Interplay of ESL Students’ Goal Orientations, Self-Beliefs, and Attitudinal Factors in Academic Help-Seeking Behaviors

ROSNA AWANG HASHIM
Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Education
Universiti Utara Malaysia
06010 Sintok
Kedah, Malaysia
E-mail: rosna@uum.edu.my

Keywords: Academic help-seeking, goal orientations, social competence, cognitive competence

ABSTRACT
This paper examined correlates of academic help-seeking behavior from a cognitive-motivational perspective. Briefly, the study examined motivational and attitudinal factors that help explain reported help-seeking behavior among 453 Malaysian undergraduates enrolled in an English Business Report Writing course at a university in Malaysia. The study investigated the relationships between perceptions of cognitive and social competence, goal orientations, and attitudes toward help seeking. Findings suggested that students who adopted a task-focused goal in learning sought to extend their mastery and understanding of the course, and would also seek more help whenever needed. Since task-focused students were more concerned about subject mastery, rather than being judged able by others, they would view teachers and peers as less threatening. The negative relationship between avoidance help-seeking, perceived cognitive competence and task goal orientation suggested that students who viewed themselves as less cognitively able and those who reported low task-focused goals were more inclined to avoid help-seeking in the face of difficulties. Threats from peers and teachers were more significant determinants of avoidance help-seeking behavior. These findings were discussed in relation to classroom practice.
There is a considerable agreement among teachers that many students do not like to ask questions or seek help in order to make progress in their learning. Although attempts have been made by many researchers in the field to throw light on the problem, the fact continues to be an enigma to teachers and schools. Research on strategic help seeking has matured significantly in recent years. Important distinctions have been made between forms of help seeking. Of these, asking questions is the most frequent manifestation of help seeking.

Adaptive help-seeking involves "...strategic posing of direct, verbal questions for the purpose of obtaining information required for the successful completion of school tasks..." (Newman and Schwager 1992:125). Briefly, adaptive help-seekers have the goal of obtaining information for the sake of learning and mastery of a task. Research to date has repeatedly indicated that seeking assistance from knowledgeable others, such as classmates or teachers, is one of the self-regulatory strategies that can enhance learning (Karabenick and Sharma 1994; Newman 1994). However, students generally view help seeking as a manifestation of incompetence, dependency, and immaturity. In the Malaysian classroom for instance, a majority of students remain passive learners. Very few would actually seek out explanations of misunderstood problems, clarifications of ambiguous problems, or confirmations of answers of which they are still in doubt. Similar phenomenon is observed at the tertiary level where a good number of undergraduates who seek academic assistance are, in fact, those who need help the least.

From a developmental perspective, these undergraduates have reached the adolescent cognitive capacity. They are supposed to be equipped with a wider repertoire of cognitive and metacognitive skills compared to children (Keating 1990), and they are better able to monitor their progress to determine their need for help in academic contexts (Newman 1991, 1994). Despite these presumptions, research in the West has shown that many adolescents do not actively seek academic help when needed (Ryan and Pintrich 1997; Ryan, Gheen and Midgley 1998). It is predicted that this avoidance of help-seeking behavior would be more pronounced in the Malaysian classroom, especially in the English as a second language class. It is rather oblivious to say that Malaysian undergraduates do not seek out help at all, but it is widely known among educators and also supported by empirical data that those who seek help are generally among the more academically inclined students (Karabenick and Knapp 1991; Alderman 1999).

Why do few students seek help while a majority of below average students avoid help-seeking despite their metacognitive capacity? This question reminds us of students who have the 'skill' but without 'will' as being posited by the social cognitive theorists (Pintrich and Schunk 1996). To understand this classroom behavior, we need to recognize the simultaneous effects of cognitive-affective motivational factors that might influence students' behavior. Factors such as students' perceptions of competence, academic and classroom goal orientations, and attitudes toward help-seeking have been proposed to yield significant explanatory power for help-seeking behaviors (Newman 1994, 1998; Newman and Schwager 1992). The scarcity of research in academic help-seeking behavior in Malaysia, albeit numerous grouses by teachers and educators, prompts the researcher to investigate correlates of academic help-seeking behavior, and to examine help-seeking in relation to academic achievement. The present study also extended Ryan and Pintrich's (1997) study on adolescents' help-seeking in math class to another subject domain, i.e. the English class.

It is hoped that findings of this study help us understand the interplay between both factors within the students and classroom environment, which might explain students' help-seeking behavior. Then, we can suggest ways to help teachers encourage students to take a more active role in their own learning by seeking help whenever needed.
help-seeking or avoidance behavior. Researchers have often discussed motivational orientations in terms of goals. These goals, which concern the purpose and meaning each students ascribes to achievement behavior, affect motivation, achievement, and self-regulation (Bandura 1997; Pintrich and Schunk 1996; Schunk 1991). Since help-seeking is seen as one important component of self-regulation, it is hypothesized that goals have significant bearing on students help-seeking behavior. Recent findings were consistent with previous findings, where significant relationships between students' motivational orientations or achievement goals and their help-seeking behavior were observed (Ryan and Pintrich 1997; Ryan, Gheen and Midgley 1998).

Though goals are generally discussed in terms of 'learning' versus 'performance' (Dweck 1986), various labels have been used to distinguish these goals. This study used the terms 'task-focused goals' versus 'performance-oriented goals.' Albeit differences somewhat in their operational definition, task-focused goals are similar to learning, mastery, and process goals; performance-oriented goals are analogous to outcome, ego-ability, and product goals (Ames 1992; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Jagacinski 1992; Meece 1991; Pintrich and Schrauben 1992; Urdan and Maehr 1995; Schunk and Ertmer 1999). Findings from the above studies and many more cited in Pintrich and Schunk (1996) indicated that students with task-focused goals are more concerned with developing their competence, and seek to extend their mastery and understanding. On the other hand, students who adopt performance goals are more concerned with demonstrating their competence or gaining favorable judgments of their abilities in relation to others. In this study, performance goals were conceptualized in terms of 'approach' and 'avoidance' components as evidenced in recent studies (Elliot and Harackiewicz 1997; Middleton and Midgley 1997).

Previous studies have shown that task-focused oriented students are more likely than the performance-oriented students to seek information or ask for confirmation of previous work (Butler and Newman 1995; Newman and Schwager 1995). These adaptive help-seeking behaviors presumably help students resolve difficulties during an impasse, and thus, move toward task mastery. Additionally, classroom context that fosters a similar goal orientation with students' own goals would reinforce this behavior, leading researchers to conclude that classroom contextual goals can moderate students' achievement goals.

Research on students' achievement goals has flourished in the last few years. Newman (1998), for instance, examined goals from three different perspectives: learning, performance, and social. Middleton and Midgley (1997) recently suggested that researchers should also examine performance goals from two different perspectives: performance-approach (demonstrating ability), and performance-avoidance (avoiding demonstrating lack of ability). This suggestion seems congruent with earlier motivational research in education where some students were motivated to attain success but some were motivated to avoid failure (Pintrich and Schunk 1996). Hence, this study will examine performance goals from approach-avoidance continuum, that is performance-approach goal and performance-avoidance goal. It is hypothesized that students with performance-avoidance goals tend to avoid the demonstration of incompetence and will, therefore, avoid help-seeking.

Relationship between Help-Seeking and Perceived Competence

In their book chapter on students' perceptions and academic help-seeking, Newman and Schwager (1992) summarized voluminous research that supports the relationship between self-perceived competence and help-seeking behavior. Their summary indicated a consistent pattern of relationship between the various measures of self-perceived competence (such as self-concept of ability, perceived academic competence, or beliefs of agency or capacity) and task engagement and help-seeking behavior. In the classroom context, when asked why they do not seek help earlier, very often students reply "I don't know exactly what I don't know, and therefore I don’t know what to ask". This common statement reflects students' perceived cognitive competence of the subject domain. From the researcher's observation, cognitive competence is deemed important in understanding patterns of help-seeking in English class as it may act as a filter in adaptive help-seeking. Students who perceived themselves as academically competent were more likely to view help-seeking as an instrumental strategy for
classroom learning; thus, they tend to display high levels of task engagement and have high achievement (Ryan and Pintrich 1997).

Newman's (1990) study with grades 3, 5, and 7 school children indicated that when children feel competent, they were not afraid of looking dumb by seeking out help. The study also observed a stronger relationship at grade 7. This finding is not surprising because as individuals grow older they tend to have a more accurate conception of their own ability (Dweck and Leggett 1988). From this developmental perspective, the relationship between self-perceived competence and students' decisions, whether or not to seek help when needed, may be more pronounced during adolescence. As these decisions are also closely linked to potential costs such as social embarrassment, those who have positive self-percepts would be more willing to seek help.

Recent evidence (Ryan and Pintrich 1997) added more support to the importance of both perceived cognitive competence and social competence in help-seeking research. Research to date has indicated how social motivational factors in classroom contexts, such as individuals' social goals and social competence, were positively related to various academic outcomes, including self-regulatory strategies, adaptive help-seeking and academic achievement (Ryan and Pintrich 1997; Wentzel 1991). Since help-seeking requires both social engagement and cognitive competence, it is hypothesized that high perceptions of these two aspects should be positively related to adaptive help-seeking behavior, and negatively related to avoidance of help-seeking.

Relationship between Help-Seeking and Attitudes Toward Help-Seeking

Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) seminal work explained how attitudes influenced behavioral intentions and, in turn, actual behavior. This theoretical framework was repeatedly adopted by several researchers to understand help-seeking behaviors (Karabenick and Knapp 1991; Newman 1990, 1994; Ryan and Pintrich 1997). These researchers proposed that attitudes mediate the relationships between students' perceptions of social and cognitive competence, and goal orientations, and reported help-seeking behavior in the classroom.

Following Ryan and Pintrich's (1997) study, the present study examined attitude variables from a threat to self-worth perspective. As threat may derive from both teachers and peers, the two scales from Ryan and Pintrich's study, that is, threat from teachers and threat from peers, were adapted for this study. When help-seeking is construed as low ability or incompetence, individuals tend to exacerbate negative judgment from others. These negative attitudes will mediate between students' goal orientations and patterns of help-seeking. Since threat to self-worth is more salient when students approach learning with performance-oriented goals (Newman and Schwager 1992), it is hypothesized that both performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals would be positively related to perceived threat from peers and teachers, and positively related to avoidance of help-seeking. On the contrary, students with task-focused goals conceive success as mastering something new through continued effort (Pintrich and Schunk 1996). Thus, it is hypothesized that task-focused goals would be negatively related to perceived threat from peers and teachers, and positively related to adaptive help-seeking.

Purpose of Study

This present study investigated motivational and attitudinal factors that help explain reported help-seeking behavior among Malaysian undergraduates at a university in Northern Malaysia. Particularly, the study focused on perceptions of cognitive and social competence, goal orientations, and attitudes toward help-seeking (from threat to self-worth perspective). The following research questions guided this study:

1. How are students' perceptions of competence, goal orientations, and attitude toward help-seeking related to their endorsement of adaptive help-seeking behavior?

2. How are students' perceptions of competence, goal orientations, and attitude toward help-seeking related to students' reported avoidance of help-seeking behavior?

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 453 undergraduates enrolled in an English Bussiness Report Writing course at a university in Northern Malaysia. The
participants were 165 (36.4%) males and 288 (63.6%) females of whom 313 (69.1%) were Malays, 113 (24.5%) Chinese, and 27 (5.9%) Indians and other ethnic groups. The mean age was 21.86 years old (SD=1.64) with the median age at 22. Questionnaires were distributed via their respective English instructors during regular class periods. These English instructors were briefed on the procedures for data collection. To ensure participants' cooperation, they were briefed about the intent of study and the confidentiality of their responses. The items from the different scales were intermixed in the questionnaire in order to avoid response set. The questionnaire took about 20 minutes to administer.

**Instruments and Variables in the Study**

The questionnaires consisted of two parts: instrument and demographic. The scales for the instrument were adapted from Ryan and Pintrich’s (1997) study and the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey-PALS (Midgley et al. 1997). With the authors' permission, these scales were adapted and translated into Bahasa Malaysia using back-translation method (Brislin 1970, 1980). The format for all scales used a six point Likert-scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Descriptions of each scale follow:

1. Perceived Competence Scale. The questionnaire comprised two sub-scales: Perceived Cognitive Competence, and Perceived Social Competence (Ryan and Pintrich 1997). The Cognitive Competence Scale was adapted to measure students’ perceptions of cognitive competence in English. A sample item is: "I can finish my English work quickly." Perceived Social Competence measures students' perception of their ability to socialize with others. A sample item is: "I think that most students like me.”

2. Achievement Goal Orientations. The questionnaire comprised three sub-scales adapted from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey-PALS (Midgley et al. 1997): Task Goal Orientations, Performance-approach Goal Orientations, and Performance-avoid Goal Orientations. All items were adapted to make them specific to English. Task goal orientation students are more concerned with developing their competence, and seek to extend their mastery and understanding. A sample item is: "I like English work that I'll learn from, even if I make a lot of mistakes.” Performance-approach goal orientations students are “...positively motivated to outperform others and to demonstrate their competence and superiority...” (Pintrich 2000: 476). A sample item is: “I would feel successful if I did better than most of the other students in my class.” Performance-avoid Goal Orientations students are negatively "...motivated to try to avoid failure and to avoid looking dumb, stupid, or incompetent...” (Pintrich 2000: 476). A sample item is: “The reason I do my work is so others won’t think I’m dumb.”

3. Attitudes Toward Help Seeking. The questionnaire comprised two sub-scales adapted from Ryan and Pintrich’s (1997) study: Threat from Peers, and Threat from Teachers. A sample item from Threat from Peers is: "I think other students might think that I am dumb when I ask questions in English class." A sample item from Threat from Teacher is: "I feel the teacher will get annoyed with me when I ask a question in English class.”

4. Help-seeking Behaviors. The questionnaire consisted of two scales adapted from Ryan and Pintrich’s (1997) study: Avoidance Help Seeking, and Adaptive Help-Seeking. A sample item from Avoidance Help Seeking is: “If I need help to do a problem in English, I skip it.” A sample item from Adaptive Help Seeking is: “If I have trouble doing an English problem, I ask someone to give me examples of similar problems we have done.”

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 1 shows mean, standard deviation, and the Cronbach’s Alpha internal consistency reliability of each scale. All scales reached acceptable reliability levels to enable further analyses. The item means suggested that these undergraduates have high task-focused goal orientation (M= 4.36) compared to performance-approach (M= 3.53) or performance-avoidance (M= 3.44) goal orientations for the Business Report Writing Course. They also felt more threat from peers (M= 3.00) than teachers (M= 2.51) about asking questions in class. Cognitive competence (M= 3.35) was rated lower than social competence (M= 4.27) among these participants. Finally, these undergraduates seem to have a more adaptive help-seeking behaviours (M= 4.42) than avoidance help-seeking (M= 2.82).

The nature of the course that requires group collaboration and several draft writings may
Table 1 displays intercorrelations among the variables in the study. The directions of the correlations were consistent with current help-seeking behavior research. For instance, students with high task-focused goals would also feel less peer threat ($r = -.21, p < .05$) compared to their counterparts. Task-focused goals were also positively associated with performance approach goals ($r = .27, p < .05$), perceived cognitive competence ($r = .49, p < .05$), and perceived social competence ($r = .24, p < .05$). However, perceived cognitive competence was inversely related to performance-avoidance goal orientation ($r = -.21, p < .05$), peer threat ($r = -.36, p < .05$), and teacher threat ($r = -.14, p < .05$), which suggested that students who felt less competent in the subject were also those who reported high performance-avoidance goal orientation, and those who perceived teachers and peers as more threatening during the learning process. Performance-avoidance
students were likely to focus more on the self and try to avoid the demonstration of incompetence, which may explain their avoidance behavior. The direction and the strength of the relationships were similar to previous research in help-seeking behavior (Ryan and Pintrich 1997; Ryan, Gheen and Midgley 1998).

Three separate regression analyses were run to determine predictors of achievement and adaptive-avoidance help-seeking behaviours. A stepwise regression analysis indicated three significant predictors of achievement: performance avoid (β = -.23; p<.05), perceived cognitive competence (β = .23; p<.05), and perceived social competence (β = -.14; p<.05). These three factors accounted for only 13.7% (F(3, 377) = 19.74; p<.05) of the variance accounted for in achievement. This low variance explained suggests that there are other significant predictors of ESL achievement that are not being investigated in this study. However, these findings suggested that students who were so concerned about being evaluated by others would avoid help seeking, thus, resulting in lower academic performance as reflected in their course grades. Consistent with other studies, higher perception of cognitive competence also resulted in higher performance. However, the negative relationship between perceived social competence and performance, albeit marginal (β = -.14; p<.05) does not support previous studies. This finding suggests that even those who perceived themselves as socially competent did not perform well in the course.

The second regression analysis indicated that all the seven motivation and attitudinal factors accounted for a total of 40% (F(7, 445) = 42.92; p<.05) of the variance in adaptive help-seeking behaviour. However, only three factors, task-goal orientation, peer threat, and teacher threat, were significant predictors with betas of .49 (p<.05), -.17 (p<.05), and -.11 (p<.05) respectively. Findings suggested that students who adopt task-focused goals in learning Business Report Writing seek to extend their mastery and understanding of the course, and thus, would seek more help whenever needed. Since task-focused students were more concerned about subject mastery, rather than being judged able by others, they tend to view teachers and peers as less threatening.

A third regression analysis indicated that all the seven motivation and attitudinal factors accounted for a total of 32% (F(7,446) = 31.32; p<.05) of the variance in avoidance help-seeking behaviour. Four strongest predictors, peer threat, teacher threat, perceived cognitive competence, and task goal orientation were significant (p<.05), with betas .29, .21, -.19, and -.14 respectively. Another predictor, performance-approach goal orientation was only marginally significant (β = .10; p<.05). The negative relationship between avoidance help-seeking and perceived cognitive competence (β = -.19; p<.05) and task goal orientation (β = -.14; p<.05) suggested that students who view themselves as less cognitively able and those who reported low task-focused goal tend to avoid help-seeking whenever needed. However, threat from peers (β = -.29; p<.05) and teachers (β = .21; p<.05) were more significant determinants of maladaptive help-seeking behaviour. These findings can be explained from goal theory and self-worth perspectives. First, avoidance help-seeking may be greater for students who do not seek mastery learning. Perhaps these students are more concerned about demonstrating or avoiding demonstrating their competence. In this study, avoidance behaviour may be due to their low perception of cognitive competence. Low perception of cognitive competence may engender more threat from peers and teachers as students were trying to protect their self-worth.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

The findings of this study suggest that English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor should help inculcate academic intrinsic goal orientation and increase classroom task values in order to encourage students’ school engagement, such as increased persistence by seeking help from knowledgeable others when faced with difficulties. In this way, we are also working toward lifelong learning where learning is done toward lifelong learning where learning is done by the students voluntarily. Since most undergraduates in this study were majoring in business-related fields, instructors should put more emphasis on the value and importance of business writing in their future life.

On the other hand, focusing too much on extrinsic goals may adversely affect achievement because students may then adopt a performance-avoidance goal. Even though students can have multiple goal orientations concurrently, the intrinsic goal should outweigh the extrinsic. This
intrinsic goal can be enhanced if instructors can relate the courses or subjects to students in a meaningful, interesting, and non-threatening way. For instance, an ESL classroom that focuses on understanding and mastery may foster intrinsic goals among students; however, an ESL classroom that focuses on competition among students may perpetuate extrinsic goals. Even though healthy competition is believed to generate positive outcomes, we also need to examine its impact on the less able students as some of these unfortunates will simply drop out of the race (performance-avoiders).

Undergraduates are especially so preoccupied with the self; thus, those who are weak in English and have low cognitive and social competence, for instance, will avoid help-seeking in order to protect their self-worth. These students are more vulnerable to classroom threats, be it from peers or instructors. Consistent with self-worth theory (Covington 1992), students will adopt avoidance behavior in order to conceal their inability. From a cognitive-motivational perspective, these students are motivated, but for the wrong reason: they are motivated to avoid failure. Future research should therefore examine current ESL classroom goal practices and whether ESL teachers are reinforcing mastery learning in their classroom.

Generally, most findings of this research were consistent with help-seeking literature. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution as this study involves only a group of undergraduates at one university in Malaysia and focuses on one subject domain, i.e., Business Report Writing. Because many motivation theories are domain specific, future studies should be replicated with different groups of undergraduates from various domains in order to come up with a more conclusive statement. We also need to refine the newly translated instrument in order to improve its precision.

REFERENCES


(Received: 23 August 2001)