

**A STUDY ON THE LIAISON BETWEEN LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND  
ACADEMIC LANGUAGE ACHIEVEMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study has been conducted to find out the liaison between learned helplessness level and academic success in ELT classes of state, private and Anatolian high schools. Besides, it has had the goal of exploring co-varying relationships between two or more variables in demographic qualities of learners. In the research, the micro study areas have been; Mersin Ticaret ve Sanayi Odası Anatolian, Pakize Kokulu and İçel College High Schools with 296 active participants from 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades. A statistically significant relation has been found between Learned Helplessness and academic success and also between Learned Helplessness and some demographic qualities.

**Key words:** Learned Helplessness, English Language Teaching, Demographic Qualities

**Introduction**

People face up to many failures and disappointments throughout their life, and their reactions develop in an exceedingly personal way. Some people try to approach reasonably constructively to the problem and think that they have explored the ways not leading up them to success when they have experienced lots of failures. On the other hand, others lose their belief in achieving and delimit their life with an over staid manner. Likewise, the school life which is the hardest period in terms of developmental process, reshapes this aspect of people under different dimensions.

Different conditions, chances and obstacles, met in the university life, give shape to the approach of people towards their life and school period. It is an obviously observed fact that learners come into a helplessness situation in the aspect

of many negative experiences and feel feeble in different areas of life in every purview. This situation is named as “learned helplessness” in real psychology. Learned helplessness is the occasion of being passive with the fear of being unsuccessful (Seligman, 1975 cited in Davidson & McFarren, 2002, p. 253).

This study aims to find out the liaison between learned helplessness level and academic success in ELT classes of state, private and Anatolian high schools. Besides, it has the goal of exploring co-varying relationships between two or more variables in demographic qualities of learner profiles including age, gender, class, school, parents’ education level, monthly income, number of sisters/brothers and the former graduated school.

In this study, a window has also been opened for the discovery of the reflections regarding demographic qualities on the Learned Helplessness level of the learners. As it is known, human beings have millions of different reflections in the mirror of world that cannot be reduplicated even with any similar detail. The reflection of a person in the mirror is unique to that body and to that soul which opens the window of originality. Each soul draws his/her own life with different colors and styles that take a shape by some personal variables. Having errors while making the “own life monument” or meeting with some obstacles, leaves probably no patience in the people’s mind. Learned helplessness (LH) is one of the main sources of compelling the people to close their doors to all impossibilities and difficulties by forcing them face with the struggle of hard problems in life. At this point, personal variables come to the stage as life experiences, environment, family, gender, age, teacher & learner interaction in school life etc.

In this research, basically the learned helplessness of high school learners was investigated. This developmental period of learners is a critical stage enabling learned helplessness to strike its strong roots permanently to the general area of life experiences. The reason underlying this estimation is the intensive personalization of the learners’ self-hood in the high school process. The starting point of the study was based on the knowledge claiming that the main stone of learned helplessness and the main enemy of self-esteem were some prejudgments shaped with the first experiences. The micro study areas are selected intentionally from different state schools as Mersin Ticaret ve Sanayi Odası Anatolian, Pakize Kokulu and İçel College High Schools. Especially learners from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> classes were integrated as active participants of the study keeping in mind that judgmental experience increases parallel to the learning life period.

When it comes to the liaison with English Language Teaching (ELT), learned helplessness has a ground on the human psychology which is also a common point for language teaching. Especially for English teaching or learning, it has a big role as the variables in the class are very important for the learning process of language learners. Language learning is a concept that depends on both the learner and the instructor in terms of human psychology and interpersonal communication. Generally, learners concentrate on their personal problems. If a learner believes that s/he is not valuable or s/he is not good at language skills, s/he will never be successful. So it can be said that a lack of motivation prevents

language learning (Aki, 2006).

#### Research Questions

This article addresses the following research questions:

- Is there a liaison between learned helplessness and academic language achievement?
- Do the demographic qualities as gender and class reflect the level of learned helplessness and academic achievement level?
- Do the characteristics of the family as parents' education level, number of the sisters/brothers and monthly income of the family make a difference in the level of learned helplessness and academic achievement level?
- Does the type of school have a role on LH and achievement scores of 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> class learners?
- Is there a significant difference in the level of learned helplessness and English exam scores between İçel College and MTSO Anatolian High School?
- Is there a significant difference between the level of learned helplessness and English exam scores of İçel College and Pakize Kokulu State High School?
- Is any difference observed in the level of learned helplessness and English exam scores between Pakize Kokulu State High School and MTSO Anatolian High School?
- Does the type of the previous school that was graduated from affect the level of learned helplessness of learners?

#### Learned Helplessness

The concept of "learned helplessness" has been defined in many ways by different researchers. In accordance with its nature, the learned helplessness is more likely to result from situations that are experienced where the failure is uncontrollable. Showing a tendency to give up easily is generally the unavoidable result of these bad experiences. Seligman defines it from different aspect as "learned helplessness exists when individuals believe that their own has no influence on consequent events" (Sutherland, 2004, p. 171). In addition to Seligman, his friends Maier and Solomon carry his definition to another dimension stating that "having any relationship where the probability of a reinforcement given a response is equal to the probability of reinforcement given a nonresponse" (Seligman, 1975 cited in Davidson & McFarren, 2002, p. 253).

Lastly according to Sekman, learned helplessness causes the loss of the courage to try again if a learner experiences many failures in many attempts. This situation results in the opinion that nothing will ever alter and the events are not in the control. Learned helplessness is the identification of the negative conditioned

present behaviors derived from bad experiences (Sekman, 2005).

### Learned Helplessness Theory

The theory of learned helplessness was first formulated by Martin E. P. Seligman and his colleagues in 1975 (Seligman 1976 cited in Selenius, 1996). Overmier and Seligman (1967) have discovered that when dogs are applied a serious of inescapable shocks in a Pavlovian harness, this experience lets the dogs perform poorer where they learn to avoid or escape from the shocks. After receiving unavoidable shock, the dogs made fewer responses to escape the shuttle box, despite ever-present opportunities to avoid this unpleasant condition. The authors named this phenomenon as “learned helplessness” (cited in Davidson & McFarren, 2002, p. 253).

The study of Seligman has been a very successful ground from the point of view of animal reactions and changing. Nevertheless, the biologic, psychological and communicative nature of human and animals work different from each other. On account of this, many researchers investigated and depicted the human helplessness following different ways (Bahadır, 1995, cited in Kaya, 2005, p. 8).

The researchers inclined to develop a model for explaining the “learned helplessness” as the studies on learned helplessness in humans mostly give contradictory findings. It is Seligman and Maier who developed one of these models. The model carries the idea that humans were insufficient in showing the necessary behaviors when the power of control was possible (Hovardaoğlu, 1986, cited in Kaya, 2005, p. 9).

According to Abraham and his colleagues’ model, helplessness was not enough solely under the dimension of observing the helplessness behavior. It was thought that the second factor defining the helplessness situation was the “causal attributions”. Saintonge, Chaput and Dunn (1998) see the “attribution as the measure of learned helplessness. They believe that the experienced negative events are permanent, pervasive and trigger the mood of hopelessness and depression. In addition, Tennen and Eller (1977) have carried out a research, constituting two groups and two gradual experiments. As a result, it was observed that the ones who were directed to make attribution to the “ability” showed less effort and solved less number of problems compared to the second group. But, it was still thought that individual helplessness and incapability attribution were not solely enough for observing the helplessness (Tennen & Eller, 1977 cited in Kaya, 2005, p.14).

Abraham and his colleagues realized the experienced explanatory insufficiencies, and put forward the idea that there might be some sub-factors. Thus, the truth of helplessness is not a one-sided fact (Abraham, 1978, cited in Kaya, 2005, p.11). Parallel to the Abraham and his colleagues’ approach, learned helplessness divided into two dimensions as; “universal helplessness” and “individual helplessness”. In “Universal helplessness” a person believes that neither he nor somebody can control the result of a behavior, nevertheless; in individual helplessness a person think that only he is insufficient about controlling the result of

the behavior, and anybody except him, can have the probability of controlling the result of a behavior (Aydın, 2006).

Besides, Uras and Valas (2001) made different studies. Valas examined the relationships of learned helplessness, self-esteem, depression, academic success, age, gender and expectations in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> classes. On the other hand, they studied on the learned helplessness and depression level points among children who are under the responsibility of an institution and who leave with their family.

The researchers have not designated any research based on the possible relation between language learning and learned helplessness. Having a psychological dimension, language learning is a concept that depends on both the learner and the instructor in terms of human psychology and interpersonal communication. This fact signals the need of discovering the probable role of Learned Helplessness in the language learners' learning process in ELT world and highlights the necessity and the aim of the current study.

## **Methodology**

The research of the study is based on the cross-sectional, correlative design as it aims to find out the liaison between learned helplessness level and academic success in ELT classes of state, private and Anatolian high schools. Besides, it has the goal of exploring co-varying relationships between two or more variables in demographic qualities of learner profiles including age, gender, class, school, parents' education level, monthly income, number of sisters/brothers and the former graduated school that has been finished.

## **The Participants**

The participants of the study were chosen from three different types of high schools in Mersin, which were defined intentionally as the micro-population of Anatolian, State and Private high schools. Two 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade language classes of M.T.S.O Anatolian High School, Pakize Kokulu State School and İçel College were examined under the basis of learned helplessness level and academic achievement level. Approximately 15 and 18 year-old learners formed the participants of the study. About 296 learners constituted the sources of input for this research.

## Research Design

A Learned-Helplessness scale (LHS) titled as "Öğrenilmiş Çaresizliğe Özgü Açıklama Biçimi Ölçeği" (ÇABÖ) was used to have an overall idea about learned helplessness level of learners. ÇABÖ was developed by Aydın (1988). It consists of 30 items which describe a positive or a negative situation and presents some preferable choices for the participants. The score distribution ranges between 0-30 in the scale which provides two different casual choices. Thus, whether the participants have learned helplessness or not was defined through the guidance of their scores. Moreover, the level of learned helplessness is defined with the help of their scores. In a previous study made by the mediation of this scale, neurotic depressive and normal participants took place for the sake of structure validity. As a result of t-test, a significant difference was observed ( $t=3.18$ ;  $sd=100$ ;  $p<0.003$ ). Under the light of the study based on neurotic depressive and normal participants, the content validity for all items of the scale was found as 100%. In addition, for the internal consistency, the coefficient of Cronbach-Alpha was calculated as 62 ( $p<0.001$ ) (Aydın, 1988). The T-test, Variance analysis of Post Hoc Test (Bonforoni) and Correlation analyses were used via "SPSS 11.5".

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data for the level of learned helplessness were collected through a Learned-Helplessness scale (LHS) titled as "Öğrenilmiş Çaresizliğe Özgü Açıklama Biçimi Ölçeği" (ÇABÖ) in three different high schools with different characteristics. An Anatolian, a state and a private school were the centers for investigation. Two groups of students from 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades constituted the participants for each school. The scale used was extended with the demographic qualities to find out the different relations of variations with the learned helplessness. Moreover, the academic success of the participants was investigated with the level of learned helplessness through exam results. The level of learned helplessness and the academic achievement were examined under the possible relation between them. The study approximately took three months throughout 2007-2008 Fall semester.

## Findings and Discussion

First of all, analysis regarding the liaison between level of "Learned Helplessness" and academic success under the light of the level of some demographic qualities are presented in this section. Besides, in an attempt to analyze the obtained data, t-test, Variance analysis, and Post Hoc Test (Bonforoni) and Correlation Analysis were conducted and the results will be presented through the tables below.

**Table 1. LH Scores and Exam Scores Interval**

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
LH SCORE	10,26	2.990	296
EXAM	58,54	19.994	296

**Table 2. The Correlation between LH Scores and Exam Scores Interval**

Correlations			
		LH SCORE	EXAM
LH SCORE	Pearson Correlation	1	-.310 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	296	296
EXAM	Pearson Correlation	-.310 **	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	296	296

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As it can be concluded from the analysis of data, there is a statistically significant correlation between LH level and academic achievement of the learners. As the level of the learners' LH increases, the level of their academic achievement decreases which means that these two variables are negatively correlated.

**Table 3. LH Scores Interval according to the school types**

Schools	Population (n)	Mean ±SD	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
Anatolian High School	104	10.2±2.7	4-20
Private School	81	10.9±3.1	3-20
State School	111	9.9±3.1	2-16
Total	296	10.3±3.0	2-20

One Way Anova=2.982 , p=0.052

In an attempt to see the relation of LH level of learners and school types, One-Way Variation Analysis was computed. It was observed that Private High School came out on top with highest LH mean, m=10.9. Next, Anatolian High School follows with m=10.2, and lastly the state schools have the least score; m=9.9. There is only a statistically significance between private schools and state schools with the leading mean score of private school.

**Table 3.Exam Scores Interval according to the school types**

Schools	Population	Mean ±SD	95 % Confidence Interval of the Difference
Anatolian High School	104	59.5±16.8	22-96
Private School	81	51.5±26.0	5-99
State School	111	62.9±16.3	26-100
Total	296	58.5±20.0	5-100

The Private School purported the least mean score 51.5 in the level of exam scores. The Anatolian High School was more successful in their exams with 59.5 mean score. Furthermore, the state school performed the best mean score in the English exam with 62.9.

A statistically meaningful difference was found between Anatolian High School and Private School according to their academic achievement. When the exam scores and LH scores were thought in combination, a significant difference was observed between Private schools and State Schools in terms of LH scores; however, the difference moves to between Anatolian and State Schools when the exam scores were considered.

When the results were analyzed more closely in terms of the learners' class level, there was no significant difference between their LH scores. However, the LH scores of learners indicated that 11th class learners had less LH scores than 9th grade learners. Moreover, the analysis of difference between 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades according to the achievement scores did not provide a statistically significant result. Nevertheless, a slightly higher tendency of 11<sup>th</sup> grades in the level of achievement scores was stated than the 9<sup>th</sup> classes. In other words, 11<sup>th</sup> grade learners were more successful than 9<sup>th</sup> grade learners in the exams.

When the gender difference was considered within the framework of Learned Helplessness concept, no statistically significant difference was found. However, the Learned Helplessness mean score of male learners was found slightly higher (10.7) than female learners (10.0). This result is parallel with the Erdoğan's (2006) study in which he concluded that males experience more intensive Learned Helplessness than the females. However, Mal, Jain & Yadav (1989) obtained the results indicating that female students exhibited greater helplessness than the male counterparts. They linked this thought with the reason of discrepant socialization of sexes.

Apart from, Learned Helplessness, the exam success level was also dealt with under the basis of gender difference. A statistically significant difference was found between genders. Males predicted a lower exam score with 53.7 in contrast to the females who succeeded with approximately 62.3 mean score.

As another variable, the education level of parents did not elicit a statistically significant difference. The 146 learners' mothers who were between Under Primary Level & Primary Level had 10.1 LH score and 150 learners' mothers who were Above High School & High School Level had 10.4 LH score. Likewise, the 95 learners' fathers who were between Under Primary Level & Primary Level had 10.2 and 201 learners' mothers who were above High School & High School Level had 10.3 LH score. When the result was bethought, interestingly learners whose parents' education level was above High School & High School Level had more LH tendency. In addition, the reflection of parent education on the learners' exam scores was also examined. However, a significant statistical difference could not be observed.

Similarly, there is not a statistically meaningful result between the LH score and Monthly Family Income. Nevertheless, there is an obvious difference in the "highest monthly income level" in which a slight increase in LH score was observed. The belief that the high income is not a completely enough fact for the low occurrence level of LH appeared as a result of the investigation of the data. As a conclusion, it may be stated that learners with high level of income suffer much more from negative experiences and psychological problems which may reflect on their Learned

Helplessness level. However, contrary to our study, Erdoğan (2006), who made three level classification of monthly income, stated that the possibility of observing LH among the learners with high income level decreases through his findings. He reached a distinct view, providing the result that there is no statistically significant difference of LH score between the low and the middle monthly income level while the high level of income indicates a statistically significant difference in terms of their LH score. Providing a different perspective, present study classifies the monthly family income into six categories by taking the economical standards into consideration. All results show that the learners whose monthly income is 700 TL. & under 700 TL. are more successful, which may be concluded that income cannot be only and most effective reason reflecting on learners' achievement.

**Table 4. LH Scores Interval according to the Graduated School**

<b>Graduated School</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Arithmetic Mean <math>\pm</math>SD</b>
<b>State School</b>	269	10.11 $\pm$ 3.0
<b>Private School</b>	27	11.8 $\pm$ 3.0

t=0.220, p= 0.005

A statistically significant result was found in the LH scores according to the former graduated school. There is an exact liaison between the graduated school and the LH score. In other words, the 269 learners who graduated from state school show less helplessness with 10.11 mean score.

There is not a statistically significant result in terms of exam scores according to the graduated school. Furthermore, our results indicate that the 269 learners graduated from state schools perform better in the English exams.

A significant statistical relation could not be observed between LH scores-sister/brother numbers and exam scores-the sister/brother numbers. Our data reveal that, the learners who have 3 or above sisters/brothers show more propensity to helplessness. On the other hand, the learners who have 3 & above sisters/brothers have more success in the English exam.

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed to illustrate how the learned helplessness -the occasion of being passive with the fear of being unsuccessful - response patterns may also contribute to academic language achievement through the effects of demographic qualities. In this study, the liaison between the learned helplessness and the academic

language achievement was taken into account from the aspects of school, class, gender, mother-father education level, family income level and the number of sisters & brothers in order to comprehend the nature and the consequences of learned helplessness and to make it more applicable to a wider range of real life experiences and social contexts. Indeed, determining the specific contribution of demographic qualities on LH requires a detailed and elaborative study, nevertheless; this study was conducted as a cross-sectional study in a small community consisting of Pakize Kokulu, MTSO Anatolian High Schools and İçel College in Mersin. Each of them was selected considering that each represents one type of school in Turkey. Besides, just the 9th and 11th grades of these schools were integrated into the sample in the study so as to identify clearly the difference at the beginning period of the school, in which learners were supposed to have been came with less LH, and at the end of the period right before the graduation, which was thought to be the last step of the progress and process of the helplessness.

The main hypothesis of the study is to deal with the liaison between LH and the academic language achievement. The results indicate that there is a statistically slight inverse-correlation difference between LH level and academic achievement. In other words; when the level of LH increased, the level of academic achievement decreased with the same amount.

It is inevitable to notice that values and self-confidence levels are mainly in the hands of educators and the family. For instance; a surprising result was found that learners with high income level had more LH score than the other classified groups in which the loss of self-confidence was observed and positive emotional qualities were parallel to the economical dependence. This situation could possibly result in loneliness except for happiness of being supported only economically but not emotionally enough. At this point, the teachers could provide a support with more pedagogically developed time periods specifically organized to regain the personal strengths of learners via the help of some techniques. On the other hand, the families of the learners should be more interested in the emotional needs of their children. Sharing time efficiently, having some social activities specific to the family could be some small tips. To sum up; there are many ways to prevent the LH from planting its seeds into the lives of their children.

For the researchers who want to investigate the LH fact from different aspects, some further suggestions could be made via the light of the experienced difficulties and restrictions in this study. It should be highlighted that carrying on an investigation of LH in a cross-sectional area creates many handicaps due to the changes in people's psychological world throughout the experienced life. Thus, conducting a study on LH and its reflections, eliminating the negatively effecting secondary variables, with a longitudinal approach can provide richer and reliable data. For further study, a wide range of different schools from different regions of Turkey can be conducted just as a longitudinal and descriptive study. Moreover, the population, the number of schools and the used scales (e.g. parents' and teacher's attitude, achievement tests, self - evaluation checklists and so on) can be increased to reach a clearer and more generalized outcome.

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