

STUDENTS' BACKGROUND DIFFERENCES AND APPROACHES TO OBSTACLES IN LEARNING ENGLISH: A CASE STUDY

Yrd. Doç. Dr. Adem Sultan TURANLI

Erciyes Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi
turanli@erciyes.edu.tr

Abstract

This qualitative case study aimed at investigating the ways students with different previous learning experiences go through in order to survive the problems faced within a foreign language learning context. The data were gathered qualitatively through semi structured interviews. The students who were purposefully sampled were each interviewed twice. It was found that when students with different entry characteristics go through a similar challenge, they react differently to the obstacles in the way. Students with former failures in learning find it harder to cope with the problems than students with little or no earlier experience in language learning. Since self-efficacy is closely related to students' backgrounds, the knowledge of students' previous experience in language learning and students' strategies against the learning problems may enable teachers to help their students throughout the process.

Keywords: Previous experience, foreign language learning difficulties, coping strategies

İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRENMEDE ÖĞRENCİLERİN DENEYİM FARKLILIKLARI VE SORUNLARA YAKLAŞIMLARI: BİR DURUM ÇALIŞMASI

Öz

Durum incelemesi tarzındaki bu nitel çalışma; farklı öğrenme deneyimleri olan öğrencilerin, yabancı dil öğrenilen bir ortamda karşılaşılan problemlerin üstesinden gelmek için başvurdukları yaklaşımları belirlemeyi hedeflemiştir. Veriler, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme yöntemiyle toplanmıştır. Amaçlı örnekleme yöntemiyle seçilen öğrencilerin her biriyle iki defa görüşülmüştür. Farklı giriş nitelikleri olan öğrencilerin; daha önce denenmiş bir 'zorlukla' yeniden yüzleştirildiklerinde, engellere farklı tepki gösterdikleri tespit edilmiştir. Başarısız öğrenme deneyimleri olan öğrenciler, deneyimi çok az olan veya hiç olmayan öğrencilere göre, yabancı dil öğrenmeyle ilgili sorunlarla başa çıkmada daha fazla zorlanmaktadır. Öz-yeterlik, öğrencilerin geçmiş deneyimleriyle yakından ilgili olduğu için, öğrencilerin geçmiş yaşantılarına ve öğrenme sorunlarına karşı tercih ettikleri yaklaşımlara ilişkin bilgi, öğretmenlerin öğrencilerine yardımcı olmasını kolaylaştırabilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Önceki deneyimler, yabancı dil öğrenme zorlukları, baş etme stratejileri

1. Introduction

In the educational system of Turkey, students start taking English courses from very early grades. As long as schools meet the needs, installing English courses in the curricula from the earlier grades on is reasonable. However, due to various deficits in the educational system such as student-teacher ratio, equipment, etc., failure may be unavoidable. Regular Turkish students are supposed to take around one thousand English lessons before the tertiary level (university or college). However, for various reasons, most of the students are not so lucky as to take so many lessons; or even if they do, they cannot reach the pre-stated goals. Those who have even taken private lessons or attended some private courses often fail to attain a satisfactory command of English. Such negative experience may hinder students in their later attempts to learn, as the theory of transfer supports, and it may cause learnt-helplessness¹.

On the other hand, even today in spite of many improvements recently made, there might still be many high school graduates who have taken few English lessons until they graduate. Correspondingly, they have few impressions about language learning, either positive or negative. It is believed that it is hard to change people's beliefs, such students with little or no negative experience in language learning are expected to cope with the obstacles more comfortably than those with negative backgrounds.

In foreign language classes, the flow of activities is relatively much faster than that in most of the other courses. The teacher may often do several activities within a 40-minute session. Many ambiguities in class threaten students and make them feel less secure². Children are harsher critics than adults when mistakes are made³. Therefore, students are in the risk of being ridiculed by their classmates due to some mistakes. Likewise, when they ask about something ambiguous, they may feel that they look foolish. Also, some students may be ridiculed just because they cannot speak any English, whereas some of their classmates can express themselves quite well. Such problems may trigger high anxiety and fear of failure⁴, making students escape classroom activities.

Time spent on teaching is waste of time unless learning occurs. Cook states that the strategies students choose in order to learn something are closely related to the propositions they bring to the classroom, and students' varied levels of motivation for learning has a strong bearing on their success. Cook also warns that

¹ C. B. Darch, & E. J. Kameenui, *Instructional Classroom Management: A Proactive Approach to Behavior Management* (2nd ed.), Longman, White Plains, NY, 2003.

² D. Allwright, & K. M. Bailey, *Focus on the Language Classroom: An Introduction to Classroom Research for Language Teachers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 172-175.

³ H. D. Brown, *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, Longman, New York, 2000, p66.

⁴ G. Spielmann, & M. Radnofsky, Learning Language under Tension: New Directions from a Qualitative Study. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85, 259-278, 2001; H. D. Brown, *Principles of Learning and Teaching*, pp143-152.

learning takes places in the privacy of students' minds and they may have fully switched off and be doing something totally different from what the teacher expects them to. In the same work, Cook adds that "the different ways in which students tackle learning also affect their success and what is happening in the class is not equally productive for all the students because their minds work in different ways."⁵ He reminds that these differences do not vanish immediately and students' actions usually depend on their previous experience of learning. Supporting Cook, Cohen and Dörnyei claim that students approach learning tasks with different abilities, agendas, degrees of application, and attitudes to education in general and the language in particular⁶. Similarly, at any grade level, the values, norms, and behaviors of the group significantly affect individual students' feelings such as safety, belongingness, respect for others and self-esteem, and they add that this influence may be positive or negative⁷. Hadley suggests that teachers have difficulty in coping with individual differences and irregularities since people sense and respond to the things around them differently from their peers⁸.

Even if the teacher is aware that such individual differences have different levels of interference with learning, they may not notice how their students feel or they may tend to look down on students' feelings. Consequently, learners with emotional problems are left alone to cope with them on their own. However, when the teacher has a clear mind about the influence of the problems, it is often too late to get over the problem. In such a case, the teacher cannot do anything in order to motivate and encourage students to overcome the obstacles.

Despite the similarities of the problems, students' reactions to them and their ways of handling them differ due to their backgrounds⁹. Language teachers know that not all students can achieve all goals and behavioral objectives to a desired level. Only a limited number of students meet the program requirements while many others may leave the program in the middle or lose their hopes. Such failures reduce students' self-confidence since self efficacy is formed by previous experience¹⁰. Still some students, at the end of the course, may end up with increased self-confidence and positive attitude toward language learning even though they have not fully met the program requirements. Consequently, they most likely take up new learning situations with positive expectations.

Teachers have to be aware about and empathize with students' feelings which may lead to academic failure, and despite the similarities of the obstacles that

⁵ V. Cook, *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching*, Arnold, London, 2001, p9.

⁶ A. D. Cohen, & Z. Dörnyei, Focus on the Language Learner: Motivation, Styles and Strategies, In *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*, Arnold, London, 2002, p170.

⁷ V. F. Jones, & L. S. Jones, *Comprehensive Classroom Management: Creating Communities of Support and Solving Problems*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 2003, pp. 39-40.

⁸ A. O. Hadley, *Teaching Language in Context*, Heinle & Heinle Publishers, Boston, 2003, p64.

⁹ J. S. Cangelosi, *Classroom Management Strategies: Gaining and Maintaining Students' Cooperation*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1988, p54.

¹⁰ A. Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1977.

students are faced with, it may be a total mystery to most teachers why some students fail while some others can achieve all the goals. A teacher with enough knowledge thereupon who may diagnose students' failure can interfere in the process, when necessary, and help the students who are likely to fail.

This study was planned to investigate how students with different learning backgrounds in learning English approach the obstacles in their way. Consequently, the major concern and the research question of this paper can be stated as: "*How do students with different backgrounds of learning English differ in their reactions to the difficulties within later learning contexts?*" However, since the study did not aim to generalize for other students or contexts, the conclusions should be cautiously used.

2. Method

Since qualitative studies aim to explore, find out something¹¹, this descriptive qualitative study aimed at identifying the emotional processes that language students with different performances go through in order to cope with similar problems within the same context. The following features of descriptive and qualitative studies had the researcher study the research question descriptively and qualitatively: First, descriptive studies are mainly concerned with portraying the present and try to clarify the nature of the factors that have led to the present conditions. They initially identify the nature of factors and interpreting the meaning of the existing conditions¹². On the other hand, qualitative studies aim to identify the perceptions and events in a realistic and holistic way, using the qualitative data gathering instruments. They are conducted to study the phenomena in their own contexts. Sensitivity to the natural environment, the participant role of the researcher, holistic orientation and its power in digging perceptions out are some of the strengths of qualitative studies¹³. In addition, one of the most common ways of data gathering in qualitative studies is interviewing, and people often express their feelings, opinions, experiences in interviews¹⁴.

This study also used case study method. In a case study, a case is researched, or tested. In case studies, the case is usually defined as a bound system or as a unique and integrated system¹⁵. Besides, in case studies, a bound system or a topic/problem, etc. is chosen, investigated and the boundary of the case is identified

¹¹ B. L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, Allyn and Bacon, Needham Heights, Mass., 1995, p6.; Bogdan, R. C. & Biklen, S. K., *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1998, p38.

¹² V. Gajendra, (Ed.), *Researching Education: Perspectives and Techniques*, Falmer Press, London, 1998, pp. 78-80.

¹³ A. Yıldırım, & H. Şimşek, *Sosyal Bilimlerde Nitel Araştırma Yöntemleri* (6. Baskı), Seçkin, Ankara, 2006, pp. 48-65.

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 40-41.

¹⁵ R. Stake, *The Art of Case Research*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA., 1995, pp. 2-3.

by the researcher¹⁶. So the possible cases of this study were the students at the Basic English Program at a Turkish university.

Technique: The study used “note taking” technique in undertaking the interviews and remarks were taken from the students’ responses relevant to the research question. Finally, a composite history was made up from the responses of each group, as suggested by Cohen & Manion¹⁷.

Context of the Study: The class where the sample was taken from was one of the 45 groups in a school of foreign languages at a Turkish university; the students in the school had to study Basic English for a year before they started their majors. This is how the students are normally placed in their classes before the lessons start: The new coming students are given a placement test by the program planners/implementers to provide data for program evaluation at the end of each academic year. The students are placed in their classes according to the scores they get in the placement test.

In the academic year when this study was conducted, the classes were purposefully made partly homogenous (in order to avoid huge differences among students in terms of their levels of English) by the program planners, with the assumption that within any same context, students with similar learning backgrounds would have similar learning and motivational problems. That is to say; when the teachers started teaching their students, this was how they found the class and they had no interference with the structure of the school or the classes. The researcher was one of the teachers instructing the class.

In the given class, there were six girls and 18 boys between 17 and 20 years of age, which was a distribution close to the school population. The researcher was informed by the program planners that 14 of the students in the 24-student class were at *pre-intermediate* level, while the other ten students were *beginners*. However, within three or four weeks, the students’ reactions toward difficulties started to differ, even of the students who were initially placed in the same category as *beginners*: some students were fighting against the difficulties and problems in their way, whereas some of them were losing their courage. Such differences invoked the researcher (teacher) to investigate the reasons why the students went through different ways.

The Sample: Ten students were selected, using *purposive sampling* method, which is one of the sampling methods suitable for qualitative research¹⁸. Before informing the ten students about the study who were initially named by the program

¹⁶ C. Adelman, D. Jenkins, & R. Kemmis, Rethinking Case Study. In J. Bell, T. Bush, A. Fox, J. Goodey & S. Goulding, (Eds.), (1984). *Conducting Small-scale Investigations in Educational Management*, Harper & Row and the Open University, London, 1976, pp. 93-102.

¹⁷ L. Cohen, & L. Manion, *Research Methods in Education*, Routledge, London, 1996, pp. 294-295.

¹⁸ R. C. Bogdan, & S. K. Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1998, p38; A. Yıldırım, & H. Şimşek, *Sosyal Bilimlerde Nitel Araştırma Yöntemleri*, pp. 107-114.

planners as *beginners*, the researcher observed the whole class for one and a half months. Afterwards, the ten students were all verified by the researcher himself to be (*full or false*) *beginners* in English and they constituted the target sample. Out of these *beginners*, four had almost had no experience in language learning (*full beginners*) and three of these four had already begun to gain some achievements when the research design was set up. However, the other six students (*false beginners*) had some negative attitudes towards language learning and four of these six were not willing to learn English at all. In addition to considering their levels in English, their willingness for participation was also sought for ethical reasons; therefore, they were all convinced to take part in the study voluntarily.

Research Question: The major concern and the research question of this paper can be stated as: “*How do students with different backgrounds of learning English differ in their reactions to the difficulties within later learning contexts?*”

Data Gathering and Analysis: In order to answer the research question, interviews were thought to provide more profundity in responses because the researcher was, in a sense, part of the class as a teacher and had intimate relations with the students. Interviewing was the only way of data gathering and the students were observed just for sampling purposes or for ensuring that there did not happen to be anything unexpected.

The Interviews: The ten students were interviewed twice during the study (named as Interviews A and B); once soon after they were invited to participate in the study and once when the first four-month term of the program ended. The first interviews aimed at identifying the ten students’ backgrounds in learning English as a foreign language and their first impressions when they started the course. The second interviews were held to identify the students’ feelings and perceptions about their learning difficulties and coping strategies. Each interview lasted 25 to 30 minutes.

The researcher prepared the interview questions in a semi structured form. Since it was open to modification, some follow-up questions were asked during the interviews, in need of clarification. Since the participants did not want the interviews to be recorded, the researcher took short notes of the students’ responses during the interviews and tried to complete them thereafter. They were mainly asked the following major questions:

Interview A:

You have been here for about one and a half months...

1. How did you feel at the beginning of the course and how did you relate your impressions to their previous language learning experience?
2. How do you feel about learning English in this program now after one and a half months you started?

Interview B:

The first term is about to end. You have been here for about four months...

1. What kinds of problems have you had within this course, related to learning English and how have you tried to cope with them?
2. How are you feeling now about the process you have gone through? How has your progress affected you?

The short notes taken during the interviews were completed after the interviews. The remarks from the students' responses relevant to the research question were picked up and sorted out according to the group (*full* or *false* beginners) they came from in order to make up a composite history of each group. Since the relevance of the remarks was considered more important than their frequency, each new comment was used to make up the histories.

The information from the ten students was used to make up the two *composite* histories for the students who were initially named as *full* and *false* beginners. The histories of language learning for two groups of students are given below.

Full Beginners

They attended a primary school in a village/a little town/in the suburbs where they were almost never taught English or another foreign language. They went to a secondary school downtown where they had some English lessons. Mostly, a teacher of geography, of mathematics or the like with a little knowledge of English were assigned to teach them, which is a very common way of meeting the official requirements in Turkey so that students can satisfy the requirements for graduation. Despite the low level of efficiency attained, they mostly liked or did not complain much about studying a foreign language. As for their level of English at the beginning of the course, they were nearly a full beginner with a vocabulary of around 200 words or less, mostly inaccurately pronounced.

False Beginners

They attended primary and secondary schools in a big town/a city center. They all studied English in the middle and secondary schools every year. However, they have not learned much English because almost every year they had new teachers and sometimes more than one in an academic year who mostly used different building strategies and did not build up onto the previous courses. Therefore, these students have grasped only a small number of structures and a limited vocabulary. In addition, as a detrimental impact of different teaching strategies, these students believe that English is too complicated and difficult to understand. At the beginning of the English preparatory class at the tertiary level, most of them had the impression that no matter how hard they studied English, they would not be able to learn it.

3. Findings

The students' responses in the interviews were sorted out under two headings and the relevant remarks were used to build the profiles of the two groups of students. The parts of the profiles that were made up out of the notes are presented in line with the research question. It has to be kept in mind that the information given in the profiles does not belong to a unique person but to those who were grouped under those two headings. For each sub-section, some major points made by students are first presented, followed by a composite summary of their remarks

3.1. Impressions at the very beginning of the course

The first interview questions aimed at investigating the students' impressions at the beginning of the course and how the students related their impressions to their previous language learning experience. Students' first impressions were thought to influence their following behaviors and, consequently, their levels of achievement. Therefore, the ten students' first feelings when they started the course were investigated, and this is how their first impressions were:

Most of the *beginners* were unhappy and frustrated because they were again face to face with the challenge of learning English in which they had previously failed many times in primary or secondary schools. They all believed that not many students could learn English in schools. However, most of the students in this group (*beginners*) believed that some students in their class (*pre-intermediate ones*) 'had already gained a command of English to an extent to 'tell something' (when compared to themselves) and they assumed those students to be lucky "products" of the educational system.

One of the differences between the students was related to their perceptions deriving from their previous experience in language learning. The *false beginners* started this last program with a negative attitude as a result of their previous failures in language learning. Although they previously studied English for a long time, they had failed to learn it. Their former failures had possibly made them over-generalize their negative impressions to similar contexts, and consequently they were inclined to think that they would fail again.

On the other hand, as for the *full beginners*, they were not fully aware of the prospective difficulties waiting for them because they had not had almost any experience in language learning. Therefore, the only source that might have built their perceptions was what their peers told them about the difficulties of learning a language. Finally, it was also noted that both groups of students were negatively influenced by the fact that some of their peers were doing better in class than them.

Full Beginners

They did not have any opportunity to learn English in the schools that they attended previously. Rather, they did not have almost any teachers of English or any English courses. Therefore, most of them predicted that learning English would be difficult for them but they did not have any personal impression (positive or negative) on what difficulties were waiting for them. They had just heard from their peers that since it was too difficult to learn a language, it was a kind of time wasting. And at the very beginning of the course, they noticed it was really difficult; everything was new to them and they could never make use of anything they had learnt before. The spellings and the pronunciations of the words were different; and it was hard to make just one sentence. Most of them were afraid to say something in English and to make a mistake. However, some of their classmates were more comfortable in class and they were participating in the activities willingly in order to show that they knew more than their classmates. They thought that those who seemed to know more were trying to impress the other students who knew little or no English.

False Beginners

At the beginning of the school, most of these students were aware that they would have many difficulties learning English in their new attempt; it was because they had taken many English courses for many years but in vain. They had always found it very difficult to learn English. They mostly complained that almost every year, their English teachers had started from the very beginning, teaching the very common structures and tenses in English again and again. However, none of them could use any of those structures or tenses properly or even remember few of them in written examinations. Before the present course, most of them had teachers teaching them English who were trained to teach geography, mathematics or something. Consequently, they all failed to teach.

It can be concluded that the educational system does not help students develop language skills. Students enter schools at higher levels with drawbacks, which is an indicator of coming failure. There are various humors among students on how difficult learning a language is which often discourage students to even attempt. However, students may have alternatives; some tend to be optimistic while others may be pessimistic.

3. 2. Impressions changing

In order to explore the students' perceptual and behavioral changes, the students were asked to talk about how they were feeling one and a half months after they had started the course. Their main remarks about and the composite summary for the topic are given below.

Some weeks after the classes had started, the perceptual differences between the two groups of students got somewhat bigger and clearer. The *full beginners* admitted their relatively lower position compared to their classmates as a

result of self-reflection and gave up comparing themselves with their classmates. Consequently, most of them made more effort to improve their English and attempted to get rid of their fears. They did not avoid their teachers' questions and even hoped to be asked questions.

On the contrary, the *false beginners* went on comparing themselves with their classmates and tended to regard their achievements as a sign of their own failure. Most of them were worried by the likelihood of being asked questions, and they thereby pretended to be dealing with something else and avoided being seen by the teachers. Their fears went on increasing and they mostly associated their new experience with their previous failures. In addition, it became pointless to them to be studying further because they tended to believe that studying did not make a difference in the short run.

Full Beginners

They got somewhat disappointed at the beginning when they compared themselves to their peers who could speak English much better than the others and who could sometimes be boastful. However, they also thought that they might behave almost in the same way if they were in the shoes of the others who knew more English. On the other hand, most of these students observed that the teachers behaved impartially, which implied to them that the teachers believed that they, the poor students, could achieve, as well: *'If the teacher had not believed this, he would have been dealing with only the better students.'* Therefore, they decided to do their best in order to improve their English. Although they rarely participated in the activities voluntarily, they did not fear that the teacher would ask them a question. In addition, when the teachers sometimes asked them or forced them a bit to participate in the activities or to read out their answers, they felt respected and encouraged to some extent.

False Beginners

Some weeks after the course had begun, these students observed that some of their classmates more readily participated in the activities and that some of their classmates were quite hard-working and tried to do their best, though not very willing to participate yet. However, they themselves were unwilling to participate and were afraid that the teacher would ask them something. Therefore, they always pretended to be interested in something else, avoiding eye contact, for fear that they would catch the teacher's eye. As time went by, their fear of failure mostly turned to a kind of despair and they started to believe that they would fail to learn English again, in the same way as they had before. In addition, they also noticed that some of their peers who were studying very hard could not achieve as much as they deserved. Therefore, they started to believe that working hard did not necessarily mean high grades.

The process that students go through is greatly affected by their previous impressions. The context in which students are taught is also influential on

students' perceptions, and consequently performance. It can be concluded that the perceptual changes of two groups of students were formed by both their backgrounds and the present context. Being influenced by this combination, students often choose their ways against the obstacles; some get stronger while others get weaker.

3. 3. Strategies against the difficulties

The students were asked about what strategies they were using in order to tackle the difficulties in the way of learning the target language. Some notes from their responses and the composite summary are given below:

As time went by, the differences in perceptions between the two groups became more apparent. The *full beginners* had been attending the classes and had never chosen to give up hopes. They were often happy with some small achievements that increased their hopes. As a result, most of them made study schedules and tried to study regularly. On the other hand, the *false beginners* tended to lose their interest and hopes in learning English, leading them to study in an unplanned manner or not to study at all. This negative attitude toward studying led to their more frequent absenteeism from class. They believed that their classmates developed negative attitudes toward them. As a result of using up their credits not to attend the classes (%20 of all classes), they had to be in class even when they were very bored or tired. This resulted in more negative feelings toward the course and lower grades in examinations.

Full Beginners

They never missed a class and carefully attended to their teachers. They were trying to do their best to understand the instructions and explanations of their teachers, given mostly in English, although it was still difficult most of the time. They also worked hard outside the class and sometimes stayed up late studying at nights. In addition, they tried to get some help from their classmates. Consequently, they started to feel that they were having some small achievements, such as somewhat higher grades than the class mean in some quizzes. Such improvements highly motivated them and increased their hopes that they could learn some English. Feeling more hopeful, they got inclined to study harder. However, they thought that there were still a lot to do ahead of them.

False Beginners

The difficulties in class disheartened them and they got less willing to take part in the activities or to study outside class. Although they kept on studying out of class, it was not a regular study. Since they felt that some of their classmates looked down on them as poor students or felt pity for them due to their failures, they got less and less secure in class. Failure to learn and low attendance functioned like a vicious circle for them and induced each other. They had already missed quite a lot of lessons and they had to follow all the following ones (because they were officially obliged to attend more than eighty percent of the total number of lessons). In other words,

they were in class, but restless and unhappy. Since they were not interested in classes, they did not attend to the teacher or did not study hard enough. Consequently, they did so badly in their examinations that they tended to feel desperate to learn English.

It is concluded that repeated failures lead to learned helplessness, and students' tolerance to difficulties is not limitless. In addition, new teachers may bring the class an inspiration, but no inspiration is endless. Therefore, students in a new course have a limited time to get attracted into a subject; otherwise, he will get out of the track. When students notice that they have a lot to do, but are short of time, they already know that they have limited options; they should either work very hard and probably succeed or give up. When they are to make a decision, some strong students choose to work on, while some weak ones resign.

3. 4. Conclusive effects of classroom occurrences

The students were also asked to express how they handled their feelings resulting from their classroom experience. The important points from the students' responses and the composite summary of their remarks are presented below:

Their classmates and teachers noticed that the *full beginners* were making some improvements in English. Feeling more confident, the *full beginners* started to behave more courageously. They made more effort to catch the teacher's eye and to have them notice their willingness to answer, which consequently led to more questions from the teacher. Their answers were correct more often than before, which encouraged them to study harder, and they preferred to go on studying. Although they were still behind their classmates, they were not upset about it; on the contrary, they had closer relationships with their classmates and benefited from the others' knowledge. Accordingly, they tended to develop a belief that they could improve their English.

On the contrary to the *full beginners*, the *false beginners* were not much happy: they had already tended to worry that all of their negative experiences in class would damage their self-respect. They mostly felt lonely and isolated from their classmates. All of these problems became so agonizing four months after the course had started that they preferred to put off learning English again for a later time.

Full Beginners

Over time, they observed that things were changing. They also observed that their classmates and the teachers valued their efforts and the improvements in their English. Consequently, they participated in class activities (pair work, group work, reading comprehension etc.) more willingly and more frequently. Although they rarely participated in oral activities voluntarily, their and the teachers' eyes crossed more frequently, and the teachers more often asked them questions. Their answers more often happen to be correct, which made them happy but never spoiled.

Later on, they went on studying as hard and in line with their studying plans, and they were more often voluntary to answer questions. Although they could not yet speak as fluently or accurately as some of their classmates, most of them felt that they were on the right way. Most of their classmates supported their efforts, encouraged and helped them when they were in need. They also believed that their English had improved a lot from the beginning of the course and that they could even do better. Consequently, they were hopeful about their future.

False Beginners

They thought that their English had not improved at all during those four months and they consequently got to feel steadily worse. These students believed that most of the other students in class felt pity for the poor performers. The students in this group thought that their classmates sometimes laughed at them as well. Although most of their classmates, according to their perceptions, were enjoying themselves in class, the lessons turned out to be ‘a complete torture’ to them because they did not understand or enjoy doing anything in class. Consequently, they could not endure that ‘agony’ any more and decided to leave English preparatory class in the middle. In other words, it was another failure for them.

It is known that not all people are able achieve the same goals even if they are equipped with similar tools. Their stamina and motivation mostly determine who will fail or succeed. Language learning resembles going through a funnel starting from its narrow side. It cannot be predicted how long the agony in the narrow funnel will last and when the learner will reach the end to have a much larger vision. Some students tolerate the agony longer and succeed, whereas some others whine, give up and wait for a ‘better’ time to come.

4. Conclusions and suggestions

The findings from this study are summarized and some suggestions are accordingly made below. It should be kept in mind that due to the limitations in design as a qualitative study of a limited sample, the conclusions should be cautiously used and verified with further studies before generalizing to other contexts.

4.1. Conclusions

First, it was noted that students’ backgrounds influence their following experience in different ways¹⁹. Positive earlier experience leads to hopefulness for further achievements, whereas negative experience fosters discouragement. Also, grouping students heterogeneously on the basis of their levels of English may have some negative influence on lower students’ learning. They tend to compare

¹⁹ C. B. Darch, & E. J. Kameenui, *Instructional Classroom Management: A Proactive Approach to Behavior Management* (2nd ed.).

themselves with better students all the time and accordingly consider themselves unsuccessful.

Another conclusion from this study is related to the influence of participation. The less often the students participate in activities, the less likely they feel part of the class. In other words, lack of participation impedes students from feeling part of class and results in a sense of isolation²⁰. On the other hand, the student involved in the classroom life becomes a ‘member’ of class and feels more secure²¹. Besides, while the problems in the way which the students have difficulty in overcoming lead to absenteeism, those with a sense of accomplishment participate in activities more readily²². Class participation improves learning, and it helps the students feel part of the class²³.

Also, their classmates and the teacher appraise students’ obvious effort and willingness. However, they feel pity for those who lose interest in and detract from classes, which damages students’ self-esteem²⁴. This indicates that hard work and effort pay off. Moreover, a hard-working student who is highly respected by his classmates avoids comparing himself against them²⁵; on the contrary, he tries to benefit from his friends’ knowledge and experience. Finally, students who are not informed about the nature of language learning may have unrealistic expectations, such as getting to learn it perfectly in a short time. A short period of study in language learning may not necessarily lead to success, although it may do in some school courses. Expecting big achievements with small efforts is likely to result in failure and, consequently, in despair.

4. 2. Suggestions

In line with the conclusions of this study, the following can be suggested. First, the teacher who starts teaching should be aware of and try to wash away the negative effects of their previous negative experience. They should warn their students about the possible difficulties in the way. Next, students in heterogeneous classes tend to compare themselves to their peers, which may affect poorer students negatively. Therefore, while designing any course and arranging groups, students

²⁰ M. M. Rohrkemper, & T. L. Good, Proactive Teaching. In M. J. Dunkin (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Teaching and Teacher Education*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1988.

²¹ D. Allwright, & K. M. Bailey, *Focus on the Language Classroom: An Introduction to Classroom Research for Language Teachers*, pp. 158-165.

²² C. M. Charles, *Building Classroom Discipline (7th ed)*. Longman, New York, 2001, pp. 206-207.

²³ R. Comish, C. K. Rader, W. J. Daboval, & C. Northam, National Impact - A Classroom Trust Inventory. *Psychology*, 33 (1), 1996, pp. 37-40.

²⁴ H. D. Brown, *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, Longman, 145-147; D. Allwright, & K. M. Bailey, *Focus on the Language Classroom: An Introduction to Classroom Research for Language Teachers*, pp. 158-164.

²⁵ J. S. Cangelosi, *Classroom Management Strategies: Gaining and Maintaining Students' Cooperation*, pp. 76-77.

should be placed in homogeneous classes or nearly homogeneous ones in terms of their backgrounds.

In addition, the teacher should encourage and even force their students to take part in activities since participation increases sense of belongingness. Accordingly, the teacher should plan and conduct activities that may increase students' interest and participation. Besides, in language learning, a short segment of intensive study may not claim effectiveness, while a long period of regular study, though not necessarily intensive, is seen to be more useful. Therefore, students should be informed about study habits and the importance of patience in language learning. Finally, teachers who teach a foreign language should monitor their students very closely. Thus, the teacher can inform students in advance what they could expect from the program they have been attending and help them with the problems in their way throughout the process.

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