

The Impact of Affective Communications on Students' Perceptions and Performance in an Online University Course

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Abstract: Instructor's support via communications is an essential component in online contexts. This study focuses on instructors' affective communications and their impact on students' perceptions of the course, their instructor, teacher communications and performance in English academic reading courses. 35 students participated in the study: 17 (control group) received instructional communications, 18 (experimental group) received additional affective comments. Students completed a questionnaire which focused on their perceptions of the course, their teacher and the teacher communications. T-tests were performed to see if significant differences occurred between the two groups. Final exam scores were compared. Results showed that students in the experimental group were significantly more positive in their perceptions of *feedback effectiveness* and *encouragement*. They also performed better. Despite the small scale of the study, the results suggest that affective communications foster positive attitudes towards instruction in online courses.

Introduction

The English online courses at the Open University of Israel have become increasingly popular. Online instruction consists of written assignments followed by comprehensive feedback with instructional support when needed. Surveys carried out by the university consistently show that online students perform well and are generally satisfied with the course. In this study we wanted to focus on the impact of affective instructors' communications on students' perceptions of the course, the quality of instruction and characteristics of the instructor as well as on exam performance.

It is widely acknowledged that student motivation is essential for successful learning in general and in online instruction in particular. Gardner states that "students with higher levels of motivation will do better than students with lower levels" (2006, p.241). In his model for motivation in second language learning he includes 'affect' as one of the three elements central to motivation. He goes on to say that a motivated individual is a person who exhibits positive affect in his attitudes towards the learning situation which includes the class atmosphere, the quality of the materials, the curriculum and the teacher. Gardner sees the teacher as central to promoting favorable attitudes and motivation among his students. Noels, Pelletier, Clement & Vallerand (2000) suggest that students who learn a language in an autonomy- supportive environment, where feedback enhances their sense of competence in the learning tasks, are likely to find the learning experience pleasurable which results in enhanced self confidence. Dornyei (2001) states, "teacher skills in motivating learners should be seen as central to teaching effectiveness" (p.116). He says that the teacher plays a central role in influencing learner motivation and this can be exhibited through teacher feedback and praise in addition to grades for assignments.

From the above review of motivation in the context of language learning, we see that the learning context or classroom situation and more specifically, the role of the teacher and classroom environment are vital aspects of the learning process which impact students' motivation and subsequently their performance. However, these studies were conducted in the context of a face to face classroom- an instructional environment different from a virtual learning context. In online courses the instructor does not have a physical social presence or regular in-class opportunities to create a productive and nurturing classroom environment for the students. The real challenge to the online instructor is to create a productive and supportive learning environment for her students within the virtual classroom setting.

Research has also shown that affective instructor communications enhances student motivation. Richardson and Swan (2003) focused on teacher immediacy behaviors, "a measure of the psychological distance that a communicator puts between themselves and the object of their communication" (p.70), and found that "students who perceived more frequent verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors in their teachers were more likely to give a higher rating to the overall quality of instruction and value of a course (p.78)." Muirhead (2004) emphasizes the importance of *affective feedback* in the virtual learning environment and mentions (Brophy, 1999) who states "affective dimension of learning indicate[s] that it can have a positive impact on academic achievement...[and that] affective benefits represent important social and emotional aspects to the online experience." Garrison and Anderson (2003) claim that affective instructor responses have a direct effect on interactivity and open communication between the student and instructor which are essential "to deep and meaningful learning outcomes." Baker (2002) found that "the instructor is important to the effectiveness of the online learning experience" (p.9). Swan, Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, Pelz

& Maher (2000) found that “compassionate, positive feedback that provides information about how to improve competencies tends to enhance intrinsic motivation.... sustained effort, and, ultimately, achievement in the task”. In another study, Swan (2001) reports that high perceived levels of interaction with the instructor result in high levels of satisfaction and learning. She concludes that “interactions with instructors are critical factors in the success or failure of online learning” (p.322).

Clearly then, affective communications, providing support to the student and individual guidance to the learner about his work and progress seem to be necessary elements for a successful online learning experience. But how significant is the impact of affective support? Does it have a significant impact on students' perceptions of the course in general and the instruction and instructor in particular? In order to shed light on this issue, the following research questions were examined:

1. Will students in an online course receiving affective instructor communications have more positive perceptions of the *instruction*, the *instructor*; *instructor communications* and the *course*, than students who do not receive affective communications from their instructor?
2. Do students in online courses receiving regular affective communications perform better on the final exam than students who did not receive affective communications?

The Study

The purpose of the study was to see whether the inclusion of affective comments in the teachers' ongoing communications affected students' perceptions towards the instruction, the instructor, the course in general and performance. The variables focused on in this study were: **1. Instruction:** quality and effectiveness of materials, instructor's guidance and written feedback; **2. Instructor:** students' perceptions of the instructor's personal characteristics and professional qualities (*friendly, easy to communicate with, patient, supportive, professional* etc); **3. Teacher communications;** **4. Course:** overall perceptions of course and online delivery mode-*improved reading; efficient, enjoyable; friendly interesting and made me responsible for my learning;* and **4. Performance:** scores on the final exam.

The sample included 35 students participating in an exit level online EFL Academic Reading Course. The students were randomly divided into two separate groups (Control and Experimental) and both groups were taught by the same instructor. The control group consisted of 17 students and the experimental group included 18 students. The groups were very similar in terms of their previous background in English.

A 5 pt. Likert scale questionnaire (1 indicating *not at all* and 5 indicating *to a great extent*) was designed to elicit information on the following variables:

1. **student's background information** (8 items)
2. **perceptions of instruction - course material and course instruction** (15 items; Cronbach's alpha = .92).
3. **perceptions of instructor 's email communications** (7 items; Cronbach's alpha = .91)
4. **perceptions of the instructor** (8 items; Cronbach's alpha = .95)
5. **overall perceptions of the course** (6 items; Cronbach's alpha = .89).

The questionnaire was anonymous and administered by the Evaluation Department of the university via email.

Throughout the course, both groups (experimental and control) received the same administrative information, content instruction and instructive communications either via email or written on the assignments submitted. In addition to the above, the students in the experimental group received affective comments in the teacher communications and on assignments (which encouraged, motivated etc).

Examples of instructional communications (received by both Control and Experimental Groups):

Please look over the answer to question 7- you are missing one example.

Please look over the answer to question 4- you did not choose the correct option- see the feedback.

Examples of affective comments (received by experimental group in addition to instructional comments):

You have done great work on this assignment. Only question 4a needs to be corrected- many parts of the chart need to be changed. Read over the feedback to understand your mistakes.

I know it is hard to find the time to review but it is so important for your success- I have seen how hard you have worked this semester and I know you can do it!

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all items in the questionnaire. T-Tests were performed between the experimental and control groups on each of the items. In addition, T- Tests on exam scores were calculated in order determine significant differences between the two groups in *performance*.

Findings

The instruction in the online reading for academic purposes course consists of teacher’s comments and feedback on submitted weekly assignments and three comprehensive graded assignments. Results of the T-Tests show significant differences ($p \leq .05$) on the items: *the personal comments of the instructor on weekly assignments encouraged me*; *the feedback on graded assignments contributed to my understanding of the material*; *the feedback on the graded assignments guided me as to how to understand my errors* and *the feedback on the graded assignments encouraged me* . Table 1 presents the results.

Item (translated from Hebrew)	Significant results
<i>The personal comments of the instructor on weekly assignments encouraged me</i>	p= 0.05
<i>The feedback on the graded assignments contributed to my understanding of the material</i>	p<0.05
<i>The feedback on the graded assignments guided me as to how to understand my errors.</i>	p<0.05
<i>The feedback on the graded assignments encouraged me.</i>	p<0.05

Table 1: Significant differences between experimental and control groups

From table 2 we see that significant differences were observed on those items relating to the instructor’s input - *personal comments* and *feedback*. Students in the experimental group (those receiving affective communications regularly from their instructor) on the weekly assignments and graded assignments perceived the feedback they received as being significantly more effective and encouraging than students in the control group (those who did not receive regular affective communications from the teacher). It is important to point out that the students’ attitudes towards the materials and feedback were positive in both groups.

In general, the students in the online reading course had very positive attitudes towards the instructor. While no significant differences between students in the experimental group and the control group were observed in their perceptions of their teacher, the results showed a trend in the expected direction indicating more positive perceptions among students receiving regular affective comments. They viewed the teacher as being more patient, friendly, supportive, easy to talk to, considerate of their needs and encouraging than students who do not receive regular affective communications.

Items relating to students' perceptions of teacher's ongoing communications did not reach significance. However, a meaningful trend was observed suggesting that students in the experimental group tended to view the ongoing communications more positively than students in the control group.

No significant differences were found between the two groups regarding their general attitudes towards the course or the online delivery mode. Most students perceived the online course to be very *efficient* and *friendly*. They felt that it is fairly *interesting* and *enjoyable*, that it *increased their autonomy as learners* and *improved their reading* to a moderately high degree.

A significant difference was observed where the experimental group performed better than the control group. Results are presented in table 2.

Group	Average (standard deviation)	Significance
Control Group (N =17)	79 (9.0)	p<0.05
Experimental group (N=17)	86 (8.9)	

Table 2: T-Test on exam results for control and experimental groups

Table 2 shows that those in the experimental group receiving ongoing affective communications from the instructor performed significantly better than the control group - those not receiving affective communications. It should be noted that the exam was relatively easy and both groups performed well.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that regular affective instructor communications have a significant effect on online students' attitudes towards the feedback they receive on assignments. They perceive this feedback as being more encouraging and helpful in understanding the material as well as more useful in understanding and overcoming their problems than students who did not receive instructor's affective communications. Furthermore, students receiving affective feedback did significantly better on the final exam. This result must be related to cautiously since no baseline measure of group equivalence in English ability was obtained prior to the study. Meaningful trends were observed where students receiving affective communications had more positive reactions to the instructor's ongoing emails and perceived their instructors as more encouraging, supportive, considerate and easy to talk to than those in the control group. Despite the small scale of the study, the results suggest that affective communications foster positive attitudes towards the instruction and the instructor in online instruction. It should however, be replicated on a larger sample.

Because of its relationship with motivation to learn, it is important to create a learning experience which fosters positive attitudes towards learning and instruction. This is even more essential in an online or distance learning mode where human contact is mediated by technology. The results of this small study indicate that when instruction is held constant, affective comments in teacher's communications can create among students, a significantly more positive perception of the course and instruction they receive.

These findings have direct implications for teacher training programs. In addition to the existing focus on methodologies in online learning contexts, teachers should also be made aware of the importance of providing affective support in order to enhance students' motivation and positive attitudes towards their learning. The affective support should be provided throughout the course via ongoing communications as well as within the feedback on assignments. This affective component not only serves as a motivating element within the course but also provides the "human presence" that is missing in distance learning contexts.

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