Failing a course: A diary case study of an Iranian EFL student

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ABSTRACT

Students' failure in an academic course is usually considered as a common phenomenon in the eyes of instructors. Luckily, in recent years some scholars have attempted to reconsider the issue trying to investigate students experience and perceptions on their academic success and failure. Taking attribution theory as their theoretical framework, these scholars have tried to shed light on this neglected aspect of education. Drawing on a learner's course diary, this paper explores an Iranian EFL learner's perceptions of difficulties and constraints in failing and retaking a course on Linguistics. The results of the study indicated that EFL learner attributed factors such as examination anxiety, deficient study skills as the influential factors of her failure. Furthermore, socio- psychological issues such as negative self-evaluation and peer- negative –judgements were emerged as the most bitter experience the diarist went through after her failure. Based on the findings of the study, some pedagogical implications have been presented.

Keywords:Course failure, Diary studies, EFL learning, Language teaching, Students' perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Failing a course in tertiary levels can be considered as one of the major problems threatening students' future academic success. It "not only leads to the waste of current expenditure and time but also generates mental-psychological, social and family problems for the university students" Najimi, Sharifirad, Amini & Meftagh,2013, p, 1). However, students' failure in an academic course is usually considered as a common phenomenon in the eyes of instructors. Luckily, in recent years some scholars have attempted to reconsider the issue trying to investigate students experience and perceptions on their academic success and failure. Taking attribution theory as their theoretical framework, these scholars have tried to shed light on this neglected aspect of education.

Attribution theory (Weiner, 1992) deals with the reasons that individuals attribute to their perceived successes and failures. The theory deals with how the social perceiver uses information to arrive at causal explanations for events. It is a kind of forming a causal judgment. (Fiske, & Taylor,

1991). In other words, the theory focuses on how people explain the causes of their own successes and failures.

Attribution theory has been described in terms of four explanations for success and/or failure in achieving a personal objective: ability-, effort, perceived difficulty of a task, and luck. Two of those four factors are internal to the Learner: ability and effort; and two are attributable to external circumstances outside of the learner: task difficulty and luck (Weiner, 1992). Applying the theory to a language classroom setting "failure to get a high grade on a final exam in a language class might for some be judged to be a consequence of their poor ability or effort, and by others to difficulty of exam… and perhaps others to just plain old bad luck" (Brown, 2007, p. 156). Thus, students with high degree of self-efficacy tend to attribute success to internal factors and conversely those with low degree of self-efficacy tend to attribute their failure to external factors. (Ibid).

Based on the attribution theory some scholars have attempted to explore students' perceptions on their failure and success in the language learning employing either perceptional questionnaires or diaries as research tools.

Perceptional studies

Learners' attributions for success and failure in learning French was explored by Williams, M., & Burden (1999). Through conducting interview with students from 10 to 15 years of age who were learning French in the Southwest of England, the researchers indicated that most of the learners tended to judge their success by external factors such as teacher approval, marks, or grades, and that the range of attributions increased with age. They also indicated that apparently the teacher played a significant role in the development of students' attributions.

Later on, in Iranian EFL context, Pishghadam, (2011) studied the relationship between EFL learners' attributions for success and failure in learning a foreign language and their achievement in foreign language classes. To this end, the Causal Dimension Scale (CDS-II), and the Language Achievement Attribution Scale (LAAS) were administered to 209 EFL learners studying at English language institutes. Six causal attributions (ability, effort, task difficulty, mood, luck, and teacher) together with four attributional properties (locus of causality, stability, personal control, and external control) were compared with learners' English language achievement. The results of the study indicated that there was a significant correlation between LAAS as well as CDS-II subscales and learners' final scores. The results also indicated that the effort attribution was the best predictor for achievement, signifying that students who attributed the outcome of their test to effort received higher grades on the final exam.

In the same year, Zohri (2011) investigated Moroccan university learners' perceptions of failure. In his study 333 subjects studying English at university ranked their perceptions of failure in a Causal Attribution Scale of University Failure (CASUF). The researcher concluded that Moroccan learners attributed their failure to teachers' attitude, effort, interest and pressure. Exploring the link between gender and causal attributions of failure, the study revealed that, in general, male and female students reported similar causes for their failure.

Analyzing perceptions of Turkish tertiary level EFL learners on their academic success and failure was the purpose of a study conducted by Genç, (2016). Based on his findings EFL learners respectively attributed interest, ability, task difficulty, effort, luck and the influence of teacher and school as influential factors of their success. On the other hand, hey rated effort, interest, the effect of teacher and school, ability, task difficulty, and luck as influential factors of their failure. The study also reported that the participants perceived internal factors as major reason for their success while blaming external reasons for their failure. Age was not reported as a leading factor for attribution.

Diary studies

Involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, all qualitative research designs aim at studying things in their natural setting "attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln ,2003, p. 5). From this perspective, diary study, as a kind of qualitative research, "can offer insights into processes that are not otherwise easily accessible or open to investigation and thus provide useful information to language teachers, learners and researchers" (Curtis & Bailey, 2009 p.70). A diary has been defined as "a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal and then analyzed for recurring patterns or salient events" (Bailey, 1991, p. 215).

Therefore, they are of particular importance in language learning as they provide the researchers with "the opportunity to study each learner's views on affective factors, such as sources of stress in second language learning, in an unobtrusive way" (Gkonou, 2013, p.57).

Diaries, as research tool or research project have been used in language-learning/teaching studies shedding "light on the understanding of a wider range of affective and environmental factors which other studies on language learning have not highlighted before" (Tanaka, 2009 p.59) and allowing us "to see the classroom experience as a dynamic and complex process through the eyes of a language learner" (Bailey, 1983, p. 98).

Focusing on university learners' course diaries, Huang (2005), explored Chinese EFL learners' perceptions of difficulties and constraints in EFL learning and their responses to the

perceived difficulties and constraints. His findings indicated that the students' learning difficulties lay mainly with their linguistic competence partially resulting from the demands that examinations placed on it included undesirable teacher-learner role relationships, negative self-evaluation, examination anxiety, deficient study skills, and obstacles to independent learning were indicated as socio-psychological constraints raised by diarists.

Within the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) curricula in Asia, Chao (2013) explored the use of films in intercultural learning setting through analyzing 52 diaries written by university EFL students in Taiwan who were enrolled in an intercultural course that integrated foreign films as an instructional tool. Based on the findings, Chao concluded that participants appreciated the course, and made real progress in developing intercultural motivation, attitudes, knowledge and awareness.

Drawing on eight Greek EFL learners' diaries, Gkonou (2011) explored the sources of English language classroom anxiety (ELCA) of the students in private language school settings. The results of the study indicated that ELCA was situation-specific as well as a dynamic variable in L2 contexts. Moreover, the socio-psychological constraints raised by the diarists were reported as fear of negative evaluation by the teacher and by the peers with specific attention to mistakes and correction, and extrinsic motivation.

EFL students perceived factors in promoting their success in their EFL listening skill was investigated by Chen, (2016). Reporting on a group of Taiwanese college students' first-person diary accounts of their private, transactional listening activities outside the classroom, the researcher reported that most students chose audiovisual materials to listen to, and the most frequently chosen material was ted- talks. Moreover, it was indicated that the most frequently reported listening problems were unknown vocabulary and speed.

If an important part of teachers' responsibilities is to care for their students' feelings after experiencing a failure in their academic courses, then it would be quite logical to find a way into their feelings and taking them into account especially when we, as teachers, are on the verge of assigning them a Pass or Fail based on their performance. The reviewed literature in this study fortunately indicates that focusing on students' perceptions has already found its way into literature. In line with this almost new trend, the present case study addresses the following research question on a student's perception on her course failure.

What is the perception of an EFL student on failing a course and retaking it?

METHODOLOGY

An adult female EFL student, with a pseudonym, Neda, consented to participate in this dairy case study. Neda has already taken her BA on English translation studies. As a master student

enrolled in MA course in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in an Iranian university context, she took Linguistic course as a part of requirement for the MA course on the first semester of the academic year 2017. However, in spite of her almost active participation in the classroom, Neda, along with other three classmates, failed the course on that semester. The researcher, as their teacher, asked the failed students to attend a private meeting at teacher office to discuss the newly announced outcome of the linguistic course. Two of the students did attend the meeting and discussed their failure on the course separately. However, Neda refused to attend the meeting. On the following semester, the same course on Linguistics was offered to the new batch of the students.

On the first session of the class Neda and the two other failed students were spotted taking a seat in the class meaning that they have taken the course for the second time. As Neda had already refrained from expressing her feeling on the issue, the researcher decided to focus on her as a case trying to elicit her perception in her failure on linguistics. Thus, the researcher suggested Neda to initiate writing a diary in the first person recording her experience on taking a class for the second time. Considering the fact that "the limited language proficiency will not allow [diarists] to express their thoughts confidently and fluently" (Curtis & Bailey, 2009, p. 72), Neda was asked to write the journal in her native language, Persian, so that she could freely jot down her ideas without too much concentrating on style and mechanics of her writing in a foreign language. I informed her that the diary would be studied and responded to as a classroom procedure. However, in an effort to minimize "data contamination" (Allright & Bailey, p. 192), it was not until the last day of the class that the researcher informed her of using the diary for the research purpose and she immediately expressed her verbal consent. Thus, at the end of the semester, the researcher focused on a 2592 –word- diary hardly dividable to any specific entries. However, to capture the emerging themes the researcher initially tried to divide the diary into manageable entries based on discourse markers such as "first", "second" and "today".

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Attribution of failure

Going through the diary entries, the researcher came up with four emerging themes with respect to the attribution of the exam failure namely: anxiety, family problems, diarist health problem and lack of proper studying. As an example of the case, the following entry provided a profile of the Neda's mental status towards on her course failure:

> *In my first semester I do admit that I did not try at all. I learnt the lessons, all lessons, but I didn't have enough reading then. Since the early days of September I had a kind of anxiety that caused my weakness start again to the extent that I couldn't do my daily chores.* **Extract No. 1 (Data 3)**

As the entry indicates the course failure is initially attributed to diarist's laziness and then attributed to anxiety and health problem. In other words, Neda admitted that basically she herself was responsible for the failure.

Neda's Initial perception to her failure

In some of entries she exposes her first reaction to her failure in Linguistics course. Extract No. 2 reveals the point:

> *So many times I was thinking of it [failing the course] I can remember how much I cried when I got my score. My mom was looking at me wondering either to laugh at me or fight with me. She told me I didn't used to pay any damn to my scores before and went on saying that I would give another try and would make it up again. I told her "Mom, score isn't so important for me at all. I feel like I'm a retarded student having a lower IQ". I started hating everything. I thought that all my classmates would make fun of me. The other thing, I started getting jealous of them!!! ... . Oh, something else, when I saw my score on the site kid[classmates] started posting me messages asking me what my score was. How muchI hate this. It is none of your business.* **Extract No. 2 (Data 8)**

The above-mentioned dairy entry is so suggestive in that it actually signifies how a mundane act of announcing students' scores in an even higher education center becomes such an emotionally loaded complex process. First of all, one can infer that failing a course is a lasting experience which has been signaled by the diarist through the initial phrase *"so many times"*. This is in a sharp contrast when compared with announcing the scores by the teachers on the site which takes few seconds. The second inference one can make is the idea that it was not the score itself that disturbed the diarist as evident in the sentence *"Mom, score isn't so important for me at all"*. Rather it was the backlash from the diarist over getting a low score on the course. This backlash can be subsumed under the general term namely socio-psychological factors. In other words, for Neda the low score on the course has been associated with some negative emotional feelings such as: retardedness, being made fun of, getting jealous of and losing face.

Besides such negative emotional feeling, a sense of regretfulness was evident in the diary as indicated in the following entry.

> *I wish I had dropped the course the day before, retaking a course was not a problem for me but this score gave me a sense of bad feeling.* **Extract No. 3 (Data 11)**

Of course, regret is considered to be a common and inherent phenomenon of human development (Landman, 1987as cited in Wrosch, & Heckhausen, 2002) and is often associated with   negative

emotional states (Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998, as cited in Heckhausen, 2002) that might affect one's quality of life. According to Wrosch, & Heckhausen, 2002):

> In principle, the negative consequences of regret can be regulated in two ways. Individuals either actively change the conditions that have led to the regretted event or adapt internally to regrettable behaviors by adjusting their perceptions about the personal responsibility and control for the regret. (p. 341)

Considering the fact that "undoing the consequences of regrettable behaviors is not always possible" (Ibid), we can assume that the diarist in Extract No. 3 has started, at least verbally, to adapt to her regrettable behaviors (failing the course).

Neda's perception on retaking the course

As indicated above, Neda's first entries in her diary was generally dealing with her initial reaction to her course failure. However, one could detect a second phase in the diary namely her reaction towards taking the course again and attending the class. Extract No. 4 Neda exposes her perception on the issue:

> *On the first day of Linguistic, I was standing at the class door waiting for the teacher. You cannot imagine. Everybody came to me asking me "Why are you here?". Then I had to say that I hadn't passed Linguistics the semester before. This initiated a series of questions and answers. And then the same negative feeling came all over me. I should say that I did know they were all happy at the bottom of their hearts. Ok, let's move on. The first session of the class was really terrible. I didn't like to take the class at all. Looking at the text-book made me really nervous. ... That very day, the teacher started speaking to us on our failure last semester. Still, I didn't want to accept that. But, later on I realized what he was saying.* **Extract No. 3 (Data 13)**

As is evident in the entry, Neda in her first session is over-concerned about her classmates' reaction on her failure and fears derision by her peers. This over concern about others' opinion has been considered not only as a feature of anxious language learners but of perfectionists as well (Tsui 1996 as cited in Gkonou, 2013). In other words, Neda's over-concern about her classmates can be attributed to her personal anxiety as she herself in several entries had referred to this trait. Extract No. 4 is an example of the case:

> *I'm getting so happy when I've classroom presentation as it makes one*
> *follow the issue and conduct a research on. But, it makes me nervous as it is*
> *so hard to speak to the kids [classmates]. I used to say" She say". I had*

some problems in using simple grammatical structures. I'm very stressful. I want to control it though. **Extract No. 4 (data 16)**

The other theme that is evident in the above-mentioned entry is the diarist's absolute pessimism which has been surfaced through her sentence "*The first session of the class was really terrible.*" This sense of pessimism has still been associated with *rejection* of failure signaled by "*Still, I didn't want to accept that*".

Unlike the absolute pessimism discussed above, a sense of optimism gradually started emerging as the researcher moved on the entries.

Last semester I didn't understand the section on Presupposition. I don't know why. This time while I was presenting the chapter I asked him [the teacher] to explain more and he did. I think this time I got it. **Extract No. 5 (Data 18)**

Throughout the first few sessions I felt like humiliated and mentally retarded but at the end of the semester my nervousness got cooled. Now I'm quite sure why the teacher asked me to write down whatever I was studying. ... Without any reason, I was a little bit angry with the teacher? All in all, if I want to speak frankly, I should say that retaking this course was very beneficial to me. **Extract No. 6 (Data 21)**

Extracts No. 5 and 6 clearly demonstrate the change of diarist's mood from absolute pessimism to optimism. This also indicates that Neda's failure perception is not basically stable. Initial total rejection was changed into regret and mental retardedness to hopefulness. This suggests that EFL perceptions of their failures are not a static process but a dynamic one vulnerable to fluctuations based on few contextual factors. This reminds Dornyei's (2011) words that "diary studies are appropriate for looking at temporal variation in dynamic processes, investigating for example how people change or respond to certain stimuli" (p.157).

As one of the main challenges of interpreting qualitative data is said to be "its potentially questionable reliability and internal validity" (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, p. 306), the researcher in the present study resorted to "methods triangulation" (Ibid. p.212). That is, after finalizing our analysis of Neda's diary entries, we set a short oral interview with her sharing the results of the analysis. She almost verified the emerged themes and patterns. Even, when she was asked about her performance on the two final exams (11, fail score and 13, pass score), she asserted:

I know that by judging numbers you might feel there wasn't any big improvement in my scores, but I learnt things about linguistics in the second semester that I had totally missed in my first semester. **(Data: Int. Q.4)**

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study indicated the diarist, Neda, attributed her exam failure to anxiety, family problems, her health problem and lack of proper studying. Anxiety stood out as being the most widely cited attribution for exam failure. This reaffirms the findings of the study by Fry & Ghosh, (1980) who claimed that Asian students assumed more personal responsibility for failure and attributed success to luck. This is also in partial agreement with the results of study conducted by Gkonou (2005). Based on his study "socio-psychological constraints raised by diarists [in his study] included undesirable teacher-learner role relationships, negative self-evaluation, examination anxiety, deficient study skills, and obstacles to independent learning" (p.1). However, Gobel & Mori, (2007) found a significant relationship between exam scores of EFL students and the attributions of ability and task difficulty with attributions for their failures. None of these factors (ability, task difficulty) was identified in the present study.

Moreover, further scrutiny of the data entries revealed that for the diarist getting a low score on a course was associated with some negative emotional feelings such as: retardedness, being made fun of, getting jealous of and losing face. However, after retaking the course and attending the class for few sessions, the diarists'[Neda's] negative perception of her failure was gradually changed into kind of optimism. It was as if there was a clear pattern of failure perception. That is, an initial emotional reaction characterized by strong affective status (crying, rejecting the failure) which was later on changed into at least a neutral or in some cases positive mind set (being hopeful, accepting the failure) on course failure.

Furthermore, the diarist's points of view on her course failure in the present study raised some pedagogical implications to be considered by EFL teachers. Awareness of students' course failure attributions and exercising cautions on evaluating students' final course performance can be considered the two practically relevant issues in classroom teaching.

Identifying the causal attributions of students' course failure is of importance. If we found that causal conditions for students' failure are unstable like *effort*, then we can expect that they are likely to change. That is, the failure might not be repeated. Students' should be informed that even stable reason for course failure like *exam anxiety* can be changed provided that they cooperate on the issue. All in all, teachers' awareness of students' course failure attributions might result in students' future academic success.

EFL teachers should exercise outmost cautions while evaluating and assigning test scores on students' course performance. As was indicated in the diary, the assigned scores by the teachers, might have a lasting negative influence on students' emotions and their subsequent academic performance and motivation as well. If the evaluation is carried out improperly then it would become somehow difficult to stimulate the interest of the EFL learners.

Success and failure are two inseparable aspects of any educational system. In fact, there is no guarantee that one would accomplish an academic degree without experiencing any of them.

That being said, teachers should remind the students failed in a course that their negative feelings are natural and subject to change for the better in the end.

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Appendix: A sample of Neda's diary entry