

The Role of Socio Economic Status on the EFL Learners' Attributions on Success and Failure

Devrim Hol^{1*} and Aysun Yavuz²

¹ Pamukkale University, School of Foreign Languages, Department of Basic Languages, Denizli, Turkey

² Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language Teaching, Canakkale, Turkey

***Corresponding Author:**

E-mail: devrimhol@gmail.com

Abstract

The focus of this research is on investigating EFL learners' attributions on success and failure with respect to the socio-economic status of the participants. Attributions of 204 EFL students having different socio-economic status (SES) were investigated. The findings of the questionnaire were analyzed through SPSS 20.0 Program (Statistical Program for Social Sciences). The most important differences regarding with the attributions of the participants were found between the participants with low socio-economic status and the participants with good or average socio-economic status. Findings of the study were discussed in the light of the relevant literature and some suggestions for further studies were made.

Key Words: Attribution, External, Internal, Academic Achievement, Socio-economic Status

1. Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language is widespread in the modern world and it takes its part in educational context in many countries, however, most of the research related to foreign language learners, who are the medium of teaching and learning, ignore the role of Socio-Economic Status (SES) of students, and, unsurprisingly, attributions of EFL learners on success and failure have been rarely investigated. There is no doubt that attributions of learners with different SES is also necessary to find out whether SES has an effect on the attributions of EFL learners. As SES is one of the factors

which may have an influence on the motivations and attributions leading the way to the learning environment and learning itself, it is important to gain insights about the factors driving learning, how SES of EFL learners are related to attributions on success and failure was investigated in our paper. Woolfolk (2004) states that learning is the relatively persistent and observable change in a person's knowledge and behavior as a result of the interaction with the environment.

1.1 Background and Literature Review

Learning is the relatively persistent and observable change in a person's knowledge and behavior as a result of the interaction with the environment (Woolfolk, 2004). These changes can be intentionally or unintentionally, to better or worse, and consciously or unconsciously. However, in the process of education and learning, whether "learner" or "teacher", human being is the focus domain, so when there is an interaction between human beings, 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. 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 always stressed by all the stakeholders that learners 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.

The term "motivation" is a central construct in psychology and educational psychology, and in correlation with motivation, Attribution theory achieved a unique status among contemporary motivation theories, and subsequently, it became the dominant model in research on student motivation (Dörnyei, 2003). Attribution theory mainly deals with how motivation of success is influential in language learning. Finding out and describing the attributions of the learners, being aware of the reasons underlying these attributions and trying to treat these attributions is of a great importance to motivate the learners and improve their success in learning.

Although people always question the outcome of an event in their minds and they attribute different causes or reasons that may change or be alike with other people and these descriptions which people think or feel are called as attributions (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008).

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)

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.

Bernard Weiner broadened Heider's ideas and had a great contribution to the development of attribution theory. The most important contribution of Weiner is to link 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.

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). With these insights in the theory of attribution, it took its place in research. On the other hand, Socio-Economic status of the students is highly correlated with the attributions.

Socio-economic status (SES) is a defining term which is used by sociologists for variations in wealth, power, and prestige, and it is closely related to academic achievement (Woolfolk, Winne&Perry, 2003). According to American Psychological Association (APA), socioeconomic status can be described as the social class of a person or a specific group, and a combination of education, income and profession are the most important signs (Ghaemi & Yazdanpanah, 2014).

There have been many researches on the relationship between socio-economic status and achievement. The PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) report clearly states that learners whose parents had higher qualifications performed significantly better in the language proficiency test administered to European school-age children (cited in Ray & Margaret, 2003). It can be clearly seen from the studies that students who have a high Socio-economic status are more successful and they stay longer in school compared to their counterparts who have low socio-economic level (Conger, Conger, & Elder, 1997), and the longer the learner is in poverty, the stronger impact it has on the achievement (Woolfolk, Winne&Perry, 2003). According to Bogdon (2010), the gap between the learners with high socio-economic level and those with low socio-economic levels is getting larger because the learners with high socio-economic level can access to different types of schools (public vs. private) and extracurricular exposure. In addition, Fan (2011) claims that socio-economic status does not only affect learners' achievement but also it has a profound influence on their perceptions and motivations towards language learning.

Many researches show the relation between learners' language performance and SES variables. According to Thompson (1994) age of acquisition, motivation, language family, literacy, and socioeconomic status of the learner are a few of the many significant factors that should be taken into consideration while studying the acquisition of a new language by individuals. Yuet (2008) claims that socio-economic background of learners play a big role to motivate the learners to learn a new language. The main reason to this idea is that parents with low-income may be so busy with the necessities of life that they have little time to consider how to promote their children's cognitive development. Brustall (1975, cited in Ellis 1994) states that there is a strong correlation between socio-economic status and achievement as learners with middle SES got higher rank than the learners with lower SES in the study of primary and secondary school learners of L2 French. In his study, Shamim (2011) found that, when English scores are compared with socio-economic levels of the students, learners from high socio-economic level always outperformed the learners with low socio-economic level and the reason may be attributed to their opportunities in learning a foreign language at an earlier age or private courses.

Learners' motivation factors can strongly be influenced by socio-economic factors. Learners' immediate environment such as their family and friends, and their socio-economic status can play an important role in their learning motivation, self-efficacy and effort to carry out learning tasks. According to The PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) Report (2003), students having parents with higher qualifications significantly performed better in the language proficiency test administered. Similarly, Nikolov (2009), in his study, found a close relationship between parents' education level and academic achievement of learners in language learning. Munoz (2008) states that having different socio-economic status directs the way the students are exposed to language learning, as they attend to different schools, they can study abroad or home country. Accordingly, Benson (2007) claims that socio-economic factors such as Access to learning resources both at home and school may have an effect on learners' learning behaviour. With respect to these findings, Fan (2011) suggests that socio-economic status not only affects motivation but also it has a significant effect on self-related beliefs, and also attributions.

In our research, although attributions on success and failure have been investigated and clearly highlight, we will also focus on the relationship between socio-economic status and attributions of EFL learners in success and failure in learning English as it is neglected in the previous studies and we consider it as one of the most important antecedents in foreign language education.

1.2 Research Question

What is the role of socio-economic background on the attributions of success and failure of Turkish EFL Learners?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants in this quantitative survey consisted of 204 EFL learners. All the participants were Turkish and their native language was Turkish. The learners' age range varied from 17 to over 23 years old. Their major varied from Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Education to Faculty of Engineering; however, they are all EFL learners in the same classes grouped according to their level of English, which is pre-intermediate or intermediate. The research participant selection was according to the convenience sampling.

2.2 Data Collection Tool

The research instruments used in this study was a questionnaire developed by the researcher investigating parental income, parental education, and parental occupation, which are accepted as the most important factors affecting SES. The data collecting instrument consisted of 24 five-point Likert scale-type items. They were required to state the income of their parents, the level of education for their parents, and professions of their parents, which is used as a supportive factor for the analysis in a range that can be categorized. The total reliability of this scale was calculated via Cronbach's Alpha formula (.80).

2.3 Procedure

The instrument was translated into Turkish from the English version. Back-translation was used with four translators, and the final version of the questionnaire was agreed by all the translators when reached to a satisfactory version. The questionnaires were delivered to the participants by the researcher personally.

2.4 Analysis

All the questionnaires were coded and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences 20.0 was used to analyze the data gathered by the participants. In addition, ANOVA was used to assess the effect of SES on the attributions of success and failure in learning English.

2.5 Measuring Socioeconomic Status

SES is in the centre in the field of many research, however, its conceptual meaning and empirical measurement in studies is not clear (Bornstein & Bradley, 2003). Accordingly, many different combinations have been used by researchers with many different variables (White, 1993). Although there are many ambiguity about the conceptual meaning of SES in many research, there is a consensus on Duncan's definition (cited in Hauser and Warren, 1997) which defines "*parental income, parental education, and parental occupation*" as the three most important parameters. In this study, under the lights of the related literature, the socio-economical level of the participants were categorized and used as follows;

Table 1: Categorization of Socio-Economic Level of the Participants

Level of Education	Economical Situation	Socio-Economical Situation
Very High	Very Good	Very Good
Very High	Good	Good
Very High	Average	Good
Very High	Low	Average
Very High	Very Low	Average
High	Very Good	Good
High	Good	Good
High	Average	Average
High	Low	Average
High	Very Low	Average
Average	Very Good	Good
Average	Good	Average
Average	Average	Average
Average	Low	Average
Average	Very Bad	Low
Low	Very Good	Average
Low	Good	Average
Low	Average	Average
Low	Low	Low
Low	Very Low	Low
Very Low	Very Good	Average
Very Low	Good	Average
Very Low	Average	Low
Very Low	Low	Low
Very Low	Very Low	Very Low

ANOVA test was used to test the hypothesis as there are more than two socio-economical status. As the Hypothesis F-value is 6,526 and p-value $0.002 < 0,05$, it is denied. As a result, it is clear from the data analysis that there is a meaningful difference between the attributions of the participants and their socio-economical background. When the means and were analyzed, as the socio-economic level gets better, the responses to the items related to success get lower.

3. Findings

3.1 Internal Attributions on Success and Socio-Economic Level of the Participants

Table 2

Relationship between Internal Attributions on Success and Socio-Economic Level of the Participants

Household Status	Socio-Economic	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Low		39	3,5678	0,70634	0,1131
Average		149	3,2157	0,70449	0,05771
Good		16	2,9821	0,80959	0,2024
Total		204	3,2647	0,72757	0,05094

According to the results of Table 2, it can be concluded from the findings that there is a meaningful relationship between Socio-economic level of the participants and their internal attributions to success. While the participants having bad socio-economical status have more internal attributions to success, the participants with good socio-economic status have less internal attributions than the other two groups.

3.2 External Attributions on Success and Socio-Economic Level of the Participants

Table 3

Relationship between External Attributions to Success and Socio-Economic Level of the Participants

Household Socio-Economic Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Low	39	3,2906	0,67291	0,10775
Average	149	2,9004	0,65098	0,05333
Good	16	2,8333	0,69921	0,1748
Total	204	2,9698	0,67425	0,04721

The quantitative analysis of the relationship between external attributions of the participants and socio-economic status of the participants show that the participants with bad socio-economic level status attribute their failure to external attributions more than the participants with average and good socio-economic status. When the means and percentages were analyzed, as the socio-economic level goes better, the responses to the items related to success get lower.

3.3 Internal Attributions on Failure and Socio-Economic Level of the Participants

Table 4

Relationship between Internal Attributions on Failure and Socio-Economic Level of the Participants

Household Socio-Economic Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Low	39	3,3197	0,54957	0,088
Middle	149	3,2479	0,51208	0,04195
Good	16	3,275	0,57497	0,14374
Total	204	3,2637	0,52244	0,03658

When ANOVA test was applied, no statistically meaningful difference between the groups in terms of internal attributions on failure and socio-economic level of the participants was found.

3.4 External Attributions on Failure and Socio-Economic Level of the Participants

Table 5

Relationship between External Attributions on Failure and Socio-Economic Level

Household Socio-Economic Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Low	39	3,3026	0,60589	0,09702
Middle	149	3,2302	0,55443	0,04542
Good	16	3,275	0,42348	0,10587
Total	204	3,2475	0,55402	0,03879

The results of the ANOVA test make it clear that socio-economic level of the participants has no effect on the external attributions on failure in learning English. It shows that there is no relationship between the external attributions on failure and socio-economic level.

4. Discussions and Conclusion

The aim of this present study was to explore how socio-economic status of EFL learners affects the attributions on success and failure in learning English. In order to investigate learners' attributions on success and failure in EFL settings, an adapted questionnaire was distributed to 204 Turkish university students. The results show that while the participants having bad socio-economical status have more internal attributions to success, the participants with good socio-economic status have less internal attributions. Unfortunately, to the researcher's knowledge, there is no study to compare about the attributions of EFL learners on success and failure and their SES. However, there are some studies investigating the relationship between socio-economic level of the students, the location of their school or house and success has been one of the focus for the researchers (Hashemi 2011, Banks & Woolfson 2008, Westwood 2004). The overall effect of SES on the attributions of success can be explained with a number of factors. Firstly, social and economic status of a household may determine their attributions because while learning English is seen as a prestigious and important for a future career, it may be regarded as unnecessary or useless in low socio-economic context, and learners may think that they might rarely need English for their future career. Secondly, families with high socio-economic status may influence the goals of the learners studying English as a foreign language, that is,

they motivate their children to put more clear targets, which leads to motivation and affects the attribution of the learner. Finally, it can be said that SES has an overall effect on the attributions of students in learning a foreign language. Bandura et al. (1996) states that SES has a direct impact on the academic aspirations of parents on the academic achievement of their children, which may influence the attributions of students on success and failure.

This research, however, is not without limitations. Firstly, the findings cannot be generalized as it just represents a group of students in a state university in Turkey. The context in other areas or schools may give other results as each context is unique. Even though the results give insights about the relationship between SES and attributions, further research on different age groups would really produce different findings.

As the final word, teachers and institutions should be aware that in addition to individual differences, learners have different socio-economic levels and being aware and understanding these differences can shed light on their attributions and in turn, their performance and achievement scores as these differences affect the learners' reactions to learning a foreign language and also to success and failure.

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