

Intervention Strategies in a Saudi English Classroom at Majma'ah University

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ABSTRACT

Verbal reports and English teachers' classroom experience at Community College of Majma'ah University (MU) warn that underachievement is an educational crisis in the making. And in the paucity of research findings to raise the institutional awareness of the phenomenon, coupled with the lack of relevant professional training programs to deal with the situation, the crisis could be further aggravated. This study is an attempt to address underachievement among English students at Community College; it particularly reports a tripartite teaching strategy comprising three intervention methods: orientation, use of the students' first language (L₁) and multiple mid-term exams. This teaching strategy has been devised to achieve two objectives: to motivate the students to improve their performance; and to help them acquire new (college-related) study skills. In the light of what has so far been done, it can be concluded that the majority of the students are able to excel academically provided that they are properly informed and guided to discover these abilities.

Keywords: Underachievement, Intervention Strategies, Assessment, Learning.

1. Introduction

For three academic years (i.e. 2010/2011, 2011/2012 and 2012/2013), many entrants at Community College of Majma'ah University have been reporting that they had achieved high scores (i.e. 85+) in their English secondary certificate examination. However, only a few of them were able to answer simple Yes/No or wh-questions of the type: Do you live in Majma'ah? Where are you from? Why are you late?, etc. When they were asked if they had earned such scores, some of them said they had not, explaining that about one-third of the scores had been rewarded for classroom participation (something which many did not do), attendance, punctuality and the like. Some students even claimed that since their school teachers had also been their private teachers at home, they had often (successfully) negotiated for desired scores. Generally speaking, the students' educational behaviour abounds in the following characteristics:

- They usually entered the classrooms bare-handedly, leaving their pens, notebooks, and textbooks at home or in their cars despite teachers' repeated warnings that they should not attend classes without these course requirements.
- They had a rich repertoire of excuses to evade classes or to have a quiz repeated.
- They were not clear about the aim behind joining the English programme; some of them informed that they had done so to please their parents.
- Once an (optional) make-up quiz consisting of a single reading question was scheduled at a time of their own choice but none showed up on the quiz day.
- Despite the fact that quizzes were announced beforehand so that they had ample time to study, most of the students got prepared for them just hours or even minutes before a quiz time.

All these characteristics, among others, negatively affected the students' performance in terms of knowledge to be acquired and final exam results. It was, therefore, concluded that the best way to approach this dilemma, so to speak, was to consider it a case of "underachievement" owing to its rigour in diagnosing educational problems and prescribing suitable intervention strategies.

2. Conceptual Background

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2007:1411), the verb "underachieve", and hence the nominal forms "underachiever" and "underachievement", means "to do less well than you could especially in school work". This difference is technically conceived in the educational literature as "discrepancy" between potential and performance. According to the Center for Applied Motivation, Inc. (2008) (CAM), underachieving students "have the intellectual ability to do substantially better but they lack the ability to work to competition, function independently and produce with time limits". A plethora of terms are widely used in the literature

indicating both agreement and dispute over the scope and relevance of the term “*underachievement*” to a variety of learning problems; they include “*slow learning*”, (Blanchard, 2007), “*high achieving underachiever*”, “*low achieving underachiever*” (Smith, 2005), “*gifted underachievers*” (CAM,2008), etc.

Blanchard draws a comparison between the terms “*underachievement*” and “*slow learning*”, pointing out that they differ with regards to the measurement of the students’ performance. Viz. “*Slow learning*” is measured against “*approximate norms*” so that slow learners “*fall behind their peers*” (who are talented students). By contrast, “*underachievement*” is “*measured against predicted levels*” whereupon the students “*fall behind the progress they are expected to make*” (vis-à-vis overachievers or achievers). Another difference between “*slow learning*” and “*underachievement*” is that while the former “*signals something is different, not necessarily wrong*”, the latter “*signals something has gone wrong*” (ibid). This point will be detailed further in connection with the reasons of underachievement below.

Research into underachievement associates underachieving students with a host of attributes that can be summarized along these lines:

- i. CAM: unmotivated, fearful, uncertain, uncomfortable, distressed, unhappy, etc.
- ii. Smutney (2004): low self-esteem, reluctant, isolated, lacking in perseverance, etc
- iii. McPherson and Begaman (2008): disorganized, sloppy, moody, etc.

These attributes can be further categorized as personal (e.g. fearful, moody), social (e.g. isolated), and academic (e.g. unmotivated, lacking in goal-oriented behavior). Apparently, they have been diagnosed by research findings and general observation of the student’s educational behavior. Moreover, despite the fear of being biased, teachers’ judgment can be a reliable method for indentifying underachieving behaviour based on the students’ grades, motivation, commitment to daily work and position relative to their peers (International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, p. 484).

However, there are dissenting voices concerning the reliability of the notion of “*underachievement*” in explaining students’ performance. Smith (2005: 156) contends that “*the term underachievement is not really very useful in helping us understand what is happening with regard to relative achievement in school*”. Thus, the argument goes, “*attempts to identify students who may be underachieving have left us with a relatively heterogeneous group of individuals with little in common...*”. Smith bases her criticism on the role of standardized test results in identifying underachieving students in Great Britain, Australia, Japan and the United States of America. Now Smith’s argument against the explanatory power of underachievement can be rejected on two grounds. First, she has just been quoted classifying learners into “*high achieving underachievers*” and “*low achieving underachievers*”; this seems to detract from the logic in her view that the attempts involved in the learners’ identification process “*have left us with a relatively heterogeneous group of individuals with little in common...*”. Second, and most importantly, there is empirical evidence to support the understanding that underachievement has real world consequences and can, thus, be a powerful mechanism in accounting for the students performance. For instance, Topol and Reznikoff (1979) conducted a study, comparing, *ineralia*, education and career goals of achievers and underachievers among high school senior girls. The findings revealed that there were significant differences between achievers and underachievers in that “*achievers aspired significantly higher than underachievers*”.

The underachievers’ attributes reported above are assumed to be given impetus by a number of factors. Table (1) below summarizes some of them:

Table (1): Factors responsible for Underachievement

| Rogers et al (2008) | Preckel (2006) | Marcus (2012) |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High or low expectations of others • Text anxiety/tension • Learning problems • Fear of problems • Lack of motivation • Peer Pressure • Negative attitude towards school • Lack of experience • Forced choice dilemma • Missed basic skills • Low academic self-efficacy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personality of the student • Family variables • School environment • Intervention styles • Preferred learning style | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention deficit disorder (ADD) • Learning disability (LD) • Various medical problems • Emotional or psychological problems • Academic problems |

This table informs that underachievement is given rise by factors that are psychological/academic (Rodgers et al 2008), psychological/social/academic (Preckel 2006) and psychological/medical/academic (Marcus (2012)). The presence of academic factors in the three models indicates that they are conceived to be the prime instigators of underachievement among the students. In fact, they can be argued to work in harmony and are further aggravated by the other factors. For instance, "peer pressure" (a social factor) can worsen a student's "text anxiety" (academic factor). Needless to say, the classroom practitioner should collaborate with other consultative departments in the academic institution to handle such problems since their subject-specific, teaching-related training could not be expected to have qualified them to deal with social, psychological and medical problems.

Having identified the underachievement attributes and the factors responsible for it, it would be convenient to review the literature on the intervention strategies devised to overcome underachievement. A most comprehensive model to be considered in this connection is CAM (2008). The CAM model is one that draws on the type of underachiever as the sole determinant of the intervention strategy. In other words, underachievers of different types require different methods of intervention to have their educational problems properly handled. Below is a description of four types of underachievers along with the relevant intervention strategies as per CAM (2008):

- i. The distant underachiever. The type is characterized by lack in trust and certainty, focus on solitary pursuits, etc. To deal with learners in this category, educational institutions should be sensitive to the students' anxiety, distrust and fear and follow through with commitments, among others.
- ii. The passive underachiever. Learners subsumed under this category focus on acceptance by and approval of others and fear of failures among others. The intervention methods suitable for these learners include assistance to develop and maintain motivation and equip them with strategies necessary to assert themselves.
- iii. The dependent underachiever is conceived to postpone responsibility, want other to solve his/her conflicts and fail to prioritize. Such a learner should be required to do extra work, explain (in writing) why he/she tends to procrastinate, etc.
- iv. The defiant underachiever is insecure, sees him-/herself as a separate individual and takes opposing views. The intervention strategies suitable to this category include emotional flexibility in dealing with such a learner, encouragement to express his/her emotions and feelings, etc.

Associating underachiever's type with a given intervention method is not necessarily a one-to-one process since cases of overlap are not hard to find in the relevant literature. Other things being equal, "lack of trust in oneself" is an attribute of "distant", "passive" and "dependent" underachievers. It is not uncommon, therefore, that the same intervention procedures can be applied to the three cases of underachievement. Also, it was shown in table (1) above that underachievement could be given rise by factors that are of composite nature, viz. Psychological/academic, psychological/social/ academic, and psychological/medical/academic; thus, supports the argument that the same intervention procedure can suit more than one underachievement situation. Moreover, the educational literature abounds in intervention methods that are addressed to all underachieving students regardless of their type. For instance, investigating learners' reading skills, Quatroche (1999) lists a number of

strategies to help them overcome their reading problems, including one to one tutoring, extra-instructional time, repeated exposure to words, repeated reading of connected texts, easy reading materials, etc.

3. Intervention Strategies at MU

It was reported in (1) above that the students investigated in this study showed indifference to classes, evaded mid-term exams, procrastinated, hired private teachers, etc. On the other hand, they voiced interest in satisfactory attendance record, course-work scores, final exam grades, etc even though they had not worked hard to achieve these goals. In fact, they repeatedly submitted complaints against faculty who did not co-operate sufficiently. Technically speaking, varying degrees of the CAM's (2008) underachiever's categories discussed in (2) above seem to apply to them. Now given the fact that these categories emanate from psychological, social, medical and academic reasons, the English teacher could be left with a limited room for manoeuvre to handle a number of problematic situations experienced by the students. Generally speaking, there are three factors that are argued to get in the way of the teacher's attempts to assist the students to effectively discharge their academic responsibilities. First, like the other faculty at MU, English teachers were and still entrusted with academic counselling so that they enculturate their students into University traditions and advise them on immediate academic concerns such as exam regulations, course selection, calculation of term and accumulative average, etc. However, English teachers were not initially trained to do such a job. Thus, it is doubtful if they had minimum academic counselling skills to benefit their students. Second, most EFL teachers were expatriates and as such know little about Saudi traditions. Needless to say, misunderstanding could be a possible consequence of this inter-cultural encounter, which would in turn limit the amount of counselling provided. For instance, Saudi familial issues could not be discussed publicly even when they are directly responsible for the student's poor performance. Additionally, it was once reported that it would be shameful to inform others of one's, say, physical pain as that would violate the Bedouin bravery code. Apparently these are social, psychological and medical causes of underachievement that could not be handled through academic counselling. Third, such concepts as 'academic development', 'lifelong learning', 'autonomous learner' are hard integrate into the classroom environment since the majority of the students are driven by extreme (instrumental) interest in getting a degree to secure a job. It was unfortunate that a number of students either sacrificed the college education for a low level job or transferred to (an intermediate) diploma-awarding technical college as a short-cut to the labour market.

Despite these inconveniences, a tripartite teaching strategy was attempted to equip the students with study skills and help them improve their performance in the courses associated with the experiment. It consisted of three intervention methods that focused on academic counselling (orientation), bilingual teaching (the use of Arabic as a medium of instruction in addition to English) and multiple mid-term exams. The last component was particularly criticized by the audience of the fifth annual conference of the Saudi English Language Teachers' association held at Effat University (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia) in 2012 (where this research was presented). It was argued that multiple mid-term exams were mere reflection of a product approach to learning that did nothing more than provide the students with transient learning strategies to pass a given course exam. Emphatically, such an approach could not help the students to develop long-term learning strategies that could have otherwise been the case if learning had been approached as a process. However, this argument could be rejected on two grounds. First, multiple mid-term exams were an essential component of the Saudi educational system in that schools and colleges allow the students to take both regular and make-up mid-term exams to improve their overall course assessment. Second, multiple mid-term exams were not the only intervention methods used in the classroom as alluded by some critics. Rather, they were part of a tripartite teaching strategy subsuming three methods that were intended to function collectively to motivate the students to enhance their performance and gain new study skills.

To date, this teaching strategy has been applied to a number of English courses; however, the present study will report its application to three language components: vocabulary, reading and writing. The remaining part of this section details what has to date been done under three subheadings: orientation, use of Arabic and multiple mid-term exams.

i. Orientation

Orientation is a process whereby entrants are introduced to the University traditions, values and academic system so that they can function properly as members of the University community. It is considered a matter of

great importance since it is arranged at all levels of the University administrative hierarchy: the Vice-Chancellor's general meeting with all the new students and the Deans' meeting with the new students enrolled in their Colleges. This same process formed the backbone of academic counselling at the Department level. The students were repeatedly warned that poor performance would cause them to suffer educationally to the degree that their whole academic life in the College might be jeopardized. By contrast, if they were to study hard and do well in the mid-term quizzes and final examination, they would achieve a sustainable accumulative average that would enable them to resist future breakdowns. The students were also assured that they were not lacking in intelligence to excel in their academic life and that all they needed was a positive attitude towards the subject. This was reinforced further by a story summarizing an academic discussion which took place at an international conference held in Malaysia. In that conference a presenter, who was very critical of his Saudi students, was opposed by a Malaysian Professor, telling the audience that the Saudi students were the best in her class. Such an intervention strategy was hoped to enhance the students' perception of themselves and their ability to adapt to the new academic environment. Modelling was another strategy that was employed to achieve the same goal. In other words, many graduates of the English programme were reported as success model to motivate the students to follow in their footsteps so that they could excel academically.

ii. The Use of Arabic

It was reported in (1) above that most of the students failed to answer simple Yes/No questions of the kind: "Do you live in Majma'ah?". So it was apparent that if the classes were to be exclusively run in English, most, if not all, of the students would be put at disadvantage. Thus, translation of new lexical items into Arabic was richly employed to facilitate the comprehension of the concepts underlying various classroom activities.

It was widely argued in the contrastive analysis literature (cf. Lee 1968; James 1980) that learners' mother tongue impedes L2 acquisition through negative interference; thus, some language educators might object to the legitimization of an explicit source of L2 errors- a practice that was condemned fifty-two years ago (cf. Lado, 1959). However, the tendency to use the mother tongue as a facilitator of L2 acquisition receives support from recent literature. Bax (2004) points out that in the post-methods era, it would legitimate to employ whatever means that could help learners digest L2 materials, including their mother tongue. Butzkamm (2003, p. 31) postulates that "monolingual learning is intrinsic impossibility", and that even if attempts are made to "turn off" what the students have learned through their L1, it will still be "silently present" in the students minds. Thus, given the fact the course materials were more advanced than the students' actual level of performance, it was practically necessary to devise ways to enhance the students' understanding of the different components of the courses. All things being equal, Arabic proved to be very useful in the teaching of a number of grammatical rules. For example, were it not for the explanation of the Arabic counterparts of the English conditionals, the students would not have understood the situations requiring each of the English conditional structures.

iii. Multiple Mid-term Exams

Until the academic year 2008/2009, coursework ranged between 30% and 50% of the of the final course assessment. In the following year most Saudi universities released their (online) *Edugate* that have revolutionized their academic transactions, i.e. timetables, students' lists, exam results, faculty assessment (by the students), etc. have come to be posted online. One of the important consequences of this new electronic system was the fixation of course-work at 60% of the final course assessment; thus, allocating the remaining 40% for the final examination. Generally speaking, course-work consists of two mid-term exams to be taken at times negotiated between teachers and their students. It was unfortunate that most of the students enrolled for the courses considered in this study failed both exams. So it became clear that the students would certainly fail their final examination unless the assessment system was to be reconsidered. Thus, there arose a need for a new intervention approach that would consider the students actual performance level. A proposal was made, replacing the two mid-term exams a series of quizzes to be administered at the end of each study unit. In other words, unlike the traditional assessment paradigm, the proposed system presented the course components in small amounts, i.e. part of a chapter or just one topic in a chapter to be the subject of a quiz.

Where vocabulary learning is concerned, each reading passage in the textbook used to teach an integrated course (i.e. Hartman et al 2007) starts with a list of lexical items. The students were instructed to mark with a tick those words that they knew as illustrated by table (2) below:

Table (2): Vocabulary learning

| Nouns | Verbs | Adjectives |
|-------------------|-------------|---------------|
| () cities (city) | () growing | () afraid |
| () countries | () move | () busy |
| () crime | () work | () crowded |
| () density | | () different |
| () megacity | | () dirty |
| () monster | | () large |
| () people | | () small |
| () population | | () terrible |

Source: Hartman et al (2007:5)

One student marked the word “people”, another marked the words “people” and “work” while the rest of the class did not know a word to mark. Five students were asked if they had ever come across the word “small” but no one was able to remember what it meant. The same word was written twice on the board as “small” and “SMALL”. The class was asked if they could see any difference between the two words on the board and only then that many students smiled with relief. As a result of this state of lexical deficiency, the students were asked to keep special record of at least twenty words that they had learned by the end of each chapter to be the basis of oral quizzes. So if the students could give the meaning or the Arabic equivalent of up to 80% of the words, they would be rewarded with 5 marks; otherwise their reward would range between 3 and zero marks. The quizzes system was highly flexible that a student could choose to take one when they were ready. At first a few students were prepared to take these quizzes in the proposed time (on Saturdays) but soon the majority of the students showed interest in this form of vocabulary learning to the extent that extra time was needed to accommodate the students’ rush. This course component was emphasized because it was assumed that knowing the meaning of a lexical item would enhance the students’ comprehension of the relevant reading passage.

The second component that received special attention was reading. It was the skill that the vast majority of the students lacked. Thus, they were encouraged to practice it with speed and accuracy so that those who could show improvement would be generously rewarded. Once more, regular reading quizzes were attempted. The students were allowed to read one paragraph, short or long, more than one paragraph, or a whole passage. They could also read a passage of their own choice. Reading quizzes could take place in the classroom or teacher’s office. With time, this approach to reading proved to be advantageous to those who had originally struggled with every word.

Writing was the third activity that was emphasized and tested but fortnightly. Practice showed that the students’ writing was characterized by poor organization in terms of writing mechanics and spacing despite the fact that all they were required to do was copy or complete sentences or short paragraphs. The intervention strategy adopted here was to ask the students to copy whole paragraphs from the textbook and rewrite paragraphs that were already attempted in the classroom, paying special attention to the spaces between words, mechanics and grammar. And in order to motivate the students excel in this activity, a challenging marking scheme was followed whereby smallest mistakes, e.g. leaving comma, was penalized and only faultless texts were rewarded with ten marks. At first, all those who participated got zero but soon they seemed to have understood and enjoyed the challenge and started reaping the rewards of their faultless writing. This activity had to be done in the class for the fear that they had someone else do it for them at home.

4. Conclusion

The intervention strategies reported in this study were basically intended to pressurize the students into acquiring new learning skills. Practice proved that the students did acclimatize themselves to new learning styles and strategies that they had not tried during their pre-college education. Fortunately, the students’ pragmatic approach to education considerably facilitated their adaptation to this form of pressure-based teaching. In other words, most of the students repeatedly voiced their interest in having good attendance record, good accumulative average, reward for participating in the classroom activities, etc., saying nothing about academic development with regards to the courses being studied. Breaking down the course components into digestible

bits in the manner described in the few paragraphs above have proved to be useful at least for the specific students reported in this study.

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