Intervention Strategies in Saudi EFL Classroom

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Rationale

• In three academic years (i.e. 1430/1431, 1431/1432 and 1432/1433), many new college entrants informed that they achieved 85+ in the English secondary certificate examination;
• however, only few were able answer simple Yes/No or wh-questions of the type: Do you live in Al-Majma’ah? Where are you from? Why are you late?, etc.
• when asked if they earned such high scores, some students 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
Context of the Study

• The study participants: 1st - 4th level students doing English at Community College of Majma’ah University (a Transitional Program)

Most of the students were observed doing the following:

• Although the students were repeatedly warned not to leave their pens, notebooks, and textbooks at home or in their cars, they usually entered the class bare-handed.
Despite the fact that tests and quizzes were announced beforehand so that they had ample time to study, most of the students started doing so just minutes before the quiz time.

Even when they were allowed to choose test questions, most of students either failed these tests or did unsatisfactorily.
• When advised to make greater effort to improve their performance, they would ask the course tutor to recommend a private teacher.

• The students had a rich repertoire of excuses to evade Wednesday (the beginning of weekend vacation) classes or to have a quiz repeated.
• students were not clear about the aim behind joining the English program and some of them informed they had done so to please their parents.

• The majority of the students missed about 15-30% of the classes.

• Once an (optional) make-up quiz was arranged to be based on a single reading question but on the quiz day no student showed up.
• Therefore, educational intervention became necessary to:
  1. Help students acquire new study skills
  2. Improve students’ performance
Conceptual Background

• All these characteristics negatively affected the students’ performance both 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.”
• It was so considered because underachievement theory is so powerful in diagnosing educational problems and prescribing suitable intervention strategies.

• Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2007:1411): “underachieve”, 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.

• Viz. 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” (CAM)
• A plethora of related terms are widely used in the literature: “slow learners”, (Blanchard, 2007), “high achieving underachiever”, “low achieving underachiever” (Smith 2005), “gifted underachievers” (CAM), etc
Blanchard draws a comparison between the terms “underachievement” and “slow learning”: they differ with regards to the measurement of the students’ performance.

“slow learning” is measured against “approximate norms” whereupon slow learners “fall behind their peers” (who are talented learners).

“underachievement”, it is “measured against predicted levels” whereupon the students “fall behind the progress they are expected to make” (vis-à-vis overachievers).
Another difference is that while slow learning “signals something is different, not necessarily wrong”, underachievement “signals something has gone wrong”
## Attributes of Underachieving Students

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unmotivated</td>
<td>low self-esteem</td>
<td>disorganized</td>
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<tr>
<td>fearful</td>
<td>reluctant</td>
<td>sloppy</td>
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<tr>
<td>uncertain</td>
<td>uncomfortable</td>
<td>moody</td>
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<tr>
<td>uncomfortable</td>
<td>isolated</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>distressed</td>
<td>lacking in perseverance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>angry</td>
<td>lacking in goal-oriented behavior</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>unhappy</td>
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## Factors responsible for Underachievement

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<tr>
<td>High or low expectations of others</td>
<td>Personality of the student</td>
<td>Attention deficit disorder (ADD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Text anxiety/tension</td>
<td>Family variables</td>
<td>Learning disability (LD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning problems</td>
<td>School environment</td>
<td>Various medical problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear of problems</td>
<td>Intervention styles</td>
<td>Emotional or psychological problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of motivation</td>
<td>Preferred learning style</td>
<td>Academic problems</td>
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<td>Peer Pressure</td>
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<td>Negative attitude towards school</td>
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<td>Lack of experience</td>
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<td>Forced choice dilemma</td>
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<td>Missed basic skills</td>
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<td>Low academic self-efficacy</td>
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• Intervention Methods
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<tr>
<th>Type of Underachiever</th>
<th>Salient Attributes</th>
<th>Intervention Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **The Distant Underachiever** | -Lacking in trust and certainty  
- Experienced loss circumstances  
- Focus on solitary pursuits | - Be sensitive to their anxiety, distrust and fear  
- Be consistent  
- Follow through with commitments |
| **The Passive Underachiever** | - Focus on the acceptance by, approval of others  
- Anxiety for approval  
- Fear of failure | - Need help to develop and maintain self-motivation  
- Need to learn how to assert themselves |
| **The Dependent Underachiever** | - Postpone responsibility  
- Wants others to solve their conflicts  
- Fail to prioritize | - Let them do extra work  
- Have them write why they procrastinated  
- Help them after they have made attempts |
| **The Defiant Underachiever** | - Insecure  
- See themselves as separate individuals  
- Arbitrarily take opposing stances | - Stay flexible and emotionally calm in dealing with them  
- Encourage them to express their opinions and feelings |
Intervention Strategies at EFL Classroom at MCC
Orientation

• New entrants are introduced to the University traditions, values and academic systems so that they can function properly as members of the University community.

• Rector’s general meeting with all the new students of the University

• Deans’ meeting with the new students of his/her College are all ways of integrating the new entrants into the University community.
At the Program level

• The students were repeatedly warned that coursework amounts to 60% of the final course assessment; thus,

• Failure in the coursework would mean failure in the final exam.
• On the other hand, doing well in the quizzes, tests and final exams would guarantee an accumulative average that would enable them to resist future breakdowns
• students were also assured that they were not lacking in intelligence to excel academically and that all they needed to develop 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 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.

• We are very lucky to have two of our old students appointed as demonstrators in the same college. They became success models that are retold in the classroom.
The Use of Arabic

• Contrastive analysis literature (cf. Lee 1968; James 1980): 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)
• Given the fact the course materials were more advanced than the students’ actual levels, it was practically necessary to device ways to enhance the students’ understanding of the different components of the courses.
• The use of Arabic in EFL classroom receives support from the Universal grammar:
  • innate property of language development.
  • It is through L1 that people acquired all the phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic rules.
  • This ability aids comprehension of the same components in the target tongue.
Coursework Assessment

• Coursework represents 60% of the total course assessment.
• Traditional assessment paradigm: two mid term exams: 30 marks each.
• Apparently, this paradigm is not successful as evidenced by the repeated students’ complaints and requests to have make-up mid term exams.
• A new assessment system was proposed: it presents course components in small amounts.
• In other words, only a chapter or part of a chapter is included in a quiz.
• In one of these courses, students did eight quizzes.
• Also, because it was felt that three course components, i.e. vocabulary, reading and writing, needed further emphasis, additional quizzes were also regularly administered to help the students excel in these areas and gain more marks.
Vocabulary Quizzes

• 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.
Reading quizzes

• Reading was a skill that the vast majority of the class lacked. Thus, the students 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 started. 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 the teacher’s office.

• With time, this approach to reading proved to be advantageous to those who had originally struggled with every word during the reading classes.
Writing Quizzes

• Writing was the third activity that was emphasized and tested but fort-nightly. In principle, the writing practice advocated by a first year course is sentence-based; viz. it trains the students to write simple and compound sentences along with such writing mechanics as punctuation and capitalization.

• 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 sentences literally from the book or the board.
• The intervention strategy adopted here was to ask the students to copy whole paragraphs, paying special attention to the spaces between words.

• 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 5 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.
• 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 and Tuesdays) but soon the majority of the students showed interest in this form of learning to the extent that extra time was needed to accommodate the their rush.
Conclusion

• To conclude, the intervention strategies reported in this study were basically intended to pressurize the students into acquiring new learning skills.

• A nine-week work 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 the 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 course 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.
Thank you