



Short communication

The moderating effects of goal orientations and goal structures on test-preparation strategies for Taiwanese students

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the effects of a quasi-experimental classroom goal structure (mastery, approach performance, multiple that combined mastery/approach performance) and personal goal orientations on test-preparation strategies for 280 Taiwanese junior high school students in order to check whether this interaction supports either the buffering hypothesis or the matching hypothesis. There were significant interactive effects between goal orientations and goal structures on cognitive regulation and motivational/affective regulation strategies. In line with the matching hypothesis, students with goal orientations that matched their classroom goal structures were found to be most adaptive in regard to the use of their self-regulatory cognitive and self-regulatory motivational/affective test-preparation strategies.

1. Introduction

Goal orientation theory includes two areas of research: personal goal orientations and classroom goal structures. At present, there is a large amount of empirical literature that shows how personal goal orientations and classroom goal structures play important roles in learning processes (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Pintrich, 2000b). However, it is not clear how students with different goal orientations respond to varying classroom goal structures (Linnenbrink, 2005). The current study was conducted to understand the interaction between personal goal orientations and classroom goal structures. If researchers want to understand which learning context is most beneficial to learners with different goal orientations, investigating these potential Person \times Context interactions is important.

1.1. Goal orientations and classroom goal structures

Goal orientations are the reasons or ends of learners who are engaged in specific learning tasks (Middleton & Midgley, 1997). The initial research on this topic was centered on two types of goals: mastery goals, which focus on mastery of tasks, and performance goals, which focus on ability as compared with others (Pintrich, 2000b). Elliot and his colleagues (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996) made an important distinction between approach performance goals

and avoidance performance goals. In this extended model, maladaptive patterns of intrinsic motivation and performance occur only in the case of avoidance performance goals. In addition, goal theorists also proposed a multiple goal perspective whereby endorsing both mastery and approach performance goals at the same time may be the most adaptive approach (Barron & Harackiewicz, 2001; Pintrich, 2000b). Theorists proposed the four-dimensional goal orientation theory by additionally bifurcating mastery goals to create approach mastery and avoidance mastery goals (Elliot, 1999; Pintrich, 2000a). Based on the four-dimensional goal orientation theory, mastery/performance orientations and approach/avoidance focuses will have different influences on learning processes (Cherng, 2003; Pintrich, 2000a).

In order to inspect a multiple goal perspective, we referred to a method suggesting that approach mastery and approach performance goals should be dichotomized using median splits (Pintrich, 2000b). Accordingly, four groups of students, the approach mastery goal group, the approach performance goal group, the multiple goal group, and the low goal group, were examined in the current study.

Classroom goal structures are conceptualized as competence-relevant environmental emphases made salient through general classroom practices and the specific messages that teachers communicate to their students (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988). Ames contended that teachers can communicate information concerning goals behind achievement behavior through tasks, evaluation/recognition and

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authority in learning contexts, thereby influencing learners' beliefs and behavior. Previous studies have found that classroom goal structures are linked to students' academically-related outcomes (Kaplan, Ghee, & Midgley, 2002; Urdan, 2004). Most of these studies adopted a two-dimensional classroom goal structure framework including mastery and performance. A mastery goal structure means that learners perceive the learning goals created by teachers in classes and focus on mastery, understanding and personal improvement, while a performance goal structure means that students perceive the learning goals created by teachers in classes and emphasizes relative ability and competition (Middleton & Midgley, 1997; Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998). Classroom goal structures are not generally characterized in terms of the approach-avoidance dimension. However, researchers typically have been more concerned about the approach focus. In addition, some researchers (Linnenbrink, 2005; Peng, Cherng, & Chen, 2013) extended the multiple-goal hypothesis (Barron & Harackiewicz, 2001) to the contextual level of the classroom. They found that the multiple goal structures were also beneficial to students learning.

In this study, teaching experiments were adopted to manipulate classroom goal structures. Because this approach dimension of classroom goal structures is beneficial to students, we only stressed the approach focus for classroom goal structures. Therefore, we manipulated three kinds of classroom goal structures: mastery, approach performance, and multiple classroom goal structures (which combined both mastery and approach performance) and examined whether the single classroom goal structure or the multiple classroom goal structure would produce optimal behavior patterns.

1.2. Two hypotheses for a moderating effect: buffering hypothesis vs. matching hypothesis

When students are involved in classroom contexts, they tend to endorse their own particular goal orientations, but each class also has its own stressed goals. However, few studies have inspected differences in the moderating effect between goal orientations and goal structures. Regarding the assumption of such a moderating effect, there are two competing hypotheses, the buffering hypothesis and the matching hypothesis (Linnenbrink, 2005). The buffering hypothesis is based on normative goal theory and places an emphasis on the adaptive characteristic of mastery goals and the maladaptive characteristic of performance goals. It suggests that either mastery goal orientations or mastery goal structures will buffer the negative effects of endorsing approach performance goals or studying in a performance-oriented context. Therefore, mastery-oriented students in the mastery goal structure exhibit the highest level of adaptive learning patterns, followed by approach-performance-oriented students in the mastery goal structure or mastery-oriented students in the approach performance goal structure group, and approach-performance-oriented students in the approach performance goal structure are the worst in this regard.

Based on the revised goal theory, the matching hypothesis emphasizes that approach performance goals are beneficial for some outcome variables and students. It suggests that a match between the personal goal orientation and the classroom goal structure is the most beneficial because the same kind of classroom goal structure can offer the necessary support for learners to pursue their own goals. Therefore, approach-performance-oriented students in the approach performance goal structure would be expected to exhibit adaptive learning patterns that are identical to mastery-oriented students in the mastery goal structure.

There have been few studies that have inspected the interaction between personal goal orientations and classroom goal structures. Newman (1998) conducted experiments to inspect the interaction between goal orientations and goal structures as they relate to problem-solving performance and help-seeking. The findings indicated that when students endorse performance goals and are involved in

performance goal structures, they show low levels of help-seeking. Linnenbrink (2005) also conducted experiments to examine whether there were any Personal Goal \times Classroom Goal interactions in the primary school students under consideration. There were no significant interactions found between personal and classroom goals.

It is not clear which of these two hypotheses with moderating effects is in line with the educational status quo. Considering the educational context of Taiwan, success in school is valued as keys to good prospects. Parents in Taiwan show great concern for the academic achievement of their children, and children always pursue goal orientations according to their parents' expectations. Shih (2005) found that mastery and approach performance goals positively predicted Taiwanese sixth-graders strategy use and intrinsic motivation, and negatively predicted test anxiety, in line with revised goal theory. In other words, pursuing an approach performance goal in the case of students in Taiwan may be beneficial for both their learning process and achievement. Therefore, we assumed that the results of this study were more in line with the matching hypothesis of moderating effects which is based on the revised goal theory.

1.3. Test-preparation strategies

Test-taking strategy as a skill or coping tactic is important for students because it could strongly affect their tests scores. Using appropriate test-taking strategies improves students' grades and reduces test anxiety (Ghafournia & Afghari, 2013). In the early 90s, test-taking strategy was firstly included in the Motivated Strategies and Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990) and was defined as one kind of self-regulated learning strategy. Much of the literature on motivation clearly states that goals offer guidance for our thoughts, behavior and strategies (Schutz & Davis, 2000). Many studies have explored how goals influence the strategies that students use in their learning process (Pintrich, 2000b; Wolters, 2004), but few studies have examined the relationship between achievement goals and test-taking strategies.

In order to comprehensively explore how personal and situational goals interact to affect test-taking strategies, we extend the conceptualization of test-taking strategies according to two aspects. Firstly, we examine the strategies that students use when preparing for tests rather than those used when actually taking the tests. Secondly, we refer to the classification of the self-regulated learning strategies proposed by Pintrich (2000a) and adopt four kinds of strategies, cognitive regulation, motivational/affective regulation, behavioral regulation and contextual regulation. Therefore, we change the terminology from test-taking strategies to test-preparation strategies. Cognitive regulation test-preparation strategies refer to all kinds of cognitive and metacognitive strategies that learners use during their preparation for tests to control and regulate their information process. Motivational/affective regulation test-preparation strategies refer to strategies that are intentionally and willingly used by learners to manage and affect their motivation during their preparation for tests. Behavioral regulation test-preparation strategies refer to the effort, insistence and help-seeking behavior used by learners in their preparation for tests. Contextual regulation test-preparation strategies refer to the active monitoring, control and regulation of the involved learning environment to make sure tests are conducted smoothly. Given that few studies on the relationship between goals and test-preparation strategies have been conducted, in this study, these four test-preparation strategies are used as dependent variables to further explore the moderating effects of personal goal orientations and classroom goal structures.

1.4. The present study

In the current study, a 3×4 between-subject design was adopted for the study. We manipulated three classroom goal structures (mastery, approach performance and multiple goal structure) and divided the

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