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Exploring the Effectiveness of Feedback on Students' Engagement and Participation in their Online Classes

Yazan M Alghazo

Mohammed Jaber Al Ansari College for Teachers, University of Bahrain, Bahrain

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Corresponding Author: Yazan M Alghazo

Abstract

This study aims at exploring the effectiveness of feedback on students' engagement and participation in their online classes. More specifically, the study examines how positive reinforcement using feedback in an online learning environment can increase student participation and engagement in the classroom. Currently, the researcher is struggling in finding ways of improving student engagement in the classroom as well as increasing participation. Regular feedback is provided to students only when submitting assignments or when students demonstrate mistakes in their answers (corrective feedback), however, supportive positive feedback that asserts correct responses is not common practice in the researcher's classes. Therefore, this study

proposes the utilization of supportive positive feedback throughout every class session in high frequencies in an attempt to increase student engagement and participation, since prior studies have shown a positive relationship between consistent positive feedback and motivation in general (Chakraborty and Nafukho, 2014 ^[4]; Cimen and Gakmak, 2020; Miltiadou and Savenye, 2003 ^[10]). The study combines two key Areas from the UKPSF since it suggests the use of giving feedback to learners in order to develop and improve effective learning environments. The findings of the study further support previous studies suggesting the positive effect of using feedback as a positive reinforcement strategy on student engagement.

Keywords: COVID 19, UKPSF, Bahrain

1. Introduction/ Current Practice

Student engagement and levels of participation are key factors in a successful learning process. It is important that students enter the classroom with the needed positive attitude and motivation to learn for the teaching learning process to be successful. Therefore, examining ways of increasing students' participation and engagement in the classroom environment is essential. Moreover, during the current COVID 19 pandemic and the movement towards online learning, the researcher is facing difficulties in receiving higher student engagement as online learning does not seem to foster an environment that supports rich engagement activities as face to face instruction does. According to the UKPSF, developing an effective learning environment for students and providing students with feedback are both key areas of activity when it comes to "ensuring good practice and excellent student experience". Moreover, Chakraborty and Nafukho (2014) ^[4] explored instructional practices that support engagement specifically in an online environment and found that positive feedback is an effective strategy in increasing student engagement.

The researcher attempted to conduct online classes in a manner that is similar to face-to-face instruction utilizing some of the available tools like chat and polling to get student feedback during instruction, and provided students feedback when mistakes were made or when questions were raised. This simple approach of feedback did not seem to be engaging enough for students and the researcher began to struggle in ensuring students are motivated to participate in the classroom. It was clear to the researcher that a change must be implemented in order to increase student motivation to participate as well as their engagement.

2. Literature Review

Online Learning and Student Experience

While online learning is viewed as the new norm, and many universities around the world are beginning to implement online

learning in one form or another due to the Covid-19 restrictions, some students also seem reluctant towards online learning due to a lack of direct interaction and communication with the instructor and fellow students. According to the research of Salmon *et al.* (2015) [11], some students while sharing their views about online courses have pointed out that they had faced the issue of lack of attention and motivation in the virtual learning environment. The instructors, while sharing their ideas about online learning show a similar trend, according to Alqurashi. (2016) [1], the major problem the instructors face is motivating the students to engage in the class. Due to lack of direct interaction with the student teachers cannot keep their attention on the instruction and the students mostly distract from the class due to the instructors' inability to deliver the lecture in a much fruitful way. However, most instructors while sharing their perspective regarding online learning pointed out that, indeed, there is some limitation of online education but in today's technological era online learning is best for students especially because it eliminates the problems of time, space and money for most students (Chakraborty and Nafukho, 2014) [4].

Strategies Used by The Instructors to Increase Engagement and Motivation of Students in Online Learning

Various strategies are identified by Lee *et al.* (2015) [8], that assist the instructor to design and successful delivery of online courses that will enable maximum student engagement in their online courses. Providing an effective learning experience in the student online learning required and efficient strategies that motive the students and increase their engagement in the class activities effectively. One of the important strategies that the instructors can use to increase the engagement of student is the creation of a positive learning environment. According to Czerkowski and Lyman. (2016) [7], the students' motivation is a direct bond to their learning experience. Therefore, motivation plays a key role to maintain and built attention of student in the online class activities. The author has pointed out that the teachers need to promote a healthy competitive environment in the online class to increase the motivation of the student and attract their attention towards the class activities.

In addition to this, one of the best engagement strategies revealed by studies of Barkley and Major (2020) [3], is providing timely feedback to the students about their performance and pointing out their strengths and weaknesses concerning their actions. In view of Covelli. (2017) [6], to produce learner engagement efficient technology must be used by the instructors, this will improve the quality of teaching and promote interaction between the instructors and the teachers. According to the study of Ma *et al.* (2015) [9], the created contents also have a vast impact on the engagement of students in the courses. By the use of efficient technology in designing the course content and including such activities that promote a competitive environment in the class also motive the students by increasing their attention towards the class. Consequently, it enhances the effective engagement of the student in the online courses.

Impact of Positive Reinforcement on Student Participation/Engagement in Online Learning

Reinforcement is the act of strengthening certain type of behaviours in student to get them motivated and increase their engagement in online courses. According to Banna *et al.* (2015) [2], typically, reinforcement involves a specific type of stimulus and tactics such as appreciation, praise, reward etc. that the instructors usually used to motivate and inspire the student and engage them effectively during the online lectures. Researchers suggest various types of positive reinforcement that can help the instructors to improve the behaviours of their students and increased their engagement in the online class. One of the types is verbal recognition or praise, which is most commonly used by the instructors to stimulate the students' attention toward the class activities.

Action Research Question:

To what extent is using feedback as a positive reinforcement tool effective in increasing students' engagement and participation?

Research hypothesis:

The researcher's hypothesis is that the increase in the supportive positive feedback will increase student engagement and motivation. Thus, improving the overall quality of the learning experience that is provided to the students. (V2)

3. Plan of Action/ Methodology

To conduct this action research study, the researcher designed a two-cycle action plan for the purpose of increasing student engagement and motivation to participate in the online learning environment. Based on the literature review presented earlier, the researcher decided to utilize positive feedback as an intervention to attempt to increase student participation. In Cycle 1, students are given oral positive feedback during class time individually and as a group. The first cycle lasted five weeks. In the second Cycle, the students received written positive feedback on their work and discussions in the class and, based on results from the first cycle, students were given more opportunities to have open-ended discussion questions that allowed for more chances of engagement and presentation of different ideas.

Aims of the first cycle:

1. Observe and measure student engagement throughout the cycle duration.
2. Explore the effectiveness of supportive positive feedback on student engagement and motivation in the classroom.
3. To reflect on personal practice with giving feedback to students and improve the researcher's ability to engage the students in an online learning environment.

Data Collection Method:

To ensure a reasonable level of data validity and reliability, the researcher used the triangulation method to obtain the data for the study, where student engagement and participation were measured using three methods:

1. **Observation:** The researcher **observed** the quality of participation and questions posed in the classroom and took notes of it. (**qualitative descriptions**)
2. **Observation Checklist:** Participation levels were counted per class per student, and divided by the number of classes attended (**quantitative checklist**).
3. **open-ended survey:** students were given an **opinion survey** that asks about their satisfaction with their roles during classes. At the end of each cycle.

Procedures:

The action research study was implemented in a class that meets weekly for periods of three hours in each class. The researcher began the first cycle by observing student engagement levels using two methods; taking notes of the type of engagement they offered (i.e. posed questions, responded to questions, presented additional thoughts or ideas, argued against or for certain points of view), and by completing a checklist of the number of times each student would participate and engage in the classroom.

As part of the introduced change, the researcher would provide the students who do participate and engage meaningfully in the class with supportive positive feedback in the form of demonstrating enthusiasm for their thoughts and praising them for presenting their ideas or their responses. This positive supportive feedback was given to students directly after they engaged in the lecture.

Also, at the end of each lecture, the researcher thanked students who did engage in the classroom activities and discussion by name. Then after each lecture, an analysis was conducted for the checklist and the observation to check for the number of students who participated as well as to check the quality of this engagement. Students' quality of engagement was labeled into three categories, a) **initiative**, where a student would engage willingly without any solicitation or prompt by the instructor, b) **effort**, where a student would simply respond to a question posed by the instructor to all students, and c) **inattentive**, where the student does not participate or engage in the classroom discussion at all.

Based on the results obtained from the first lecture, the researcher set plans for feedback opportunities with students who were not engaging in the lecture or for those who were engaging within the effort category only. Those plans included presenting those students with directed individual questions during the lecture and, then providing them with praise and positive feedback once they responded in an effort to increase their motivation and engagement. This process continued for the entire duration of both cycle 1 and cycle 1, the added intervention in cycle 2 was that the researcher added written positive feedback to students individually, and, based on the results from the first cycle's survey, the researcher also provided students with more open ended discussion questions in each class to provide more opportunities of engagement.

4. Results

Results from the first Cycle revealed that students' engagement levels increased significantly within the 5-week period of implementation of the supportive positive feedback strategy. Moreover, the quality of students' engagement improved where, at the beginning of the cycle, the majority of students' engagements were labeled as either inattentive or effort, however, by the end of the cycle, the

majority of student engagements were labeled as initiative. This shows that students engagement and participation behaviors have improved after implementation of the feedback strategy. Fig 1. Shows the weekly increase of student levels of engagement.

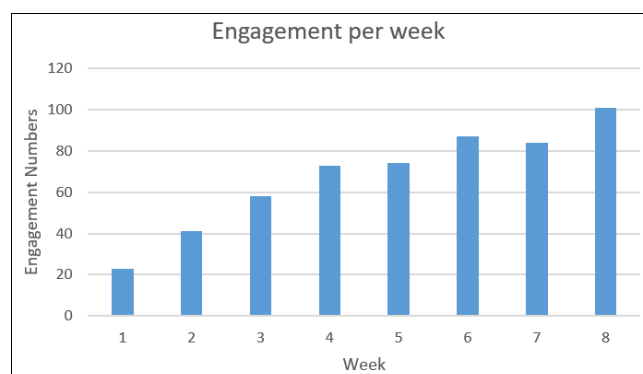


Fig 1: Levels of student engagement per week (quantitative)

As shown in Fig 1. Students demonstrated an increase in engagement levels from 23 engagements on the first week of Cycle 1 to 74 engagements on the final day of Cycle 1. Also, the high levels continued throughout cycle 2 (week 6 to 8), and slightly increased as well, to reach a maximum of 101 engagements per week.

Moreover, the results of the qualitative observations of student engagement showed that students' engagement quality improved over the period of both Cycles one and two. The more notable change had occurred in cycle 1, but continued throughout cycle 2 as well. Initially, 10 students were labeled as "inattentive", which indicates they either did not participate or engage in the classroom at all, or they had very limited responses that did not show engagement in the class material, and only 2 students were labeled as "initiative", which indicates that they engaged in classroom material through meaningful and productive answers or questions. However, by the end of cycle one and throughout cycle 2, all 20 students were labeled as "initiative" in every class period, which shows great improvement in the quality of engagements that students were demonstrating. Fig 2. Demonstrates the increase of students labeled as initiative and the decrease of inattentive students through the two cycles of the study.

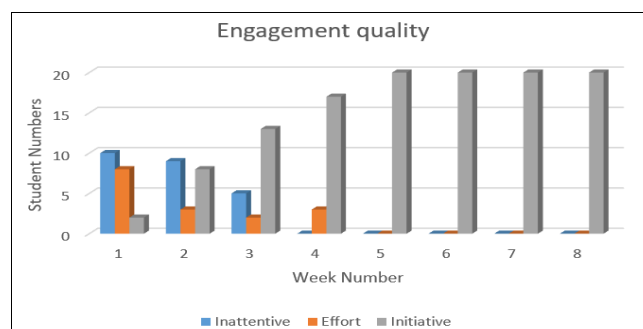


Fig 2: Quality of engagement by week (Qualitative)

The results from the survey at the end of cycle one indicated that approximately 9 students or approximately 35% were not satisfied with their current levels. This was a surprising result as, at the time of the survey, student participation and engagement levels had increased significantly. When asked

about the reasons that might hinder their engagement, two main themes emerged: 1) being in an online environment and attending classes from home affects their ability to participate, especially since their families are around, and 2) several female students mentioned that cultural shyness due to males being in the classroom stops them from participating. As for actions that would increase their participation, the majority of students mentioned group activities and providing more open-ended discussion questions during the lecture would increase their engagement and participation. This finding led the researcher to adjust the intervention in Cycle 2 by increasing the numbers of group activities and allowing students to engage in more opinion based issues and discussions.

The survey at the end of Cycle 2, showed similar results as far as reasons that hinder participation and strategies that would increase participation, however, only 4 students indicated they are not completely satisfied with their levels of engagement in the classes, two of whom indicated that they were "somewhat" satisfied, which shows that students' satisfaction of their roles in the classroom as engaged participants improved by the end of cycle 2.

5. Evaluation/ Discussion

The results of this action research study showed that supportive positive feedback can help increase student engagement and motivation to participate in an online class environment. This supports the research hypothesis posed in the beginning of this study in relation to the research question: "To what extent is using feedback as a positive reinforcement tool effective in increasing students' engagement and participation?". Moreover, this supports previous studies that suggested positive feedback can be used to increase student engagement and motivation (Chakraborty and Nafukho, 2014) [4]. Furthermore, the results indicated that students prefer to have opportunities of engagement through group work activities, as well as open-ended discussions that allow students to express their opinions freely without worrying about the correctness of their answers and the type of feedback they would receive from their instructor. This further validates the importance of creating learning environments that foster student active learning as emphasized by the UKPSF.

One benefit of the results of the study is that it provides instructors with a solution to the issue of struggling to engage students in an online learning environment, as Alqurashi (2016) [1] has pointed out that many instructors face difficulties in achieving the desired levels of engagement in online learning environments.

These results indicate that for future practice, instructors should seek to provide students with supportive positive feedback on a continuous basis in order to increase students' engagement in the classroom. The researcher plans to utilize this strategy throughout his lectures and continue to improve on the type of feedback and quantity of feedback to optimize student engagement and create a better learning environment for his students.

Limitations

There are several limitations that could affect the interpretation of the results of this study:

1. Students' engagement levels could have increased due to reaching more comfort levels with the instructor and their peers, and not directly due to the supportive positive

feedback they received. However, based on previous experiences with other classes, students' engagement levels and behaviors had not changed to this extent without the implementation of this feedback strategy.

2. While the students were not aware entirely of the implemented strategy, they were made aware of the research being conducted by the instructor and this could have caused students to increase their engagement significantly, to the point that in the last few weeks of the study, increased student engagement caused the lecture to continue past the allocated class time.

3. The data collection methods turned out to be overwhelming and, somewhat difficult to implement as the instructor needed to take notes during the class as a researcher and also perform his duties as the lecturer. This caused the researcher to use class recordings to validate the notes and double check on the engagement levels of the students.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to investigate to what extent is using feedback as a positive reinforcement tool effective in increasing students' engagement and participation. The results showed that using positive feedback as a positive reinforcement tool increases student engagement levels, as well as the quality of student engagement in an online learning environment.

Based on the results of the study, the researcher plans to continue to utilize this strategy throughout his career in teaching in order to create engaging and meaningful learning environment for the students. Moreover, the research plans to continue to research different strategies that improve the learning experience provided to the students, as well as the efficiency and quality of his own teaching. Attending virtual classes, and webinars, as well as participating in workshops designed to provide instructors with best practices in teaching and learning should be general practice for all university instructors, and the researcher will ensure to utilize all available opportunities to attend such webinars and workshops.

The researcher recognizes that, while the results of this action research study were promising, there continues to be room for improvement at different levels such as, the data collection methods, the intervention strategies, and the number of cycles. These are all aspects the researcher plans to work on in future action research studies.

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