

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, a detailed description of how this investigation was carried out will be discussed. The investigation involved about twenty Shan students, four colleagues at the Migrant Learning Center (MLC), and the instructor (myself). Because motivation is such a dynamic construct, a qualitative approach was taken for this study. Qualitative research involves identifying participants and sites based on places and people that can best help researchers understand their central phenomenon. In this study, the field site chosen was a school (MLC); the students studied were Shan people who have migrated from Myanmar to Thailand. Four instruments were used in this study. First, a focus group interview with the four teachers (three Shan and one American) took place before the start of the term. Second, a motivation questionnaire was administered to all twenty Shan students in my class on the second day of the term. After this, five students were selected on the basis of commitment, availability and willingness to be individually interviewed. Finally, as the instructor, I was involved in participant observation throughout the nine-week term.

Setting

This study was conducted at the Migrant Learning Center (MLC), located in Chiang Mai, Thailand. MLC offers nine-week courses in Thai language, English language, Burmese language and computer skills five times per year. Migrant workers who work at restaurants, hotels, shops, construction sites, farms and houses attend the courses. All instruction is provided free of charge, although students must pay for a copy of the coursebook and provide of their own transportation to and from the school. While all students are welcome to attend classes regardless of ethnicity, a vast majority of the students are Shan. The other students are Karen, Kachin, Burman, Lahu and Akha. The students at MLC range in age from 15-40. The level of the class I taught was pre-intermediate; the course was nine weeks, from 9-11 a.m., Monday through Friday.

Participants

As touched on previously, Shan students living in Chiang Mai face considerable challenges as they undertake the process of learning English. Struggling with problems such as obtaining proper immigration papers, low education levels, and busy schedules, many Shan students are not able to attend classes consistently. Due to feelings of discouragement and an inability to see progress, some students drop out of classes after several days or weeks. According to one teacher, the dropout rate is 40%, due to the students' ever-changing work conditions (personal communication, 7 October 2009). For most of the students, English is not their second language, but their third, fourth, or fifth language. Many of them are fluent in Shan, Burmese, and Thai. Yet only half of them are literate in these languages, as over 40% of the students have never been to school before attending classes at MLC. Consequently, the

students not only need to learn English, but they also need to learn good study skills and habits. In other words, they must be taught how to learn.

Out of the original twenty students in my class, twelve were female and eight were male. Seventy percent of the students had jobs at the time; the other 30% were unemployed but looking for jobs. Some of the jobs held by the students included housecleaners, restaurant workers, hotel workers and seamstresses. Although all of the students in the course were supposed to be at a pre-intermediate level, many of them were basic beginners and a few were even false beginners. So the range of abilities was a bit wide. About 40% of the students did not complete high school and received little education as children. The rest of the students completed high school but had no further education before enrolling in classes at MLC. None of the students had a university education. Many students expressed that they were studying English to improve their lives, get better jobs and take advantage of educational opportunities that they never had as children.

From the original twenty students enrolled in the course, five students were selected to participate in individual interviewing. Because the results of the motivation questionnaire were quite uniform and little variance was found among participants, the five students were not selected on the basis of their answers on the questionnaire. Instead, they were selected based on their commitment, availability and willingness to participate. Many of the students could not volunteer for this since they had to leave immediately after class to start working. I scheduled the individual interviews to take place directly following class sessions so that the day's activities would be fresh in the students' minds. For this reason, it was imperative that the participants could remain after class for 40-50 minutes for the interviewing. Since most of the answers on the motivation questionnaire were similar, it is safe to say that

the five students selected represent the general population of Shan students at MLC in regard to motivation.

Instruments

For this study, a total of four instruments were used. During the week before the term began, I conducted a focus group interview with four other teachers at MLC. This interview (conducted in English) was recorded and lasted about 20 minutes. The interview consisted of five open-ended questions regarding students' motivation, demotivation and behaviors (see Appendix A). One purpose in conducting this interview was to identify what behaviors the teachers considered to be indicative of motivated students. For example, if it was raining during the time when students would need to travel to class, at least 80% of the students did not show up. I asked the other teachers if this indicated a lack of motivation on the part of the students. Through this initial interview, I was able to compile a list of behaviors for which to observe among the students in my own class.

On the second day of the term, I administered a motivation questionnaire (translated into Shan and Burmese) to my entire class (20 students). Unfortunately, some of the students could not read Shan, so they completed it in English with some difficulty. The questionnaire consisted of ten statements having to do with reasons why the students were studying English, their attitudes towards the English language and how frequently they studied English outside of class. After reading each statement, students had to rate their agreement with the statement on a scale of 1-3. By circling *1*, the students indicated that they strongly disagreed, *2* indicated unsure and *3* stood for strongly agree (see Appendix B). The primary purpose of this instrument was to discover the main reasons why the students were coming to study

English at MLC. I wanted to compare the data from this questionnaire with the findings from the teachers' interview.

Third, I recorded my observations in a teaching diary both during and after each class session. The observations were recorded with the use of an observation checklist, containing three questions about the behaviors observed during the class (see Appendix C). The observations were based on fact, comments from the participants and my perceptions regarding what I saw and heard. On some days the entries were quite long; on other days, nothing new was recorded.

Finally, after viewing the results of the motivation questionnaire, I noticed that the results were quite similar among the participants. On the following day, I selected five students to individually interview, starting from that day. For the first week and a half, these interviews took place after each class session for about forty minutes, five to ten minutes for each student. After the second week, I decreased the number of interviews to three times per week, and by the seventh week, the interviews were held only twice a week. The reason for the decrease in the frequency of interviews was that the class routine was in place and the students did not have enough to talk about every day. The personal interviews included five open-ended questions dealing with topics such as what parts of the lesson were motivating, demotivating, helpful, easy, difficult and so on (see Appendix D). After special events, such as parties and class visitors, I included specific questions regarding those events. As I interviewed the students, I was able to compare my observations to what the students actually said.

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected in four ways. First, before the start of the term, I recorded the focus group interview with four teachers at MLC. I also took some hand-written notes during the interview. This interview lasted approximately twenty minutes. Next, on the second day of the term, I administered a motivation questionnaire consisting of ten questions to my class of twenty students. The questionnaire (translated into Shan) was handed out to the students during the last fifteen minutes of the second class session. Some students could not finish in fifteen minutes, so they stayed a bit longer to complete it. Because the questionnaire was scaled (1-3), there was no need for anyone to translate it. By looking at a copy of the questionnaire in English, I could understand the results. Third, I recorded my observations of the students and their behaviors both during and after every class session. I recorded all of my observations by hand in a teacher diary; later, I typed them. I usually spent about fifteen minutes after class jotting down my findings for the day. Finally, I privately interviewed five students after class every day for the first two weeks, three times a week until the seventh week and two times a week until the end of the term. These open-ended interviews were conducted in Thai (as all of the students were fluent in Thai), so I did not need to use a translator. Each interview took about ten minutes every day, for a total of about fifty minutes. The students selected stayed after class until they were interviewed and then they could leave. The interviews were conducted in a small classroom at MLC. After the first three weeks, two of these students had to drop out of classes due to their work situations. After that, only three students were interviewed regularly.

The term started on Monday, August 3, 2009, and lasted until Friday, October 2, 2009. Because there were two holidays during the term, there were only 43 days of

class, instead of 45. Each class was two hours long, for a total of 86 hours of English instruction. On the last day of class, a party was held at my house, to honor the students for their hard work during the term. The last of the individual interviews were conducted immediately following the party.

The textbook used during the term was one chosen by the director, *English for Life* by Hutchinson, Tabor and Quintana (Oxford University Press, 2007). In addition to using this book, many other handouts, games, and worksheets were implemented into the curriculum. Classes took place in a long narrow room at MLC. In this room, there were two long vertical rows of tables. Because of the shape of the room, this formation of tables was the only one that could accommodate the number of students in the class. The room was quite crowded, making it difficult to move around. Additionally, the students sitting in the back of the room were so far back that they could not see the board at the front of the room. Several other challenges regarding the classroom included the unpredictable temperature and extremely loud construction noises from outside.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed weekly, and all of the information collected was typed and printed immediately after it was gathered. The motivation survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics based on percentages. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed on the same day that they occurred. Throughout the process, I compared the findings of the three different groups (the teachers, the students and the instructor). I looked for similarities and differences in the data collected. I also kept the research questions in front of me as I coded the data, looking for important themes that would help to answer these questions. Because I wanted to find out more about

the behaviors of Shan people as it related to instruction in English. I also visited a Shan school in Fang. Any free time that I had, I spent with my students outside of class, eating lunch with them, going to their houses, going to the Shan temple and observing their lives. I wanted to find out what interests my students had outside of class and what were their fears, worries and struggles.

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