

Better Writers, Not Just Better Papers: The Impact of Perceived Competence and Goal Orientation on the Writing Performance of ESL and Native English Speakers

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ABSTRACT

Previous literature indicates that individuals can be categorized into one of two general goal orientations – performance or mastery – that determine approaches to learning. A performance goal orientation reflects a need to demonstrate competence, while a mastery goal orientation reflects the belief that competence develops over time through practice and effort. It was hypothesized that priming mastery (vs. performance) orientation would result in stronger (vs. weaker) writing performance and retention, and we expected the effect to be moderated by perceived competence. Participants were 44 undergraduate students (12 male, 32 female; 26 native English Speakers, 18 English as Second Language). Participants completed a perceived competence scale and were randomly assigned to either a mastery or performance orientation condition and received the corresponding prompt for the writing task. The findings suggest that mastery orientation increases performance among native and ESL speakers. Additionally, the impact of the mastery (vs. performance) prompt appeared to be greatest on ESL students.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Wisconsin System is currently facing budget cuts in state funding that could dramatically impact the campuses (Simmons, 2015). During these times, student tutoring and learning centers often come under scrutiny to demonstrate their impact on student learning. The proposed study aims to demonstrate the importance of such resources by examining the impact of perceived competence and goal orientation on English as a second language (ESL) and native English speaking students' performance on a language task.

Previous literature indicates that individuals can be categorized into one of two general goal orientations – performance versus mastery. Research suggests that goal orientation is the determinant of students' approach to learning and achievement situations, effort expenditure, and persistence (Dupeyrat & Marine, 2005). Furthermore, students' motivation and goal orientation are influenced by their mindsets or implicit theories of intelligence (i.e., lay beliefs about the importance of “natural” ability and effort) (Shankland, Troia, & Wolbers, 2012).

A performance goal orientation reflects a need to demonstrate competence, especially in competition with others, with the ultimate goal of being judged favorably (Dekker & Fischer, 2008). These individuals tend to hold external motives, being influenced by instrumental gains such as a passing grade, and can resort to cheating behaviors to meet the requirements of a task (Ormrod, 2013; Wrzesniewski et al., 2014). Holding a fixed mindset, or the belief that competence is a stable characteristic that one either has or does not have, often leads these individuals to engage in self-handicapping behaviors to justify failure that may be viewed as a lack of competence (Ormrod, 2013). Mastery goals, in contrast, align with internal motivations and growth mindsets. One who holds mastery goals believes that competence develops over time through practice and effort. A recent study found that behaviors such as undertaking challenges and persisting in the pursuit of academic success are more frequently reported by those with both mastery goal orientation and internal motivation (Cerasoli & Ford, 2013). Learners with internal motivation display interest in classroom activities and the learning process and seek out challenges to maximize opportunities for learning. Holding a growth mindset with an understanding of intelligence as flexible, that it can be changed if enough effort is invested, encourages individuals to view errors as normal and a useful method of improving performance (Ormrod, 2013). Indeed, Komarraju and Nadler (2013) found that students who hold a growth view of intelligence report higher levels of academic success.

Besides goal orientation, the proposed study seeks to examine perceived competence, another factor identified by educational psychologists as being critical for student success. Perceived competence is an aspect of self-efficacy related to a student's overall confidence in their general skill and ability level (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013), and is predictive of academic performance (e.g., Alercao & Simoes, 2014). Students' mindsets or implicit assumptions about intelligence and competence, and their goals and motivation (whether mastery or performance oriented), are predictive of how they develop self-efficacy (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013).

Goals, Motivation, and Writing

Strong writing skills are a key outcome associated with higher education (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007). Saddler's (2012) research on motivating college student writers reports that students who struggle with writing often experience motivational difficulties related to goal orientations. Thus, appropriate motivational mindsets and goals are a necessary component in any learning task and especially so in the writing context (Ince, 2002).

For writers, differences in goal orientations often manifest in the writing process itself. Those who report having mastery goals and internal motivation to write engage in what is referred to as a recursive writing process, one that focuses on self-regulation and metacognitive strategies (Perl, 1980). Self-regulation is a student's belief that achievement outcomes are their responsibility and that acquisition of these outcomes are systematic and controllable (Zimmerman, 1990). Metacognition refers to one's awareness of his or her own ongoing cognitive processes, and both strategies are associated with proactively seeking out information to master academic environments (Berger, 2009). Conversely, those who hold performance goals with more externally focused motives are less engaged with the process of writing and are more likely to engage in a linear writing process that focuses more on the completion of the task at hand at the expense of the quality of the work (Perl, 1980). Goal orientations and motivations can be influenced by student-based mentoring programs such as university learning centers. Indeed, Alarco and Simoes (2013) found that students' levels of unexcused absences, a measure of motivation, were lower in mentored groups than in non-mentored groups.

A rich context to explore motivational factors in the writing process is with ESL students, in comparison to native English students. Examining these cognitive processes across cultures, however, could lead to confounding effects. Past research has found that performance goals are more prevalent in Eastern societies, such as China, that place strong emphasis on maintaining the success of the group. These environments value embeddedness and stress the importance of social evaluations. In autonomous societies where value is placed on the individual's goals, such as the United States, the researchers found higher levels of mastery goal orientation (Dekker & Fischer, 2008). In their international study, Alarco and Simoes (2014) found that student based mentoring play an important role in predicting motivational behaviors and improving students' perceived competence and resulting academic achievement. Thus, the critical interaction between perceived competence and goal orientation on writing performance in this study might validate the importance of such learning centers in all cultures.

In the current study, we were interested in investigating how perceived competence and goal orientations impact students' performance on language tasks. Controlling for differences in perceived competence, we hypothesized that both native and ESL students will perform better on the language task when presented with mastery than performance goals, and that the prompt will have a greater effect on ESL students than native English students (i.e., the difference between the mastery and performance prompts).

METHODS

Participants were 44 undergraduate students (12 male, 32 female; 26 native English Speakers, 18 English as Second Language). Under the auspices of the Writing Center director, Dr. Virginia Crank, a list of students who had used the UW-L writing center over the last two years was obtained. An email was sent to eligible students inviting them to participate in the study. The students were compensated five dollars for their participation.

A 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design was used with student language status/perceived competence (native English vs. ESL) and goal orientation prompt (mastery vs. performance) as the manipulated variables. At the start of the study, students completed a four-item Perceived Competence Scale to assess their feelings of competence about completing the language task (e.g., "I feel confident in my ability to learn this material"). As part of the lab session, participants received instructions, which included goal orientation prompts expressed as statements that reflected either mastery or performance goals, depending on their randomly assigned condition. The mastery goal orientation prompt adopted the motto of the Writing Center, "Better writers, not just better papers," while the performance goal orientation prompt reflected the importance of earning a high score on the task. As such, the mastery prompt read "What we are interested in is how students develop their writing skills using Writer's Help. We're getting students with different levels of writing experience and collecting data on how they learn to write and improve using Writer's Help." The performance prompt read "What we are interested in is how well some students perform on Writer's Help exercises compared to others. We're getting students with different levels of writing experience and collecting data on how well they perform compared to others." After reading the instructions, participants completed an English language task using a Qualtrics based exercise that reflected the software commonly used by UW-L students called Writer's Help. The critical assessment exercises, pre-tested to be at an appropriate level of difficulty, consisted of a series of questions where participants chose what they thought was the best answer. Each participant had one attempt to complete the task. Time 1 consisted of ten items, which asked

questions related to subject-verb agreement (e.g., “Fables are short stories that [convey / conveys] a moral”), sentence structure, commas, sentence fragments, irregular verbs, and articles. A key difference between Time 1 and Time 2 is that in Time 1 participants had access to a help section. For example, if a participant did not know how to use commas correctly, he/she could reference the help section. After the language task, participants completed an Intrinsic Motivation Inventory to assess their interest, enjoyment, perceived competence, effort, importance, and perceived choice related to the language task (e.g., I tried very hard on this activity). After about 10 minutes, participants completed exercises in Time 2. The exercises were different than in Time 1, but used the same topics. There was no help section included in Time 2. The study ended with a survey of basic demographic information. Performance was measured by recording participants’ score on the language assessment exercise at both Time 1 and Time 2.

RESULTS

Native English speakers ($M = 6.04$, $SD = .811$) perceived more competence in their ability to complete the language task than ESL students ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.16$), $F(1,40) = 8.75$, $p = .005$. Indeed, at Time 1, native English speakers performed better than ESL students on the language task, $F(1,40) = 9.11$, $p = .004$. Consistent with our hypotheses, both native and ESL students performed better on the language task at Time 1 when presented with the mastery prompt, $F(1,40) = 4.67$, $p = .037$. Although the interaction between language status and prompt was not significant, $F(1,40) = 0.23$, $p = .634$, the impact of the mastery (vs. performance) prompt appeared to be greatest on ESL students, as hypothesized. These results, however, were not observed at Time 2 (main effect of language: $F(1,40) = 2.95$, $p = .094$; main effect of prompt: $F(1,40) = .05$, $p = .818$; interaction: $F(1,40) = 0.65$, $p = .424$). As part of the Intrinsic Motivational Inventory, students reported the perceived value of the language task. Results of this measure showed that native speakers perceived more value when they received the performance prompt, and ESL speakers perceived more value when they received the mastery prompt ($F(1,40) = 3.92$, $p = .055$).

DISCUSSION

The results of our study provide suggestive evidence that ESL and remedial students should adopt a mastery orientation during tutoring sessions. We expect that if tutors have conversations with students regarding their motivation, notably related to writing tutoring, that more productive outcomes will result. Conversations could promote students to not only adopt a mastery goal-orientation, but also to increase internal motivation, and develop growth mindsets based on discussions of recursive writing strategies and metacognition and thus result in increases in perceived competence. These practices could be helpful for both native English speaking students and ESL students, and could potentially have a greater impact for ESL students.

The findings related to the measure of perceived value of the language task have implications that could inform our understanding of the differences between the learning styles of native English speaking students and ESL students. Because native English speakers reported perceiving more value when they received the performance prompt, we speculated that students who already have high perceived competence in their English language ability would find a language task more valuable if the purpose was to display their competence to others. For example, after speaking with one participant after the study had ended, the student, a writing tutor at the writing center, reported that he had received the performance prompt, and remembered feeling that it was very important for him to perform well to uphold expectations of him as a tutor, or a supposed expert of the English language. Alternatively, because ESL speakers perceived more value when they received the mastery prompt, we theorized that students who recognize themselves as in the process of learning and improving their competency in the English language would perceive more value in a task with the purpose of helping them improve as students, rather than demonstrating their proficiency to others. However, previous research related to cultural patterns of learning styles complicates this understanding, and future research should investigate the interplay of culture with this issue (Dekker & Fischer, 2008).

LIMITATIONS

One limitation of this study was a small sample size. We were particularly challenged in recruiting ESL students. We feel that if we had been able to secure a larger sample size, the trends we had found would be more strongly supported. Also, because we were significantly challenged in recruiting ESL students, we were unable to keep ESL students’ countries of origin consistent. This potentially complicated the impact of students’ cultures on their motivations, and learning approaches when performing the language task. Another limitation is that participants’ Time 1 performance (immediately following the prompts) was not repeated in Time 2. This suggests

the prompt was not strong enough. Future research should investigate other methods of strengthening the mastery and performance orientation prompt.

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