

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

Motivating students is an issue to which most teachers continue to devote considerable time on a daily basis. Despite volumes of books outlining numerous motivational theories, much of a teacher's attention remains occupied with solving such basic issues as how to encourage lazy students to work harder, how to make language classes more inspiring and how to supplement dull teaching materials. Scheidecker and Freeman (1999, p. 116) confirm the difficulty of trying to motivate students, "Motivation is, without question, the most complex and challenging issue facing teachers today."

Motivation determines to what extent learners are actively involved in learning a second language (L2). Unmotivated learners, however, do not take an active role in learning and therefore do not develop their potential L2 skills (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Although the study of motivation has received a prominent place in the fields of psychology and education, there is a surprising scarcity of conclusive evidence regarding motivational theories. Additionally, most researchers have trouble reaching an agreement regarding various terms and theories related to the study of motivation. Dörnyei (2001a) agrees that motivation is one of the most elusive concepts in the social sciences domain. After all, motivation theories attempt to explain why complex humans think and behave as they do.

According to Galloway et al. (1998, p. 42), the challenge for the researcher “is to find ways of conceptualising motivation which help teachers to understand children’s progress and behaviour, thereby helping them to evaluate their classroom practice and teaching methods.”

Language learning theory has generally accepted the axiom that language learners with higher levels of motivation will be higher achievers. However, discovering exactly what constitutes motivation for language learners in various cultural settings remains an important task. Oftentimes, motivation research focuses on cultural contexts related to North American and European values (Chen, Warden & Chang, 2005). When considering contexts outside of the western domain, researchers commonly employ sample frames centering on students learning English as a second language. Unfortunately, the vast majority of English teachers across the globe are teaching students with no realistic intentions of leaving home to enter an English-speaking environment. As a result, these so called “convenient samples” do not accurately describe motivations of the majority of English students. Additionally, in settings where English is a foreign language, there is little or no opportunity to use English outside of the classroom. In fact, according to Chen, Warden and Chang (2005), native Chinese speakers in Taiwan may participate in global culture without English, since books, TV programs, movies and magazines are supplied in localized forms by subsidiaries of global firms. They warn, “Teachers in Asia may attempt to apply motivation research results from the West, but they risk frustration if underlying assumptions do not align with local reality” (2005, p. 611). Instead, a more productive approach is to understand specific motivations of students in their local environments (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995).

This study set out to investigate the specific motivations and demotivations of Shan learners during a 9-week English course in Thailand. It attempted to uncover the unique motivators of Shan learners currently living in Thailand. Through localized, scientific and research-based approaches, new potential motivators may be discovered and those without measurable validity may be eliminated for use with Shan learners, regardless of how valid they are in other cultural settings.

Research Questions

1. According to teachers, what behaviors indicate to them that their students are motivated as well as demotivated?
2. What influences students' *motivatedness* during the course?
3. According to students, what aspects of a single lesson and of an entire course are motivating for them? What aspects are demotivating for them?

Significance of the Study

Much of the motivation research conducted thus far has been with quantitative methods using standard questionnaires and surveys, such as Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). Little attention has been given to qualitative methods of investigating motivation in L2 learning. This is unfortunate since qualitative research provides rich data as well as new information on old problems. Fortunately, there has been some increase in the use of qualitative studies on motivation. Ushioda (1994) has been one of the few to advocate qualitative approaches to L2 motivation, arguing that the quantitative framework is necessarily limiting for such a dynamic construct as motivation. Because of its open-ended and

exploratory nature, qualitative research tends to be more insightful than quantitative methods.

By investigating student behaviors from the perspective of teachers as well as of students and by observing the changing levels of motivation throughout the duration of a course, researchers and teachers alike can better understand which aspects of a course are motivating to students. Meaningful insights can be gleaned from the observation of students over a longer period of time. Students themselves will benefit as teachers are better able to understand and meet their needs in the classroom and help them achieve their goals. However, the uniqueness of this study lies in that it attempts to understand motivation in the cultural, geographical and educational setting of Shan people living in Thailand.

Definition of Terms

Motivation: an abstract, hypothetical concept used to explain why people think and behave as they do.

Motive: something that increases an action tendency.

Motivated: refers to an individual who is goal directed, expends effort, is aroused, has expectancies, demonstrates self-confidence and has motives.

Motivating: describes teachers, a course, instruction or materials that arouse interest in students.

Motivatedness: the changing levels of motivation in students on a day-to-day basis.

Demotivation: the loss of commitment or interest for some reason.

Demotive: something that decreases an action tendency.

History of Participants

The Shan (who call themselves Tai) were once proud feudal rulers of vast lands in Myanmar, China and Thailand. Now they are a people with no land to call their own. The Shan are oppressed—politically, economically, physically, culturally, and spiritually—and their communities suffer from illiteracy, addiction, prostitution, AIDS, poverty, broken families and a loss of hope. Despite their oppression and hardship, they remain a very proud race, deriving great joy from their heritage.

Recent estimates indicate that up to two million people from Myanmar (including the Shan) currently reside in Thailand (Caouette & Pack, 2007). This reflects one of the largest migration flows in Southeast Asia. The vast majority of people leaving Myanmar are fleeing from persecution, fear and human rights abuses. While the initial reasons for leaving may be expressed in economic terms, underlying causes explain the realities of their lives in Myanmar as well as their vulnerabilities upon return. Caouette and Pack (2007) relate many accounts given by Shan migrants in Thailand describing instances of forced relocation and confiscation of land; forced labor and portering; taxation and loss of livelihood; and war and political oppression in Myanmar. For many, it is the inability to survive or find safety in their home country that causes them to leave.

Once in Thailand, the Royal Thai Government (RTG) classifies migrants under the following categories: *temporarily displaced*, *students and political dissidents*, and *migrants*. These categories dictate the Shan people's legal status within Thailand, the level of support and assistance available to them as well as the degree of protection afforded them. According to Caouette and Pack (2007), the categories set up by the RTG are faulty distinctions, with the lines between the categories often being blurred. The unfortunate result is the superficial identification of millions as simply economic

migrants, with the vast majority of the Shan being denied asylum and protection in Thailand. Consequently, many Shan live in fear of deportation back into the hands of their persecutors or to the abusive environments from which they fled. Since 2000, several thousand people have crossed into Thailand from Shan State fleeing the fighting between the Shan State Army, the United Wa State Army and the State Peace and Development Council. In May and June 2002 alone, over 600 people crossed into Thailand as a result of the fighting (Brees, 2008). None of these people have been considered anything but undocumented migrants except by a handful of small non-government organizations who provide limited emergency assistance.

The Shan are essentially a stateless people and one misstep (or one displeased employer) can lead to forced deportation. One student explains his dilemma in his own words, "The Thai say I am Burmese, but the Burmese say that I am Shan. So where do I go?" (personal communication, September 18, 2009). With the RTG often refusing to afford these aliens with refugee or resident status, they are precluded from owning land or receiving a public education. There are also numerous difficulties in getting health care. Many of the Shan students studying English have had very limited educational opportunities. One female student only completed a second-grade education, because her family was forced to flee from the Myanmar military to a remote area in Shan State with no schools or opportunities to learn. A Shan teacher who has been teaching Thai and English to Shan migrants in Chiang Mai for many years says that education is his people's greatest need at this time (personal communication, September 18, 2009).

What with all of the turmoil, unrest and injustice following the Shan people as they relocate in Thailand as well as their unique culture, it may be that standard motivators for ESL students do not carry over into their culture. What instructors of

Shan students need is a detailed understanding of what motivates and demotivates the Shan as they study English. When instructors realize the specific motivators relating to Shan culture and educational settings, they will have a solid foundation for constructing an effective motivational plan. Ultimately, the Shan people themselves will be empowered to change their future and that of their nation.

PAYAP UNIVERSITY