

Young EFL Learners' Attributions of Perceived Success and Failure in English Language Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate young Turkish EFL learners' attributions of success and failure in English language learning. The instrument used in this study was A.Taşkıran's (2010) questionnaire of attributions' adapted version by the researcher. Adapted version had two questions: first one asking the students whether they perceive themselves as successful in English language learning or not and the second one asking students to list five causes of their (perceived) success or failure. The study took place in a primary school. The questionnaire was given to 115 in total and they all were 4th graders. The causes of success and failure listed by the students were analyzed through content analysis. Frequencies and percentages were found and tabulated and important inferences were made from them. The results showed that there are more students who perceive themselves as successful than unsuccessful. Further findings were interpreted and valuable suggestions were made.

Keywords: Attribution, Young EFL learners, Success, Failure, English language learning

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Introduction

Today, English is a common language in many aspects of life, globally. However learning English is not an easy process for many students. Some students seem to achieve better than others while the other fail even though they are exposed to the exact same teaching.

“Understanding learners’ beliefs, perceptions, and their learning experiences is a precondition for efficient learning” (Meskill & Rangelova, 2000). Particularly, attributions, which are defined as the interpretations of the causes of outcomes by individuals (Weiner, 1986), have been identified as the most significant factors influencing students’ persistence, expectancy of future success, motivation, and in return, academic achievement (Brophy, 1998; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Weiner, 2000).

The more teachers know about how learners evaluate their learning process and what factors they attribute their successes and failures to, the better they can assist their learners through the feedback they give or the tasks they prepare. Therefore, attribution research is significant for language teachers to provide optimum conditions for higher motivation and achievement in language classrooms (Taşkıran, 2010)

The understanding, appreciation, encouragement and constructive feedback of teachers are vitally important factors. If the teacher gets to understand underlying perceptions behind his/her students’ success and failure, a more appropriate approach can be taken. Furthermore, in the case of failure, when learners become unsuccessful at a certain task, the steps which lead to unsuccessful outcomes should be analyzed to come up with possible solutions to the problems.

It is hoped that the results of this study can provide instructors practical suggestions as well as increasing their awareness of their learners’.

Literature Review

What is Attribution?

In social environments, individuals have a need to understand how their own and others’ behaviors may cause the outcomes they experience in that situation. There is a number of definitions for attributions, but a common way to define ‘attribution’ is “the process in which people attempt to explain the causes of their and others’ behaviors” (Saticilar, 2006, p. 44). Ellis (1985) explains attribution as “causal statements that answer ‘why’ something happened” (p. 32).

Weiner (1974) explains that attributions reflect students’ explanations for their success or failure. Furthermore, Eggen & Kauchak (1994) define attributions as “... explanations for learners’ success or failure” (p. 444). In line with Weiner (1974) and Eggen & Kauchak (1994), Fairbarin, Moore, & Chan (1994) define attributions as “what students perceive as the cause of their success and failure in school” (p. 51).

Weiner’s conclusion that the most general and salient causes attributed by both teachers and students in identifying success and failure were ability, effort, task

difficulty, and luck has received broad support from a number of further researches (Elig & Frieze, 1979; Burger, 1980; Frieze & Snyder, 1980; Burger, Cooper, & Good, 1982; Anderson, 1983; Cooper & Wilson & Palmer, 1983; Bar-Tal, Goldberg, & Knaani, 1984). However, Bruning, Schraw, Norby, & Ronning (2004) demonstrated that individuals can make countless attributions that can vary considerably among learners. Then, Weiner himself acknowledged that the potential causes of an achievement-related outcome are infinite (Weiner, 1986).

Previous Studies

Saticilar (2006) conducted a study where she analyzed the achievement attributions of English language learners at sixth and ninth grades in a Primary School and a High School in Turkey. The variables used to investigate the students' achievement attributions of English language were gender, grade, outside help they get while learning English and learners' studying habits learners. The results showed that the learners are prone to attribute their success and failure to internal factors in language learning. The most significant factor attributed for success and failure was found to be effort. Some gender differences were also found in terms of their attributions .

Another study has been conducted by Taşkıran (2010) to explore 158 EFL Anadolu University Preparatory School students' causal attributions of perceived success and failure in language learning. In order to examine students' perceived success and failure and their perceived causes of the outcomes, a questionnaire was conducted. It was revealed that there were more students who perceived themselves as unsuccessful compare to the number of the students who perceived themselves as successful. Compared to the causal attributions reported for success, these students made more causal attributions for failure. Importantly, the success oriented students made significantly more internal, controllable and relatively stable attributions than the the failure oriented students.

Gobel, Mori, Thang, Kan, & Lee (2011) examined the reasons behind why successful and unsuccessful students in FL and L2 classes make different attributions as well as how these attributions are related to cultural forms. What they did was they compared the attributions of Thai, Japanese and Malaysian learners' attributions for success and failure in learning English as a first or second language. The findings showed that all three groups appeared to have some salient similarities in the manner in which they ascribed reasons behind their successes and failures. All three groups attributed more causes to success compare to the ones they attributed for failure. Also, in case of success, they all seemed to focus more on external factors, especially teacher influence while in the event of failure, they all seemed to focus more on internal factors such as lack of ability, preparation and effort, and inappropriate use of strategy.

Genç (2016) conducted another study in which it was aimed to analyze Turkish tertiary level EFL learners attributions to success and failure and the effects of gender, age, and perceived success on their attributions. The participants were 291 students of preparatory classes studying English for one year in the School of Foreign Languages. The instrument used for this study was a questionnaire. The results revealed that EFL learners respectively attributed

interest, ability, task difficulty, effort, luck and the influence of teacher and school as influential factors of their success whereas they respectively rated effort, interest, the effect of teacher and school, ability, task difficulty, and luck as influential factors of their failure. In addition, males and females had some differences in terms of their attribution dimensions such as external and internal. Lastly, age was not found to be an important factor in EFL learners attribution to success and failure.

Phothongsunan (2014) examined attributional causes of success in learning English reported by 329 Thai university students. The students also made an evaluation of themselves in respect of whether they think they were successful EFL learners. After the questionnaire and the follow-up interview, the results showed that teachers, effort, and class atmosphere influenced their learning success more than other factors. A significant difference was found between students who perceive themselves as 'successful' and those perceiving as 'unsuccessful' in terms of effort and strategy in learning English. As a result of the study, creating positive learning relationships between teachers and students, instilling in students the necessity of effort in learning English and developing a safe class atmosphere were given as implications.

Although very significant findings are revealed in the above-mentioned studies, many more researches are needed in this area in order to achieve further details in the quickly and continuously changing EFL world. In addition, it is widely known that attributions vary across contexts, from culture to culture and from individual to individual. In other words, they cannot be generalized (Siegel & Shaughnessy, 1996). Taking all these as a starting point, this study aims to identify the young Turkish EFL learners' attributions to their perceived successes and failures in their English language learning process.

Research Questions:

1. What are the young Turkish EFL learners' perceptions about being success or failure oriented?
2. What are the attributions of perceived success and perceived failure oriented 4th grade Turkish EFL learners?

Methodology

Participants and Setting:

The questionnaire participants were 115 students who were 4th graders. Their average age was 10 and they all were native speakers of Turkish. The participants were chosen due to convenience. This study took place at Mustafa Kemal Primary & Middle School in Eskişehir, Turkey. This is a school located in the Anadolu University's campus. The majority of the students enrolled here are the children of university employees. Therefore, it can be claimed that socio-economical and educational level of the parents are mostly above the average.

Instruments:

Questionnaire

A. Taşkıran's questionnaire that she used in her thesis called ("Exploring EFL Learners' Causal Attributions Of Perceived Success And Failure In Language Learning Process", Anadolu University, 2010) was adapted by the researcher for this study (see Appendix A).

The questionnaire consisted of 2 questions. The first question asked if they perceive themselves as a success oriented or failure oriented t in English language learning. This was a yes/no type of questions. The second question asked the participants to list 5 causes of their perceived success or failure in their own words. It is important to mention here that the main focus was on "perceived" success and not outside sources such as marks, grades, and teachers' evaluations.

This shows parallelism with Attribution Theory, which also focuses on the notion of "perception" (Williams, Burden, Poulet, and Maun, 2004). The entire questionnaire was written in Turkish so that it is easier for the subjects to fill out.

Procedure:

The questionnaire was distributed during class hours. Before distributing the questionnaires, the students were informed that they would be participating in a study. All participants accepted to participate and filled out the questionnaires willingly. The last format of the questionnaire was given according to this expert comments.

Data analysis:

Qualitative research design was utilized for this study and this study can be claimed to have a descriptive nature. Data were analyzed through content analysis. As Patton (2002) defines it, "Content analysis is used to refer to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings (p. 453)". The questionnaires were divided into two groups as "(perceived) success-oriented" and "(perceived) failure oriented". Those groups were formed according to the students' answers as 'yes' or 'no' to the first question asking whether they perceive themselves as a success-oriented or failure oriented in learning the English language.

The researcher gave a copy of each of these lists to a colleague. Each researcher analyzed the causes and assigned a meaningful label to each cause independently. Together with that colleague, the researchers compared the assigned labels to the similar responses. Meanwhile, the data were reanalyzed again and again in the light of emerging labels. The labels reported in this study are those that both readers agreed on via independent analyses. The frequencies of all labels that were listed for success and failure were calculated. The percentages of the causes were compared descriptively due to the reason that each group included different labels which could not be compared statistically. After all, everything was tabulated in order to have a clearer image of the results.

Results

Perceptions about Being Success or Failure Oriented

In reply to the first question on the questionnaire, out of 115 fourth-grader students 98 (85%) of them perceived themselves as success-oriented in English language learning while 17 (15%) of them perceived themselves as failure-oriented.

Table.1.1

<i>Perceptions about Being Successful</i>	f	%
Success Oriented	98	85
Failure Oriented	17	15
Total	115	100

Attributions of (Perceived) Success and Failure Oriented 4th Grade EFL Learners

The second question concerned the learners' attributions for their perceived success and failure in English language learning. Among 314 causes that were listed by the 4th graders, 273 (86,94 %) of them belonged to the (perceived) success-oriented students and 41 (13,05 %) of them belonged to the (perceived) failure oriented students.

In terms of the reliability of the data, a colleague who has the knowledge of the field was consulted and while discussing the labels given for the listed categories, between the two researchers labels given for 24 reasons out of 530 did not match. Since we used the formula of $[\text{agreement} / (\text{disagreement} + \text{agreement}) * 100]$, the inter-rater reliability was calculated as 95 %. The value passing over 80% was considered to prove the reliability of the study.

Table.1.2

Causes - 4th Grade Students – Success Oriented			
	Categories	<i>f</i>	%
1	Effort	46	16,84
2	Interest	40	14,65
3	Paying Attention	31	11,35
4	Private Language Courses	30	10,98
5	Family Support	26	9,52
6	Teacher	18	6,59
7	Getting High Grades	17	6,22
8	Computer Games	15	5,49
9	Ability	14	5,12
10	Participating in Class	14	5,12
11	Other sources (song, video, book)	8	2,93
12	Practicing Speaking	7	2,56
13	Translation Exercises	3	1,09
14	Good Quality Material	2	0,73
15	Starting at an Early Age	2	0,73
	<i>Total</i>	273	100

As it is clearly seen from the Table.1.2, the most frequently stated cause of success was *Effort* 46 (16,84 %). The second most frequent cause was *Interest* 40 (14,65 %), third one was *Paying Attention in class* 31 (11,35 %), fourth one was *Private Language Courses* 30 (10,98 %) and the fifth was *Family Support* 26 (9,52 %). The following causes were the *Teacher* 18 (6,59 %), *Getting High Grades* 17 (6,22 %), *Computer Games* 15 (5,49 %), *Ability* 14 (5,12 %) and *Participating in class* (5,12 %). Other causes were *Out-of-School Sources (songs, videos, books, etc.)* 8 (2,93 %), *Practicing Speaking* 7 (2,56 %), *Translation Exercises* 3 (1,09 %), *Good Quality Material* 2 (0,73 %) and lastly *Starting at an Early Age* 2 (0,73 %).

Table.1.3

Causes - 4th Grade Students – Failure Oriented			
	Categories	<i>f</i>	%
1	Getting Low Grades	8	19,51
2	Lack of Attention in Class	6	14,63
3	Lack of Ability	6	14,63
4	Lack of Effort	6	14,63
5	Lack of Interest	4	9,75
6	Can't Speak in English	3	7,31
7	Lack of Family Support	2	4,87
8	Lack of Vocabulary Knowledge	2	4,87
9	Task Difficulty	2	4,87
10	Teacher (school)	2	4,87
	<i>Total</i>	41	100

As one can see in Table.1.3, the most frequently stated cause of failure was *Getting Low Grades* (19,51 %). The second most frequent causes were *Lack of Paying Attention in Class* (14,63%), *Lack of Ability* (14,63%), *Lack of Effort* (14,63%), third one was *Lack of Interest* (9,75 %) and the fourth one was *Can't Speak in English* (7,31%). The following causes were *Lack of Family Support*, *Lack of Vocabulary Knowledge*, *Task Difficulty*, *Teacher (at school)* (4,87 %).

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the questionnaire results, it seen that there are more young Turkish EFL learners who perceive themselves as success-oriented rather than failure-oriented in terms of both 4th and the 8th graders. Most frequently stated cause of success by 4th grade students was found to be *Effort* (16,84 %) out of 15 causes and it is reported as the second most frequent cause (11,57 %) out of 17 causes of success for the 8th graders. Weiner (2010) states that if a learner explains his/her success as due to hard work and, s/he will have a sense of high-satisfaction. Effort is ascribed a central role in terms of the achievement outcomes by the attribution theorists. This result shows parallelism with the studies conducted in Asian context. When it comes to failure-oriented 4th graders, *Lack of Effort* was listed among the second (14,63%) most frequent causes of failure out of 10 causes. The second most frequent cause listed for success by the 4th graders was *Interest* (14,65 %). For failure, *Lack of Interest* was the third (9,75 %) most frequent factor. It can be inferred from the results that the young Turkish EFL learners think that liking the lesson/ the language comes as one of the top three most important causes of success, and lack of it as a cause for failure. A common problem that many English language teachers face is sustaining a genuine interest in the students towards learning the English language. Deci and Ryan (1985) claim that when people, on their free will, are to make a choice of the activity that they will perform, they will choose the interesting ones that will give them chances of challenge. This statement carries quite significant clues about the teachers' role in awakening students' interest.

Paying Attention in class came in the third place (11,35 %) for success-oriented students. When it comes to the failure oriented students, they reported the lack of it in the second frequency (14,63 %). As Nair (2015) points out this issue in his article: "Our whole education system has been constructed on the simple premise that learning begins when a student pays attention to what a teacher is saying. All children, regardless of how sincerely they might wish to please the teacher, will be chastised at some point or the other during their life in school for not paying attention in class." This can be claimed to be the reason why most of the younger students in this context, have a strong belief in the importance of paying attention in class. He also underlines how this tendency is imposed to students by saying: "Many books and articles have been written about strategies to improve children's attention in the classroom. One Internet "how to" piece that talks about paying attention starts thus, "Do you want to pay attention in class and get good grades? If you don't get good grades, it is probably because you're not paying enough attention." Nair (2015)

Private Language Courses came as the fourth most frequently reported (10,98 %) cause of success by the 4th graders. This may have the meaning that the students do not really feel satisfied with what they learn at school and attending a private language course makes them feel as their learning is more complete. However, not attending a

private language course was not reported as a cause of failure by the students. These results show that students in this context do not see attending a private language course as a condition to be successful in English language. This can imply the positive situation that they believe in the fact that they can be successful on their own and only by attending their school, without necessarily going to a private course. It is worth mentioning that these results are not in agreement with many studies in the literature. To illustrate, Lamb (2011) stated: “several learners and teachers identify the private course as the primary site of learning English”. Hamid and Baldauf’s (2008) study in Bangladesh also found “private tutoring in English to be extremely popular with students and parents (mainly because of the perceived deficiencies of the state system) and they identified a direct positive effect on students’ achievement.”

Family Support was the fifth most frequently listed (9,52 %) cause of success by the 4th graders. Yet, *Lack of Family Support* was listed among the fifth but frequent causes of failure (4,87%).

Petchprasert (2014) states that the “parents who have high level of involvement in and positive attitude toward their children’s English language programs caused their children’s higher level of achievement in the language program.” It may be beneficial to add, parents and other older relatives with English proficiency may themselves be a resource for learning, or know of other opportunities through their own social networks, while older siblings or their friends can serve as ‘near peer role models’ (Murphey and Arao 2001) as well as English conversation partners.

The *Teacher* factor was listed as the sixth frequent (6,59 %) cause of success by the 4th graders and among the fifth frequent causes of failure (4,87 %). Firstly, what grabs one’s attention here is that the teacher factor in general was not very frequently cited by the students. These results are not alike the results of Taşkıran’s (2010) study in which the teacher factor was the third most frequently reported cause in all groups and in both success and failure situations it was considered significant with the frequency of more than 10 %.

Getting High Grades is another interesting cause that was listed as the seventh frequent (6,22 %) cause of success and *Getting Low Grades* as the most frequent (19,51%) cause of failure by the 4th graders. It is strange to state this factor as a “cause” of success due to it is usually considered a “result” of success. Yet, it is seen here that primary school students tend to perceive themselves either successful or unsuccessful according to their grades. Especially the failure oriented students took their grades as a reference to their being unsuccessful. One can conclude that evaluating students by giving grades in primary school is a quite sensitive issue. “We live in a test-conscious, test-giving culture in which the lives of people are in part determined by their test performance.” (Sarason et al.,1960). This quotation is extremely remarkable considering that it was written in 1960. It has been so many years since then, but our “test-conscious” culture has not changed and in fact it grew bigger.

What we see in many students now is that they judge themselves on the basis of their grades, “a good grade resulting in high esteem”. Another important point made by Putwain (2008) is “To a greater or lesser extent there has been an internalization of

the message that esteem can be enhanced through educational achievement.” Many researchers agree about the fact that grades are perceived by students as controlling rather than informative (Elawar & Corno, 1985; Stipek, 2002). As Roos and Hamilton (2005) noted, “feedback is too deeply encoded in a grade for it to lead to appropriate action.” Hence, as Holmes suggested back in 1972, it can be suggested that in situations in which grades must be given to students, teachers need to consider accompanying it with meaningful praise.

4th graders listed *Computer Games* as the eight frequent cause (5,49 %) of success while it was not listed as a cause of failure at all. This finding is in line with other studies in the literature. “Computer games at school and in children’s spare time is actually a good way of supplementing the conventional teaching.” This became clear to Birgitte Holm Sørensen and her research colleagues when they recently interviewed a number of Danish schoolchildren, aged 12-14, some of the pupils said: ‘If only our English teacher knew how much we speak English in our spare time’. These children played computer games every day, games which required English language skills because that’s the language that was spoken in the games,” says Sørensen, who is a professor at Aalborg University’s Department of Education, Learning and Philosophy.

Ability was listed as the ninth (5,12 %) frequent cause of success stated by the 4th graders. *Lack of Ability* on the other hand, was reported in the third place by the 4th graders. This shows that both the students are prone to attribute their failure to lack to ability more than they attribute their success to it. “People undertake and perform confidently activities that they believe themselves capable of doing, however they avoid the tasks they believe exceed their ability.” Bandura (1986)

The teachers need to be careful about this issue, because if the learners start to think that they do not have control over the outcome, they lack in motivation to behave. So, “it would be useless to put forward any effort to attain success (Keblawi, Faris - 2009).” This maladaptive behavior is called learned helplessness.

Practicing Speaking took place as eleventh (2,56 %) frequent cause of success only by the 4th graders. Yet, lack of it, *Can’t Speak in English*, was cited both by the 4th grade (7,31 %) and also by the 8th grade (7,69 %) with students as a cause of failure. As everyone knows, “without speech, a language is reduced to a mere script.” Together with these results, one can suggest that the English language teachers should give more importance to improving their students speaking skills.

To conclude, it can be claimed that the more teachers know about their learners’ attributions, the better they can assist their learners through feedback or the tasks they prepare. Hence, attribution research has a significant place in learning and teaching. However, attributions are specific to their context. Therefore, instead of generalising these results completely to their teaching environment, instructors should go ahead and search for their own students’ attributions. It is hoped that this study will shed light on the way to discovering many more students’ attributions about their learning.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Although this study provided valuable insights about young EFL learners' attributions of success and failure, more in-depth studies are merited. One of the limitations to this study is that this study is only generalizable to its specific context. What is more, the participants were not chosen randomly. In further studies, a larger sample size would be helpful in terms of investigating the issue in more depth.

Moreover, data triangulation, could be enabled with an additional data collection methods. Lastly, even though the researcher is confident in the fact that the translated data captured the meanings as close as possible, there can always be certain meanings that will be lost in translation.

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