



## Investigation of Turkish EFL learners' attributions on success and failure in learning English

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the attributions of Turkish EFL learners on success and failure in learning English as a foreign language with different variables such as gender and level of English proficiency. To investigate the attributions of the participants and gather the relevant data, a questionnaire including 38 items and semi-structured interview protocol were applied. To analyze the data, SPSS 20.0 was used, and interview protocol was decoded using document analysis. It was revealed from the findings that learners attribute their success and failure to both internal and external attributions; however, they give more priority to internal attributions. Investigating all these concepts will help all the stakeholders to be aware and understand the reasons behind the learners' success and failure in learning English with different variables including gender, and level of proficiency.

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*Keywords:* Attribution theory; gender; level of proficiency

## 1. Introduction

“Why do people fail?” is probably the most frequently asked question both by people themselves, and in this context, by teachers and learners sharing the same classroom. In language learning classrooms, this question may be more complex as learning a foreign language is a very different area of learning because no other field of study necessitates learners to take social risks, and it is highly related to personal factors (Horwitz, 1990). Another reason is that although learning a foreign language may seem as a “learnable” school subject and contains grammatical rules that are taught explicitly, it is a social event and it is socially and culturally bounded (Williams, 1994).

It is an indispensable fact that human beings have always tried to understand what the reasons are behind their success and failure and question the reasons underlying a specific result, and try to find the deeper understanding of the event, and change and develop the process when the result is negative or inadequate. To answer these reasons, people ask themselves and each other “why” questions, and as

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the modification to these questions, people try to change their behaviors and thoughts. According to Woolfolk (2004), learning is the relatively persistent and observable change in a person's knowledge and behavior as a result of the interaction with the environment. These changes can be intentional or unintentional, to better or worse, and conscious or unconscious. However, in the process of education and learning, whether "learner" or "teacher", human being is the focus domain, so when there is an interaction of human beings with each other, it is inevitable that human psychology will be one of the most important concerns. In education context, in theory and application processes, human psychology must be taken into consideration, too.

As a result, attitudes of the learner, their preferences towards learning, and psychological factors that affect these preferences attract educational researchers' and academicians' attraction in the age of humanistic approaches, and during the last few decades, researchers have spent a lot of effort on cognitive aspects of learning (Altan, 2006). It is known that the learner should be willing and motivated to learn actively to implement the effective learning and teaching process. In another words, unless the learner is motivated, however successful your materials, curriculum and methods are, the learning-teaching process can end up with a failure because of an unmotivated learner. Thus, motivation appears to be at the heart of the teaching-learning process.

### *1.1. Literature review*

As social psychology gained importance, and individuals try to seek answers to the events in a meaningful way rather than attributing the reasons and results to destiny, religion or tradition, people had a strong desire to find out the reasons and put the world around them in order. As cognitive theories were gaining grounds in 1960s and 70s, individuals were trying to find the causes (Slavin, 2000). During that time, Heider (1958) was the first to propose a systematic analysis of causal structure, and he is known as the founder of the Attribution Theory. Heider's attribution theory simply based on a three-step process: (1) it is strongly believed by the individuals that there are causes behind behaviors (2) people believe that it is important to find out why others behave as they do; and (3) the cause of a behavior is in a person, a situation, or both (Sweeton & Deerrose, 2010). As a result, for the first time, personal causes were differentiated from situational ones. According to Heider (1958:146), understanding and being aware of the causal structure of human behavior is significant as it has an important effect on expectancy for future success and behaviors. Accordingly, he states that consciousness of the causal structure of human behavior is a great limestone and factor for people's future expectancies and behaviors. Heider's attribution theory (1958) claims that individuals need a basic description to define and arrange the events in an order. Individuals who attribute the events in a meaningful way have more chance to control and understand the environment (Kelley, 1967). Fritz Heider's studies constitute the basis of the theory today known as attribution theory. Attribution theory has originated in the field of social psychology to explain how people regard the causes of events and behaviors (Heider, 1958). According to Heider, individuals have the necessity to predict and affect what the outcome of a specific event will be, so, to reach the goal, the best way is to understand and describe the specific reasons of the behaviors (Kelley, Michela 1980). Heider's definitions and classifications on understanding of attributional structure inspired other psychologists and researchers to look into the processes by which people explain their own successes and failures (Ozkardes, 2012). His attributional structure was taken up and extended by many social psychological researchers such as Rotter, 1966 and Weiner, 1986. Rotter (1966) was the first psychologist that made a clear distinction between internal and external factors and he also introduced locus of control dimension to the attribution theory as he claimed that some individuals are tended to perceive themselves in control of events in their lives, while others see events and results beyond their control and environmental circumstances affect them. Kelley advanced Heider's theory of attribution and tried to find out the

underlying reasons how people decide whether to make external or internal attributions (Kelley & Mihella, 1980). With these advances and clarifications on attribution theory, it did not take a great time to adapt it into educational context although attributions on success and failure were first used in sports and for athletes. Bernard Weiner also broadened Heider's ideas and had a great contribution to the development of attribution theory by linking between attributions and locus of control (Weiner, 2010). Attributions for Heider is how a person make inferences on his environment in order to have a foresight to control what is going around, and provide some benefits by functioning like a mirror reflecting the world. What Weiner suggested with his attribution theory in 1986 is that student attributions concerning success and failure consist of three dimensions as locus of control (internal or external), stability (stable or unstable), and controllability (controllable or uncontrollable). As individuals grow and get knowledge on both himself/ herself and also the environment surrounding, s/he can attribute her/his success or failure to different reasons (Gronhaug & Falkenberg, 1989: 23). According to the earliest attribution theory of Weiner, attributions for success and failure are generally based on four causes, specifically ability, effort, task difficulty and luck, which are the most remarkable factors in achievement outcomes (Weiner, 1974). Skehan explains that the relationship between attribution theory and language learning stems from causal factors that affect academic achievement. When it comes to definition of attribution, it is clear that attribution theory deals with what reasons people ascribe as the causes for their success and failures (Slavin, 2000), and it took its place in educational psychology in the mid 1970s. Attribution theory can also be called as common sense psychology since it deals with the human behavior. (Kelly, 1992). According to some other definitions, attributions are qualified as the explanations made by people so that it would be possible to control similar events likely to happen in the future (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1979). According to Weiner (1991), it is of critical issue for human beings to find out the reasons for the specific events they observe. The aim of attribution theory is to determine what students think about the reasons of their failure or success during their academic progress. On the other hand, in educational context, when individuals succeed or fail in a task or test, they attribute the results to different reasons. As these reasons can differ according to the personal traits and characteristics of individuals, it may affect their future judgments. In short, attribution theory examines what kind of reasons individuals attribute to for their success or failure. Weiner (2000) also suggests that student attributions may reflect students' expectations, values, emotions, and beliefs about their competence. While attribution theory describes the behaviorist reasons, it also focuses on how the motivation of the individuals should be enhanced. Attribution theory forms a basis on the outcomes of the events and tries to define the real underlying reasons and tries to modify, develop and motivate the individual rather than describing them with unrealistic and external reasons (Weiner, 1992). There have been recent studies in Turkey although most of the research has been done in primary and secondary school contexts and many of which are descriptive (Akca, 2011; Aydin, 2006). Ozduygu (1995) investigated the achievement attributions of elementary school students and found no significant differences between these two groups of students in terms of their attributions. Kayaoglu (1997), in his study of the learning strategies of Turkish EFL and ESL adult learners, explored language learners' past and present experiences and identified the reasons which learners attributed to success and failure in language learning using an open-ended questionnaire. The major finding was that learners attributed success and failure to different internal and external factors which seemed to affect their approaches to language learning and language behavior. Teacher-related factors and attitudinal factors were found to be the most stated reasons for success and failure. Another major result was that stable factors such as ability, a good ear and a good memory affected their strategy choice. In another study, Can (2005) examined elementary school teachers' attributions for their perceived success and failure in their professions in terms of their causal dimensions. The results revealed that participants made more internal, stable and controllable attributions for success than they did for failure. Gender difference was also apparent as

female teachers made more internal attributions for success than male teachers. Besides, male teachers tended to believe that they were more in control of their failures. Saticilar (2006) investigated the achievement attributions of English language learners at sixth and ninth grades. The results revealed that students tended to attribute their success and failure in learning English to internal factors. Effort was found to be the most important cause for success and failure. As for the gender difference, female learners attributed their success to effort more frequently than male learners did. Male learners tended to attribute their success more to ability compared to female learners. Buyukselcuk (2006) examined the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and causal attributions of 342 undergraduate senior and graduate students at Bogazici University. Findings of the study showed that students made more external and effort attributions in failure situations regardless of the level of their self-efficacy. High self-efficacious students, on the other hand, made mostly ability attributions for their successes. These results led her to conclude that it might be of help to use attributional retraining to change the attributional styles of low self-efficacious students in order to increase their self-efficacy. Semiz (2011) examined the effects of a training program on EFL students' attributional beliefs, self-efficacy, language learning beliefs, achievement and effort. The training program aimed to alter EFL learners' maladaptive attributions for failure and thus enhance their self-efficacy, success and effort. A further concern was to investigate the explanations of EFL students of success and failure at Karadeniz Technical University during 2010-2011 academic year and it was found that successful students have more internal and personal attributions (effort and strategy) compared to unsuccessful students. Although no gender differences were observed, pre-and post-test comparisons revealed significant changes in attributional beliefs.

Even though there has been an increase in the number of studies in EFL contexts both in Turkey and around the world, most appear to be descriptive in nature and there are just a few attribution retraining studies. In addition, the relationship between attributions and foreign language education is a new research domain in the study, and also the effect of attribution retraining programs has a potential benefit to all EFL stakeholders including teachers, researcher, and learners.

There is no doubt that if educators, researchers and teachers have knowledge about attributions of their students, they can redesign or modify their programs or design the learning environment according to the individual backgrounds and perceptions of their learners rather than teaching in the same way and ignoring the attributions of EFL learners towards learning English as a foreign language. Moreover, when learners are aware of their attributions to their failure or success, and how these attributions lead to behaviors and motivation, they will be able to change some maladaptive behaviors into more favorable ones, so that they can provide self-control and it may have a positive effect on language learning process, and it may improve their performance (McDonough, 1989) To sum up, the lack of studies to unearth the attributions of EFL learners in foreign language teaching programs in the first year of the universities, and also uninvestigated practices in terms of the gender and level of English and their effects on the success or failure of the learners gives the study further credibility.

## *1.2. Research questions*

The present study aims to find out the perceptions of success and failure attributions of Turkish EFL learners regarding with their gender and level of English. The following research questions will be investigated in the study:

Research Question 1: To what factors do the Turkish EFL learners attribute their success in learning English as a foreign language?

Research Question 2: To what factors do the Turkish EFL learners attribute their failure in learning English as a foreign language?

Research Question 3: What is the role of gender and English level of the Turkish EFL learners on the attributions of success and failure?

## 2. Method

The design of research is decided by the aims and objectives of the research (Siegel, 2015). The current study aimed to find out the attributions of a group of EFL students on success and failure in detail, so a mixed study approach was chosen. While doing the research, both quantitative and qualitative studies were taken because a quantitative study would concentrate on the relationships by attaching quantifiable measures and would be useful to find out the relationships, if there is, by attaching quantifiable measures. It would be appropriate for the study to understand whether a relationship exists, or how strong the relationship is as the first step of the study. It is clear that a quantitative approach cannot itself find out the deep understanding and complexities of an individual's behavior (Robson, 2002:98), which is one of the most important aspects of this study, as it seeks to find out information on individuals' behavior, so qualitative approach also takes part in the study. In addition, although there is no doubt that quantitative measures put out really interesting accounts, it should be also argued that attributions of the individuals is a factor more than numerical data and the meanings, reasoning and all the underlying factors should be attached by participants, and the researchers has a duty to make them speak. It is known by all the researchers that there are many other factors such as cultural and environmental influences and socio-economic influences for the individuals that may have an effect on a young-adult participant's thoughts and ideas. Thus, for the given reasons explained, this study made use of a mixed approach experimental design.

### 2.1. Sample / Participants

The participants are the students in the School of Foreign Languages at Pamukkale University. The school has nearly 1600 students whose level of English ranges between elementary to intermediate, and their level of English is determined at the beginning of each academic year via the placement exam applied by the school itself. The students have 20 hours of English classes per week including as reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. The learners must have intermediate level of English at the end of the academic year and they must get 70 out of 100 points to be successful in the proficiency test administered by the school.

The researchers selected the participants of the study to conduct the study based on the following criteria: (1) They must attend the courses regularly, so the requirement is 70 % of attendance to classes of English. (2) They should agree to participate in the study voluntarily. A group of 204 students, who study English in a public university in Turkey, was selected. Regarding the participants' gender and level of English, the researchers decided them to be equal in numbers, so of the learners who participated in the survey, 102 were female (50%) and 102 was male (50%), and, similarly, the participants were at pre-intermediate level of English (50 %), and intermediate level of English (50 %). All participants were between 18 and 21 years old.

### 2.2. Research instruments

The study employs both the quantitative and qualitative types of research, so the research tools were designed according to the purpose of the study and to find out the possible answers to the research questions. With that in mind, data was collected through the following instruments:

### 2.2.1. Causal attributions questionnaire

A Causal Attributions Questionnaire developed by the researcher by reviewing the literature was used to identify the causal attributions of the EFL learners on success and failure. Although some questions in the questionnaire may be pre-existed in the literature, the researcher revised or modified the items to be confident that they are good indicators and tailored for the purpose of the present study. The questionnaire is comprised of 3 parts; the first part includes demographic information to find out the related data including gender and level of English, which is determined through the placement test administered by the institution at the beginning of the academic year and age, the second part, which aims to identify the attributions on success, is comprised of 13 items and the third part, which aims to explore the attributions on failure, consisted 25 items, and in total, the questionnaire has 38 items in addition to items to collect demographic data.

The reliability statistics for the questionnaire were as follows;

**Table 1.** Cronbach's Coefficient of the Causal Attributions Scale

	Reliability Statistics	
	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
General	.800	38
For Success	.799	13
For Failure	.773	25

It can be understood from the table that Cronbach's Coefficient of the Causal Attributions Scale used in the study is between the acceptable values of alpha, which is accepted from 0.70 to 0.95.

### 2.2.2. Interview Protocol Piloting

Focus group interviews were used to find out a deeper understanding of the feelings and opinions of the participants on attributions towards success and failure in an EFL setting. In addition, just using a questionnaire would contradict with the philosophical assumptions of the researchers. Looking into detailed descriptions and explanations of the participants' opinions, exploring their background stories and gaining richness to the data were a must for the researchers, so semi-structured interviews were used as the second step in the study. Interviews are one of the most widely used qualitative data collection methods (Bagozzi, 1994), and it is direct, personal way of data collection and helps to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes and feelings (Malhotra, 2004). Another important benefit of the interview is that it increases the comprehension of the data and makes the data collection more detailed and more organized for each participant (Greenfield, 2002). Semi-structured interview was chosen for this study rather than a structured interview because it certainly gives more freedom and also gives enough flexibility to both the participants and the researcher. In addition, using an unstructured interview would not give the control on the topic and it would be inconsistent and problematic during the data analysis. Kvale (1996) defines the characteristics of the semi-structured interviews as they have a lower degree of structure designed by the researcher, asking some fixed questions would pave the way to obtain relevant information, and also provoke the interviewees to elaborate and explain their own reasons and specifications that have brought into the research from their own life. The study is an exploratory study to gain a deeper understanding of the participants, and to understand the participants' attributions. This semi-structured interview would certainly help the researchers to investigate the reasons and the hooks in their minds. In the selection process of the interviews, participants were randomly selected to take part in the interview process, which is the

second step to gather a detailed and more specific data and ensure the data gathered from the questionnaires. The interview questions were determined according to the self-report statements of the participants at the beginning of the study. These statements were analyzed through document analysis, itemized, examined and checked by 4 experts and also by 9 students to prevent any problems that may be encountered during the main study.

The main interview questions were as follows:

1. Do you like learning English?
2. What makes you like/dislike learning English?
3. Do you think you are successful in learning English?
4. What can make you successful in learning English?
5. What makes you unsuccessful in learning English?
6. Why do you think some students are more successful than others in learning English?
7. What are the reasons some students can never be successful in learning English?

Individual interviews were conducted and took ten to fifteen minute sessions in one of the researcher's office. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees. The interviews were held until the data required is saturated, and with this aim in mind, 9 participants took part in the interview process of the study. The participants' responses were categorized in specific descriptive codes; responses were compared and discussed by the researchers.

### 2.3. Data analysis

Quantitative data analyses were performed by using SPSS 20 statistical software program. Differences are considered to be statistically significant if  $p \leq 0.05$ . As for the analysis of the Causal Attributions Questionnaire, the interval scale for the items was calculated by using  $n-1/n$  formula, and the interval was found as 0.80. Thus, the mean scores of their responses were interpreted according to a five-point Likert scale, and the intervals of the scale are consistent with the related literature and as mentioned above;

4.21 - 5.00 = strongly agree;

3.41 - 4.20 =agree;

2.61 - 3.40 = neutral

1.80 - 2.60 =disagree

1.0 - 1.79 = strongly disagree

In addition, qualitative content analysis was used for the qualitative data. According to Phillip (2000) the object of (qualitative) content analysis can be all sort of recorded communication (transcripts of interviews, discourses, protocols of observations, video tapes, documents).

## 3. Results and Discussion

*3.1. RQ1.To what factors do the Turkish EFL learners attribute their success in English language learning?*

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of the Participants to Success before the AR (N=204)

Attributions	Mean	SD	SEM
Internal	3.26	.73	.051
External	2.97	.67	.047

When the attributions on success in the questionnaire data were analyzed, the mean of the internal attributions is 3.26, while the external ones are 2.97. As the means more than 3 are regarded as positive and less than 3 are regarded as negative, and as the internal factors' mean is more than 3 and has a bigger mean than the external attributions, it can be said that the participants attribute their success on internal factors. Although they are aware of the external attributions, they think that internal attributions are more important than external ones. Paired sample t-test was applied to find out whether  $r$  is meaningful statistically and was found that  $t = 7.047$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , was found statistically meaningful.

As the second step and to put out the details of the analysis, the following table puts out the mean values of both internal and external attributions on success for each item to reveal a more detailed way of the findings.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics of the Participants to Success (N=204)

	Descriptive Statistics	Mean	SD
<b>Internal</b>	Their English backgrounds from their past education give them additional advantage	3.62	1.48
	They have self confident in learning English	3.51	1.14
	They attend classes regularly	3.40	1.18
	They have ability for learning English	3.35	1.05
	Classes are enjoyable for them	3.34	1.17
	Their teachers are successful	3.28	1.08
<b>External</b>	They are intelligent	3.25	1.15
	They work hard	3.02	1.16
	They read books in English after school	2.99	1.20
	Learning English is easy for them	2.88	1.09
	Exams are easy for them	2.80	1.10
	The system in their school support them to work hard	2.73	1.22
	They are lucky in exams	2.50	1.07

The mean values of the each item in the questionnaire show that although the participants attribute their success to internal factors in general, the highest mean of all the items is having a better educational background as the most important factor among all items, which is an external and uncontrollable one, whose mean is 3.62. In addition to this, when all the means of items considered, it is clear that the means are between 2.50, "*Being Lucky in the exams*", which has the least mean, and 3.62, "*Having a better educational background*". The findings show that there is no striking difference between internal and external attributions, which shows that the participants have a blended/ mixed perception on the attributions of success. It is clear from the table that, EFL learners

attribute the success in learning English to “*having self-confident in learning English*”, which is the most important to the participants with the mean 3.51. In addition to the participants, “*attending the classes*” regularly (M=3.40) and “*ability in learning English*” are also the factors that lead to be successful in learning English. On the other hand, the participants regard “*being lucky in the tests*” (M=2.50), *the system of the school* (M=2.73) and “*the easiness of the tests*” (M=2.80) as the least important factors in learning English. To conclude, although there is no meaningful difference on the internal and external attributions of success of the participants, it can be said that they attribute the success in learning English to internal attributions more than external ones.

3.2. RQ2. To what factors do the Turkish EFL learners attribute their failure in English language learning?

**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistics of the Participants to Failure (N=204)

Attributions	Mean	SD	SEM
Internal	3.26	.52	.037
External	3.25	.55	.039

When the attributions of the participants of failure were analyzed, it can be seen from the table that the mean of internal factors is 3.26; on the other hand, the mean of external factors is 3.25. As the means more than 3 are regarded as positive and less than 3 are regarded as negative, and the means less than 3 can be regarded as negative, and as the means of both internal and external items are very close to each other, the participants attribute the failure in learning English to both internal and external factors although the internal factors are slightly more important than the external ones. When the t-test was applied to find out whether there is a meaningful difference or not, and  $t = 0.444$  and p-value is  $0.658 > 0.05$ , it cannot be rejected, but the mean difference between internal and external factors was 0.01618 and no meaningful statistical difference was found.

**Table 5.** Descriptive Statistics of the Participants to Failure on Each Item (N=204)

Part III	Mean	SD
They don't have a robust background from their past elementary and high school education	3.92	1.26
They study enough	3.79	1.03
They don't study hard enough	3.76	1.07
They don't believe in themselves enough to learn English	3.66	1.06
Their attendance to class is not in a regular basis	3.60	1.14
They don't have enough motivation to learn English	3.55	0.98
Working hard lets students be successful	3.54	1.26
Teachers determine student's destiny in learning English	3.50	1.23
They are nervous about being unsuccessful	3.46	1.11
They don't have enough self-confidence in learning English	3.46	1.11
Working hard is the most important factor in learning English	3.41	1.27
Exams are hard for them	3.38	1.13
Their classes are boring	3.22	1.20

They think that they won't succeed in learning English even they study hard	3.21	1.17
The language teaching system of the school is unsatisfactory	3.18	1.16
Students are determinants of their destiny in English learning by themselves	3.17	1.22
They don't have ability to learn English	3.13	1.15
System of school does not adapt to new developments	3.04	1.19
Their teachers are not successful in teaching English	3.03	1.08
Exams are difficult and therefore they don't succeed	3.00	1.12
It's hard to learn English	2.97	1.16
They don't like their teacher	2.86	1.17
They are unlucky in learning English	2.83	1.15
They are not smart enough	2.43	1.16
Being successful in English is a matter of luck	2.32	1.11

As the Table 5 shows, the results indicate that prep-class students attribute the failure in learning English attribute to “*not having enough background in learning English effectively from their elementary/ secondary school education*”, which is an external and uncontrollable attribution with the mean of 3.92. However, the participants secondly tend to attribute the failure in learning English to “*not studying hard enough*”, which is an internal and controllable attribution signaling to “*effort*”. In addition, the results show that the further items with the highest means are related to internal attributions, which are respectively “*not having self-confidence enough in learning English*” (M=3.66), “*not attending the classes regularly* (M=3.60)”, and “*not having enough motivation in learning English*” (M=3.55).

On the other hand, the results describe that the participants think that “*luck*” is the least effective factor of failure in learning English (M=2.32). Similarly, they do not consider “*being smart enough*” as one of the reasons to fail in learning English (M=2.43). They also tended to rate “*teacher*” as one of the least effective factors in failure (M=2.86). In addition, these results are remarkable in that although the participants think that internal factors are slightly a bit more effective in failure in learning English than external factors, they are nearly undecided and confused on the reasons of success and failure in learning English.

### 3.3. RQ3. What is the Role of Gender and Level of English of the participants on the Attributions of Success and Failure?

Further analysis was conducted to find out whether there is a difference on the attributions of success and failure in learning English according to some variables such as gender, and level of English proficiency.

#### 3.2.1. The relationship between gender and attributions

Participants' scores were also analyzed by gender, and t-test was run in addition to the means of both samples. From the t-test procedures, it was found out that there is no significant difference between two groups, however, female students tended to attribute success in learning English to more internal factors than male participants.

**Table 6.** Gender Attributions on Internal Factors on Success in Learning English

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	SEM	t	p
Internal	Female	100	3.34	.67	.068	1.509	0.133
	Male	104	3.19	.77	.076		
External	Female	100	3.05	.69	.069	1.780	0.077
	Male	104	2.89	.65	.064		

Another t-test was applied to examine the differences on external achievement attributions of the participants according to the gender. No significant difference was found although the female participants have more internal attributions than male counterparts.

3.2.2. Differences of the participants according to their proficiency level of English

The other domain of the present study is to find out whether there is a relationship between the proficiency level of the participants and their attributions on success and failure. To compare the results, independent sample t-test were carried out.

**Table 7.** Distribution of the Participants According to Their Level and Gender

			Level of language proficiency		Total
			Pre-Intermediate	Intermediate	
Gender	Female	Count	20	80	100
		% of Total	9.8%	39.2%	49.0%
	Male	Count	32	72	104
		% of Total	15.7%	35.3%	51.0%
Total	Count	52	152	204	
	% of Total	25.5%	74.5%	100.0%	

**Table 8.** Distribution of the Participants According to Their Level

		What is your level of language	N	Mean	SD	SEM	t	P
Attributions to Success General	Pre- Intermediate		52	3.03	.74	.103	-	0.188
	Intermediate		152	3.16	.60	.048	1.320	
Internal Attributions to Success	Pre- Intermediate		52	3.12	.74	.124	-	0.149
	Intermediate		152	3.31	.60	.053	1.460	
External Attributions to Success	Pre- Intermediate		52	2.93	.69	.096	-	0.564
	Intermediate		152	2.99	.67	.054	0.578	

Table 8 reveals that Internal attributions of the participants is higher in both group samples and intermediate level participants have tended to both more internal attributions to success and have

higher levels than pre-intermediate level participants although there is no statistically meaningful difference. The findings indicate that English level is not a statistically important factor in attributions to success.

To investigate the level factor of the participants towards attributions of failure in learning English, independent t-test was carried out.

**Table 9.** Participants' Attributions to Failure in Terms of Their Level

	What is your level of language	N	Mean	SD	SEM	t	P
Internal Attributions to Failure	Pre- Intermediate	52	3.18	.59	.082	-	0.179
	Intermediate	152	3.29	.50	.040	1.350	
External Attributions to Failure	Pre- Intermediate	52	3.14	.60	.084	-	0.120
	Intermediate	152	3.28	.53	.043	1.563	

According to the Table 9, the results indicate that there is no meaningful difference between Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate Level participants with regard to attributions to failure. Although Intermediate level participants have higher level of attributions to both internal and external attributions, it is not a statistically meaningful difference.

### 3.4. Qualitative analysis of interviews

The participants were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their attributions on success and failure in learning English. The participants were asked open-ended questions to discover the attributions on success and failure.

**Table 10.** The Participants' Attributions for Success and Failure

Number	Attributions for failure	Locus
Participant I	Effort	Internal
	Lack of Interest	Internal
Participant II	Ability	Internal
	Effort	Internal
Participant III	Lack of Interest	Internal
	Teachers	External
Participant IV	Effort	Internal
	Teachers	External
Participant V	Effort	Internal
	Lack of Interest	Internal
Participant VI	Lack of Motivation	Internal
	Lack of Self-Confidence	Internal

Participant VII	Ability	External
	Effort	Internal
	Lack of Education system	External
Participant VIII	Attendance to the Classes	Internal
	Effort	Internal
Participant IX	Teachers	External
	Effort	Internal

It was found from the data collected through the interview protocol showed that 7 out of 9 students stated that “*Effort*” is the most important attribution, which is an internal attribution. The attribution “*Lack of Interest towards learning English*” was stated by 4 participants, and seemed the second highest attribution to the participants. Participant 4 stated that “*teacher*” is the most important factor to success or failure in learning English, and she stated that:

*If the student has a successful teacher, he/she can help the learner to improve her/his motivation, and the learner can be successful.*

Although she thinks that “*teacher*” is the most important attribution, she mentions that “*motivation*” leads to be more successful.

Another participant mentions that effort in learning English is very important and she keeps saying:

*We do not talk during the classes, we have even American teachers for speaking classes but we do not put enough effort to improve our English.*

#### 4. Discussion

Quantitative and qualitative analyses showed that participants hold a great diversity of attributions on success; however, they mostly attribute success on internal causes, some of which are effort and ability. The results are consisted with the other studies and research in the literature. The results of studies conducted showed that learners attribute their success on internal attributions. (Stevenson & Lee 1990; O.Sullivan & Howe 1996; Williams & Burden 1999). Platt (1998) conducted a research and suggests that attributions to internal causes can lead to expectancy for future success. In addition, McCombs & Pope (1994) holds a study and found that internal factors has a determinant role for future success and enhance it. There are also studies conducted from different level of learners about the attributions on success. In Stajkovic and Sommer’s study (2000), it was found that foreign language learners tended to attribute failure to external factors while they attribute success to internal factors. In another study, Can (2005) investigated the success and failure perceptions of elementary school learners and found out that they have more internal attributions on success than failure. Furthermore, Brown, Gray & Ferrara (2005) analyzed the attributions of university students from different countries, which are Turkey, China and Japan. It was found in the study that the participants suggested internal factors for both success and failure. However, there was a small difference between the samples as Japanese students have equally internal attribution to success and failure, but Turkish and Chinese participants reported more internal attributions for success than for failure, which can involve the cultural dimension of the attributions.

In Saticilar's study (2006), it was found that elementary school learners attribute their success to internal factors. In his analyses of attributions of 80 Turkish foreign language students, he found out that internal attributions have a great domain in their perceptions of success. Finally, Semiz (2011) held a study on university level of learners and it was found in the study that successful students endorsed more internal and personal attributions (effort and strategy) more strongly than unsuccessful students. Another result of the study is that the participants attribute their failure in English not only to internal ones but also to the external ones as the results of the research question show that both internal and external factors related to failure of the participants were very close to each other. In other words, they feel that they are responsible for their failure in English. However, according to most attribution studies, learners, mostly, attribute success to internal factors, such as effort, ability, and failure to external factors, such as task difficulty and luck (Stevenson & Lee 1990; Christenson et. al. 1992; O.Sullivan and Howe 1996; Georgiou, 1999).

Yet, in this particular study the results showing that learners attribute their failure also to internal factors could be interpreted from a number of perspectives. One of the most important factors could be the personalities of the participants in the study. However, this speculation also calls for research that is more detailed studies, which will include personality differences. The results of both questionnaire and interview indicate that most of the participants' achievement attributions to their success in English are unstable and controllable (e.g. effort). In other words, when learners attribute their achievement to stable causes (ability and task difficulty); a similar performance is expected from them in the future. On the other hand, unstable causal explanations (e.g. effort and luck) cause the expectation of different performances in the future (Woolfolk, 1998). According to the findings of the study, a better performance of English may be expected from the participants in the future because their achievement attributions to success in English are unstable. In other words, the unsuccessful learners whose attributions are unstable may be more successful in English in the future. The results of the main study also reveal that the participants attribute their success in English to their effort (internal-unstable-controllable) more frequently than other achievement attributions. Williams & Burden (1999), Georgiou (1999), Moore and Chan (1995) also found that language learners attribute their success to effort more frequently than other achievement attributions. Therefore, the results of this study are in line with those cited here. In conclusion, most of the participants in this study believe that when they make effort to learn English they can be successful in English. According to the findings concerning the relationship between gender and achievement attributions, although there is no significant difference between male and female participants, it can be seen that female participants have more internal achievement attributions to success in learning English than their male counterparts. These findings are correlated with the findings of the studies of Power and Wagner (1984), Lightbody et. al. (1996), Georgiou (1999). It was found in their studies that that female participants state more internal attributions when compared to male learners. The difference may be due to physiological, psychological or cultural facts that distinguish the two genders. When it comes to the level of the participants and their level of English, although there is no meaningful difference between pre-intermediate and intermediate level of students; however, it was found that as the level of students get higher, their internal attributions for success is higher than external attributions. The findings are related to the studies in the literature. Hashemi (2011) found that there is a significant relationship between English language proficiency level and internal attributions. It was revealed in his study that the higher the level of students is, the higher their internal attributions such as effort and interest is.

## 5. Conclusions

There is no doubt that the kind of methodology used in each study to investigate different dimensions of attributions has a great effect on the results and discussions. Based on the studies in the field of EFL, this study has attempted to shed light on attributions for success and failure according to different variables including gender and level of English.

The findings revealed a number of significant attributional differences between success and failure; while success is considered as an internal attribution in some variables and research questions in this study, some perceptions are attributed to external reasons.

In addition, it can be concluded from the findings of the study that students' perceptions or experiences in EFL classrooms can affect their attributions or success in language learning. It was also found in the study that individual differences affect how they perceive the foreign language learning journey on their success and failure perceptions. This may be another important and useful domain for teachers, educators, researchers and institutions to find out how the learners interpret their success and failure, and it can also help teachers, educators and institutions to find out the effect of individual factors on the attributions of success and failure and help to change the external attributions to internal ones and also malattributions learners have.

As another conclusion for this study, it can not be denied that teachers play an important role in EFL setting and they can be one of the reasons that the learners attribute their success or failure in learning English. While teachers who are successful in their classrooms can create a positive atmosphere for the learners and can affect the attributions learner have in learning a foreign language, teachers with poor performance can lead to a learner attribute to external or internal attributions unconsciously, so the role of teachers in EFL classrooms can not be ignored.

As teachers are dealing with malattributions that can be changed, it can be suggested that teachers can affect the future causal attributions of students on success and failure as they can motivate the learners in a more positive way and they can put bricks on the perceptions of success and failure.

As an implication of the study, the findings of the study suggest several implications for the language teaching practice and research on second language learning and teaching.

The study made it clear that learners' attributions can be external or internal according to some variables and have a great diversity. Teachers should be aware of this diversity and complexity so that they can help learners change their attributions. The study also verifies that attributions can be difficult to change, but when they are improved or changed, there is no doubt that, it may help to create a favorable learning condition.

Language learners and teachers always aim at successful performance and grades, however, learning and teaching a foreign language is a complicated and challenging process and progress, and it is never simple and one-sided. The related literature suggest that internal, unstable, and controllable causes should be attributed to be successful and when they can achieve this, they can control the causes of their achievement and they can be more successful language learners in future. Finally, as a suggestion for a further study, although attributions on success and failure affect the learners' performance, grades and motivation, there are many other domains and factors to be taken into consideration and addressed, so a further study on attribution training to change their attributions towards learning a foreign language can be conducted.

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## İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin İngilizce öğrenmede başarı ve başarısızlığa yönelik yüklemelerinin belirlenmesi

### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı katılımcıların cinsiyet ve yabancı dil yeterlik seviyesi gibi farklı değişkenler esas alınarak yabancı dil öğrenen öğrencilerin başarı ve başarısızlığına yönelik yüklemelerinin belirlemektir. Katılımcıların yüklemelerini belirlemek ve bu konuyla ilgili verileri toplamak amacıyla, 38 maddelik bir anket ve yarı-yapılandırılmış bir mülakat prosedürü uygulanmıştır. Verilerin analiz edilmesi amacıyla, SPSS 20.0 kullanılmıştır ve görüşme yoluyla elde edilen veriler doküman analizi yöntemiyle çözümlenmiştir. Bulgular, öğrencilerin başarı ve başarısızlıklarını hem içsel hem de dışsal yüklemelere atfettiklerini göstermiştir, bununla birlikte, katılımcılar içsel yüklemelere daha fazla önem verdiklerini ifade etmişlerdir. Bu değişkenlerin araştırılması, yabancı dil seviyesi ve cinsiyet gibi değişkenleri esas alarak, tüm paydaşlara, öğrencilerin yabancı dil öğrenme konusunda başarı veya başarısızlık yüklemeleri konusunda yol gösterici olacaktır.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* yükleme kuramı; cinsiyet; yeterlik seviyesi

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