

# Why Can't We Learn English? : Students' Opinions at Akdeniz University<sup>1</sup> Neden İngilizce Öğrenemiyoruz?: Akdeniz Üniversitesi Öğrencilerinin Görüşleri

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to find out university students' opinions on the social, personal and educational reasons for their failure in learning English. Data is collected by means of a scale answered by 1414 students enrolled at Akdeniz University. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean scores and standard deviations) were used to interpret participants' perceptions on social, personal and educational reasons for their "failure" in English. Results show that students feel disadvantaged because of their parents' not knowing English. Students also do not hold ethnocentric thoughts that may hinder their language learning. Results also show that students are aware of the importance of English in their future careers. However, participants do not particularly blame themselves for their failure as they tend to blame some sociocultural and economic on their learning. Students also believe that their failure is mostly related with educational factors among which giving all skills and especially the speaking skill and a variety of materials less importance in the classroom environment are the leading ones.

**Keywords:** Failure, success, achievement, English, reasons, motivation.

## Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı üniversite öğrencilerinin İngilizce öğrenmelerindeki başarısızlıklarının toplumsal, bireysel ve eğitimsel sebeplerini ortaya koymaktır. Çalışmanın verilerini Akdeniz Üniversitesi'nde öğrenim görmekte olan toplam 1414 öğrencinin geliştirilen bir ölçeğe verdikleri yanıtlar oluşturmaktadır. Verilerin çözümlenmesinde betimsel istatistik araçlarından frekanslar, yüzdeler, ortalamalar ve standart sapmalar öğrencilerin toplumsal, bireysel ve eğitimsel gerekçelerini hesaplama ve göstermede kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları öğrencilerin İngilizce öğrenimindeki başarısızlıklarını anne ve babalarının yabancı dil bilmemesine, televizyon ve film gibi araçlar yoluyla İngilizceyi duyarak büyümelerine bağladıklarını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, öğrencilerin etnik-merkezci görüşlerinin olmadığı, İngilizceye olumsuz bir yaklaşım taşımadıkları görülmektedir. Çalışmanın sonuçları ayrıca öğrencilerin başarısızlıklarını kendilerinden ziyade toplumsal ve eğitimsel olan dış etmenlere bağladıklarını göstermektedir. Öğrenciler ayrıca eğitimsel etmenlerden dört beceri ve özellikle de konuşma becerisine ve çok çeşitli metinlere derslerde az yer verilmesinden dolayı başarısız olduklarına inanmaktadır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Başarısızlık, başarı, İngilizce, sebep, gerekçe, motivasyon.

## Introduction

According to Stern (1975), a language learner has three main problems that mainly occur due to the effect of the first language reference system on the newly developing foreign language system. For him, students often experience difficulty in balancing the use of the newly acquired linguistic forms in communication while feeling in dilemma as learners who are stuck between rational and intuitive learning. Turkish students usually use their first language reference system while learning a foreign language which may hinder their foreign language acquisition. In Turkey, it is often argued that people spend many years to learn English, but they cannot be accurate and fluent in it. While there are many studies related to Turkish students' failure in learning English, this problem especially affects university students who, after graduation, must look for jobs for which knowledge of English is decisive. Therefore, it is important to identify the reasons that hinder learners' development in English.

There are a number of studies aiming at exploring the reasons why students fail in learning English. Trang and others (2012) investigated foreign language anxiety and its' effect on students' determination to study English. Participants were 49 non-English tertiary level

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students feeling anxious about learning English. Data was gathered using autobiographies and interviews. The findings in this study showed that being aware of the importance of English and desire to learn a foreign language were two important factors that influenced students' determination to study the language. The study also suggested that students should be encouraged to be aware of the importance of English and their volitional strategies should be reinforced in order to help them deal with their anxiety.

In Sawir's study (2005), language learning difficulties of many international students studying in Australia were studied. The researcher tried to find the reason why these students face difficulties in speaking. Data was gathered through interviews with students from five different Asian nations. As the results showed, students' weaknesses depended on their prior learning experiences. It was found that the students' previous learning experiences were framed in a teacher-centered learning context in which the focus was on grammar teaching and reading skills rather than conversational skills. Sawir (2005) summarized the reasons as follows:

- Students' prior English language learning experience has an impact on how well they can cope with the academic requirement of the Australian university.
- The data indicates that students did not have sufficient exposure to English language conversation either in classroom or outside class, prior to coming to Australia.
- Classroom practice was not only largely didactic (one-way) rather than conversational in form, but was largely confined to the teaching of grammatical rules.
- This classroom practice appeared to have shaped some learners' beliefs that grammar was the most important part of English language learning.
- It appeared that this belief had then become manifested in their communication behavior, so that they were not able to communicate effectively, socially and academically, and the learning of conversational skills was retarded. (p.577)

Reiss (1983) suggests that successful foreign language learners are supposed to be highly motivated, active and monitoring individuals who focus on meaning rather than the form. Reiss further argues that teachers have some responsibilities in learners' success in English. They should first let students know about the tasks associated with learning a language. Then, they are supposed to create an effective classroom atmosphere which helps students feel comfortable and develop guessing abilities. Furthermore, they should motivate learners to express themselves freely and monitor their and their peers' speech. They should also create opportunities where student practice the language outside the classroom. Asking successful students to act as informants for unsuccessful students regarding learning strategies is also of great importance. They need to encourage slow students to find the most appropriate learning style for them.

Abidin and others (2012) investigated secondary school students' attitudes towards learning English in terms of the behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects. A total of 180 participants in the three study years from three departments of Basic Sciences, Life Sciences, and Social Sciences took a questionnaire as a measuring instrument. The result indicated that students' attitudes towards learning English language were negative. The students also had a negative behavioral attitude and stated that they felt nervous whenever they tried to speak in English in class. The researcher recommended encouraging a relaxed atmosphere in English classes to motivate students to learn English. The importance of English should be highlighted by implementing suitable methods and activities effectively. Furthermore, integrating the modern materials and supplementary resources in addition to course books is of great importance to attract students' attention. Teachers were also recommended to adopt

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communicative approach which enables learners collaborate and become more motivated and enthusiastic about learning the target language.

Wang (1993) studied the factors affecting language learning of Chinese EFL learners. The factors included language shock, cultural differences, cultural background knowledge, motivation, and ego permeability. It is concluded that Chinese learners need to be encouraged by their teachers and peers and their teachers should arrange activities which increase learners' curiosity in English speaking countries. Hamid and Baldauf (2011) analyzed Bangladeshi language learners' perceptions and experiences of learning English and showed how important the curricular regulations were and how English dominated their thoughts and consciousness. Students in their study desired to learn English, but because of their poor educational environment, they were unable to learn it.

Çelebi (2006) summarized the important issues that are supposed to be taken into consideration in foreign language teaching as follows:

- Since language is acquired through experiencing, curriculum needs to be prepared according to this principle.
- Learning environments should be appropriate to individual students' needs.
- Teachers must not have concerns about meeting the deadlines while they are following the curriculum.
- Students need to be encouraged to attend out-of-class activities for practice.
- While preparing the lesson plans, teachers are supposed to consider using stimulus and reinforcement very often.
- Multiple choice tests should not be often used in testing. Instead, other alternative testing techniques can be engaged in learning process.
- Language teachers always have to be planned for their lessons (p.305).

A study that demonstrated the reasons behind university students' failure in English is completed by Gökdemir (2005) who found the following factors affecting students' overall success:

- Theoretical information is usually emphasized in classes, whereas practice is ignored.
- Lessons are generally teacher-centered rather than student-centered.
- There is a general belief that universities are not the best places for language learning.
- Preparatory class students do not spare sufficient time to learning the language.
- School administrators do not promote the importance of foreign language learning.
- Universities which offer preparatory classes do not provide convenient classroom atmosphere with necessary materials and equipment in a way to make students active participants.
- The curriculum for language teaching in preparatory programs is usually so accelerated that it is often difficult to keep up with it effectively.

Considering the related studies mentioned above, little research has been done to investigate university students' perceptions on their failure in learning English. Moreover, their social, personal and educational reasons have not been studied comprehensively and little has been put forward about university students' opinions on their failure in English. In the light of the scarcity of available information pertaining to the issue mentioned above, the main purpose

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of this study is to find university students' opinions on the social, personal and educational reasons for their failure in English. To be more exact, in this study, factors affecting students' failure as language learners are studied in terms of some self-reported social, personal and educational reasons within the context of Akdeniz University.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

A quantitative approach was followed in this study. Descriptive statistical techniques (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations) were used to show participants' perceptions on social, personal and educational reasons for their failure in English. Cross-tabulation was also used to point out the relationships between the selected variables and participants' demographic information.

### **Research Sample**

The participants were selected through a convenience sampling procedure. Teddlie and Yu (2007) state that "convenience sampling involves drawing samples that are both easily accessible and willing to participate in a study" (p.78). In our case, Akdeniz University was found to be the most convenient location in which students could be reached easily because both researchers taught at this university and the primary researcher was enrolled in the university's English language teaching MA program. University students from 19 different faculties or vocational schools completed the questionnaire (n=1414).

### **Research Instrument and Procedure**

To develop the questionnaire, first, an open-ended question was asked to 34 students enrolled in the preparatory school to collect their views on their possible weaknesses in language learning. After getting students' written opinions, the researchers prepared a bulk of questionnaire statements related to students' personal, educational and social reasons that affected their failure. Then, the researchers added some other statements after reviewing the related literature. After this item preparation process, the questionnaire items were examined by two experts researching in the field of English language teaching and an expert of Turkish language. The final version of the questionnaire was applied in Turkish considering issues related with participants' success in comprehending the items.

The questionnaire is divided into 2 parts. The first section aims to collect students' demographic information. The second section is designed to collect the data about the reasons why students fail learning English as a foreign language. In this part, the items about the social, personal and educational reasons were grouped separately. For the second section the participants were asked to answer all the items on a 5-point Likert-type scale with options ranging from "Strongly Agree" (5) to "Strongly Disagree" (1). The reliability of the scale was calculated by using Pearson Correlations as represented by the Cronbach's alpha value through a statistical package and it was found to be .895 which is considered as an acceptable value in educational research.

Although there were 50 items in the scale, for the purposes of easy reading, we have decided to use a cut-point of 60% to share the results. Results lower than this cut-point are excluded from this report while the study as a whole can be reached at the national repository.

## **Results**

### **Social Reasons**

The participants showed the most positive attitude ("strongly agree" and "agree") towards the statements, "if my mother or my father had known English, I would have learnt

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English better” (item 2) and “if there had been English speakers around me, I would have learnt English better” (item 4). The statement “if there had been English programs on TV and radio (original or with English subtitles), I would have learnt English better” also had a high level of agreement (item 1).

**Table 1:** Social reasons

Questionnaire Items	S.A. / A. (%)	Neutral (%)	S.Di. / Di. (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. If there had been English programs on TV and the radio (original or with subtitles in English), I would have learnt English better.	64.5	24	11.4	3.799	1.122
2. If my mother or my father had known English, I would have learnt English better.	76.2	13.9	9.9	4.11	1.1186
3. I couldn't learn English because my mother or my father motivated me to go to other courses (football, the guitar, etc.) instead of English courses.	12.7	11.2	76.2	1.917	1.1832
4. If there had been English speakers around me, I would have learnt English better.	74.5	14.6	10.8	4.032	1.1533
5. I couldn't learn English because I think that we would be dominated by another country if we learnt English.	11.1	10.7	78.2	1.806	1.168
6. I believe that we don't need to learn English because other nations need to learn our language instead.	22.2	16.1	61.6	2.373	1.4368

Items such as “I couldn't learn English because I think that we would be dominated by another country if we learnt English” (item 5) and “I couldn't learn English because my mother or my father motivated me to go to other courses (football, guitar etc.) instead of English courses” (item 3) received the lowest scores. Another statement “I believe that we don't need to learn English because other nations need to learn our language instead” had a notable level of disagreement (item 6). These results suggest that most students do not hold ethnocentric views towards learning foreign languages. These results suggest that students attribute their failure most to the fact that they were not exposed to English in their immediate social environment especially when they were children. They claim that their parents are not able to speak English, there were no English speakers around and English was non-existent in the media. Hence, according to these results, our participants tend to believe that earlier and continuous exposure to English in family or through the media would result in successful learning.

### Personal Reasons

Results show that our participants do not blame themselves for their failure in learning English. Our participants strongly believed that if only they could have an opportunity to go abroad, they could learn English successfully (item 20). Participants do not believe that they couldn't learn English because they think English has no use in their future life (item 25) or because they always wanted to learn another language (item 13). These results show that our participants are eager to learn English especially for their future careers and they could do better in it if only they had been abroad.

**Table 2:** Personal reasons

Questionnaire Items	S.A. / A.	Neutral	S.Di. / Di.	Mean	Standard Deviation
13. I didn't learn English because I have always wanted to learn another language.	13.6	11.2	75.2	2.012	1.1726

20. If I had had the chance to go abroad, I would have learnt English better.	80.3	8.7	11	4.231	1.1471
25. I couldn't learn English because I think learning English won't contribute anything to my life.	12.1	14.4	73.5	1.953	1.1732

### Educational Reasons

Students showed a high level of agreement towards the items “If speaking had been practiced with the teacher rather than teaching the rules, I would have learnt English better” (item 46), “If much importance had been given to the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in English lessons, I would have learnt English better” (item 47) and “If reading texts which appeal to everyone (magazines, cartoons, short stories, etc.) had been used in lessons instead of boring ones, I would have learnt English better” (item 49). Additionally, 68.4% of the participants agreed on the importance of speaking practice rather than studying the book in their classes (item 40). More than sixty percent of the students showed agreement on the item “if I had had a greater vocabulary, I would have learnt English better (item 45).” Related with teachers’ instructional techniques and materials, majority of students believe that if English had been taught through games and enjoyable activities such as through songs and films, they would have learnt English better (item 48).

**Table 3:** Educational reasons

Questionnaire Items	S.A. / A (%)	Neutral (%)	S.Di. / Di (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
40. If we had spoken more rather than studying the book in classes, I would have learnt English better.	68.4	17.6	14	3.883	1.1749
45. If I had had a greater vocabulary. I would have learnt English better.	62.7	18.9	18.5	3.722	1.2708
46. If speaking had been practiced with the teacher rather than teaching the rules, I would have learnt English better.	72	15.3	12.8	3.995	1.1672
47. If much importance had been given to the four basic skills (listening. speaking. reading. and writing) in English lessons, I would have learnt English better.	71.3	15.7	13	3.952	1.1623
48. If English had been taught through games and enjoyable activities (songs. films etc.). I would have learnt English better.	67.9	17.5	14.7	3.873	1.2046
49. If reading texts which appeal to everyone (magazines. cartoons. short stories etc.) had been used in lessons instead of boring ones. I would have learnt English better.	70.2	17	12.7	3.937	1.1576

### Discussion and Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to collect and understand university students’ self-reported reasons for failure as foreign language learners. It can be inferred from the results that parents’ knowledge of English might be a major element in students’ success of failure. In conjunction with this, not having people speaking the target language around them may be an influential reason for their not learning the language because the students are hardly ever exposed to the target language in their daily lives. Another underlying reason to prevent students from being exposed to the target language can be mass media which does not provide programs in the target language. Furthermore, it can be concluded that students did not have ethnocentric thoughts that set them apart from learning another language. They are likely to have preferred learning English to other hobbies and they probably received support from their

parents. However, it is indicated that students did not blame their geographical locations for their failure most probably because there were some institutions where they could learn English.

As far as the personal reasons for students' failure in English are concerned, it is probable that a majority of the students did not have the chance to go abroad to learn or practice the language they were learning. As our findings show, they did not see themselves responsible for their failure. Results also demonstrate that students are probably aware of the importance of the skills teaching, especially speaking, and they mostly prefer doing activities which improve their speaking instead of other activities such as rule-based teaching.

Some pedagogical implications can be made on the basis of the findings of this study. First of all, parents should be informed about the importance of learning English and be motivated to encourage their children. They should also be a model for their children by learning the language and using it. Similarly, learners should be provided with social environments where they can use the language actively. Learners should be exposed to English as widely as possible, that is, in their families and peer groups, through the media, and by means of visits to other countries. When the case of Turkey is considered, Çelik, Arıkan and Caner (2013) state that classroom teachers are the only source for students through which they are exposed to English. Therefore, foreign language teachers' roles as models are critical for the effectiveness of language teaching although our results suggest that family and the media are the leading ones. Hence, future studies should interrogate the factors that affect learners' success and failure in English.

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