Refugees, as I have presented, are resourceful transnational individuals, yet often marginalized because their language, culture, and literacy practices are unfamiliar to those of the host community. Local communities and policies in their receiving nations expect newly resettled refugees to become self-sufficient as soon as possible. Such self-sufficiency is often assumed to arise from getting a job, earning money, and knowing how things work in the new country. Refugee children are expected to attend formal education. In all, both host communities and refugees believe that the path to these goals involves acquiring the dominant language and literacy of the host country. These expectations can be met. However, understanding the refugees’ existing resources and daily struggles may help local communities, educators, resettlement agencies, and policy makers achieve these expectations more quickly. In writing this book and privileging ethnographic methods, I aimed to provide an inventory of language and literacy practices used by the recently arrived refugees and examine how language and literacy facilitated learning, created new understandings, and maintained transnational connections. I hope to bridge the gap between expectations drawn from the top-down policy and practices and the refugees’ real-life experiences. In the remainder of
this chapter, I provide a key summary followed by implications for pedagogy and practice.

**Contested Language Ideologies**

Throughout my study of the Karenni families, contested language ideologies, or different kinds of language ideologies, between sending and receiving nations, were constructed and reconstructed because their transnational practices were still in-process and taking shape (Braziel and Mannur 2003; Hall 2003). For instance, the Karenni refugees’ ethnic languages have been contested by Burmese dominance since the Karenni (adult) participants were in the Karenni state, and Burmese functioned as most of the Karenni adults’ (and some teenagers—Hla Meh, Daw, and Saw Reh) communicative tool, in both oral (e.g., interethnic communication) and written modes (e.g., written language in letters and agenda of the Karenni Social Community). It was also the language of the mainstream media and entertainment transmitted from Burma. In these ways, the superior status of Burmese (as the official language of Burma and as the language of wider communication) shaped the beliefs and practices of these refugees both in Thailand and the USA.

Upon arrival in the USA, tension between English and the participants’ previously acquired languages emerged because of the hegemony of English perceived due to its local prominence, prestige, and power directly and indirectly. Nevertheless, the Karenni parents and the children responded to the high status of English differently. The Karenni parents’ day-to-day encounters with English in both oral (e.g., communicating with locals and authorities) and written forms reinforced their belief that their lack of English proficiency (and literacy) created problems in living in the USA and challenged their efforts to live comfortably and to access social and economic resources. The young children, however, were influenced by their surroundings, popular culture, and the prevailing notions that have been established and disseminated throughout their community. Unfortunately, misconceptions regarding a person’s language proficiency or lack thereof were formed based on the aforementioned influences and their own personal experiences, which were shaped
from a very young age and especially during the time of their resettlement due to the ideologies of language introduced in their new surroundings. For instance, the lack of English proficiency among Karenni adults created a stereotype (such as ‘Karenni women don’t speak English’) among the younger children.

In this particular case, another layer of linguistic hierarchy was constructed, influenced partly by a belief in the high status of Standard English (e.g., the act of language correction). In these Karenni families, English learned from school was considered good because it was perceived as a more correct way from a more respectful and reliable source that has been created socially, historically, and politically. This again shows the subscription to the linear theory of learning and great divide perspective (Goody 1977) that still dominates the USA’s public discourse, education, policy, and society where language is structured in a vertical hierarchical order. As a result, all adult participants seemed to feel devalued and unrecognized. Given such ideologies, language socialization became a two-way process in this community. While the older generation passed on the native language and culture to the younger ones, the younger generation, who had formal schooling in the USA, became the mediators of good English, the prestigious language in the new context.

Nevertheless, I do not suggest that the Karenni adults are deficient. In fact, there are ‘different literacies associated with different domains of life’ (Barton and Hamilton 2000, p. 8) and everyone has some literacy difficulties in some contexts (Street 1995). Based on the data analysis, I argue that the newcomers are now in the process of acquiring new literacies in a variety of new domains through informal learning and sense making (Barton and Hamilton 2000, p. 8). As Teh Reh stated, his Karenni community needs ‘to know the American government policies and stuff,’ but it becomes more complex when it simultaneously affects how they use their new language in situ. Nevertheless, I have found that my participants are in the process of examining which language and literacy practices work effectively for them and fit their needs during the first years of their resettlement. Trying to overcome their challenges in the receiving nation, the Karenni adults asked for help, experimented, questioned, observed, and made use of resources such as friends and the people they
knew. In these ways, the participants employed survival and literacy skills to solve their problems.

**Socialization Using Both Previously and Recently Acquired Languages**

Previously acquired and recently acquired linguistic repertoires shape the ways in which language choice, strategies, and language socialization among these multilingual individuals are practiced and performed. I approached the participants’ abundant linguistic repertoires and practices by examining those practices in light of their life trajectories, their language and literacy skills at the time of movement (Blommaert 2010), and what additional practices emerged after their resettlement in the USA. I found that variations in linguistic repertoires among the participants were prominent, primarily due to differences across generations (i.e., adults’ linguistic repertoires are different from children’s), within families (e.g., religions, primary languages), schooling experiences (e.g., language of instruction in previous and current schools), individual preferences, and notably the circumstances after the movement (e.g., languages required at work, for socialization, and for networking).

In each family, family members shared some sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and sociohistorical background aspects but their language and literacy practices and repertoires varied because they had acquired different languages at different levels while living in different countries. In the USA they were engaged in different activities, social networks, academic pursuits, or work-related projects. For instance, in Ka Paw’s family, Ka Paw had limited Karenni proficiency as he had learned Kayan and Burmese as his primary languages. However, his children, Daw (14) and Je Ru (10), were more comfortable communicating in Karenni because they spent a considerable amount of time each day with Karenni friends. In addition, Daw read the Bible written in Karenni while Je Ru was learning to read the Bible in English because he had limited Karenni reading and writing proficiency. In Teh Reh’s family, See Meh (15) had acquired Karenni as her primary language while learning Thai through formal schooling in
Thailand. Conversely, her brothers, Gu-Gu (7) and Ngee-Ngee (7), had only acquired Karenni at home when they were in the refugee camp in Thailand because they were too young to be enrolled in school before the resettlement move. Therefore, See Meh and her younger brothers utilized different linguistic strategies in the USA. That is, Gu-Gu and Ngee-Ngee learned English as their second language in the USA. As a result, the act of translanguaging (as described in the section on ‘counting in English’ in Chap. 6) was carried out to create their unique communicative strategy and their own norms of interaction. Conversely, See Meh understood academic content better when I used Thai to explain class materials, such as for math and biology, to her as Thai had been her most-used academic language.

I found that generational differences in linguistic strategies were influenced by the language and literacy levels that refugee participants had before their movement. While living in the USA, the Karenni teenagers and adults utilized their previously acquired languages (e.g., Burmese, Karen) more than English because they were more comfortable and competent in those languages than they were in English. Conversely, for the younger children, who had had limited time to learn other languages in the refugee camp because of their young age, using English, the recently acquired language, for their social and learning opportunities was more common.

The teenagers’ language and literacy practices also indicate that certain languages were used for certain circumstances. For example, See Meh (re)learned Karen because she wanted to be accepted among her Karen friends in the USA. Similarly, Hla Meh employed different languages for different purposes—Burmese and Karenni for translating documents for her family, Karenni for instructing her young siblings, and English for texting (because there was no Karenni option). Saw Reh learned Burmese in order to consume cultural products from Burma. And, both See Meh and Hla Meh made use of their strongest academic language other than English to make sense of the English academic language they were expected to comprehend. Finally, Daw’s practice of reading the Bible in Karenni and Burmese represents the relationship between meaning-making tools and religious practices. For Daw, when religious texts are
carried out in the language in which she is most proficient they are far more appreciable than those in English, which is the language she is still learning (although this might change as she becomes more comfortable and proficient in English). As shown in these practices, the language that carries the most meaningful concepts, connects to the participant teenagers’ experiences, and benefits them directly for socialization and entertainment in the current setting is used as the meaning representational tool. I propose once again that multilingual repertoires should be treated as resources (Canagarajah 2009, p. 19; see also Ruiz 1984). As discussed in these Karenni youth’s experiences, a language is maintained and given a place in the speaker’s linguistic repertoires when it functions in an authentically meaningful activity.

Language socialization, or how one learns to become a member of a speech community, occurs and changes throughout life (Schecter and Bayley 2002). In this case, migration is a major factor in the participants’ new trajectories in the language socialization process. The complexity of their linguistic repertoires and accumulated literacies in their current setting were heavily shaped by their past (or what they had learned in the past, linguistically and culturally) and impacted by their present ideological circumstances. Previously acquired and recently acquired languages were used to fulfill context-dependent strategic goals despite the dominant language in their receiving nation being English. In addition, the participants’ practices demonstrate that language and literacy has the capacity to travel (Luke 2004) and reinforce the notion of *ethnoscape* (Appadurai 1996), or what people do according to their language and culture that may not coincide with the dominant norms of the nation-state. The participants’ practices and experiences show that language and literacy practices, rather than their geographical/physical residence, are powerful indicators of their identity (Hall 2003; McDonald 1997).

**The Construct of Multilingual Capital**

The Karenni participants’ hard-earned linguistic knowledge (in Burmese, English, Karen, Karenni, Kayan, Shan, and Thai) acquired over the course of a lifetime influenced their use of, and positive attitude toward,
multilingualism. This is because each language functions differently, yet appropriately, in different domains. In spite of the fact that they subscribed to the high status of the languages of the dominant groups, they were determined to maintain their primary languages because those are the languages of their family members and of their heritage and long civilization. Traveling to many places and learning many languages influenced their motivation to maintain their primary language as well as the other acquired languages to secure economic and social opportunities (Dagenais 2003; Kanno and Norton 2003). Such processes were influenced by their movement and by the contested and contradictory language ideologies they encountered along the way.

As demonstrated in instances of translanguaging, learning a language other than English, and using multiple languages and translations for work and play, such practices, indeed, are vital resources for language learning. While the refugees were required to learn English, it is also important to note that these learners ‘occupy different points of bilingual continua’ (García 2009, p. 145) because both of their primary and second languages are consequentially joined and involved in the meaning-making process (Gutiérrez et al. 2001) in order to fulfill their communicative needs. Practices based on a restricted view of language (such as English-only instruction) do not support their learning in part because these multilingual individuals are daily exposed to and engaged in multilingual surroundings in their families, neighborhood, and communities while also trying to learn English. This finding suggests that transnational trajectories among the participants create imagined multilingual communities (see also Anderson’s (1996) ‘imagined communities’), which I view as the communities that evolve in places where acquired multiple languages are used.

In addition to distinctively unique skills, practices, and strategies, the refugees’ experiences and everyday lives show that what is prioritized more in their lives and community is being multilingual, although they know in the bottom of their heart that English is important. Here, instead of viewing languages in a vertical hierarchy, where English is at the top, the refugees’ use of multilingual repertoires in daily life leads us to view languages in the form of a continuum where English is one of many useful and available languages in the participants’ repertoires.
Implications for Pedagogy

There are a number of pedagogical implications that come out of this work. First, it demonstrates how valuable it is for teachers to understand and reflect on the resources that students bring to the classroom. Professional training and teachers’ education would gain more than they would lose when keeping up with new groups that bring with them different languages, modes, and learning strategies. Also, to help learners succeed academically, pedagogy would benefit from incorporating multiple media, modes, and student-centered approaches (Short 1991) where language is taught simultaneously with content and context. Below, I add more suggestions and emphasize the implications of this study.

Translanguaging: An Alternative for English Language Learners

In Chap. 5, the utilization of translanguaging among the young children and between See Meh and me functioned as a tool to connect meaningful concepts to the learner’s repertoires. In addition, as demonstrated in Chaps. 6 and 7, the participants’ practice of using a code that makes sense to them is shown to be an effective strategy. These findings suggest that academic language at school may be successfully developed when learners are allowed to use their linguistic resources to make meaning, draw connections, and improve comprehension. This aspect of translanguaging can support both teaching and learning. It helps English language learners in the classroom make sense of their bi/multilingual repertoires and appreciate their primary language. Though teachers may not know the students’ primary language, they can activate the learners’ prior knowledge by utilizing visual aids, media, and multimodal materials. Alternatively, schools may be able to find or locate those who can speak students’ native language in addition to the dominant language such as English in this study and create after-school tutoring sessions for students with Less Commonly Taught Languages.
Digital Literacies in Schools and Curriculum

Problem solving in technology-rich environments and ‘using digital technology, communication tools, and networks to acquire and evaluate information, communicate with others, and perform practical tasks’ (OECD 2014, p. 26) is in high-demand in our education systems and in society. In the refugees’ everyday lives, multimodal literacies have been integrated in their activities, interests, and tasks. As demonstrated in Chap. 7, playing video games and using digital technologies has had a great influence on the children’s language and literacy practices. However, many educational authorities and the majority of educators do not approve of this kind of learning because of the assumed negative effects (De Aguilera and Mendiz 2003). The process of learning and literacy development when playing video games and participating in social media is similar to the process of learning and literacy development in other evocative contexts, where the meaning-making mechanism has to be enacted, encouraged, and practical. As shown in the data analysis, multimodality advances children’s understanding of content by combining sound, image, text, and contextualized story in ways that make sense to them.

To integrate and take advantage of technology advancement in the twenty-first century for teaching and learning, we need teachers and educators who can apply technology, digital literacies, and pop culture in the classroom. I hope that this study sheds a little bit of light on what might also count as learning and what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century, when technology is advancing at a high speed. There is no unidirectional form of literacy (Street 1995, 1997).

Implications for Practices Among Practitioners and Resettlement Agencies

Becoming self-sufficient at a lightning speed is expected from recently arrived refugees. However, practitioners, resettlement agencies, and organizations that support refugees may have to tailor their model and support plans to fit each group. In the resettlement process, language and literacy
is a key ingredient (Leymarie 2016). There are different forms of English and English literacy in different contexts that refugees yearn to master but seem to have limited guidance in acquiring, for example, academic English, work-related English, and English for different tasks and errands. Learning their specific needs, hardships, and linguistic and cultural backgrounds may help create language and literacy programs that draw upon their life trajectories and experiences (Freire 1998; Tyeklar 2016).

The Karenni families’ practices in this book could be used as a model of a self-sufficient community. Although the participants received support from the local school and resettlement agencies, they still needed more sociable and amicable support from family members, friends, neighbors, and volunteers, who understand their unique needs. Their self-established support network and community is an example of how they overcame daily challenges and extended their help to the Karenni community elsewhere. With the people they are familiar with and with the languages they understand best, they feel more comfortable. Practitioners, volunteers, and organizations will benefit from the refugees’ community leaders or representatives input and may be able to support the refugees through these individuals, individuals whom the refugees trust and are comfortable with. In these processes, translators and interpreters, especially the ones from within the refugee community, are also in need and will be able to unlock multiple unfamiliar languages and bridge cultural understandings between local service providers and newly arrived refugees.

References


