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Turkish EFL Learners' Attributions for Success and Failure in Speaking English

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate Turkish EFL learners' attributions for success and failure in speaking English, and to find out whether gender and department variables exert any impact on their attributions. The attributions were analyzed and compared in terms of the four dimensions: locus of causality, external control, stability and personal control. The data were gathered through Causal Dimensions Scale adapted to Turkish by Koçyiğit (2011). The sample consisted of 104 tertiary EFL students studying one-year-long English in the preparatory program of a state university. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyse the emergent data as well as independent samples t-tests and ANOVA to test significance between/among the variables. The results indicated that personal controllability and internal reasons—a lot more apparent in attributions for success than for failure though—were the two leading factors which were ascribed to both success and failure in speaking English. In addition, the students' attributions for failure tended to be less stable and more externally controllable in comparison to success. The gender variable had no significant effect on attributions for success and failure. With reference to the department variable, a significant difference was observed not in the attributions for success but those for failure, and only between English language teaching and Civil aviation management departments, in terms of locus of causality dimension.

Key words: Attribution theory, success and failure, EFL learners, speaking skill

Introduction

Having emerged as a socio-psychological concept, in simple terms, attributions are the causal explanations assigned by people to the events which happen to and around them (Banks & Woolfson, 2008). They relate to “how individuals observe, perceive and explain causes of events, others' behaviour, or their own behaviour” (Lian, 2012, p. 24). People are in constant need of explanations regarding the causes of their and others' actions, and in this way, they make causal inferences (Försterling, 2001). These causal inferences, i.e. attributions, are most widely imposed in terms of success and failure in everyday situations. As the key figure in the development of the attribution theory following Heider's work (1958), Weiner paid specific interest in the reasons which people attribute to their success and failure in academic as well as other achievement situations (Williams & Burden, 1999). Weiner's attribution theory mainly deals with degrees of achievement, and perceptions of the ways in which achievement was or was not attained (Thang et al., 2011). Weiner (1972) identified four important factors that affect attributions: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. These factors can be addressed within the first dimension of Weiner's (1986, 1994) subsequent categorization of attributional factors, i.e. the locus of causality which “refers to whether individuals perceive the causes of events as internal or external to the self” (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011, p. 2). As a case in point, luck and task difficulty could be counted as external while ability and effort could be viewed as internal factors (Gobel & Mori, 2007). Apart from the locus of causality, Weiner's subsequent categorization includes two more dimensions: stability and controllability. The stability dimension is concerned with whether causes change over time. To exemplify, again, ability can be considered stable whereas effort is supposed to be unstable (Weiner, 2006). The latter dimension, controllability, is the extent to which individuals have control over a cause. This may include controllable measures such as skills and effort on the one hand, and uncontrollable factors like others' actions and luck on the other (Zohri, 2011).

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Attribution theory has come of age through a large number of studies in educational psychology and educational research (e.g. Baştürk & Yavuz, 2010; Yang & Montgomery, 2011; Yapıcı & Koçyiğit, 2012; Simms, 2014; Sambo & Mohammed, 2015). An important reason for the application of this theory in educational research is that it serves as an instrument to understand learners' interpretations of the degree of success (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008) and as a valuable source of information for their explanation for the success and failure (Williams, Burden, Poulet & Maun, 2004). Students' causal attributions for their success and failure can affect their future academic performance considerably (Banks & Woolfson, 2008) as well as their emotions, and as a result, their motivation to learn, in a reciprocal and interdependent manner. Undoubtedly and not surprisingly, in foreign language learning process too, learners' attributions for success and failure influence their level of motivation and acquisition (Tse, 2000). The attributions made by the learner for her failure in L2 (second or foreign language) learning bear significant implications for her future motivation to learn and approach to a subsequent learning task (Sorić & Ančić, 2008). From this perspective, the attribution concept also applies to L2 learners' explanations regarding their progress for language learning (Ellis, 2008). Despite the given theoretical and practical importance of attribution theory in L2 learning which serves as a promising research construct (Williams & Burden, 1999) and although it is almost three decades now since the research on learners' success and failure attributions for L2 learning started (Lei & Qin, 2009), studies that have reached the present day in this field are rare (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011; Lian, 2012). If one also considers that there are frequent and different ways of failure for struggling L2 learners, attribution theory is a relevant area of research in L2 field (Gobel & Mori, 2007). These considerations highlight the need to conduct more studies on elaborating L2 learners' attributions for success and failure in language learning process in general as well as in main language skills, and with reference to some influencing concepts such as motivation, self-concept, attitudes, perseverance, and so on.

The Purpose and Significance of the Study

The rationale for conducting the present study, with the research questions raised in mind, is fed from a number of gaps and considerations in the field. First and foremost, attributions of causality vary depending upon the individual, culture, society and context (Graham, 1991). Therefore, no doubt, each study context could bear different attributions given the cultural variety embedded within different study contexts. In addition, variables such as gender, age and perceived success have the potential to affect attributional practices for success and failure (Williams et al., 2004). Furthermore, while most of the available studies in L2 field identified attributions in terms of general language learning success and failure, and different types of attributions made (e.g., Suwanarak & Phothongsunan, 2008; Taşkiran, 2010; Besimoğlu, Serdar & Yavuz, 2010; Thang et al., 2011; Setiawan, 2017), what causal attributions L2 learners make to success and failure in acquiring language skills such as speaking has been poorly addressed (although see Mali, 2015; Mahpudilah, 2016). L2 teachers need to be informed of their students' attributions on success and failure in speaking English in order to initiate remedial endeavors, especially in the present research context where the inability to speak English has almost become a syndrome (Coşkun, 2016) as in many other EFL environments. In these respects, the main purpose of this study is to identify the attributions manifested by Turkish EFL learners for their success and failure in speaking English. Accordingly, the following research questions were developed:

1. What are the causal attributions of Turkish EFL students for their success and failure in speaking English?
2. Do these causal attributions differ in terms of department and gender variables?

Attribution Research Regarding EFL Learning in the Turkish Context

Taşkıran and Aydın (2017) investigated tertiary-level students' causal attributions on their perceived success and failure in English learning process through a self-administered questionnaire. They found that more causal attributions were made for failure than success. Also, the successful students were understood to display more internal, controllable and stable attributional styles in comparison to those that perceived themselves as unsuccessful. Besimoğlu et al. (2010) conducted a study in a similar setting with 240 EFL learners. In their study, strategy, interest and effort were shown to be the most commonly employed attributions. The participants' attributions for both success and failure were mainly internal. In another study, Erten (2015) analyzed gender and age effects on explaining EFL students' attributions for success. As a result, significant effects of gender and age variables were observed on the attributions for test performance. Moreover, the teacher input was considered to be the most salient factor in explaining their success. Genç (2016) also examined tertiary-level EFL learners' attributions on success and failure in addition to the effects of gender, age and perceived success on their attributions. The students were reported to hold internal reasons responsible for

their success and external reasons for their failure. With regard to the variables, age was not an important factor in their attributions. What is more, the students who reported being unsuccessful attributed more credit to effort and internal dimension than those who self-perceived as successful, and females attributed external factors more than males. Yılmaz (2012) investigated EFL learners' attributions in reading, adding at the same time some variables. The students mainly attributed their success in reading to good strategies, positive mood and interest, in a descending order. Lack of interest and time were the two most frequently addressed reasons for their not doing well in reading comprehension. Moreover, females attributed their success in reading to their own efforts significantly more than males, and males held poor teacher performance responsible for their failure in reading more than females did.

Methodology

Participants

In this survey study, convenience sampling method was used in the selection of the participants. Comprising almost one fourth of the population, 104 B-1 level students from the English preparatory program of a state university in Turkey participated in the study. Of the participants, 39 were females (37.5%) and 65 were males (62.5%). The program which is home to the present study provides one-year-long English course before students attend their own departments where English is the medium of instruction in certain subjects. The participants were from different departments, serving as another variable for the research ($n^{\text{Civil aviation}}=45$, $n^{\text{Engineering}}=42$, $n^{\text{English language teaching}}=17$).

Instrument

Alongside the demographic information part which elicited gender, department, self-perceived success in speaking English and the single most important cause for success or failure in speaking English, the instrument used in this study was a 12-item scale adapted to Turkish by Koçyiğit (2011) from the second version of Causal Dimensions Scale developed by McAuley, Duncan and Russell (1992). The adapted scale used in the present study (ACDS) measures causal attributions depending on four dimensions (locus of causality (items 1,6,9,), external control (items 5,8,12), stability (items 3,7,11), and personal control (items 2,4,10). ACDS has an interval structure to rate from 1 to 9 based on two opposite statements in each item. The maximum and minimum scores which can be received from each of the dimensions are 27 and 3, respectively (Koçyiğit, 2011). Factor analysis administered by Koçyiğit (2011) to ACDS generated KMO value as .82, and Bartlett sphericity test result as significant at .00 level. Despite the emergence of three dimensions in the exploratory factor analysis, by considering the four-dimension theoretical structure of the scale as well as the scree plot, the instrument took the form of a four-dimension scale. Alpha reliability coefficients for the dimensions of ACDS were calculated as .66, .75, .77, and .56 for the locus of causality, external control, personal control and stability, respectively. In the present study, alpha reliability measures calculated for the dimensions of ACDS are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Alpha reliability coefficients for the dimensions of the ACDS

Dimension	Alpha coefficient
Locus of causality	.855
External control	.842
Stability	.737
Personal control	.882

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through SPSS 23 software. Descriptive statistics were utilized in the calculation of mean scores, frequencies and standard deviations. Independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were also used to analyse the effects of variables on attributions.

Results

Attributions for Success and Failure in Speaking English

The first research problem of this study addressed the causal attributions of Turkish EFL students for their success and failure in speaking English. To this end, mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for each of the dimensions in terms of success and failure. It is important to note here that a high mean score for locus of causality, external control, stability and personal control indicates a high level of internal attribution, controllability by others, permanence and controllability by the self, respectively.

Table 2. Mean scores and standard deviations for attributions to success in speaking English

	Locus of causality	External control	Stability	Personal control
\bar{X}	21.29	11.61	16.29	23.03
sd	5.324	6.672	5.299	4.637
N	104	104	104	104

As shown in Table 2, personal control dimension had the highest mean score ($=23,03$; $sd=4,637$). Locus of causality received the second highest mean ($=21,29$; $sd=5,324$), followed by stability ($=16,29$; $sd=5,299$), and external control ($=11,61$; $sd=6,672$) dimensions.

When the students' worded attributions to success are examined, these factors are grouped under nine categories (Table 3). Of these factors, practice/exposure ($N=9$) and perseverance/interest ($N=9$) stand out.

Table 3. Attributions for success in speaking English

Factor	N
Practice/exposure	9
Determination/interest	9
Previous learning experiences	4
Self-confidence	3
Personal focus on fluency	2
Teacher	1
Ability of self-expression	1
Vocabulary knowledge	1
Environment	1
Total	31

With regard to the mean scores for the attributions on failure in speaking English, as shown in Table 4, personal control dimension had the highest mean ($\bar{X}=17,53$; $sd=6,690$), followed by locus of causality ($\bar{X}=15,45$; $sd=6,265$) and external control ($\bar{X}=15,26$; $sd=6,416$). Stability dimension received the lowest mean score ($\bar{X}=11,10$; $sd=5,551$).

Table 4. Mean scores and standard deviations for attributions for failure in speaking English

	Locus of causality	External control	Stability	Personal control
\bar{X}	15.45	15.26	11.10	17.53
sd	6.265	6.416	5.551	6.690
N	104	104	104	104

As is evident in Table 5, the most frequent attributions manifested by the students for their failure in speaking English are reported to be personal lack of study/practice ($N=18$), ineffectiveness of the learning environment ($N=15$), and anxiety/lack of self-confidence ($N=12$).

Table 5. Attributions for failure in speaking English

Factor	N
Personal lack of study/practice	18
Ineffectiveness of learning environment	15
Lack of self-confidence/anxiety	12
Previous negative learning experiences	2
Education system	5

Lack of vocabulary	5
Unwillingness/lack of interest	5
Lack of exposure	4
Curriculum	3
Personal focus on accuracy	3
Teacher	1
Total	73

When Table 2 and 4 are examined together, firstly, it is seen that, overall, the mean scores for the attributions made for success are higher than those made for failure. More importantly, the students' attributions for success in speaking English seem to be mainly internal and controllable by them. These two dimensions, i.e. personal controllability and internal attributions are also the two factors that received the highest mean scores to ascribe to their failures as well, at a lower rate than to success though. In addition, as can be understood from the mean scores, the students seem to believe that their causal attributions for failure can be controlled by outside factors more than in success. To sum up, the students perceive the causes of failure in speaking English to be less internal, personally controllable and permanent whereas more externally controllable than in success.

The Comparison of the Attributions for Success and Failure in Speaking English in terms of the Department Variable

One-way ANOVA tests were run in order to test potential significant differences between/among the departments in terms of the attributions for success and failure in speaking English in consideration of the four dimensions.

Table 6. One-way ANOVA for the attributions for success in terms of the department variable

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Locus of causality	Between Groups	54,644	2	27,322	,961	,395
	Within Groups	795,744	28	28,419		
	Total	850,387	30			
External control	Between Groups	52,829	2	26,415	,577	,568
	Within Groups	1282,526	28	45,804		
	Total	1335,355	30			
Stability	Between Groups	26,490	2	13,245	,455	,639
	Within Groups	815,897	28	29,139		
	Total	842,387	30			
Personal control	Between Groups	20,737	2	10,368	,465	,633
	Within Groups	624,231	28	22,294		
	Total	644,968	30			

As can be understood from the insignificant p values ($>.05$ for all the dimensions) in Table 6, there are not any significant differences in terms of the attributions for success in speaking English made by the students in

different departments. In other words, the students' future departments do not significantly affect their attributions for success.

Table 7. One-way ANOVA for the attributions for failure in terms of the department variable

		Sum	of	Mean	F	p
		Squares	df	Square		
Locus of causality	Between Groups	330,777	2	165,389	4,640	,013
			70	35,647		
	Within Groups	2495,305	72			
	Total	2826,082				
External control	Between Groups	72,233	2	36,117	,874	,422
			70	41,312		
	Within Groups	2891,822	72			
	Total	2964,055				
Stability	Between Groups	73,466	2	36,733	1,199	,308
			70	30,641		
	Within Groups	2144,863	72			
	Total	2218,329				
Personal control	Between Groups	157,419	2	78,709	1,798	,173
			70	43,782		
	Within Groups	3064,745	72			
	Total	3222,164				

As shown in Table 7, with reference to the attributions for failure, significant differences were not identified for the external control, stability and personal control dimensions ($p > .05$ in all the three cases). The only significant difference for the department variable was found in the locus of causality dimension ($p = .013 < .05$). In order to locate the sources of difference, a Bonferroni post hoc test was performed on the dimension of locus of causality as shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Bonferroni test on the locus of causality dimension

(i) depart.	(j) depart.	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	p.
Aviation	Engineering	-3,119	1,517	,131
	ELT	-5,901*	2,087	,018
Engineering	Aviation	3,119	1,517	,131
	ELT	-2,782	2,104	,572
ELT	Aviation	5,901*	2,087	,018
	Engineering	2,782	2,104	,572

Bonferroni test yielded a significant difference between English Language Teaching (ELT) and Civil Aviation Management (CAM) departments in terms of their attributions for failure in speaking English under the locus of causality dimension ($p = .018 < .05$). This difference was observed to be in favor of the ELT department (ELT=19,18, CAM=13,28). Therefore, the students in the preparatory ELT department can be considered to

make significantly more internal attributions to their failure in speaking English than the students in the CAM department.

The Comparison of the Attributions for Success and Failure in Speaking English in terms of the Gender Variable

Independent samples t-tests were performed for each of the dimensions to find out possible significant differences between female and male students in terms of their attributions for success and failure in speaking English.

Table 9. t-test for attributions for success in terms of the gender variable

	Gender	N	\bar{X}	sd	t	p
Locus of causality	Female	13	21,69	4,837	,352	,727
	Male	18	21,00	5,770		
External control	Female	13	13,46	6,887	1,328	,195
	Male	18	10,28	6,369		
Stability	Female	13	15,92	6,062	-,323	,749
	Male	18	16,56	4,841		
Personal control	Female	13	24,15	2,478	1,151	,259
	Male	18	22,22	5,652		

Table 10. t-test for attributions for failure in terms of the gender variable

	Gender	N	\bar{X}	sd	t	p
Locus of causality	Female	26	15,00	6,066	-,456	,650
	Male	47	15,70	6,423		
External control	Female	26	15,81	5,622	,540	,591
	Male	47	14,96	6,856		
Stability	Female	26	11,27	5,896	,197	,844
	Male	47	11,00	5,413		
Personal control	Female	26	17,12	6,134	-,396	,694
	Male	47	17,77	7,032		

Table 9 and 10 reveal that the gender variable has no significant effect on students' attributions for success and failure in speaking English ($p > .05$ for all the dimensions).

Discussion and Conclusion

The first major finding of the study is that the participants ascribed their success and failure in speaking English mainly to personally controllable factors and internal causes. However, these factors were observed in the attributions for success considerably more than those made for failure. When they were asked to write the single most important reason for their success or failure in addition to the quantitative measures, language practice/exposure, determination to study and interest in speaking were the most highlighted attributions on success, while lack of study/practice/self-confidence, and anxiety were their frequent attributions for failure in speaking English. From this perspective, a correspondence can be identified between the quantitative results and their worded attributions. It is important to note here that the students also had a frequent mention of the ineffectiveness of learning environment to account for their failure in speaking English, which corresponds with the mean score they obtained under the external control dimension. In addition, the students' attributions to success were understood to be more stable than those made to failure. This study also found that the students' attributions for success did not show any significant differences in relation to their departments. However, a significant difference was found between ELT and CAM departments in terms of the attributions for failure under the locus of causality dimension. Lastly, for both success and failure, females and males have manifested similar (insignificantly different) levels of attributions for all the dimensions.

Findings of the present study, having essential focus on attributions for speaking English under the more general language learning attributions, to a large extent, are in keeping with those of many studies in the field alongside some exceptions. For example, in Besim et al. (2016), it was shown that in terms of both success and failure in language learning, students' attributions were mainly internal. Moreover, in Saticiilar (2006), students attributed

both their success and failure in learning English to internal reasons such as effort and ability. Likewise, in Taşkıran and Aydın (2017), success in language learning was strongly ascribed to effort, and reasons for success were seen to be more stable than reasons for failure. However, contrary to the present research findings, Gobel and Mori (2007) found that EFL learners' attributions for success were made on external causes. Just as in this study, on the other hand, Lei & Qin (2009) found that lack of confidence and practice interpreted failure in learning English. With regard to the effect of gender on attributions, in Genç (2016), gender had a significant effect on attributions on failure in learning English, but not on success. However, Mohammadi and Sharififar's (2016) study revealed significant associations between gender and attributions on language proficiency, disaccording with the related results of this study.

Most of the practice-oriented insights to be gained from the present study can be reinforced by Mali's (2015) findings. In his study which analysed students' attributions on their English-speaking enhancement, he underlined the positive effects of specific English-speaking activities, strategy, encouragement from friends and the teacher's essential role as the significant attributions. This finding also has a specific overlap with the present study findings in that the participating students in this study highlighted (lack and availability of) practice among the most frequently addressed attributions for both success and failure. Given these factors, especially considering the frequent attributions on failure in speaking English in this study, such as, alongside lack of practice, anxiety, lack of self-confidence and ineffective learning environment, teachers should assign themselves not only the role of a knowledge provider and practice stimulator, but also embark for significant metaphorical roles such as scaffolder, archetype of spirit, change agent, cultivator, entertainer and democratic leader. While this would not be an easy task especially in a non-English speaking country where it is relatively difficult to motivate students, the teaching process can be exploited to the best advantage, to mention but a few, by drawing from the merits of technology (ICT, mobile applications, weblogs etc.), reducing anxiety by building rapport and positive relationships with students and avoiding negative affective feedback, and engaging in strategy training for improving communicative skills. Attributions are changeable, and such teacher-led practices can help to change attitudes in the first place, and in turn, negative attributions.

To conclude, the findings of this study shed light on Turkish EFL learners' attributions for success and failure in speaking English. Still, more research is needed so as to draw a more overarching picture of the students' attributions to speaking English as well as researching on those to other language skills. Further studies of attribution research in the field may employ data triangulation, with larger student samples, by incorporating into these studies some related constructs such as motivation, identity, beliefs and autonomy.

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