

DO FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS NEED FAILURES?

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A lack of motivation, incomprehensible content and a high workload are only some of the causes leading to students' failures in the learning process. Dealing with failures seems to have become a new core competence in the current world, which is why the definition and implementation of an appropriate strategy is essential for prospective learning results. The focus of the contribution is on the meaning of failure and sources of potential student failures in the foreign language learning at the university level. The results presented in the paper base on the survey conducted with English language students at Koszalin University of Technology. Students were asked to identify the field causing learning failures. The described survey delivers information about the sources of failures from learner's point of view, which can be an incentive to develop and implement strategies to cope with failures in the ESP class.

Keywords: failure needs analysis, foreign language teaching, academic teaching, ESP.

Introduction

There are many controversies around the phenomenon of failure and its meaning in the learning process. In primary and secondary education, failure is associated mainly with a lack of success in acquiring a given set of materials, which leads to students' anxiety, sorrow and remorse (Okoń 2014). However, failure seems to be of ultimate importance at later stages as well. Difficulties in acquiring knowledge are naturally connected with human activity, and apart from the usually negative consequences they are without deeper hesitation also a kind of stimulus evoking the individual development of a person. On the one hand, failure can discour-

age further attempts to learn and contribute to resignation; on the other hand, potential failure can reinforce the motivation to learn, boost interest in the subject and show the need to expand one's capacities. Which option will be more probable depends on the individual, as people are determined by a variety of different internal and external factors.

Many studies have been conducted on motivation and failure at the primary level. Nevertheless, the problem of failure in the academic environment has been relatively poorly researched, forming the main motivation to conduct the research presented in the following

paper. The article aims to investigate the background of failure at the academic level and additionally to analyse the relationship between learners' failure and motivation in the context of language learning at the university level.

The following questions are to be answered through the results of a survey conducted among English Philology students learning a language for specific purposes (Business English, English for Tourism, Legal English) at the Koszalin University of Technology¹:

- How do students understand failure?
- What kind of failure do students experience when learning a specific language?
- How does the experience of failure change an individual's personal motivation to learn?

In the first part of the following paper, the definition of failure in the learning process together with the reciprocal relationship between failure and motivation will be analysed and discussed. Later, the basis of the students' statements and the sources and consequences of failure in foreign language learning will be categorised. The contribution concludes by analysing the results of interviews with students concerning their methods of dealing with failure.

Failure in the learning context

The phenomenon of failure has been analysed many times in the context of primary and secondary education and has been the subject of different publications and research (Okoń 2014; Fisher 2005; Konieczna 2009; Fortuna 2012). However, failure plays a vital but underestimated role at the academic level as well and can be, for example, the cause of failing to complete higher education.

Scientists differ when it comes to defining failure.

Slavin and Madden (1989) define failure as the "danger of unsuccessfully completing his or her schooling with sufficient skills", which corresponds with the view of Okoń (2007: 276) that failure is the result of a discrepancy between the educational aims and skills of pupils.

Hunt (2013: 12) in turn points out that "failure means not performing up to expectations, being unsuccessful or defeated. Unmet expectations lead to disappointment and sometimes to despair." However, according to Hunt (2013: 14), failure is not always negative. Hunt distinguishes between two types of failure: destructive and productive failure. The first kind reveals limitations and weaknesses, highlighting one's shortcomings and often leading to feelings of negativity and inadequacy. In contrast, productive failure reveals limitations and weaknesses but can lead to better options, giving strength and allowing for new opportunities (Hunt 2013: 14–16).

Witkowska (2011) emphasises that success and failure are usually two sides of one coin; once it has become easy to deal with the first one, the acceptance of the second causes many difficulties but is just as important as the first for balanced personal development.

The presented points of view may be confronted with the opinion that failure is not an option for today's students, which many educators would support: "in spite of the fact that many students indeed fail, the succeeding consequences of that are so severe that allowing such option is very careless" (see Blankstein 2004: 2–3). The differences in how scientists perceive failure indicate the range of options it offers and the still relatively unknown nature of this phenomenon.

To understand the complex nature of failure, it is necessary to reflect on the source of failure. According to Bandura (1968: 9), subjectively difficult knowledge does not exist; rather, difficulties occur through the acquisition of

¹ Philologies are not common at Technical Universities in Poland. English Philology at the Koszalin University of Technology specialises at teaching languages for specific purposes.

knowledge. Difficulties in learning contribute to further failures.

According to Pólturzacki (1999: 180–182), difficulties in learning can be classified as follows:

- Student-oriented difficulties (resulting from an insufficient way of learning, a lack of knowledge about learning strategies, problems with or disability concerning conducting thinking operations such as making observations, conclusions and comparisons).
- Teacher-oriented difficulties (a lack of knowledge about methods for encouraging students, failure to monitor students' advancement, failure to share enthusiasm for the subject with students).
- Curriculum-oriented difficulties (resulting from the first confrontation with new topics and complex issues that fall outside of the learner's current breadth of experience).
- Difficulties resulting from methods and forms (inappropriate textbooks, monotonous and boring exercises that demotivate students).

Motivation to learn and failure

Motivation has a complex nature and relates to the cognitive and socially-affective fields which reflect the way different factors of both internal and external origins can affect one's behaviour. Motivation initiates, coordinates and evaluates the cognitive and motoric processes in order to select and prioritise planned aims (Zając 2013: 59).

As such, motivation can be understood as a core skill for achieving success in learning. A low level of motivation to learn languages contributes, according to Iluk (2013: 67), to poor efficiency in the learning process.

The evidence for the statement is the fact that the prolongation of the period of English language learning in the Polish education

system does not improve students' level of knowledge and language skills. Although foreign language is introduced as an obligatory subject beginning in the first class of primary school, the results of exams upon finishing gymnasium are highly unsatisfying – over 80% of students did not achieve A1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; the program forecasts that students should have a level of A2+ or even B1 in some skills at this stage (see Iluk 2013: 68).

Iluk (2013: 68) also refers to the results of a survey conducted in the Polish region of Silesia in order to categorise and systematise the role of motivation and emotions in foreign language learning. Interestingly, 72.5% of the interviewed participants (who were 14 years old) started learning a language (German, in the case of this study) with a real interest; however, their motivation constantly weakened over time. The situation was caused by the fact that the participants had very distant motives (communication possibilities, future jobs, travel) as factors that triggered their interest in learning languages.

These strongly instrumental motives named by the participants of the survey have a declining impact on their long-term motivation to learn. The lack of emotional or cognitive interests in learning leads to a weakened desire to broaden one's knowledge. Norwegian research on the subject of students' motivation has had similar results. Interestingly, the majority of the interviewed participants declared no interest in the culture of the foreign country whose language they were learning (Hovstad 2011: 20).

The presented facts support the thesis that there is a strong reciprocal relationship between the motivation to learn and the potential success or failure experienced by students. At this stage, the category of age seems to be crucial: 14-year-olds are still under the expectations and control of their parents; this factor seems to be much weaker in the case of university students.

Research methodology

Philology students (in their first, second and third years) at the Koszalin University of Technology were asked to complete a short survey in written form in order to systematise the sources of possible failures they experience during their studies and how they cope with them. Students answered in English.

The decision to inquiry philology students was not accidental. English language students are more sensitive to language problems than students of other faculties; their knowledge of a foreign language is closely connected with their future profession, and they are exposed to a very high number of foreign language classes, which are usually highly specialised.

Almost 100 students answered the questions in the questionnaire:

- Have you ever experienced failure in language teaching in an academic setting?
- How do you understand the term “failure”?
- What has been the main cause of your failure in learning a specific language?
- In which field (in relation to which skill) did you experience failure? (In this question, participants were asked to choose between speaking, listening, writing and reading in a specific language.)

- How did you manage to cope with the mentioned failure?
- How did the failure influence your motivation (in the short- and long-term period) to learn?
- Are there any positive sides of your failure?

Analysis of the results

- Failure experience:

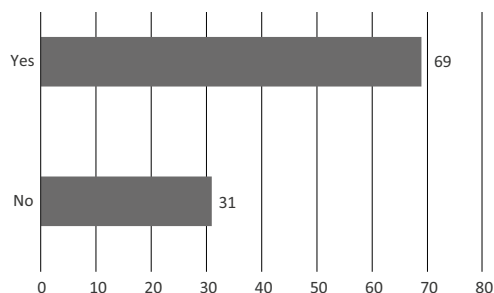


Fig. 1. Failure experience – survey analysis (n = 100)

Almost 69% of the inquired students representing different years of study stated that they had experienced failure during their studies. This is a crucial message confirming the importance of the phenomenon of failure at the academic level (see Fig. 1).

- Failure perception:

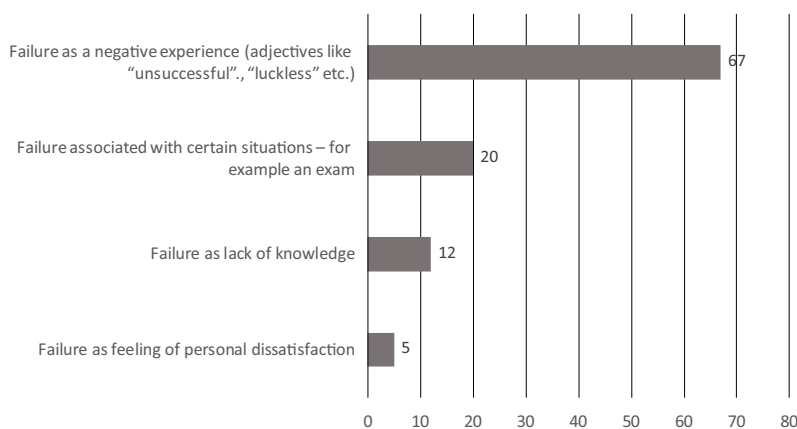


Fig. 2. Failure perception – survey analysis (n = 100)

In the above question (see Fig. 2), participants were supposed to define the term “failure”. The majority of answers (67)² included the words “unsuccessful”, “unlucky”, “luckless” or “miserable”; for example:

- “Miserable effects of learning” Q 13.
- “The state of not being successful in achieving planned goals” Q 34.
- “Not meeting certain expectations” Q 56.

Some students (20 answers) associated failure with concrete situations like exams:

- “Not passing the exam” Q 22.
- “Failure is something experienced when you cannot pass the exam.” Q 67.
- “Re-taking exam or test” Q 78.

For some participants (12 answers), failure was linked to a lack of knowledge that makes meeting a set of aims impossible:

1. “Lacking knowledge” Q 26.
2. “Insufficient knowledge that caused dissatisfaction of the received results” Q 8.

Interestingly, failure for some participants (5 answers) was not associated with failing an exam, but was seen rather in terms of personal dissatisfaction from not learning the material sufficiently.

– Source of the failure:

Students were asked to indicate the reason for a certain failure. The answers of the students were by and large divided into two main categories: internal and external factors. Within the groups, additional subcategories were named. The numbers given next to each category indicate the number of answers given; students were allowed to highlight more than one aspect in their answers.

Internal factors (depending on the individual):

- Lack of motivation (98).
- Lack of previous knowledge; for example, on economics (76).
- Inability to learn caused by distractions, stress or a lack of learning strategies (66).

- Conviction of the impracticality of the material (58).
- Inability to learn caused by not understanding the material (32).
- Lack of time to learn (22).
- Individual problems with learning; for example, dyslexia (6).
- Lack of the will to learn (3).

External factors (depending on external circumstances):

- Improper/insufficient explanation of the material (40).
- Detrimental influence of competition in a peer group (30).
- Demotivating behaviour of the lecturer (20).
- Excessive amounts of material to cover (17).
- Negative attitude towards the lecturer (16).
- Complexity of new material (13).
- Boring nature of exercises (10).
- Parental pressure (4).

In the students’ answers, clear tendencies in the context of the causes of failures are visible. For the majority of participants (98), a lack of motivation is not the immediate result of failure, but rather a common cause of it. A relatively large number of participants pointed out a lack of previous knowledge (76) and an inability to learn properly (66) as the main factors leading to the experience of failure. Far more interviewees pointed to internal, rather than external, factors as the cause of failure. An insufficient explanation of the material and the detrimental influence of competition in peer groups stand out among the external factors.

The conducted survey depicts the opinion of the students about their failures. In the answers given to the inquiry, a subjective and very personal view of the phenomenon of failure can be observed.

First of all, students see the potential causes of failure in their own weaknesses, such as problems with concentration or a lack of learning strategies, which may indicate the need for lecturers to introduce some elements

² Some students gave answers belonging to more than one category.

of learning strategies into the curriculum. There is usually a gap in the requirements for and presentation of learning material between high school and university. In the primary and secondary education system, it is still common for teachers to teach pupils using certain guidelines about what to learn; however, at the university level, individuals search for knowledge on their own and have the ability to select what they expect the most important information will be.

Second, the participants of the study showed a pragmatic approach towards the knowledge they gained, which indicates a high percentage of answers highlighting the relationship between failure to learn and a feeling that the given material lacks the potential for practical use.

The third observation resulting from the collected data is the fact that at the university level, the role of the lecturer (tutor) is still very important and can be a deciding factor in achieving success in the learning process. Lecturers can have a demotivating influence on learners, which can even lead to a negative attitude towards the lecturer and the subject itself. The leading external factor was an improper explanation of the material, which again can be understood as criticism of the teacher or lecturer.

– Scope of failure:

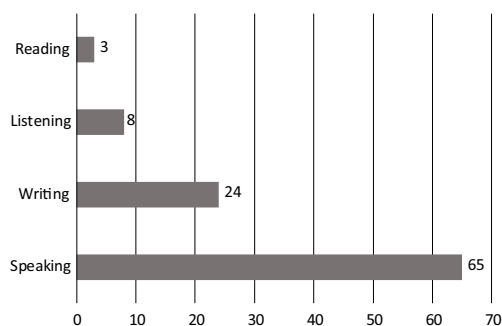


Fig. 3. Scope of failure – survey analysis (n = 100)

The students had the greatest difficulties with speaking and experienced failure most frequently in this area (see Fig. 3).

– Managing failure:

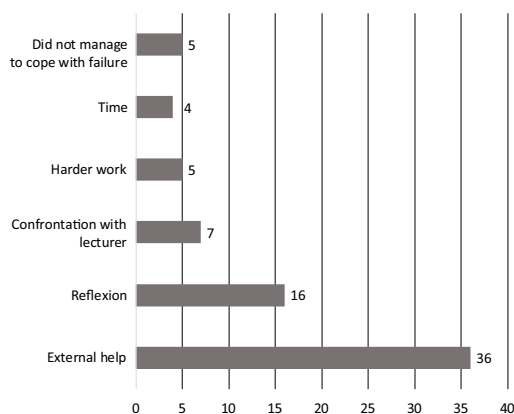


Fig. 4. Managing failure – survey analysis (n = 100).

The next question referred to the ways students coped with failure. The answers were divided into the following categories (see Fig. 4). In each category, a few quotations concerning the given answer will be analysed:

External help (36 answers):

“My friend studied with me and explained the material to me; only then did I manage to understand it.” Q 87.

“I needed to take extra lessons to pass the exam.” Q 17.

“I had enormous problems with English pronunciation, but then I enrolled in an online course, and it helped me a lot.” Q 10.

Reflexion (16 answers):

“At first, I couldn’t figure out why I was failing. It made me angry, but after some time that anger turned into motivation. I started analysing the material and understood what I was doing wrong.” Q 44.

Confrontation with lecturer (7 answers):

“I decided to go to my lecturer’s office hours, talk about my problems and ask for additional exercises. It worked.” Q 98.

Harder work (5 answers):

“After experiencing failure, I decided to work harder on my studies.” Q 55.

Time (4 answers):

“It was much easier to cope with the failure after some time had passed.” Q 80.

“It took me some time to cope with my failure.” Q11.

Did not manage to cope with failure (5 answers).

An analysis of the answers given by the students to the question concerning strategies for dealing with failure indicate that help was a crucial factor for 36% of the research participants and they found this help through their peers or other tutors (for example, online courses). The results show how important adequate support is (additional exercises, office hours or even strategies for coping with failure introduced during in-class activities), even at the university level. Only seven students mentioned going to the teacher and asking for help. The reason for such a low percentage of participants seeking the support of their own tutors can be explained either by a lack of communication in the field or the unwillingness of either side to confront the problem. An interesting observation resulting from the conducted research is the fact that 16 students stated reflexion on the learning process as their individual strategy of dealing with failure. For four participants, time was a crucial factor in dealing with failure.

– Failure and motivation:

A total of 87% of the interviewed students admitted that there is a strong relationship between their motivation and the experience of failure. A total of 50% of them stated that this is unambiguously positive from a long-term (longer than three months) perspective, as they associate failure with increased motivation. In contrast, 38% of them stated that it is unambiguously negative from a long-term perspective, as failure leads to lower motivation. The rest of the participants could not estimate the character of the relationship.

Concerning the relationship’s influence from a short-term perspective, 20% of the participants saw the relationship as unambiguously positive, and 80% saw it as negative. These results indicate that failure can have a positive impact on motivation when viewed from a long-term perspective, whereas this

relationship can be detrimental from a short-term perspective.

– Are there any positive sides of your failure?

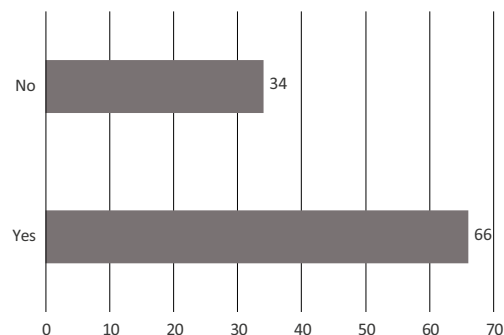


Fig. 5. Positive sides of failure – survey analysis (n = 100)

“Now I study harder.” Q 45.

“I am more careful and systematic.” Q 78.

“Developing team work cooperation” Q 34.

In spite of having a negative experience with failure, the majority of the interviewed participants were aware of the positive sides of their failures (see Fig. 5).

Conclusions

The conducted research confirmed that failure exists in academic education and can be the cause of decreasing motivation of students. Lacking unanimity in defining the phenomenon as well as diverse factors causing it, named by the students show the complexity of the problem. The given answers indicate also difficulties with coping with failures, which is crucial for the success of the learning process.

However, the responses also point out that failure can be beneficial from a long-term perspective (likely after one has distanced oneself from the problem). The collected arguments support the thesis that there is a relationship between failure and motivation. Moreover, failure that has the appropriate support can be transferred into success. In summary,

contemporary education should support the process of dealing with failure. Consequently, the failures experienced by students should not be treated as one-sided faults, but rather as the common responsibility of the student and teacher. Some strategies that are helpful in dealing with failure in the learning process can be implemented in the learning process.

Disclosure statement

I declare that I do not have any competing financial, professional, or personal interests from other parties.

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