

EXPLORING STUDENTS' ATTRIBUTIONS FOR THEIR SUCCESSES AND FAILURES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Though there has been a growing interest on exploring learners' perceptions of successes and failures, this issue has not attracted the attention it deserves in the field of foreign language learning, particularly in EFL contexts. The aim of this study is to provide data on 240 Turkish university students' attributions of their perceived successes and failures in English language learning and to examine the ways in which their attributions vary according to gender, perceived success and positive attitude towards English language learning. Data collected by means of a modified version of Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun's (2004) questionnaire revealed several of attributions found in the related literature. Regarding all variables, the most widely used attribution was that of strategy.

Key Words: Learners' Perceptions of Successes and Failures, Attributions, English Language Learning, EFL Learners

ÖZET

Öğrencilerin başarı ve başarısızlık algılarının ortaya çıkartılmasında artan bir akademik ilginin olmasına rağmen, bu konu yabancı dil öğrenme alanında özellikle de İngilizcenin Yabancı Dil olarak öğrenildiği ortamlarda hak ettiği ilgiyi görememiştir. Bu araştırmanın amacı araştırmanın örneklemi oluşturan 240 üniversite öğrencisinin İngilizce öğreniminde başarı ve başarısızlık yüklemelerini belirlemektir. Özellikle, bu yüklemelerin cinsiyet, başarı algısı ve İngilizce öğrenimine karşı sahip olunan olumlu tavra göre ne şekilde değişkenlik gösterdiği incelenmektedir. Williams, Burden, Poulet ve Maun'dan (2004) uyarlanmış açık uçlu sorulardan oluşan bir anket ile toplanan veri, ilgili literatürdeki

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birçok yüklemeyi ortaya koymuştur. Tüm değişkenler göz önüne alındığında en çok ortaya çıkan yükleme ise strateji olmuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Öğrencilerin Başarı ve Başarısızlık Algılamaları, Yüklemeler, İngilizce Öğrenimi, İngilizcenin Yabancı Dil olarak Öğretimi

Exploring Students' Attributions for Their Successes and Failures in English Language Learning

Introduction

There is a substantial body of research on learners' attributions for their successes and failures (McQuillan, 2000; Tse, 2000; Williams and Burden, 1999; Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun, 2004). Yet, this issue has not attracted the attention it deserves in the field of foreign language learning particularly in EFL contexts particularly in Turkey. Conducting a study on learners' attributions for their successes and failures in English language learning in Turkish educational context is timely in view of Turkey's situation that of being on the edge of becoming a European Union member (Kırkgöz, 2007). The current interest in promoting English language learning has lead to reforms and restructuring in education. Thus, it is of high importance to capture students' perspectives related to English language learning in order to provide data to guide reforms and shape the future English language programmes. The present study aimed (1) to examine university students' attributions for their successes and failures in English language learning in an EFL context and (2) to investigate the ways in which these vary according to gender, perceived success and positive attitude towards English language learning.

Theoretical background

Why some learners are not as successful as others has always attracted attention in educational research. It is widely accepted that various interacting factors play significant roles in development of learners' competencies in learning a foreign language. Recently, with a growing interest on exploring learning via the perspectives of learners, it is becoming quiet common to utilize learners' perceptions of successes and failures. Research on constructivism and attribution theory provides data in this respect (Williams& Burden, 1999).

Constructivism argues that the process of learning is one of active construction of meaning by each individual learner (Pope& Keen, 1981; Sutherland, 1992; Thomas & Harri-Augstein, 1985). Such a perspective on

learning posits that knowledge is internal and personal to the individual. In line with this argument, it emphasizes that since individuals give their own meaning to events, all will have different understandings (Williams & Burden, 1999). These understandings have an influential role in the ways in which individuals make sense of their experiences and construct new knowledge. Within this framework, the developing conceptions of learners' are placed at the center of the learning process. How an individual sees herself/himself affects the overall attitude to whatever is being learned (Seifert, 1997).

At this point, it is necessary to refer to some studies that focused on learners' perceptions of successes and failures in foreign language learning. Being one of the inspirational sources of the present study, Williams and Burden's (1999) study will be mentioned first. This study revealed the British primary and secondary school students' tendency to identify internal effort, support from others and a growing sense of competence as the main reasons for success in foreign language learning. On the contrary, external factors such as distraction by others, difficulty of work and poor teaching were identified as the main reasons for failure. The study also indicated that as the ages of the participants increased, they began to have a tendency to judge their successes in terms of external factors such as marks, grades and teacher approval. Williams and Burden (1999) argued that teachers play a significant role in the development of students' attributions.

There is also Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun's (2004) study which investigated secondary school students' attributions for their successes and failures in learning foreign languages along with the ways in which these attributions varied according to age, gender, perceived success and specific language studied. Effort, ability, strategy use, interest, the contribution of the teacher, the nature of learning and task were found to be the possible perceived causes of success in foreign language learning. With regard to the attributions of female and male students, clear differences emerged as boys attributed doing well more to their own efforts than girls did. The data also revealed that the percentage of attributions to effort as a reason for success dropped between years 7 and 11. On the contrary, the percentage of lack of effort remained constant as a reason for failure. Finally, students who perceived themselves as successful attributed their successes to effort more than students who found themselves as unsuccessful did.

In a study conducted with university students, Tse (2000) found out that success was attributed to the teacher, the environment, the community and personal motivation. The participating university students cited lack of effort, motivation, the teacher and the course as the reasons for failure. Likewise, in McQuillan's (2000) study participating university students cited motivation, teacher influence, ability, time and effort, level and atmosphere as reasons attributed to success. Lack of time and effort, poor study strategies and

atmosphere were attributed as reasons for failure. A study by Williams, Burden and Al-Baharna (2001) revealed that practice, support from family, teachers and exposure to target language and a positive attitude were cited as reasons for students' successes. In contrast, lack of support from family and teachers, inadequate teaching, poor comprehension and negative attitude have been identified as the reasons for failure.

As the brief overview of the studies on causal attributions reveals, different studies come up with different causal attributions of learners. Williams et al. (2001) argue that such variation may be related to the fact that the responses are mainly determined by the categories provided by the questionnaires used in the studies. Another explanation is based on the argument that attributions are personally, situationally and culturally determined.

Attributions about success and failure continue to be a fertile area of research. In reviewing the literature on the conceptualization of success and failure, one is both impressed and overwhelmed with the amount of work that has been done. Yet, Williams and Burden (1999) call for more research with larger population in this area and more in-depth investigation in different contexts. In line with this need, the present study aims to fill in this gap in the related literature.

The study

The aim of this study was to provide data on Turkish EFL learners' attributions of their perceived successes and failures in English language learning. In particular, the main objective was to examine the ways in which learners' attributions vary according to gender, perceived success and positive attitude towards English language learning. It would not be a failure to note here that the focus is on the perceived successes and failures rather than on external ratings. The Attribution Theory rests on the argument that what matters is how one perceives something rather than how it really is. In line with this theory and following Williams and Burden (1999) and Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun (2004), this study focuses on how participating students perceive themselves as language learners and what their causality attributions are with respect to notions of success and failure in English language learning.

Methodology

For gathering data, a modified version of Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun's (2004) questionnaire was administered by three researchers. The original questionnaire had one question examining the perceived success or failure and two open-ended questions investigating the perceived reasons for doing well and not doing well. The modified version of the questionnaire had two more questions related to gender and positive attitude towards English

language learning. The questionnaire was administered in class time by teachers. The students were assured of confidentiality.

Participants

The sample consisted of 240 volunteered university students, 110 female and 130 male, between the ages of 17-22 learning English at a foundation university in Istanbul, Turkey. Since none of the participants managed to score higher than 213 on the TOEFL exam or pass the English proficiency exam prepared by the testing office of the university, they had to take preparatory courses for a year in order to begin their undergraduate programme. At the English preparatory school, all lessons were conducted in English. Its programme consists of 28 hours of English instruction.

Data analysis

Grounded theory was adopted for the analysis of the responses. It is a research method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This method allows categories to emerge from the raw data. Thus, the data can not be influenced by pre-determined categories. In keeping with the principles of this method, the researchers did not have pre-determined categories before the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

First, the participants' responses for each question on the questionnaire administered were listed in specific descriptive phrases. Second, independently, each of the three researchers searched for the natural groupings in the data. Then, these groupings were compared and discussed. The method of constant comparative analysis was followed. When a consensus on the categories was reached, the categories were labeled. Finally, the categories were analyzed according to student gender, perceived success and positive attitude towards English language learning.

Results

Attributions for doing well

Three hundred statements were cited for doing well. Out of these statements 10 attributions emerged (see Table 1).

Table 1: Attributions For Doing Well (N=240)

Attribution	Number	(%)	Internal/External
Strategy	178	59,33	I
Interest	44	14,66	I
Effort	31	10,33	I
Teacher	13	4,33	E
Background Knowledge	10	3,33	I
Attendance	9	3,00	I/E
English Speaking Environment	6	2,00	E
Ability	4	1,33	I
Classroom Atmosphere	3	1,00	E
Educational Policy	2	0,66	E

As seen in Table 1, out of the 300 statements which were reported as the cause of success, almost three fifths were concerned with the use of *strategies* such as processes students undertake to enhance their learning. These strategies included repeating the newly learned words, listening closely to the teacher, reviewing often, memorizing new words and phrases, note-taking, practicing with classmates and asking for the teacher's support which include asking the teacher to slow down, repeat and clarify information.

The attribution *interest* was referred to 44 times. This category involved statements such as wanting to learn, being interested in learning the language, liking the language, and interest.

The next attribution to emerge was *effort* as it was mentioned 31 times (10,33%). The difference between this attribution and the above mentioned attribution *strategy* was that statements which reflected a sense of trying to learn but failed to define or clarify how that could be achieved were included in this category. Included in this category were items like studying hard, trying to learn, studying regularly, and studying everyday.

Surprisingly, the attribution *teacher* was cited only 13 times (4,33%). This category consisted of statements such as teacher's teaching style, the rapport between the teacher and students, my teacher, liking the teacher, the ability of the teacher in transferring what he knows, and teacher's success in instruction.

The resulting six attributions, namely, *background knowledge*, *attendance*, *English speaking environment*, *ability*, *classroom atmosphere*, and *educational policy* were not cited very frequently. However, background knowledge (3,33%) emerged as an interesting category since to our best knowledge this attribution was not cited elsewhere in the related literature before. Statements here were having English lessons since primary school years, having studied English for one academic year at high school, having

studied English for seven years, background knowledge, and my pre-existing knowledge.

As illustrated in Table 2, students' attributions for their successes were mainly internal which indicated a strong belief in their capability in controlling their success in language learning.

Table 2: Internal and External Attributions For Doing Well

	Number	%
Internal	267	91,75
External	24	8,24

Attributions for not doing well

Two hundred and seventy-four statements were cited for not doing well. Eleven attributions emerged and ten of these attributions corresponded to the categories for doing well. A new attribution, namely; anxiety, emerged as a new attribution (see Table 3 below).

Table 3: Attributions For Not Doing Well (N=240)

Attribution	Number	%	Internal/External
Strategy	118	40,83	I
(Lack of) Interest	59	20,41	I
(Insufficient)Effort	43	14,87	I
(Lack of)Ability	16	5,53	I
Attendance	14	4,84	I/E
Teacher	10	3,46	E
Background Knowledge	10	3,46	I
Anxiety	6	2,07	I
Educational Policy	5	1,73	E
Classroom Atmosphere	5	1,73	E
English Speaking Environment	3	1,03	E

As displayed in Table 3, lack of strategy use emerged as the most important category and comprised almost half of the statements for not doing well. The statements in this category included items like not listening to the teacher carefully, not revising the newly learned information, and not memorizing new vocabulary items.

Strategy was followed by lack of interest. Comments in this category were: student's dislike for language learning, not liking the foreign language, and not being interested in the lesson. Insufficient effort emerged as another significant attribution. Comments included not studying, not putting enough effort, not liking studying, and not studying regularly.

Lack of ability and attendance were other frequently mentioned attributions. Lack of ability involved statements such as failing to understand, type of intelligence, lack of ability for language learning and attendance included statements like not attending the classes regularly and missing too many classes.

A comparative look at students' attributions for doing well and for not doing well showed that strategy was more often used for explaining success (59,33%) than failure (40,83%). As for failure, lack of interest (20,41% vs 14,66%), lack of effort (14,87% vs 10,33%), and lack of ability (5,53% vs 1,33%) were attributions that were more often used by the students.

Table 4 shows the relative distribution of internal and external attributions reported by the students for their failures. As seen the results are almost identical with the results obtained for students' attributions for doing well.

Table 4: Internal and external attributions for not doing well

	Number	%
Internal	250	91,57
External	23	8,42

Gender Differences

The differences between boys' and girls' attributions for their successes are revealed in Table 5.

Table 5: Boys' and Girls' Attributions For Doing Well

Attribution	Boys		Girls	
	Number	%	Number	%
Strategy	80	53,69	98	64,90
Interest	23	15,43	21	13,90
Effort	15	10,06	16	10,59
Teacher	8	5,36	5	3,31
Background Knowledge	7	4,69	3	1,98
Attendance	4	2,68	5	3,31
English Speaking Environment	4	2,68	2	1,32
Ability	3	2,01	1	0,66
Classroom Atmosphere	3	2,01	0	0
Educational Policy	2	1,34	0	0

As is seen, the most significant difference between boys' and girls' attributions for doing well was that a larger proportion of girls emphasized the use of strategies as the reason of their success than boys did. On the other

hand, it was realized that boys reported background knowledge, teacher, and classroom atmosphere as causes of their success slightly more than girls did.

The differences between boys' and girls' attributions for not doing well are illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6: Boys' and Girls' Attributions For Not Doing Well

Attribution	Boys		Girls	
	Number	%	Number	%
Strategy	58	39,72	60	40,81
(Lack of) Interest	25	17,12	34	23,12
(Insufficient) Effort	18	12,32	25	17,00
Teacher	6	4,10	4	2,72
Background Knowledge	2	1,36	8	5,44
Attendance	8	5,47	6	4,08
English Speaking Environment	3	2,05	0	0
(Lack of) Ability	10	6,84	6	4,08
Classroom Atmosphere	4	2,73	1	0,68
Educational Policy	4	2,73	1	0,68
Anxiety	4	2,73	2	1,36

As Table 6 shows, boys tended to attribute their failures to lack of ability, English speaking environment, classroom atmosphere, and educational policy slightly more often than girls did. On the other hand, a slightly larger proportion of girls tended to report lack of interest, effort and background knowledge as the causes of their failures.

Differences in the success and failure attributions according to perceived success

Differences in the percentages of success attributions reported by the students who perceive themselves as successful and usually successful and the ones who perceive themselves as unsuccessful and usually unsuccessful are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Differences In Attributions For Success Between Students Who Perceive Themselves As Successful and Usually Successful and The Ones Who Perceive Themselves As Unsuccessful and Usually Unsuccessful

Attribution	Successful& Usually Successful		Unsuccessful & Usually Unsuccessful	
	Number	%	Number	%
Strategy	148	64,62	30	42,25
Interest	31	13,53	13	18,30
Effort	18	7,86	13	18,30
Teacher	7	3,05	6	8,45
Background Knowledge	8	3,49	2	2,81
Attendance	7	3,05	2	2,81
English Speaking Environment	4	1,74	2	2,81
Ability	3	1,31	1	1,40
Classroom Atmosphere	2	0,87	1	1,40
Educational Policy	1	0,43	1	1,40

The most striking difference between the attributions of those who perceive themselves as successful and the ones who perceive themselves as unsuccessful was that the first group emphasized strategy use as the reason of their success far more than the latter group did. With regard to failure, values that were computed revealed that the ones who believed that they were not very successful cited insufficient effort, teacher, and lack of interest more often than the successful ones.

The following table compares the percentages of failure attributions cited by students who consider themselves as successful and unsuccessful.

Table 8: Differences In Attributions For Failure Between Students Who Perceive Themselves As Successful and Usually Successful and The Ones Who Perceive Themselves As Unsuccessful and Usually Unsuccessful.

Attribution	Successful& Usually Successful		Unsuccessful & Usually Unsuccessful	
	Number	%	Number	%
Strategy	100	46,94	18	23,68
(Lack of) Interest	40	18,77	19	25,00
(Insufficient) Effort	26	12,20	17	22,36
Teacher	8	3,75	2	2,63
Background Knowledge	4	1,87	6	7,89
Attendance	13	6,10	1	1,31
English Speaking Environment	3	1,40	0	0
(Lack of) Ability	12	5,63	4	5,26
Classroom Atmosphere	3	1,40	2	2,63
Educational Policy	3	1,40	2	2,63
Anxiety	1	0,46	5	6,57

Here it can be seen that the students who consider themselves as successful showed a greater tendency to attribute their failures to insufficient application of strategies and irregular attendance while the ones who consider themselves as unsuccessful tended to blame insufficient effort, lack of interest, anxiety, and background knowledge as the reasons of their failures .

Differences in the success and failure attributions according to attitude towards language learning

The differences in the success attributions of those who like learning English and the ones who do not like learning the language are compared in Table 9 below.

Table 9: Differences In The Percentage of Success Attributions of Those Who Like Learning English and The Ones Who Do Not

Attribution	I like learning English		I don't like learning English	
	Number	%	Number	%
Strategy	134	63,80	44	48,8
Interest	25	11,90	19	21,11
Effort	22	10,47	9	10
Teacher	10	4,76	3	3,3
Background Knowledge	7	3,33	3	3,3
Attendance	5	2,38	4	4,4
English Speaking Environment	4	1,90	2	2,2
Ability	1	0,47	3	3,3
Classroom Atmosphere	1	0,47	2	2,2
Educational Policy	1	0,47	1	1,1

The main difference between the success attributions of the students who stated that they liked learning English and the students who reported that they did not was that the first group attributed their success to the use of strategies with a quite higher percentage whereas the second group underlined interest, attendance, and ability as the cause of their success more.

The differences between the students who like learning English and the ones who do not in terms of their attributions for failure are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10: Differences in the percentage of failure attributions of those who like learning English and the ones who do not

Attribution	I like learning English		I don't like learning English	
	Number	%	Number	%
Strategy	85	44,97	33	33
(Lack of) Interest	29	15,34	30	30
(Insufficient)Effort	29	15,34	14	14
Teacher	8	4,23	2	2
Background Knowledge	4	2,11	6	6
Attendance	12	6,34	2	2
English Speaking Environment	2	1,05	1	1
(Lack of)Ability	12	6,34	4	4
Classroom Atmosphere	2	1,05	3	3
Educational Policy	3	1,58	2	2
Anxiety	3	1,58	3	3

These data reveal that insufficient strategy use, irregular attendance, lack of ability, and teacher were attributions that were more frequently used by the students who like learning English with an attempt to explain their failures. It was also recognized that the ones who did not like learning English favored lack of interest and background knowledge to account for their failures more than the ones who liked learning the language.

Conclusion and educational implications

This study aimed to investigate Turkish university students' attributions of success and failure in English language learning. Our data reveals several of attributions found in the related literature. Of the found categories, strategy, interest and effort are clearly shown to be the most commonly employed. Concerning all variables, strategy stands out. This seems noteworthy in view of extensive literature on learning strategies.

Research into learning strategies generated a great deal of interest in the last few decades. The underlying issues of such investigation resulted in the belief that learning strategies improve proficiency or achievement in general or in particular skills (Cohen, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1993). It was also emphasized that use of learning strategies allows learners to be more self-directed and thus enhances learner autonomy (Oxford & Nykos, 1989). Following the findings of the related literature, the integration of learner strategies into L2 classrooms and language course books with corners of "learning how to learn" gained popularity.

When Williams and Burden's (1999) statement about attributions being socially constructed is taken into account, one may argue a link between strategy being the most cited attribution for success and failure by the participants of the present study and the popularity of language learning strategies in the related field. This link may become more visible by Williams and Burden's (1999) following statement: "Notions of success and failure are shaped by the expectations and demands of the curriculum and by social interactions with significant others such as teachers, parents and peers" (p.199). It appears that the importance given to learning strategies and their integration into language learning classrooms have no doubt an impact on teachers, administrators and course book developers. It may be argued that the messages containing the importance of strategy in foreign language learning are filtered through to students by the actors above listed. This argument is consistent with what Williams and Burden (1999) state as "the way in which individuals make sense of the external influences to shape internal attributions. Such external influences include the way teachers teach, teachers' aims, and their beliefs about learning and the nature of education" (p. 199). The language teachers administrators recruit, the messages these teachers convey to their students implicitly or explicitly and the course books used in language classes affect learners' conceptualizations of success and failure in language learning.

Another significant finding from this study was that for both success and failure in language learning, participating students' attributions were mainly internal which indicated a strong belief in their capability in controlling their success and failure in language learning. Williams and Burden (1999) claim that "if the focus is on developing learners' ability to learn effectively, to use appropriate strategies intelligently, and to develop autonomy, self-awareness and meta-cognitive self-monitoring strategies, then more internal attributions are likely to develop" (p. 199). This finding may indicate that participating students of the present study accepted personal responsibility for their successes and failure in language learning. In comparison of boys and girls, it is also found out that both group displayed internal attributions.

There are implications for language teachers with regard to the importance of exploring and becoming aware of how both they and their students conceptualize success and failure in language learning since they have influence on how their students make sense of their learning and how they construct notions of success and failure in language learning. Yet, it is crucial to note at this point that the findings of this study should be viewed in the light of its limitations. As in case of most studies in the field, it is difficult to draw strong generalizations due to the limited number of participants. Further research with a greater number of students may yield further information. Nevertheless, we believe that potentially useful insights generated about participating students' attributions of success and failure in learning English.

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