THE BLAME GAME: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' FAILURE ATTRIBUTIONS IN LEARNING ENGLISH

Ertan YAZICI[1]

Article Info	Abstract
	This qualitative single case study investigated failure attributions among the Turkish university students. A total number of 39 English preparatory repeat level students learning English at the school of foreign languages of a public university in Türkiye participated in the study. The data were collected by means of a survey consisting of a written interview form, and semi-structured individual interviews. The analysis of the data showed that lessons, homework, instructors, absenteeism, exams, and family were the participants' external failure attributions. However, their internal attributions were concerned with not studying enough, attitudes towards English, study habits, and inability to adapt. The participants' suggestions were related to more increased commitment to improve English proficiency, instructors' roles, learning vocabulary, less homework, medium of communication and instruction, and more exposure to English for decreasing failure at the research context among prospective English students.

1. Introduction

Individuals tend to make meaning of their actions' reasons most of the time. English students are no exception in this case due to trying to understand why they are successful or unsuccessful at learning English. Many language students consider language learning as a struggle because perceived failures are a common component of the learning process (Horwitz, 2001). Lessons should provide learners with consistency and unity, meaning and purpose, clear language-learning goals, a beginning and an end, and active participation (Cameron, 2001) so that they can feel motivated to continue learning. People, nevertheless, attribute unlimited number of reasons for their failures, and these views impact them; therefore, they play an important part in learning English. A key aspect of contributions might be that students' ideas and how they understand past behaviors and actions clearly influence their current and future behavior (Dörnyei, 2001).

[1] Hacettepe University, Türkiye, ertanyazici@hacettepe.edu.tr

Since first coined by Heider (1958), attribution theory has been attracting a lot of interest both in the fields of psychology and education. Attribution theory relates to how people's reasons, justifications, and excuses for their own success and failure influence their motivation (Woolfolk et al., 2003). However, according to Weiner (2010), it is all about how individuals interpret events, how they assign success or failure to various factors, and how they connect causes to outcomes. Because language learning failure is so common across the world, attributional processes are assumed to play a key influence in language learning motivation (Williams et al., 2001).

The constructivist paradigm, which stresses the social factor in knowledge generation, meaning construction, and attribution building, was employed in this study. The current research was more clearly framed within the theoretical framework of attribution theory, a social cognitive account of motivation pioneered by Weiner (2001), aiding in explaining or justifying people's educational accomplishments or failures.

According to psychologists, students use attribution to learn about themselves and to bring order to chaotic surroundings (Graham, 1994). Weiner (2010), on the other hand, defines it as individuals' subjective reasoning and justifications about why they struggled or excelled at an activity, assessment, or engagement. The most important elements determining an individual's tenacity, expectation of future success, motivation, and, as a result, academic achievement could be accepted as their attributions (Brophy, 2004).

Learners' academic success may be increased in schools through supportive and caring connections (McNeely & Falci, 2004). Blackwell et al. (2007) claim that when faced with failures, students with learning goals and positive effort attitudes are more likely to make less ability-based, helpless attributions and are less prone to attribute a potential failure to a lack of skill and are more likely to claim they would put in more effort or adjust their plan in the event of a failure. In line with attribution theory, humans have a desire to make sense of their surroundings, and making sense of their surroundings has a practical benefit by increasing their odds of surviving (Perry et al., 1993).

The objective behind attribution theory is to explore for answers and formulate hypotheses about what causes one's success or failure. Weiner's (2001) attribution theory was utilized in this study to explain how students make meaning of their failure in the language classroom, as well as how specific attributions influence academic development. To explain achievement-related outcomes, Weiner's theory relies on four important attributions which are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Multiple causative aspects - locus of control, stability, and controllability - are present in each

of these attributions. The locus denotes whether the cause of a result is external or internal. Controllability refers to whether or not the individual has influence over the reasons, while stability refers to the perceived durability of the causes.

Building on the notion that attributional factors like perceived teacher support and exam performance shape students' views on success and failure, Williams and Burden (1999) explored specific attributions related to learning a foreign language. Their study examined how students perceived success and failure, particularly focusing on the external factors like teacher influence and exam performance. The findings indicated that as students grew older, their attributions for success and failure diversified, often leaning toward external influences. This supports the role of attributional factors highlighted in the literature, showing how external perceptions affect motivation and learning persistence over time.

Expanding on attribution theory's emphasis on internal versus external causes of success and failure, Gobel and Mori (2007) investigated Japanese students' attributions in both oral and reading classes. They administered a questionnaire to 233 Japanese freshman university students, focusing on attributions such as aptitude, effort, assignment difficulty, and luck. Findings demonstrated significant relationships between exam results and attributions to ability, task difficulty, and personal interests, with failure often attributed to internal factors while success leaned toward external factors. These results reinforce the importance of how students' internal and external attributions can influence their motivation in different language learning contexts.

To further examine how demographic factors influence attributions in language learning, Peacock (2009) explored the relationship between students' attributions and their English proficiency, gender, and academic discipline among Hong Kong university students. By examining how 505 students attributed success or failure in English to 26 common attributions, Peacock's study highlighted differences in attribution patterns by proficiency, gender, and academic specialty. This study adds to the literature by illustrating how attributional perspectives differ across various demographic categories, suggesting that these personal factors significantly shape motivation and persistence in language learning.

Building on attribution theory's implications for learning motivation and persistence, Thepsiri and Pojanapunya (2010) examined the influence of English proficiency on students' success and failure attributions. Their study involved 356 freshman engineering and science students in Thailand, analyzing factors contributing to their success or failure in learning English. Results indicated that high-performing students attributed their success to effort, teacher influence, classroom atmosphere, and

preparation, while low-performing students attributed failure to a lack of aptitude and improper methods. This aligns with prior findings that personal beliefs about internal and external factors can drive learning outcomes and motivation levels.

Extending the cross-cultural examination of attributional influences in language learning, Gobel et al. (2011) conducted a comparative study of students' attributions across three Asian cultures. Involving 355 Thai, 350 Japanese, and 298 Malaysian university students, this study explored students' attributions for success and failure in different language learning tasks. Results revealed a notable lack of autonomy bias across all three cultures, suggesting an idiographic bias in how students perceive their learning efforts. These findings support previous research emphasizing cultural factors in attribution theory, highlighting similarities and differences in how Asian students perceive success and failure.

Focusing on young learners' internal and external attributions in foreign language learning, Sahinkarakas (2011) investigated how English learners attributed their success and failure to specific causes. Analyzing self-assessment papers from 52 young learners, the study found that listening to the teacher and completing homework were prominent success factors, while failures were attributed to unstable, internal factors. This supports the role of self-perception and internal control in students' motivation to improve, emphasizing the need for teachers to be mindful of these attributions in shaping students' learning experiences.

Exploring how English learners' attributions affect their academic performance, Hashemi and Zahibi (2011) conducted a study among 96 English students in Iran, linking their attributions to language proficiency. The study demonstrated that students who attributed success to effort tended to have higher proficiency scores, while those who attributed failure to task difficulty had lower scores. These findings highlight how internal and external factors, especially effort and perceived task difficulty, can significantly impact language competence, reinforcing attribution theory's emphasis on internal control and persistence in language learning.

Addressing adult learners' perspectives on attributions for success and failure, Taskiran and Aydin (2018) examined the dimensions of locus of causality, stability, and controllability among English learners and teachers. Using a questionnaire, the study found that effort, teaching, motivation, and involvement were the most frequently cited attributions by both students and teachers, with controllable and unstable factors predominating. This finding aligns with attribution theory, highlighting how both students and teachers tend to attribute outcomes to factors

within their influence, thus fostering motivation and persistence in the learning process.

Expanding attribution theory's application to task-specific contexts, Soriano-Ferrer and Alonso-Blanco (2020) investigated the attributions of success and failure among A1 and B2 level students in language schools. Findings revealed that A1 students attributed success to internal but uncontrollable factors such as effort and strategy, while B2 students attributed it to ability, grades, and preparation. This study underscores the impact of attributional perspectives on learning outcomes across proficiency levels, supporting the broader literature's emphasis on how internal and external attributions shape students' motivation and achievement.

Studies over the past two decades have provided important information on English students' motivation in learning English. However, attributions, which are perceived causes of success and failure that arise from self-questioning, have received remarkably little attention in the literature. This study may be considered unique in the literature as it is the only qualitative study examining students' attributions for failure using both written interview forms and oral interviews, specifically without influencing participants' responses through scales or directed questions.

2. Method

2.1. Design and Aim

Following a qualitative approach, this study utilized a case study design, and as a single case, the school of foreign languages of a public university in Türkiye was chosen. The research context has a considerable number of students having to repeat every term and/or year, and because of the inadequate number of English instructors and facility problems, it might be considered a critical issue within the institution. Every year, a huge number of university students, initially classified into A1, A2, and B1 levels, in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, learn English in this institution following a well-established English curriculum. In the second term, it is not uncommon for some students to have to repeat what they learned in the first term.

The aim of this study was to investigate failure attributions of the repeat level students learning English at the school of foreign languages of a public university in Türkiye. It also aimed at providing some suggestions made by the participants for the practices of the institution and its prospective English preparatory students. In order to achieve this, the researcher tried to answer the following research questions:

1. What do the repeat level English preparatory school students attribute their failure to?

2. What are the suggestions made by the repeat level English preparatory school students for prospective students in order for them not to fail?

2.2. Setting

This study was carried out in the 2021-2022 academic year spring term at the school of foreign languages of a public university in Türkiye. The university with 16 faculties, 15 institutes, four vocational schools, two colleges, one conservatory, and 98 research and application centers, continues to contribute to societal progress and universal ideals in the fields of science, technology, and art. At the school of foreign languages, each year, about 3000 students are taught in preparatory programs, the majority of which is in English. Its goal is to provide qualified education programs to all Turkish and international students at the university, allowing them to gain the foreign language knowledge and skills they may need to effectively manage their academic studies, express themselves, and exchange information in a variety of settings where the relevant language is used as a means of communication. There are two types of preparatory programs namely compulsory, and optional. The English preparatory program is compulsory for students enrolled in programs whose medium of instruction is 30% or 100% in English (except for the faculty of medicine students), yet it is optional for those enrolled in programs whose medium of instruction is 100% in Turkish.

At this school of foreign languages, students are first expected to take a placement test, and those having 65 and above are required to take an English proficiency exam in September of each academic year. The students having to attend the English preparatory school lessons are allocated to A1, A2, and B1 level classes after taking the placement test. A1 students learn English 19 hours per week, while A2 and B1 students have 17 hours per week. A1 and A2 level students reach B1 level, whereas B1 level students are necessitated to reach B2 level in the second term. Due to the COVID19 pandemic, students had three days of face-to-face education, and one-day of online education in the spring term of the 2021-2022 academic year. Throughout the year, students are assessed by progress tests, and level achievement tests, as well as writing and speaking portfolios, presentations, extensive reading practices, and online assignment software. Except for the level achievement test, all the exams were online in the fall term of the 2021-2022 academic year. In the spring term of the same academic year, all of the exams were conducted face-to-face. The English preparatory school

program uses course books and other extra materials to help students improve their four skills in English in addition to their grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

In order to successfully complete the fall term level of the preparatory program, students must fulfill the attendance requirement and have a passing score of at least 65. At all levels, exams measuring different language skills and areas are administered each semester, as well as presentations, portfolio studies and similar practices within the scope of process assessment. Instructors' evaluation of students is also included in the process evaluation. An end-of-level exam is held in the last week of each semester. If failed at the level achievement test at the end of the first term, in the second term, students have to repeat what they have learned in the first term.

Regarding the number of repeat level students at the research context, in the 2019-2020 academic year, there were 91 repeat level students out of 1820 students (5%), in the 2020-2021, they were 75 out of 2052 (3.65%), and in the 2021-2022 academic year, the number of repeat level students was 156 out of 2019 students (7.73%). There was a decrease in the 2020-2021 academic year (*N*=75, 3.65%) compared to the 2019-2020 academic year (*N*=91, 5%). The reason behind this might be related to the fact that in the first term of the latter there was face-to-face education. However, in the former, the lessons and the exams were fully online, therefore, students may have passed the English preparatory program more easily, as online assessments could have been less rigorous or allowed for more flexibility compared to in-person exams. Additionally, students might have experienced less anxiety and a more comfortable environment in online settings, which may have positively influenced their performance. Nevertheless, in the 2021-2020 academic year, there was a dramatic increase (*N*=156, 7.73%) because in that academic year there was hybrid education (three days face-to-face, one day online), the online exam procedures were more controlled, and the level achievement test at the end of the fall term was carried out face-to-face.

2.3. Participants

There were two groups of participants in the study: the ones completing the survey (*N*=39) and those who were also interviewed (*N*=5). The interview participants were the ones who completed the survey and volunteered to take part in the interviews. The participants comprised of English preparatory students (*N*=39) who had to repeat what they had learned in the previous term in the spring term again as they failed to pass the level achievement test they had taken at the end of the fall term.

Table 1. *The demographic information of the participants.*

Age	*n*	*%*	High School	*n*	*%*	Departments	*n*	*%*
18	11	28.2	Anatolian	27	69.22	healthcare management	3	7.71
19	11	28.2	science	4	10.26	information management	3	7.71
20	11	28.2	vocational	4	10.26	political science and public administration	3	7.71
21	3	7.6	Anatolian imam hatip	2	5.13	business administration	2	5.13
22	1	2.6	open education	2	5.13	civil engineering	2	5.13
23	1	2.6				geomatics engineering	2	5.13
24	1	2.6				nuclear engineering	2	5.13
						physics engineering	2	5.13
						sociology	2	5.13
						tourism and hospitality management	2	5.13
						Turkish folklore	2	5.13
						archeology	1	2.56
						chemical engineering	1	2.56
						economics	1	2.56
						environmental engineering	1	2.56
						family and consumer sciences	1	2.56
						graphics	1	2.56
						history	1	2.56
						hydrogeology engineering	1	2.56
						mathematics	1	2.56
						mechanical engineering	1	2.56
						medicine	1	2.56
						mining engineering	1	2.56
						nursing	1	2.56
						social work	1	2.56
Total	**39**	**100**		**39**	**100**		**39**	**100**

Concerning the participants' gender, slightly less than half of them were female (*n*=18, 46.2%), but slightly more than half of the participants were male (*n*=21, 53.8%). The English preparatory program of the majority of the participants was compulsory (*n*=23,

59%), whereas it was optional for the others (*n*=16, 41%). With regards to medium of instruction in departments, the majority of the participants were the students of the departments with 100% English (*n*=16, 41%) and 100% Turkish (*n*=16, 41%), yet it was 30% English for the minority of them (*n*=7, 18%).

2.4. Tools

2.4.1. Failure Attribution Survey

The researcher developed a survey consisting of two parts. In the first part of the survey, the participants needed to fill in their demographic information such as gender, age, high school type, department, medium of instruction in department, and type of preparatory school (compulsory or optional). In the second part, there was a written interview form where in one of the columns the participants were only asked to write what they thought were the reasons for their failure in English. Then, in the other column, they wrote some explanations for the reasons they had provided. The survey was prepared in Turkish so that the participants could fill in the survey without any misunderstanding.

Two experts' opinions were taken before finalizing the survey and in accordance with their feedback and recommendations, necessary modifications and changes were made. Before the actual data collection, the survey was piloted with five repeat level students who were excluded from the actual data collection process. Their feedback was also taken into consideration while finalizing the latest version of the survey.

2.4.2. Semi-structured Interviews

The researcher also developed a set of semi-structured interview questions by reviewing the studies conducted on English students' failure attributions. In total, there were five semi-structured interview questions followed by some follow-up questions when needed. The two experts' opinions were taken again for the interview questions, and the questions were also piloted with the same five students who participated in the piloting of the survey, followed by making the alterations needed. The questions in the final version were about how successful the participants considered themselves in learning English, whether it was a sign of failure for them to be at the repeat level, what they thought could be the reasons for their failure, what could be done to reduce failure, and whether there was anything they would like to add. The interviews were also carried out in Turkish in order that the participants could feel less stressed and explain themselves better. Answering the semi-structured interview questions, the participants were shown the categories reached in the

qualitative data obtained from the second part of the survey, the written interview form, and asked to comment on them.

2.5. Data Collection Procedure and Data Analysis

After taking the experts' opinions and piloting both tools and making the necessary changes, the researcher applied for the research ethics committee approval. Once they got the approval from the research ethics committee, in addition to participant consents, official approval from the administration of the school of foreign languages was obtained prior to data collection. There were two repeat classes where 52 students were studying. 39 of them agreed to take part in the study, and the ones who wanted to be included in the interviews filled in the necessary parts in the consent form.

When the researcher finished analyzing the qualitative data gathered from the written interview form, they contacted the participants who wished to be interviewed. Initially, there were nine participants; however, once they were asked whether they still wanted to be a part of the interview process, only five of them agreed to do so. The participants were interviewed on a video conferencing software individually.

The researcher made use of NVIVO software to analyze the qualitative data gathered from the written interview form in the survey, and the semi-structured interviews. Utilizing content analysis, codes, categories, and themes were generated in accordance with the framework developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Another researcher also analyzed the data to increase the validity of the data analysis. In order that the frequencies of the codes and categories in the content analysis could be reached, tallying was employed. They were presented based on how many times they were mentioned in all of the data. Since both sets of the qualitative data were in Turkish, before reporting them, the researcher translated them into English, and an expert translated them back into Turkish so as to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. Moreover, while giving quotes from the interview participants, they were assigned English pseudo-names. To enhance the internal validation and dependability of the research, an intercoder agreement procedure was implemented. Within this procedural framework, an additional researcher assumed the role of the second coder and meticulously analyzed 20% of the data. This process involved the utilization of the same content analysis framework, ensuring a rigorous and systematic approach to data analysis.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Repeat Level English Students' Failure Attributions

When the participants were asked what the reasons for their failure in English were, they mentioned a plethora of reasons which were external (*f*=44) and internal (*f*=49). The total frequency of external attributions was slightly less than the internal ones; nonetheless, it is necessary to highlight that the one that was mentioned the most was under the theme of internal attributions. The overall findings related to this are presented in the table below.

Table 2. *Participants' failure attributions.*

Themes	External		Internal	
		f		*f*
	lessons	11	not studying enough	19
	homework	10	attitudes towards English	12
Categories	instructor	9	study habits	11
	absenteeism	6	inability to adapt	7
	exams	4		
	family	4		

The external attributions were lessons (*f*=11), homework (*f*=10), instructor (*f*=9), absenteeism (*f*=6), exams (*f*=4), and family (*f*=4). Lessons were the most repeated external attribution reported by the participants. It was indicated that they could not pay attention to the lessons, and the lessons were boring. This finding contradicts with Taskiran and Aydin's (2018) findings. In their study, it was reported that lessons were associated with success attribution. The reason behind this might be because of the intense curriculum of the English preparatory program (Bayram & Canaran, 2019). The repeat level students not only suffered from an intense English program but also dealt with the same program again, hence, they may have experienced more burnout, resulted in increased failure in English (Liu & Zhong, 2022; Najimi et al., 2013). However, one of the interview participants disagreed with this finding.

"I have no problem with the lessons. You know, my communication with my teachers and my exchange with them are very good. I do not have a very good English at the moment, but I think I have improved myself by listening to and participating in the lessons." [Katy, female, 19, optional English preparatory student]

Homework was the second most repeated external attribution found in the study. The participants noted that a lot of unnecessary homework was given during the term, they did not do most of the homework, and they got low scores for using translation

websites. They also stated that they did not like doing homework and being forced to do anything. Nonetheless, Blackwell et al. (2007) argue in their study that homework was associated with success in language learning. Being assigned too much homework could be accepted as a reason for this finding (Amiryousefi, 2016). The workload of the repeat level students was as much as the ones continuing learning English in new levels, yet their motivation might have been affected negatively (Cooper et al., 2006; Yue, 2012) since the contents of homework were similar to the previous term. Accordingly, the rationale behind repeating the term but not the year could be reconsidered.

"We had two reading assignments. Reading book project assignments. I do not know why but they seem a little difficult to me." [Will, male, 20, compulsory English preparatory student]

Some participants also attributed their failure to the English instructors from the previous term. They indicated that their face-to-face teacher in the first semester was not constructive because she would humiliate them by not correcting their mistakes and tell them not to speak English like a "caveman". In addition, they mentioned that they did not attend the classes because they did not like their teacher. This is in contrast with Peacock's (2009) findings as in the study it was seen that teachers affected students' success positively. This might be due to some English instructors' decreased motivation to teach English (Tsutsumi, 2014). Over the years, English instructors whose students attributed their failure to them could have lost their drive to work effectively (Prawat et al., 1983). In accordance with this, there may be a need for in-service training for the English instructors working at the institution.

"In the first semester, our teacher had a slightly different concept. For example, she used to get angry with us in unexpected times when nothing happened. There was no reason. We certainly could not ask questions. When you asked a question about the present tense, she was saying 'I taught you this' and reacting badly. Therefore, we were not able to talk to her, and it totally took a toll on my self-confidence. In the first semester, I thought that I would not be able to learn English, and I even started looking for an English course. I said, I wonder if it would have been more beneficial for me if I had gone to an English course." [Michael, male, 24, compulsory English preparatory student]

As an external attribution, the participants also attributed their failure to their absenteeism. They indicated that they missed too many subjects because they did not attend most of the lessons, and they used too much of their right of absenteeism in the first term which caused them not to be able to catch up with their friends. Similarly, McNeely and Falci (2004) indicate that students missing too many class days are more

inclined to quit school and exhibit behavioral problems. Absenteeism, therefore, might be accepted as one of the most critical causes of failure, which should be monitored by teachers (Gottfried, 2014).

"Absenteeism is a very valid attribution. Absolutely because everything is interconnected. I think it is hard to catch if you miss the end of the rope." [Will, male, 20, compulsory English preparatory student]

The participants' next external attribution was related to exams. It was noted that they felt ready for the exams, but it was not like what they thought at the time of exam. Likewise, Perry et al. (1993) argue that exams can both help and hinder achievement; therefore, the classroom environment, which includes tests, may cause students to believe that grades are meaningless, leading to them being associated with failure. The most common reasons given by students for their exam results include lack of effort and incorrect strategy use, lack of desire and interest, absenteeism and health-related issues, and lack of aptitude (Williams et al., 2001). Students who have negative perceptions or dysfunctional attributional styles tend to attribute more to their exam scores (Weiner, 2001). This could be regarded understandable due to the fact that they may question their performance more and come up with more justifications for why they performed poorly (Imran et al., 2023).

"We take too many exams. We had exams almost every week or every two weeks. You know, they were not very difficult exams, but they were not easy either. They were preparing them at a medium level, but we were taking a lot of exams. I was so tired of constantly taking exams." [Simone, male, 18, optional English preparatory student]

The last external attribution the participants reported was family. Some of them stated that due to some family issues in the first term, they could not come to school, and they could not study; therefore, they failed. However, no interview participants attributed their failure to their family or family-related issues. This can be supported by the study of Gobel et al. (2011). They found that family related issues may have an impact on students' failure attributions. The social environment in which success and failure occur is easily influenced by the performance of other stakeholders such as instructors, peers, and parents (Świderska, 2015; Weiner, 2001).

The internal attributions reported by the participants were not studying enough (f=19), attitudes towards English (f=12), study habits (f=11), and inability to adapt (f=7). Not studying enough was the most repeated category in overall findings. The participants in this study stated that they did not want to study, and they thought that it was enough to study just before the exam. It is known that the variation in effort put forth

for English lessons, rather than inequalities in English competency, was the cause of some students' high and other students' low grades in English classes (Libed, 2022). This is consistent with how observers like language instructors would evaluate students' classroom behavior as observers of an activity or behavior are more inclined to evaluate the exerted effort than the talent (Weiner & Kukla, 1970).

"There is nothing that can be done for a student who does not study enough, that student will fail in any way." [Michael, male, 24, compulsory English preparatory student]

Attitudes towards English were the second most reported internal attribution. Therefore, the participants indicated that they had problems with English and did not want to study. It did not matter Turkish or English, they had never liked language lessons, so they could not become successful. Disliking English is a significant attribution in addition to others including ignorance, psychological and mental problems, health issues, and lack of aptitude (Bodur & Arıkan, 2017; Gümüş, 2014).

"I do not like English for a long time either. My English grades were always low. I did not receive a very good English education in high school. Of course, not liking to learn English also has an effect on me. I wanted to learn, it was optional, yes, I came, but you know, it is not a lesson that I do something very fondly." [Katy, female, 19, optional English preparatory student]

They also mentioned that they always believed that they could not learn English, and their belief that they could not learn was the reason they failed (Matthew, 2003). The findings of this study are in accordance with the findings of the study by Gobel and Mori (2007), who reported that internal attributions such as interest were prominent in their findings.

"I am speaking for optional preparatory students. If you have a negative attitude towards English, why do you want to take preparatory education? Is it for having fun?" [Simone, male, 18, optional English preparatory student]

The participants also attributed their failure to their study habits as an internal attribution. They noted that they did not revise the lessons as much as necessary; therefore, they quickly forgot (Arnold, 2017), and after school, they should have revised the lessons, but they did not have much time. Tse (2000) also indicates that one potential cause of failure is found to be a lack of revision.

"When you do not revise it, you forget, and then other subjects come along. Not revising is an important reason. You know the situation; language is an ungrateful thing. You know, it does not improve when you do not revise it. When you do not show interest, you forget it right away.

You need to revise; you need to take your time." [Elanor, female, 18, optional English preparatory student]

Moreoever, the participants believed that because they had not studied effectively in the first term, they were a repeat level student. These findings are consistent with what Thepsiri and Pojanapunya (2010) found in their study. In the study, they indicated that failure attributions included a lack of talent, an ineffective learning technique, a lack of preparation, and a lack of effort. On the other hand, higher levels of performance and perseverance are found in English students ascribing their success to having a high degree of ability and studying effectively (Graham, 2004; Hartwig & Dunlosky, 2012).

"When you do not study effectively, maybe you do not know how to study, and it is a waste of time." [Will, male, 20, compulsory English preparatory student]

Inability to adapt was the last internal attribution highlighted by the participants. It was argued that they were in the process of adaptation because they came to the university from another city and they missed their families a lot. Therefore, they could not adapt at first, and because it was their first year, they could not adapt, and they usually went to their hometown. This finding is in line with what Hashemi and Zabihi (2011) reported in their study asserting adaptation problems concerning failure attributions. The issue of not adapting influences the success of English students to a great extent (Meng et al., 2018) because if a learner has any kind of adaptation problem, he/she is likely to fail more (Martin et al., 2013). English students experiencing this should be reminded that they may benefit from the aid provided by the psychological counseling and guidance unit.

"Actually, this is a huge factor because on the one hand, you are trying to get used to everything. For example, I came from a very different place and am in a very different place now. I do not know anyone around me. While getting used to these, it can sometimes be very difficult to focus on the lessons and keep up with them all at the same time." [Elanor, female, 18, optional English preparatory student]

3.2. Repeat Level English Students' Suggestions for Prospective Students

The semi-structured interviews with five participants, the ones completing the survey and volunteering to participate in the interviews, revealed five categories, which were more increased commitment to improve English proficiency (*f*=3), instructors' role (*f*=2), learning more vocabulary (*f*=1), less homework (*f*=1), medium of communication (*f*=1), medium of instruction (*f*=1), and more exposure to English (*f*=1).

Table 3. *Participants' suggestions.*

Theme	Suggestions	*f*
	more increased commitment to improve English proficiency	3
	instructors' role	2
	learning vocabulary	1
Categories	less homework	1
	medium of communication	1
	medium of instruction	1
	more exposure to English	1

The participants indicated that prospective English preparatory students should study more. They stated that the more they study, the more successful they will be. The students may have thought that the English preparatory program was difficult and demanded a lot of preparation to succeed. They might have also believed that the course load was rigorous, which would have suggested that extra study time was required (Gracia & Jenkins, 2002). Sahinkarakas' (2011) findings support the findings of this study as studying more was something leading students to success.

"Definitely study hard. If you keep it tight from start to finish, you will surely succeed. But if you say: 'I will study for vocabulary one day and not repeat it on the second day', you will forget it anyway. Study at least two hours a day from day one. It is also important to study regularly every day until the proficiency exam." [Michael, male, 24, compulsory English preparatory student]

Another suggestion made by the participants was related to instructors. One of them noted that learning English or learning anything depended a lot on the teacher (Song, 2006). For example, he was a science student, but his social teachers were all good people, and particularly history teachers, so he loved history and had an interest in history. Moreover, he was more interested in English compared to the previous term thanks to his current instructor. This is in accordance with Williams and Burden's (1999) study indicating that students had a tendency to attribute their failure to their teachers.

"If your teacher is good and if you want, you can definitely be successful in English." [Will, male, 20, compulsory English preparatory student]

The participants highlighted the importance of learning vocabulary, as well. They reported that if they had begun from the beginning, they would have paid more attention to learning vocabulary. The participants may have understood the importance of terminology in clear communication. A strong vocabulary is essential

for communicating ideas and understanding others, which may be why they place such a strong focus on it (Afzal, 2019). Learning vocabulary was also associated with being successful in English in Soriano-Ferrer and Alonso-Blanco's (2020) findings. In addition, the participants mentioned that the amount of homework given in the first term should have been decreased. This finding is consistent with the results of Cooper et al.'s (1998) study. It is possible that the participants went through a transitional period during the first term and needed some time to become used to the new academic setting, and the perceived overabundance of coursework hampered their adjustment by causing stress. Regarding the use of English as a medium of communication, and instruction, the participants stated that with A1 level students, Turkish should have been used when needed. The participants' recommendation to educate A1 level pupils in Turkish raises legitimate questions concerning understanding and the learning process (Altun, 2009; Cummins, 2014). To make sure that the students' long-term English language acquisition goals are not jeopardized, a careful and balanced approach is important.

"I think communication with the teacher should be in Turkish to some extent. If your teacher does not communicate with you in Turkish at all, this is a much more difficult situation. In the lessons, you already have difficulties in understanding the subjects in English, if you cannot understand in English, for example, you may have a harder time understanding grammar subjects." [Simone, male, 18, optional English preparatory student]

The last suggestion was being more exposed to English outside the classroom. This can be supported with Cameron's (2001) words claiming that exposure to English was considered to increase success in language learning. English preparatory students should be interested in English outside of the classroom (Ali, 2019). They should not be content with just the lessons because it will not be enough. They need to listen to songs, watch movies and read books in English. The more English exposure they have, the better English learners they will be.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

The purpose of this single case study was to investigate the failure attributions of repeat level students learning English at the school of foreign languages of a public university in Türkiye. It also aimed to provide some comments from the participants for the institution's procedures and future English preparatory students. The qualitative data was obtained first through a survey including a written interview form, and then from semi-structured individual interviews. The participants' external failure attributions were concerned with lessons, homework, instructors, absenteeism, exams, and family, while their internal attributions were concerned with not studying

enough, attitudes towards English, study habits, and inability to adapt. The suggestions made by the participants were related to more increased commitment to improve English proficiency, instructors' role, learning vocabulary, less homework, medium of communication, medium of instruction, and more exposure to English.

In order to decrease the reasons for failure, students may be provided with a thorough orientation program at the school of foreign languages (Robinson, 1996). Moreover, curriculum and test development unit might need to reconsider their current practices (Abrams et al., 2003). English instructors working at the school of foreign languages may be given in-service training programs on a regular basis focusing on learner psychology, as well (Pawlak, 2011). Last but not least, successful students finishing the English preparatory program may be invited to give motivational speeches to students attending the program (Aldaihani et al., 2015).

In future studies, teachers', curriculum and test developers', and administrators' opinions could also be taken. Other universities' schools of foreign languages' students might be investigated, and different data collection tools such as focus group interviews, observations, and participant and researcher reflections may be utilized to enrich data resulting in more in-depth analysis and results.

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