Research article

Use of self-selected nicknames by female Kuwaiti students and their perceptions of the impact of nicknames upon their learning in the classroom

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ABSTRACT

While numerous studies have been conducted on the impact of nicknames on students, these studies have focused on the effects of nicknames students have received in their lives. This study adopted a very unique and different design and asked female Kuwaiti university students to self-select a nickname of their own choice to be used in the classroom instead of their proper name. The students who volunteered to self-select nicknames and the students who did not were administered a structured questionnaire that was designed to gather data regarding the perceptions of the effects the self-selected nicknames had upon classroom performance. The analysis of the surveys revealed that the female students who selected nicknames reported that it improved their classroom performance. In addition, the females who did not select a nickname reported that it appeared to improve the classroom performance of those who choose a nickname.

Keywords: Nicknames, learning, classroom performance, Kuwaiti, self-selected nicknames

INTRODUCTION

Our name is the primary means used by the owner and others for the identification and reference of self. In short, we identify and address each other by name. In general, a child is given a name by their parents or through some form of societal process. Aceto (2002) reported that the birth name is acquired through a culturally approved arrangement and that the name usually remains for life unless there is a status change such as marriage or other such events. However, there is also the occurrence where an informal or unfixed name that is usually used by acquaintances or nickname becomes a mode of address (Phillips, 1990). Yet, in this study the aspect of acquiring a nickname that is usually given by acquaintances was by-passed and instead individuals were allowed to select their own nicknames. As far as known to this author's investigation, this self-selection process and research on its effect upon student classroom and learning performance has not been done prior to this study.

Now, it is known that children have received nicknames in many societies throughout the ages. Dollinger (2006) stated that the Ancient Egyptians used the process of nicknaming children. So, the activity of using names other than the "given" name has a long tradition. Research has revealed that in general the nickname functions within a realm of positive, negative, or neutral connotations and effects (Mehrabian and Piercy, 1993). Even earlier, Anderson (1986) reported that nicknames influence the self-concept of a child because of the types of messages that are conveyed through the nickname. In addition, numerous studies have looked at the impact of nicknames within the school environment (Crosier and Dimmock, 1999; Eliasson, Laflamme and Isaksoon, 2005; Kepenekci and Cinkir, 2006; Kolawole, Otuyemi and Adeosun, 2009). However, in general these studies focused on the use as forms of positive or negative name calling, verbal abuse, and bullying. The aspect of the impact upon learning was not investigated. Thus, this study was designed to investigate the phenomenon of having students self-select their own nickname and then survey their perceptions regarding their view of their chosen nickname and its impact upon their classroom learning performance.

In addition, while many studies on nicknames have been done in the United States and Europe on nicknames, very little has been conducted in the Middle East. One study by Haggan on the derogatory, affectionate and neutral uses of nicknames by Kuwait undergraduates (2008) was the only study discovered after intensive investigation. As mentioned earlier, what is important is that no study was found for any culture that looked at the effect of having students choose their nickname and then that nickname's impact upon their perceptions of classroom performance and learning.

LITERATURE

Nicknames are derived through many different processes in different cultures and many studies have investigated nicknames based upon the cultural setting in which they occur. Some previous investigations on nicknames have looked at languages and cultures and types of nicknames used such as Icelandic (Wilson, 2008), Spanish (Fernandez, 2008), Russian (Drannikova, 2006), and German (Koss, 2006). Not only major languages, but also smaller population's languages have been investigated for their impact upon the culture. These include Butkus (1999) who researched Lithuanian nicknames, de Klerk & Bosch's (1996) work on Xhosa, and Molefe's (2001) study on Zulu are just a few of many studies on nickname use within specific language and cultural groups.

Some early research on nicknames followed Anderson's (1986) view that nicknames have an impact upon the self-concept of a child because of the inherent connotations that a nickname might bring as a message to the holder. Thornborrow (2004) presented information regarding nicknaming as a process of constructing individual identity within a group, such that, some members are given unique names to help identify themselves. Other researchers (Kiesling, 1996; Liao 2006) looked at gender differences used in nicknaming and corresponding reasons for the differences.

These are but a small sample of the number of studies done on nicknames in the school environment. As discussed by Kuranchie (2012), it has also been reported that there seems to be a high prevalence for the nicknaming practice amongst students (2012). Crosier and Dimmock (1999) investigated British primary school students and reported that one-fifth of the students felt hurt and vulnerable because of the offensive nicknames that they had received.

In the Arabic culture, which has the focus in this study, Wardat (1997) looked at the nicknaming in the context of Jordanian Arabic and noted that sociocultural habits of individuals were used as reasons for existence of nicknames. Also, as mentioned earlier Haggan (2008) investigated Kuwaiti teenager nicknames and noted that despite religious views against hurtful speech, harmful nicknames were common, especially amongst females. However, compared to the amount of literature that has been

produced regarding nicknames in other cultures, the Middle East and specifically Kuwait have had little investigation, and neither of these studies investigated the impact of the nicknames upon classroom learning.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As mentioned, nicknaming has been a common practice for thousands of years in the Middle East culture. Yet there is a lack of research on the use of nicknames in a Middle East university setting and its potential impact on learning.

Now, research has shown that nicknames function in different sociological contexts for different cultures and for different languages. The study of nicknames has revolved around the reasons nicknames are given to individuals (Kiesling, 1996, de Klerk and Bosch, 1996) and perceived sources of nicknames (Liao, 2000; 2006). Orbach (1977) found evidence that nicknames were given to individuals for personal traits and gaffes. Trice (1993) and Trice and Beyer (1993) also found negative traits and derogatory use of nicknames.

Prior research important to the formulation of this study was the reasons used for student nicknames in educational settings. It has been reported students use nicknames as a moniker for identifying one as a member of a certain group (Wilson, 1998). While Eliasson, Laflamme, & Isaksson (2005) looked at verbal abuse and well-being incidents amongst students of both genders.

However, the focus on how nicknames function in the context of learning by the student has not been investigated. In Kuwait, the dramatic shift in society that occurred with the discovery of oil has brought many unforeseen conditions. One critical aspect has been a drop in educational standards due to many factors that are beyond the scope of this paper. It is sufficient to report that these many factors have created a condition where new methods of instruction are needed to motivate students in the classroom.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study sought to explore the concept of the use of nicknames as an aid for assisting students with their learning performance. The research question:

Research question: Students who did not accept nicknames would report that the use of nicknames appeared to improve the learning environment in the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the lack of research on the self-selection of nicknames and their effect upon classroom performance, this exploratory study was designed to gauge possible learning outcomes from the use of nicknames chosen by students themselves. Two female (segregated instruction present at the institution) courses of an introductory course in communications at a Middle East university were randomly selected from multiple sections of the course for this preliminary study. This resulted in an N = 39 students participating in the study. The study was conducted over the entire semester of 15 weeks. In the first 6 weeks, the student's names as written on the official roster of the class were used. This length of time was considered appropriate in creating estimations of student performance behaviors by the students and also by their fellow students in the course.

At the start of the seventh week, the students were asked to volunteer to have "nicknames" under the pretext that it would aid the instructor in remembering names easier. A list of nicknames were culled from websites that specialized in female nicknames. These nicknames were used as the nickname pool from which the students could choose in their selection of a nickname. This pool utilized both eastern and western nicknames. While it was not known if there would be any volunteers, the preliminary view was that Middle East students are generally known to assist instructor's requests due to cultural norms. In addition, there are certain student names that are so numerous that classes have an abundance of students with that name and so it was felt that they might be inclined to pick a nickname to avoid the confusion when they themselves are not being addressed by the instructor. These views were witnessed as students volunteered to allow the instructor to use a nickname they personally choose from the list used in this study. In particular, it was witnessed that the students who choose nicknames to aid the instructor in remembering them most often had other students in the class assist them with discovering a nickname that they also felt was a favorable nickname. Rarely, was the decision made solely by the student.

No other variables were used in the study other than the instructor now used the nickname instead of the name on the official roster for the remainder of the semester. During the semester, qualitative incidents that resulted from the use of nicknames were recorded. These were predominantly comments made by students in regards to the nickname. Finally on the last day of the course, a survey was administered to the students in the courses. The survey was a descriptive sample survey designed to gather data to test hypotheses or answer questions related to the status of the investigative idea (Sudnman, Bradburn, and Schawarz (1996). Lastly, following the students completing the survey a class inquiry was held to gather additional information from the students regarding the study. This inquiry was conducted as two large class focus groups.

DATA, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 39 students completed the survey and participated in the class inquiry. First, the 39 students responded that the felt there was nothing detrimental with holding the experiment and that it violated no social, cultural or religious norms. One student indicated that there were some nicknames on the list used in the study that could have been a problem and should probably not be on the list. Yet, the students felt that there were so many nickname choices that allowed them to avoid that issue.

The surveys indicated that 27 students had experienced having a nickname in their past and 12 students had not experienced having a nickname prior to the study. Out of the 27 students who had a prior nickname, 25 students "liked" their prior nickname. Two students reported not liking their nickname. An analysis of the students who "liked" their nicknames showed this likeness fell into four categories. These four categories were: (1) gave them self-confidence; (2) it was a sign of friendship; (3) it made them more liked; (4) made the feel unique. The two students who reported not liking their nickname both cited the nickname used by others made fun of their looks.

In the study, 11 students volunteered to have nicknames and choose nicknames from the prepared list. At the end of the experiment, the 28 students who did not volunteer to have a nickname were asked if they would change their mind and instead chose to have a nickname.

Eighteen students reported that they would now chose to have a nickname, with 10 students saying they still would not want to have self-selected a nickname. The 18 students' responses to why in looking back they would have chosen to have participated with a nickname gave responses that were analyzed as illustrating the following five categories with categories ranked from first to fifth by the number of responses that fell into that category. First category responses were in the realm of "it looked easier to be remembered and your name (sic) not forgotten by the instructor." Second category, "made you more included in the class." The third category, "sign of being liked by others and the instructor." The fourth category, "made class less formal." Fifth category, "they seemed to study harder because they were known." In regards to the 11 students who still did not want a nickname, the responses were analyzed as the following three categories. First category was "felt too old for a nickname." Second category, "I like my own name." Third category was "might be called on more in class."

The 28 students who did not self-select a nickname were asked how they felt the introduction of the nicknames impacted the learning environment in the class from the midterm till the end of the semester. The analysis indicated that 25 students felt the use of nicknames improved the classroom learning environment. The analysis of the why's indicated that students felts that it, "made the class more positive," "made the class more active," "made it easier to deal with the teacher," "made it easier to talk to fellow students," and "brought energy to the class room." However, three students felt that the experiment did not have any impact at all on the second half of the semester. Thus, there was 89% support for the research question.

Additional information provided from the surveys showed that in asking the 11 students who self-selected nicknames if they felt the use of nicknames helped their learning performance and why, eight students said "yes," the use of nicknames appeared to help learning with three "no" responses. These "whys" covered a large range of reasons given on the surveys. The quantitative categories that were derived show the "whys" to range from "more comfortable in class so you learn better," "feel acknowledged so you work harder," "you have a friendlier relationship with the teacher which makes you work," "you work harder for the classes you like which nicknames help to do," "class was more exciting so you studied more," "you feel special so you study more," "you come to class cause you are remembered and so you learn." The three students who responded against the occurrence of more learning viewed the situation in as follows;" still depends upon if the teacher is good or not," "the nicknames might make a student nervous about being called on and so they'll skip class," and lastly,

"a name is a name." Although, this study did not have direct measure of classroom learning, these particular findings indicate that more investigation should occur in this area.

OTHER DATA RESULTS

There were some other important results that occurred in this study. After the study began, an additional six students asked if they could receive a nickname. As the study was already underway, the students were told that unfortunately it was not possible now because of the timeline involved in the study, and they were thanked for their willingness to participate. When the students were asked, what caused them to change their mind, three responded that they noticed that the students came to class more often than they did in the past. Two responded that their friends had asked for nicknames and enjoyed the class more and so they wanted to take that approach. The last individual responded that they did not and had never liked their proper name. When asked why they did not participate in the study if this was the case, they responded they were not present in class the day nicknames were chosen.

CONCLUSION

Morgan, O'Neill, and Harre (1979) postulated that nicknames function in four realms: norm, social control, status, and insult. The many studies cited in this report indicated that in-general most research has functioned upon these lines. The major caveat involved in these studies was that the research on nicknames has functioned in the vein where the process of nicknaming was by far mostly instigated by others placing the name upon the individual. As noted by Berger (1993) sometimes individuals place nicknames upon individuals as part of a language skill that illustrates the humor abilities of allusion, facetiousness, and sarcasm. de Klerk and Bosch (1996) also reported that nickname formation demonstrated verbal playfulness as well as linguistic creativity and was frequently used to create indexical peer group membership or peer cohesion.

This study utilized a far different approach and allowed female students to self-select a nickname to be utilized by others. A very early study on names (Smith, 1967) found that names and their connotations form a strong context for how individuals come to see themselves. Names and nicknames create certain impressions about the owners of such names and can affect how people respond or behave towards them. This effect can be critical in the development of student self-concept. Student academic self-concept has been shown to be related to level of engagement and persistence in classroom activities (Skaalvik and Rankin, 1996; Skinner, Wellborn, and Connelll, 1990). Also, studies on student self-concept have indicated relationships to student's seeking help in the classroom (Ames, 1983), intrinsic motivation (Gottfried, 1990; Harter, 1982), and achievement in the classroom (Marsh, 1992). So, as noted by earlier studies, nicknames can frequently have a negative effect when derogatory nicknames are given by others to individuals. So, in this study the reverse effect was considered by which the students could self-select a nickname that aided in positive self-concept. This was the exploratory nature of the investigation.

Therefore, as a study, it used as its primary research tool a written self-administered questionnaire and an open class inquiry discussion at the end of the research period. The results as reported earlier supported the research question that the use of self-selected nicknames in the classroom was perceived to improve the learning environment in the classroom by the other students. Also, insight into further research was indicated by the survey results reporting that students who self-selected nicknames felt it improved their classroom learning. Perhaps, future research using some reliable measure of classroom learning can used for such investigation.

There were some conditions that must be noted that have a bearing upon this study. The study was based upon the perceptions of the students of class room improvement and not upon actual GPA or specific intelligence based criteria was used. Those researchers who have conducted studies outside of the United States or Europe know that in certain countries it very difficult to obtain certain information due to regulations within the culture. Also, the test group was female, due to the lack of access to male subjects at the time of the study. Obviously, an inquiry into the effect of self-selected nicknames by a male population would be beneficial in order to see if there are gender effects or not with the technique of self-selected nicknames.

In conclusion, Kuranchie (2012) stated it clearly, "there is a dearth of knowledge on the effects nicknaming has on students' self-concept and their morale in learning" (Kuranchie: 127). This study was motivated by this view. The importance of discovering more avenues to improving a student's

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self-concept is paramount as research indicates student performance is declining in many universities in the world.

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