

FACULT ENHANCEMENT GRANT PROPOSAL

TITLE *“The Social and Temporal Development of Motivation, Anxiety, and Beliefs in a Community of Beginning Language Learners”*

ABSTRACT

Learning a foreign language is a complex process that is significantly shaped by learner characteristics such as motivation, anxiety and beliefs. While their important influence has been documented in the professional literature, our understanding of these factors is still limited. So far, most research has provided us only with snapshots that fail to address the temporal and social evolution of these learner characteristics. How a learner feels and thinks is likely influenced by peers and instructors and changes throughout his/her learning career, which can span many years.

This study is based on a process-oriented framework to investigate the dynamic nature of motivation, anxiety and beliefs, in other words the temporal fluctuation and changes as well as social influences that occur within a social unit. Conducted over the course of one academic quarter, it follows a class of college learners as they begin to learn a new language. Questionnaires as well as extensive interviews and observations will be used to collect data about how learners' motivation, anxiety and beliefs change in terms of intensity and orientation and how these changes are shaped by the peers and instructor in their immediate learning community.

GOALS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Learning a foreign language is a complex process, one that is significantly shaped by learner characteristics such as motivation, anxiety and beliefs. The influence of psychological factors such as these is particularly unique and profound when it comes to learning a new language. While the important influence of motivation, anxiety and beliefs is widely recognized and documented in the professional literature, our understanding of these factors is still limited. So far, most research has provided us only with snapshots. Specifically, previous research has often relied on the one-time administration of quantitative measures such as questionnaires in order to investigate the effect of motivation, anxiety and beliefs on learning outcomes. While such studies have yielded important insights, they provide an incomplete picture that fails to address temporal and social evolution. How a learner feels and thinks is likely influenced by peers and instructors and changes throughout his/her learning career, which can span many years. In fact, Ushioda (2001) stressed that fluctuating, not stable motivation is the norm in institutionalized language learning settings. How exactly, however, such changes and interactions occurs, we do not fully understand yet. It is this overarching question that the proposed study is designed to address.

With this focus on temporal and social evolution, this research project is designed to expand on several strands of research. In the field of motivation, a few studies have explicitly tested changes over time. Koizuma and Matsuo (1993) and Tachibana, Matsukawa and Zhong (1996), for example, found a definite decrease in motivation among language learners. Some studies have also documented social influences on motivation. One example is Dörnyei's 2002 study, which showed how language learners collaborating on a task affected each others' level of motivation. He used the term 'pulling force' to refer to the phenomenon of a highly motivated interlocutor improving the motivation of his/her partner towards the task. These findings underscore that "the social unit of the classroom is clearly instrumental in developing and supporting the motivation of the individual" (Ushioda, 2003, p. 93).

The social influence is better understood for language anxiety as peers and the teacher are often a source of anxiety. Most of the literature has described an indirect influence that is based on the sheer