

Effect of Classroom Emotional Climate on Students' Engagement among Business Students in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Student engagement is a significant element in learning at institutions of higher education. This becomes apparent among business students as the courses offered are quite challenging and require students to possess prior knowledge and skills. Such demanding circumstances distract students' focus in class which creates disengagement between the students and their learning environment. Consequently, the course learning objectives and outcomes cannot be achieved. This study aims to explore the level of engagement through classroom emotional climate on business students, focusing on the International Business course, which is a mandatory course in the business degree programme. This study uses a peer observation method in assessing the phenomenon in a classroom setting. It is found that student-teacher interactions are vital in creating a positive emotional climate in the class which eventually escalates the students' engagement in class. In creating such a climate, the creativity of the instructor is necessary to ensure learning objectives are achieved.

Keywords: class engagement, emotional climate, learning in business, peer observation

1. Introduction

Student engagement is one of the factors that enhances the process of teaching and learning in tertiary institutions. When students are engaged in the learning process, active learning is taking place as the learners connect to absorb new knowledge and information. Students who study more of the subject matter gain more experience; similarly, when students practice more and receive feedback on their assigned tasks either in writing or problem solving, they become more skilled (Kuh, 2003). Being engaged in learning enables the students to increase their ability to comprehend the knowledge and skills thus improving their academic performance. Studies show that student engagement contributes to effective outcomes for college students (Kuh et al., 2001) and it plays a significant role in enhancing learning and thus improving academic achievement.

The business degree programme is still in its infancy for female students in higher education institutions within Saudi Arabia. This programme was offered for the first time to female students in the 1990s, while male students have had the opportunity to enrol in similar programmes since much earlier. The 1990s also witnessed major transformations that transpired in the education systems of Saudi Arabia, primarily in business education. The business degree programme is not only offered by public universities but also private universities. Both universities started to offer business courses in the English language to equip the students with the required business knowledge and, simultaneously, language skills. Regardless of the students' choice of major, all business degree programmes in the Kingdom require students to enrol in core courses such as Economics, Organisational Behaviour, Strategic Management, Finance, Accounting and International Business. The challenges emerge as early as the sophomore year when students enrol in these courses at an introductory level.

Business students in the Kingdom face several challenges in business courses, primarily when courses are taught in English. As English is not the native language and therefore not widely practiced in public schools and universities throughout the Kingdom, language could become a major obstacle in the learning process. The language barrier can affect the teacher-student interaction, and this disrupts the emotional climate of the classroom. Secondly, apart from using English as the medium of interaction and delivery in class, the textbooks and other references and learning resources are also produced in English. These textbooks and other learning resources are mostly published to accommodate readers in the United States and more often produced as global editions which add another challenge for the students to comprehend the materials. The third challenge is that business students in this country did not undertake any business courses in their secondary schools before entering universities, except for those who went to international schools which adopt American or British curriculums. Nevertheless, the number of local students who received their early education at international schools are very low relative to public schools.

In addition, business students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia must complete one hundred and thirty-five credit hours for the whole degree programme compared to business students in other parts of the world who need only complete one hundred and twenty credit hours. This requires students to enrol in eighteen to twenty-one credit hours per semester. This excludes time spent for examinations, assignments and other extracurricular activities. These tiring circumstances could affect their engagement in class. Lastly, the current generation of students in tertiary institutions grew up surrounded with various technologies and electronic gadgets. Conversely, the common classroom setting does not incorporate these technologies. As a result, students feel displaced during lectures, which sometimes distracts their attention and focus in the classroom. This leads to low

engagement in the class, particularly from students who have little motivation in pursuing their studies or are facing difficulties in learning. Hence, it is essential for the instructor to explore other effective teaching methods in enhancing their engagement in the class to ensure the learning objective of the course is achieved.

2. Problem Studied

It was observed that students in one of the private universities in Saudi Arabia struggle not only to get good grades in business courses but also to achieve the desired learning outcomes of these courses. This study aims to explore this phenomenon so that further actions can be taken in the future to improve the situation. The past observations demonstrate that lack of students' engagement in the classroom could be one of the profound causes of the struggle that students encounter in business courses. Lack of engagement in the class can be further examined in a local and current context which might differ from other environments. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of the classroom's emotional climate on students' engagement among business students enrolled in the International Business course in a private university.

3. Scope and Objective of the Study

This study examines the teaching of an International Business course which requires students to have some prior knowledge in related disciplines such as Economics, Management, Finance, Marketing and Operations Management. This course is a core course for all business programmes offered by the business school in one of the private universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In pursuing a bachelor's degree in any area of business, the university offers a four-year programme and all students in this programme are required to take the International Business course. Most of the students who enrol in this course are third-year students; therefore, they should have completed the prerequisite courses in the disciplines mentioned earlier. However, some students may take the course earlier, in their second year of study, if they can manage to complete the prerequisite courses in advance.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of the classroom's emotional climate on students' engagement among business students in the International Business course in a private university. The practice of students' engagement is common in learning whereby research in this area has grown significantly over the past two decades. Student engagement was initially viewed as participation and time on task only (Brophy 1983; Natriello 1984). However, recent studies extend the understanding and highlight that emotional (Connell 1990; Finn 1989) and cognitive engagement (Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris 2004) and self-regulation in which students demonstrate control over their learning actions (Pintrich and DeGroot 1990; Miller et al. 1996) are also measured. Student engagement refers to the time and effort that students dedicate to activities that are related to desired outcomes (Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2009). Engaged students tend to be more attentive and participative in class discussions, exert more effort in class activities, and show greater interest and motivation to learn (Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004; Marks, 2000; Skinner and Belmont, 1993). In contrast, disengaged students tend to be more disruptive, score lower marks, are more likely to drop out of school (Kaplan, Peck and Kaplan, 1997) and are more passive, bored or anxious in the classroom (Skinner and Belmont, 1993). Therefore, greater student engagement in classroom learning activities resulted in greater learning effectiveness (Chen, 2005; Finn and Rock, 1997; Osterman, 2000; Wang and Pomerantz, 2009).

Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) advocate three dimensions of student engagement: behavioural, emotional and cognitive. Behavioural engagement relates to the participation in academic, social and extracurricular activities for achieving positive outcomes (Connell and Wellborn 1991; Finn 1989). Emotional engagement focuses on the extent of positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics and college (Connell and Wellborn 1991; Finn 1989). While cognitive engagement describes students' level of investment in learning which includes being thoughtful and purposeful in tasks assigned and making efforts to understand complicated ideas or hard skills (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004). This study will examine only the emotional dimension within the classroom environment.

The classroom is the most important environment that creates conducive learning. Researchers recently moved their focus on classroom social process or teacher-student interaction that supports student outcomes (Brophy, 1986, 1988; Patrick, Ryan and Kaplan, 2007; Pianta, La Paro and Hamre, 2007). The instructional and organisational features of the classroom environment also contribute to teacher-student interaction which includes a teacher's ability to promote higher order thinking (Zohar and Dori, 2003), connect and integrate prior knowledge into instruction (Vermette et al., 2001), and determine the limits for classroom behaviour (Emmer and Stough, 2001). Another essential characteristic of teacher-student interaction is the teacher's ability to cultivate an emotionally supportive classroom climate (Battistich, Schaps and Wilson, 2004; Solomon et al., 2000). The classroom is an essential micro context in which students and teachers interact. The quality of social and emotional interactions in the classroom specifically between and among students and teachers creates the classroom emotional climate (Daniels and Shumow, 2003; Jia et al., 2009; Pianta, La Paro and Hamre, 2007; Ryan and Patrick, 2001). Classroom emotional climate has shown to have an effect on learning outcomes for

students (Brophy, 1986, 1988; Konstantopoulos 2009; Stuhlman and Pianta, 2009; Reyes et.al 2012). For this reason, classroom emotional climate is the primary focus of this study.

4. Methods Applied: Intention and Peer Observation

This study applied a classroom emotional climate (CEC) setting to enhance students' engagement in an International Business class. Three domains were used to assess CEC: emotional support, classroom organisation and instructional support (Pianta, La Paro and Hamre, 2007). In emotional support, the classroom climate was evaluated based on positive relationships, enjoyment and excitement, feelings of comfort, and experiences of appropriate levels of autonomy. The class organisation evaluates teachers' classroom management strategies which include the ways teachers structure students' behaviour, time and attention in the classroom. Instructional support covers the ways that the teachers implement lessons and activities that encourage higher order thinking skills.

Using peer observation, implementation of CEC includes providing emotional support; managing the classroom organisation; and achieving instructional support. In providing emotional support, four methods were applied: a) Positive relationship: first, establish a connection with the students through their personal characteristics. For example, know them well by names, specialisation, interest, and other information which could create mutual interest between the instructor and student. Second, encourage them to meet the instructor personally if they have any issues they want to discuss further. b) Enjoyment and excitement: share real life experiences in the class and relate them to the concepts currently introduced in the lecture. Where possible, insert some sense of humour during these lectures. This situation could increase the students' level of enjoyment and excitement in the class and reduce the boredom of merely sitting and listening to lectures. c) Feelings of comfort: spend more time with students in discussing issues related to the course and provide advice to them on how to manage the assessment and successfully produce high quality assignments. This practice would relieve them from any ambiguous conditions they may feel about the class. d) Experiences of appropriate levels of autonomy: pay more attention to the students' problems in the course and identify the obstacles related to them. Emphasise the importance of the concepts learned in the real world to retain their focus in class.

In managing the classroom organisation, three methods were applied: a) Structure students' behaviour: give lectures and create activities within the class time and monitor the reaction of the class, then react to the situation appropriately so that the students' behaviour can be controlled. b) Time: plan activities and materials to cover and ensure that they were accomplished within the class time. c) Attention: use various learning resources and techniques in teaching to attract the students in a conscious manner and make them focus on learning. In achieving instructional support, two methods were used: a) Implement lessons and activities: plan the lessons to be taught accurately and activities required within the time limit. b) Higher-order thinking skills: design tasks that encourage students' involvement and motivate them to perform the duties themselves. Feedback was given immediately to encourage them to think and understand the concepts better.

4.1 Actions Conducted

4.1.1 Positive Relationship

In the first week of the semester, the class was initiated with an ice-breaking session between instructor and students. There were thirty-one students in the International Business class, and most of them were in their third year of studies. They had about one more year to graduate from the programme. The instructor introduced herself and gave some background about her education and personal information and asked them to provide similar information about themselves. They were invited to share their names, specialisation, interest, and some personal information if they were willing to share. The details of the instructor were shared, such as contact number and office phone extension and corresponding email to facilitate communication with students. A WhatsApp group was created for the whole class to enable easier and faster communication amongst members, especially when making important or urgent announcements. This was found to be more convenient than using ordinary email or the learning management system.

4.1.2 Enjoyment and Excitement

When delivering lectures, slides and videos were also shown to the students as a visual aid. In simplifying the concepts or materials covered, the instructor explained the whole concepts in a diagram by drawing them on the whiteboard. The explanation was given in layman's terms before more technical terminologies were introduced. The instructor also gave real-life examples from local companies' experiences to make the description more interesting. Ice breaking, asking questions and debate are always conducted to make the class more enjoyable and exciting. Students were called individually to make them actively involved during the class and discussions were being guided and monitored. Each student has an equal chance to express her ideas and opinions; the instructor controlled the setting by not allowing any students to dominate the discussion.

4.1.3 Feelings of Comfort

Students are always asked about their concerns and worries regarding the course. Advice and guidance are

regularly given to support and relieve the students from any ambiguity. This effort also helps to alleviate students' level of confidence and provide them with comfort in carrying out their tasks and performing the assessments.

4.1.4 Experiences of Appropriate Levels of Autonomy

Student performance was monitored after each assessment to identify any problems or obstacles they might face. Remedies were applied to rectify any particular problems that might arise, thus ensuring fair treatment was given to the students.

In managing the classroom organisation, three methods were applied: a) Structure students' behaviour: give lectures and create activities within the class time and monitor the reaction of the class, then react to the situation appropriately so that the students' behaviour can be controlled. The description, objective and learning outcomes of the course were explained clearly to students. Further information such as teaching domain and strategies also are clarified as well as assessment and educational resources. During each week, apart from the ordinary lectures, other various in-class activities were created to diversify the atmosphere of the class. b) Time: plan activities and materials to cover and ensure that they were accomplished within the class time. All the activities and assessments involved are explicitly written in the weekly plan to assure the entire curriculum design can be completed within the fifteen weeks of the semester. c) Attention: use various learning resources and techniques in teaching to enhance cognisance and focus on learning.

In gaining the students attention and interest, different educational resources and teaching methods were used. For learning resources, a textbook is not the only source of reference. Online resources are another way of accessing the information in which various links and videos related to the chapters covered were shared with the students. Multiple databases were also taught to the students to expand their experiences in accessing to the information as well as continue to give attention to the class. In achieving instructional support, two ways were used: a) Implement lessons and activities: plan accurately the lessons to be taught and activities to be carried out within the time limit. The syllabus for the course was made in detail where all the chapters covered are stated clearly with exact dates and weekly plans. All exams, quizzes, exercises and project assignments are specified with exact dates. The programme was explained and discussed with them for clarification. b) Higher order thinking skills: design tasks that maximise student involvement and delegate duties for them to carry out. Feedback was given immediately to encourage them to think and understand the concepts better. Assessments or tasks varied depending on the learning domains which are classified into four categories; i) knowledge, ii) cognitive, iii) interpersonal skills and responsibility, and iv) numerical and communication skills. For the knowledge domain, which involves lower order thinking skill, quizzes and simple learning activities were used. However, for higher order thinking skill, types of tasks involved analysing scenarios, case studies, and project assignments.

5. Results and Critical Reflections

When the instructor recognised her students quite well and gave them personal attention, she noticed that their responses to her were becoming more transparent. Even though initially they resisted revealing personal information because culturally they are not accustomed to it, some of them tried to break the barriers. By the third week, they freely voiced out their opinions and disagreement on certain issues discussed. The attendance of the class also increased to ninety percent despite the inconvenient timing of the class which started late at two o'clock in the evening. This class time is considered inconvenient as students became exhausted after attending classes the whole day since eight o'clock in the morning. Establishing the WhatsApp group for the class provided the most convenient communication as students always keep monitoring the tasks given by asking questions related to the assigned tasks or assignments. This made them clear about what to do and how to do it. Some of the students started to trust the instructor by revealing their personal problems and expressing their concerns about how these problems might affect their studies.

The instructor viewed this situation as a positive relationship where she could offer more support to the students in enhancing their engagement in class. They developed trust among each other and teacher-student relationships become stronger. Nevertheless, not all students were keen on strengthening these relationships; some needed longer time to show positive reactions, and some only started to be friendly and became more open in the seventh or eighth week. A few remained themselves and did not show significant responses due to their shyness.

During lecture sessions, the instructor constantly moved from time to time and approached each of the students in the class to encourage their participation and to remove any psychological barrier they might have on the instructor. Apart from giving real life examples and describing the consequences in business, the instructor also inserted some sense of humour to make the class more fun and lively. She discovered that by doing this not only did the students enjoy more of her class but they also put forth the effort to stay awake and be active until the class ended. In the previous experience, students in the class were more likely to fall asleep and sometimes were daydreaming as well as playing with their mobile phones that they kept underneath the textbooks. This was

how they tried to survive the class that was held in the late afternoon.

The instructor also sometimes shared her personal or others' experiences to motivate the students to increase their interests and efforts in their studies. Students benefited significantly from the diagram or mind map that they developed after the completion of discussion of each topic as they found it easier to grasp the concepts holistically and increase their understanding as well. The instructor felt that receiving questions from the students is the best part of the learning process because from these questions she could identify the level of understanding and knowledge that they gained, thus guiding her to design the next step of action to overcome the knowledge gap. Though there was no score given to the discussion, it revealed the truth about the students' level of understanding and interest. It is more satisfying to learn the truth about the students' academic performance than to rely solely on assessment scores. The good part of this practice was that the instructor realised that students tend to be more honest and less shy to admit their lack of knowledge or areas of uncertainty in study. As a matter of fact, similar issues were sometimes raised repetitively to deepen the level of understanding.

The instructor could see their enthusiasm from the way they responded to the discussion, and some of them were trying to articulate their curiosities about certain issues. The eagerness to obtain answers to all questions and to inquire more from the instructor indicated their excitement in learning thus enhancing their engagement in class. Nevertheless, there were still some passive reactions from few students even though they laughed together and participated in the discussion. The instructor also noticed that as time goes by some students became more active and involved in the class debate. This two-way communication revealed that the students were becoming more confident and comfortable in class and did not hesitate to ask questions to relieve them from any doubt or ambiguous situation. This atmosphere created positive progress as it indicated improvement in their level of confidence and comfort as well as strengthening the teacher-student relationship. Listening to their problems and offering solutions to overcome the problems seemed to be effective as the students felt that they are cared and appreciated by the instructor. As a result, they are more likely to focus in class as they know their voices are heard.

Monitoring student performance and behaviour in class also helped to strengthen the rapport between teacher and students thus enhancing their engagement in the class. Performing the activities in accordance with the schedule contributed significantly towards developing their attentiveness to course progress. Online resources were also used more frequent and in a very convenient way by the students. Nevertheless, students were found to be resistant to change when attempts were made to move from lower order thinking to higher order thinking. This circumstance posed a challenge to the instructor to upgrade their skills as this resistance slowed the pace of discussion, although the students continued to pay attention in class. The instructor realised that the students were not sufficiently exposed to hands-on experience in their previous semesters and also in other non-business courses. Therefore, they tend to perceive the instructor as attempting to make the course more challenging and inconvenient for them. In overcoming the challenge of shifting their mind set towards higher order thinking skills, the instructor redesigned the tasks to enable the students to involve and perform the duties independently. Feedback was given immediately to encourage them to reflect on their responses and understand the concepts better. Eventually this action provided some comfort for them to change.

6. Conclusion

This action research indicates that there are several ways for instructors to increase the students' engagement in teaching an International Business course to the business students. Students' engagement is influenced by the classroom emotional climate, behavioural, and cognitive factors. This study focuses solely on the classroom emotional climate. It examined the students' emotional aspect of their engagement in a controlled setting which is the classroom. The focal point was the teacher-student interactions which mainly influenced the emotional climate of the class. The study found that the higher the teacher-student interactions, the better the classroom emotional climate would be, thus increasing the level of students' engagement in the course.

This study also revealed that certain elements of teacher-student interaction were more challenging and difficult to be implemented. For instance, analytical skills are crucial to the International Business course and efforts were made to develop such skills, however measuring the skills proved to be difficult as students couldn't gain the skills within one semester. These kinds of competencies require more time and practice for the students to develop and perform them independently. Nevertheless, this study also indicates that some of the actions taken were successful in improving teacher-student interactions and strengthening the classroom emotional climate. Moreover, this study confirms that some changes need to be implemented in teaching strategies primarily in enhancing the classroom emotional climate so that students can be more engaged and acquire more knowledge from courses. Priority should be given to help students increase their understanding and obtain new insights by connecting the current experience together with previous knowledge thereby enhancing the students' engagement in the class.

The instructor has to be more creative in designing activities in the class that could develop higher order thinking skills unconsciously and develop students' analytical skills. Creative teaching strategies are necessary in

improving the students' engagement as well as facilitating the acquisition of required knowledge and skills from the course. These conditions are essential for the course and the programme as it leads to enhancing learning effectiveness and achieving the learning outcomes. In the future, the assessment of analytical skills must be continuously developed and improved to enable students to be assessed at higher levels of difficulty. Appropriate tasks need to be redesigned to enable the evaluation to be conducted.

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