

The Effect of Rewarding In-Class participation to Decrease Off-task Conversations in Middle
School Age Females

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if students in an eighth-grade, all-female Spanish I class of 15 would decrease off-topic conversations after an intervention to award in-class participation. Off-task conversations were defined as any time students spoke out of turn in a reciprocal manner that was not related to the lesson. For the intervention, the researcher gave out tickets to students when they contributed to class discussion. The tickets were then put in drawings for weekly prizes. There were two weeks of weighted baseline data and four weeks of intervention data. Data was prorated to adjust for absences. The mean of off-task conversations per student during the weighted baseline (Mean= 144.38, SD=151.28) was significantly higher than during the intervention (Mean= 107.37, SD= 119.89). [$t(14) = 3.09, p = .008$]. Because the data was significant (as shown by p-value), the null hypothesis was rejected. Implications and ideas for future research are discussed.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The process of learning a foreign language is broken down into five domains: reading, speaking, listening, writing, and culture. In any given class period, a teacher is encouraged to hit as many of the five domains as possible; realistically speaking, three domains are easy to fit into a lesson and a fourth one may be added if time allows. In a beginner's class, a teacher's job is to cover the basics in all domains, but too frequently the speaking domain falls short. It is often difficult to engage students in meaningful speaking practice that is age-appropriate. For foreign language teachers in secondary schools, this practice is just as hard if not harder because songs are "too childish" and choral repetition is viewed as "boring."

For these reasons, creating a safe environment in which students feel safe to make mistakes and are encouraged to take risks is particularly important in a foreign language classroom. Equally as important is to make sure that these "risks and mistakes" are grounded in the learning of the new language. Evertson and Poole (2008) found that the best classroom encourages students to participate, naturally decreases misbehaviors, and maximizes learning.

Statement of Problem

Can an intervention in which students earn incentives for class participation during a 30-minute instructional period lead to a decrease in off-topic conversations in a middle school Spanish class?

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis is that there will be no difference in the mean number of off-topic conversations per student among eighth-grade Spanish I students during a weighted baseline

period and an intervention period in which students receive incentives for class participation.

Operational Definitions

An off topic conversation is defined as a statement said by a student which does not pertain to the lesson. Each statement said by a student will result in a tally. Two or more students who engage in the off-topic conversation will earn one tally each for each statement or contribution to the off-topic conversation.

Active participation is defined as a student volunteering an answer. This could be by raising a hand to participate or being called on and volunteering an answer even when the student is unsure if she is right.

Participation tickets are given to students for instances of active participation during the 30-minute of direct instruction time. Tickets are put in a weekly raffle.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

Before learning can occur, a teacher's job includes establishing desired classroom behaviors. This task is often difficult for a teacher to plan for considering the current standards and teaching programs that focus on content. However, an effective teacher knows to dedicate time in the summer, before students arrive to school, to outline expected behaviors and have classroom procedures and rules to support those behaviors (Evertson & Poole, 2008).

Classroom procedures and rules are the foundation for a classroom to run smoothly, to allow productive learning to occur, and to maximize the time in the classroom. In other words, this is simply the foundation a teacher must invest in to have students buy into the systems that the teacher believes would lead to learning. The goal is to minimize classroom disruptions by praising a job well done and reinforcing the rules and procedures when necessary. With a focus on middle school classrooms, this literature review seeks to address classroom behaviors that should be avoided and give ideas for successful classroom management. Additionally, this literature review will focus on combining behavior management techniques with increasing classroom participation to give students and teachers a tangible way to track behaviors.

Section one provides a focus on misbehavior and what can be done to address this issue, especially in the middle school classroom. Section two focuses on why classroom management is so critical to the teaching process. Section three reviews ways to reinforce desired behaviors. Section four outlines programs to promote participation and thus reduce unwanted behaviors.

Classroom Misbehavior

Classroom misbehaviors can be described in a variety of terms including times students get out of their chairs without permission and/or call out/talk aloud (Haydon & Musti-Rao, 2011). These behaviors are often frustrating for a teacher who feels the burden of having to discipline and the stress from doing it often (Haydon & Musti-Rao, 2011). These kinds of misbehaviors have the potential to cut into valuable class time, and this affects not only the teachers and the misbehaving student but also the other students in the classroom. A sustainable goal for a teacher struggling with challenging student behavior would be to apply behavior management techniques that are known to work and to decrease the amount of verbal corrections given by attaching behavior to participation grade. Class participation can be defined by evaluating three key aspects: quantity, dependability, and quality (Petress, 2006). Therefore, class participation and behavior management should be looked at together since one often affects the other.

Why is Behavior Management Important?

Teachers have the unique challenge of having to incorporate all types of personalities and student needs while at the same time creating a safe haven for students. Although the job description asks a professional to teach, a teacher has to take into account other factors that will ultimately promote learning. A strong teacher will make sure that classroom time is spent mostly in academic talk with communication from teacher to students and from student to students (Ratcliff, Jones, Costner, Savage-Davis, & Hunt, 2010). Ratcliff et al. (2010) found that teachers who struggle with behavior management spent more time addressing behaviors than teaching; this results in less instructional time. This same research found that teachers who needed behavioral support had a classroom climate that focused on reprimanding and correcting

students, whereas strong teachers “used praise and rewards four times more often” (Ratcliff et al., 2010, p. 310).

It is crucial that teachers create an environment where students are welcomed, know the expectations, and feel like they can succeed. With the middle school population in particular, many social withdrawal symptoms develop, and those symptoms can become apparent to middle school teachers. In extreme situations where students are friendless or appear to be excluded a lot from their peers, more serious labels of social exclusion would be attributed (Oh et al., 2008). These larger emotional issues emphasize the need for a strong classroom culture in every classroom and the need for teachers to promote healthy peer relationships.

New trends in teaching seem to be agreeing with these findings: praise and rewards are a better way to promote positive student behavior than correcting poor behavior and taking away privileges. Encouraging classroom engagement and decreasing misbehaviors works not only through teaching the desired behavior through procedures and rules, but also through constantly praising and acknowledging when students are complying.

Reinforcing Desired Behaviors

In general, a behavior management technique does not aim simply to condition students to a behavior, but rather it replaces bad behaviors with good ones. Thus, when the school year begins, a teacher’s job is to determine what kinds of behaviors will be conducive to higher order thinking and learning and then to plan to teach norms, procedures, and rules that support that goal. All of this is geared toward running a class with active participation and constant learning (Evertson & Poole, 2008).

In a study by Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield (2010), researchers found similar principles applied in college. Students who felt connected to their peers in the classroom were

more likely to participate in class discussions. No matter how big or small the class size was, a key engagement factor was student-to-student connectedness. Applying this same principle to middle school students, the task of encouraging peer-to-peer engagement becomes that much greater. Building students' self-esteem by letting them engage in low-risk tasks like peer discussions may increase their participation in the class just like it does in a college setting. Additionally, activities encouraging students to collaborate are a good way to prepare them for the future and to provide productive ways to engage with others.

Another key component of decreasing classroom misbehavior and increasing class participation is increasing rigor. Matsumura, Slater, and Crosson (2008) found that classroom climate was enhanced when the teacher prompted students to explain and support their answers and followed up with more rigorous questions. The same study found that teachers who had the rules posted in the classroom had better classroom management. This study was also done in middle school classrooms in math and language arts classes. The researchers found that effective classroom climate led to student academic success. Teachers understand the value in investing in classroom engagement techniques.

Motivational interviewing, or MI, is a "brief client-centered counseling technique used to motivate people for behavioral changes" (Strait et al., 2012, p. 1032). Although this technique is most often used with adults, because of its success, Strait et al. (2012) did the same for 103 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders to promote academic achievement. Students randomly assigned to the experimental group had a personalized session in which they created academic goals that they were reminded of at a follow up session and by signing a poster to solidify their commitment. The results showed that students in the treatment group did better than the control group in quarter four math scores (Strait et al., 2012). Even though classroom teachers may find

it difficult to replicate this study, it important to note that support staff like counselors and psychologists should be invited into conversations about student behavior. Strait et al. achieved positive academic results, and their technique is thus worth taking into account when considering ways to promote classroom participation.

It is important to note that although the ultimate objective is to push the rigor and to connect students to each other to decrease misbehaviors, these are not always programs a teacher can put in place singlehandedly. Programs and ideas to promote rigor and student-to-student interactions will be discussed next.

Programs for Promoting In-Class Participation

A college technique that grade school teachers have begun adopting is the “cash for comment” technique. Chylinski (2010) tracked undergraduate students majoring in marketing and investigated whether students who were paid for participating in class would participate more. He found that participating in class discussions not only improved class participation grades, but it also helped students feel integrated and part of the classroom (Chylinski, 2010). Classroom teachers can easy duplicate this study in their day-to-day classrooms. This technique could serve as dual purpose: encouraging class discussion and encouraging ownership of the class content.

Another easy way to connect students to classroom content is to use response cards in class. Response cards, as opposed to traditional hand raising, give teachers the opportunity to do a check for understanding all at once; a teacher can ask students to respond with yes or no, multiple choice letters, or simply by displaying their answers. A large budget could be used to purchase a class set of white boards and markers, or a teacher could pre-create a response card that becomes part of the class materials. Randolph (2007) found that that response cards not

only increase classroom participation but also have a positive effect on test and quiz scores. This tool can prove beneficial for teachers to again do a quick check for understandings while also allowing the whole class to participate, not just the students who are more comfortable raising their hands.

A technique that should not be discounted because of its simplicity is the use of behavior-specific praise. It is easy to understand why behavior-specific praise would be successful, and Haydon and Musti-Rao (2011) found that simply adding this technique improves class culture. They followed two middle school math teachers struggling with behavior management and focused on increasing the amount of praise instead of punishment those teachers gave students. Haydon and Musti-Rao specifically wanted to focus on behavior-specific praise where a teacher “approves a specific academic or social behavior with a verbal comment, the praise statement” (p. 31). This behavior management technique focuses completely on motivating good behavior and rewarding it. It is also easy for teachers to implement, and it can be highly successful.

Finally, one classroom management strategy that can increase class participation is a group contingencies system. Hulac and Benson (2010) explain how individual behaviors can be changed or persuaded to change based on a group buy-in of the system. The system targets individual students but ultimately manages the behavior of the class as a whole. Hulac and Benson describe how students paying attention to the disruptor—which is often the desired goal of the disruption—sustain some of the disruptive behavior. By incorporating a group contingency system, the teacher in the classroom can focus on desired behaviors for the class instead of focusing on individuals and individual negative behaviors. This positive spin on behavior management keeps students engaged, and it’s not punitive, as it doesn’t have to single anyone out.

The four techniques above are focused on behavior management that can lead to participation. The strategies can be implemented by classroom teachers alone (with no help from an aid) and in middle school settings with very promising results. If the desired outcome is to have better classroom management, then typically replacing poor behaviors with positive ones—like active participation—will yield better results.

Classroom engagement relies heavily on behavior. Even so, there are various dimensions to classroom participation. Wang, Bergin, and Bergin (2014) suggest that the three dimensions—*affective, behavioral, and cognitive*—be merged into one. They created the “Classroom Engagement Inventory” which promises to help accurately assess classroom participation and engagement. Their study suggests that “*affective engagement refers to positive emotions during class such as interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm... Behavioral engagement refers to observable behavior such as time-on-task, overt attention, classroom participation, question asking and choice of challenging tasks. Cognitive engagement refers to mental effort, such as meaningful processing, strategy use, concentration, and metacognition*” (Wang et al., 2014, p. 518). A student who demonstrates these three types of classroom behaviors is a strong scholar and leader in the classroom. A strong teacher would benefit from applying the ideas behind the three dimensions of engagement to make sure that class participation is done purposefully.

A success story to confirm classroom engagement is taken from Blood’s (2010) study. Blood’s experiment focused on students with emotional and behavioral disorders to determine their responses in terms of participation and learning. Blood found that, with the right system (in the study a “student response system” SRS was used), student response was increased. Because

this population is particularly known for behavioral and emotional outbursts (Blood, 2010), it is important to consider how to reach the extreme cases as well as the general student population.

Conclusion

In summary, behavior management is and will continue to be the cornerstone of classrooms. A strong teacher will create a smooth classroom by preparing students with procedures and rules that promote a positive classroom environment (Everston, 2008). A good behavior management strategy will not only promote good behavior but will ultimately lead students to engage in more and deeper class participation which should positively affect academics. If a teacher's goal is the delivery of content, the foundational piece of classroom management must be present to build a healthy classroom. Teachers and students alike will see the results and benefit from it (Haydon & Musti-Rao, 2011).

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

This research used a pre-experimental, one-group pretest/posttest design. The goal of the intervention in the study was to decrease off-task conversations between students by introducing a “ticket system.” The independent variable was whether or not students were participating in a ticket system. The dependent variable was the mean number of off-topic conversations per student

Participants

This study used a convenience sample consisting of students in the eighth-grade Spanish 1 classroom for which this researcher is the teacher. The school is an all-girls public charter located in the mid-Atlantic region. The school and all its students are eligible for Title 1 services. Eighth graders do not have a choice in a language class; Spanish is the mandatory elective imposed on students to encourage them to take a placement test at the end of the year and receive high school credit.

The 15 participants were between the ages of 13 and 14. This particular group was placed together based on their math ability; on a test conducted in October 2015, all students were found to place between second- and fifth-grade level for math skills. This group of students travels together from class to class.

Instrument

For this experiment, the researcher created a simple tracker to record students’ off-topic conversations. The tracker had all 15 students’ names and allowed for recording five days of the

week at the time. At the end of the week, the researcher transferred this information to an Excel spreadsheet.

The first two weeks, for 30 minutes each class period, the researcher tallied each off-task statement said by the students as it happened. However, this researcher determined that it was too difficult to manage the logistics of recording the off-topic conversations while also giving out tickets. Consequently, for the four weeks of the intervention, the class was recorded on a laptop computer and the researcher later went back and tallied off-topic conversations by viewing the video. Videos were deleted after they were viewed.

There is no reliability or validity data for the tallies of the off-topic conversations either as they happened during the baseline or as recorded during the intervention.

Procedure

School administration gave permission for this study, which took place over a six-week period in March and April.

Since the beginning of the school year, a class management program has been in place through which students could earn, by completing the warm up, five class participation points. Participation points make up 5% of a student's grade. If a student was disruptive (e.g., had an off-topic conversation) during teacher instruction or guided practice, she would lose a participation point. Students could potentially lose all five points. A student would know she lost a point either through teacher eye contact or a verbal announcement. Although there are some validity issues that will be discussed in Chapter V related to the potential impact of changes in the classroom point deduction system on the results of the current study, the researcher felt confident that changes in the point deduction system would not impact the class

culture (e.g., increase the number of off-topic conversations) since the strategy had appeared ineffective throughout the school year.

During baseline, this researcher did not deduct participation points for disruptive behaviors. However, she did not explicitly tell students that the penalty for being disruptive was no longer in effect. However, if students asked whether they had lost a participation point, the instructor told them ‘no.’

Baseline data was collected over a two-week period during class. Data collection consisted of keeping tallies of off-topic conversations during 30-minute periods. An off-topic conversation was defined as a statement not pertaining to the lesson that involved reciprocal conversation between at least two students. Two or more students who engaged in off-topic conversation earned one tally each for each statement or contribution to the off-topic conversation. The data was collected during the 30-minute period of class during which this researcher reviews old content, teaches new content, and guides practice. This researcher encouraged conversations as long as they were in Spanish and about the appropriate content.

After the two-week baseline period, this researcher sent a letter home explaining that she was starting a new incentive system: each time a student volunteered an answer or was willing to take a risk in making an educated guess for an answer, she would earn a ticket. The letter also explained to parents that students would be video recorded for tracking purposes but that no part of any video would be shown or seen by anyone else other than the researcher. No parents refused participation or expressed concerns about the video recordings.

This researcher explained the new incentive program to the students. They were told that they would earn tickets when they made a class contribution. Students did not have to raise

hands but did have to wait to be called on to respond; any blurted out answer did not result in a ticket. (This helped with making sure all students had equal opportunities to earn tickets.)

Tickets were collected at the end of the week, and all names were placed in bowl such that the more tickets a person had earned, the more likely she would be to win. Three different winners were picked weekly. A student could not win more than one a prize a week, but she could earn prizes over multiple weeks. Once the three different winners were picked each week, the tickets were discarded so that there was no carryover from week to week of chances to earn prizes. Students were encouraged to suggest prizes. Tickets and prizes were purchased from a dollar store to minimize outside spending. Prizes included iPhone cases, stickers, mechanical pencils, and notepads.

Orally, the researcher also explained to the class that she would hold a clipboard close to her (much like she had the last two weeks) to jot down student behavior to keep track of participation. The researcher also explained that participation points would no longer be deducted for disruptive behaviors.

The intervention period lasted four weeks. The number of off-topic conversations per student was calculated for the baseline and intervention periods. Then number of off-topic conversations was prorated to adjust for absences. For example, if an individual had an average of one off-topic conversation per day on the days she was there and had two absences, then for each of her absent days she was assigned one off-topic conversation. The number of off-topic conversations for the baseline period was multiplied by two in order to equal out the amount of time spent in the baseline and intervention periods. The weighted prorated mean number of off-topic conversations per student during the baseline period was compared to the mean prorated

number of off-topic conversations per student during the intervention period by a paired sample t-test.

CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

In the study, the researcher recorded off-task conversations of 15 girls aged 13-14 of an eighth-grade Spanish I classroom. The researcher took baseline data for two weeks before introducing an intervention. During the four-week intervention, students were awarded tickets for volunteering answers during the lesson. Those tickets were then entered into a drawing for prizes. The mean of off-task conversations per student during the weighted baseline (Mean= 144.38, SD=151.28) was significantly higher than during the intervention (Mean= 107.37, SD= 119.89). [t(14) = 3.09, p = .008]. See Table 1. Consequently, the null hypothesis that there would be no difference in the mean number of off-topic conversations per student among eighth-grade Spanish I students during a weighted baseline period and an intervention period in which students receive incentives for class participation was rejected. The students had fewer off-topic conversations during the intervention.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and t-test Results for Number of Off-Topic Conversations per Student during Weighted Baseline and Intervention Periods

Condition	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-test
Weighted baseline	144.38	151.28	.008*
Intervention	107.37	119.89	

N = 15

* Significant at $p \leq .01$

As can be seen in the Table 1, the standard deviations were larger than the means. This indicates that the data was not distributed normally. Consequently, the t-test is less effective as a statistical measure. In this case, it is helpful to look more closely at the data of individual students. In looking at the data, some students had high numbers of off-topic conversations, while some students had few. However, in reviewing the pattern of scores for each girl in the study, 12 girls had a higher number of off-topic conversations during the baseline period, while only three had a higher number of off-topic conversations during the intervention. Thus, a more qualitative inspection of the data suggests that for most of the girls, there was a decrease in off-topic conversations during the intervention.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Originally, the researcher attempted to answer the question “*Can an intervention in which students earn incentives for class participation during a 30-minute instructional period lead to a decrease in off- topic conversations in a middle school Spanish class?*” The researcher hypothesized that an intervention would not significantly change the frequency off-topic conversation; however, there were significantly fewer off-topic conversations during the intervention.

Implications of Results

The results of this study suggest that behavioral interventions could have a positive effect on student learning. Although the study did not focus on academic growth, it was observed that students were less engaged in off-topic conversations, safely assuming that this leads to maximizing quality of instruction and time spent on instruction rather than redirection. Furthermore, it was observed that students quickly embraced the intervention; they kept the teacher and each other accountable for the fidelity of the program. The researcher observed positive conversations among students encouraging their peers to participate more in order to earn tickets. Although this level of teacher involvement in reinforcing class participation is not necessary in all classrooms, teachers of students with mildly disruptive behaviors such as talking out will likely find it a relatively cost effective and simple intervention. In order for the teacher to control costs, he or she will need to think of creative ways to reduce the cost of prizes (e.g. giving a sheet of stickers rather than the whole booklet; letting students win an opportunity to engage in a free activity such as playing on the computer; asking businesses for donations) so

that this program would be financially manageable over the course of an entire school year. Most teachers should find it easy to implement.

Theoretical Consequences

The results of this study are consistent with behavior management theory in which the goal is to replace negative behaviors through reinforcing positive behaviors. In the literature reviewed in Chapter II, it was noted that teachers who struggle with behavior management spend more time addressing behaviors than teaching (Ratcliff et al., 2010). The same study concluded that strong teachers focus on praise and rewards rather than reprimanding and correcting (Ratcliff et al., 2010).

Threats to validity

There are threats to the internal validity worth mentioning. The distribution of talking incidents was skewed with certain participants responsible for a very high number of the off-task conversations. Since the data was skewed, this limits the effectiveness of the t-test.

Another threat to internal validity is that the researcher could not control attendance during the six-week period. The internal validity of the study is compromised because, although the majority of the participants were present most of the time, enough absences happened to affect that data. Although the number of off-topic conversations were adjusted to accommodate for absences, this is less valid than if the students had been there consistently. In addition, the intervention could potentially vary in its effectiveness based on regularity of attendance.

Another threat to internal validity to consider is the point system. The teacher originally had a point system in which students' participation grades were penalized for disruptive behaviors including off-topic conversations. The researcher removed the point system at the beginning of the study since it had been ineffective and to limit the behavioral contingencies

other than the intervention. During the baseline, the students were not told that it was no longer in effect; however, it was not being applied and when students asked whether they lost points, they were told they had not. Consequently, the status of the point system was ambiguous during the baseline. Then students were told at the beginning of the intervention that the point system was no longer in effect. This could have inadvertently raised the number of off-task conversations during the base period because students were no longer being penalized.

There are also threats to external validity that any future research in a similar topic should take into account. This study had participants ranging in age from 13 to 14 years old. They were all girls, and they were a fairly talkative group. Duplicating the intervention in a different setting may not yield the same results. In the case of an all-boys setting, the intervention may work, but the person implementing the intervention would have to take into account the likes and dislikes of the population to purchase relevant prizes. As mentioned above, the participants in the intervention were fairly talkative; if a teacher of quieter group of students attempts to recreate this, the results would not necessarily be the same as the ones shared in Chapter IV.

Connections to Previous Studies

The study by Chylinski (2010) tracked undergraduate students majoring in marketing. He wondered whether students who were paid for participating in class would participate more. He found that participating in class discussions not only improved class participation grades, but it also helped students feel integrated and part of the classroom. The study's objective was to improve oral communication skills. The study focused on giving students classroom cash for quality statements, and, given the amount of class cash distributed, the study was deemed successful.

Similar to the Chylinski (2010) study, this study focused on classroom participation. The biggest difference was the population: Chylinski focused on undergraduate students in a marketing class, whereas the current study focused on eighth-grade girls. Both of these studies prove how successful it is to focus on positive reinforcement to increase the class participation of students no matter what age.

Implications for Future Research

The current study could be enhanced in the future by focusing on the weaknesses of the study. For example, future research could duplicate the intervention but add a control group that receives no intervention to see how much the intervention actually reduces off-task conversation. The current study would also be strengthened by comparing a group with the intervention to one that keeps the point system; this research could further prove rewarding positive behavior works better than penalizing off-task behavior.

Future research could build on this study by simply duplicating with a different population, either in an all-boys setting or even a coed setting. It might be beneficial to duplicate the intervention in a high school classroom; this could serve as a comparative analysis of what motivates adolescents versus young adults.

It would also be interesting to examine the academic effects of the intervention. Since the study was created in a foreign language classroom, it would be a good idea to recreate it in a foreign language classroom and track assessment results, specifically those involving speaking or using the target language. A study of this magnitude can more conclusively say how effective the intervention is in getting students to use the target language and retain the knowledge.

Conclusions

This study examined whether an intervention focused on increasing classroom participation could decrease off topic conversations among female middle school foreign language (Spanish) students. The number of off-task conversations was significantly lower during the intervention period, in which the teacher awarded class participation by giving tickets, than during the baseline period. This suggests that classroom behavior and presumably learning can be improved through a positive intervention that motivates students rather than punishing them. Specifically, it is an example of how rewarding a competing behavior is a successful method of reducing a negative behavior. By using this type of positive behavioral strategy, not only will teachers promote better classroom behavior and hopefully greater learning, but they will also be creating a more pleasant learning environment.

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