

ผลของการรับรู้ความง่ายต่อความวิตกกังวลของผู้เรียน

Take it Easy: the Effect of Perceived Easiness on Students' Anxiety

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บทคัดย่อ

เนื่องจากความวิตกกังวลของนักเรียนนักศึกษาก่อให้เกิดผลกระทบในแง่ลบหลายประการ เช่น ในด้านแรงจูงใจในการเรียนรู้ และผลการเรียน ดังนั้นนักวิจัยด้านการศึกษาควรคิดหากลยุทธ์ในการลดความกังวลและความไม่แน่ใจให้แก่ผู้เรียน วัตถุประสงค์ของงานวิจัยนี้ คือ เพื่อทดสอบว่าการบอกกล่าวเกี่ยวกับความง่ายของใบงานจะสามารถช่วยลดความกังวลของนักศึกษาได้หรือไม่ การวิจัยแบบกึ่งทดลองได้ถูกนำมาใช้ในชั้นเรียนผู้เข้าร่วมจำนวน 105 คน ได้ถูกขอให้แก้ไขปัญหาคณิตศาสตร์ โดยกลุ่มแรก ถูกบอกว่าใบงานของเขาจะง่ายและอีกกลุ่มถูกบอกว่าใบงานของเขายากทั้งคู่ ที่ทั้งสองกลุ่มได้ใบงานที่มีคำถามเดียวกัน การเปรียบเทียบโดยการทดสอบค่าที่ได้ถูกนำมาใช้ และพบว่า ผู้ที่ถูกบอกว่าใบงานง่ายนั้นมีความกังวลน้อยกว่าอีกกลุ่ม ผลการวิจัยนี้สามารถถูกนำไปแนะนำผู้สอนให้จูงใจผู้เรียนโดยกล่าวถึงความง่ายของกิจกรรมในชั้นเรียนและกล่าวถึงจุดมุ่งหมายของการเรียนรู้ว่าสามารถบรรลุได้กลยุทธ์การบอกกล่าวนี้ควรถูกทดสอบและถูกใช้ในบริบทอื่นๆ เช่น พูดเชิญชวนให้ประชาชนปฏิบัติตามกฎหมาย เป็นต้น

คำสำคัญ: ความง่าย, วิตกกังวล, การรับรู้, แรงจูงใจ

Abstract

Because students' anxiety caused numerous negative effects on students' learning motivation and class performance, researchers in the area of education should identify the strategies to reduce students' anxiety and uncertainty. The objective of the current study is to test if teacher's informing regarding the easiness of worksheet has influence on students' anxiety. Quasi-experiment was used in a classroom. One-hundred and five participants were asked to solve math problems in the given worksheet. The first group was told that its worksheet is the easy version, and another group was told

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that they received the difficult version. In fact, both versions have the same math problems. Independent t-test was used to compare the results from both groups. The findings reveal that the students who perceived that their worksheet was easy have lower level of anxiety than the other group. These helps suggest other teachers and instructors to encourage their students by informing regarding easiness of the task or reachable academic goals. This informing strategy should be tested and used in other contexts, such as using as compliance gaining method for persuading people to follow the laws.

Keywords: easiness, anxiety, perception, motivation.

Introduction

One of the most important responsibilities of teachers is to improve their students' class performance. Thus, it has been questioned what the factors that help benefit class performance and its obstructions are. Numerous research studies showed learning strategies that could heighten class performance, such as using problem-based learning (PBL), media-based or animation-based learning (ABL), and medical-related comics. While these mentioned studies required some extra class material to enhance class performance and learning motivation, the objective of the present study is to test the effect of perceived easiness on students' anxiety. In this case, teachers do not need to prepare additional material, but they only need to inform their students regarding the easiness of class exercise. Anxiety, as one of negative traits, sent a negative impact on learning motivation, which is the major predictor of class performance and life achievement. If teachers' communication pattern could help reduce students' anxiety, it should be able to benefit students' learning motivation, class performance, and life achievement.

Just as an early study that found a negative effect of anxiety on learning motivation, so the first researcher of the current study similarly experienced the impact of students' anxiety in the same way. As a past school teacher, a tutor, and a university instructor, the first researcher found a difficulty to teach students with high level of anxiety. This is not only because anxiety performs is a barrier in learning activities, but anxiety also prevents them to think and create work themselves. Based on this experience and short prior interviews, students who had anxiety regarding drawing and painting would try to copy some existing images from websites, since they were afraid that their own original drawing might not be good enough to submit as class assignment. For students in English class, when they felt uncertainty to write English essays, they chose to use translating application instead of using their own writing skills. Using translating application did not help their essays more readable, and the worst thing was that they lost opportunity to learn how to complete an essay. Similarly for animation class, students with anxiety commonly intended to draw Chibi (super deformed with big head and tiny body) because they could avoid drawing human with actual anatomy. According to these three examples,

anxiety and uncertainty in students should be removed. The current study tests the variable, perceived easiness, if it can be a strategy for anxiety reduction.

Literature Review

Anxiety Reduction

Anxiety refers to distress in communication, including verbal, non-verbal, intrapersonal, and also interpersonal communication (Mattick & Clarke, 1998, pp. 455-470). The interaction between teachers and students, even through homework assignment or direct verbal communication can cause anxiety and uncertainty in students. In the previous study of Arunrangsiwed (2017, pp. 3-13), some people are threatened by uncertainty because of insufficient information, losing meaningful objects, and perceived insecurity. Aforementioned examples, given in the first part of this article about the first researcher's experience, could be considered as a part of perceived insecurity and lack of information. Both of these causes drove the students to imitate others' work rather than thinking themselves. In the same academic article (Arunrangsiwed, 2017, pp. 3-13), anxiety reduction strategies were also discussed by contributing based on the original uncertainty reduction theory of Berger and Calabrese (1975, pp. 99-112). One of its suggestions is to prejudice, either in positive or negative way. When teachers notified their students that class assignment was easy, it could be one way to make their student prejudice in homework that they could finish it on their own. This kind of uncertainty reduction might strengthen students' homework motivation. Conversely, Ozcelik, Cagiltay, and Ozcelik (2013, pp. 12-20) found that the uncertainty or anxiety could somehow benefit students, since it helped extend the time that students spent to find out the right answers for a class problem. However, there were a larger number of papers showing that researchers worried about students' anxiety and intended to reduce it, which is similar to the purpose their current research study.

Although a proper level of uncertainty could motivate students to learn, but teachers should not use it at the level that it can cause anxiety in their students (Barker & Gower, 2009, pp. 338-341). Earlier, Carroll and Ryan-Wenger (1999, pp. 24-31) conducted a content analysis and found that children's anxiety could be read by looking at their drawing. Later, LaRoque and Obrzut (2006, pp. 381-393) measured children's anxiety from their pencil pressure in their drawings. There is a long time belief that children could communicate via drawings better than writing (Hale, 1995), and in Julliard, Gujral, Hamil, Oswald, Smyk, and Testa's study (2000, pp. 118-124) showed that drawing activities in seminar class could help reduce anxiety in first-year students. This means that drawing is a tool to narrow down the gap between teachers' and students' communication pattern. To narrow down the physical gap is also help reduce students' anxiety as could be seen in Chinpakdee's study (2015, pp. 61-90), that students' anxiety could be decreased when English-language teachers walk around the class to see students' work, but not when the teachers just sit in front of classroom. Perceived easiness, the predictor of the current study, has never been directly tested in previous studies, so to

include it in this quantitative study would help fill in the gap of early knowledge and help suggest teaching strategies to other teachers.

Perceived Easiness

Easiness has been explored in other area such as technology use and design. This could be seen in application and website that the designers and developers need remind themselves to create user-friendly elements or easy-to-use tools (Bangthamai, Satiman, &Autthawuttikul, 2015, pp. 91-104; Nam, 2014, pp. 211-220). This could imply that the easiness is a cause that brings people to use online service. Comparatively, the perceived easiness should help increase students' willingness to study. Since intrinsic motivation is the predictor of self-efficacy (Liang & Chang, 2014, pp. 36-42), which means the belief that one has ability to achieve one's goal by oneself. The meaning of self-efficacy is closed to self-confidence in reaching to one's goal. One of the most successful methods to develop learning motivation in English class is to increase students' self-confidence and decrease students' self-comparison to others (Mastan&Teo, 2017, pp. 161-186). The perceived easiness should be able to improve students' belief in own self or their self-confidence. Price (2013), as a painting teacher, suggested the way to develop art students' confidence by encouraging their student to keep practicing on fast watercolor painting. Her students needed to use large brushed on loose leaf paper. To repeat creating many paintings will help heighten students' confidence and their perceived easiness on painting skill development. In the case that practicing could not be done, teachers and advisors may need to verbally inform their students that their academic goal is not too difficult to get to (Coombe, 2014).

Another aspect regarding easiness used in academic context is when fan fiction was allowed to be composed as a part of writing assignment (Arunrangsiwed& Beck, 2016, pp. 40-58). This is because students have sufficient information about original plot and character development (Jessop, 2010, pp. 29-34). Using existing material or website template in web design class, similarly, caused perceived easiness on students who needed to create a website (Ariga& Watanabe, 2008, pp. 815-828). Sometimes, there are various parts in the same lesson, in which, some are hard and some are easy. One of the hardest parts perceived byengineer studentswas their visual imagination skill. Pun (2011) has made this part easier by providing them a visual art class. In this case, Pun (2011) has solved the difficult part and made the whole learning process easier.

Students with different traits need different learning technique (Fariba, 2013, pp. 112-116; Saengsawang, Langka, Uthairatanakit, andSemheng, 2016, pp. 14-28), but in-class studying, teachers need to choose only one technique to use at a time, because it will be hard to separate the class and use specific technique for each student. Hence, it comes to the question that which technique the teacher should use. The current study was conducted to answer if perceived easiness could really help reduce students' anxiety. Chanprasert and Wichadee(2015, pp. 131-156) identified the causes of anxiety in learning Japanese languages and one of those causes could be controlled by teachers, that is experience of in-class learning. Since teachers can control this cause of anxiety, they may construct

a set of belief into their students which will bring about a changing in attitude; from perceived hardness to be perceived easiness. This causal relationship is consisted in a communication theory, expectancy-value theory, of Martin Fishbein(Fishbein&Middlestadt, 1987, pp. 361-371).

Objective

To compare the level of anxiety of students who were told that the task is easy and those who were told that the task is difficult.

Hypothesis

The researchers of the current study hypothesized that the students who were told that the task was easy (perceived easiness) would have less anxiety than the students who were told that the task was difficult. In other words, perceived easiness has negative impact on anxiety.

Method

Research Design

The current study used quasi-experiment conducting during class period in a large university in Bangkok city, Thailand. The data collection was done during January to June of 2017. Target research population is undergraduate students in Thailand, but participants in this quasi-experiment were selected by using convenience sampling technique.

Participants

The participants of the current study are 105 students in Communication Arts program. They were from 3 classes, one research-based learning class and two English classes. Forty seven percent were female and 53 percent were male. The average age was 19.31 years old.

Procedure

In each classroom, students generally sat on both side of the middle walk way. In other words, in a classroom, there were two sides of students' tables. The first researcher provided each student a math worksheet. The participants who sat on the right side of classroom were told that they got an easy-version of worksheet and the ones who sat on the left were told that they got a difficult version. The researcher gave them 5 minutes to finish the whole worksheet. There were 6 versions of worksheet, for preventing students to copy the answers from others. Every worksheet consists same 25 math problems, but with different arrangement. After 5 minutes, every student had to stop filling in the answer and start to rate the level of anxiety, 0 – 10 (0 = no anxiety; 10 = high anxiety). Because all students had to complete same math problems, their level of anxiety would only be caused by the message that the researcher told them.

Measure

The only scale used in the present study is for measuring participants' level of anxiety. As mentioned earlier, this scale is a single item scale, ranked from 0 to 10. Because the scale consisted only one item, its reliability was not able to be reported.

Analysis

The purpose of this data collection was to compare between two groups of students, who were told that the worksheet was easy and difficult, so independent t-test was used to compare the level of anxiety of both groups of participants.

Result

The group that was told that their worksheet was the easy version (Mean = 4.714; S.D. = 3.317) has lower level of anxiety than the other group (Mean = 6.107; S.D. = 2.246). By using independent t-test, a statistically significant difference was found between the levels of anxiety of both groups ($t = 2.484$; $p = .015$). Since all worksheets contain the same math problems, the researcher's statement really has an effect on students' level of anxiety. This could imply that if the teacher tells their students that the task is easy, the students will have less anxiety. This result supports the hypothesis of the current study.

Table 1. *Independent T-Test between the groups with perceived easiness and perceived difficulty*

Group	Mean (Level of Anxiety)	N	S.D.	S.E.	t	p-value	Mean Difference
Perceived easiness	4.714	49	3.317	.474	2.484	.015	1.393
Perceived difficulty	6.107	56	2.246	.300			

Discussion

Lee and Kim (2014, 131-139) found that the level of intrinsic motivation in studying math of middle school and high school was continuously reduced. This might be because math problems and method were increasingly difficult especially for math and science program. To tell the students initially that math class is not as difficult as they think should be able to help motivate them to learn and save them from poor psychological well-being.

Based on studies mentioned in literature review, several researchers and university instructors had a similar goal which is to heighten students' learning motivation and increase their perceived easiness regarding the class. Without spelling out the words, scholars have improved students perceived easiness to reduce their level of anxiety by allowing them to use existing materials to create their own work (Ariga & Watanabe, 2008, pp. 815-828; Jessop, 2010, pp. 29-34), encouraging them to keep practicing the same task to decrease difficulty (Price, 2013), and adding the missing skills which were the main cause of perceived hardness (Pun, 2011). One thing that could be noticed on these researchers' goal of perceived easiness improvement is to strengthen students' class performance. Since this teaching method was introduced in this study, the researchers expect to see other effective methods contributing from both this study and others.

Limitations

The major limitation of the current study is that the participants were from only one major in a university. Hence, the finding may not be able to be generalized to other groups of students. Moreover, quasi-experiment was used instead of true experiment, so the participants were not randomly assigned to each group. This might cause the weakness in internal validity. Another limitation is the scale that was used to measure the level of anxiety, which is single-item scale. This might cause a low level of reliability.

Implication

Although the current study has several limitations, it is still worth to apply the result to use in other class and other contexts, such as in different academic stages or in different country. In the context, such in an organization, communication practitioners should also apply this strategy to use as a compliance gaining strategy. The managers could inform their employees regarding the easiness of the task to reduce their anxiety and extend their willingness to finish their work. This easiness informing is not existed in compliance gaining strategy, written by Marwell and Schmitt (1967, pp. 350-364). Thus, the result of this study could also help contribute a theory in the area of communication. Another suggestion based on the findings is for conducting a governmental campaign or announcement. People should be informed that illegal actions are a lot harder to do than being a good citizen. This communication strategy should be tested in such the contexts to see its effectiveness.

Future Studies

Future studies should use a longitudinal design to see how long-lasting the effect of informed message is, and to test if there might be some negative effects after people were told about the easiness of the task; such as increasing laziness and lowering concentration. The researchers encourage other scholars to identify other strategies to reduce students' anxiety and increase their learning motivation. According to early studies, their researchers have used communication pattern (Jurik, Gröschner, and Scidel, 2014, pp. 132-139; Trautwein & Ludtke, 2009, pp. 243-258) or other stimuli (Dujmovic & Bancic, 2014; Manowong, 2016, pp. 137-161; Mayer, 2014, pp. 171-173; Oh, Robinson, and Lee, 2013, pp. 1334-1341). Researchers of future studies may both repeating teaching methods in different context or develop new method and test it as well as we had done in the present study.

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