

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Since I have been teaching at the Migrant Learning Center (MLC) for almost one year, I have spent a great deal of time with the students as well as the teachers both in and out of class. Over the past months, I have developed a deep respect for the students, many of whom have overcome insurmountable obstacles to start a new life in Chiang Mai. As a teacher of these tenacious students, I wanted to provide the best possible English instruction that I could. I wanted to teach in a motivating, helpful and inspiring way. But I realized that these students were not exactly like all other Asian students. Because of the tragic history of their country during the last fifty years, they have experienced events making them different from other Southeast Asian students. Although their language and culture is similar to that of Thailand, they cannot be lumped into the same category as Thai students or even Burmese students. For this reason, I undertook this study. I wanted to find out from Shan people how to help them. I wanted them to tell me in their own words how I could be a more motivating teacher.

Teacher Focus Interview

Three Shan teachers and one American teacher participated in this interview: Kyaw, Chan Chai, Tin and Anthony. The Shan teachers are from Shan State, but have been living in Thailand for over twenty years. All three Shan teachers mentioned that

because of the unrest and oppression in Shan State during the last several decades, the quality of education for the Shan people has severely declined. They believe that at this present time, education is the single greatest need of Shan people living in Thailand. According to Kyaw, the Burmese government forbade the Shan people to open their own schools with instruction in Shan language. Instead, all Shan children were forced to go to Burmese schools and could not study their own language. The Burmese believed that by restricting the type of education for Shan people, they would be able to limit their power and authority. For this reason, many Shan people are illiterate in their own language. Consequently, most traditions are orally passed down to the next generation.

Several reasons may explain what motivates Shan people in Chiang Mai to study English at MLC. First, some students have never studied English before, but they have some sort of relationship with foreigners and would like to learn English for immediate communication purposes. This includes students who have married foreigners. Another reason for initial motivation to study English is to obtain better jobs. Many of the students currently attending classes at MLC have menial labor jobs, such as construction, house cleaning or washing dishes. Some students are not able to find any jobs at all because of lack of proper papers or suitable qualifications. Finally, a few students have finished high school and would like to further their education by going to university. These students are still young, but need to improve their English in order to gain admittance into universities.

After teaching at MLC for almost one year, I have noticed that students frequently missed classes and arrived late. Also, in the case of inclement weather (i.e., rain), the school was deserted, except for a few teachers. I wondered whether or not this behavior indicated lack of motivation. The teachers I interviewed had several

explanations for frequent absences. First, the work situation of many Shan people living in Thailand is quite delicate. The teachers confirmed that the approval and pleasure of a Shan worker's boss is crucial. Often, the Shan are required to work overtime, making it difficult to wake up in the morning. Shan students are also concerned about getting sick, as it could cause them to miss work. So whenever it rains, the students are reluctant to get wet, fearing that they may get sick, miss work and subsequently lose their jobs. Tin believes that the students would like to attend the classes more regularly, but due to their precarious job situations, it is often impossible.

The three teachers also suggested that the lack of stability at MLC also poorly influences consistent attendance. Shan students are not able to afford private instruction in English, and they are grateful for the free tuition at MLC. Unfortunately, the free English classes often result in poor quality of instruction with frequent changes in teachers. All of the teachers are volunteers at MLC, so they are frequently absent as well. Some teachers can only teach for 2 months or two weeks, or maybe even only for a few days after which they leave to find a paying job or to move on to the next thing. Additionally, every teacher has his or her own unique style of teaching, and each teacher's style differs greatly from that of other teachers. The books used by the various teachers are not uniform; instead, all of the teachers can use whatever materials and books they choose. This causes confusion for the students and slows down their progress. Another factor relating to the teacher involves the language used to explain English. Some students prefer a native speaker who can instruct them using only English. Other students would like a teacher who can explain vocabulary and grammar rules in the Shan language. Consequently, students may drop out for one term if they do not like the teacher and then come back again when

their preferred teacher is teaching. Tin stated that in his opinion most of the job of motivating students depends on the teacher. Many of the foreign teachers who come to teach at MLC would like to stay longer and teach on a more consistent basis. However, they often cannot afford to remain a volunteer for an extended period of time. The American teacher, who has been teaching at MLC for over one year, admitted that he does not take this job as seriously as his previously held jobs since he is not getting paid.

In order to insure that the material being taught is relevant, the teachers strongly recommended asking students what are their primary needs for learning English. At the beginning of a term, it is vital for teachers to take into consideration what is most useful for their students' daily lives. Some students work in restaurants, shops and hotels and need English skills to communicate with customers. Tin noted that pronunciation is a difficult skill for Shan learners to master and recommends spending more time on this area. He said most of the students are concerned with speaking and listening and want to spend class time in conversation practice.

The teachers compiled the following list of behaviors that indicate to them when their students are motivated:

- Smiling.
- Looking at the teacher and paying attention.
- Participating in the activities.
- Asking questions about the lesson.
- Asking question about culture.
- Sharing their feelings with the teacher.
- Sharing their personal struggles and problems with the teacher.

Interestingly, there was no mention of arriving on time, not missing classes or completing homework. While these behaviors might be considered indicative of a motivated student in Western culture, there seems to be an allowance for these behaviors in the setting of such a school as MLC. The American teacher said that he does not appreciate students missing classes or arriving late. However, there seems to be nothing he can do about it since those in charge of MLC consider these behaviors to be normal.

At the conclusion of the interview, I asked the question *What are ways for foreigners to help the Shan people?* The biggest way to help, according to these teachers, is through education. Since education may be the greatest need of Shan people in Thailand, teachers with all types of skills can help teach the Shan. Second, Shan people living in Thailand often do not have proper papers to live, work and travel in Thailand and need help obtaining these papers as well as finding work. Lastly, the teachers said that Shan people in Thailand really need friends. Chan Chai compared Shan people without friends to a tree whose leaves are withering. He said that many of the Shan students at MLC have come alone to Thailand: the rest of their families still live in Shan State or other parts of Myanmar. Consequently, when they arrive in Thailand, they are often very lonely and have no family or friends on whom to depend. Without a community or network of friends, the Shan people cannot thrive and grow. As a teacher working at MLC, Chan Chai encouraged me to become friends with the students. He stated that building friendships with the students is just as important as teaching them. Tin believes that teachers should get close with the students, be available for them outside of class, give out their phone numbers and even visit them at their work places. In Shan culture, teachers are role models, greatly

respected and held in high esteem. As a result, teachers can be very influential people in the lives of their students.

To sum up, education is a huge need for Shan people living in Thailand. Shan students may need to learn English for their jobs, to communicate at home or to improve their future. When motivated, Shan students typically demonstrate such behavior as smiling, paying attention, participating in activities, asking questions and opening up to the teacher. Shan students may frequently miss classes or arrive late, mostly due to their work situations. They do not want to come to class if it is raining so that they do not get sick. Many Shan students have left their families and communities to come to Chiang Mai. Consequently, they may be lonely and without many friends. Teachers should go beyond simply teaching Shan students in the classroom; they should be available for them outside of class as well and be involved in the students' personal lives.

Motivation Survey

In order to gain a general idea of why Shan students come to MLC to study English in the first place, this survey was administered to my class of 20 students at the beginning of the term. The results from the first five statements on this survey show little variation among the participants. Almost all of the students believed that studying English was important for the following reasons:

- To make friends with foreigners.
- To help when traveling.
- To know various cultures and people.
- To be successful.
- To use in school or on the job.

Thirty percent of the students stated that they did not particularly enjoy learning English and were only studying because they thought they may need to use English in the future. Only 10% of the students said they got nervous and confused speaking during class, and none of the participants reported fear of being laughed at by other students. The majority of the students (90%) said that they often studied English outside of class and thought about what they have learned.

Table 4.1
Motivation Survey Results

	Strongly Agree	Unsure	Strongly Disagree
1. Studying English is important to me because I would like to make friends with foreigners.	90%		10%
2. Studying English is important to me because it will help me when traveling.	100%		
3. Studying English is important to me because it will enable me to know various cultures and people.	100%		
4. Studying English is important to me because without it, I cannot be successful.	90%	10%	
5. Studying English is important for me because I may need it later for my job or school.	90%	10%	
6. I do not really like learning English and I do it only because I may need the language.	30%	10%	60%
7. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my English class.	10%	50%	40%
8. I am afraid that other students will laugh at me when I speak English.		40%	60%
9. I frequently study English outside of class and think about what I have learned.	90%	10%	

The results of the survey concur with the data from the teachers' focus interview. In general, Shan students initially want to learn English to communicate with foreigners and to be successful in the future. Some of the students do not particularly enjoy learning English, but they know it will be useful for them. Interestingly, the majority of the students reported that they study English outside of class and think about what they have learned, indicating that students are at least somewhat intrinsically motivated.

Observation

During one term, I recorded my observations after each class. While I was teaching, I jotted down as many notes as I could, and I continued writing my observations immediately after each class. I attempted to observe students individually as well as the class as a whole. First, I kept track of absences, late arrivals and incomplete homework. I noticed that attendance was sporadic at best. Only about five students consistently attended class. Some students came for a couple days one week, skipped a week, and then showed up again for a few days. Other students came for the first week or so and then dropped out. Students were also allowed to join the course at any time. This meant that some students joined halfway through the course or even during the last week. Consequently, creating a cohesive group in the classroom proved to be a challenge at MLC. The students had difficulty remembering the names of classmates who did not regularly attend. In order to try to create some sort of group atmosphere, about two weeks into the course, I appointed the five regular attendees as group leaders. So during any group activities, they were in charge

of a group. This allowed for some consistency and also gave the leaders a valuable and important job to do.

Just about every day, many students arrived late to class. Although the class was supposed to start at 9:00 a.m., at least half of the students arrived after 9:30 a.m. Unfortunately, there is no late policy at MLC, and the director does not want to exclude anyone from learning even if they are late. Usually, the students were late due to family responsibilities or because they had to work late the night before, making it difficult to wake up on time.

Throughout the term, the students had a workbook from which I daily assigned pages to be completed for homework. Additionally, I assigned journal writing about various cultural topics once or twice a week. Only about half of the students completed their daily workbook pages, which we checked every day in class. About a fourth of students did the writing assignments. Many of the students said they either forgot to do it or they did not have time because of work.

As I observed the students' behavior during various activities, I used the checklist of behaviors mentioned by the teachers in their interview. Each lesson had a similar structure consisting of the following components: conversation, listening, and the coursebook. On some days I had the students play games, listen to English songs, read newspaper articles, read articles about Shan culture, write in journals and do role plays. For most of these activities, I observed that if something was too easy or too difficult, the students were more likely to zone out, stop paying attention or talk with their classmates. This behavior is consistent with the literature (Dörnyei, 2001a); however, in a class with a wide range of English ability, it is inevitable the some activities will be too easy or too hard. The activities in which I observed students exhibiting the most positive behavior were *conversation*, *games*, *songs*, and *reading*

articles about Shan culture. The students demonstrated all of the behaviors in the checklist during these activities. On the other hand, the students looked bored and distracted during any activities involving the book. Yet surprisingly, during an informal discussion about motivation in class, over two thirds of the class said the book was their favorite thing. One student explained that he liked the satisfying feeling he received from completing pages in the book. He felt like he was improving and accomplishing something. However, I have noticed the topics in the book were usually a bit irrelevant for the Shan students. In fact, as we studied some of the topics in the book, I realized that the students have never even heard of such concepts as *a gap year* or *an ideal holiday* since many of them never take holidays. Most of the students had not been to high school or college and had no schemata for a concept like a gap year. Although the book I used during this term was recommended by the director, it was actually written for students learning English in the UK and had little relevance for the Shan students in Chiang Mai.

In contrast to the coursebook, a small book titled *Letters from Shan State* (2007, the School for Shan State Nationalities Youth) elicited excited responses from the students. The book contains over thirty short stories written by other Shan students about food, festivals and daily life in Shan State. I observed that the students were shocked and surprised to be reading about their own culture in English. The first reading I gave to the students was about a Shan traditional paste, Nam Phit Phoo. The students laughed delightedly as they read this article. This behavior from the students confirms what is already written in the literature that students are more motivated to learn when they are reading authentic texts about topics that are relevant to them (Dörnyei, 2001a). Although these readings were a bit difficult and contained higher-

level vocabulary, the students were still able to understand more because of the familiarity of the context.

What also surprised me was that during one class discussion about motivation, the students reported that playing games and learning songs in class were not as motivating as studying the book. Yet these verbal responses contradicted what I observed in the students' behavior. During times of playing games and learning songs, most, if not all, of the students were laughing, smiling, paying attention and participating wholeheartedly. When listening to the songs, they asked many questions about the lyrics and the songwriter. One student told me after class that the songs and games are fun, but he is not sure if they are helping him to improve his English. It may be that some of these Shan students have incorrect beliefs about learning English—that English can only be learned through drills, exercises and book work.

Finally, as I got to know my students, I realized two things: they thrive on consistency and 2) the teacher is a huge model for them. When I interviewed the teachers, they mentioned that a constant stream of volunteer teachers come through MLC, making it hard on the students. When I first started teaching at MLC, I could not always come to class due to other responsibilities. I saw that this behavior on my part influenced my students negatively. When they saw that teaching at MLC was not a huge priority for me, they began to treat their studies in the same way, resulting in even more absences, latecomers and incomplete homework. I also felt that they did not trust me because they did not open up to me or try to get to know me. After a few months, I could see how detrimental my attitude was on my students' motivation. So during the next term, I concentrated on preparing for the lessons, getting to know my students and their needs, and making sure I could come to class every day. At the end of that term, I threw a party for the students at my house and invited some other native

English speakers to come as well in order to practice with them. Many of them told me they had never been to a foreigner's house. One student said, "I will never forget this day." Another student told me I was like her mother, even though she is much older than me. All of the students agreed that if they had more chances to speak English like at the party, they would study harder and be more likely to do their homework. These comments helped me to see the importance of providing authentic practice for students. Many of the students have limited opportunities to practice English outside of class, unless they use it on the job. So any chance for them to practice is quite exciting as well as motivating for them.

Overall, I observed that students are motivated by conversation practice, using materials relevant to Shan culture, tracking their progress by using a coursebook, games, songs, opportunities to meet and speak with foreigners as well as consistency in teachers and materials. I observed that students were demotivated by grammar drills and exercises found in the coursebook, irrelevant topics, lack of a cohesive group and unmotivated teachers.

Individual Interviews

Based on availability and commitment, I had originally selected five participants for individual interviewing. However, after the first few weeks of the term, two of the participants were no longer able to attend classes due to their work schedules. So the following three students have been interviewed throughout the duration of the term. During the first week, I interviewed these students every day immediately after class. After the second week, I interviewed them three times a week. Finally, toward the end of the term (after the sixth week), we only met twice a week. The number of interviews per week was decreased because the students were

not reporting any new information after the first several weeks. They had more to discuss when interviewed less frequently. These are their stories. (All names have been changed to protect the participants' identities.)

Sai Himon

As one of the oldest sons in his family (the first son of his mother and the second son of his father), Himon carries great responsibility. He grew up on a farm in a remote part of Shan state and did not attend school until he was fourteen. Because there were no schools near his home, his parents sent him to Yangon to study in a Burmese school. In this school, Himon studied English, but said he had no opportunity to use it and did not make much progress. He stayed there for four years and returned home at age eighteen, where he helped on the family farm for one year. Fearing conscription into the Burmese military, his parents sent him to Thailand, hoping he could earn money and help support the family back home. Himon's family is greatly in debt to the Burmese government because they have not been able to pay the heavy taxes imposed on them. Since his arrival in Chiang Mai two years ago, Himon has found various types of employment including construction, cleaning and serving food in a restaurant, which he currently does from about 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. each day. Before Himon came to Thailand, he was literate in both Shan and Burmese. Now he has learned not only to speak Thai but also to read and write. He has been studying English at MLC for about four months.

At first glance, it seemed that Himon was bored during class, since he was always talking to his nearest classmate and not paying attention to the teacher or to whoever was talking. In addition, he always appeared to be about two steps behind the rest of the class in that he was usually not on the right page in the coursebook or on

the right worksheet. Yet a deeper look revealed that Himon was actually very interested in English. When he talked to his classmates, he was usually asking a question about English, though it might not have pertained to the activity at the moment. Yet often the pace of the class was too quick for him to follow, and he was stuck on something that was covered fifteen minutes earlier. Himon was a risk-taker. When he first started coming to class, he would speak in English constantly, but I could not understand a word he said. His classmates would make fun of him for speaking with such a terrible accent. But nothing deterred him. Now he is much more intelligible and still talks constantly. Himon was extremely inquisitive in class. He drove me crazy asking so many questions about English. When he sat in the front of the classroom, near the teacher, he talked to me incessantly. Himon frequently asked to eat lunch with me or to go on an outing together so he could practice his English. He almost always arrived on time and actually never missed a single day of class. Unfortunately, he also never completed any homework during the whole course. He claimed that he always forgot to do it.

When I first started interviewing Himon, it was difficult for him to think of things that were motivating or demotivating. His standard answer was, "I like everything! Everything is good, Teacher." But gradually, I was to draw out his true feelings. The most motivating parts of a lesson for Himon were conversation practice and working in groups. He also enjoyed playing games, especially the BINGO game. He was one of the few students who said that the book was demotivating because he had trouble understanding it. The journal writing was also demotivating for Himon for two reasons: it was too hard for him and he would rather focus on speaking instead of writing. He mentioned that he had no use for writing in English. Himon also mentioned that he liked reviewing previous lessons. He thought reviewing was

important since he is really forgetful. He also felt that the pace of the class was too fast, and it discouraged him when he fell behind and could not keep up. Himon's highlights of the course were the class party at my house and a visit during class from a group of Scottish teachers who sang and danced to traditional Scottish music. He mentioned those two events in particular because it was at those times when he got to meet foreigners and have a real chance to speak English.

Nang Jing

Jing was born in the southern region of the Shan State. When she was 8 years old, her parents feared that the Burmese military would come to their house and force Jing's five older brothers to join their army. In order to escape this fate, Jing's parents moved their whole family to a remote area of the northeast region. They fled quickly and had to leave behind gardens and fields with produce waiting to be harvested. Fortunately, the place where they moved was peaceful, and they were safe from the Burmese military. However, their new location was so remote that there were no schools for Jing to go to. She grew up with little education except in the area of practical skills such as farming, cooking and taking care of a household. When she came to Thailand with her family ten years later, she was illiterate in her own language but she could speak Shan as well as some Burmese. Since then she has married and started a family. Jing works out of her home as a seamstress. She began to study at MLC one year ago, but feels like there is no hope for her since she is in her late 30s. Jing frequently made comments such as, "I'm so dumb; I'm too old, I'll never be able to understand English." Her wish for the future of her people is that every Shan child will have the educational opportunities that she never had.

During her time at MLC, Jing had a variety of teachers, both Shan and foreigners, as well as a variety of coursebooks. Jing felt discouraged because she did not think she had made any progress in the last year. In fact, her progress was much slower than other students. She remained in the lowest level throughout her entire time at MLC, while most students passed into the next level after two months. She always reminded me that she never went to school as a child, so she could not understand as much as other students. She said she really felt motivated when she had completely mastered a certain question or set of vocabulary words and could easily use it in conversation.

For Jing, the most motivating parts of a lesson were conversation practice, listening and the coursebook. She said the only time she spoke English was during class, so it was important for her to practice speaking as much as possible. Conversation practice was also the most fun for her because it gave her a chance to get to know the other students. Jing also felt motivated during activities requiring listening because she could understand more than before. She mentioned that listening was one of the few areas in which she can see progress. She also likes listening to the CD that accompanied the coursebook because she had a chance to hear people speaking with a British accent. Jing said that one reason why she finds the coursebook so motivating is because growing up in Shan State, she never had books. Even if not all of the topics in the book were interesting, Jing was happy just to have a book. She also mentioned that she enjoyed following a coursebook so that she could have a systematic way of studying English. Jing faithfully completed her workbook homework every day, and said that she enjoyed doing it.

The demotivating parts of a lesson, in Jing's opinion, were activities that were too difficult, such as the cultural readings and any sort of writing. She also preferred

not to play too many games or listen to very many songs because she did not find those activities useful. While games and songs were fun, Jing did not think they were beneficial to learning English.

Looking back on the entire course, Jing said what motivated her most was having a native speaker consistently teach for a solid term. In her previous experiences at MLC, she only had a native speaker teaching for several days or a week at a time. She also said her classmates were very encouraging and always helped her during class when she had questions or problems.

Sai Sai

When Sai was nine years old, his parents separated. He was left in the care of his grandfather, since neither parent would accept responsibility to raise their son. For several years, he lived with his grandfather, but could not attend school due to the political turmoil and the unavailability of teachers and schools in Shan State. When Sai reached the age of eleven, his grandfather became sick and could no longer care for him. So his grandfather sent him to become a novice at the nearest temple. Until he was eighteen, Sai moved around to various temples in Shan State as well as other parts of Myanmar. At age eighteen, Sai had the opportunity to come to Thailand and continue his work as a monk in a Shan temple in Fang. He lived there for several years before coming to Wat Pa Pao in Chiang Mai. Before coming to study at MLC, Sai had never been in a normal classroom before. He had never studied with girls before. His only form of schooling had been in temples. At first, he was reluctant to participate in various activities because they were so unfamiliar to him. Currently, his responsibilities at Wat Pa Pao include training the novices and teaching the Shan language. Sai has a passion for preserving the Shan language and culture. He said that

the Shan language is in danger of becoming a lost language since teaching it was forbidden in Myanmar for so many years. Therefore, Sai wants to teach the Shan language so that it will not disappear but will continue to future generations. He also hopes that some day there will be more Shan scholars and more books written especially for Shan people in their own language.

Sai has studied English for many years, but only in a temple setting. He has been studying in a classroom environment at MLC for six months. During our interviews, he stated that the activities which motivated him included *listening to songs, playing all types of games* and other types of *listening practice*. Sai told me that even though it was strange at first to play games, sing songs and work in groups and pairs, English class became the highlight of his day because of those things. Most of Sai's education in English has been in the areas of reading and writing. He felt that those skills were very easy for him, so he mentioned that he felt bored when spending time on reading and writing during class. However, he said that he was really excited to read the short articles about Shan culture and food. Later, he also told me that he would not mind writing if he could write about interesting topics. Other activities that demotivated Sai were the book and worksheets. Although, Sai faithfully did his workbook exercises and other grammar exercises in the book, he thought that those types of drills did not help him very much to communicate in English. His main goal for studying English at that time was to be able to have conversations with foreigners in English.

Sai mentioned two things that especially motivated him throughout the entire course. First, he felt happy and encouraged that he could study English with a group of students. He said he had so much fun being a part of the class especially with such nice classmates. Second, similar to Jing, Sai felt motivated to be able to study with a

teacher who was a native English speaker. Actually, this is the first time Sai has ever had a teacher who was a foreigner. At the temple, all of his teachers have been Shan.

The results of the individual interviews match with my own observations. The students were motivated by conversation practice, interesting and relevant topics, meeting foreigners, an exciting and motivating teacher who taught consistently for at least a term, games, songs, listening practice, encouraging classmates (good group dynamics), appropriate level of materials and spending time reviewing material. Aspects that demotivated students included reading and writing, grammar drills and tasks that were too difficult or too easy.

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