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Text and Worksheet: Primary Source: Interview with the Nguyen Family

In 1997, Joseph Hieu wrote his master's thesis entitled "A Study of Parental Interviews on Bilingual Programs for Vietnamese Students." In it, he interviewed several Vietnamese families. The following are excerpts from those interview transcripts.

Background information at the time of the interview :

- **Interviewee:** Mrs. Hoa Nguyen (born in 1950) is the mother of six children. Her highest level of education is college, and she made $25,000 per year. Upon arriving in the United States, she began working part time and attending college. Three years later, Nguyen had completed her M.B.A. and was working for an American investment firm in a suburban area near Chicago at the time of the interview. She had been born in North Vietnam in 1950 and moved to the non-Communist South Vietnam with her family after the country was partitioned in 1955. She had worked as an elementary school teacher for a Catholic school and had just graduated from social work school in 1975.
- **Time of immigration:** The Nguyens immigrated during the first wave. In 1978, Nguyen tried to escape Vietnam by boat several times unsuccessfully. In March 1980, she and her family left Vietnam and traveled by land through Cambodia to Thailand's border, where they stayed in four refugee camps before arriving in the United States in October 1981.
- **Family Background:** The Nguyen family consists of Nguyen and Tam Nguyen, her husband, and six children between the ages of one and six. One of the children attends a bilingual program in a Chicago public secondary school.
- **Place of Interview:** The interviews took place at the Nguyens' home with the entire family present.

OBSERVE Identify and note details. What seems important to you? What seems interesting to you?	**READ THE TEXT** **Interview with the Nguyen Family**	**QUESTION** What do you wonder about? What confuses you? What do you want to further investigate?
	INTERVIEWER: I learned from you that you were among the first "land people," not "boat people." What are the differences between the two? **NGUYEN:** Since the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, hundreds of thousands of refugees have left their homeland seeking freedom. Many of them went by sea, where they endured the hardships of the open sea and pirates. The plight of these "boat people" has already stirred the world. At the same time, thousands of other refugees fled Vietnam by land, traveling through Cambodia to reach the Thailand border. I was among those people. We suffered tremendously on the way to freedom due to the climate and terrain, wild animals, and man's inhumanity to man. Once we reached the Thai border, our suffering was not over, as we experienced further ordeals - physically, emotionally, and mentally. We left Vietnam on foot, walking through	

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Cambodia to Thailand. We did not want to escape by boat for fear of piracy. We called ourselves "land people" instead of “boat people."

INTERVIEWER: During your trip, you mentioned that you faced a great deal of suffering. Can you share with us some of the incidents?

NGUYEN: In my opinion, being a refugee by land proved to be one hundred times worse than going by sea. I mean from the moment I left home to the time I was finally resettled in a third country. At the time, nobody outside Vietnam paid any attention to the land refugees. No one acknowledged their movement or shared their sorrows or gave any moral or physical support. The international community at the time remained silent about those refugees who left Vietnam on foot.

INTERVIEWER: Share with me stories of your journey, will you?

NGUYEN: Our journey to freedom was as follows. Before we reached the Cambodian border, all the way from Saigon to Tay Ninh, it seemed relatively safe. In Tay Ninh we had to split up into small groups and go into Cambodia a few at a time. My children and I were crowded into a tiny shanty in an open field. The kids cried, but what could I do? It would be dangerous for us if we were heard. For five hours we lay there as I tried to quiet the little ones. The people there gave me a sarong and told me to rub dirt on my face because my skin was too fair.

INTERVIEWER: What was the journey through Cambodia like?

NGUYEN: It was horrible. [deleted content] A human being had no more value than an ant in those times. There were swarms of flies and jungle mosquitoes, too, whose sting burned sharper than hot ashes on the skin.

INTERVIEWER: Your memory of that time seems to still be vivid.

NGUYEN: I shall never forget it. The jungle met us in the border areas, between Vietnam and Cambodia in the beginning, and at the end between Cambodia and Thailand. The most precious thing we carried with us was a bottle of water. At one time or another we had to drink turbid water or water in which buffalo had bathed. Many times we had to drink urine or the dew from the leaves in the jungle. Along the road, the misery, deprivation, anxiety, and fear of being discovered all tore at our hearts and made our heads pound. [deleted content]

INTERVIEWER: You told me that you had one child enrolled in a bilingual program. How did you and your family reach that decision?

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	NGUYEN: Having been in this country for a number of years, I have observed that one of the problems in United States public education is that while the acquisition of a second language and cross-cultural communication skills are highly desirable, bilingual education generally has met with negative criticism. I am a teacher and my family supports bilingual education because the goals of foreign-language education and bilingual education are the same. All help develop second-language skills and cross-cultural competencies among students. And that was the reason why my husband and I wanted my daughter to be involved not only in bilingual programs but also in multicultural classes. **INTERVIEWER:** In your opinion, what are the goals of bilingual education that your child hopefully will achieve? **NGUYEN:** As I understand it, the goals of bilingual education are twofold. It seeks to have language-minority children achieve competency in English, and it strives to enable them to meet grade promotion and graduation requirements by providing instruction in their native language. Significant amounts of instruction in my child's native language did not impede her ability to master English. Bilingual as well as multicultural programs helped, not hindered, my child's education.	
REFLECT	What more did you learn from reading this person's firsthand account? Why is this source important?	

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