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**University Students' Perceptions of Their Failures in Learning English  
as a Foreign Language**

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**ABSTRACT**

The main purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate university students' perceived failure attributions in learning English as a foreign language at a preparatory school. The participants were 118 undergraduate students who failed at the end of a preparatory year and had to attend the repeat program. Each participant was asked to write about their perceived causes of failure in learning English. Students' responses were analyzed based on Weiner's (1983, 1985) Attribution Theory, and the emerging themes were linked to the locus of control, stability and controllability dimensions. The qualitative nature of the study provided in-depth information about the content of each dimension. The results suggest that students mostly attributed their academic failure in learning English to external and uncontrollable factors, which are in line with the findings of similar studies conducted in other university settings.

**Key Words:** Attribution theory, preparatory class, foreign language learning, failure attributions

**1. Introduction**

Attribution Theory, which was developed by Weiner (1985, 1986, 1990, 1992) is concerned with how individuals interpret a particular outcome, and how these interpretations (attributions) affect their future expectations and achievement. According to Attribution Theory, individuals try to determine why an outcome has occurred and attributions are the answers to those "why" questions. Weiner identified ability, effort, task difficulty and luck as the most common factors that affect individuals' causal attributions. He located these attributions on three dimensions: Locus (internal or external), stability (stable or unstable), and controllability (controllable or uncontrollable).

In general, Weiner (1985, 2000) claims that people have a tendency to attribute success to their efforts and abilities whereas they tend to attribute failure to some external factors. He also argues that internal and controllable attributions produce greater changes in motivation and academic achievement than external and stable factors. That is, if people attribute their success or failure to internal and controllable attributions, they exercise a great deal of control on the outcome and they make a greater effort to succeed. Attributing outcomes to external, stable and uncontrollable causes, on the other hand, weakens motivation and might discourage people from making an effort to succeed.

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Various research studies have been carried out to investigate students' attribution patterns with regard to their success and failure in academic context. The findings of these studies are generally in line with attribution theory in that high performing students are likely to associate their achievements to internal factors such as ability, effort, and having worked hard whereas low performing students have a tendency to attribute their failure to external factors such as bad luck, bad teaching, and unfavourable learning environment (Linder & Janus, 1997; Boruchovitch, 2004; Lei, 2009; Banks & Woofson, 2008; Mkumbo & Amani, 2012).

However, not much research has been conducted in the field of foreign or second language learning to investigate students' attributional beliefs. The first L2-related study was by Williams and Burden (1999). They asked British school children learning French why they did and did not do well. Results showed that students had a tendency to attribute their success mainly to their efforts, assistance from other people, and their competence. Regarding reasons for not doing well, students cited external factors such as distraction by others, the difficulty of work and poor teaching. Similarly, the results of a qualitative study by Ushioda (2001) with university students learning French indicated that students found ability, effort and love of French to be the main factors that influenced their success. In another study, Williams et al (2001) investigated the attributions of Bahraini learners of English for their success and failure. They found out that learners attributed their success to their effort (practice), help from others (family and teachers), exposure to the language, and a positive attitude. The most commonly reported reasons for failure were inadequate teaching methods, lack of support from family and teachers, poor comprehension and a negative attitude.

In a recent study, Paker & Özkardeş-Döğüş (2017) investigated university English preparatory students' achievement attributions. They also aimed to find out whether there is a relationship between achievement attributions of learners, their gender, and level of language proficiency. Their results indicated that successful learners attributed their achievement mainly to having a successful teacher along with some internal and controllable causes such as having self-confidence, enjoying learning English and being interested in English. Unsuccessful learners, on the other hand, ascribed lack of enough vocabulary, difficulty of exams, short education term to learn English, and lack of background education as the most important reasons for their failure. Another finding of that study was that there were some differences in students' attributional patterns depending on their gender and proficiency level.

A general conclusion that we can draw from the findings of the aforementioned studies and some others in the field of foreign language teaching (e.g. Williams et al, 2004; Gobel & Mori, 2007; Şahinkarakaş, 2011; Thang et al, 2011; Dong et al, 2013) is that students' attributional patterns are critical for academic achievement. Thus, knowledge of students' attributions is valuable for language teachers to ascertain the real causes of students' achievement, particularly failure, and to modify any undesirable attributions, which are likely to hinder progress.

Considering the importance of causal attributions, the aim of this study was to define university students' perceived causes of their failure in learning English as a foreign language. More specifically, it aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What reasons do university students attribute to their failure in learning English as a foreign language?
2. Do university students' attributions of failure in learning English as a foreign language vary across the students from English Medium Instruction (EMI) and Turkish-English Medium Instruction ((T-EMI) faculties?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Context

The study was carried out at a School of Foreign Languages of a Turkish State University that offers an intensive English language preparatory class to students whose level of English is below proficiency level when entering university. Through its two-semester intensive program, the school aims to bring students to a proficiency level (CEFR B2) where they can pursue their undergraduate studies at their departments. The students can graduate from preparatory school if they achieve a certain score (%60) on the language proficiency test given at the end of the academic year. Those who fail the language proficiency test have to attend the repeat program in the following academic year.

### 2.2. Participants and Procedure

Participants were 118 students (76 male, 42 female) who failed the English language proficiency test given at the end of the two-semester intensive program and had to the repeat program. 63 of those students were from the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, which adopt only English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI). 55 students were from the Faculty of Agriculture, the Department of Food Engineering which adopt Turkish (%70) and English (%30) as the Medium of Instruction (T-EMI).

To collect data, a simple questionnaire was constructed by the researchers. It was in Turkish, the participants' native language because the researchers agreed that this would allow longer entries since the students would naturally feel more confident while expressing themselves in their native language. In the questionnaire, the students were asked to write about their perceived causes of failure in the English language preparatory class. They were allowed to attribute their failure to multiple causes in an open-ended format. Students' papers were content analyzed on the basis of emerging and recurrent concepts related to their perceived failure attributions. In order to ensure consistency of the findings, the researchers coded each paper at two different time intervals. As the students wrote in Turkish, the emerging concepts were then translated into English.

## 3. Findings

As mentioned earlier, the first research question of the current study aimed to find out university students' attributions of their failure in learning English as a foreign language. In Table 1 below, results about both EMI and T-EMI students' perceived causal attributions of failure are presented.

**Table 1***EMI and T-EMI Students' Perceived Causal Attributions of Failure*

<b>Internal</b>	<b>External</b>
<b>Effort</b> not studying hard (26) not attending classes regularly (18)	<b>Environment</b> previous education (17) early classes (1) language teaching methodology (16) language instructors (21) rigid attendance requirements (2) distracted by others (2) too many teaching hours (1)
<b>Interest / Personality Traits</b> lack of interest (10) prejudice about learning English (1) hopelessness and giving up (6) exam anxiety (5) low self-confidence in learning English (1)	<b>Task Difficulty</b> difficult exams and rigid success criteria (46) gap between the language education given and the exams(31) too many things to learn (1)
<b>Ability</b> bad at listening (5) bad at learning vocabulary (2) bad at reading (1) bad at writing (1) lack of effective study skills (9)	<b>Luck</b> health problems (3) family issues (9)

Note: Numbers in brackets refer to how many times they appeared in students' texts

As can be seen in Table 1, students mentioned both internal and external factors to account for their failure. Their attributions were related to effort, environment, interest/personality traits, task difficulty, ability, and luck. Although Weiner (1986) identified ability, luck, task difficulty, and effort as the most common causal attributions, the participants in our study mentioned a larger array of attributions. These results are in harmony with the results of similar studies (Bruning et al., 2004; Graham, 2004; Tse, 2000; Williams et al., 2004) which indicated that individuals can make countless attributions that can vary considerably among learners.

The results presented in Table 1 show that most frequent causal attributions were about task difficulty (78 in total). In this category, students mentioned difficult exams and rigid success criteria, gap between the language education given and the exams, and too many things to learn. Some extracts from students' reports about task difficulty can be seen below.

- I think there is wide gap between what is taught in class and what is tested. The tests that we are given far exceed the level of the material and exercises we cover in class.

- In class, the instructors focus on grammar, but in the exams, the questions are designed to test our language skills and vocabulary.

- The proficiency exam is too difficult and is not based on the curriculum.

- The score to graduate from preparatory school is too high to achieve, and most students fail because of the rigidity of this success criteria.

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*- I failed because the exams were too difficult, and I think the instructors do not grade our exams fairly. Moreover, in the listening exams, the speakers speak so fast that we cannot understand anything.*

Explaining failure with an external and uncontrollable cause- difficult exams and rigid success criteria- shows that the participants relate their failure to some outer factor which is beyond their scope of control. This perception might cause them to make little or no effort to succeed and result in repeated failure. As Weiner (1986) suggests, when subjects think that the causes of failure are about uncontrollable factors such as task difficulty or lack of ability, their expectations for subsequent learning decreases.

The second mostly cited reasons for failure were about environment (60 in total). Language instructors, previous education, and language teaching methodology were the most endorsed attributes in this category. There are some quotations below from students' reports that are related to these causal attributions.

*- The reason why I failed last year was the instructors who treated us with indifference. They were reluctant to make the lessons interesting with enjoyable activities.*

*- The instructors' attitudes towards us caused me to hate learning English.*

*- I believe that I failed mainly because of the language instructor I had last year. She was too strict, so I was really nervous before and during her classes. As you know, anxiety results in failure.*

*- In high school, I did not have any English classes, so I didn't have any language learning experience. When I started the preparatory class, I was a true beginner, and I couldn't keep up with the course content.*

*- I had graduated from a state high school, so I didn't have an appropriate background to start the preparatory class.*

*- The lessons were boring because the instructors did not try to attract our attention with different methods and activities.*

*- The instructors focused too much on grammar, which was wrong. We should have practised speaking more.*

*- We did not do enough exam practice in class. That's why I couldn't do well in the exams.*

Most of the extracts above imply that the participants believe teachers have an important role in their learning and in increasing their motivation to learn English. Our results regarding the causal attributions related to environment seem to be parallel with the findings of previous research. In several studies (e.g. Tse, 2000; Gobel & Mori, 2007; Peacock, 2009; Tang et al., 2011; Paker & Özkardeş-Döğüş, 2017), one of the most frequently cited reasons for achievement (success / failure) was the teacher. Our results also suggest that students identify the instructors among the most important sources of their lack of success because the third most frequently cited reason (language teaching methodology) under the category of environment is also related to the teacher.

The third most frequent attributions of failure were about effort (44 in total). As can be seen in Table 1, 26 students reported that they failed because of not studying hard and 18 students mentioned not attending classes regularly as the cause of their failures. Some students' emphasis on effort attributions can be seen in the extracts below:

*- The causes of my failure were not attending classes regularly and not studying hard enough.*

*- I didn't study hard last year. That's why I failed.*

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- I don't think I failed because of the preparatory school curriculum or the instructors. I failed because I skipped a lot of classes. If anyone to blame, it's me!

- I personally believe that the education given at the preparatory school is very useful and effective. I couldn't pass just because I didn't study hard.

The extracts above hint that these learners tend to accept responsibility for failure outcomes rather than blaming external factors. This self-critical tendency that was observed in some students' reports does not support the basis of the Attribution Theory that when one fails, s/he is more likely to use external attribution, attributing causes to situational factors rather than blaming himself/herself, and contradicts with the findings of some studies conducted in Turkey (Genç, 2016; Taşkıran, 2011; Özkardeş, 2011) as they indicated the existence of self-protective bias (i.e. blaming external forces for failure/denying responsibility for failure outcomes). This is quite promising because effort, which is an internal and controllable attribution, is expected to produce greater changes in motivation and academic achievement (Weiner 1985, 2000).

As is shown in Table 1, the number of students who made attributions to interest/personality traits, ability, or luck was small when compared with the others. 23 students expressed the belief that they failed because of interest/personality traits, especially because of lack of interest in learning English. There appeared to be very little expression of ability and luck. It seems reasonable to conclude that this is good news because as mentioned by Graham (1990), attributions of failure to lack of ability are likely to prevent students from continuing their study altogether.

The results, taken together, suggest that although some students seem to have a tendency to cope with their failure to some extent, the majority of the participants tend to attribute their failure to external and uncontrollable factors, namely task difficulty and environment. This finding is quite consistent with the findings of the studies in the relevant literature in that unsuccessful language learners attribute their failure to external factors such as task difficulty.

In order to find out whether attributions of failure vary across the students from EMI and T-EMI faculties (Research Question 2), we analysed students' texts for the two groups separately. EMI students' perceived causal attributions to failure are demonstrated in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*EMI Students' Perceived Causal Attributions of Failure*

<b>Internal</b>	<b>External</b>
<p><b>Effort</b> not studying hard (18) not attending classes regularly (11)</p>	<p><b>Environment</b> previous education (10) rigid attendance requirements (2) language teaching methodology (8) distracted by others (2) language instructors (8)</p>
<p><b>Interest / Personality Traits</b> lack of interest (3) prejudice about learning English (1) hopelessness and giving up (3) exam anxiety (2) low self-confidence in learning English (1)</p>	<p><b>Task Difficulty</b> difficult exams and rigid success criteria (23) gap between the language education given and the exams(14)</p>

**Ability**

bad at learning vocabulary (2)  
 bad at writing (1)  
 bad at listening (2)  
 lack of effective study skills (5)

**Luck**

health problems (1)  
 family issues (4)

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Note: Numbers in brackets refer to how many times they appeared in students' texts

One can see from Table 2 that the factors EMI students reported were related to effort, environment, interest/personality traits, task difficulty, ability, and luck. External factors, task difficulty, and environment, were most often cited as reasons for failure (37 and 30 respectively). The third most frequently reported reason by EMI students for not doing well was effort (29 in total), which is an internal, unstable and controllable factor. Ten students mentioned reasons related to interest/personality traits, and ten students cited reasons about ability. There were five participants who reported that they failed because of luck. With these results, we can conclude that, although some of them mentioned reasons about interest/personality traits, ability and luck, EMI students had a tendency to identify task difficulty as the main reason for their failure in learning together with environment and effort.

Findings about T-EMI students' perceived causal attributions of failure are displayed in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*T-EMI Students' Perceived Causal Attributions of Failure*

<b>Internal</b>	<b>External</b>
<b>Effort</b> not studying hard (8) not attending classes regularly (7)	<b>Environment</b> previous education (7) language teaching methodology (8) language instructors (13) too many teaching hours (1) early classes (1)
<b>Interest / Personality Traits</b> lack of interest (7) hopelessness and giving up (3) exam anxiety (3)	<b>Task Difficulty</b> difficult exams and rigid success criteria (23) gap between the language education given and the exams(17) too many things to learn (1)
<b>Ability</b> bad at listening (3) lack of effective study skills (4) bad at reading (1)	<b>Luck</b> health problems (2) family issues (5)

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Note: Numbers in brackets refer to how many times they appeared in students' texts

As is presented in Table 3, T-EMI students mentioned attributions related to effort, environment, interest/personality traits, task difficulty, ability and luck. Similar to the results about EMI students, external factors, task difficulty and environment, were most often reported by T-EMI students as reasons for failure (41 and 30 respectively). It can be seen in Table 3 that the third most frequently cited reason by T-EMI students for failure was effort. With these results, we can conclude that, in general terms, both EMI and T-EMI students had a tendency to attribute their failure in learning English to task difficulty and environment. Also, effort was the third most frequently cited causal attribution in both groups; however, we should note that EMI students focused more on effort when compared to T-EMI students.

#### 4. Conclusion

The results of the current study showed that both EMI and T-EMI students attributed their failure in learning English to multiple causes, namely effort, environment, interest/personality traits, task difficulty, ability, and luck, but they had a tendency to identify task difficulty and environment as the main reasons for their failure. Task difficulty was the most endorsed attributes for failure in both groups. Students perceived difficult exams and rigid success criteria as the most important factor in their failure. They also complained that there is a gap between lesson contents and the exams. When the causal dimensions of these two factors are considered (external, uncontrollable and usually stable), we can conclude that they showed self-protective bias that is widely recognized in cognitive psychology. This might imply that both EMI and T-EMI students have a tendency to feel a lack of control over their learning and achievement. These results are in line with the findings of many previous studies (Linder & Janus, 1997; Augoustinos, 2005; Boruchovitch, 2004; Brown et al, 2005) and support the basis of the Attribution Theory that when one fails, s/he is more likely to use external attribution, attributing causes to situational factors rather than blaming himself/herself.

Another important finding is that although the third most frequently cited reasons for failure by both EMI and T-EMI students were related to effort (not studying hard and not attending classes regularly), this self-critical tendency was more evident among EMI students. A possible explanation for this phenomenon could be the fact that students should get a higher score on the university entrance exams in order to attain EMI; thus EMI students might be more aware of the importance of effort in order to succeed.

As almost all the studies in the relevant literature (Ghonsooly et al, 2015) indicate that students' academic achievement is improved when students attribute academic outcomes to factors such as effort and the use of appropriate study strategies, one implication of our findings is that teachers should allocate some time to explore their students' failure attributions. We suggest that this is very important because learners might not be aware of the internal and controllable causes of their failure, and might have underestimated the effect of effort, which might have hindered their progress. This might also enable teachers to encourage internal and controllable attributions which are likely to affect proficiency.

Another implication of the current study is that in order to produce a positive change in behaviour which will ultimately have an impact on students' effort and success in learning English, course contents and assessment should be planned in such a way that students should believe studying hard

could actually lead to successful academic outcomes. Otherwise, it is quite likely for students to underestimate the effect of effort, drop out or give up studying.

The current study is a descriptive one with 118 participants in the same learning context, which might stand out as a major limitation. However, it can propose some important implications for further research in the field of foreign language teaching.

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