

PERCEIVED ATTRIBUTIONS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

Yabancı Dil Değerlendirmesinde Algılanmış Atıflar

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Abstract

In this paper, how the academic staff studying for YDS exam conceptualizes their success and failure attributions is studied. Academic staff who studied for YDS examination took part in this study. This study refers to 2 different subjects: 'How do the academic staff studying for YDS exam conceptualize their notion of 'doing well' in the exam?' and 'What reasons do Academic staff who study for YDS exam attribute their success and failure to?' Self-assessment survey and questionnaire were applied for data collection and in order to support the data obtained through self-assessment, an online semi-structured interview was conducted. According to the results, in terms of the notion of doing well 'score', 'comparing with others and feedbacks from others' were the most frequently stated attributions. In one hand, most frequently stated attributions for success were 'effort and ability'. On the other hand, most frequently stated attributions for failure were 'effort and task difficulty'. Moreover, possible reasons for the data obtained, related deductions and suggestions were presented in the study. In one hand, most frequently stated attributions for success were 'study hard and ease of the work'. On the other hand, most frequently stated attributions for failure were 'lack of time and difficulty of the work'.

Key Words: Foreign language achievement test, failure and success attribution, notion of doing well.

Özet

Bu çalışmada, Türkiye'de yapılan Yabancı Dil Seviye Tespit Sınavlarına (YDS) hazırlanan farklı alanlarda eğitim veren akademisyenlerin, yabancı dil öğrenimi ve girdikleri sınavlardan aldıkları puanlar bakımından başarı ve başarısızlıklarını nasıl kavramsallaştırdıkları araştırılmıştır. Bu çalışmaya, YDS'ye hazırlanan akademisyenler katılmıştır. Bu çalışma iki farklı konuya değinmektedir: Akademisyenler hazırladıkları yabancı dil seviye tespit sınavında başarılı olma kanısını nasıl kavramsallaştırır? Akademisyenler hazırladıkları yabancı dil seviye tespit sınavında başarılı ya da başarısız olma sebeplerini nelere dayandırıyorlar? Bu çalışmada veri toplamak için öz değerlendirme yöntemi uygulanmıştır. Elde edilen sonuçlara göre, iyi iş çıkarma kanısı anlamında 'alınan puan', 'başkalarıyla kıyas' ve 'başkalarından gelen dönütler' en çok dile getirilen atıflardır. Buna ek olarak, akademisyenlerin dil öğreniminde ve hazırladıkları yabancı dil sınavlarındaki başarılı olmalarının nedeni olarak 'çok çalışmak' ve 'işin kolaylığı' başarısız olmalarının nedeni olarak da 'zaman darlığı' ve 'görevin zorluğu' sınava hazırlanan akademisyenlerin en çok yansıttığı atıflardır. Akademisyenlerin hazırladıkları yabancı dil sınavlarındaki başarılı olma durumu için çaba algısı 'sınav için sıkı ya da çok çalışma', görevin zorluğu algısı 'girilen sınavın kolaylığı' olarak belirlenmiştir. Akademisyenlerin dil öğrenimi ve sınavlarda başarısız olma durumu için çaba algısı 'yetersiz zaman' ve 'sınavın zorluğu' olarak belirtilmiştir. Yabancı dil öğrenen ve Yabancı Dil Seviye Sınavı'na hazırlanan akademisyenlerle yapılan bu çalışmada elde edilen veriler, ilgili çıkarımlar ve öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Yabancı dil seviye tespit sınavı, başarı ve başarısızlık atıfları, akademisyenler.

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1. Introduction

In the field of learning and teaching a foreign language, some factors have attracted relatively little attention and these are the reasons that learners construct for their successes and failures in learning a new language. Two major psychological perspectives that shed light on this matter are constructivism and attribution theory are the two main perspectives that illuminate this case. Attribution theory sheds light on understanding of learners' motivation in the learning process.

Despite originating in the work of Heider (1944), attribution theory's most influential exponent has been Weiner (1986), whose "statement of theory" has been widely accepted as guideline in this field. Upon Heider's work, Weiner added some dimensions such as locus of control, stability and controllability to the original concept.

Attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) emphasizes people's notions about themselves and how they explain their perceived successes and failures. Attribution is the process of assigning a cause to a specific event. Every person seeks reasons for success and failure and as a result, similar future situations can be predicted beforehand.

On the other hand, attribution theory is not made use of only in education. It has also been made use of in a great number of disciplines such as sports, economy, psychology and so forth. The reason behind attribution theory's being used in many fields is to do with its being a part of human psychology.

Initial researches on motivation for learning a foreign language were applied by Gardner and Lambert (1972). In the 1990's, Deci and Ryan (1985) presented a more educational psychological aspect of learners to enlighten motivation with internal and external motivation for learning foreign languages. Dornyei (2001, 2003) utilized psychological elements more comprehensively in foreign language learning with expectancy value theories, achievement motivation, self-efficacy theory, social motivation.

Weiner (1986, 2000) assumed that attributions derive from a person's self-perceptions, which have impact on their feelings, expectancy, perspectives, and beliefs about their proficiency and motivation.

In his early writings, Weiner indicated that there were four major reasons that people attributed outcomes in situations involving achievement to, namely ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck (Weiner, 1979).

Studies about attribution theory in language learning are relatively limited and very few studies have related attribution theory to exam preparation. For this reason this study was undertaken to explain how motivational factors take part in the process of exam preparation.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study are 5 academic staff at Adana Science and Technology University, Turkey. The respondents were from different branches, respectively; "food engineering, tourism, business management, bio-engineering and genetics. All of the

participants needed to learn English so as to teach their students in English. The respondents' English language proficiency was measured by a national exam called YDS.

2.2. Data Collection and Instruments

Three instruments were used in this study for triangulation. These are self-assessment, semi-structured interview and questionnaire. The data were collected through, at first, self-assessment papers. Self-assessment papers were written in Turkish Language in order to prevent misconceptions. After the self-assessment, semi-structured interview was conducted to find answers to how and why questions that arose in the self-assessment papers. In addition to these instruments, pre-questionnaire was carried out before the examination. Then, in order to see whether there are any changes in the attributions of the participants, the same questionnaire was given to the participants as post-questionnaire after the examination.

In this study triangulation was performed through using three data collection tools so as to make the collected data stronger and put forth multi-faceted findings. As Patton claims (2002), triangulation reinforces a study by combining the methods, which can mean utilizing different kinds of methods or data inclusive of both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

2.3. Procedure

The data was collected from an exam preparation course carried out in Continuing Education center, Science and Technology University in Adana. Participants of the study were asked to write a self-assessment paper about the notion of doing well and their reasons for success and failure at the end of the preparation period of the course. In their self-assessment paper, they stated their perceived reasons for their successes and failures in English. The papers were content analyzed to verify emerging concepts about students' perceived success and failure attributions. Each of the self-assessment papers was read and coded twice by the researcher at different time intervals in order to discern the consistency of the findings. The students were allowed to write the self-assessment papers in their native language (Turkish Language) in order to get accurate information since their English level may not be enough to express their exact perceived attributions. Then, the emerging categories were translated into English. Then, a semi structured interview was conducted in order to eliminate the misunderstanding about the attributions of the participants in the self-assessment papers. Interview was in Turkish Language as it is in the self-assessment stage. The data obtained through self-assessment papers and semi-structured interview were analyzed and compared to each other.

An open-ended questionnaire was given to the participants of the study before they entered the language exam to ascertain the validity of the data obtained through self-assessment papers. Likewise, the data that were obtained in the pre-questionnaire were compared to the outcome of the self-assessment papers and interview.

In the last phase, the same open-ended questionnaire was given to the participants of the study after the language exam as post-questionnaire to verify the stability of their responses by comparing each questionnaire result, through which any change in the attributions of the participants before and after the examination occurred.

Finally, all the data from self-assessment papers, semi-structured interview and pre-post questionnaires were compared to each other to get accurate outcome.

3. Results

The main aim of this study was to investigate the attribution of the academic staff for success and failure. The results are given below. Table 1 shows the participants' YDS examination score and needed score for their academic career goals.

Table 1. Participants' YDS scores and minimum necessary scores.

Participants	YDS Examination Scores	Needed Scores
Participant 1	73	65
Participant 2	66	55
Participant 3	78	65
Participant 4	57	55
Participant 5	69	65

As the figures show in the table 1 '*participant 1*' needed the score of 65 and got higher than needed, 73. Just like the *participant 1*, the other participants got higher score than they needed. As for the needed scores, they are the minimum scores for the academic staff for their career goals.

3.1. Self-assessment Papers

Self-assessment papers were read and content analyzed to reveal 'the notion of doing well, perceived success and failure attributions' of the participants of this study. These results were handled in three groups as "the notion of doing well, success attributions and failure attributions".

The following table points out the participants' notion of doing well in their self-assessment papers.

Table 2. Notion of 'doing well'.

Participants	The notion of doing well
Participant 1	Score Feedback from others
Participant 2	Score Comparison with others
Participant 3	Score Score
Participant 4	Comparison with others Feedback from others
Participant 5	Sense of qualification for jobs Score

In table 2 conceptualization the notion of doing well was illustrated. Main attribution is 'score' and 'comparison with others, feedback from others and also sense of qualifications

were the other cited beliefs about the notion of doing well in the examination that participants of this study went in for.

3.1.1. Success Attributions

Analysis of the data suggested that success attributions could be grouped by four factors just as it was in failure attributions: effort, ability, task difficulty and with the least attributed luck. Effort and ability factors are internal while task difficulty and luck are external factor. Table 3 shows academic staff's perceived reasons for 'success' stated in the self-assessment papers.

Table 3. Perceived reasons for success.

Participants	Success Attributions
Participant 1	Enough knowledge Study hard Discipline Enough time Ease of work
Participant 2	Enough knowledge and ability Trying hard Ease of work
Participant 3	Teacher Practicing Special techniques
Participant 4	Enough ability Belief in luck Ease of work Trying hard Concentrating
Participant 5	Mood Ease of work Practicing hard

Table 3 indicates the perceived reasons of each participant which they attributed their success to. The most cited reasons, 'studying hard, disciplined practicing and enough time' were under category of 'effort' (an internal, unstable, and controllable attribution). For a general analysis, success attribution findings from the self-assessment papers indicate that participants' perceived success attributions are mainly internal in terms of locus of causality. They do not change over the time, therefore, they are stable. As the main attributions were effort and ability, they are naturally controllable.

3.1.2. Failure Attributions

'Effort' factor which is an internal and unstable factor was cited most frequently by the participants of this study. The participants of this study claimed that the most important reason for their failure was lack of practicing which means exerting less effort than needed. All of the five participants linked their failure to the lack of effort.

Participants' Perceived Reasons for 'Failure' in self-assessment papers are shown in table 4.

Table 4. Perceived reasons for failure.

Participants	Failure Attributions
Participant 1	Lack of concentration No luck
Participant 2	Not enough time No discipline Not enough practicing Lack of vocabulary knowledge
Participant 3	Circumstances Difficulty of the examination Not enough practicing Not enough time Belief in luck
Participant 4	Difficulty of the examination Bad mood Sense of qualification for jobs Bad mood
Participant 5	Difficulty of the examination Not practicing hard Lack of vocabulary knowledge

Table 4 indicates that the most cited perceived reasons for failure were about ability, task difficulty and effort. These two factors were expressed with ‘not practicing hard, not enough practicing, lack of vocabulary knowledge, difficulty of the examination and not enough time’.

3.2. Semi-structured Interview

Semi-structured interview was conducted to make some statements clear and understandable in terms of attributions, through which reliable data was obtained.

All of the participants thought that they conceptualize the notion of ‘doing well’ with the score they get from the national examination, YDS. The reason for this was because the score was the most important criteria to determine how successful they were in the examination and it was a medium to achieve their goals such as academic career and promotion. The higher score they got, the better positions they could reach. Some of the excerpts were “the better score it is, the better chance I have”, “score of the examination is the medium with which I can get what I want” and “score is a passport to success in academic career”. ‘Feedback from others’ was a reason for considering themselves successful in that they would feel better when their achievements were appreciated, not for occupational, academic aspects. This was a kind of source for their being proud of themselves. Excerpt about feedbacks from others was “I feel motivated and honored when I am appreciated by somebody close to me”.

‘Comparison with others’ was another success indicator through which participants made out the level of their success or failure by noticing the standards.

The following examples illustrate the notions of doing well:

Participant 1: *"I will understand how successful I am after the results are announced", "I feel successful when I am appreciated by my exam results."*

Participant 2: *"Score of the examination is the main indicator of my success", "comparison with others can be a good scale for my success."*

Participant 3: *"Score is important to determine the success level."*

Success and failure attributions of the participants in the self-assessment papers were verified with the interview. 'Discipline' as a belief for success was referred to indicate effort factor by the *participant 2*. Moreover, enough time, trying hard and practicing hard was mentioned to emphasize the significance of 'effort factor'.

To emphasize the importance of ability was the reason why 'special techniques', 'enough knowledge' and 'concentrating' were mentioned. When details about these beliefs were given by the participants, the meanings of them showed 'ability factor' clearly. A few of the explanation in the interview about these specific beliefs were "concentrating is a matter of ability", "in my opinion, special techniques entail a practical mind which is to do with ability" and "If one does not have enough intelligence, he or she cannot receive information, which means he or she is lack of ability".

Mood, on the other hand, was cited in self-assessment papers by two participants of this study. Both of the participants put down the word "mood" in their self-assessment papers to emphasize the importance of ability. Excerpts about mood were "If I am in a bad mood I cannot understand what I read", "I need to feel good to score better in the exam".

The findings obtained through semi-structured interview revealed that success attribution confirmed that participants' perceived success attributions were to a great extent internal. Again, they do not change over the time and can be taken under control by the individuals, so they were stable and controllable. Other than success attributions, through semi-structured interview, participants attributed their perceived beliefs of failure to effort, ability, luck and task difficulty. This confirmed the findings of self-assessment as internal and external in terms of locus of causality; stable and unstable in view of stability; controllable and uncontrollable in controllability because of effort, ability, task difficulty and luck attributions of the participants.

3.3. Open-ended Questionnaire

Open-ended questionnaire was conducted before the YDS exam and after YDS exam were analyzed and the results of "pre" and "post" questionnaires were compared to verify the validity of the notion of 'doing well', perceived reasons of the participants for success and failure in national foreign language test.

The answers given to the questionnaire showed that all of the five participants were of the same opinion about the "notion of being successful". The response, in common, to the first question was 'the score' of the YDS exam. All the participants stated that the score determines their level of success or failure.

Moreover, two of the five participants conceptualized the notion of being successful with 'feedbacks from others', which means, apart from the score, these two participants take

other people's opinion into consideration while determining whether they are successful or not.

'Comparison with others' is another way of participants to conceptualize the notion of being successful. Two of the five participants referred to 'comparison with other examination takers' as the success. 'Sense of achievement', 'sense of qualification for jobs' and 'completing a set of goal' were other notions of being successful. And each of them was stated once as the indicator of being successful by the participants.

4. Discussion

The present study was designed to survey Academic staff's beliefs about language examinations and reasons for their success or failure. Participants were asked to report their perception about the notion of doing well and causal attributions for success and failure.

As in the hypothesis of Weiner (1986) the findings of the study verified the bipolar dimensions of locus, stability, and control for success and failure. All the factors as attributions, namely 'luck, ability, task difficulty, and effort' were found out as the causal attributions by the academic staff who prepares for national examination, YDS.

Parallel findings out of the self-assessment papers, questionnaires and interview suggest that 'score of the examination' is the major conceptualization in terms of being successful or doing well in the exam. Score of the exam is the medium through which the academic staff can achieve their set of goals, reach the positions or status they desire. This shows the real motive behind the academic staff's conceptualization the notion of 'doing well' in the national examination. Therefore, they have positive belief towards learning English and taking YDS examination because of the importance of English for their academic career, which reflects both instrumental and integrative motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) as English is considered important for enhancing their status.

All of the participants of this study put a vital importance on 'effort' for success in language examination, which indicates the necessity for discipline, regular practicing, trying hard in language examination. Weiner (1979, 1986) as an internal attribution, effort, produce greater change in self-efficacy impact than external attributions. This is a crucial view to point out how significant the level of effort is. The more effort the language learners and exam takers exert, the greater improvement they get. In a study conducted by Lei and Qin (2009), important ties were detected between learners' teacher and effort attributions and their English language achievement. Likewise, Peacock (2010) has found significant relationships between attributions and EFL proficiency. Results of the study for causal attributions and proficiency for exam preparation indicated that effort attribution was the best predictor of high scores. All the participants bounded effort with the score, with which they conceptualized the notion of doing well in the exam. And after the examination, the participants confirmed this attribution as a major factor for doing well.

'Ability', on the other hand, was another causal attribution for success and failure. Hsieh and Challert (2008) studied the causal attributions in EFL learner's achievement. The results of their study suggested that ability attributions were predictive of foreign language achievement on the part of learners. Ability sheds light upon the result, score and outcome of any progress such as language learning examination.

'Task difficulty' was cited as an important causal attribution by four of the participants. Although effort and ability attributions were cited as the main reason for their success and failure, participants stated the significance of the exam difficulty in completing their set of goals. Actually, task difficulty or ease of work can be crucial for motivation of the language learners or exam takers, which may have positive or negative effect on the result of the progress. Since task difficulty is an external factor, learners' self-confidence can suffer due to uncontrollable factors.

On the other hand, the results of the self-assessment papers suggest that the participants, in some way, tend to attribute their success or failure to teacher influence, too. This is also in tune with the idea that a teacher has a significant role in student belief of language learning success and failure.

As for the 'luck' factor, it was mentioned in the self-assessment papers and questionnaire. The findings about luck in the self-assessment papers were parallel to the ones in the questionnaire, which increases the validity of the results. As an attribution, luck is an external factor that has influence on the success or failure of the language learners as exam takers. Although the factor luck may not be perceived as a reason or belief for success or failure by all of the participants, it has a psychological effect on the performance of the learners as language learners.

To draw a summary table, the findings of self-assessment papers, questionnaire and semi-structured interview were parallel to each other to a great extent in terms of ability and effort attributions. These two internal attributions were cited in both self-assessment papers and questionnaire as the most important element of success in both language learning and YDS examination. That is, success was attributed to internal factors by all of the participants.

Again, the findings of self-assessment papers, questionnaires and interview were in accord with each other in terms of failure attributions. Especially, post-questionnaire verified this claim. As the questionnaire was conducted before and after YDS examination, the results out of it were very important to confirm the attributions. So, the findings were in tune with each other, which showed both internal and external factors were predictive of failure in language learning and taking YDS examination. As in the success attributions, ability and effort were the main reason for failure, but task difficulty was another major failure attribution for the participants of this study. Therefore, failure attributions were not only internal ones but external.

The other attribution, luck, was cited as a reason for failure but ability, effort and task difficulty were of great importance as reasons for failure.

In this thesis, the notion of doing well, success and failure attributions of academic staff in YDS examination were studied. The findings which were obtained through self-assessment papers, questionnaires and semi-structured interview verified the validity of the study in terms of consistent results.

For a general deduction out of the findings, indicated that the notion of doing well was conceptualized with the score achieved from foreign language achievement test. And also, it is clear that while participants of the study attributed a successful result effort and ability. This means that they were sure that they had the ability and control of effort to successfully complete future tasks. On the other hand, they attributed failure mainly to

task difficulty. This means they attributed the result to something out of their control, which is not a good sign for their confidence about future success.

All the findings through self-assessment, semi-structured interview and pre/post-questionnaire revealed that participants' success attributions were mainly *internal, stable and controllable* while their failure attributions were in 'unstable, external and uncontrollable' in terms of dimensional model of Weiner (1979). Different instruments confirmed the validity and reliability of the obtained findings. The only different result not in tune with the results obtained through other instruments was the failure attribution 'task difficulty' in post-questionnaire.

5. Implications

Being aware of perceived beliefs for why a result occurred is important in building self-efficacy and it gives an individual more confidence when approaching the task. Positive beliefs about one's abilities and capabilities lead to desired results thus leading the learner to conceptualize that it is his/her effort and ability that led to success. So, learners who are more aware of these will also take more responsibility for the outcomes of their study period.

Learner autonomy and self-awareness are absolutely determining factors for student motivation. When learners notice that they are responsible for the result of events or grades, they tend to become more involved and active in the learning process. Therefore, language teachers should help learners establish the value of effort and ability.

If the learners' beliefs are not compatible with the reality, they can break down their motivation and decrease language performance while studying for an achievement test. Therefore, in a classroom environment, it is very important to understand these learners and help them identify their beliefs about success and failure.

When learners' perceived attributions about their success and failure are taken into consideration, benefits of the preparation period in the classroom will surely increase. Determining locus of causality, stability and controllability can ease the processes for the learners in the preparation period for achievement test.

If the reason for an outcome is internal, value of ability and effort factors should be clarified for the exam takers by the language teachers or instructors. This will offer a valuable insight for the future success of the learners. Likewise, determining internal factors as the reason behind a failure will offer a perspective to prevent future failure. It is valid for the other dimensions of attribution theory.

As the findings of this study suggests, 'internal, stable and controllable' factors were the attributions for success while 'external, unstable and uncontrollable' factors were the attributions for failure. Therefore, in an exam preparation atmosphere, language teachers should give an extra consideration for this educational psychology in order to get repetitive success and prevent future failures.

6. Suggestions for Further Research

The present study was conducted with only 5 academic staff in Continuing Education Center of Science and Technology University, Adana. And the study was conducted for

only one foreign language achievement test period. In a similar study, the number of the participants might be increased in order to have more insights that can be generalized to all academic staffs. Moreover, with a bigger number of participants, this kind of study may be conducted in other educational institutions to have better findings in preparation period and language learning for academic staff and other career pursuers who are required to have a certain level of foreign language knowledge.

Furthermore, both qualitative and quantitative methods may be used in a similar study to obtain various data. This may offer a better insight into the matter.

The present study described the attributions of academic staff as examination takers and language learners. In further studies, it may be fruitful to investigate the attributions of teachers, instructors, lecturers so as to obtain a more comprehensive and detailed understanding, perspective and view of the issues about causal attributions.

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