

A Psycholinguistics Case Study: The Relations of Learned Helplessness, Locus of Control, and Attitudes towards English with Academic Success

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Abstract:

Learned helplessness is the result of exposition to enduring negative and/or painful stimuli. If somebody thinks that he has free will to do something and his behavior is related to various outcomes, his/her locus of control is internal. Otherwise, s/he is convinced that her/his behavior, emotions and thoughts are controlled by some external factors which they cannot influence. The aim of this study is to examine the impact of learned helplessness and the locus of control on overall academic success (average grades) as well as on English grades. Our sample consisted of 159 students who were at tertiary level in Balkans (from the first to the sixth year of study). The mean age of participants was $M = 21.62$ ($SD = 1.83$). There were 76 males (47.80%) and 83 females (52.20%). The measures used in this study are: Demographic Information Questionnaire, Emotional aspect of attitudes toward the English language, Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS), and Trice's Academic Locus of Control Scale. The results revealed that students had low levels of external locus of control and learned helplessness whereas their attitudes toward English were positive. The main part of results included the following findings: students who had low levels of learned helplessness and internal locus of control had better average grades as well as grades in English as a high school/university subject. In addition, they like English more than students with external locus of control and high levels of learned helplessness.

Keywords: *learned helplessness, locus of control, English as a foreign language (EFL), attitudes toward English, academic success*



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INTRODUCTION

Educational context could be regarded as a system that includes: teachers, students, teaching strategies, learning strategies and subject curriculum. Likewise, lots of variables and their interrelationships contribute to the dynamics of this complex system: teachers' and students' levels of motivation, their intelligence levels, interests, personality traits (extraversion, emotional stability, conscientiousness, creativity, etc.). Positive learning/academic outcomes (i.e. school performance/achievements) are influenced by the interaction between these variables and participants of the educational process. Some of these factors have positive and some of them negative impacts on academic success. In this paper, the effects of learned helplessness and external locus of control on students' grades were examined. In addition, attitudes towards English and English grades were taken into account as well.

Learned helplessness was first observed in rats, monkeys and dogs (Seligman, 1975: 56). Besides, it was noticed in humans also. In fact, it is related to pessimism and depression (Miller & Seligman, 1975:229). In the field of cognitive psychology, the academic aspect of learned helplessness is investigated. Some students usually attribute their academic failure to an internal source of poor ability which is significantly associated with an expectancy of poor and noncontrol achievements (Canino, 1981:471). According to the attribution theory, people attribute their helplessness to global or specific, stable or unstable and internal or external causes (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978:49). In the worst scenario, hence, some students can explain their academic failure by global, internal and stable causes. In other words, they "learned" that they will always get poor school grades, in all school subjects and they attribute these negative outcomes to their own incapacities and disabilities.

Internal/external locus of control refers to the extent to which a person feels that his/her reinforcements are contingent upon his/her actions (Cohen, Rothbart, & Phillips, 1976:1049). In other words, locus of control can be defined as "one's tendency to attribute the consequences to internal or external source" (Madsen & Goins, 2002:266). If one's behavior is mostly influenced by the internal locus of control, s/he will feel like s/he has high degree of control over his/her actions. On the other hand, people labeled *externals* are often convinced that their behaviors are influenced by lots of external factors such as luck, fate, and chance (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978: 51; Marsh & Weary, 1995:381).

As for the "attitudes towards the English language", which was one of the main variables in this study, it can be said that they play an important role in learning and using English. In general, attitudes have the following three components (Jain, 2014:6): affective/emotional (feelings), cognitive (beliefs, thoughts, evaluations), and behavioral component (overt actions and responses). Students, on average, have preferable attitudes toward English (e.g. Ardeo, 2003:119). To be more specific, they have high levels of the affective/emotional component of these attitudes.

A short review of foregoing studies are reviewed: An old study, carried out by Hiroto (1974:187) showed a positive correlation between learned helplessness and external locus of control. Valås (2001: 71) carried out a study where the statistically significant relationship between learned helplessness and academic performance was found. In other previous studies, internal locus of control was in positive correlation with academic achievement (Warehime, 1972:314; Bar-Tal & Bar-Zohar, 1977:181) as well as with achievement in English as a second language (Fakeye, 2011: 551). Furthermore, attitudes toward English were in a positive correlation with academic achievement (Rukh, 2014:5607).

However, there is a lack of studies addressing the relationship of attitudes toward English with locus of control and learned helplessness. In line with this notion, the author of the present study noticed this kind of gap in the available literature. Taking into account the Balkans Region, there are few studies that cover topics such as English language learning as well as students' motivation and attitudes linked to this process.

Based on the previous findings and the perceived gap in the foregoing research, the aim of this study is to investigate the relationship of learned helplessness, locus of control and attitudes toward English with average and English grades of university students in the Balkans.

The following three hypotheses have been proposed:

1. Learned helplessness and (external) locus of control are in statistically significant negative correlations with students' average and English grades.

2. The level of emotional component of attitudes toward English is in a statistically significant positive correlation with students' average and English grades.
3. Learned helplessness is in a positive correlation with (external) locus of control; however, these variables are in negative correlations with attitudes toward the English language.

METHOD

Participants

Our sample consisted of 159 university students. All participants were from Balkans Region at tertiary level of education, and had participated in English courses offered by their institutions. Hence, the convenience sampling method was utilised, as a specific type of non-probability sampling. Participants' average age was $M = 21.62$, whereas standard deviation was $SD = 1.83$. The youngest participant was 18, while the eldest one was 27 years old. In Figure 1, we displayed the distribution of this sample with regard to gender and year of study.

There were 76 male students (47.80% of the total sample) and 83 female students (the rest 52.20% of the total sample). 20 students attended the first year of university, 32 students were at the second year, 48 students attended the third year and the same number of them were at the fourth year, seven students were at the fifth year and four students were at the sixth year of their university studies (Figure 1).

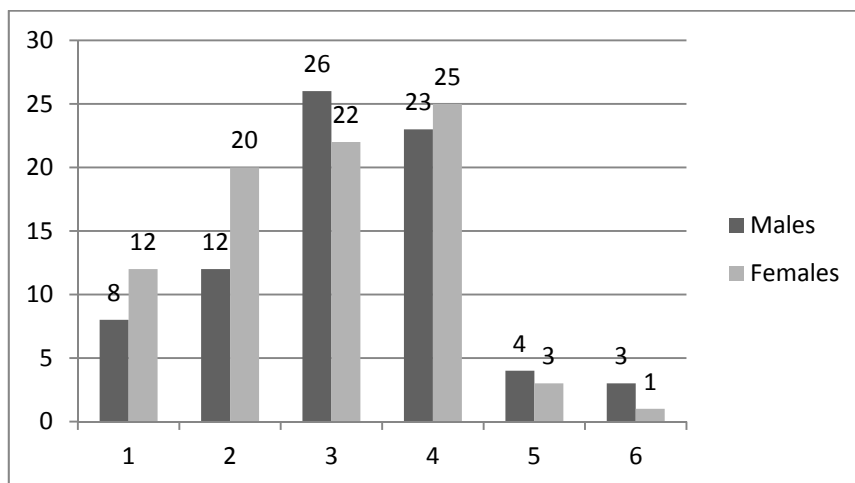


Figure 1. The distribution of the sample (gender by year of study)

Instruments

Demographic Information Questionnaire was designed for the purpose of this study. It includes questions on participants' gender, age, education institution (high school vs. university), and the year of study. Two questions on average grades (marks) and English grades (marks) were added as well.

Emotional aspect of attitudes toward the English language is assessed by an item with five answering options: "I totally dislike it" (1), "I dislike it" (2), "I neither like it nor dislike it" (3), "I like it" (4), and "I like it very much" (5).

Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS) (Quinless & Nelson, 1988: 11) comprises 20 items, with 4-point Likert scale (where "1" means "strongly disagree" and "4" corresponds to "strongly agree"). For example, one of its items is: "When I do not succeed at a task I do not attempt similar tasks because I feel that I will fail them also." The internal consistency of this scale, expressed as Cronbach alpha coefficient, was $\alpha = .782$. Hence, its reliability was quite good. According to its authors (Quinless & Nelson, 1988, 12), his scale has a good construct validity, where the main extracted factor which explains the largest and significant percent of variance was labelled as "Learned helplessness".

Trice's Academic Locus of Control Scale (Trice, 1985:1044) consists of 28 true-false items. The minimum possible score is 0 whereas the maximum one is 28. The higher the score, the higher the level of external locus of control is. The author of this scale found out that it had high test-retest reliability and its scores were in statistically significant correlation with measures of achievement motivation. The item: "What I learn is more determined by college and course requirements than by what I want to learn" is an example of external

locus of control indicators. The internal consistency of this scale was very high because $\alpha = .934$. The validity analysis of this scale showed that one bipolar factor can be extracted. It is "External-internal locus of control".

Research procedure and data processing

This study was carried out via Internet. The main reason for that is students' willingness to use computers and their positive attitudes toward online activities. It took them approximately 15 minutes to fill out the questionnaires (scales). Their anonymity and the confidentiality of data were guaranteed. The data were processed in SPSS for Win, where both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were applied. Because parametric statistical procedures are, compared to the non-parametric ones, more accurate and frequently used by researchers in different fields (Egboro, 2015: 80), it was decided that they should be conducted in the present study, as well.

FINDINGS

First of all, the minimum scores, maximum scores, mean values were displayed, and standard deviations of the five main variables of this study, too (Table 1).

Table 1
Descriptive statistical Values of the Main Variables

Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Learned helplessness	159	32	63	40.53	7.00
Locus of control (external)	159	1	26	11.04	7.99
Attitudes toward English	159	1	5	4.04	1.08
Average grades	159	60	95	79.01	8.92
English grades	159	55	95	78.79	9.72

As can be seen in Table 1, the scores of learned helplessness ranged from 32 to 63 (the theoretical range of scores on this scale is 20 to 80). The mean value was $M = 40.53$, and this value is lower than the theoretical mean (which is 50). The minimum score of locus of control was 1 whereas the maximum one was 26. The average value of participants' scores on locus of control scale was $M = 11.04$ (it is lower than the theoretical one which equals to 14,5). On average, hence, students' levels of learned helplessness are low and their locus of control was primarily internal (because higher scores on this scale implicate higher levels of external locus of control). Generally speaking, participants' attitudes toward English are positive ($M = 4.04$) and the range of their scores was equal to the theoretical range (i.e. 1 to 5). The last result was in accordance with Ardeo's (2003:119) findings.

In addition, the mean value of their average grades in the foregoing semester was calculated as $M = 79.01$ whereas their English grades' mean value in the same semester was equal to $M = 78.79$. The range of their average grades is a little narrower (60 to 95) compared to the range of their English grades (55 to 95). The results of the most important part of our analyses were shown in Tables 2 & 3 below.

Table 2
Correlations of Learned Helplessness, Locus Of Control, and Attitudes Toward English With Students' Grades

	Average grades	English grades
Learned helplessness	-.767	-.761
Locus of control (external)	-.410	-.416
Attitudes toward English	.784	.760

Note: All correlation coefficients are significant at .001 level

As can be noticed (Table 2), students' average grades as well as English grades were in strong negative and statistically significant correlations with learned helplessness ($r(157) = -.767, p < .001$ and $r(157) = -.761, p < .001$). Furthermore, their average and English grades were in moderate negative and statistically significant correlations with the external locus of control ($r(157) = -.410, p < .001$ and $r(157) = -.416, p < .001$). Based on these findings, the first hypothesis was completely confirmed.

On the other hand, participants' average and English grades were in strong positive and statistically significant correlations with attitudes toward English (to be more specific, with their emotional component): $r(157) = .784, p < .001$ and $r(157) = .760, p < .001$, respectively. Hence, the second hypothesis was confirmed as well.

Table 3

Intercorrelations Between Learned Helplessness, Locus of Control and Attitudes Toward English

	Locus of control (external)	Attitudes toward English
Learned helplessness	.446	-.725
Locus of control (external)		-.462

Note: For all correlation coefficients: $p < .001$

As expected, the levels of external locus of control were in positive and statistically significant correlation with learned helplessness' levels ($r(157) = .446, p < .001$, Table 3). However, emotional component of attitudes toward English was in negative and statistically significant correlations with learned helplessness ($r(157) = -.725, p < .001$) and external locus of control ($r(157) = -.462, p < .001$).

This part of findings was in accordance with the third hypothesis. Thus, the last hypothesis was confirmed also.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students who think that their academic effort is futile and, consequently, it does not lead to the positive educational outcomes, are usually prone to learned helplessness. They are passive and think that almost all variance of their success can be attributed to the external factors (parents' and teachers' expectations, chance, luck or destiny). Accordingly, they receive poor school grades (see Table 2). This is to say that learned helplessness was in negative correlations with students' academic achievements. Our results are similar to those obtained by Valàs (2001: 71). Furthermore, external locus of control was in positive correlations with students' grades. Thus, our findings and the findings of Warehime's (1972:314) as well as Bar-Tal and Bar-Zohar's (1977:181) studies were alike.

The contribution of learned helplessness to their academic and English grades is greater compared to the contribution of external locus of control. This is because the relationships between grades and learned helplessness are stronger ($r = -.767$ and $r = -.761$) compared with those of grades and external locus of control ($r = -.410$ and $r = -.416$). Because the study obtained by Fakeye (2011:551) revealed a positive correlation among internal locus of control and achievements in English as a second language, it can be said that our results were supported by his findings.

The more positive emotional component of attitudes toward English is, the higher the participants' grades are. These findings were in accordance with those obtained by Rukh (2014:5607). In fact, students' attitudes toward English explain 61.47% of average grades' variance (calculated by squaring their correlation coefficient, which was $r = .784$) and 57.76% English grades' variance (because $r = .760$). Accordingly, teachers have to put their efforts into developing positive attitudes toward English among their students.

Next, learned helplessness positively correlated with external locus of control which is in accordance with the findings of Hiroto's study (1974:187). Based on the value of the coefficient of correlation obtained in our study ($r = .446$), their common variance was calculated as 19.89%. Furthermore, both of them negatively correlated with the emotional component of attitudes toward English. In other words, students who do not believe in their abilities, effectiveness and personal effort while learning school/university subjects, will not like English (or probably any other school subjects).

The main shortcoming of our study was the impossibility to conduct regression analysis (where students' grades would be considered as dependent variables) because of the collinearity issue related to learned helplessness and locus of control. Another limitation is the nature of measures that were used in this paper. All main instruments were self-report measures that indicated participants' perceptions, subjective estimates and their opinions about their behavior, personality, motivation and attitudes. The chief advantage of our study was the inclusion of attitudes toward English as well as English grades (i.e. achievement in English as a second language).

Some implications of our study are the following: teachers should not overlook the fact that some of their students have high levels of learned helplessness (this is because these students could have some underlying emotional and school problems that should be solved as soon as possible); locus of control is a changeable disposition and thus it can be modified (e.g. by teachers' instructions and supportive behavior); the level of learned helplessness can be modified as well (teachers should encourage students not to give up and build

high levels of self-esteem); and students' academic achievement could be improved by changing their levels of learned helplessness as well as locus of control.

The most important contribution of this study is the following finding: the higher level of learned helplessness and external locus of control, the more negative attitudes toward English among participants from the Balkans.

Hence, the best or the most favorable educational scenario can be described as follows. Students have low levels of learned helplessness and external locus of control. They also have positive attitudes toward learning English. As a consequence of the two mentioned features, students will have high average and English grades. Additionally, these high grades will improve students' academic self-esteem and they will not feel helpless while keeping on learning English. They will also have higher levels of internal locus of control. Therefore, there is a recursive, repeating circle of interrelationships of the mentioned variables that facilitate the learning process.

The recommendations for further studies can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Interaction between gender and locus of control could influence students' grades and because of that they should be examined.
- 2) Other researchers might also investigate the impact of interaction between gender and learned helplessness on academic achievement and English grades.
- 3) This study can be replicated among high school and elementary school students in order to increase the generalizability of findings.
- 4) The relationship between motivation (the extrinsic and intrinsic one) and locus of control should be examined as all these factors can contribute to school performance.

Taking into account the three hypotheses listed earlier, it can be concluded that high levels of external locus of control as well as learned helplessness among students have negative impact on students' average and English grades. Hence, in order to academically succeed, students should feel self-confident, be self-efficient and have internal locus of control.

In order to achieve high grades, students have to like the English language. In other words, their positive attitude toward this language, regarded as lingua franca of the modern world, is one of the main factors that affect their academic performance in this subject.

The levels of external locus of control and learned helplessness have also negative influence on students' attitudes toward English. To be more specific, students will like English more if they have internal locus of control and if they have low levels of learned helplessness.

Moreover, the levels of external locus of control and learned helplessness are mutually connected. Hence, they jointly contribute to students' average and English grades as well as to their attitudes toward English.

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