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Motivational Impact of Emulation in a Saudi Writing Classroom at Majmaah University

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Abstract

This study aims to assess emulative interventions conducted in a Saudi writing classroom at Majmaah University during the academic year 2019/2020. The interventions, i.e., orientation and revision, were needed to deal with writing challenges experienced by underachieving students. Thus, the main question to address at this connection is whether emulative intervention could enhance Saudi EFL learners' writing since they were generally believed to lack motivation to pursue higher education, as evidenced by their indifference to classes. Also, the students were observed to demand satisfactory attendance records, high coursework scores, high final exam grades, etc., though they had not worked hard to achieve these goals. The qualitative data was collected from 18 male students enrolled in the English program at the Community college. It consisted of the participants' reaction to both success stories (collected from orientation sessions) and revision using guidelines set by expert writers and achieving students as informed by the literature. More specifically, toward the end of the second term of the academic year 2019/2020 a focus group discussion was conducted where the students freely expressed their views of the advantages and disadvantages of the intervention. Discussion was originally conducted in Arabic and then translated in English. The results revealed that the interventions effectively produced positive attitudes among participants toward writing, gaining confidence in themselves as writers and, ridding themselves of writing fears. The results led to some implications for both learning and instructional practices in the writing classroom.

Keywords: emulation, expert writers, imitation, intervention, underachieving writers, writing

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Introduction

Although the role of motivation in second/foreign language acquisition dates to Gardner and Lambert (1959), it can still be a vibrant research area with an emphasis on the acquisition of skills that characterize the classroom in the twenty-first century, such as academic honesty, digital literacy, critical thinking, globalization, and information literacy (Hughes & Acedo, 2016). Twenty-first-century skills also include critical skills and the 4Cs (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity) (Joynes, Rossignoli, & Amonoo-Kuofi, 2019). Indeed; recent research has focused on motivational factors affecting the acquisition of twenty-first century skills in language classrooms (Al-hoorie & MaIntyre, 2020; Czerkowski & Bert, 2020; Talmi, Hazzan & Katz, 2018).

Twenty-first-century skills could equally lend themselves to the writing pedagogy to facilitate the acquisition and practice of writing skills that were once considered challenging for Arabic-speaking learners. A comprehensive search on major research platforms, i.e., Researchgate.net, Google Scholar, and Academia.edu, has shown that writing challenges have mainly become a significant concern for studies conducted in the Saudi context from many perspectives. Overall; the research addressed curricular issues (Ezza, 2010; 2012), writing problems (Khuwaileh & Shoumali, 2000; Barzanji, 2016; Alharbi, 2017), and attitudes towards writing (Ankawi, 2020; Al-Murshidi, 2014). Classroom researchers also examined the effect of specific intervention measures to assist the students in overcoming these challenges and thus produce enhanced writing quality. For instance, research focused on orientation (Ezza, 2012), flipped instruction (Chatta & Haque, 2020), collaborative writing (Alkhalaf, 2020), revision strategies to enhance writing quality (Ezza, Alhuqail & Alwehaibi, 2019), and technology-based instruction (Ezza & Bakry, 2014; Ezza, Alhuqail & Elhussain, 2019).

A necessary intervention that has been neglected in the literature is the use of emulation as a teaching/learning strategy in the Saudi writing classroom. Defined as doing something as someone else because of your admiration for them (Oxford Advanced learner's Dictionary, 2015, p. 489), emulation can be a powerful instructional tool that can both cause the students to have positive attitudes toward writing and equip them with best writing techniques. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to explore the educational opportunities of emulation in a writing classroom at Majmaah University in Saudi Arabia. Also, the study intends to assess the participants' emulation-related writing experiences. To achieve these objectives, the study attempts answers to the following questions:

1. What educational opportunities could emulation bring into the writing classroom?
2. How do the study participants perceive emulation?

The subsequent sections of the paper include review of the literature, methods, results and conclusion and limitations.

Literature Review

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the verb *emulate* and, hence, *emulation* as "to try to do something as well as somebody else because you admire them" (p. 489). As such, the term *emulation* has been widely investigated in educational research as both a teaching and learning strategy that could effectively enhance the student's performance as it involves

connecting the students to a model (i.e., a teacher, researcher, author, etc.) who would eventually motivate them to improve their performance through emulation. To give insight into the affective dimension of emulation, it is crucial to attempt a sketchy account of the Social Learning Theory (SLT) under which it is subsumed.

As envisioned by its founder, i.e., Bandura (1972), SLT views learning as a laborious and hazardous process that could not result solely from the actions of the individual learner. Thus, it proposes modeling as a way to acquire new behavior forms. By observing others, people can form ideas “of how new behaviors are formed, and on later occasions, this coded information serves as a guide for action” (p. 23). The strategy of observational learning, Bandura theorizes, is governed by attentional and retention processes. Where the first process is concerned, SLT stipulates, “people cannot learn much by observation unless they attend to and perceive accurately the significant features of the modeled behavior” (p. 24). What is selectively observed includes specific characteristics, features, and interactions. All modeled behavior forms (i.e., aspects, features, and interactions) are central to regulating observational experiences. The effectiveness of these modeled forms depends on the social role of the individual being observed, as some individuals tend to receive more attention than others. In other words, the “models who possess engaging qualities are sought, while those lacking pleasing characteristics are generally ignored or rejected” (p. 24).

The attentional process cannot function properly without the retention process. That is, the influence of the modeled behavior cannot be effective if it is not remembered. Thus, for people to benefit from the observed behavior of the models, they should represent it “in memory in the symbolic form” (Bandura, 1972, p.25) so that they can later reproduce it more accurately. However, a close approximation of the new behavior requires people “to refine it through self-corrective adjustments based on information feedback from performance and from focused demonstrations of segments that have been partially learned” (p.28).

Along the SLT lines reported above, and particularly as of the early 2000s, educational research focused on emulation as a powerful learning motivator (Acerbi, Tennie, & Nunn, 2011; Hill, 2009; Cane, 2009; Coddler, 2011; Graham, 2016; Graham & Perin, 2007; Jonas, 2017; Kindeberg, 2013; Kory-Westlund & Breazeal, 2017; Zimmerman & Kitsanatas, 2002). Taking an SLT stance, Kindeberg (2013) argued that the lack of recognition of the role of emotions in education led learning theories to neglect the importance of emulation as pedagogical support to student learning. She contends that people are born into an eternal reliance on each other and that human nature can only be conceived in a community. Thus, the essential human dimension for teachers is the characteristic of dependency as it makes their verbal actions credible, renders what they teach interesting, and creates a more secure learning environment.

Emulation is an abstract concept that can be operationalized in terms of modeling. According to Hill et al. (2009), a model is an example that shows how a student might behave based on the expectation that observation of a model “will impact the students’ perceptions and understandings about the subject. Where writing instruction is concerned, modeling “allows the students to observe the thinking and actions of a strong writer,” (p. 91), and thus acquire the “features of effective writing (Graham et al., 2016, p. 18). For example, the students are provided

with written examples to read, analyze and emulate their critical elements such as tone, style, forms, and patterns to eventually integrate into their writing (Graham & Perin, 2007; Zimmerman & Kitsanatas, 2000).

Yet there are some views that reduce emulation to mere imitation, which involves copying the qualities and processes of the modeled behavior (Cane, 2009; Root-Bernstein, 2017; Acerbi et al., 2011). As such, emulation is argued to fail to preserve the modeled behavior. It was also contended that emulation is excessively prescriptive and tends to deprive the students of their voices and creativity (Abbuhl, 2011). Where writing is concerned, emulation is perceived to undermine the writing process by “privileging form before the development of ideas and failing to provide information to students on the writing processes that gave rise to the model” (Abbuhl, 2011) these critical views can be refuted on several grounds. First, emulation played a significant role in the formulation of two major approaches to writing: Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) and writing revision. The first approach is a well-known modern instructional intervention that Karen Harris and Steve Graham, and their associates developed to handle writing challenges faced by adolescents (cf. Graham et al., 2016; Graham & Perin, 2007). SRSD has been widely accepted by writing scholars across the globe owing to its effectiveness in improving the composing competence of both achieving and underachieving student writers. To date, a huge scholarship has been devoted to it. SRSD-related activities included scholarly articles, monographs, books, and conferences. As to the second approach, academic research has focused on the role of revision in enhancing the writing quality of the student writer. This approach draws on the revision practices of expert writers that can be transferred to novice writers through emulation.

Second, research findings reveal that emulation could significantly improve the student’s performance in language skills, as evidenced by Kory-Westlund and Breazeal (2019). This study explored the relationship between the pre-school children’s learning, rapport, and emulation of the robot’s language. The study findings revealed that the participants who emulated the robot’s language scored higher on the vocabulary test. What is more, most SRSD-related studies confirmed the vital role played by emulation in enhancing the students’ writing (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2003).

Third, emulation might not involve any learning activity to be reduced to imitation. For example, it was argued above that verbal actions, and oral expressions make teachers appear more or less credible, the subject more or less interesting the learning environment more or less secure. It is the creation of a friendly educational environment that is conducive to learning that is the crux of the matter. Such an environment can inspire the students to be optimistic about writing, which could ultimately assist them in being good student writers.

Methods

It is important to point out that the main objective of this paper was to explore the educational opportunities of emulation in a writing classroom at Majmaah University in Saudi Arabia. Because the writing course was offered by the English department at Community college, permissioned was requested from the College administration to use course as a source for the study data. Upon the College approval the students were informed that an intervention would be integrated into the

official activities of the course with the prime aim of helping them to overcome some of their writing challenges. Because all the students participated in the course activities, there was no need for sampling procedures for the subsequent study.

Participants

The study participants were 18 Community College (CC) enrollees at Majmaah University for the academic years 2019/2020. They were enrolled in the transitional English program, which lasts for four terms to qualify them for enrolment in the College of Education to graduate with a bachelor's degree in English. The transitional program introduces the students to the basics of the four syllabus components: linguistics, literature, translation, and English language skills. It is well known that Community College is the last resort for students. That is, only after failure to secure enrolment in the College of education that students end up in CC. Generally speaking, CC students were believed to lack motivation to pursue higher education, as evidenced by their indifference to classes, mid-term exams, and procrastination behavior, to mention but a few. On the other hand, they voiced interest in satisfactory attendance records, high coursework scores, final exam grades, etc. even though they had not worked hard to achieve these goals. They repeatedly submitted complaints to CC administration against faculty who tend to apply disciplinary measures in the classes. At the time of the intervention, the participants were enrolled in the fourth level course ENG312: Short Essay, where they studied five types of essay: descriptive essay, narrative essay, opinion essay, comparison and contrast essay, and cause and effect essay. The reason for including male students only was that the Saudi academic system does not allow co-education at all educational levels. Thus, there were separate campuses for male and female students at Majmaah University. On average, the students join the university at age eighteen. By the time they enrolled for the intervention-related course, they turned 19.

Research Instruments

A two-part intervention was conducted to motivate the students to study hard so that they could reach the threshold level required by the Department of English at the College of education, into which they would move after successful completion of the transitional program in the manner described in the previous section. The participants were required to develop their pre-college English into college-level knowledge and skills in the four components of the English syllabus to be able to embark on more rigorous syllabus components at the College of Education at the beginning of the fifth level. The intervention included orientation and revision, which had, over the time, lent themselves effectively to the creation of interactive learning environments. The first intervention was a quality assurance requirement that students should be thoroughly informed about the courses in the first week of the term. Apart from the course information as coded in the course file, several success stories were shared with the students. For example, in the writing classes, the students were happy to know that two of the best-known world-writing researchers i.e. Professor John Swales and Professor Ken Hyland, had started their successful careers in the MENA region i.e., Sudan and Saudi Arabia, respectively. The students became so enthusiastic about the information that a class member declared he "would be Ken Hyland or John Swales of Saudi Arabia." Another success story came from a conference presenter in Malaysia, who reported that her Saudi students were in the top 5% of their classes at Putra University Language Center. These success stories were highly needed to help these underachieving students to redeem themselves and raise their hopes so that they could achieve similar educational goals.

Another emulative intervention in the writing classes was revision. The students were introduced to revision as a powerful tool that characterized the writing of achieving students and expert scholars. It involved not only the elimination of local or surface errors of grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics in their completed texts but also the attention given to the global features of the text in a recursive manner. It consisted of a series of activities where “details are added, dropped, substituted, or reordered according to their sense of what essay needs for emphasis and proportion” (Sommers, 1980, p. 385). The students were challenged that only well revised, error-free task answers could receive total or high scores. Overall, both instruments produced various types of qualitative data. On the one hand, the orientation produced several positive reactions on the parts of the participants, as will be detailed in the results section.

Research Procedures

The emulative interventions were flexible and significantly facilitated by educational technology and social media. These e-platforms allowed the participants to communicate with the instructor 24/7. Because most of the writing activities were conducted on the University learning management system, the course settings for deadlines were frequently modified to allow the students to produce more enhanced drafts based on the instructor’s comments using the track changes feature.

Results

Two types of results were obtained: demonstration of modeled behavior and responses to interview questions about the use of revision in improving their writing drafts. As to the first type, the participants admired the success stories of Professor John Swales and Ken Hyland. They started following their pages on various digital repositories, including Wikipedia, Researchgate, Google Scholar, and YouTube. The participants were particularly impressed by the plenary presentations given by these scholars gave at international conferences. This led them to seek help in the use of PowerPoint so that they could provide classroom presentations, particularly in courses that require reading and writing, such as “Introduction to Linguistics,” “English Phonetics,” and “Morphology and Syntax.” They were challenged to this task provided that they should speak for twenty minutes, which they did so marvelously. One of the participants was so enthusiastic about the prosperous career of these two scholars to declare that he would be the future “John Swales or Ken Hyland of Saudi Arabia.” The success stories of Saudi students at Putra University encouraged some participants to travel to Malaysia to enroll in one of the English language centers so that they could give professional presentations or write essays of good quality. A third example of acquisition of modeled behavior is the choice to produce multiple drafts of the same writing task as informed by the revision literature. Most participants showed interest in submitting up to three revised drafts based on the comments, using track changes. Although the participants’ motive was primarily instrumental in getting higher scores, they were able to revise to produce better writing quality.

Second, a follow-up discussion was conducted in the classroom to elicit data about the students’ perception of the revision guidelines to enhance the quality of their writing. The discussion centered on two topics: instructional transparency and confidence. Most frequent responses regarding instructional transparency are listed in table 1:

Table 1. *Participants' perception of the intervention*

Instructional transparency	Confidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was a new experience. Nobody knew how instructors assess our writing before this course. The use of rubrics in assessment is persuasive. • It was the first time to know why I missed many marks. If we were taught how to revise, our writing would have improved. • Before applying quality assurance standards to teaching, we could not know how teachers assessed our performance. • The use of rubrics helped us to ask whatever questions we had about the course. • It is the first time that we felt mutual respect with our writing teachers. • Open discussion of rubrics helped me become independent, although I still need help from teachers and colleagues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm sure that I'm now more confident in my writing because I can revise my paper. • I used to avoid writing tasks because I wasn't sure about how good it is. This course helped me to revise well before submitting. • Writing many drafts of the same tasks made me more confident. • I'm no longer afraid of writing. I feel very confident in doing all the tasks. • I agree with my friends we are no longer afraid of writing courses. I hope all other writing instructors teach us in the same way. • I have extreme confidence in dealing with all writing tasks because I have the chances to write many times.

Discussion

Because the data was qualitative, narrative analysis was the most appropriate method for documenting the participants' feedback regarding the usefulness of the intervention. As shown in the previous section, a general discussion was conducted in the classroom to know the students' perception of the "emulative intervention", which was followed by interview questions that the participants answered in writing. Data analysis positively answered both research questions. That is, the first research question enquired about the educational opportunities that emulation could bring in the classroom to enhance the participants' writing. The data reported in the previous section shows that the participants were highly receptive of the ideas included in the intervention. Particularly, the participants showed positive attitude towards emulation as a writing strategy. As to the second research question, table 1 informs that the participants were receptive of the revision strategies both as a sign of instructional transparency and a source of writing confidence.

The overall results confirm the claim that emulative interventions can positively affect the perception and the behavior of underachieving Saudi students enrolled in writing classes at Majmaah University. Further support for this comes from the SLT hypothesis that "we were born into life-long dependence on each other, and the will to evolve derives from a fundamental need to be part of a community ..." (Kindeberg, 2013, p. 103). Both interventions produced data that attest to the relevance of this SLT premise. In practice, inspired by the success stories told and retold in the classroom, the participants not only demonstrated positive attitudes toward writing but also showcased their competence in applying strategies characteristic of the writing of expert writers and achieving students to their writing. These findings indicate that writing instructors cannot just commit themselves to the course description as detailed in the syllabus to complete the

course objectives/learning outcomes, e.g., “use appropriate argument to support a claim.” In other words, extra efforts are needed to integrate innovative interventions into mainstream teaching to engage underachieving students in classroom activities and thus provide them with rich opportunities to enhance their writing.

A basic question to consider in this connection is how do low-motivated underachieving students end up showcasing behaviors originally associated with expert writers and achieving students? In an attempt to answer this question, there are two factors that caused Saudi academia to be conducive to academic success among under-achieving students per se. First, as of 2014, e-learning has become an integral part of traditional education. The MU Learning Management System (technically known as Desire 2 Learn) has considerably facilitated academic communication between the students and the faculty; thus, it has dramatically improved teacher-student relation that was once confined to the traditional classroom. The situation has provided rich opportunities for the teaching and learning processes. The success stories recounted by teachers became credible and replicable by the students. What is more, teachers played emulative roles by sharing their publication lists, citation records, and conference presentations that remarkably motivated the students to emulate them in future. Second, the last decade witnessed the introduction of quality assurance standards into Saudi academia. A most daunting quality assurance task for the faculty was to base teaching and assessment of the student’s performance on a set of learning outcomes. However, success in performing this task was subject to a rigorous verification process. Because the test to verify the learning outcomes primarily related to the students’ examination results, it became necessary for faculty to apply additional instructional interventions to guarantee results that could pass the verification test. In the present intervention, emulation of the behavior of inspirational scholars helped to boost the morale of struggling student writers.

Locally, the study results of the study are consistent with the results of Ezza (2013). Although this study was conducted ten years later, it surprisingly produced corresponding qualitative data. That is, while a participant in Ezza (2013) declared that he would be the future “Paul Matsuda” of Saudi, a present study participant wished to be John Swales or Ken Hyland of Saudi Arabia. This similarity is attributed to the fact the same intervention (i.e., orientation) was replicated ten years later, where reference was made to the same writing scholars: Professor John Swales, Professor Ken Hyland, and Professor Paul Matsuda. The findings of this study were also consistent with Ezza et al. (2019). Participants in both studies showed positive attitudes towards revision and managed to free themselves of writing fears because of the rubrics they used to revise their work. Globally, it was shown in the literature section that students who emulated the robot’s language scored higher on the vocabulary test (Kory-Westlund & Breazeal, 2019). This study focuses on the improvement of the participants, while the current study explores the possibility of motivating the students to write to the satisfaction of their instructors. However, Kory-Westlund and Breazeal (2019) can still provide strong support for the assumption that emulation has an educational role to play.

Conclusion

This study has been an attempt to report a classroom experience applied at Community College at Majmaah University to motivate underachieving students to improve the academic

behavior of the students included in the study. Thus, the study drew on the SLT premises to guide successful classroom practices. It is necessary to point out in this connection that it is the plan of this study to enhance the academic performance of the students. Instead, it attempted to change their educational behavior by helping them to have a positive attitude towards learning so that they ultimately write to the satisfaction of their writing professors. There arose a need for extended orientation sessions where multiple success stories were recounted to prove to the students that everyone has similar opportunities to succeed academically. Fortunately, most of the students were receptive to new ideas, which they richly integrated into their repertoire of learning strategies. Further research is needed to decide if the participants have improved their composing skills based on their new (positive) approach to writing. At the same time, it is true that the transitional program in the Community College was closed in the same academic year (2018/2019), its findings can still be integrated into teaching and research in similar programs in the MENA region.

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