Motivating the Passive Learner
Through Exploring His Social Skills

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ABSTRACT

The present action research investigates whether it is possible to improve the social skills of university students with the help of peers and the classroom teacher. In this study, mainly a qualitative approach, case study methodology is adopted, and a student’s social skills are analyzed by the researcher, who is the classroom teacher. A male student’s social skills are examined within a classroom context, within a real-life situation to decide whether it is possible for a teacher to improve the social skills of university students. Classroom observations, private chats, discussions and written classwork were used to collect data. In terms of methodology, the current research proceeded in four phases as selecting the student who needs training in certain social skills, identifying powerful reinforcers that will motivate the student to attempt the new behavior, specifically defining the targeted behavior to be taught, and the task analysis of the target behavior. The findings of the study reveal that teachers can contribute to the social skills of their students if they want to.

Keywords: Motivation, Social Skills, Task Provision, University Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Why do we laugh? Why do we cry? Because we are social human beings who are affected by our relationships to other people, and our existence is almost impossible or cannot be tolerated without a good social life. What does a good social life require then? The answer is quite simple: to possess good social skills. The purpose of this study is to find out what can be done for the students who lack the appropriate social skills at the university level.

A. Definition of Terms

1) Social skills

Laura Candler (2005) in her website on “Teaching Resources” highlights social skills and identifies some problematic social skills from her own classroom. Taking turns, patient waiting, accepting differences, staying with the team are examples of these skills.

2) Social skilled

The website on “Teaching Social Skills to Kids who do not have them” defines the term ‘social skilled’, as:
The ability to respond to a given environment in a manner that produces, maintains and enhances positive interpersonal (between people) effects.

Helping a student to become more social skilled is the aim of this paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

After reading relevant literature on the topic, several new insights arose in my mind regarding the social skills of university students and the role of instructors within the socialization process of young learners.

Our socialization process starts within the family and relatives, continues with neighbors and friends, and then moves into the school in the presence of peers and teachers. A human being is not born with acceptable social skills. He/she acquires them gradually. They are learned through interaction with a model, caregiver (Mahzoon et al., 2016).

Although the family plays an important role in teaching basic social skills to their children, such as appropriate language and traditions, the role of the schools is also vital in terms of improving the social skills of the students. Baldacchino (2000) claims that “Schools present young members of the society with an opportunity to learn how to live with others” (p. 58) Furthermore, he raises an important question: “Can we be fully human without having good friends?” (p. 53).

Fontana (1995) claims that “Much of our progress in life, whether at school or in the later world of employment, depends on our ability to master and use the necessary social skills” (p. 319). People who are not social, are generally shy, lonely and unable to assert themselves. For these reasons, they cannot stand up for their rights, or lodge required complaints.

Unfortunately, the role of school education is generally misunderstood as involving obligatory attendance,
timetabled subject courses, using drilling or memorization techniques to students to convey the subject matter required by the fixed curriculums set by the schools, administering exams, quizzes, etc. However, attendance rate is only a factor to consider when sizing up a school. Traditional teachers who take attendance, give instruction and finish the lesson when the topic finishes, actually cannot contribute much to their student’s real growth. Kamenetz (2020) declares that:

*We’re so used to testing and just taking attendance as kind of anchors of measurement. And we need to take our thinking to the next level*, adding that as teachers we have to be creative and understanding taking our thinking skill to higher levels (p. 4).

Teachers who think like this are happy nowadays continuing their education as remote learning and online education sitting in front of the camera without real face-to-face interaction. In online education, as teachers we should not just count days to go back to classrooms for a better education but look for new effective directions for our new teaching platforms. There are always ways to increase overall social practices of using online tools in real-life situations and reflecting the best practices in the learning environment (Zounek & Budický, 2013). However even in this Covid-19 situation, schools need to act actually as a social institution which affects the student’s human potential and therefore education given at schools or online should always be crucial.

Baldacchino (2000) states that:

*According to UNESCO definition, education refers to the entire process of social life by means of which one develops personal capacities, attitudes, aptitudes and knowledge fully, for the benefit of the self and community* (p. 302).

Furthermore, he introduces two important aspects of education as functional and liberal (p. 302). The functional aspect concentrates on skills such as literacy, vocation, linguistics, numerical understanding, laws etc. to help learners to survive normally according to the basic requirements of the society. However, the second aspect of education is liberal, which includes providing the students with skills such as criticism, judgment, social skills and decision-making to enhance their appreciation of the world. One of the problems within our education system is the fact that it emphasizes the former ignoring the latter. Teachers cannot understand why they should bother to spend their time teaching social skills and they think it is the parents’ responsibility only, however, it is not. Baldacchino goes further and claims, “No society can survive if its citizens are unprepared for their social roles” (p. 304).

Moreover, Baldacchino stresses that youth in a society is the most important group who need special attention because this maturation period causes continuous social changes within the personality of students. For example, they start to realize their social roles and responsibilities, consider others, and make decisions without their parents. This transition period is very dangerous because while trying to find their own positions within the society, they may choose wrong role models for themselves such as a popular peer who uses cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. Alternatively, this role model could be Adriana Lima and the student may leave the school to become a fashion model.

Generally, youth is seen as a time for crisis. Baldacchino states, “We often hear comments about young people being carefree, irresponsible, only interested in the banal and the insignificant.” (p. 343) Moreover, youth is also an important time period which may foster fresh ideas about how to change the society for the better. For many reasons, youth is the most critical period in human life.

Lev Vygotsky is an important figure who contributed to the research on the socialization process. Although Piaget, similar to Vygotsky, focused on how the child interacts with the external world to construct meaning, the two men have different viewpoints on the subject. Piaget claims that cognitive growth of a person consists of four stages which are sensori-motor, pre-operational, concrete operations and formal operational which follow each other for an end goal of personal, social development. However, Vygotsky finds it wrong to define such stages, suggesting human development as too complex. He believes that it is social learning and social interaction which lead to cognitive development, and this is completely the opposite of what Piaget argues. Vygotsky emphasizes the importance of others’ contributions to the construction of meaning and accordingly describes cognitive development as socially and culturally bound.

As Fontana (1995) highlights; Vygotsky (1978; 1986) disagreed with the Piagetian view that there are psychological structures in the human mind that are essentially independent of context, task content and social factors, and took the view that children’s cognitive abilities are built up in interaction with the opportunities and guidance provided by the environment (p. 64).

Does the socialization process end with maturity? Does it end when the students attend university? Is it too late to help them at the university level? Peelo (1994) discusses that undergraduates continue absorbing social values whether aged 18 or 80—they develop expectations, confidence etc. and this change process is usually destructive because the university student does not know his/her place in life yet (p. 82). A university student is like a primary school student in terms of doing wrong and feeling shame to correct his/her behavior. As Peelo (1994) states “a low mark at university brings the same sense of shame as being discovered as ‘dirty’ when a primary school child.” (p. 85).

If the youngsters we teach haven’t learned appropriate social skills, it is the time to manage such behavior of disorders at the university. What is important for us should not be only the written exam results of students. Achieving the curriculum should not be the only goal of a teacher. A teacher needs to teach his/her students the skills everyone would like to see such as positive interaction with others, handling frustration, active listening, turn-taking etc. Although the main participants of this study were lucky enough to have face to face educational setting, nowadays, there are several studies now which reveal that even through computer supported tools still teachers can enhance the degree of mastery in social skills (Tadjer et al., 2018). These type of articles and research mean a lot now in covid 19 online education era.
III. METHODOLOGY

The research approach of this study is ‘action research’. Nunan (1989a) states that the main concern of action research is to find a solution to a problem and such research projects generally deal with a single case in a specific situation. He defines the primary motivation for action research as;

(...) the more immediate one of bringing about change and, hopefully, to improve the state of affairs in the classroom in which it has taken place. It is, thus, problem-focused (Nunan, 1989a, p. 13).

Similarly, Cohen and Manion (1994) state that the emphasis of action research is on obtaining “precise knowledge for a particular situation and purpose” (p. 187).

This study is an example of action research because a classroom problem is diagnosed in a specific setting by the classroom teacher and a new approach is taken onto the existing classroom system for the learner to find a solution to his problems. Gibbs (1995) claims that change is necessary for teachers, especially for university teachers, who are lecturers. Likewise, he states: “We need to take up the challenges that are offered, for fresh vision and new ideas are essential ingredients for the university of the future” (p. 20). Even a discussion with a single student can create a negative classroom atmosphere and ruin our education. Therefore, teacher sometimes needs to change something to create positive classroom atmosphere, as the way it was, immediately, due to the fact that the opposite situation can cause big problems for us as the actors of the classroom (Sanli, 2019).

Furthermore, the research approach of this study is a qualitative approach, a case study which aims to obtain information about humans through emphasizing contextual analysis of a limited number of events and their relationships to each other, generated by the data collected. Case study is in depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon, intensive analysis of a particular event, situation Schoch (2016).

A website on “The Case Study as a Research Method” quotes the well-known case researcher Yin’s definition for a case study as an empirical research that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. In this study, a student’s behavior is examined within a classroom context, within a real-life situation to examine whether it is possible to improve the social skills of university students as a teacher. Classroom observations, private chats, discussions and the written classwork were used to collect data.

In terms of methodology, the current research proceeded in four phases. A website on “Teaching Social Skills” suggests four main steps to be followed in teaching social skills. This case study focuses on these four steps as follows:

• Step I Selecting the student who needs training in certain social skills.
• Step II Identify powerful reinforcers that will motivate the student to attempt the new behavior.
• Step III Identify and specifically define the targeted behavior to be taught.
• Step IV Task Analyze of the target behavior.

IV. DETERMINED RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1) Can we change the attitudes of the students in a positive way, at the university level, by helping them to gain better social skills?
2) How can we help our students to improve their social skills?

V. CASE STUDY

A. Step 1: Selecting the Student Who Needs Training in Certain Social Skills

It was not difficult for me to select a student who needed training in social skills. I had a student who always caused trouble in class and disrupted my teaching experience. As Allright and Bailey (1991) state, if a student is not receptive to the teacher, this may ruin the experience of the whole class (p. 169). Below are some of my negative classroom experiences with this student, Mr. X. This student was always coming to class late, daydreaming in class or sometimes listening to music with his headphones. It was as if he was trying to ignore all his classmates and me in class. He never wanted to cooperate with his mates. I asked my colleagues, his other subject matter teachers, and they all complained about his misbehavior in class, but all five teachers said that they ignore him instead of finding a solution to his negative attitudes.

One Monday afternoon, while I was giving important instructions on a new topic, X put his head down on his desk and sighed to express his boredom. I immediately interrupted the lesson and admonished him”. Do not repeat this again. This is not a place for sleeping. Nobody comes here to sleep. People sleep at home! This is a place for learning and your friends are trying to learn something. You do not have the right to disturb the attention of the class.” When I went home, I thought of this event again and asked myself whether Mr. X’s lying on his desk was a sufficiently serious reason for me to interrupt the lesson and scold him. I couldn’t answer this.

I strongly agree with the idea that ‘that the teachers are members of the society and that their attitudes and schemas about the target behaviors of the students cannot develop independently from the societal dynamics’ (Agir, 2019). Considering this I felt the ultimate need to do something and support this guy for a healthy flourishing of my class.

When I went home, I reexamined all his behavior and strongly felt that I had to do something for this student. I started to blame myself for not solving this problem. This was a result of my self-reflection which is actually something that all teachers require after their classes. As Altinay and Altinay (2012) proclaim, “teacher reflection is a key for developing professional knowledge that is supported from observation skills and teaching practices” (p. 91).

First, I went over his class work to check what he wrote the first day of the semester. I had given them a question as “Please Introduce Yourselves”. Here is the information I received from his paper. X is a 20-year-old male from Jerusalem. He has been studying English since he was in the elementary school. He is here because his father wanted him to be here, but he wants to study in America. He lives here with his sister.
Then, I started to chat with him after each class to learn more about him. For example, I asked him about his favorite English teacher and his opinions about English lessons. He replied as “I never had any favorite English teachers so far. About English lessons, all I can say is, I know all this stuff, I don’t understand why I should take it again. I started to learn more and more about X. On asking him the reason for coming late to class, he replied as “Everything is always the same, I do not miss anything when I come 10 minutes later”.

Then I asked him about his life in here and he said he hates living here and he hates the authority of his elder sister trying to act like a mother figure for him although she is only 4 years older than he is. He himself added that he hates being controlled by others; he wants to live his life independently. At this point, I guess that as a young teacher from the opposite sex who is not much older than him, like his sister, X probably hated my authoritarian attitude.

Furthermore, he added that his classmates do not know how to speak good English, so he doesn’t want to speak with them. He has got nothing in common to share with them and he does not enjoy spending time with them. From all these contacts and classroom observations, I identified three deficiencies in X’s social behavior to concentrate on for this study, and I thought of ways to improve them. The first skill was his misbehavior to his teacher, to me. The second one was coming late to the class, and the third one was his being antisocial to his classmates, isolating himself from everyone.

B. Step II: Identify Powerful Reinforcers that will Motivate the Student to Attempt the New Behavior

Several tasks were assigned for Mr. X for reinforcement to improve his social skills. These were being the assistant of the teacher, guiding a tour and giving a presentation. While designing task I was feeling very curious about the overcome of what I was trying. As Craig (2019) highlights ‘Use of positive reinforcement leads to heightened enthusiasm in students – and even the teacher’!

While carrying out all these tasks, aim was for Mr. X to acquire better social skills. In short, a task-based approach was used for Mr. X.

C. Step III. Identify and Specifically Define the Targeted Behavior to be Taught

1) Respecting to teacher in class and being active during lesson
2) Having social interaction with peers
3) Coming to class on time

D. Step IV: Task Analysis of the Target Behavior

1) Misbehavior towards his teacher

As a teacher disappointed by Mr. X’s negative attitude, I started to avoid my anger. I stopped myself always saying “don’t” whatever Mr. X does. For example, when Mr. X sighed in class, I said: “Do not repeat this again. This is not a place for sleeping. Nobody comes here to sleep. People sleep at home! This is a place for learning and your friends are trying to learn something. You do not have the right to disturb the attention of the class”.

In other words, I reacted. The website on “Beyond Ms. Manners Preferences: Improving Social Behavior Patterns” states that as teachers we should not say don’t. It doesn’t work to correct the misbehavior of our students. We should try to sympath our learners’ problem rather than reacting or threatening them. As Thacker (as cited in Desforges, 1995) argues, “Education must go beyond subject knowledge if it is to maintain civilized values” (p. 256). Furthermore, he adds that social values, skills are essential bedrocks on which knowledge might be founded and the realness of a facilitator includes a sensitive and emphatic listening, trust, respect for the learner, a positive classroom climate, etc.

All misbehavior has a reason. If we approach the students in a friendly manner rather than shouting, it becomes easier to help the student by being closer to him/her. If you threaten him/her, he/she thinks you are disrespectful and accordingly, you cannot help that student. There is no such thing as wrong behavior; all human behavior is acceptable, but the problem is the timing of the behavior, carrying out the behavior at the right time. As teachers, we need to treat social skill deficits as deficiencies in learning and try to teach the desired social skills, in this case, showing respect to the teacher.

After considering all the above, I decided to listen empathetically and called Mr. X for a coffee to listen to him, to share his problems and to develop trust. As Thacker (as cited in Desforges, 1995) suggests, “Students learn more and behave better when they receive high levels of understanding, caring and genuineness” (p. 257). Negative skills can be eliminated through conscious effort of the classroom teacher.

Participant student in such studies can improve his/her behaviors with the implementation of appropriate behavior program and accordingly can generate positive changes in students’ attitudes as well as social skills (Gil-Madrona et al., 2019).

To help Mr. X to improve his social skills, I shouldn’t merely tell him what to do. To maintain mutual respect, I held a private meeting with him in my office. I kindly asked him to explain the reasons behind his misbehavior in class. He said he is bored; he has no friends and doesn’t feel motivated as he has nothing to do. He said, he didn’t sigh on purpose to make me angry, but because of the silence I thought that way. Then, I asked him for possible solutions to his problems. He said he wants to be active but does not know how. I said I understand him and then I suggested that he be my assistant, helping me to take attendance, on completing the tasks earlier, checking his neighbor’s paper, writing on the board what I was going to copy from my notes, etc. Of course, I offered him a bonus for this assistantship as reinforcement. I expressed my confidence in his ability to improve his skills. I said you are the best student in class, so I need your help a lot. You have very good English, and I am lucky to have a student like you. I kept the discussion confidential. The basic theory behind this positive approach was that when a student is treated as an adult who must solve a problem, rather than a child who must be punished, the student is more likely to respond positively and correct the problem. Sensitive empathy was effective with Mr. X. As Thacker (as cited in Desforges, 1995) puts forward, Mr. X most probably said: “At least someone understands how it feels to be me, without wanting to analyze or judge me. Now I can grow and learn” (p. 125).
Due to his assistantship and most probably due to his positive conversation which made him to feel proud of himself, Mr. X devoted himself to English lessons.

2) Coming late to class

When I asked Mr. X the reason behind his coming late to class, his reply was:

“Everything is always the same, I do not miss anything when I come 10 minutes later”. This made me think for another solution to correct his behavior. Since the beginning of the semester, my class was requesting me to have the speaking classes outside on the grass after buying our coffees from the cafeteria. This idea was challenging for me but somehow, I didn’t try it. On seeing Mr. X as absent the first week, I took my students to the garden and had a very effective and enjoyable speaking class. Mr. X was not the only late student who missed this opportunity. Next lesson, those late students who could not find us complained as they couldn’t find us and I said if you were in class on time like we were, you wouldn’t miss the class and they accepted that I was right.

A website on “Beyond Ms. Manners Preferences: Improving Social Behavior Patterns” (Ms. Manners, 2005) claims that it is vitally important to allow students to experience the consequences of their misbehavior. For example, according to what Ms. Manners suggests, if Mr. X had experienced how it makes one feel to be interrupted by a latelcomer while trying to give clear instructions, he would not have come late all the time. I applied this to Mr. X. Each of my students was responsible to present a language point from our course book for 15 minutes. On purpose, I assigned Mr. X to explain the passive voice, which was a difficult topic for most of the students, during the first fifteen minutes of the lesson. I asked four students whom I knew well to come late to Mr. X’s presentation and to interrupt him on purpose every 3 minutes and they did. The anger was obvious from Mr. X’s facial expression. Every time he was saying something, he was interrupted by a knock on the door and lost his concentration at the end.

My mission was successfully completed. After the presentations, each presenter used to come to my office for feedback and to learn their grades. Mr. X came to my office one day after the presentation and I asked him: “It seemed to me as if you were not concentrated on your topic. Was it because of your topic’s difficulty, passives?” He said, “No miss, latecomers didn’t let me concentrate. I forgot what I was going to say”. I said “So, can you understand now how another person, like me, feels when you interrupt them by coming late?” He said “yes” and blushed but started to come to class on time late after that.

3) Being antisocial to his classmates

Mr. X was always very anti-social in class, never talked with anyone or helped anyone. He had no friends in class at all. Most probably because of his good English, he was conceited. On reading “Typical Social Skills Training Methods” I have discovered that homework assignments and role-plays provide an opportunity to practice social skills. Because Mr X’s problem was lack of friendship and cooperation, I planned a group work for organizing a tour to Magosa’s historical places. I selected the group members as Mr. X, Miss. Y (another anti-social student) and 3 very social and friendly students. I added one more anti-social student to Mr. X’s group because according to a website on “Teaching Social Skills”, creating small groups consisting of similar deficits, is more helpful. Naturally, I thought that helping two students rather than one was better. This tactic would ‘kill two birds with one stone’.

The group was going to organize a historical tour for all the class as an end of the semester project. To do this, they had to visit and choose the places, arrange the tickets, bus, games, music, jokes during the tour, lunch, etc. In short, they had to cooperate. They had to come together often, share their ideas. Mr. X loved this idea. From the first day, he said I can present most of the tour as a tour-guide. The others liked this idea as they were afraid of doing mistakes while presenting. They started to meet after my English class, every week. They started to travel to historical places together. They started to become friends. Mr. X was very excited. After one of my classes, I heard him saying “Why don’t we go with my car, it’s big enough.” They started to cooperate, share their ideas come together, in other words, they started to become friends. Mr. X was becoming a social person in class. Observing this was making me feel happy. I was improving his friendship, in turn one of his social skills.

After all these trials, I went to see Mr. X’s teachers in other subjects to ask about his behavior, because at the beginning of the semester all of them had complained about him. The teachers said that he had changed a lot. He started to participate in class and group work. They said that he had more friends. They added that during the break he usually used to leave and not come back, but later the teachers saw him chatting in the corridor with his classmates during the break. Also, the number of lessons to which he was late decreased a lot according to his other teachers. All of them noticed a big change for the better in Mr. X towards the end of the semester.

VI. SUGGESTIONS

I have conducted a case study and the result was positive, but the major benefit was for one student only. What else can be done to improve the social skills of our students? We should think of all our students. Various people or groups in the field of education had several suggestions to improve the social skills of our students. One of them highlights the importance of the curriculum to gain better socially educated students. As Tacker (edited by Desforges, 1995) suggests “personal and social development through the curriculum cannot be left to chance but needs to be coordinated as an explicit part of a school’s whole curriculum policy, both inside and outside the formal timetable” (p. 257). The National Curriculum Council in England emphasized that personal and social education (PSE) is extremely important for the school curriculum (p. 257). The expectation of PSE is to prepare the students for their future role within a wide democratic society. Teachers need to accept a role beyond just being the subject matter teacher conveying only the topics of their lesson. It should not be only the families’ responsibility to contribute the life competencies of their children. All the parents are working nowadays and teachers in some cases even spend more time with the students than families.
Helping them being capable with the challenges of life should also be a part of our education system. Similarly, Saravanakumar (2020) declares that ‘in a continuously altering environment, having life competencies is an imperative part of being capable to meet the challenges of everyday life’ (p. 557).

Another recent study claims that deficits in social skills interfere with university students’ success and post-university success. The University of Detroit Mercy develops a Personal Development and Social Responsibility course to shape their students’ values and norms. According to Hazen (2004), this three-hour credit course “integrates personal development, ethics, spirituality, service to the community, social justice and teamwork” (p. 374) and is offered as one of the introductory courses in the MBA curriculum. The six main goals of the course include:

1) Challenging students to grasp the vision and the mission of the university,
2) Identifying their own goals,
3) Working in teams,
4) Building skills such as oral presentations,
5) Discussing important social responsibility strategies,
6) Familiarizing students with ethical norms of judging personal and organizational dilemmas.

In other words, what is important is that: The course enables adult professional students to work together to define their own ethical standards, develop stronger personal and moral roots, and realize the importance of contributing to the community (p. 385). Fontana (1995) argues that the classroom atmosphere is very important for teaching social skills. According to him, if the student feels embarrassed or inadequate in class, the result will be negative. Furthermore, he adds that confidence is important in dealing with individuals’ social problems.

For Fontana, role-playing is seen as a way forward to improve the social skills of students. He states that during a role-play “what emerges will be a much clearer understanding of the nature and power of persuasion, of the right wording needed if a request is to succeed, of how others see us, of the importance of voice, of manner, of non-verbal signals, and of studying the person with whom we are interacting” (p. 323). For good social training, the individual should feel ready to share his/her feelings, to convey and receive social warmth. Sometimes he/she should be a good listener, by self-disclosure and then should share his own problems by being open to the other party.

All students have something good inside themselves. Unfortunately, many struggle to see this. If we think we are good educators, we should stop complaining about the lack of social skills of our students. Rather, we must teach them the skills we wish to see! Only then will, the education we offer, become a real education in every sense!

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social skills should be included in the education system. As Gökel and Dagli (2017) proclaim; helping the people to participate in social activities in young ages, developing the skills, performing works that will let them to be creative and productive in their social life (p. 7371).

It is very important, so teachers should not just convey the subject matter while ignoring the improvement the social skills of their students. Teaching grammar or mathematics is not enough for students. We should prepare them for a successful and better life. Nobody is born with social skills and social skills training can continue throughout all ages.

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