

Exploring Factors for Undergraduate Students' Absenteeism in English Language Classrooms

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Abstract: This study aimed at detecting factors affecting undergraduate students' absenteeism in English classes. In so doing, a total of 145 students at three majors including law, psychology and teaching English as a foreign language, were considered the participant pool of the study. They were asked to fill out a researcher-made questionnaire. To probe the perceived reasons for the non-attendance, descriptive statistics and regression analysis was run. The results indicated that teachers' function was the most perceived reasons for absenteeism in English classes out of the four factors of non-attendance, i.e., teachers' function, problems in curriculum, family and personal problem, and position of major in the society. More precisely, teachers' characteristics, teaching oratory, incorporating new techniques, timing of the class, and challenging classroom were the determinants cited subcategories by the students as a motivator for a class attendance. This paper illustrated some practical suggestions for motivating students' classroom attendance.

Key words: attendance, absenteeism, English class, curriculum, professors' function, motivation.

1. Introduction

The way we learn things in general and the way we attack to problem seem to link between personality and cognition. When cognitive style are related to educational context, where affective and psychological factors are involved they are referred to as learning styles. The term learning style came into use when researchers began looking for ways to combine course presentation and materials to match the needs of each learner. From this perspective, learning style is considered a broader term that includes the construct of cognitive style (Kirby, as cited in Tuan, 2011). Claxton and Murrell (1987) defined the term as a learner's "consistent way of responding and using stimuli in the context of learning" (p. 7). For Keefe (1979), learning styles are "cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment" (p.4). Ehrman and Oxford (1989) states that learning styles are preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning, and dealing with new information. Dornyei (2009) state the main problem with learning styles is that even through the various style dimensions proposed in the literature seem to have an intuitive appeal. He believes that learning style refers to learning mode preferences, but this can be of varying degree; they are related to varying strategies but are somewhat different from them as they fall midway between innate abilities and

strategies. Recent studies, revealing some potentially positive effects of instruction on SL development mainly consist of four aspects: (1) the effect of instruction on accuracy orders and developmental sequences; (2) the effect of instruction on acquisition processes; (3) the effect of instruction on rate of acquisition; and (4) the effect of instruction on the level of ultimate L2 attainment. In aspect (1), results show that formal instruction does not change morpheme acquisition order (Perkins & Larsen-Freeman, 1975), and that acquisition orders may well be immutable (Pienemann 1984). In aspect (2), Pica (1983) found an instructional effect on acquisition processes. Pica concluded that similarities in acquisition order across the three groups of subjects (namely, subjects from three different learning contexts: formal, naturalistic and mixed) support the idea that L2 acquisition depends on the learner, not the environment or context, and that instruction has an effect on production/performance by triggering oversuppliance of grammatical morphology and by inhibiting the use of ungrammatical constructions found in pidgins. Pica reminded people what distinguished the formal learners from the naturalistic learners is the tendency to overapply grammatical morphology and to avoid pidginization strategies, perhaps long-term or permanently. In aspect (3), five studies showed a positive effect of instruction over exposure, proving instruction is beneficial to: children; intermediate and advanced learners, on integrative and discrete-point, and in acquisition-rich and –poor environments. Pienemann (1984) and Weslander and Stephany (1983) supported the conclusion that instruction speeds up learning. Gass (1982) investigation is the strongest evidence on the effect of instruction on rate of acquisition by showing that the experimental group's overall improvement was significant and that overall performance on relatives in all the higher positions in the accessibility hierarchy was higher than the control group. In aspect 4, one major study done by Pavesi (1984) who compared relative clause formation in instructed and naturalistic acquirers found that formally instructed students a) outperformed the naturalistic learners, b) lending evidence to the positive effect of instruction on rate of L2 development.

Course attendance is an important part of learning and many studies have confirmed a correlation between class attendance and academic performance, having generally found that a student's class attendance has a positive effect on exam performance. The term absenteeism is a widely topic discussed amongst academics in general and in Higher Education and institutions in particular. Reviewing current professional literature revealed that relatively little research has been conducted in Iran among humanity students. Many research studies provide empirical evidence that there is a nexus between attendance and students grades. The findings of these studies are compatible, regardless of the country, course, university and students. Romer's (1993) study in economics classes at three elite US universities found that students who attend only a quarter of the lectures on average earned a C- grade, while those who attend all lectures earned a B+. A similar study conducted by Massingham and Herrington (2006) indicated that the common factors for absenteeism are a number of personal factors such as sickness, being too busy and having to do paid work. Some studies conducted by (Ajiboye & Tella, 2006; Devadoss & Foltz, 1996; Gendron & Pieper, 2005; Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Paisey & Paisey 2004; Thatcher, Fridjhon, & Cockcroft, 2007) revealed similar results in different countries like UK, Canadian, USA, Australian and South African Universities. The more classes a student attend, the better the student's grade. Similarly, LeBlanc, (2005) compared the attendance records of students against their test score averages at four institutions over a fourteen year period and found that attendance significantly influences test score averages whether or not an attendance policy is enforced. Likewise, Paisey and Paisey (2003) add financial stresses placed on learners with the raising the cost of students education as well as the need for students to acquire part-time work during term time and vacations. Chenneville and Jordan (2008) concluded that graded attendance policies motivated undergraduate college students to attend their classes. This is a sort of external motivator because the fewer times a student misses a class. Contrary, Moore (2005) found that penalties for excessive absenteeism did cause the students to avoid absenteeism.

The perceived factors that why learners attend to class is a subject to explore in this topic. Winn (2002) stated the pressures that experienced by learners with young children based around demands of their responsibilities. Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (2001) found the perceived reason for the students' absenteeism due to a number of reasons like interest in the subject matter, class size. Teachers in elective courses saw higher attendance rates than those of required

courses because students have more intrinsic motivation for attending the courses that they wanted to take. More students also tend to miss large classes because their attendance is not noticed, necessary, or consequential.

A study conducted by Fjortoft (2005) reveals that students prefer to attend to the classes that the professor presents new materials by connecting the course content to the real life situation. This study indicated that students showed interest in attending such classes. There is a general consensus that student attendance at classes and their eventual success are interwoven to each other. Students' attendance depend on a number of factors such as classroom size, teachers' performance, characteristics, classroom environment and many other factors. Teachers usually employ different methods of attendance monitoring implementing a wide range of interventions. This study adds to the existing literature on factors affecting (non) attendance of students in the EFL classroom. In so doing, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the main factors affecting (non) attendance of university students in English classroom?
2. What are the perceived reasons for (non) attendance at English classes as far as the gender, semester, and GAP are concerned?
3. What are the most/least perceived factors in teachers' performance?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

A total of 145 undergraduate students studying in the faculty of human science at Islamic Azad University, Ayatollah Amoli branch took part in this study. Their age ranged from 23 to 35. They were all native speakers of Persian. A convenient random sampling procedure was conducted for the purpose of this study. Of all the participants 17.72 % were male and 79.37% were female. 61.17 % of the participants were below the general average point (GAP) of 17 and 14.78% were above 17. Twenty-four percent did not answer this question in their demographic questionnaire. Table 1 below summarizes the demographic information of the participant in this study.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants

participant	Major			gender	
	Law	Psychology	TEFL	Male	female
	82	38	25	90	81
	56.55%	26.20%	17.24%	62.06%	37.93%
Total				145	

The participants were of different majors including law (82 members), psychology (38 members), and TEFL (25 members).

2.2 Instruments

In order to answer the research questions, a researcher made questionnaire were employed. The questionnaire comprised of 3 sections. The first section encompasses 6 question about the respondents' demographic information. The items asked their demographic information such as gender, GPA, marital status, the year of entrance, age, and their job status. The second part included 24 Lickert-scale items in four sections: (1) Family and personal problem; (2) Educational curriculum; (3) Instructors' efficacy; and (4) The position of their major in society. More precisely, each section included 6 items. The last section of the questionnaire comprised of 11 open-ended items. The items aim to explore the perceived reasons for non-attendance at English classes and to suggest some strategies for encouraging class attendance from the respondents' perspectives.

2.3 Pilot study

To ensure the preliminary validation and content validity of the questionnaire 3 experts hold PHD degree in law, psychology, and in TEFL were asked to read the proposed items of the questionnaire. It is worth mentioning that the item were extracted from an extensive reading the literature review and a semi-structured interview from the undergraduate students in Amol. After collecting the data four major themes emerged next for each theme some questions developed. The experts were asked to assess each questions based on four indices (comprehension, relevance, clarity and wording). More precisely, they were asked to solve each indices based on 4 points content validity index (CVI) from 1 to 4 correspondingly poor to excellent.

After collecting the data from the experts some vague points were eliminated 24 questions i.e. each factors 6 questions enjoyed higher internal consistency. Table 2 below summarizes the CVI for the overall questions of the questionnaire.

Table 2

CVI for the Questionnaire

Item	Content validity	Index	Scale validity	Inter rater agreement	Comprehensiveness score
Comprehensiveness	Relevance	clarity	wording		
.90	.89	.94	.92	.89	.87
					.93

To assure the reliability of the questionnaire it was administered to a group of 20 undergraduate students. The results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Reliability Coefficient for the (Non) Attendance

Cronbach alpha	N of item
.78	24

After collecting the data, the range of the elicited responded was checked by SPSS. The questionnaire enjoyed reliability of .78. This index is acceptable and strong in educational research (Hatch & Farhadi, 1991).

2.4 Procedure

After piloting study and ensuring the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, the researchers obtained the official persuasion to administer the questionnaire to the target subjects. The questionnaire was administered to the students by the researchers with the assistance of educational administrative during the regular class time. The researchers clarified the questionnaire. She asked them to answer items as honest as possible. In addition, were asked to consider the items of questionnaire as a whole and do not focus on specific class or professor. Majority of the respondents (98.20%) were willing to reply the questionnaire and only small percentage (1.70%) was not consider for this study. They were ensured the confidentiality of the data. Since there are various social, cognitive, affective, environmental and economic variables affecting the attendance of students in the classroom such as teachers' characteristics, classroom environment, classroom size, personal attribute timing of class, facilities, the present study was delimited on the four main factors. The factors were extracted from extensive reading the professional literature. More precisely, this study was delimited on (a) family and personal problem; (b) Educational curriculum; (c)Instructors' efficacy; (d) The position of their major in society. Students were asked to fill out the four section of the questionnaire with a hope to find out the perceived reasons factors affecting (non)attendance of university students in English classroom and seeking the corresponding reasons as far as the gender, semester, and GAP are concerned. Finally this study embarks up one investigating the most/least perceived factors in teachers' performance as far as the following factors are concerned: (a) teachers' knowledge and oratory; (b) building rapport with students; (c) classroom discussion; (d) including audio and video materials. After collecting the data, the completed questionnaires were

computer coded and processed with SPSS version 21. The results are presented as what follow.

3. Results

To probe the perceived reasons for non-attendance for English classroom at different majors, descriptive statistics was run. As indicated in the table 4 below 13.10% of the students responded that they do not attend to the classroom from one to four sessions when their professors do not read aloud of the list of name. Similarly, 8.17% of the students do not attend to the class at all. They are those students who attend to the class by force or due to the teacher' roll call the name. Of all the subjects 62.06% attends to the class just for the sake of the professor or the importance of the course. Table 4 below illustrates the results.

Table 4

Students' Attendance in Case of Calling a Roll by Professor

No.	Items	Frequency	percentage
1	I attend in all sessions	8	5.51
2	I prefer to be absent from 1 to 4 sessions.	19	13.10
3	I prefer to be absent more than 4 sessions	16	11.03
4	I do not attend to the class at all.	12	8.27
5	My attendance depends on my professor and the course.	90	62.06
Total		145	100

As indicated in the Table 4, the role of professor and the course play an important role for the attendance or non-attendance of the students. To uncover the perceived reasons for non-attendance at English classes, a descriptive statistics was run. Table 5 below indicates the perceived reason.

Table 5

Factors Affecting Students' Non-attendance in their Classroom

No.	Factors	Rank
1	Professors' performance	4.31
2	Problems in curriculum	4.02
3	Family and personal problems	2.15
4	Position of my major in the society	1.28

As indicated in the Table 5, professors performance (4.31) and the position of students major in the society (1.28) had the highest and the least role respectively. Each of the above four factors were compared among students as far as a number of factors like semester, gender, and GAP are concerned. Table 6 below scrutinizes the comparative study of the main reasons for the non-attendance at English class. To do so, regression analysis was conducted.

Table 6
Regression Analysis for the Non-attendance at English Classes

Specify your non-attendance with not calling the roll		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)
It depends on my professor and class	-Intercept	-.861	.271	5.412	1	.011	
	-Family and personal	.471	.211	2.182	1	.080	1.189
	-Curriculum	.143	.200	.607	1	.287	1.189
	-Professors performance	.812	.151	11.131	1	.0001	1.345
	-Position of my major in society	-.277	.216	1.312	1	.325	.654
I do not attend to class at all	-Intercept	4.450	.711	36.041	1	.0001	
	-Family and personal	1.117	.347	6.187	1	.0008	2.312
	-Curriculum	.343	.324	1.070	1	.398	1.575
	-Professors performance	1.583	.287	17.006	1	.0001	.454
	-Position of my major in society	-.605	.331	1.780	1	.180	
I'd rather not attend more than 4 sessions	Intercept	-3.324	.712	19.566	1	.0001	
	-Family and personal	1.250	.388	19.566	1	.0006	2.757
	-Curriculum	.138	.375	6.214	1	.508	1.238
	-Professors performance	1.115	.325	.152	1	.012	3.078
	-Position of my major in society	-.465	.414	5.515	1	.265	.465
I prefer to be absent from 1 to 4 sessions	Intercept	-1.160	.326	7.364	1	.0003	
	-Family and personal	.641	.253	3.139	1	.029	2.008
	-Curriculum	-.130	.236	.163	1	.565	.758
	-Professors performance	.742	.187	7.132	1	.0003	1.236
	-Position of my major in society	-.453	.280	1.182	1	.148	.458

As indicated in the Table 6, there is a significant difference among all factors as far professors' performances are concerned. However the other factors are not statistically significant. To determine the most perceived factors in teachers' performance for absenteeism at English classes, a frequency of occurrence was run. Table 7 below illustrates students' responses.

Table 7

Frequency of Occurrence for the Most/least Perceived Factor in Teachers' Performance

No	Items	Frequency	Percentage
1	Teachers' knowledge and oratory	65	44.82
2	Building rapport with students	35	24.13
3	Class discussion	24	16.55
4	Incorporating audio/video materials	15	10.33
5	No answer	6	4.13
Total		145	

As illustrated in the Table 7, teachers' knowledge and oratory was the most perceived factors in teachers' performance (44.82%). In contract, incorporating audio/video materials in the classroom was the least effective factor (10.33%). Figure 1 below represents the schematic representation of the most/least perceived factors.

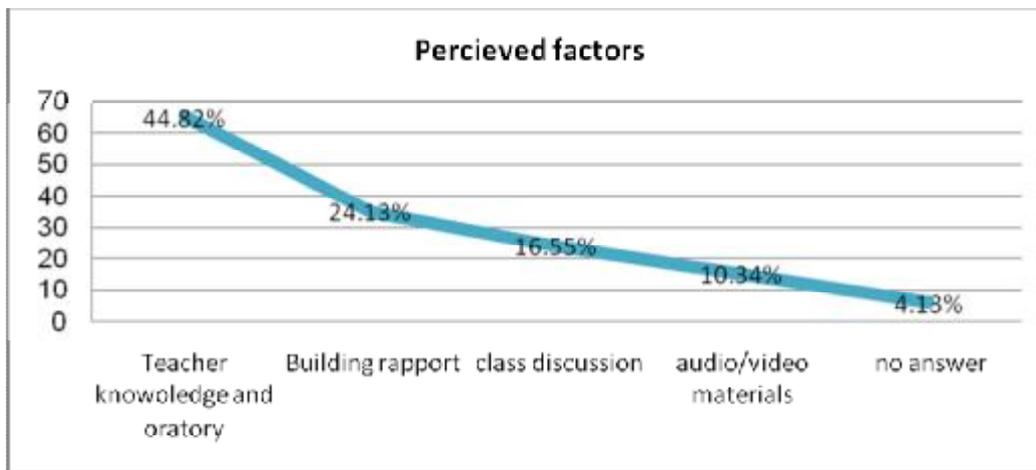


Figure 1. Most/least perceived factors in teachers' performance

4. Discussion

The main mission of the university education is fostering human resources and creating creativity and innovation. Classrooms are suitable places for transferring teachers' experiences to the students and a better understanding of educational contents. This study considered four main factors affecting absenteeism in English classes. The finding indicated that professors' performance and knowledge are the main causal factor for (non) attendance. They believe that teachers low knowledge on the course content and limiting on the course book were two demotivation factors for absenteeism. The finding indicated that if teachers do not have a roll call in the class students will be absent in the class. In addition, most of students mentioned that teachers' knowledge and building a rapport are among the main motivating factors for attendance. The findings of the present study highlighted the role of teachers as the core motivating factors for students' attendance. This finding indicates that professors should implement different techniques to motivate students for attending the class. Gump (2004) indicated that professors play the pivotal role motivate students for the class attendance. Gump concluded that teachers' attention to the active class participation and interesting course content are two main motivating factors for attendance. The findings of the present study are against the claim made in the professional literature that students do not like to have active class participation. The finding confirmed that students prefer to attend the class since the attendance lead better understanding amongst the learners.

The second nonattendance factors concerned to problems in curriculum. To delve into the issue, the corresponding items in the questionnaire reveals that 28% of the respondents found the class time and 41% found the physical atmosphere of the class such as color, heating and cooling system as the demotivation factors. Similarly, of all respondent, 46% maintained that condense class schedule and authorities' behavior, 25%, were the main factors for absenteeism. The finding suggests that responded considered English as being a burden and compulsory for them to take. This finding is line with a number of studies conducted and ESP and EFL courses. The findings echoes Clay (2012) who claimed that clarity of the course content, teachers' knowledge, and classroom discussion are the main motivating factors for students' attendance. Similarly, Fleming (1992) revealed that teachers' poor rhetorical knowledge, inappropriate class time, and low quality are the factors for nonattendance. Another study by Hunter and Tedley (2000) outlined the following reasons for students' absenteeism in the classroom: class assignments, access to the course content from other recourses, low quality of academic level, and inappropriate timing. The finding also echo a number of studies (Dolnicar et al., 2009; Hunter & Tetley, 1999;

Kottasz, 2005) which outlined the following factors for students absenteeism in the classroom: The need for English module, timing of the class, unchallenging and uninteresting class, low academic level, and the distance from home and campus. This study reverberates

Durden and Ellis (1995) who pinpointed that the attendance effect was non-linear. They concluded that the attendance is important when a student missed more than four classes, with the size of the negative impact increasing with each additional absence beyond that threshold. They maintained that students' GPA and college entrance examination scores are among the most perceived factors of student academic performance. Likewise, Saberian, Ghafari, and Gorbani (2007) surveyed students' view point about class culture. The study reflected students' perspective regarding teacher encouragement about the class participation. The participants believe that most of their professors do not provide a challenging and interesting classroom. They believe that such a classroom do not foster learner autonomy and critical thinking. Like the findings of the present study, Saberian et al. (2007) gauged teachers as the main perceived reason for absenteeism. The findings also echo Nazari, Naderi, and Aiin (2014) who concluded that incorporating audio and video materials in the classroom are the least efficacious factor for the class participation.

5. Conclusion

The current study examined the factors affecting absenteeism. The present study gave a quick rundown on why students do not attend English classes. The findings reveal that professors' performance and problems in curriculum are two effective factors than personal problem and the position of major in the society. Although some factors are beyond the control of the teachers, most of the reasons found for absenteeism may concern to the professors. They can provide a challenging and interesting classroom. A number of factors can motivate students to attend to the classroom such as physical atmosphere of the class, building rapport, personnel behavior, and curriculum program. This study suggests that teachers' developers provide workshops on teacher oratory, teacher and student interaction. The present attempt touched upon four factors affecting students' attendance in English classes. It is clear that there are more other implicit factors which have not been realized. Understanding the other perceived factors demand more research since students' academic level, major and culture are constructive variable. Since the findings of the present study revealed the encouraging role of professors as the main reasons for absenteeism, it deem necessary to turn up motivating factors among students so as to expand teachers and learner interaction. Thus the more students interact with teacher, the more they attend the classroom. Considering the constructive role of teachers in education, this study suggests that teacher developers should foster techniques of educational ethics among in-service and pre-service teachers. More precisely, ethics should be placed as a course for teaching pre-service teachers.

Since this paper was delimited on the four factors for the (non) attendance, some other study may be conducted to probe other factors such as cognitive, affective, social and economic variable. A similar study may be conducted to the probable relationship between attendance and academic success.

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