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A Study of EFL college students’ self-handicapping and English performance

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore self-handicapping of college students towards English learning, to investigate the relationship among individual goal orientation, self-handicapping, and English performance, and to analyze the mediating role of self-handicapping between individual goal orientation and English learning performance, and to assess the model fit between empirically observed data and self-handicapping model proposed by the researcher of this study. The results of this study found that there was a statistically significant direct effect on self-handicapping and English performance & a positive relationship between individual goal orientation and English performance.

Keywords: Self-handicapping; individual goal orientation; learning outcomes; academic achievement; college students.

1. Introduction

In childhood, most people are confident of “learning”, and firmly believe that diligent efforts will lead to rich harvests. Therefore, they naively enjoy learning, until they finally realize that ability is not equal to efforts, it seems to be the end of their happy childhood. Thus, they treat abilities as fixed characteristics, and no longer regard efforts as the necessary factor of success. Some people misunderstand that more efforts only demonstrate their disability; when they fail after hard work, their self-esteem is pushed to the lowest end. Thus, they are no longer content, and they only work hard to survive in the competitive environment. Sadly, as a result, learning turns into a game of competence. When facing unknown challenges, to protect their public image, many students choose to escape from the real failure by some strategies of avoidance (Covington, 1992).

Covington (1992) mentioned in the self-worth theory that the need of self-acceptance is the most significant instinct of human beings. Many strategies of avoidance have been adopted by students. Self-handicap is one strategy which draws the attention of the scholars of educational psychology. For self-handicapping individuals, efforts are like double-edge blade. Although efforts can lead to success, the results can also negatively influence individuals’ self-value. The reason is that when people make the most efforts and still fail, they may attribute their failure to their disability (Covington & Omelich, 1979). Thus, in the competitive learning situation, students may actively develop some self-handicapping strategies only to shift others’ judgment away from their disability. However, some empirical studies suggested that self-handicapping is not the best strategy for individuals to reduce the threat of failure (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1994). There is a high cost to pay in the long term.
Moreover, through interview survey, some researchers found that many students level down their performances by avoidance (e.g. self-handicapping) to shift other’ attention on their disability. They may suggest that the learning is worthless and they try to leave the schools. However, interestingly, their teachers tend to attribute the students’ behaviors to their laziness, inefficient of school, and lack of parental support. They hardly recognize that the atmosphere they create is the major cause of the students’ avoidance (Turner et al., 2002). Many foreign studies have concerned self-handicapping; however, in Taiwan, there lacks educational researches on self-handicapping. Thus, this paper tended to probe into university students’ self-handicapping on English learning in Taiwan.

2. Purpose of the study

According to current learning views and new study trends on self-handicapping, this study focuses on the learning course in college. The purposes of this study included the following three points: to probe into college students’ self-handicapping in English learning, to probe into the relationship between individual goal orientation, self-handicapping, and English learning outcomes, and to validate the self-handicapping model constructed by this study according to theoretical literatures and empirical studies.

3. Literature review

For learners, self-handicapping is a kind of learning behavior instead of learning outcomes. In order to verify whether self-handicapping is the negative avoidance for the learners, this study probed into the pair relationships among self-handicapping & learning outcomes and individual goal orientation & learning outcomes, and further clarified the relationships among individual goal orientation, self-handicapping and learning outcomes.

3.1 Relationship between self-handicapping & learning outcomes

Learning outcomes in this study include the learners’ academic achievement, effort and persistence. Academic achievement refers to the learning outcome of grades after the participants experience the learning. Since it is concrete and collectable, it tends to be treated as an important source for educational researches to analyze the learners’ learning outcomes. In addition, Pintrich’s (2000) research on the learners’ self-regulated learning demonstrated that effort and persistence are the possible learning performance in the learners’ learning. Urdan and Midgley (2001) indicated that effort and persistence are the learners’ performance of accommodation. According to Volet (1997), effort means the learners’ ambition, time devoted and hard work in specific learning. According to Cherng (2003), persistence means the learners’ persistent attitude in learning.

With regard to the relationship between self-handicapping and academic achievement, some studies suggested that the individuals with self-handicapping would tend to have the behavior unrelated to works to find the excuses for their future possible failure. Thus, they are less likely to be successful. Jones and Berglas (1978) indicated that highly self-handicapping learners would have negative academic achievement since they have been restricting themselves for long term. Garcia et al. (1995) also indicated that self-handicapping could effectively predict university students’ academic achievement. The highly self-handicapping individuals have the most inferior academic achievement. Moreover, current studies (e.g. Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998) have indicated that the learners’ self-handicapping negatively influences their average academic grade and self-evaluated academic performance. In other words, self-handicapping can negatively predict the learners’ efforts. In addition, with regard to the relationship between self-handicapping and persistence, many empirical studies have found that in the learning process, when the self-handicapping individuals recognize their incompetence, they would give up learning to avoid the exposure of their disability (e.g. Tice, 1991; Hirt et al., 1991). Thus, this study infers that self-handicapping negatively influence the learners’ persistence. In other words, self-handicapping can negatively predict the learners’ persistence.

3.2 Relationship between individual goal orientation & learning outcomes

According to many foreign and domestic studies, the learners’ individual goal orientation is closely related to their academic achievement. Elliot and Church (1997) suggested that university students with high degree of
approach-performance goal tend to have better academic achievement than those with high degree of avoidance-performance goal. Researches in Taiwan have reached similar results as foreign studies, regardless of the cultural difference (e.g. Cherng, 2003).

As to the effort, Pintrich (2000) suggested that learners could adjust their time and effort management according to their individual goal orientation and perception of work difficulty. For instance, according to the view of normative goal theory, individuals with mastery goal tend to believe that success resulted from the efforts. Even when they encounter possible failure, they would work hard to overcome the obstacles. However, individuals with performance goal believe that their incompetence would be exposed when they fail with more efforts; thus, they tend to avoid learning to confuse others’ perception of their ability (Ames, 1992).

Urdan and Midgley (2001) indicated that approach-mastery goal would positively predict the learners’ orientation behavior; approach-performance goal could positively predict the learners’ approach behavior. However, the prediction is more insignificant than that of approach-mastery goal; avoidance-performance goal would negatively predict the learners’ approach behavior. Cherng’s (2003) research finding of four-dimensional goal orientation on persistence significantly supported the statement above. His study showed that individuals with approach-mastery goal have the benefits of approach and mastery orientation. Although approach-mastery goal and approach-performance goal could both positively predict the learners’ persistence, the prediction of the former is more significant than the latter. Avoidance-mastery goal could also positively predict the learners’ persistence. However, the prediction is more insignificant than that of approach-mastery goal. Avoidance-performance goal involves the negative effects of avoidance and performance orientation and thus it could negatively predict the learners’ persistence. Generally speaking, the learners’ individual goal orientation influences their persistence.

Based on the literature review above, it is known that the learners’ individual goal orientation influences their academic achievement, effort and persistence. According to the findings upon goal theory, approach-mastery goal learners can enjoy what they learn regardless of the learning obstacles or frustration. They have more effort and persistence and better academic achievement. Avoidance-mastery goal individuals have the positive effect of mastery orientation and negative effect of avoidance. Thus, although they perform well in academic achievement, effort and persistence, the effect is not as significant as that of approach-mastery goal. Approach-performance goal learners have the benefit of approach and poor adaptation of performance orientation. Thus, the influences on the learners’ academic achievement, effort and persistence are usually inconsistent. However, learners with avoidance performance orientation tend to avoid learning, make less effort and be not persistent to confuse others’ perception of their abilities. Their academic achievement would also be inferior.

3.3 Relationship among goal orientation, self-handicapping, & learning outcomes

According to past studies, learners’ self-handicapping can directly predict their learning outcomes (Frankel & Snyder, 1978; Kimble, Kimble, & Croy, 1998); individual goal orientation can also predict learning outcomes (Elliot & Church, 1997; Skaalvik, 1997; Urdan, 1997). In addition, the learners’ individual goal orientation directly influences self-handicapping (Garcia et al., 1996; Midgley & Urdan, 2001).

Therefore, the results above imply that although individual goal orientation directly influences learning outcomes, it can also indirectly influence learning outcomes through the mediating effect of self-handicapping. In other words, self-handicapping can be the mediating variable between individual goal orientation and learning outcomes. However, most of the past studies focused on the analysis of pair variable relationship. There is a lack of researches on the relationship between the three aspects and on the possible mediating effect. Upon the literature review, individual goal orientation can predict self-handicapping which can also predict learning outcomes. Moreover, individual goal orientation directly influences learning outcomes. Therefore, will self-handicapping be the mediating variable between individual goal orientation and learning outcomes? It is the question worthy of further study.

4. Method

The participants were 499 college students who took freshmen or sophomore English in one of the colleges in the northern part of Taiwan in the academic year of 2008. The instruments utilized in this study were all designed by the researcher of this study, including Self-handicapping Scale designed based on Arkin and Baumgardner’s (1985)
theory, Individual Goal Orientation Scale designed based on Midgley and Urdan’s (2001) study, Effort Scale designed based on Volet’s (1997) questionnaire, and Persistence Scale designed based on Cherng’s (2003) inventory. Self-handicapping scale includes four sub-scales (intrinsic-behavioral self-handicap, intrinsic-claimed self-handicap, extrinsic-behavioral self-handicap, and extrinsic-claimed self-handicap). The sub-scales respectively involve 6, 6, 6, and 6 items. There are 24 items in the full scale. Individual goal orientation scale also includes four sub-scales (approach-mastery goal, avoidance-mastery goal, approach-performance goal, and avoidance-performance goal). The sub-scales respectively involve 6, 6, 6, and 6 items. There are 24 items in the full scale. The effort scale includes three sub-scales (aspiration level, amount of time, and amount of effort). There are four items in the full scale. The persistence scale includes six items in the full scale. The items in all scales are rated based on Likert 6-point scale. After conducting the survey, data were inputted into computer for statistical analysis by SPSS for Windows 14.0 and LISREL 8.72; 0.05 was treated as the statistical significance level.

5. Results of the study

The results of this study found that the hypothesized model is fitted the criteria of preliminary model fit. Accordingly, the self-regulation model constructed by this study is appropriate. As for the overall model fit encompassing the absolute model fit, baseline comparison, and parsimony-adjusted measures, firstly, the Chi-square is achieved the significant level ($X^2_{(41)} = 180.96$, $N = 499$, $p < .05$), which implies that the hypothesized model is fitted the sample data set. However, Chi-square value is sensitive to the sample size; as the sample size increases to above 200, the chances of chi-square reaching a significant level will increase. Besides the Chi-square test, this study also considers other criteria for the absolute model fit, such as GFI, AGFI, and RMSEA. The GFI (0.94) and AGFI (0.9) are all above the criteria of 0.9, the outstanding standard. In addition, RMSEA (0.083) is achieved the acceptable standard as well. Secondly, in the parsimony-adjusted measures, the NFI, NNFI, CFI, IFI, RFI are 0.98, 0.97, 0.98, 0.98, 0.97, respectively, which are all above criteria of 0.9 (Hair et al., 1998). Therefore, the hypothesized model and the data set are fitted. These outstanding results showed the overall model fit between the hypothesized self-regulation model and the data set is appropriate. Thirdly, in the baseline comparison, the PNFI (0.73) and PGFI (0.58) present that this hypothesized model is a lean model. In sum, all the results of the model fit showed the hypothesized model can be well-explained the sample data.

As for the fit of internal structure of model, there are three Cronbach’s alpha indices of the observed variable below the criteria of 0.5; the other eight indices are between 0.51 0.79. The composite reliability of the latent variables, goal orientation, self-handicapping, and learning outcomes, are 0.81, 0.85, 0.84, respectively. In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) of the latent variables are 0.53, 0.66, 0.58, respectively. The above three indices show the hypothesized model provided the good quality of reliability and validity.

6. Conclusions

The following two conclusions were made based on the results of this study.

6.1 Factors affecting learning outcomes include goal orientation and self-handicapping.

The results of this study showed that college students had a slightly low English achievement; therefore, teachers should put more emphasis on teaching. Most of the previous studies focused on students’ intelligence based on their grades. Through the development of technology and statistical methodology, researchers gradually shift their studies towards learners’ learning process. Based on the results of this empirical study, goal orientation and self-handicapping are the key factors influencing learning outcomes. Therefore, teachers should pay more attention on students’ strategy use on the aspects of goal orientation and self-handicapping. Hopefully, through well-designed instruction and constant practice, students could promote their learning interests and have better English performance.
6.2 Putting more emphasis on the study of goal orientation is necessary.

The results of this study showed that students had a very low score on the aspect of avoidance-performance goal; however, students had a very high score on the aspect of approach-performance goal which needs to be further explored. Hopefully, future researches regarding this field will be conducted more precisely and more efficiently, and bring college English teachers more desirable information and results.

References

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