, English taboo language figures prominently in this process of gaining legitimacy through full participation in Canadian society.

Chelsea is consciously embracing of her identities-in-transition and consequently, this process seems to be less traumatic for Chelsea than for Xochilt who felt she had to resist relinquishing her Mexican identity. Chelsea expresses it this way:

C: I don't think I'm afraid of losing my identity because I think I am deciding to change it. So I don't think I'm living abroad, but trying to stay French to be able to go back. I'm in the process of becoming--- and not losing it, but being both.

She explains that this is possible by taking up *some* of the values of her new Canadian culture, but maintaining certain elements of her French culture. She is also aware of the way this hybridity of her identities is reflected in her language, and more specifically in her appropriation of English taboo language use.

C: I use English probably more than I use French now at home. And so, it seems to be the language of home. And so it's the language I talk to myself in and the language I swear in.

We spent much of our interview together exploring how English taboo language literacy practices have value for Chelsea in terms of blending her identities as a bicultural, bilingual Canadian immigrant.

Chelsea highlighted the strong influence of L1 taboo language literacy practices on L2 practices such that there is a “*match*” between them. For her, she has always been very curious about English taboo language because her first language, French, is very “*colourful*” in terms of taboo language.

C: I might also be more interested to use and to integrate taboo language than others because I did use a lot in my first language. ... I need to know these words because I'm probably gonna feel like I should be using them to express myself because that's how I used to express myself in French.

Chelsea considers English taboo language a necessary linguistic “*tool*” for her to fully express her-self in her second language.

C: If I want to consider myself fully proficient and ... near-native in the L2, I think I have to know taboo language as well because it is a big part of the language. ... Needing them to consider myself belonging to the group.

When she moved to an English immersion context in Canada, the significance of English taboo language increased and it became a crucial component of her literacies that offered the possibility of gaining a sense of belonging in her new culture.

However taking up English taboo language practices is not a simple matter of expanding her vocabulary. While Chelsea indicated that fellow ESL users are empathetic to

her struggles to learn and experiment with using English taboo language, in comparison she finds “*native speakers*” unsupportive and judgmental.

C: I do think they're [native speakers] judgmental and they tend to be. And I mean I'm--- that's a generalization

Despite this, Chelsea stated that she still does not self-censor her English taboo language around “*native speakers*” the way the other co-participants do.

Chelsea is extremely critical of English first language speakers who refuse to explain to her the meaning of the taboo language they use or who “*pick on her*” by doubting her English taboo language knowledge, putting her on the spot, or laughing at her ignorance. This was hardly surprising to me, but this next story was unexpected. In this incident, she was talking with two friends and they interrupted their conversation when an English taboo language expression came up to check Chelsea’s comprehension.

C: I think they felt like they wanted to include me. So right away they stopped and are, 'Oh. You didn't understand that did you?' And they wanted to explain so that I could understand, participate, instead of being there not fitting-in.

To me, this at first appeared to be inclusive behaviour on the part of the first language speakers; that is until Chelsea explained further how she felt in this situation.

C: They were trying to help, but it was condescending anyway in the end. ... It's like, 'Hey! You didn't get that, right?' Yeah, yeah. So they're helping towards me fitting-in someday, but they remind you, 'You don't quite get it yet.'

This experience shows how benevolent efforts to be inclusive can actually backfire and become modes of symbolic violence that reify the ‘otherness’ of ESL users.

Another paradox became evident when Chelsea described how she self-censors her English taboo language use when speaking with less proficient speakers. I asked her why

she would do this, to which she replied, “*I guess I would assume they wouldn’t understand. That’s horrible.*” I was struck by the irony and apparent hypocrisy of this statement. I teased her saying:

M: Careful! You’re close to doing the things we native speakers do. You’re going to be one of us soon.

C: But isn’t that what I’m trying to be? Maybe, yeah.

The quiet reflective tone with which Chelsea posed this question was telling of the underlying tensions associated with identities-in-transition.

Unlike the other co-participants, who did not draw strong links between English taboo language and their identities-in-transition, when Chelsea has an experience where a more proficient speaker doubts her English taboo language knowledge or laughs at her because she does not know an English taboo expression, it has a much deeper impact than simply causing her embarrassment. It strikes at the heart of her identities, who she is, who she is allowed to be.

C: As soon as somebody points out you don’t know that, it’s... it makes you feel like you just can’t speak that language very well. ... You’re trying to get to that identity or to including it in your identity and it’s kind of telling you, ‘No, you can’t. You’re not part of this group.’

This signaling of her lack of knowledge causes Chelsea to question her “*linguistic identity as an English speaker*” and denies her the legitimation she seeks as a fully proficient speaker of English in Canada. In this way, such instances also contribute to the process of ‘othering’ Chelsea, relegating her to the margins of social participation.

C: I always end up thinking, 'I thought I knew, but I don't. I might not know.' And feeling very insecure in that kind of situation because you're being looked at as the foreigner who doesn't know. And I feel like that might be true.

Her identities are once again de-centered and thrown into turmoil and uncertainty.

At one point our conversation turned to how Chelsea learns about English taboo language. It became clear that ESL educational institutions played a role in denying her access to this linguistic capital. Chelsea explains that in her formal ESL learning experiences, taboo language was a carefully skirted issue.

C: Teachers will tell you, 'You can't say that!', but not help.

Undaunted, she took the initiative and purchased a French/English dictionary of slang which she brought in to show Focus Group 2. She says this about it:

C: It's actually not that good. Honestly, I think it's really hard for them to really translate. ... Some of them [taboo expressions] are true only in Britain or here--- or very weird use that nobody native has actually ever heard.

Finding her dictionary unable to meet her needs and frustrated by her friend's reluctance to talk about English taboo language with her (or their inability to do so without fits of giggles), she was often forced to resort to context-guessing to make sense of examples of English taboo language she heard in her daily life. Eventually, in her fiancé, she found an English speaking confidante she could trust.

C: About the guessing thing--- I think you might do less of it once you find the one person that you know you can rely on. ... It's a trust thing and it's more like--- that you don't expect these people to laugh at you.

Chelsea's fiancé is a 'safe' source of information who can demystify the semantic and pragmatic nuances of English taboo language for her.

The fact that it is difficult for ESL users to access English taboo language knowledge, sets it apart for use by the “*native speaker*” group. As Chelsea puts it:

C: That's something you don't have access to in class. So if you know the taboo, it means you've been there long enough and you've been associating with that kind of people so you can be part of the group. ... It shows the level of belonging to the country and the culture and the group.

Because English taboo language is so closely tied to culture and vernacular literacies, not sanctioned by ESL institutions, it becomes the elusive “*ultimate language*” and marker of group membership. Furthermore, Chelsea posits that first language speakers laugh at the English taboo language utterances of ESL users in part due to the “*mis-match*” between in-group language and an out-group user.

C: That's why I say that it makes you more proficient, is because it seems it's the ultimate language. It's the thing that you only use if you're part of that group, if you're a native speaker. And if you're not, it's weird to use it.

These themes are reiterated in the following story, Chelsea's critical taboo language incident, even though the expression involved is perhaps typically considered to be more slang than taboo.

C: SOME native speakers, sort of don't allow you to use taboo language. There is a dominant and a power role with--- the definition thing and the putting you on the spot, the fact that they laugh at you. I have a friend who--- and it's not even that much taboo language, it's the expression 'for crying out loud'. ... She always says that it's not the WAY you say it, it's not the situation because I apply it in right places according to her. It's not the pronunciation. It's not, you know, that the words are wrong. It's nothing, but she always laughs when I say it. And I've asked her and

I've put her on the spot and I've said, 'Why are you laughing at me? And what are you trying to do? What's the point? Why is it so funny that I say that?' And she can't explain, but every time I say it she laughs. And I try to think about why she could do that, and I think it is the idea that, sort of, you're foreign and so you're not allowed to use taboo language because that would mean you're part of the group. ... But I think it's somewhat a way for them to kind of, keep you different.

Although Chelsea feels that this process of 'othering' is probably enacted unintentionally, she still seems frustrated by the invalidation of her utterances and her resulting marginalization. It shows how acts of symbolic violence and mechanisms of symbolic power become naturalized and misrecognized by members of the dominant group, namely English first language speakers.

I would like to conclude this section with final thoughts from Chelsea that show how for her, English taboo language represents more than just the ability to participate in Canadian society and is inherently linked to gaining a sense of belonging in her new country and legitimacy as member of the English speaking community.

C: I think participating fully, taboo language is part of it, but I think I don't think I'm lacking that anymore. And I think now it's more of 'Do I belong yet or not, completely?' I think it may be when people stop looking at me when I say, 'for crying out loud' that I will feel, 'Oh, here we go!'

5.7 – Discourse Level Analysis

A discourse level analysis of the kind of language and expression used to describe their experiences are also very telling of the meaning of taboo language for these six people. At times their tones of voice suggested feelings of frustration, anger, regret, surprise, and reticence. They used a range of emotive adjectives to directly describe their experiences

with taboo language that vacillated from “interesting” and “funny” to “isolated” and “ashamed”. A complete list of these descriptive words for each co-participant is found in Appendix H, but what is most striking is that Poupak did not explicitly use *any* emotive descriptive language. Her emotions were reflected only in her tone of voice or in her nods of agreement when other members of Focus Group 1 spoke of their emotions. During her interview I often directly asked Poupak, “How did that experience make you feel?” Inevitably she evaded my question and/or turned my question back on me saying, “How would YOU feel in that situation?” This seems to suggest that the emotional impact of these experiences can be difficult for ESL users to articulate and to deal with.

Another interesting point that became salient through the discourse of our discussions was about the way the co-participants conceptualize notions of ‘Canadian’ and ‘native-speaker’. Despite current challenges within academia to the legitimacy of the concept of ‘native-speaker’ beyond a social construct (see discussion in Chapter 2), it seems that the myth of the native speaker is still alive and well in the minds of these ESL users. They all drew distinctions between themselves as “non-native speakers” and “native speakers” of English. It is particularly interesting that Kyu-Kwan went a step further. By using phrases such as “perfect” and “real Canadian” to describe the utterances of English language speakers he, in effect, seems to conflate native speakership, English linguistic perfection, and national identity. In doing so he relegates himself permanently to non-native status. Furthermore, he relinquishes his right to the ownership of English (and English taboo language) by saying “It’s *their* language”.

I suggest that this continued mythologization of the native speaker plays into the mechanisms of symbolic violence that in turn hide the reproduction of symbolic power. By accepting the notion of native speakership, the co-participants in part reify the illegitimacy of

their own English taboo language practices and their subordinate position as non-native speakers.

I now turn to the final chapter in which I will attempt to draw out threads of commonality from the co-participants' experiences and connect emergent themes to the theoretical base of my conceptual framework.

Chapter 6: Concluding Discussion

In this final chapter, I seek to reconnect overarching emergent themes from the findings (through the conceptual framework) with the central concerns of identities and power in the first two discussion sections. Next, I describe the four major contributions of this research project and then go on to detail the implications of its findings for ESL educational theory and practice. Finally, I suggest directions for future research related to English taboo language and ESL learners/users.

6.1 – Discussion: Identities

Without exception, all six co-participants expressed the importance of knowing, though not necessarily using, English taboo language. However, their reasons for this and the way taboo language figures in their social worlds are as multifarious as the individuals themselves. They participate, at various times and places, in a multiplicity of situated taboo language literacy practices, both dominant and subversive. These ESL users simultaneously appropriate and resist English taboo language literacy practices in complex and hybrid ways as they renegotiate their identities-in-transition across cultural and linguistic boundaries. “The contradictions and conflicts – the clash of cultures, voices, ways – that one encounters at such intersections results in a tug of war” (Asher, 2002, p.83). Ilieva expresses language learning as a “struggle to find a new voice, a new identity, and a new place through a new language in a new culture” (2001, p.11). Out of these tensions, different identities begin to form.

Although I have said that language and literacy practices are tantamount to identities, this statement cannot be reduced to an oversimplified analytic formula of “language equals identity” (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001, p.254). Such an approach would naively suggest that engaging in a certain literacy practice (e.g. English taboo language) assumes one is

willing to take up a certain predetermined, corresponding identity associated with that practice. It elides the diverse motivations behind the English taboo language literacy practices of ESL users, the multiple meanings such practices have for them in various contexts, and the hybridity of their evolving identities.

According to Bourdieu (1977), the impact of new experiences on the formation of habitus (i.e. identities) must be understood in terms of the ideological distance between these new experiences and the past experiences that structured the primary habitus. In other words, the effects of experiences with English taboo language on ESL users' identities will be mediated through their primary habitus. In some cases there is a great deal of dissonance between past cultural socialization and current taboo language experiences. This clashing of ideologies creates tensions for ESL learners as their new experiences alter their habitus, identities, and language practices. Eun-Ju and Joyce are examples of this, as they wrestled with the reinvention of their notion of a 'good' woman as one who *could* engage in certain taboo language practices in the Canadian context. So identities are linked to practices and contexts, but not in a fixed, one-to-one relationship.

For others, new English taboo language experiences are more closely aligned with past experience and identities, but other tensions are still present as they struggle to reconcile aspects of their shifting identities and literacy practices. Chelsea reflected on her identities-in-transition. Although this is a process she actively engages, she has conflicted feelings about her English taboo language proficiency, an element she sees as essential as she struggles to construct third space, intercultural identities in Canada. Also, recall how Xochilt was feeling torn between her desire to be seen as an equal participant in conversations involving English taboo language, and her resistance to integration because she saw it as threatening her Mexican cultural identity. After reviewing the individual analysis I had

written on her behalf, Xochilt was moved to respond with the following quote from Marx (2002) whose sentiments echoed her own.

Within the constraints of graduate life, I resisted membership, staying on the periphery. Such a method of preserving one's identity in a foreign environment is especially common in situations involving short term visitors, who adjust as little as possible to the new setting to make their return less difficult. (p. 275).

However, it is unclear to me, even as a sojourner, how one could completely insulate oneself from being affected by experience. Are not Marx's resistance and her life at the edges of her social world experiences that are bound to impact her identities too?

More to the point, just as new experiences with taboo language will have an effect on the formation of an ESL learner's habitus; the habitus (i.e. identities) will affect how these new experiences are interpreted. Identities and experience are bound together in a "dialectical process of selective reinterpretation" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.660). So while my original research question implied a uni-directional effect – In what ways do ESL learners' understandings of English taboo language impact their identities? – in fact the opposite is also the case; identities impact the interpretation of English taboo language experiences. This is a key point because it means that we may "re-story" past experiences from the present (Hodkinson in Grenfell & James, 1998, p.145). Thus possibilities are opened for ESL users to reinterpret taboo language experiences in liberating, transformative ways. This happened during our study as Eun-Ju re-storied the "disaster" that happened to her friend in such a way that they were victims, rather than at fault.

6.2 – Discussion: Power

Positioning. ESL learners/users may reimagine and reposition their identities, but there is "perpetual tension between self-chosen identities and others' attempts to position

them differently” (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001, p.249). Where ESL users, like Chelsea, may see themselves as authorized speakers of English with a *right to speak* (Norton-Peirce, 1995) taboo language, others (particularly the dominant first language speaker group) still marginalize them and do not permit the legitimation of their taboo language literacy practices. The co-participants demonstrated an awareness of their social positioning as foreign, as outsiders. They also showed a sense of how this positioning (complicated by factors such as gender, age, and ESL speaker status) influences the taboo literacy practices that are available to them. Thus, ESL learners/users, with certain social and linguistic identities and certain linguistic practices, are consequently positioned in relations of *power* within the Canadian context. This research project asked how English taboo language is implicated in these power relationships experienced by ESL learners.

Acts of symbolic violence. For Bourdieu, symbolic power is claimed through acts of symbolic violence. According to Bartlett and Holland (2002), one such act involves “correcting ‘mistakes’ in [another’s] speech or drawing attention to his inability to engage in common literacy tasks” (p.17). They call this “literacy shaming” that denigrates the social value of the person engaging in the literacy practice. It seems a similar form of symbolic violence is at work when more proficient users of English taboo language (perhaps, though not necessarily an English first language speaker) ridicule the taboo language utterances of other less proficient ESL speakers, thereby devaluing their cultural capital and denying them legitimation (which in turn would lead to their authorization and some measure of symbolic power gained). The co-participants in this study talked about a number of other behaviours on the part of ‘native-speakers’ (though it may also be understood to be fellow ESL users who are more proficient) that I also interpret as acts of symbolic violence. Firstly, a ‘native speaker’ may verbally harass an ESL speaker who is ignorant of English taboo language

without any concern of the consequences. In other instances, a ‘native speaker’ may doubt an ESL users’ knowledge of the meaning of a taboo expression and the pragmatics of its use, thereby undermining their legitimacy as English language speakers. Yet another act of symbolic violence involves the first language speakers’ resistance to explaining unknown taboo language expressions to ESL learners, in effect denying them access to this linguistic (i.e. cultural) capital.

Is it the case that a tacit sanctioning of the permission to use of English taboo language is underlying these acts of symbolic violence? What goals motivate these acts of symbolic violence by ‘native speakers’? Does it have something to do with maintaining the subordinated position of the ESL user as ‘other’? What are the social implications if ESL users are authorized to take up English taboo language literacy practices, becoming ‘legitimized’ speakers of English? Then, the *identity* of the whole group, and what it means socially to belong to that group, is “exposed to redefinition, alteration, adulteration” (Bourdieu, 1983/86, p.250). A group is “transformed by incoming members” (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001, p.245). Is this part of the reason Chelsea felt her participation in English taboo language literacies was not accepted by her ‘native speaker’ friend? If Chelsea gets ‘in’, does this mean that the ‘native speaker’ group is no longer guaranteed special authority as ‘TL experts’? It seems protecting English taboo language as the ‘secret’ language of the in-group, may be tied up with relations of symbolic power, but may also be linked to identities at the level of group belonging.

Institutionalized education. The role of ESL educational institutions in these mechanisms of symbolic domination can not be ignored. There is an erroneous assumption amongst some educators that language is a common possession that is equally accessible to all people (Gounar, 2000). Bourdieu (1982/1991) calls this “the illusion of linguistic

communism". For English first language speakers, taboo language as a form of cultural capital is acquired by means of early socialization in families, communities, and social institutions. However, this means of learning English linguistic taboo is absent from the adult ESL learner's experience. How then, do they access this linguistic capital?

The ESL users in this study, particularly Kyu-Kwan and Chelsea, expressed frustration at the inaccessibility of English taboo language information. Their formal learning sources of English vocabulary, namely teachers and dictionaries, proved inadequate in their treatment of taboo language. Usually their teachers were resistant to explaining taboo language, merely telling them that it was 'bad' and they ought not to say it. Similarly dictionaries failed them because they offered inconsistent and/or incomplete definitions (lacking in pragmatic information). The end result is that ESL learners are denied reliable access to this linguistic capital and symbolic power by institutionalized mechanisms. Education is an especially powerful normalizing force in the reproduction of the structures of symbolic power by legitimizing what counts as authorized language practices, for whom, and in what contexts (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). But schools are also "active agents" and "sites of struggle and contradiction" (Gounar, 2000, p.21-22) where there are subversive spaces for the idiosyncrasies of 'renegade' teachers, like Kyu-Kwan's American English teacher in Korea, and who often engaged English taboo language in her ESL teaching practice. The idea of alternative pedagogies that undermine the legitimacy of traditional, dominant literacies and empower learners is picked up again in section 6.4 under *Implications for Practice*.

Normalization of symbolic domination. Symbolic domination through acts of symbolic violence tends to be enacted by the dominant group without malicious intent. At the same time, the dominated class can appear complicit. In other words, 'native speakers'

are not aware of the symbolic violence they perpetuate and ESL learners often seem to accept them as the authoritative experts on taboo language. This was evident in this study by the co-participant's insistence on using the term "native speaker" and in comments like Kyu-Kwan's when he emphasized that English is "*their* language". The arbitrariness of the legitimation of the 'expert' group's taboo language competence and practices (i.e. cultural capital) over that of ESL learners' goes unrecognized as such. It becomes misrecognized (what Bourdieu calls *méconnaissance*) as the natural order of things through a process of normalization¹⁷. In effect, this "institutionalized circle of misrecognition" (Bourdieu, 1982/1991, p.153) allows the dominant 'native speaker' group greater access to symbolic resources and power.

The active complicity in symbolic domination on the part of ESL speakers manifested itself in another way during this study. Xochilt discussed feeling a greater sense in English than in Spanish that she should apologize for her taboo language practices, and Kyu-Kwan and Joyce explained that they will not experiment with their emerging English taboo language literacies in the presence of 'native speakers'. Although all language users "self-censor" in the sense of what is acceptable for them in a given context, at a given time (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 655), these experiences lead me to wonder if ESL users self-censor differently than first language speakers. Does their implicit awareness of their lack of legitimate competence and their positioning in relations of power cause them to self-censor according to different standards of politeness than English first language speakers? Bourdieu writes, "Politeness contains a politics, a practical, immediate recognition of social ... hierarchies, between the sexes, the generations, the classes, etc." (1977, p.662). Our study

¹⁷ Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001, p.248) discuss how Bourdieu's understandings of misrecognition and symbolic domination are very much akin to the Gramscian concept of hegemony. Through the notions of "counter-hegemony" and resistance, alternatives to dominant ideologies are conceivable.

seems to suggest how differentials in the expectations of politeness (as defined by English taboo language use) reflect the hierarchical relations of symbolic power between linguistic groups.

Forms of resistance. Dominated groups “may not always accept the symbolic power of the dominant group, but may symbolically resist that power” (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001, p.248). Various acts and forms of resistance were described in this study as these six ESL learners/users resisted the power relations implicit in some of their English taboo language experiences. Some of these involved rejecting English taboo language practices, such as Eun-Ju’s anger at the man who verbally and physically assaulted her friend, Joyce’s opposition to her Chinese roommate’s appropriation of English taboo language practices, and Poupak’s denouncing of the use of English taboo language in her workplace by both co-workers and customers.

Other challenges to symbolic domination involved acts that countered the ‘native speaker’s’ exclusive jurisdiction over this linguistic capital, for example, when Kyu-Kwan and his male peer group use English taboo language to demonstrate their proficiency in English and to build relationships, and when Chelsea explicitly confronts those who ridicule her English taboo language literacy practices. By adopting English taboo language literacies and “rehearsing them in [their] communities of practice” (Bartlett & Holland, 2002, p.14), ESL users can begin to claim the right to speak (and *not* to speak) English taboo language.

However, while it is possible to legitimize their utterances within their own communities of practice and limited linguistic markets, tensions and conflicts still arise when they bring these practices to the dominant linguistic market. Here the difference in the social value of an utterance or literacy practice lies not with the linguistic product (i.e. the taboo expression itself), but rather with the positioning of the speaker (i.e. an ESL user) within the

power relations of the dominant linguistic market. Again, because an utterance (taboo or otherwise) is only worth what its speaker is worth, in a linguistic market dominated by highly proficient English speakers, the English taboo language practices of ESL users remain subordinated, marginalized, and possibly completely rejected by the dominant group. In short, Chelsea, Kyu-Kwan, and Eun-Ju may have gained the right to speak English taboo language within the limited linguistic markets of their social circles in the ESL community, but they lose their *power to impose reception* (Norton-Peirce, 1995) when they enter the dominant linguistic fields and power relations of broader society.

Acts of empowerment. It seems that learning English taboo language, the language of the dominant group, can also be understood as an act of empowerment; a way for ESL users to “escape the situation of social inequality” (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001, p.245). It empowers them as competent communicators in their second language, allowing them to perceive threats (including insults, racial slurs, and sexual harassment) and consequently have the appropriate reaction (although this does not necessarily entail using taboo language themselves). This was apparent in Poupak’s re-telling of her experiences in her workplace where she regretted her naïve reaction to her boss swearing at her and in Eun-Ju’s story where a taboo language encounter escalated and resulted in actual physical violence.

Chelsea also described a situation where her understanding of English taboo language was crucial to her empowerment. One of Chelsea’s students in the French as a second language class she was teaching called her a “bitch”. Chelsea was not sure if this student thought he could ‘get away with it’ because he guessed she would not know this word or whether he simply did not care that she understood. The point is, Chelsea *did* know the meaning of “bitch” and dealt with the student’s discipline appropriately, whereas *not* knowing may have left her in a compromised position and undermined her authority as a

teacher. This ability to turn-the-tables on the more proficient user of English taboo language demonstrates how knowledge of taboo language can be important for the empowerment of an ESL user.

Although these ESL learners need and desire access to English taboo language knowledge, as stated earlier their formal learning contexts were typically devoid of taboo language. Furthermore access in informal contexts, through information from first language speakers and other more proficient ESL users, is often withheld through acts of symbolic violence. Undaunted, the six ESL users in this study developed alternative strategies for claiming this linguistic capital and a measure of symbolic power. These strategies, also seen as acts of empowerment on the part of the co-participants, included: pretending to understand, using context-guessing, ‘trying out’ or experimenting with newly acquired taboo language expressions, reflecting on encounters with taboo language, and actively seeking out a trusted taboo language expert-confidante. This ‘expert’ was sometimes, though not always, a first language speaker of English; and in Eun-Ju’s case an entire group of people, her Korean community, became her trusted confidante.

6.3 – Contributions of the Research Project

To date, little research has considered what social meanings English taboo language may have for ESL learners. Thus, at least in terms of taboo language, the current project contributes to the growing body of knowledge in ESL research regarding the tensions and conflicts associated with ESL learner identities-in-transition and the power relationships that they experience in their social worlds (both within and without the ESL classroom). Also, the great deal of interest in this endeavor within communities of ESL practitioners, learners, and researchers has shown me that the time is ‘right’ for taboo language research. It is viewed as worth researching and has gained legitimacy as an object of study (in Bourdieu’s

terms). It seems to me that Jay's comment in his 1977 article, *Doing Research with Dirty Words*, that researchers of taboo language face "the inability to publish or circulate the research"(p. 234) , are (thankfully) out-of-date. In this section I expound four main points that I feel represent the key contributions of this research.

Firstly, this study has reinforced a point that may seem self-evident: that English taboo language, of one form or another, is almost invariably present in the social worlds of ESL learners/users. This is particularly so if they are living in an English immersion context, but also in foreign contexts thanks to the Internet and the global proliferation of Hollywood. Even someone like Joyce, who believed she did not encounter taboo language, found that she in fact *had* had many experiences, but she had been barely aware of them at the time because she did not recognize the taboo language as such until reflecting on it during our study.

A second related point is that English taboo language can not be relegated to the realm of informal contexts. It seems clear from our discussions that English taboo language does crop up in informal settings such as parties and other peer-group gatherings, but also is found in formal settings such as workplaces, classrooms, and meeting rooms. ESL learners also recognize the vernacular nature of taboo language saying, it is "real life" (Kyu-Kwan), "everyday language" (Poupak), and "it's part of people's lives" (Eun-Ju). The point I want to make is that taboo language, as a form of vernacular literacy, is pervasive and firmly entrenched in the English language and in many aspects of North American culture. Language educators and researchers can no longer ignore English taboo language by conveniently imagining that ESL learners are innocent of it and that they will never have to deal with the social ramifications of taboo language.

This brings me to my third point. ESL professionals need to take seriously the question of English taboo language and its role in language learning because of the many

social implications it has. This study stresses that ESL learners' interest in English taboo language is more than an idle curiosity of a novel element of their second language. It is significant that English taboo language literacy was linked to empowerment in social participation and to the establishment of hierarchies of power experienced by ESL learners. It is also important that these literacy practices were associated with ESL learners' shifting identities, their reimaginings of self, and the signaling of group membership and language proficiency.

Finally, the most important contribution of this research endeavor has been to highlight that there is no single way that all ESL learners/users engage with taboo language. The social meanings it has for an ESL user is highly individualized based on their unique life trajectories. In hybrid ways, ESL users simultaneously take up and resist English taboo language literacy practices in different cultural and linguistic contexts as they struggle to gain symbolic capital and power and to negotiate the conflicts and tensions of their identities-in-transition.

6.4 – Implications

Regarding the implications of this research project for theory, I have only brief comments to make before moving on to a more detailed discussion of the implications for practice. In fact, the purpose of this project was not to develop a theory or model, nor to build upon an existing one. Rather, it was designed to show that a dual theoretical framework, informed by Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and a multiple literacies perspective can be fruitful in promoting socially responsible language and literacies research. Moreover it responds to a common critique of the New Literacy Studies, namely "the limits of the local" (Kim, 2003 ; Street, 2003). The layered theoretical framework informing this study has helped to highlight the wider relevance of such locally situated literacy studies by

connecting the local, situated taboo language literacy practices of six ESL learners to the broader social structures within which they live¹⁸. In the remaining section I am anxious to respond to yet another critique of the New Literacy Studies, its lack of application to practice (Kim, 2003 ; Street, 2003). Connecting research, theory, and practice is of particular importance to me as researcher and practitioner.

Implications for practice. As I reflected on what implications our study would have for practice, I was reminded of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's passionate teaching of Maori children in remote areas of New Zealand in the 1930's, described in her book *Teacher* (1986). She used a very innovative, not to mention controversial, approach. She *asked* her young students what words they needed and then *unconditionally* gave them these words, some violent, some sexual. In my mind, it is a beautifully simple philosophy. Teach the words that learners desire, and do not shrink if these words are taboo.

However, my imaginings of how English taboo language might figure in the adult ESL classroom are somewhat different. I oppose the stance of Crooks (1998, 1999) and Claire (1998), who advocate practical approaches for directly teaching taboo language, and provide guidelines to this end. My opposition to such an approach arises in part from the slippery nature of all language. The link between words and meaning is continually in flux, particularly in the genre of language at hand. It seems impossible to produce formalized resource materials on the subject¹⁹ as such resources would become obsolete almost as soon as they hit the shelves. Furthermore, due to the value-ladenness of the topic I would not

¹⁸ Another example of the utility of connecting research in literacy practices to broader social theory (through Bourdieu's work) is found in Bartlett and Holland's (2002) study of literacy practices and programs in northwestern Brazil.

¹⁹ Some attempts have been made to write guides to learning taboo language for ESL students. For examples see: Elizabeth Claire's (1998) *Dangerous English 2000!* and Sterling Johnson's (1995) *English as a Second F*cking Language*. David Burke's *Street Talk* textbook series (Burke, 1998) also touches on taboo language, though they are more directly focused on American slang and idiomatic expressions.

presume to dictate that it must be taught, let alone how. I want to emphasize that I am not proposing that we teach students to swear, but on the other hand, we cannot ignore the question of English taboo language. By avoiding it in the classroom, we cast ourselves in the role of language moralists and become complicit in the mechanisms of symbolic power that deny ESL learners access to linguistic capital and a particular kind of literacy. A move away from the propagation of dominant literacies toward a praxis that is more aligned with the social needs, identities, and empowerment of the ESL learner is called for.

At all times teaching is fundamentally a political act. With this in mind, we are wise to heed Pennycook's (1998) warning not to assume unproblematically that language and literacy education are 'good' and 'beneficial'. He calls for an awareness that "access to language and literacy also implies an introduction to lifeworlds, cultures, and myths" (p.82). Language educators must be sensitive to the ramifications of introducing students to taboo language literacy practices that may run contrary to their values and beliefs. The conflicted nature of this process, as experienced by the six ESL learners/users in this study, shows how taboo language literacy needs and desires are at times contradictory and always diverse. So how are we to attempt to pedagogically deal with taboo language in compassionate, socially responsible ways? Currently, there is much talk of promoting language and literacy pedagogies that are more in tune with the realities of students' lived experiences outside the classroom and socially responsible. These include such approaches as: critical pedagogies that promote critical literacies (Kellner, 1998; Mackie, 2003), Masny and Ghanhremani-Ghajar's (1999) "pedagogy of difference", the New London Group's (1996) "transformed pedagogy of access", and pedagogy based on Bourdieu's theories of language and power that

“authorize” the student²⁰ (Maxim, 1998). How might these various invitations to reimagine pedagogy inform an approach to addressing English taboo language in the ESL classroom?

In her article *Living with Ambiguity: Toward Culture Exploration in Adult Second-language Classrooms*, Ilieva offers a framework for understanding cultures, where culture is conceptualized “as a negotiation of meanings among particular individuals in particular communities locked in an interplay of power relations” (2001, p.7). There are three chief reasons why I believe her guidelines may have useful applications to deal with English taboo language (arguably a component of culture) in the adult ESL classroom. Firstly, the *culture exploration* strategy meets two key criteria called for by this study; (1) it supports students as they deal with the tensions of their identities-in-transition, and (2) it seeks to empower learners by helping them to become aware of themselves as “positioned subjects” and to engage their ‘real-world’ language interaction experiences (within and without the classroom) in a way that resists marginalization.

Secondly, Ilieva’s notions of the complexity and ambiguity of cultural experiences certainly seems appropriate in light of the dynamic nature of taboo language and the capriciousness of taboo language interactions. Rather than working from the erroneous assumption that culture can be taught unproblematically as a set of certain, static facts/information (i.e. specific taboo language vocabulary), the premise is that the focus should be on preparing students to deal with the unpredictability of cross-cultural interactions (i.e. strategies for dealing with taboo language encounters). She argues that instead of teaching them *about* culture, we should help them learn to negotiate interactions *in* that culture (Ilieva, 2001, p. 6). In other words, instead of teaching ESL students about

²⁰ In this case “authorize” is used by Maxim to mean recognition and legitimation, in the Bourdieuan sense, of students’ cognitive schemes that they bring to the understanding of discourse in texts.

English taboo language, we should help them to learn to negotiate interactions involving taboo language.

Thirdly, Ilieva draws attention to the dangers of authorizing teachers to be so-called “experts” who dole out information about English culture (2001, p.5). These teachers, who are often positioned as white, middle-class, women, may have very different views on cultural appropriateness than their students. In this thesis, I have made a similar argument that seeks to undermine the legitimacy of the ‘white, Canadian, native speaker’ as the authority on English taboo language.

The practical application of this framework of cultural exploration²¹ is succinctly outlined by Haneda in her response to Ilieva’s article: “Students act as participant observers in and outside the classroom, share their ethnographic accounts with their classmates for joint reflection, identify any perceived problems, and collaboratively construct strategies to deal with the particular situations under discussion” (2002, p.92). This critical dialogue is facilitated by the following series of questions: “(a) What do/did you see? (b) What is/was happening? (c) How does this relate to your lives? (d) How do you react to that? Is this a problem for you? and (e) How do you plan to deal with situations like that?” (Haneda, 2002, p.94). By interrogating relations of power and “struggles over meaning”, this process allows a student to “name, unname, and rename his or her experience” (Ilieva, 2001, p.12). It helps place learners in a position where they will be able “to develop their own [intercultural or third] voice and will be empowered to act to fulfill their own goals” (Ilieva, 2001, p.1).

²¹ Norton-Peirce (1995) puts forth a similar strategy called “Classroom-based Social Research” as a “pedagogy of possibility” (Norton, 2000). It has much in common with Ilieva’s approach and differs mainly in that students are asked to critically analyze their ethnographic experiences through reflective writing rather than through classroom dialogue. I suggest that both might be useful depending on the particular students and their unique preferences for a mode of expression.

In many ways, the co-participants in this study used it as a venue for exactly this kind of cultural exploration exercise. Eun-Ju jumped at the chance to critically discuss and reflect upon her critical incident with English taboo language and to ‘rename’ it in terms of power relations. Chelsea found participating in the study gave her pause for thought about her own engagement in the creation of her bicultural identity as well as other forces at play in her social world. It seems that cultural exploration is a potentially useful pedagogical option to encourage learners to critically engage with their English taboo language experiences in very personal, specific ways that meet their individual needs and desires.

Haneda (2002), strongly supporting the cultural exploration framework, goes on to note that teachers must also become learners and active explorers of culture within and without their classrooms. This process of reflection on culture and their own teaching practices, can help educators resist “perpetuating the inequalities and disjunctions for which they are, admittedly rarely consciously, responsible” (Grenfell & James, 1998, p.88). I would like to close with a comment from Elizabeth Nuñez, an English writing teacher and immigrant to New York from Trinidad, who embraces such pedagogies of possibility in her own language teaching and learning (In Ogulnick, 2000).

Now I want to shake the cobwebs out of my students’ heads. I want them to affirm their beliefs, visions, and realities. ... I want to help them (and me, too) find the courage ... to claim the English language as their own. ... I tell my students: The language is yours. Bend it, twist it, curse if you must. (p. 44)

6.5 – Directions for Future Research

As is to be expected with any preliminary research in a relatively new area of study, this project raised many questions and answered very few. I pose a number of these emergent questions under three broad topics: gender issues, ‘native speaker’ perspectives,

and teacher perspectives. In the second half of this section, I discuss possible directions for future inquiry that seemed to stretch beyond the specific research questions of this study. At times, the co-participants took our conversations in unexpected directions, despite my best efforts to guide them back to the research questions at hand. I take this to be not a failing of my interviewing skills, but rather an indication that these topics were of great importance to the co-participants and warrant mention here. Again, these emergent issues are grouped by topic including: the comedic use of English taboo language, English taboo language as an emotional release, and foreign language appropriation of English taboo language.

Gender issues. Firstly, the serendipitous involvement of Kyu-Kwan in the study brought to the forefront that co-participants' gendered identities and subsequent social positionings influence their experience of English taboo language. Kyu-Kwan indicated that men (as opposed to women) ought to engage English taboo language practices, suggesting that the role of English taboo language in the social construction of the notion of 'maleness' warrants further study. Also, Kyu-Kwan was the only co-participant not to express that English taboo language knowledge served as a kind of protection from the threats of insults and sexual harassment, begging the question: What power relations associated with English taboo language are experienced specifically by women from their multiply-subordinated positionings as ESL speakers, as women, as immigrants? Furthermore, our study provided only a surface level understanding of identities at the intersections of gender and ethnicity (e.g. Chinese woman, Korean woman, Korean man). Future research may find a case study approach more appropriate to delve deeper into the specific ways taboo language literacy practices are related to gendered identities.

'Native speaker' perspectives. A second area calling for closer study is the apparent 'native speaker' perspective and by this I mean the first language English speakers and fully

bilingual ESL users. The co-participants often speculated on the motivations behind the acts of symbolic violence associated with English taboo language, but research which gathers extensive data directly from first language speakers and other bilingual ESL users is needed. Observations of English taboo language interactions between more proficient speakers and ESL learners may help to understand the way the discourse of the ‘native speaker’ myth perpetuates symbolic domination. How do more proficient speakers assume a dominant role in such interactions? What motivates them to do this? How may they impose “a system of specific sanctions and censorships” (Bourdieu, 1982/1991, p.37) that deny ESL users the ‘right to speak’ English taboo language? How might these mechanisms of symbolic domination regarding English taboo language be related to maintaining the prestige associated with ‘native speakership’ and the marginal status of ESL learners as ‘other’?

Teacher perspectives. Yet another perspective that is important to a discussion of English taboo language learning is that of the teachers of adult ESL students. This is particularly so because educational institutions (and their agents) play such a prominent role in the reproduction of the structures of symbolic domination. Xochilt’s stories of teaching English taboo language in her own English as a foreign language classroom led me to pose this group of questions: How are ESL teachers currently addressing English taboo language in their classrooms (if at all)? Do teachers who are ESL users themselves deal with English taboo language differently than monolingual teachers? If so, what power relations are being reproduced and resisted by the respective practices of these teachers? Chelsea’s teaching experience, in her French Second Language classroom, also raised some provocative issues in a situation where she was cursed at in English by a student. She reminded me of my own teaching experience in China. I found it empowering to quickly learn a repertoire of common Mandarin swear words so that I could be aware of the *Chinese* taboo language in

my ESL classroom. How then, might taboo language be implicated in the power relations of a classroom where the students have a far greater knowledge of taboo language, in a given language, than their teacher?

Comedic English taboo language use: I don't get it. Although not the focus of this study's research questions, co-participants often expressed frustration at their inability to understand comedic events due to their ignorance of English taboo language. By hindering their ability to read popular culture texts such as hip-hop music, movies, television sit-coms, 'dirty' jokes, and comic strips, it also resulted in their peripheral participation in some peer groups where such taboo language literacy practices were commonly used. Future research may further explore how the comedic use of English taboo language results in the marginalization of ESL users, and ask: How does this impact their identities and sense of belonging to the local culture?

Emotional release. It was not my intention to focus on the affective power of English taboo language for ESL users, none the less the co-participants often brought it up in conversation. Those co-participants who engaged in English taboo language literacy practices generally described feeling some sense of emotion release; however, they also suggested that this was not as affectively powerful for them as in their first language. It seemed to reinforce the same euphemistic function of code-switching described by Bond and Lai (1985). Moreover, if they were very angry and *really* wanted to swear, to have the full emotional effect, they must revert to swearing in their first language. The provocative point is that, unlike the rest of the group, Chelsea, who is actively embracing her intercultural identities, indicated that now she finds her English swearing is very affectively powerful for her and she often curses to herself in English. This leads me to ask: How might swearing practices, as a form of emotional release, be reflective of shifting identities? How might the

changing affective weight of English taboo expressions be a measure of identities-in-transition?

Foreign language appropriation of English taboo language. In a topic closely related to the previous discussion of affective power, future research in the field of linguistics may study the appropriation of various English so-called taboo language words and expressions into other languages. Some examples of this appropriation cited by the co-participants are the incorporation of the word ‘shit’ into Persian (Iranian) and Korean, the word ‘fuck’ into French, and the words ‘blowjob’ and ‘gay’ into Spanish. They indicated that these words are so naturalized into their languages, that they are not even practically recognized as English expressions. The following questions arise: How do non-English speakers appropriate these words? How does this language practice compare to the taboo language code-switching described by bilinguals? How are these appropriations related to English’s status as a world language?

6.6 – Conclusion

This research thesis has shown there is good reason to be seriously talking about English taboo language in the realms of ESL research and practice. English taboo language has become ubiquitous and is bound to be encountered by ESL learners. It has serious social implications for learners in terms of their identities-in-transition and the power relationships they experience. Most importantly, this study highlights the hybrid ways ESL users take up and resist taboo language as they negotiate the tensions of their shifting identities and create different intercultural, third space identities. Furthermore it shows the way these hybrid taboo language literacy practices are implicated in struggles for symbolic capital and power.

Participating in this research endeavor has been a valuable learning experience for me and the six co-participants by calling all of us to reflect on the meaning of taboo language in

our lives. The effects of this have rippled out to raise consciousness within our local ESL teaching and learning community of the social issues associated with taboo language. If the very goal of ethnographic research should be “to encourage compassion and promote dialogue” (C. Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748), then we have, at least in some small way, accomplished this.

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Appendix C

Reflective Journal Guidelines

Reflective Journal Instructions

(Taboo Language and the ESL Learner: An Ethnographic Study)

PURPOSE: to help you think about your own taboo language experiences, both past and present. This will be an important tool when you come to research meetings to help you remember your thoughts, feelings, and ideas that you may wish to share with the research group. You may also want to let other members of the research group read all or parts of your journal, but this is *not* required.

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Begin keeping your reflective journal right away
- Continue making entries whenever you wish for the duration of the research project (about 7 weeks)
- Choose a journal format that you are comfortable with: a traditional written journal, E-mail or computer journal entries, an audio or video-taped journal, a photo-journal, or any combination of the above
- It is *not* necessary that you write in English. You may keep the journal in a language other than English, but realize that then it will not be possible to share it with others in the research group.
- If you buy a notebook-type journal, **keep your receipt** and Monica will cover the cost up to a maximum of \$5.00.

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS for audio, video, and photography:

- Monica will cover the cost of a disposable camera and film developing (**keep a receipt!**)
- Use the camera to record *print* forms of taboo language that can not be easily brought to our meetings (e.g. a poster, billboard, graffiti, etc.)
- **RESPECT OTHER PEOPLE'S PRIVACY!** If there is a taboo expression on the clothing someone is wearing, I suggest you just *write* down the example. If you really want to photograph it, you **MUST** ask permission before taking the picture. Do *not* show the person's face in the photo. Anytime you record (audio, video, or photograph) someone outside of our research group, you must have permission to do so.

Appendix D

Questionnaire

Questionnaire

(Taboo Language and the ESL Learner: An Ethnographic Study)

Purpose: to collect information about you and your language learning background. It also helps you begin thinking about the meaning taboo language has for you.

Instructions:

Answer as many questions as you can. Remember you may leave any question that you are uncomfortable with unanswered. Please mail your completed questionnaire to Monica by Monday, Feb. 23, 2004 in the postage paid envelope provided. If you have any questions, please contact Monica at: mwate037@uottawa.ca OR phone (613) 789-1070.

Name: _____ Today's Date: _____

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Mailing Address: _____ E-mail Address: _____
 _____ Phone Number: _____

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐

Age: _____

Place of birth: _____

Date of birth: _____

To help me understand more about your life history, please provide a short response, or check (✓) only one box, for each of the following:

Education level completed: None ☐ Primary (Grade) School ☐ Secondary (High) School ☐
 Bachelor Degree ☐ Master's Degree ☐ Doctorate Degree ☐

Career background:

Ethnic background:

Religious background:

Family Information:

of brothers: _____ # of sisters: _____

Marital status: Single ☐ Married ☐ Divorced ☐ Widowed ☐
 Other: _____

Are you a parent? No ☐ Yes ☐ If yes, # of children: _____

Place a checkmark (✓) anywhere along the line to show your *current (now)* socioeconomic status.

Low Low-Mid Middle Mid-High High

Use a checkmark to show your socioeconomic status *before* coming to Canada.

Low Low-Mid Middle Mid-High High

Residency Information:

Age of first arrival in Canada: _____

Length of time living in Canada: _____ (in months or years)

Use the chart below to list, in order, all of the countries that you have lived in (*not* just visited on a short holiday). You may need to list the *same* country *more than once* if you lived there, moved away, and then moved back.

Country	Approximate dates of residency (month & year)		For each country, describe your exposure to English media (e.g. radio, movies, TV, books, internet, etc.) using a checkmark (✓)			
	From	To	none	A little	some	A lot
Canada		present				

*Add another sheet of paper if necessary.

LANGUAGE LEARNING:

The first language you learned as a baby was: _____

Do you still speak this language? Yes ☐ No ☐

Now, the language you are most comfortable speaking in is: _____

Do you consider English to be your (2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc...) language? _____

Age you began studying English: _____

Country where you began studying English: _____

Use the chart below to describe your English language study history. Include any information you believe to be important. In addition to formal (i.e. school) study, feel free to include any informal (i.e. everyday interactions with speakers of English) study.

Country	Approximate dates		Type of Study Description (e.g. level, length of time, teaching focus, certificate earned, etc.)
	From	To	
Canada		present	English Intensive Program (EIP) at the University of Ottawa

*Add another sheet of paper if necessary.

TABOO LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES:

For each statement indicate your opinion by placing a check mark (✓) in the appropriate box. If you wish, use the additional comments section at the bottom to clarify any of your answers or to add anything else you would like to share.

Statement	Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
1. I often encounter English taboo language (i.e. 'bad words or expressions').				
2. Knowing the meaning of English taboo language helps me understand English speaking cultures.				
3. Understanding English taboo language helps me "fit in" with others.				
4. Understanding English taboo language makes me feel more proficient in English communication.				
5. English taboo language sometimes causes good feelings for me (e.g. powerful, competent, etc.).				
6. English taboo language sometimes causes bad feelings for me (e.g. embarrassed, foolish, etc.).				
7. I need to understand the meaning of English taboo language I hear.				
8. I need to know how to use English taboo language appropriately.				
9. I would feel comfortable talking about new taboo language with my English speaking friends.				
10. I would feel comfortable talking about new English taboo language in my ESL class.				
11. What words come to mind when you think of taboo language?				
Additional Comments: _____ _____ _____				

😊 *Thank You for your time!* 😊

Appendix E

Example of a Focus Group Guide and Reflective Notes Chart

Focus Group Guide #2

(Taboo Language and the ESL Learner: An Ethnographic Study)

Purpose: to share past and present experiences of taboo language and discuss the social implications of these encounters. Also to react to examples of taboo language in various media and ESL materials

Instructions: The researcher will use the following questions to guide video-taped, focus group discussions (2 focus groups of 3 co-participants each). Each focus group should last approximately one hour.

Opening Comments:

- Thank them for their participation and renew introductions
- Encourage participants to ask for clarification of anything they are unsure about at any time during the discussion and to use their journals as notebooks

Part A: *Sharing Taboo Language Experiences*

I'd like to invite you to share your taboo experiences from your journal or past experiences you remember. These may be experiences in English or in your first language or a time when these two languages were being used at the same time (called "code-switching").

- Describe the situation: When did it happen? Who was there? What were you doing?
- What was said and by whom? (OR What did you read?)
- Who were you talking with?
- If you used the expression: Why did you choose to use that taboo? How did the listener(s) react?
- How did their reaction make you feel?
- If you could turn back time, would you change anything about that experience? If so, what would you change?

Part B: *Responding to Stories*

- Has anyone had a similar experience?
- How did you feel in that situation?
- In what ways was your experience the same and in what ways was it different?
- Why do you think there were these differences? How might it be related to your own identity?

Part C: *Issues Raised in the Questionnaires:*

- Varying *exposure* to taboo language in Canada and home countries.
- Varying experiences (both in and out of the classroom) with taboo as your *level of English* improved over time.
- All three co-participants agreed understanding English taboo language helps them "*fit in*" with others. WHO?
- Differing opinions on "*good feelings*" caused by taboo language.

- Differing opinions of the relationship between taboo language use and *proficiency*.
- *Pretending* to understand
- *Sources of information* on taboo language: classroom, friends, etc.

Part D: *Responding to Taboo Language Examples from Media and ESL materials*

1. Print examples: Classifieds in the *Fulcrum*, Cartoon clips from *Dangerous English*, graffiti photos from Morisette Library
2. Movie clip: *The Guru* - porn audition, cursing cook
3. TV clip: *Friends* - Season 2 Episode 15, “butt” vs. “ass”
4. ESL Material: English Fast Forward 3 Video: The F-Word from “This Unit is X-Rated”

- How do you feel about this example? Does it seem taboo to you? How or in what way(s)?
- Can you relate to the taboo language use in this example? (movie clip: Can you relate to how the ESL speaker in the example feels?)
- How do you believe you would handle this incident if it happened to you?

*****IF TIME PERMITS*****

Part E: *Factors Affecting Taboo Language Use* *ALSO IN INTERVIEW GUIDE!*

- In your opinion what factors affect English taboo language use and how?
- How might this differ from your experience with taboo in your first language?

Identity factors of speakers (producers) and listeners (receivers):

- Gender
- Age
- Religion
- Social and/or socioeconomic status (e.g. bosses, teachers, government officials)
- ESL learner status

Context factors:

- Setting (e.g. at home, in the classroom, at a pub, in a public area, in a public office)
- Format (e.g. in ESL materials, in media, in movies or TV, etc.)

Closing Comments:

- Thank them again and encourage them to continue using their journals
- Schedule individual interviews
- Return copies of questionnaires

Reflective Notes

(Taboo Language and the ESL Learner: An Ethnographic Study)

Purpose: This tool is designed to help the researcher reflect on the video tapes of the focus group discussions and plan for individual interviews.

Instructions: Following each of the two video-taped focus groups, the researcher should review the tapes and prepare reflective notes.

Date : _____ Time : _____ Location: _____ Session Duration: _____

Co – participant	Participation Level	Body Language	Examples Shared	Points Made	Reactions to Others	Other Comments
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						

Possible areas of inquiry for individual interviews:

Appendix F

Example of Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Individual Interview Guide – Focus Group #1 (Taboo Language and the ESL Learner: An Ethnographic Study)

Purpose: to clarify questionnaire responses and to allow co-participants to react to the focus group discussion. Also, to tease out the deeper social meanings of each co-participants taboo language experiences on an individual basis

Instructions: The researcher will use the following questions to guide semi-structured, audio-taped interviews with each of the co-participants in a quiet, informal setting. Each interview should last approximately one hour.

Co- Participant: _____			
Date: _____	Time: _____	Duration: _____	Place: _____

Opening Comments:

- Thank them for their participation
- Encourage the participant to ask for clarification of anything they are unsure about at any time during the interview
- Remind them they may decline to respond at any time.

Part A: *Clarification of Individual Questionnaire Responses*

EMERGENT See individual questionnaires.

Part B: *Reactions to Focus Group Discussions*

- The researcher should show selected video (approximately 20 minutes total) from the focus group discussion to the co-participant for feedback/reaction/interpretations.
 - How did you feel about the focus group discussion?
 - What things that were discussed excited or surprised or upset you? Can you explain more about that?
 - What would *you* say were the most important ideas or points made (List 3 or more)?
- Next, the researcher should present her own version of what was said and invite the participant to respond to it.

Clip #1

1. *Using taboo language demonstrates proficiency or an appearance of proficiency for Korean men.*
 - a) Is it only a “Korean guy thing”? Is it also true for women? Is it also true for other nationalities?
 - b) Is this true *only* with other ESL speakers?
2. *Using taboo language makes the ESL speaker “closer” to a Canadian or a ‘native speaker’.*
 - a) Is this closeness *only* with respect to language?
 - b) Does this closeness have anything to do with their values, beliefs, ways of thinking, ways of being, or *identity*?

Clip #2

1. *Understanding taboo language can help you “fit-in” with others and not understanding taboo language can make you feel “left-out”.*
 - a) Who do you want to fit-in with?
 - b) What group are you left-out from?
2. *Taboo language can be purposefully used to exclude others.*
 - a) Have you experienced this?
 - b) Who was excluded? (How did you feel?)
 - c) How was this exclusion accomplished?

Clip #3

1. *Not understanding taboo language can be disempowering and dangerous.*
 - a) How can taboo language make you feel “trapped”?
 - b) How do you “protect” yourself with/from taboo language?

Part C: Personal Experiences of Taboo Language

- Now I would like to review my interpretations of the main points you made during the focus group and ask for your feedback or clarifications. (*see my highlighted reflective field notes from the focus group).
- Would you like to elaborate on any taboo language experience you’ve already talked about OR perhaps share another taboo language experience (either past or present)?
 - Can you tell me about a time when taboo language was *directed at you* by another person? (How did it make you feel?)
 - Can you tell me about a time when *you used* taboo language in English, either written or spoken? (How did it make you feel? Why did you choose to use taboo language at that time?)
- How does your experience of *English* taboo language compare to your feelings toward taboo language in your first language? (possibly discuss code-switching)

Part D: *Returning to the Research Questions*

- Reflect on identities/positions you take up in your life experience. (At school, at home, with your friends, at work, elsewhere?)
- How do your understandings of English taboo language affect your *identities*? In the focus group, Hanieh said you “need to be like the person you are talking to” when speaking about her boyfriend. What does this mean?
- What critical incidents of taboo language hold meaning for the construction (building) of your English taboo language *proficiency* and your *identities*?
- In what ways has English taboo language played a role in *power relationships* you have experienced? (Are these experiences unique because you are an ESL speaker?)

Part E: *Factors Affecting Taboo Language Use*

ALSO IN FOCUS GROUP GUIDE!

- In your opinion what factors affect English taboo language use and how?
- How might this differ from your experience with taboo in your first language?

Identity factors of speakers (producers) and listeners (receivers):

- Gender
- Age
- Religion
- Social and/or socioeconomic status (e.g. bosses, teachers, government officials)
- ESL learner status

Context factors:

- Setting (e.g. at home, in the classroom, at a pub, in a public area, in a public office)
- Format (e.g. in ESL materials, in media, in movies or TV, etc.)

Closing Comments:

- Is there anything else you’d like to add before we end our interview?
- Do you wish to submit your journal?
- Thanks again!
- May I contact you for clarifications at a later date? If so, how? (phone/email)
- Invite them to the final (optional) gathering & give out profiles at that time (I will E-mail them as attachments if this is not possible).

Reflective Field Notes:

Appendix G

List of So-called 'Taboo' Expressions Raised by the Co-participants

Co-participant	Examples raised
Kyu-Kwan	cum, fuck, fucked-up, jack ass, kick your ass, kick your butt, kill your ass, 'man', piss, shit
Poupak	chick, chick-flick, nuts, shit
Eun-Ju	banana/peach, bitch, prick, what the hell
Joyce	bullshit, condom, crap, fart, F+up, F-word, holy shit, oh shit, shit, suck, 'she has two big watermelons'
Xochilt	'Are you shitting me?', ass-licking, blow-job, cougar, crap, cunt, cutting the cheese, F-word, fuck, gay, jerk off, 'jump into bed with', lick-ass ^a , lush, on the rag, red army, shit, snatch, spread-eagle, tomato boat, vagina
Chelsea	ass, bitch, butt, cheek, cunt, fart, 'for crying out loud', fuck, pissed off, shit, skank, snatch

^aRegarding this example, brought up by Xochilt during her interview, she later contacted me by Email to inform me that she had meant to say 'kiss-ass', rather than 'lick-ass'.

Appendix H

List of Emotive Descriptors Related to English Taboo Language Experiences

Co-participant	Emotive descriptors
Kyu-Kwan	funny, irritating, nervous
Poupak	none explicitly stated
Eun-Ju	angry, ashamed, bright, cheerful, confused, depressed, disappointed, frustrated, funny, nervous, uncomfortable, unpleasant
Joyce	discomfortable, don't feel comfortable, embarrassed, feel not very good, foolish, funny, interesting, isolated, regret
Xochilt	displaced, embarrassed, sarcastic, tension, uncomfortable
Chelsea	frustrating, insecure, nasty, uncomfortable, unsettling