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Language socialization through the point-of-sales system in a Vietnamese restaurant in South Texas

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Under the language socialization paradigm, the research reported here focuses on documenting communication and language socialization patterns, mediated through a point-of-sale (POS) system, among the migrant staff working in a Vietnamese restaurant in South Texas, USA. The study employed an ethnographic approach that drew upon analyses of observation field notes, semi-structured interviews, naturalistic data, and artefacts. Findings suggest that in channelling work-related communication within the restaurant, the POS system also acts as (i) a socializing tool into the working culture, (ii) a site for meaning-making and learning, and (iii) a crucial link in the joint acts of socialization. The paper concludes by proposing a model of what transnational sites could do to promote the process of second language socialization and enculturation; in so doing, it also seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on language socialization, especially with regard to its intersection with technologies, as well as provide refreshed perspectives on migrant workers' language development and acculturation process in similar contexts of migration.

Keywords: language socialization; language learning; technology; transnational contexts; Vietnamese EFL learners; English in the workplace

Introduction

It was a busy Sunday afternoon in *East Asia 2*[1] restaurant, which was packed with customers. As a norm, the hostess ushered an African American couple to have a seat in a booth and gave them two menus. After drinks were served, Loi, a new waiter at the time, swiftly approached the table, taking orders from the couple. They asked him many questions with regard to the dishes they wanted. After a while, Loi came to the Point-of-Sale (POS) computer with the order. With a baffled look, he quickly turned to Cuong, who was preparing some plates and napkins next to the system, and asked him for a confirmation: "Khách muốn ăn phở mà muốn nước gà thì mình bấm vào 'chicken broth' phải không?" (The customers want to have pho but they want chicken broth[2], so we enter 'chicken broth' right?). After Cuong gave a nod, Loi carefully typed the order in both Vietnamese and English into the POS system. (Field notes, June 10, 2018)

Loi's experience occurred in a small restaurant in San Antonio, Texas in the United States. Originally from Vietnam, he had been in the United States for nearly two years at the time and was still in the process of adapting to his new homeland's mainstream language and culture. He wanted to confirm whether his English lexicon was correct before he entered the customers' order specification (chicken broth) by seeking expertise from Cuong (also Vietnamese), who had been in San Antonio for six years and had graduated from a local high school and was, thus, more of an expert language user within the host culture. After Cuong's confirmation, Loi entered the modification in both English (chicken broth) and Vietnamese (nước gà), which would then be

interpreted by the kitchen staff. In this respect, Loi's language practices were not only reinforced by Cuong, a more proficient English speaker, but they were also mediated by the technological semiotic tool (the point-of-sale system), which, in turn, creates new understanding, social meanings, and connection within the restaurant (these will be later elaborated in the findings). Crystal (2008) notes that technological tools such as smart devices, computers and the internet, enable people to "to be linguistically creative and to adapt language to suit the demands of diverse settings" (p. 175). Language learners and emerging bilinguals such as Loi, in this sense, have been learning and using the target language in a meaningful way, framed and driven by technology, so that they can accommodate into the workplace culture.

I went into the *East Asia 2* restaurant with an understanding of the point-of-sales (POS) system's role in channelling and regulating customers' orders; however, I knew little about how it accommodates and mediates language use and socialization patterns within the site. Therefore, using the theoretical framework of *language socialization* (LS), this paper aims to shed light on the ways in which the staff members' language practices, mediated through technology, socialize into the sociocultural and linguistic norms in the new workplace. This paper begins with an overview on language socialization, especially with regard to its intersection with technology. Then it describes the methodological approach and how the research was conducted utilizing ethnographic methods. It discusses the language socialization process that involves language-mediated interaction and experiences at the intersection of technology through a detailed analysis of collected artefacts and excerpts of interviews and audio-recorded conversations. The paper concludes with a proposal for an approach to promote context-embedded exposure to a target language as an informal resource of socialization and acculturation.

Language socialization as a theoretical framework
The theoretical framework of LS (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984) states that social and cultural practices in a speech community enhance the process of language acquisition and vice versa. Language, in this sense, is considered as a means to becoming a competent member of a community of practice by "acquiring knowledge of its functions, social distribution, and interpretations in and across socially-defined situations" (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984, p. 277). Early studies on LS focus on how people socialize through language and are socialized to use it (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). In such socializations, people experience and internalize a variety of the second language's verbal interactions, forms of participation, and goals that are socio-culturally determined (Duff, 2007). Ochs and Schieffelin (2008) further add that LS characterizes human interactions during their socialization into work-related activities in increasingly globalized communities, especially when it comes to contexts of migration. An increasing influx of immigrants into the United States has encouraged critical thoughts regarding dynamic settings of interactions, which are deemed as major and innovative socialization sites where bi-/multilingual immigrants negotiate their participation in new communities and social institutions (Baquedano-López & Figueroa, 2011).

Taking LS to a narrower landscape that involves digital technology and other multimodal means, Lam and Kramsch (2002), under an ecological perspective that underscores human interaction with the surrounding environment during the course of language development, examine a case study of how a Hong Kong English learner became socialized into his second language in a virtual environment, i.e., how computer technology mediated the acquisition of his second language. Lam (2004) later notes that

while a majority of research on LS has focused on language development within specific communities of practice, "it has tended to overlook the intersection of multiple groupings or contexts of socialization in constituting the language experiences of an individual" (p. 46). She presents the computer-mediated social and discursive practices of two Chinese immigrant students in an online chatroom to illuminate the ways in which they were socialized into the second language and hybrid identities. In the same vein, Thorne, Black, and Sykes (2009) describe the socialization process of English language learners through their participation in Internet communities and virtual online games. In a similar manner, Duran's (2017) ethnographic work on Karenni refugees highlight the roles of technological and multimodal tools, e.g., social network, media, chatrooms, and texting, as rich semiotic resources which help the migrant learners to learn English in a meaningful way, thus promoting their socialization and enculturation process. Following the spirit of exploring the intersection of technological means and LS, this paper aims to broaden the scope of inquiry by delineating the restaurant staff's language practices and the ways in which their socialization process are situated within and informed by technology. The research question addressed is:

> In which ways does the POS system shape the language socialization pathways among the immigrant staff in the restaurant?

Methodology
This paper comes from a larger one-and-a-half-year ethnographic study that aims to gain insights into the language practices and socialization process of fourteen migrant staff members in *East Asia 2*. The ethnographic approach is representative of the post-modern turn movement in qualitative research, which links field-based data across time and space with multiple dynamics of much broader social formations and thus serves as a common methodological tool in the majority of LS studies (Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2002; Lee & Bucholtz, 2015). To attain the emic perspective, I, as the researcher, actively became a part of the participants' world, or a "quasi-member" (Schneider, 2014, p. 7) of the restaurant by adopting multiple roles as: a part-time staff member,[3] a fellow Vietnamese, a friend, a language mentor, a cultural broker, and a researcher.

Site accessibility and participants
Through a friend, I knew about *East Asia 2*, a popular Vietnamese restaurant in South Texas. To gain entry to the site, I had been hanging around in the restaurant on the weekends and befriending as many staff members as I could as a way to establish a solid rapport. My identity as a transnational Asian had been a great help in the process. After a few months of observation and building relationships, I got approval from the owner to become a (quasi-)member to obtain the insiders' points of view and gain in-depth insights into the site. At the time of the study the participant staff members were from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, i.e., eight were Vietnamese, one was Korean, one was Chinese, and four were Mexican. The most commonly used languages for communication was Vietnamese (spoken to Vietnamese customers and among the Vietnamese staff) and English (spoken to English-speaking customers and among staff of different linguistic backgrounds). For this paper specifically, I will present data from four Vietnamese participants (Loi, Cuong, Sy and Thanh, aged 22, 20, 19 and 26 respectively). They were employed as waiters and backwaiters[4] (see Table 1 for details)

and had frequent contact with the POS system through entering and interpreting customers' orders.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participants	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Position	Primary language	Linguistic repertoire[5]
Loi	22	Male	Vietnamese	Waiter/ Backwaiter	Vietnamese	English Intermediate Spanish Beginner
Cuong	20	Male	Vietnamese	Waiter	Vietnamese	English Advanced
Sy	19	Male	Vietnamese	Waiter	Vietnamese	English Advanced Spanish Beginner
Thanh	26	Male	Vietnamese	Backwaiter/ Cook	Vietnamese	English Beginner

The point-of-sale system

In relation to the technological tools that play major roles in the restaurant, learning how to utilize the (POS) system is perhaps the most important activity for new staff participants. The POS system is comprised of a computer, monitor, ticket/receipt printer, a debit/credit card reader, and a cash drawer. It is touch-assisted and connected to a keyboard and a mouse. In total, there are three POS computers at the site. They are all interlinked with each other through the Internet and a local area network (LAN). All of them are also connected with all the ticket/receipt printers located in strategic locations all over the restaurant, with three in the dining area and four in the kitchen.

Most of the activities related to the restaurant, especially with regard to processing orders and communication, go through the system. For instance, all the cashiers and waiters have to enter customers' orders using the touch-assisted computer screen, on which all the dishes on the menu are displayed and sorted into specific categories such as appetizers, salad, vegetable, and hot pot (see Figure 1). The order entries would then be digitally transmitted to the printers set up in the kitchen, where the tickets are printed out, read, and interpreted by the kitchen staff.
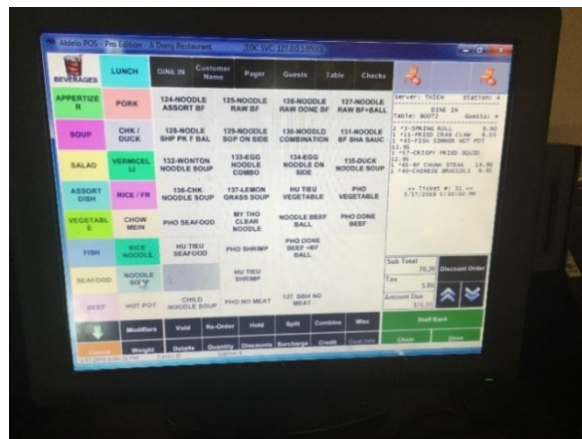

Figure 1. The POS touch-assisted computer screen

Data collection and analysis

The data were collected from four sources: (1) participant observation field notes through direct participation in the restaurant's activities; (2) semi-structured interviews that focus on the participants' reflection of experience (adapted from Seidman, 2013); (3) naturalistic data, or audio-recorded natural conversations, that provides rich accounts and insights with minimal interference from researchers' actions (Potter, 2002), and (4) a variety of artefacts collected at the site such as screenshots of the POS system and printed orders from customers.

The collected data were reduced through a three-stage approach to coding (Hesse-Biber, 2017). This framework involves three rounds of coding: (1) descriptive coding, in which a descriptive code is assigned to a segment of data; (2) categorical coding, where the descriptive codes are categorized into patterns; and (3) analytical coding, which gives a theoretical and thematic interpretation of the categorized data. The rationale behind this approach is that it allowed an overview of the data, thus better clarifying the concepts and building a solid foundation for establishing possible theories. The chunks of data reported were necessarily selective and partial, including interview quotes from the participant, as well as selected excerpts from the natural recordings. With the purpose of establishing more authenticity and agency, some of the original transcriptions in Vietnamese, the main language of communication, will be translated verbatim into English. The transcription conventions were adapted from a model proposed by Dressler and Kreuz (2000, see Appendix).

The data were analysed using a framework of textual analysis adopted from McKee (2003), in which linguistic and visual elements of the collected artefacts were examined to understand how the restaurant members interpret sociocultural meaning(s) of those elements so that they could socialize into the restaurant's communication norms, patterns, and working culture. In addition, the discourse analysis framework of ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1968) was employed to look into how the participants' linguistic repertoires and backgrounds are linked to different interpretations of the socialization process, framed and driven by the presence of technology.

Findings

The POS system as a socialization tool into working culture

The POS system acts as a communication channel among all the staff, especially between the dining area, and the kitchen, through its feature of *modifiers* which appear at the bottom of the touch-assisted main screen (see Figure 1). The waiters opt to use this modification feature when customers wish to add or remove some ingredients to or from their dishes. For example, if a customer wants a dish to be made extra spicy, the waiter should choose "Extra Spicy", an option that is available through the system setup. However, when a customer wants a modification that is not available in the system, e.g., extra shrimp (*thêm tôm*, in Vietnamese), the waiter would then manually enter the modification through the second language option previously set up by the owner (see Figure 2).

This is illustrated in Excerpt 1 taken from a follow-up interview where Loi is explaining his choice of language use for "chicken broth" (as mentioned in the vignette at the beginning of this paper), Loi elaborated on the factors that drove him towards his choice.
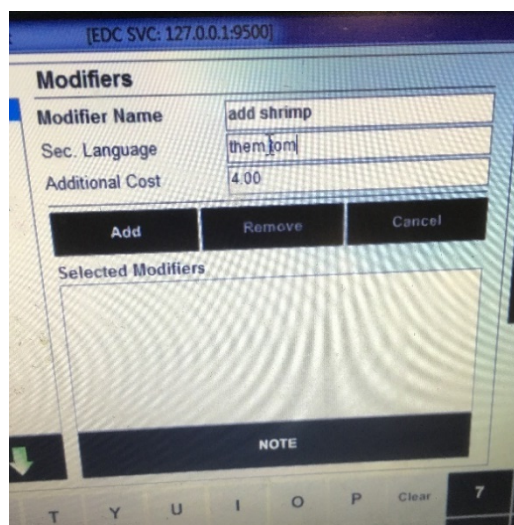
Figure 2. The second language option of the POS system

Excerpt 1: The underlying rules

1	**Loi**	Món ăn là tiếng-mấy chữ món ăn là tiếng	Food is in-food terms are in English.
2		Anh, thì cũng có tiếng Việt nữa <u>m:à</u>.. bình	There is also Vietnamese, <u>bu:t</u>.. normally
3		thường thì nếu như mà người Mễ làm chung	if Mexicans work together with
4		với người Việt thì bấm <u>tiếng Anh</u>, còn mà	Vietnamese, we type in <u>English</u>, and if
5		người Việt làm chung với người Việt thì bấm	Vietnamese work with Vietnamese, we
6		<u>tiếng Việt/</u>	type in <u>Vietnamese/</u>

According to Loi, there are some underlying rules of manual entry through the POS system: (i) the modification notes should be entered in Vietnamese if all the kitchen staff on the current shift are Vietnamese ("người Việt làm chung với người Việt thì bấm tiếng Việt"); and (ii) they should be entered in English if the Mexican staff are present ("nếu như mà người Mễ làm chung với người Việt thì bấm tiếng Anh"). Therefore, to socialize into the working culture of the site, all the staff, especially the waiters, should abide by those rules by accommodating and modifying their language output in subtle ways, i.e., code-switch between their first language (Vietnamese) and their second language (English) to maximize communicative efficiency (Bourhis & Giles, 1977). In doing so, the migrant workers also undergo a double-faceted socialization process: into the mainstream language (English) of their new homeland, and into the hybrid discourse (code-switching between Vietnamese and English) realized by the restaurant's working culture. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 2, all POS modes are set up to be bilingual (English and Vietnamese). In this way, bilingual order tickets are printed through POS printers in strategic locations to cater to the needs of the kitchen staff with diverse linguistic backgrounds and repertoires, who would then interpret the tickets and make the orders accordingly, thus bringing about an inclusive working environment and meeting the demands of a multilingual workplace (Roberts, 2010).

The POS system as a site of meaning-making and learning

Prompted through the POS system's second language feature, waiters, who have been immersed in the new language and culture, or emerging bilinguals, oftentimes make use of both their Vietnamese and English linguistic repertoires, to efficiently engage in the meaning-making process and convey their points across in a purposeful way (as described by García, 2009). As shown in Figure 3, the order ticket entered by Sy, one of the waiter participants, has a mix of Vietnamese and English modifications for the dishes entered (e.g., "ga (chicken) only"-line 4). Notably, rule (ii), in which modification notes should be typed in Vietnamese if all the back staff of the shift are Vietnamese, was violated. To be more particular, line 5 reveals that the dish assigned with number 115 "SP CHOW MEIN" (Special Chow Mein), through the bilingual mode in the POS system, was printed out with a Vietnamese name "MI XAO DON DAC BIET" (Mì Xào Dòn Đặc Biệt), with the options "doi bo" (đổi bò, meaning "change to beef"), "brown sauce" (sốt nâu), and "o nấm" (no mushroom). As the waiter entered the ticket using "o", his intention may have been brevity, because in Vietnamese teen language it means "0" (zero) and also "no" ("0" and "no" are homophones in Vietnamese, both pronounced as "không").

Figure 3. A sample order ticket entered by a waiter (Sy)

In this regard, with his strategically improvised integration of English and other resources, Sy shifted borders between Vietnamese, Vietnamese teen language, and English, thus relocating himself and reconstructing knowledge in the working culture of the restaurant community in innovative and dynamic ways. Baquedano-López and Figueroa (2011) note that acts of language innovation, convention, and norm-breaking are peculiar among children and young adult immigrants' socialization patterns across migrant communities and other social settings. Language socialization, thus, has been closely connected with the use of different languages and styles based on users' agency, choices, and meaning-making moments of interaction (Day & Wagner, 2007; Kleifgen, 2001).

The backwaiter, on the other hand, is entrusted with the responsibility to clarify those modifications to the Vietnamese cooks, most of whom are of senior age and have

limited English proficiency, or have recently arrived at the United States. They may be baffled by what is typed on tickets similar to the sample ticket above; however, in such cases, the bilingual printed texts, along with the backwaiter's interpretation, turn into potential learning resources, as illustrated below:

Excerpt 2: Learning English terms

1	**Thanh**	Cái này là súp hở?	Is this soup?
2	**Loi**	((pointing at the ticket)) Ờ.. *egg drop*	((pointing at the ticket)) Yes.. egg drop soup
3		*soup*. Là anh lấy cái gì?	So what do you get?
4	**Thanh**	(Anh) lấy trong cái hũ ((pointing	(I) get it from the container ((pointing at the
5		at the container where the soup is in))	container where the soup is in))
6	**Loi**	((nodding)) *Egg drop* là súp gì?	((nodding)) What kind of soup is 'egg drop'?
7	**Thanh**	Súp vàng-trứng =	The yellow-egg soup =
8	**Loi**	= Uhm.. Còn *crispy noodles*[6] là cái này	= Yes.. And 'crispy noodles' are these
9		((pointing at the bucket where	((pointing at the bucket where crispy noodles
10		crispy noodles are stored))	are stored))
11	**Thanh**	Ô kê ((nodding))	Okay ((nodding))

In excerpt two, in interpreting a ticket, Thanh, a cook and waiter in training, was conscious of the name of the dish printed in English. He asked Loi, who was training him on that day, for a confirmation. Loi then showed Thanh the location of the egg drop soup and crispy noodles, while teaching him the English vocabulary for the dishes ("egg drop" and "crispy noodle") in the process ("Egg drop là súp gì?", line 6 "Còn crispy noodle là cái này", line 8. Loi also used gestures (pointing) to visually represent concrete objects that were observable in the context (the container and the bucket) so that solid understanding of meanings and norms could be co-constructed between him and his trainee. In this sense, Thanh, who had only been resettled in the United States for two weeks at the time, was actively seeking membership and recognition in his new workplace by learning from Loi, a relative expert in the restaurant compared to him. Furthermore, the extract suggests that Thanh was in the process of shifting his language use towards the community norms, i.e., becoming a "speaker of culture" (Ochs, 2002, p. 99), especially with regard to usage of community-specific jargon ("egg drop" and "crispy noodles"). Socialization through the target language, therefore, is a bidirectional process where "learners of all age can be both receptor and agent of socialization", influenced by the local contexts in which they participate (Duran, 2017, p. 21; see also Orellana, 2009). Apart from its central role in facilitating all the communication pertaining to work in the site, the POS system acts as a meaningful meaning-making space and semiotic resource through which the informants perform their daily communicative practices at work, thereby socializing into the workplace's shared language, hybrid discourse, and cultural understandings. In other words, the digital means has contributed to reshaping those migrant workers' socialization trajectories, where they constantly relocalize and renegotiate resources available in their multilingual worlds to generate locally-relevant new social meanings (Dovchin, Sultana, & Pennycook, 2015).

The POS system: A key link in the joint acts of socialization

> Tonight, there was a half-an-hour Internet outage that affected the LAN connection in the site and made the POS system fail to operate properly. As a consequence, all the activities were impeded, and the restaurant became quite a chaotic scene: All the staff members had to resort

to manually writing orders and bringing them to the kitchen. The waiters had to refer to the menu and asked each other for the exact dishes' names. I (who was working as the backwaiter) and the cashier ran back and forth between the kitchen and the front for confirmation of the manual entries. There were complaints from the kitchen… It was such a time-consuming process. (Field notes, June 23, 2018)

This vignette suggests that when the POS system malfunctions, all the work-related communication is interrupted, i.e., all the operations in the restaurant become chaotic. Under normal circumstances most of the activities related to processing orders and communication go through the POS system: first, the waiters take orders from customers, revising, and entering them using language in a way that is consistent with the rules and linguistic needs of those working in the kitchen. The entries are digitally processed and printed on tickets with their bilingual names and modifications. Next, the backwaiter interprets those tickets and confirms their meanings to the cooks, who then make the dishes for the backwaiter to run to the customers.

Inferably, the POS system and the backwaiter play central roles in linking the chained activities of socialization, with the system mediating the whole process and the backwaiter acting as a language broker, a knowledge mediator, and a socialization agent between the waiters and the kitchen staff. The use of language, from this perspective, has become a linear, connected socialization process through interaction with digitally-generated signs and meanings. According to Mead (1934), semiotic platforms and interpretive mechanism have been provided in relation to the workplace norms, linking all the meaning-making moments, which altogether constitute joint acts (see Figure 4). Should one of the links, especially the POS system, that make up the joint acts of socialization, be absent, the whole socially-constructed process would be potentially compromised. In this sense, the interactional order of language socialization, with the POS system as the crucial mediating factor, is thus an indispensable pragmatic means to the restaurant's functional requirements.
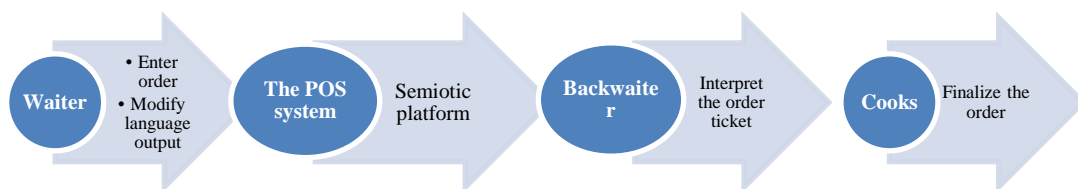

Figure 3: Joint acts of socialization mediated by the POS system

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the ways in which the POS system shapes the migrant staff members' socialization into communication patterns and working norms in a Vietnamese restaurant in South Texas. Technology is no longer a supplemental and neutral tool in the process, it has become an indispensable part of daily communication in the restaurant's operational activities (see also Dao, 2019). The LS process, situated within digital and technological means, acts as a semiotic field that allows the migrant participants to (1) integrate in a linguistically and culturally inclusive working environment, (2) communicate efficiently using their emerging and recombinant multilingual repertoires, as well as learn the target language and new knowledge in meaningful ways, and (3) become active social agents in the joint acts of socialization.

These findings, in turn, have shed light on the migrant workers' "remarkable social and linguistic adaptation to the norms and constraints of the American workplace" (Kleifgen, 2001, p. 302).

Such practices have posed potential implications for an acculturation model that enables socialization into a target language and culture while maintaining affiliation with their ethnic group members. Newly-arrived migrant workers in transnational micro-sites similar to *East Asia 2* could be exposed to context-embedded exposure to the target language in a technology-mediated environment (Kessler, 2018), e.g., learning, generating, and interpreting work-related terms and jargon through the use of the POS system. In so doing, those migrant learners could also receive peer training and support from more experienced bilinguals, i.e., what Duran (2017) calls an ethnic-based professional network, in which community members can act as mutual apprentices of each other and thus socialize one another into new ways of life. Last but not least, those experienced immigrants, with more established bilingualism and biculturalism, could assume the roles of knowledge mediator and language broker in multiple discursive practices during the socialization process. Further investigations on technologically-mediated language and communicative practices might delve into how migrant workers manage to maintain transnational ties while socializing their ways into the macro-contexts of the mainstream society, e.g., the common socialization practices among staff members of different linguistic backgrounds when watching television during lunchtime across restaurants, or the act of using smart devices to keep up to date with news in both the home and host country. Such future studies may bring about a refreshed perspective to the language socialization paradigm, with an explicit focus on its intersection with new technologies and dynamic contexts of immigration.

Notes

1. All the names of people and places that appear in this paper are pseudonyms.
2. The broth for 'pho', a popular Vietnamese noodle dish, is traditionally made from beef bones.
3. I volunteered to work as a part-time waiter and kitchen helper in exchange for meals.
4. A backwaiter interprets orders to the cooks and runs the dishes to customers.
5. Proficiency levels: **Beginner** = able to use simple words, phrases, and sentences and communicate in a limited way or only in repetitive situations; **Intermediate** = able to use an expanded set of words, phrases, and sentences and actively participate in work-related conversations; **Advanced** = able to use complex words, phrases, and sentences consistently and participate in conversations in demanding settings that may require prompt adaptability and response (adapted from Colorín Colorado, 2005)
6. Crispy noodles are fried wonton wraps, used with a variety of appetizer soups.

About the author

Nguyen Dao is a Ph.D. student in Culture, Literacy, and Language at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Before moving to San Antonio, Nguyen worked as an ESL teacher in Vietnam. Then he earned his M.Ed. in Curriculum & Instruction from the University of Houston and worked in Houston for two years as an academic program coordinator. His research interests include language learning, language socialization, literacy practices, and identity among Vietnamese- and Asian-Americans. He is now working as a graduate research assistant and as the academic coordinator of the Texas Language Education Research (TexLER) conference.

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Appendix: Transcription Conventions (adapted from Dressler & Kreuz, 2000)

Spoken loudly/Emphasis on the word:	<u>text</u>
Code-switching	*text*
Paralinguistic behavior/Gesture/Action:	((behavior))
Clarification	(clarification)
Latched talk:	=
Rising intonation:	/ and ?
Lengthened syllable:	:
Word cutoff:	-
Reported speech:	"text"
Click of tongue:	..tsk..
Short pause (< 0.5s):	..
Long pause (>0.5s):	…