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AUTHORS: Ayse TASKIRAN,Belgin AYDIN

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## EFL Learners' Causal Attributions and Dimensionality Styles for Perceived Success and Failure\*

### İngilizce'yi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenenlerin Başarı ve Başarısızlıklarına Yaptıkları Nedensel Yüklemeler ve Boyutları

Okt. Ayşe Taşkiran - Assoc. Prof. Dr. Belgin Aydın

#### Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to analyze English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' causal attributions about their perceived success and failure in language learning process at Anadolu University School of Foreign Languages (AUSFL). Their attributions were analyzed and compared in terms of perceived locus of causality, stability and controllability to find out whether causal dimensionality of the students was healthy or unhealthy. The sample consisted of 158 students. A self-administered questionnaire asked questions concerning the perceived causes of outcomes, perceived underlying dimensions of attributions. Each attribution was labeled and frequency percentages were calculated. For causal dimensionality, the number of the marks for yes/no questions that aimed to explore locus of causality, stability and controllability were calculated and frequency percentages were found. In order to explore possible differences between success and failure groups' causal dimensionality profiles, chi-square analyses were done. The number of the students who perceived themselves as unsuccessful was slightly more than those who perceived themselves successful. Participants reported more causal attributions for failure than they did for success. Success-oriented students demonstrated significantly more internal, controllable, and relatively more stable attributional styles than failure-oriented students, a finding supported by literature on attribution theory.

**Keywords:** Attribution, Causal Dimensions, EFL, Motivation, Perception

#### Öz

Bu çalışmanın temel amacı Anadolu Üniversitesi hazırlık okulu öğrencilerinin İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenme süreçlerinde başarı ve başarısızlık algılarına ilişkin nedensel yüklemelerini incelemektir. Nedensel yüklemeler algılanan nedensellik odağı, değişmezlik ve kontrol boyutları açısından incelenip karşılaştırılmışlardır. Ayrıca bu çalışma öğrencilerin nedensel yükleme boyutlarının ileride yapıcı/yıkıcı davranış değişikliği yaratmada ne derece sağlıklı/sağlıksız olduğunu tespit etmeye çalışmaktadır. Örneklem 158 hazırlık okulu öğrencisinden oluşmaktadır. Katılımcılar araştırmacı tarafından hazırlanmış bir anketi yanıtlamışlardır. Anket soruları öğrencilerin öğrenme deneyimlerine yönelik algılanan nedenleri, bu nedenlerin altında yatan algılanan boyutlarını kapsamaktadır. Öğrenciler verdikleri yanıtlara göre başarı-odaklı ve başarısız-odaklı olmak üzere iki gruba ayrılmışlardır. Her nedensel yükleme etiket verilerek sıklık yüzdeleri hesaplanmıştır. Algılanan başarı ve başarısızlığa yönelik nedensel boyutlar hesaplanırken nedensellik odağı, değişmezlik ve kontrol boyutlarını tespit etmeyi hedefleyen evet/hayır sorularına ilişkin yapılan işaretlemeler toplanmış ve sıklık yüzdeleri hesaplanmıştır. Başarı-odaklı ve başarısızlık-odaklı grupların nedensel boyutları arasında olası farkları tespit etmek amacıyla Ki-kare analizleri yapılmıştır. Sonuçlara göre kendisini başarısız algılayan öğrencilerin sayısı başarılı algılayanlara göre biraz daha yüksektir. Katılımcılar başarıya kıyasla başarısızlık algısı üzerine daha fazla nedensel yükleme yapmışlardır. Yükleme kuramı alan

Okt. Ayşe Taşkiran, Anadolu University, [aysetaskiran@anadolu.edu.tr](mailto:aysetaskiran@anadolu.edu.tr)

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Belgin Aydın, Anadolu University, [baydin@anadolu.edu.tr](mailto:baydin@anadolu.edu.tr)

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yazınında da desteklendiği gibi başarı-odaklı öğrencilerin başarısızlık-odaklı öğrencilere göre daha içsel, kontrol edilebilir ve nispeten daha değişmez yüklemeler yaptıkları gözlenmiştir. Sonuç olarak, tekrar grubu öğrencileri ile başarısızlık-odaklı öğrencilerin nedensel yükleme boyutları benzer özellikler göstermiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Yüklemeler, Nedensel Boyutlar, Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce, Motivasyon, Algı*

## Introduction

Understanding learners' beliefs, perceptions, and their learning experiences is a precondition for an efficient learning environment. In order to recognize why some learners are more successful than others, researchers have tried to explore how the learners make sense of their own learning process (Kalaja, 2015; Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2015). Since mid-1980s researchers have focused on the perceptions of learners, as they have potential effect on the learning process and product (Wang & Yan, 2015). Early studies reported stability of those beliefs, while more recent ones focused on the complex nature of beliefs and how some of them evolve and change in time (Zhong, 2015).

When learners reflect on causes of their performance outcomes, they tend to make attributions. Attributions are defined as the interpretations of the causes of outcomes by individuals and they have cognitive and affective consequences that are known to impact learners' achievement motivation, persistence, and expectancy of future success directly (Brophy, 1998; Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Weiner, 1985, 1986, 2000). With affective and emotional consequences, there is no limit to attributions (Weiner, 1986, 1992; Williams, Burden & Al-Baharna, 2001) because they vary across contexts and individuals (Russell, 1982; Stipek, 1988; Weisz & Stipek, 1982).

Attribution theory has its roots to 1950s and it began with Heider's 'common-sense' concept, which explains how we interpret our own behavior, as well as that of others (Alderman, 2013). Attribution theory was later extended by Bernard Weiner (1979). An assumption of this theory is that future behavior is

in part determined by the perceived causes of past events (Weiner, 1986). Individuals generate causal attributions during or after a performance and these attributions affect subsequent behavior, motivation in that situation, and strivings (Brophy, 1998; Gobel & Mori, 2007; Weiner, 1979). The notion of individual perception is at the core of the theory (Vispoe & Austin, 1995). In other words, the attributions that are made by individuals are just perceptions and they may not always reflect the actual causes. Despite the inconsistencies between the attributions people make and the actual causes, "... the accuracy of attribution is not important in order for an attribution to have psychological and behavioral consequences" (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996, p. 109-110). In short, these person-to-person and even situation-to-situation variations make attributions much more complex. According to Weiner (1985), however complex these attributions are, they can be categorized along three separate dimensions: locus of causality (internal versus external), stability (stable versus unstable), and controllability (controllable versus uncontrollable). Researchers might have different categorizations of individuals' attributions. For example, while an individual might perceive luck as a trait, which is stable, (I am a lucky person) a researcher might perceive it as an unstable attribution (Weisz & Stipek 1982). Therefore, underlying cognitive dimensions rather than attributions themselves can portray the individual's beliefs about the nature of the attribution (Martinko, 1995, p. 10). This means that letting the individuals do the categorizations of the attributions under the related dimensions would be healthier.

The effects of these underlying dimensions might vary in cases of success and failure. As claimed by Weiner (1985), attributing **failure** to *internal / unstable / controllable* rather than *internal / stable / uncontrollable* causes will promise better results for future performance. Among the causal attributions effort is assumed to be the most productive for learning since effort, unlike ability or luck, is perceived to be controllable. Therefore, if learners attribute their past failure to low effort, they will have hope for success in the future, so they will put forth greater effort (Brophy, 1998; McLoughlin, 2007). On the other hand, learners' ascription of past failure to an internal / stable / uncontrollable factor, namely lack of ability, will result in loss of hope for future success. If learners attribute failure to lack of ability, they are less

likely to put forth effort on future tasks because their bias of lack of ability will make them believe no amount of effort would bring success. This situation also results in maladaptive behavior, namely *learned helplessness*. When it comes to success, attributing **success** to *internal /stable* causes such as ability is assumed to be adaptive because learners with ability attributions will possess high self-efficacy, which makes them expect future success (Schunk & Gunn, 1986; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). In short, there is no doubt that some causal attributions (namely healthy/adaptive attributions) are more likely to lead to constructive achievement- related behavior, while some others (namely unhealthy / maladaptive attributions) lead to destructive achievement-related behavior (Stipek, 1988).

Attribution theory is an important piece in the motivational puzzle, especially in education because if teachers can make sense of their students' attributions to their learning experiences, they can assist their students with the tasks they prepare and feedback they give. Therefore, attribution theory has drawn interest of many researchers as a dominant conception in educational psychology, social psychology and motivation for almost three decades (e.g. Tang, Gobel, Nor & Vijaya, 2011; Tulu, 2013; Weiner, 2000).

There is no doubt that there are possible variables that contribute to success and failure attributions, such as gender, age, culture, teacher influence, like, dislike (Little, 1985; Vispoel & Austin, 1995). Culture is one of the most powerful contributing factors. Some studies suggest that different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups tend to cite different attributions for success and failure (Gobel et al., 2011; Gobel & Mori, 2007; McClure et al., 2011; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2001). With regard to the fact that attributions vary from culture to culture, context to context and individual to individual, there is a need for more attribution research in every education context. Therefore, this study intends to focus on Turkish students' attributional styles in learning a foreign language context.

Attribution research in different cultural contexts might give teachers a glimpse of how students think about their academic achievement in different contexts. Even though many attribution studies have been carried out in EFL or ESL contexts in most countries, not many studies were conducted on the per-

ceptions of language learners about the causes of their successes and failures in learning English as a foreign language in Turkish context. Therefore, the main concern of this study is to explore EFL learners' attributions and causal dimensionality patterns. There is no doubt that success in learning English is significant for preparatory school students in most Turkish universities since medium of instruction is English in many departments. Also, many university students in Turkey perceive English as an obstacle in their education lives as they cannot benefit from written sources in English due to their low proficiency in English. It is observed that although medium of instruction is English in most of the departments at Anadolu University, preparatory school students tend to demonstrate low persistence and motivation during their language learning process. Becoming more aware of the origins of students' failure is a prerequisite for helping them better. Therefore, there is a need for more information about Anadolu University's preparatory students' attributions for their successes and failures.

This study is significant because it focuses on perceived success rather than outside resource such as marks, grades, and teachers' evaluations. In addition, instead of imposing pre-determined attributions stated in the literature, this study asks students to report the causes of their perceived failures and success. As stated above, individuals and researchers might have different categorizations of the dimensions of the attributions. Recent studies revealed that if learners are given the opportunity to sort these attributions into their dimensions, they tend to do the classification differently and this difference may be linked to learners' cultural traits (Gonzalez, 2016). Asking learners to list and categorize their own attributions seems to be the strongest aspect of this study.

In this research, the answers to the following questions have been sought:

1. Do Turkish EFL learners perceive themselves successful in learning the foreign language?
2. What are the attributions of success-oriented and failure-oriented students?
3. Do causal dimensionality patterns demonstrated by success-oriented students differ from those of failure- oriented in terms of each dimension?

4. To what extent are learners' attributions favorable / unfavorable in terms of forming adaptive / maladaptive future behaviors?

## Review of Literature

A great deal of research has been done on attributions in achievement contexts (Cortés-Suárez & Sandiford 2008; Dandy & Nettelbeck, 2000; Graham, 2004; Normandeau & Gobeil, 1998; Robertson, 2000; Thang, Gobel, Nor & Vijaya, 2011), on causal dimensionality (Watkins & Regmi, 1993), on attributions in language learning (Gobel & Mori, 2007; Thang, Gobel, Nor & Vijaya, 2011; Tse, 2000; Tulu, 2013; Williams, Burden, Poulet & Maun, 2004), on gender differences (Ciabuca & Gheorghe, 2014; Graham, 2004; McClure et al., 2011; Tulu, 2013) and on age differences (Graham, 2004; Hassaskhah and Vahabi, 2010). Attributional research has also drawn interest of many researchers leading studies on motivation (Kozminsky & Kozminsky, 2002; Rui & Liang, 2008; Schunk, 2003), on language learning anxiety (Lim, 2007), on self-efficacy (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008) and on self-esteem (Sinha & Gupta, 2006). However, these studies mostly gave predetermined lists of attributions to the participants rather than allowing them to state their own perceptions.

In the field of language learning, attribution theory has received increasing attention to provide a fully comprehensive theory of motivation (McGroarty, 2001). There is no doubt that foreign language learners' attribution of success and failure influences language learning motivation and level of acquisition (Tse, 2000). The role of attributions in foreign or second language learning motivation has been examined in a number of studies (Gobel & Mori, 2007; Graham, 2004; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Lim, 2007; Mccloughlin, 2004; Tse, 2000, Williams & Burden, 1999; Williams, Burden, Poulet & Maun, 2004). It was revealed that attributing success to stable and personal factors had significant positive effect on EFL learners' achievement scores (Hsieh, 2004; Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011). However, Gobel and Mori (2007) found that the students in their study were more likely to ascribe success to external reasons, and failure to internal reasons. Another attribution study by Rui and Liang (2008) pointed out the importance of adaptive attributions focusing on causal dimensionality and its behavioral effects. The study revealed that effort and

persistence are greater when adult language learners attribute their performance to internal and controllable causes rather than to external or uncontrollable causes. Graham's (2004) study, which intended to explain the relationship between attributions and achievement level, revealed that English students who had high ability and effective learning strategies attributions had higher levels of achievement and persistence while learning French. Also, those who made more internal attributions had higher levels of achievement. It was concluded that students who have adaptive /positive attributional styles may attribute success to ability and perceive this ability as a fairly stable and internal factor. In another study, high achievers revealed effort and teacher attributions as the most effective causes for their achievements while low achievers stated lack of ability and effort for their failure (Gobel et al., 2011). Learning context, competence, goals and expectations were found to be the common attributions in Gabillona's (2013) study. Moreover, Hsieh and Schallert (2008) examined the relationship between student attributions and self-efficacy ratings using dimensions of attributions and asking about actual reasons for a real outcome. Results revealed that foreign language learners who made adaptive attributions for failure had higher self-efficacy ratings. To illustrate, students with adaptive attributions indicated that failure was not due to lack of ability, but rather to lack of effort. As another study in language teaching and learning, Lim (2007) found attributions of success and failure are directly related to their language learning anxiety.

Despite plenty of attribution research in achievement contexts in literature, not much research has been done in learning English as a foreign language in Turkish context. Studies other than language learning context mainly focused on internal/ external locus of control (Sivri, Gemlik, & Sur, 2007), the relationship between locus of control (internal/external) and achievement anxiety (Kapıkıran, 2008), locus of control and selected characteristics such as class level and gender (Akbulut, 2006), locus of control and teacher burnout (Tümekaya, 2000), attributional thinking of Turkish university students (Brown, Gray & Ferrara, 2005), the effect of attribution retraining on learned helplessness (Ersever, 1996). Those conducted in foreign language context included studies which focused on causal attributions for perceived success and failure (Şahinkarakaş, 2011), relation



between attributions and achievement (Erten & Burden, 2014), EFL teachers' and students' attributions (Yılmaz, 2012). As a result, there is a need for further awareness of attributions. Studying attributions will shed light on how we can help our students persist at learning English. Even though many attribution studies have been carried out in different EFL or ESL contexts, there has been very little research on this area in Turkish context. In this sense, this study will help minimize the gap in attribution research in FL context in Turkish culture.

## Methodology

### Participants

This study was taken from Taşkıran's study conducted in 2010. Since 2014-2015 academic year a new curriculum has been applied at AUSFL. Serving as one of the needs analyses studies, the findings of this study had a triggering effect on the renovation of the program. Even if the language program changed in the institution, the findings might still offer insights into foreign language teaching as the nature of the context is still an intensive foreign language learning context with a similar student profile.

The questionnaire was given to 158 Turkish students at (AUSFL). The participants were chosen through convenience sampling. All of these students were of various departments in the university. The language program they were enrolled at preparatory school followed an intensive skill based curriculum in which they studied four different language skills, speaking-listening, writing, reading and grammar separately for 28 hours each week.

### Instrument

The recent literature related to attribution theory points out that giving participants a range of causal explanations and asking them to select those that apply to them provide limited data because respondents might have a range of attributions (Gabillona, 2013; Hsieh and Schallert, 2008; Williams, Burden, Poulet, and Maun, 2004). Therefore, in this study the participants were not given pre-determined causal explanations. An open-ended questionnaire compiled for the purpose of this study was used after piloting it with a similar group of subjects. In the questionnaire the participants were asked to state the main reasons of their achievements in Turkish because expressing

themselves freely was considered to be easier in their mother tongue. Moreover, instead of using a specific causal dimension scale to measure underlying dimensions of attributions, the participants decided on the categorizations of the underlying dimensions of their attributions through yes/no questions by themselves.

The questionnaire consisted of 2 questions. The first question asked if language learners perceive themselves successful or not in their learning process. The second question asked students to list at least 5 causes of their success or failure. For each cause, students were asked to answer 3 yes/no questions which required learners to indicate whether the reason for the cause was internal or external, stable or unstable, controllable or uncontrollable. The purpose of these questions was to identify students' perceived causal dimensionality patterns.

### Procedure

This research was carried out with 3 different lower intermediate classes and 3 different elementary classes at preparatory school at Anadolu University. Before handing out the questionnaire to the students, they were informed that they would be participating in a study. All participants accepted to contribute and were willing to answer the questionnaires.

### Data Analysis

The researcher and an expert having an MA degree in foreign language teaching carried out the content analysis of the data independently using Constant Comparison Method (Glaser, 1992).

As the first step, each questionnaire was given a number in order to make clear identification of information. After that, the questionnaires were divided into two categories; those who answered 'yes' for the question asking if they perceive themselves as successful in learning English were named as 'Success-Oriented' group, and those who said 'no' were named as 'Failure-Oriented' group as in attribution research literature (Williams, Burden, Poulet and Maun, 2004).

In order to analyze what the students attributed their perceived failure and success to, each cause that the students mentioned for their perceived success and failure was given a number. All causes were categorized and listed as either success or failure. The causes were analyzed and assigned a label independently by

the researcher and the second rater separately. They, then compared the resultant labels. The categories were discussed, and labels were assigned only when agreement had been reached. In cases of disagreement, the raters came together and discussed the labels. The inter-rater reliability was identified as 93%.

After labeling the subjects' responses, all the resultant labels for success and failure situations were tabulated in terms of their frequencies. The percentages of reasons for success situation were compared to those for failure situation separately since success and failure groups revealed different labels.

The students were asked to list at least 5 perceived causes of their success or failure. They also answered three yes/no questions for each cause. Yes/no questions aimed to identify underlying dimension profiles of the students. They were analyzed independently from the causal attributions. For the causal dimensionality analysis, yes/no answers were counted and the total number of the marks for each dimension was identified in both success- and failure- oriented group.

Chi-square analyses were conducted in order to analyze the possible differences between success and failure groups in terms of locus of control, stability and controllability dimensions. Those dimensional calculations in all groups revealed the extent to which the attributions lead to adaptive behaviors or maladaptive behaviors with reference to mainstream psychology. If the subjects did not indicate any dimensions for their stated attributions, those dimension choices were perceived as missing data and were not included in the chi-square analysis in order not to effect the results.

## Findings

### Perception of Success

The first research question concerned if Turkish EFL learners perceive themselves successful in learning the foreign language. As seen in Table 1, among 158 students, 66 of them perceived themselves as successful language learners, and 92 of them believed that they were not successful in language learning.

**Table 1**

<i>Perception of Success</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Successful	66	41.77
Unsuccessful	92	58.23
Total	158	100

### Attributions of Success-oriented and Failure-oriented Students

The second research question concerned the preparatory school students' attributions for their perceived successes and failures in their language learning process. For causal attributions, the students were asked to state at least 5 causes for their success or failure. However, some students stated more than 5 reasons, and some stated only 3 or 2 reasons. The total number of the reasons given by 158 students was 618. Among the 618 stated causes, 246 (39.8%) were from success-oriented students. The remaining 372 (60.2%) causes were from failure-oriented students

As seen in Table 2, the causes reported by success-oriented students were grouped into 10 categories. The most commonly reported cause of success was effort, which was followed by school/program/system, successful teachers, and interest towards learning language. All the categories can be found in the table below.

**Table 2**

*Perceived causes of self-identified success*

<i>Categories</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
1 Effort	119	48.37
2 School/ Program/ System	28	11.38
3 Successful teachers	25	10.16
4 Interest	18	7.32
5 Consistent subject with future goals	18	7.32
6 Ability	13	5.28
7 Like	10	4.07
8 Strong educational background	10	4.07
9 Getting help	3	1.22
10 Low task difficulty	2	0.81
Total	246	100

As seen in Table 3, the causes reported by failure-oriented students were grouped under 14 categories. The most commonly reported cause of failure was

school / program / system. It was followed by lack of effort and unsuccessful teachers. All the categories can be found in the table below.

**Table 3**

Perceived causes of failure

Categories	<i>f</i>	%
1 School /Program / System	103	27.69
2 Lack of effort	75	20.16
3 Unsuccessful teachers	38	10.21
4 Lack of ability	29	7.79
5 Lack of strong educational background	20	5.38
6 Dislike	20	5.38
7 Task difficulty	18	4.84
8 Boring topics	17	4.57
9 Lack of interest	16	4.30
10 Not serving for future goals	11	2.96
11 Adaptation problems	10	2.69
12 Crowded / noisy classrooms	7	1.88
13 Lack of concentration	6	1.61
14 Not getting help	2	0.54
Total	372	100

#### Causal Dimensionality Patterns of Success-oriented and Failure-oriented Students

The third research question concerned the causal dimensionality of the attributions demonstrated by success-oriented and failure-oriented students in the language learning process. As seen in Table 4, in suc-

cess situation, for locus of causality dimension, 175 causes were internal, 64 of them were external. For stability dimension, 114 of the causes were unstable, 123 of them were stable. For controllability dimension, 155 of the causes were controllable, 78 of them were uncontrollable.

**Table 4**

Causal dimensionality of success

Locus of Causality		Stability		Controllability	
Internal	External	Unstable	Stable	Controllable	Uncontrollable
175	64	114	123	155	78
Total	246				

As seen in Table 5, for causal dimensionality patterns of failure-oriented students, 153 causes were internal, 210 of them were external in terms of locus of causality. For stability dimension, 199 of them were

unstable, 163 of them were stable. For controllability dimension, 138 of the causes were controllable, 224 of them were uncontrollable.



**Table 5**

Causal dimensionality of failure

Locus of Causality		Stability		Controllability	
Internal	External	Unstable	Stable	Controllable	Uncontrollable
153	210	199	163	138	224
Total	372				

**Comparison of Causal Dimensionality Patterns**

The third research question concerned whether causal dimensionality patterns demonstrated by success-oriented students differ from those of failure-oriented in terms of each dimension. As seen in Table 6, in terms of 'locus of causality' dimension, while the percentage of internal attributions in success situations is 71.1, it decreases to 41.1% in failure situations. Conversely, the percentage of external attributions in success situations is 26; however, it goes up to 56.5%

in failure situations. Causal dimension styles of the students with different perceptions of success creates a significant difference in terms of locus of control ( $\chi^2=56.16$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In other words, internal attributions outnumber external attributions in success situation, yet external attributions outnumber internal attributions in failure situation. It is obvious that attributions of failure-oriented students are highly external when compared to success-oriented ones.

**Table 6**

Locus of Control

	Missing (N)	(%)	Internal (N)	(%)	External (N)	(%)	Total (N)	(%)	$\chi^2=56.16$ sd=2 p=.000*
Success	7	2.8	175	71.1	64	26	246	100	
Failure	9	2.4	153	41.1	210	56.5	372	100	
Total	16	2.6	328	3.1	274	44.3	618	100	

As seen in Table 7, for 'stability' dimension, attributions of success-oriented students are slightly less unstable than those of failure-oriented students. 46.3% of the causes for success were perceived to be unstable, and 50% of them to be stable by the participants. In failure situation students make slightly more unstable attributions (53.5%) than those in success situations.

The percentage of stability goes down to 43.8 in failure attributions. The causal dimensionality of success-oriented and failure-oriented students does not show significant difference in terms of stability dimension ( $\chi^2=3.7$ ,  $p>.05$ ). In other words, attributions of both success and failure show similar characteristics of stability.

**Table 7**

Stability

	Missing (N)	(%)	Unstable (N)	(%)	Stable (N)	(%)	Total (N)	(%)	$\chi^2=3.17$ sd=2 p=.205
Success	9	3.7	114	46.3	123	50	246	100	
Failure	10	2.7	199	53.5	163	43.8	372	100	
Total	19	3.1	313	50.6	286	46.3	618	100	

As seen in Table 8, for 'controllability' dimension, success-oriented students report highly controllable attributions when compared to failure-oriented students. The percentage of controllable attributions is 63 in success situations, and it decreases to 37.1 in failure situations. 31% of the attributions for success were perceived to be uncontrollable but the percen-

tage of uncontrollable attributions for failure goes up to 60.2. Controllability extent of the attributions demonstrated by success and failure-oriented students was found to be significantly different ( $\chi^2=48.27$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In other words, success-oriented students make many more controllable attributions than failure-oriented students.

**Table 8***Controllability*

	Missing (N)	(%)	controllable (N)	(%)	uncontrollable (N)	(%)	Total (N)	(%)	$\chi^2=48.27$ sd=2 $p=.000^*$
Success	13	5.3	155	63	78	31.7	246	100	
Failure	10	2.7	138	37.1	224	60.2	372	100	
Total	23	3.7	293	47.4	302	48.9	618	100	

### Adaptive / Maladaptive Attributional Styles

The fourth research question concerned the extent to which learners' attributions are favorable / unfavo-

rable in terms of forming adaptive / maladaptive future behaviors. Casual dimensionality of success and failure groups can be found in Table 9 below.

**Table 9***Causal Dimensions in Success and Failure*

Causal dimensionality	Success-oriented (N)	( % )	Failure-oriented (N)	( % )
Internal	175	<b>71.1</b>	153	41.1
External	64	26	210	<b>56.5</b>
Unstable	114	46.3	199	<b>53.5</b>
Stable	123	<b>50</b>	163	43.8
Controllable	155	<b>63</b>	138	37.1
Uncontrollable	78	31.7	224	<b>60.2</b>

Note. Higher percentages are shown in boldface.

The causal explanations given for success in language learning process were found to be highly internal, controllable, and relatively more stable. The students who consider themselves successful reported approximately three times as many internal causes as external ones. For stability dimension, the percentage of stability dimension was slightly higher (50%) than instability (46.3%). For controllability dimension, the students reported two times as many controllable

causes as uncontrollable ones. These findings might show that success oriented students are more likely to view future success highly probable as they believe that the causes behind their success are under their control. Also, internal attributions that they make for their success would enhance the personal responsibility and striving for success. Attributing success to relatively stable causes (50%) should lead to higher expectancies of future success. These attributional

patterns are considered to be quite healthy (adaptive) for future behaviors as Brophy (1998, p. 55) states "attributing a successful performance to internal and mostly stable and controllable causes gives us a reason to believe that we will continue to succeed on this and similar tasks in the future". In the case of failure, the causal explanations given by 92 students were more external, uncontrollable and relatively more unstable. 56.5 % of the causes reported by failure-oriented students were external. This might show that they are less likely to take responsibility of their failure, which would hinder striving for success. Also, for controllability dimension, the students reported approximately two times as many uncontrollable causes as controllable ones. With highly external and uncontrollable attributional patterns, failure-oriented students seem to have unhealthy (maladaptive) attributional styles. However, more than half of the (53.5%) causes for stability dimension were reported as unstable. This finding is a sign of healthier attributional style for failure-oriented students as they might view that the situation would change and they might have a chance to do better in the future.

## Discussion and Conclusion

From the findings of this study, we can conclude that among the participants there are more students who perceive themselves as unsuccessful than students who perceive themselves as successful. This might be inferred as the necessity for informing students on the possible negative effects of their perceptions on their language learning process. Moreover, teachers need to be aware of their students' attributions. Another conclusion of this study is that failure-oriented students reported more causes for their failure than success-oriented students did for their success. It is assumed that learners come up with more attributions especially when they get unexpected results (McLoughlin, 2007). The results for the Turkish students' attributions of failure might be explained by this assumption. This attributional "search is not undertaken following all events, and is particularly likely when an outcome is negative, unexpected, and/or important" (Weiner, 2000, p. 2). This result might imply the necessity of encouraging the failure-oriented students to become more successful language learners by finding ways of altering their perceptions depending on the causes of failure.

Among 246 reasons cited for success, almost one half (48.37%) was concerned with effort. Effort attributions of success are thought to have definite psychological consequences, usually classified by locus (high self-esteem), expectancy of success (a sense of hopefulness) and controllability (leading to pride) (Tse, 2000; Weiner, 2000) and higher self-efficacy (Hsieh and Kang 2010). Therefore, it may be advisable for teachers to reward students' practicing efforts and to provide opportunities to use what they practice in actual communicative situations.

For failure, the students in this study reported school / program / system attribution, which is related to learning context and thus can be accepted as external and maladaptive, as the most important cause of their failure. Unsuccessful students ascribe their failure mostly to intensive language program and heavy lesson schedules. At this point, the students should be enlightened about the aim and necessity of such a program at the very beginning of their learning process. Failure-oriented students in this study reported lack of effort as the second most important cause of their failure. Although students in failure-oriented group did not report effort attribution as often as the ones in success-oriented group, they still put the lack of effort attribution at the second place by stating it 75 times, which is almost one fifth of all causes. In the case of failure, lack of effort attribution would enhance the personal responsibility for the failure and increase striving for success (Rui & Liang, 2008; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). From these results, it is possible to conclude that failure-oriented students in this study tend to take the responsibility of their failure. This might imply the necessity of encouraging those who believe their failure is due to lack of effort to put forth some more effort on tasks. In this sense, teacher feedback plays a crucial role on forming certain attributions such as strategy use, effort (Schunk and Gunn, 1986).

For both success and failure situations, teacher attribution came in the third place. Similar to the findings of Erten and Burden's study (2014), in Turkish context students tend to emphasize teacher attribution in both failure and success situations. There is no doubt that teachers have a significant role on students' academic achievement in language classrooms (Ormrod, 2006; Weiner, 2000). Weiner (2000) points out

that success and failure occur in a rich social context, which includes peers, teachers, and parents. Within this view, the significant role of teachers on student motivation in language classrooms becomes more apparent (Ormrod, 2006; Weiner, 2000).

It is possible to say that the widespread attributions such as ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck (Gobel et al., 2013; Graham, 1991; Weiner, 1979, 1984) were not found to have that much of importance according to Turkish students except for effort attribution. This shows that the students believe they have some control over the causes of their outcomes. If we consider Perry et al.'s (1993) argument that how students think about their successes and failures is significant for academic success, we might conclude that Turkish students' belief that they have control over their academic achievement will most probably help them experience success. When students believe that they have little control over their academic achievement, they experience poor performance.

The results about ability attribution contradict the findings of Altan (2006), Gobel et al. (2013), and Aydın (1999) about perception of learning English. In this study, the students at Anadolu University do not think that ability plays an important role in language learning, which is quite advantageous for expectations for future success in case of failure. Brown, Gray and Ferrara's study (2005) reveals similar findings pointing out that Japanese, Chinese, and Turkish students do not appear to believe that their learning outcomes will be limited by their inherent abilities. On the other hand, ability attribution in success situations should be considered to be promising (Graham, 2004; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008). At this point, encouraging ability attribution through teacher feedback in success situations might help learners to have higher self-esteem and expectancy. In failure situations teachers should encourage effort attribution rather than ability attribution.

Although attributions on strategy use is considered seriously in research (Graham, 2004), in this study, none of the causes was about strategy use. There are also implications for teachers of foreign languages with regard to the value of strategy training in the language classroom to enable students to learn how to learn more effectively. This might show that some students are not aware of the importance of learning

strategies. Consequently, the teachers should help students become more aware of skills and learning strategies they may need to develop (McLoughlin, 2007).

In this study, success-oriented students demonstrated significantly more internal and controllable attributional styles than failure-oriented students, a finding similar to some attribution studies in foreign language context (e.g. Can, 2005; Hsieh and Kang 2010; Pecacock 2009). Internal causal attributions were made for success (71.1 %) while relatively more external causal attributions were made for failure (56.5 %). The difference between the means is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). This finding suggests the existence of self-serving attribution or "self protective tendencies that are widely recognized in cognitive psychology" (Gobel & Mori, 2007, p. 162) in our sample, and it supports the findings of a number of studies carried out in Western cultures (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde & Hankin, 2004) but is not in agreement with studies done with Asian Groups (Gobel & Mori, 2007).

Success is attributed to more controllable causes (63 %), and failure to more uncontrollable ones (60.2 %). The difference between the means is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). It can be considered that attributing a successful performance to internal and mostly controllable causes give students a reason to believe that they will continue to succeed on the similar tasks in the future (Brophy, 1998). Students in the failure-oriented group, through "retribution training", can be trained to attribute unsuccessful outcomes to relatively more internal and controllable causes which could prevent learned helplessness and depression (Försterling, 1985, 1988, 2001).

Reasons for success are perceived as being relatively more stable than reasons for failure. However the difference between the means is not statistically significant. Success-oriented group demonstrated slightly more stable attributions. It might be concluded that having more stable attributions those students tend to have higher expectancy for future success. As Weiner (1980, 1992) claims, if people believe cause is stable, then the outcome is likely to be the same if they perform the same behavior on another occasion. The causes reported by failure-oriented group are slightly more unstable. This may be considered as a positive finding because if the reasons for failure were perceived

ved as being stable, there could be a tendency for helplessness and despair as Weiner (2000) points out that if failure ascribed to a stable cause, then the same negative outcome will be anticipated following a failure.

About causal dimensionality, in case of failure, the students in this study had external / unstable / uncontrollable attributional styles. Except from stability dimension, it can be considered that the students in this study mostly have maladaptive attributional styles. They are less likely to take responsibility of their failure, which in turn hinders striving for success. It is possible to expect that they will believe they can never avoid failure; therefore, they may put little effort on school tasks, and have lower persistence levels, which, in return, will make them give up easily (Brophy, 1998; Stipek, 1988). However, for stability dimension the findings seem promising as the students believe that the causes behind their failures are mostly unstable, which would make them believe the circumstances might change for better in the future. With regard to maladaptive attributional styles of failure-oriented students, certain precautions against unhealthy attributional styles of such students should be taken with the help of teachers via attribution retraining or teacher feedback. It is possible to sustain self-efficacy at a high level even for failure-oriented students when failure is attributed to internal, controllable, and unstable factors (Hsieh & Schallert, 2008). Teachers can help a student set realistic goals by discussing with the student a task in which the student had performed poorly. Teachers should help students determine reasons for poor performance. It is known that attributions are not stable and can change in time. This might help teachers who can affect the future causal attributions of students, "influencing the way students view themselves as learners, how they construct notions of success and failure, and even their view of themselves and their progress in learning a language" (Gobel & Mori, 2007, p. 166). At this point, it is advisable to encourage the students not to attribute their failures to stable dispositions such as task difficulty or inability (McLoughlin, 2007; Waugh, 2002). In order to overcome potential drawbacks that may appear in the low motivation situations, Brophy (1998) suggests teachers help their students learn to attribute their successes to internal factors, and to attribute failures to temporary factors (lack of task-relevant information, strategy use). This suggestion has no use if teachers are not aware of their students causal attributions for their achievements. Therefore,

findings of this study might shed light on learner perceptions so that teachers can help reshape their students' possible maladaptive attributional thinking.

When it comes to success, the causal explanations given for success were found to be highly internal / controllable and relatively more stable. These findings prove that success oriented students tend to view future success highly probable as they believe that the causes behind their success are under their control. Also, internal attributions that they make for their success would enhance the personal responsibility and striving for success. Attributing success to relatively stable causes (50 %) should lead to higher expectancies of future success. These attributional patterns are considered to be quite adaptive (healthy) for future behaviors as Brophy (1998:55) states "attributing a successful performance to internal and mostly stable and controllable causes gives us a reason to believe that we will continue to succeed on this and similar tasks in the future".

### Suggestions for further research

There are obvious limitations to the present study. One limitation is the size of the sample. Clearly, the larger the sample, the more stable the results would be across similar samples. Conclusions about Turkish learners' attributional styles would be more generalizable if more participants were involved.

The second concern is about the approach to analyze data. In this study an interpretative approach was used to analyze the data gathered by means of an open-ended questionnaire. This has strengthened our belief in the value of such studies as compared with more statistically based methods. However, more in-depth interpretative research, possibly employing interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons for learners' attributions, would certainly seem to be warranted.

It is also important to note that this study revealed a wider range of attributions than is generally reported in attribution literature. This might prove that perceptions of success and failure are inevitably context-specific, which leads to a call for more attribution studies in different cultural contexts. Also, how learner beliefs vary over time, from person to person, and setting to setting needs to be explored. Similar studies might give English language teachers and curriculum planners insights into how to set their goals, determine their teaching techniques, approaching their learners and increase motivation in foreign language context.



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