



Teacher-student relationship factor affecting motivation and academic achievement in ESL classroom

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Abstract

The teachers need to understand that in many schools, students come from different cultures and backgrounds and each student deserves to be respected as an individual and their needs vary from one another. Thus, teachers must establish a positive relationship with their students in order to provide the learning opportunity as well as motivation they needed to be successful in both academic and life lessons. Therefore, it is necessary for future teachers to be exposed with such awareness as preparations before they went out into the real world. Research overseas has shown that better contact and more closeness between teachers and students results in higher student motivation. However, not many studies have been conducted locally, in Malaysia. Hence, this study investigates the pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding teacher-student relationship factor affecting student's motivation and academic performance in ESL classroom. The findings will be presented and elaborated upon this paper.

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Keywords: positive student-teacher relationship, student-teacher rapport, motivation in learning, ESL classroom, student's academic achievement, pre-service teachers' perceptions, school environment.

1. Introduction

There is an exhaustive list of differences that could be found between schools – especially, in terms of its education system, the administration, the teaching practices, the students and others – the relationship or the bond however, that existed between the students and the teachers are the same. Pianta (2004) describes positive teacher-student relationship as an open communication as well as emotional and academic support that exists between students and teachers. It is a form of relationship that is characterized by mutual acceptance, understanding, warmth, closeness, trust, respect, care and cooperation (Leitão & Waugh, 2007). Hence, the classroom is more than just an academic setting; it also involves humanistic values to learn about life.

However in accordance to Karuppaya (2008), positive teacher-student relationship which is the foundation to establish such roles are now very scarce and is obviously lacking among today's academic dwellers in Malaysia. Based on a report on discipline released by Malaysian Ministry of Education, statistic gathered from 1985 to 1992, truancy rated as the highest with 86.5% among other social problems in school. Malaysian Police Statistic in 2000, reported 5,829 criminal cases involving juvenile and in 2003 alone, it was reported that there were 3,627 bullying case in schools which immediately turned into criminal cases. Moreover in 2004, 1,600 bullying cases had occurred in schools all over the country (Malaysian Police Statistic). Hawker and Boulton (2000, as cited in Orpinas and Horne, 2003) stressed that being a victim of aggression from peers can have serious emotional consequences, such as depression and low self-esteem. Howard, Horne and Jolliff (2001) proposed that the relationship quality between teacher and student has great significance in reducing bullying. In addition from 2001 to 2004, there were 5,332 cases of illegal racing where those involved are individuals ranging from 16 to 28 years old (IPPBM report, 2006). In most cases, people tend to see behaviour problems as being associated with lower level of academic performance

(Nelson, Benner, Lane & Smith, 2004 as cited in O'Connor & McCartney, 2007) or related work habits among students whose relationships with teachers are marked by high level of negativity (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Looking into the ESL context, the standard of English among Malaysian students is on the decline despite the eleven years stint of learning the language (Saadiyah Darus & Kaladevi Subramaniam, 2009). Moreover, based on analysis of 2008 SPM result, other subjects have shown increased in the students' performance except English language subject (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2009). Thus, it appears that there is a falling out in the learning atmosphere and environment in the school system where both teachers and students are running parallel to each other – no communication or teamwork in the process of achieving the common goal of learning. Thus, this paper will report the pre-service teachers' perceptions on teacher-student relationship as a factor affecting student's motivation and academic performance in ESL classroom in Malaysia. It is also one of the research objectives to investigate their level of awareness with regard to the topic.

1.1 Motivation Model in Language Learning

Gardner (2001; 2007b; 2008c) proposed his new form of socio-educational model by presenting motivation as a dynamic construct with integrative motivation at its centre. In accordance with the research interests, the focus is on level 1 – external influences – particularly on the Motivators factor, the teachers. In line with suggestion in Dörnyei (2001), teachers are responsible for creating the basic motivational conditions, for generating and maintaining student motivation, and for encouraging positive self-evaluation. Students who experience sensitive, responsive and positive interactions with teachers perceive them as more supportive and are more motivated within the academic contexts of schooling (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

1.2 Positive Teacher-Student Relationship

Students who have positive relationships with their teachers feel motivated to learn and supported. Students are more engaged when they have a supportive relationship with the teacher; they tend to work harder in classroom, persevere, accept direction and criticism, cope better with stress and pay attention more to the teachers (Little & Kobak, 2003). Moreover, according to Hughes et. al. (2006), a teacher's typical level of support and concern can also be treated as one of the facets of classroom climate. The classroom atmosphere or environment has a strong impact upon students.

Therefore, significant effect of change in teacher-student relationship on achievement deserves more attention – considering the dynamic quality and nature of these relationships. Teacher emotional support and academic guidance is very important to enhance student's academic achievement (Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox & Bradley, 2002) and also to protect students who were already exhibiting externalizing behaviours (Silver et. al., 2005). Hence, interventions focused on improving student's academic achievement should focus on student's relationship with their teacher (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007).

2. Methodology

The research design used for this study is a qualitative method of interviewing. The sample consisted of six pre-service teachers who have finished their practical teaching course. They have been selected based on convenient sampling method and all of them are fourth year students enrolling in B. Ed. TESL course (Teaching English as a Second Language) in one public university in Malaysia. The interview guideline consisted of 21 questions which was divided into four different section to facilitate the analysis process. The data collected provides perspectives regarding student-teacher relationship as a factor affecting students' motivation as well as academic achievement in ESL classroom. The data was then, analyzed based on coding units of information and categories relevant to the study.

3. Results & Discussion

3.1 The Importance of Teacher-Student Relationship

Overall, the findings from the interviews all showed that the respondents agree that positive teacher-student relationship is important in English language teaching classroom. Based on their responds, teacher-student relationships contribute to students' increased level of motivation to learn as well as enhanced their academic achievement. However, the respondents also showed a varying degree of differences in their level of awareness in how this relationship can be manipulated in classes to ensure classroom management and effective learning.

They stressed on the needs for teachers to “get to know the students more”, “to respect” as well as “to earn their respect in return”.

“...I think, it is very important because...like in my experience, when I like the teacher...when I know the teacher well, I will pay more attention than towards the teachers that I don't like” (Respondent 4)

The analysis of the interview also unearths the pre-service teachers' perspectives on the importance of positive teacher-student relationship in English teaching classroom. All of them agree on the notion that it is vital to build a strong relationship with the students as it will ensure a successful learning conduct.

“Yes, I do...then, you'd know how to attract them...you'll know how to control them. It is important to have a good relationship with the students, because if they hate the teachers they'll probably skip the class.” (Respondent 6)

“...when I like the teacher, when I know the teacher well, I will pay more attention than towards the teachers that I the ones I don't like.” (Respondent 4)

Interaction between the students and the teachers becomes extremely important for a successful relationship throughout the whole school year. In addition, the first impression towards the teacher will influence the students' attitudes towards education in the coming future. A close relationship will help those students who are shy, with low self-esteem or find speaking in front of the classroom difficult. Through a good relationship with the teacher, they might gain some confidence and probably will get rid of the tension that they might have when they are in class.

Therefore, positive teacher-student relationship improves classroom management as well as the atmosphere in the classroom making it conducive, comfortable and safe for self-learning and self-discovery. Besides, positive relationship means the students like the teacher – more than anything, it will make them stay in their seats (hence, reduce the truancy level in schools).

3.2 Increase in Academic Achievement

Furthermore based on the interviews data, it seems that the outcomes of positive teacher-student relationships resulted in increased motivation level and also increased in academic achievement. They claimed to achieve excellent grades in the subjects that were taught by their favourite teachers. It seems that close relationship with the teacher helps motivate the students in their learning in school. As described by the respondents, a teacher that is “approachable”, “friendly” and “helpful” made their learning process more inviting, easier and less stressful.

“...it's English...I got A1 for SPM...she encourages me...motivates me... we got closer” (Respondent 1)

“For SPM, I got A1. She uses... not like the ordinary methods. She is more like a friend. She is very concerned about her students and not only about the grades... She was like a mother to us” (Respondent 3)

All six of the respondents scored mostly As in the subject taught by their favourite teachers, not to mention, most of them received A1 in SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia or Malaysian Secondary Public Examination) for the subject. In addition, most of the relationships continue even after they have finished schools. When asked why they like the teacher, they put emphasis on him or her being more like a friend than a teacher. They also stressed on teaching style where the teacher incorporates new methods into the lesson.

Nonetheless, since the Malaysian Education system is exam-oriented, teachers are being pressured to produce excellent results for the examinations. Factors such as stress and burn-out resulted in teachers being unable to open up to their students. They became unfriendly, harsh and short-tempered. It will be difficult for students to approach such teachers, especially, the high-risks and the low-achieving students.

Even so, they agree that the faults not only fall onto the teachers, there are other factors at work here as well. For example, a statement made by one of the respondents;

“You can’t only blame the teachers...school restricts what the teachers are supposed to do. So, if the school has to change, of course the teachers have to change as well, and then only we could get better.” (Respondent 1)

When referring to the situations in schools, cultural norms and the school system are the blocks that are obstructing the process of nurturing positive relationship between the students and the teachers.

“I wish the school could be not so strict...in a way that it could allow more freedom to the students. They are the students. They have their own thinking, so we have to give them more choice.” (Respondent 1)

3.3 Motivation & Engagement in Learning

Additionally, Osterman (2000 as cited in Reschly et. al., 2006) stated that student’s sense of belonging at school can be either categorized or described as negatively or positively. He said that negative notions are those related to tardiness, absences from school and dropping out, whereas positive are those of engagement, participation and investment in learning.

“Because...she pays more attention to me. That is one of the reasons. I don’t know... But my teacher...basically, she teaches me in traditional way... not using games in class, but still, I love them. And still, I like her” (Respondent 5)

In the above comment made by Respondent 5 showed that teacher’s support and attention resulted in better student’s classroom engagement. Such strong influence of high quality relationship with the teacher that Respondent 5 – despite uninteresting lesson – managed to stay focus and enjoy the lesson. Based on a study conducted by Bush et. al. (2006), students with higher quality relationships participate more and are more engaged in the classroom than those with lower quality relationships.

The most striking finding from this question was how they put emphasis on academic support. Based on Adler and Moulton (1998), students interpreted caring as “understanding, respecting academic confidentiality, encouragement, urging the completion of assignments, and making assignments fun, interesting, and adaptable to the style of the learner.”

“When compared to the teachers nowadays... My past teachers are very strict. But even though they are strict, they are very concerned about our knowledge...about our understanding of the subject...our morale too.” (Respondent 2)

Another respondent highlighted the need for the teacher to be interesting and fun when teaching. According to Pianta (1999), high quality relationship foster student’s self-regulatory and social skill development and have been found to be related to lower levels of externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems. However, this does need to translate into being a “buddy”. McLeod et al. (2003, as cited in Stronge, 2007) stated that “students need and want teachers to be firm. The ability to blend firmness with warmth and caring is difficult but certainly possible...”. Without a doubt, teacher is the key to the school foundation.

3.4 Teacher’s Beliefs

Five out of six of the respondents claimed that it is their beliefs as teachers to put students as their utmost priority.

“...every students are the same... we must treat them equally...We must not be biased towards them” (Respondent 3)

“I believe we are all human beings... They learn from me but I’m also learning from them” (Respondent 1)

The need to bond as well as to get to know the students are some of the factors that these pre-service teachers consider heavily when dealing with the students. Thus in accordance with the feedbacks from the rest of the interview sections, the results will be further explained in the discussion session below.

3.5 Student’s Future Development

The key indicator of successful school adjustment both in the present and in the future is determined based on the student’s ability to form a strong and positive relationship with the teacher (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Ladd et. al., 2002). Beyond academic achievement, positive teacher-student relationship has the ability to curb behavioural

problems (Hamre & Pianta, 2001) and also functions to counteract the effects of problems in family relationships (Noam & Herman, 2002).

“I know her when I was in primary school year 5 because I participated in a story-telling competition and she was the teacher responsible in teaching about the story-telling. So after that we got closer and even until now, we still keep in touch” (Respondent 1)

Based on the respondents’ answers, it appears that strong and positive relationship with the teacher is one that is long-lasting – continue well even after the schooling years. The teacher’s support influenced the students’ lives forever.

4. Conclusion

Factors such as academic achievement and student motivation are influenced by the quality of the relationship that the students and teachers have with each other. From the findings, it seems that the respondents are aware of its importance and roles in their duties as teachers. The process of completing the study itself invokes realizations and awareness among the respondents. Positive relationship improves student behaviour and motivation to learn as well as their academic achievement. Such vital key to successful learning and teaching conduct should be emphasized more at higher level, so that future teachers are equipped with the right mindset when they venture into school. As so rightly stated by Rhodes, Grossman and Resch (2000), teachers’ roles is to provide a safe context for support and guidance for the students.

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