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Success factors at university from students' perspective

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Abstract. The aim of the present qualitative study was to explore the factors that support or hinder students from achieving their goals while they are at university. The participants were 84 undergraduates majoring in English at King Khalid University. Constructed interviews with students were used for eliciting information. The data were analysed stating and combining the similar factors and calculating their frequencies and percentages. The findings indicated that external support from family, friends and society was the main factor for students' success followed by determination and persistence, ambition, hard work and patience. On the other hand, discouragement was the main factor that hinders students' success, followed by irresponsibility, carelessness and laziness, then by poor time management and finally, failure and frustration. Implications for English language professionals and areas for further research were suggested.

Keywords. successful learners, obstacles, goals, success, EFL undergraduates, non-cognitive factors

Introduction

The basic goal of educational programs is to improve the quality of education and students' academic achievements. The factors that enhance students' success are of two types, cognitive and non-cognitive ones. Ample research exists in the field of cognitive factors as predictors of success (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1989; McLaughlin, 2006). However, nowadays, the non-cognitive factors received more attention as they are essential for successful learning (Stankov & Lee, 2014). Among the authors who wrote about the non-cognitive factors are Donaldson, et al., (2000) who present six factors for success. They are students' prior experience, motivation, study strategies, support, the teaching and learning experience, as well as teacher-student and student-student interactions.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) declare that "students who have experienced success in learning have developed confidence in their own ability to learn" (p, 159). Besides, success increases motivation (Kaplan & Saltiel, 1997). It is said, nothing succeeds like success. In other words, when someone is successful in one area, it leads to be successful in other areas.

Oxford (1990) states that "too much or too little anxiety will not produce successful language learning"(p. 142). Roksa and Kinsley (2019) confirm that family emotional support is important as it enhances psychological well-being and it facilitates students' engagement that fosters students'success.

On the other hand, Ross and Broh (2000) discuss self–esteem and risk taking, and the positive correlation between them and between academic achievement. Besides, Liu (2012)

adds that personality traits, self-esteem and risk-taking cause variability in language learning success. Students with high-esteem are usually risk takers and thus successful in language learning. Self-confidence is also an essential attribute for ensuring more successful learning. Self-confidence is to believe in one's self and ability to execute specific activity. Improving self-confidence can improve performance. Mills et al. (2007) stress that self-confidence helps using more proper strategies in planning, monitoring and performing activities.

Similarly, Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood (2000) discuss the positive influence of support on success. Support can be derived from family, community, classmates and teachers. It is divided into several types: social, emotional, instrumental (tangible), informational, and appraisal (guidance/feedback) (Moffatt, 2010). Students' persistence is influenced by a number of factors such as family encouragement and peer support (Swail et al., 2005). Students are more likely to perform better and succeed when their families support their decisions and encourage them. Kuh et al. (2006) add that financial aid appears to affect students' persistence and their success.

On the other hand, Noel's et al. (2000) mention that students enjoyment in the learning process does not guarantee their involvement in the task or perceiving the importance of language learning.

Motivation is crucial in pursuing goals. Gardner (2001) stresses that integrative motivation is essential in learning a second language in which, learners have a positive attitude towards learning situations. Slavin (1988) states that success creates a desire for more success. Dembo and Seli (2008) state that successful learners know how to motivate themselves to achieve their goals, whereas less successful learners have difficulty controlling their motivation to perform any task. Moffatt (2010) states "Support and personal motivation and determination lay the foundation for success" (p. 136).

Macaro (2001) reports that learning strategies have a great role in helping learners to become more independent and successful. Similarly, Gan (2011) indicates that successful learners use more learning strategies than the unsuccessful learners. Moffatt (2010) adds that successful students exert efforts by using effective strategies and resources to attain academic achievement.

Bash (2003) states that having a sense of being overwhelmed by competing responsibilities is one of the factors of less successful learners. Kuh et al. (2006) propose that students' success is positively affected by their engagement in the learning process. Successful students are self-reliant and they have a strong sense of responsibility. Conzemius and O'Neill (2001) define the responsibility for learning as an inside out processes. It is generated from within the learners themselves to attain real learning and success.

Perseverance and persistence are the same. They are traits that enable students to work hard and try again and again until their goals are attained. They set goals and commit to them. They accept challenges and ignore distractions. Dembo and Seli (2008) state that successful learners use self-management strategies. These strategies maintain their persistence in distracting situations that may interfere with their learning. Successful learners know how to restructure their social and physical environments.

Time management is crucial in determining academic success, Dembo & Seli (2008). In order to accomplish what needs to be done, students have to know how to manage the amount of time available to them for doing tasks effectively.

Wong and Nunan (2011) propose that successful learners use communicative style, whereas unsuccessful learners rely on their teachers' guidance and prefer the authority-oriented style. Furthermore, successful learners prefer to continue learning and improving themselves.

Statement of the problem

Academic success does not depend on cognitive skills only. It is associated with non-cognitive ones also, such as students' qualities. So, in order to achieve success, everyone needs to rely on his own characteristics. Therefore, a top priority objective of every educational institution is to assess students' qualities. By doing so, teachers could identify their students' traits and foster the missing ones that help them be successful learners. Students will also be taught some traits and skills and not just curriculum content. The purpose of this study is to investigate the students' factors that help to make them successful learners and the factors that hinder their success.

Objectives

This study aims to achieve two goals:
1. To identify the factors that foster Saudi EFL undergraduates' success.
2. To explore the factors that hinder Saudi EFL undergraduates' success.

Specifically, the following major research questions are addressed:
1. What are the factors that foster Saudi EFL undergraduates' success?
2. What are the factors that hinder Saudi EFL undergraduates' success?

Significance of the study

Most of the previous studies describe successful learners as those who achieve high levels or get high GPAs in their academic programs (White & Sedlacek, 1986; Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1989). Recently, a growing number of research shows that certain non-cognitive factors are strongly associated with students' success, but none of the studies are comprehensive enough to account for all the factors that influence student's success in university. Identifying students' views on factors for success can give some light on their thoughts, practices and their natural ability to succeed. Dweck (2000) demonstrates the importance of learners' beliefs about their own capacity for success. Thus, the focus of this study is to identify, from the perspective of the students, the factors that foster their success in reaching their goals, or hinder them from it.

Empirical Studies

Several studies have been conducted to give a complete understanding of factors that contribute to success or failure at university level. Each of the following studies addresses the relationship between specific contributing factors and learners' success such as self-esteem, anxiety, family support, motivation, language learning strategies, styles, persistence, self-management and self-monitoring

Maleki (2009) investigated the effect of self-esteem and anxiety on learners' performance in second language. The participants were 32 undergraduates from Arak University. The findings indicated that there is significant relationship between the two variables, self-esteem and performance level in second language. Maleki found that a high level of self-esteem positively correlates with performance level in second language. Another one of his findings revealed that successful learners showed less anxiety than that of less successful ones.

Moffatt (2010) conducted a study to explore the factors that contribute to success and persistence of adult undergraduate students in their educational goals. The participants were 45 undergraduates from four different colleges and university settings. The tools used in the study were a survey, interviews and follow up activities. The findings indicated that there are four

essential factors for success. They are support from family, friends and community, personal motivation, financial aid and the academic achievement of success in learning.

Vanthournout et al. (2012) explored the relationship between motivation and academic performance in a university setting. 873 first year students participated in the study. They were all enrolled in a professional bachelor degree program for teacher education in Belgium. Two questionnaires were used, the inventory of learning styles-short version (ILS-SV) and the Dutch version of the academic self-regulation questionnaire (SRQ-A). Results revealed that students who are autonomously motivated achieve higher grades than those who are not, as they are better in organizing their learning activities and they engage in deeper learning.

Pages (2015) investigated the influence of five individual differences on students' success. They are personality, motivation, language learning beliefs, use of learning strategies, and learning style. The participants were 24 language school learners in their intermediate level. The tools used in the study were a four-week diary and three questionnaires. The findings indicated that successful learners have high motivation, they spend more time devoted to learning outside the school setting. They used more learning strategies that cover the four language skills: receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing). They combine activities together to make it enjoyable. They reported that they had pre-established objectives when using the activities, unlike unsuccessful learners who had less frequent activities, and without pre-established goals. Both successful and unsuccessful learners have a desire to learn. Unsuccessful learners claimed learning a language is a difficult process and they do not enjoy it. They had positive language learning beliefs. Besides, successful learners dominant style was communicative whereas unsuccessful learners tend to use concrete style.

Stelnicki and Nordstokke (2015) conducted a study to identify students' perception about their personal resources that they use to achieve their goals as well as the obstacles they face that keep them from achieving their goals. 1427 participants were asked to report five words that describe things that contribute to their success and failure. The findings indicated that future orientation, persistence and time management were most helpful in students' success. On the other hand, stress, poor academic skills and distractions were obstacles that hinder students' success in university.

Al-Ghamdi (2016) investigated the differences between successful and less successful students in terms of six factors: self-management, self-monitoring, self-directedness measures, study time, motivation, and a general aptitude test. 37 students participated in the study. A questionnaire was the tool used in it. The results showed that there are significant differences between successful and less-successful learners in terms of self-directedness, self-management and study time measures. On the other hand, the differences in self-monitoring measures and motivation between the two groups were not significant.

Roksa and Kinsley (2019) examined the role of emotional and financial family support on low-income students 'success. The sample consisted of 728 students. The findings indicated that family emotional support is influential in fostering positive academic outcomes. On the other hand, financial support has no relation to students' outcome in the sample as a whole.

In general, most of the empirical studies showed the power of some traits on outcomes. In particular, among these traits were self-esteem, support, motivation, learning strategies, persistence and self-management which were associated with higher grades.

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative data were collected to give a complete picture on how certain factors could account for the distinction between successful and unsuccessful learners. Answers were analysed in detail and classified into several categories.

Participants

A sample consisted of eighty-four undergraduates from King Khalid University majoring in English participated in the study. They were enrolled in two sections of a translation course. Their ages range between 19 and 23 years.

Instruments

A constructed interview was conducted to collect the data. Students were asked to list three factors that helped them in reaching their goals and to list other three factors that kept them from reaching their goals. The descriptive words provided by the students were analysed and clustered by the researcher into categories, then a frequency analysis was done to calculate the number of words for each category.

Results and Discussion

This section describes the factors that foster or hinder Saudi EFL undergraduates' success. As far as the first research question is concerned, the study aimed at understanding the factors that contribute to students' success at university from their own perception. There were 250 responses that were obtained from the participants on the factors that helped them reach their goals. These responses were analysed and clustered into 26 categories for factors that support success, then a frequency analysis was conducted to calculate the number of words for each category as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 - Frequency and percentages of factors related to success in achieving goals

	Factor	Frequency	Percentage
1	External support, support of family and friends, encouragement and good comments, praise	54	21. 6
2	Determination and persistence	33	13. 2
3	Ambition	26	10. 4
4	Hard work, exerting effort, practice, responsibility	23	9. 2
5	Patience	21	8. 4
6	Self-confidence, trusting abilities, challenge	13	5. 2
7	Hope	11	4. 4
8	Prayer and trusting Allah	10	4
9	Love of success	9	3. 6
10	Love what I study	8	3. 2
11	Positive attitudes	7	2. 8
12	Self-support	6	2. 4
13	Motivation	6	2. 4
14	Time management	5	2
15	Travel	3	1. 2
16	Love of settlement	2	0. 8
17	Encouragement of environment	2	0. 8

18	Happiness	2	0. 8
19	Good teacher	2	0. 8
20	Being (single) not married	1	0. 4
21	Intelligence	1	0. 4
22	Availability of a good example	1	0. 4
23	Success	1	0. 4
24	Ignoring disappointing comments	1	0. 4
25	Honoring parents	1	0. 4
26	Looking for a job	1	0. 4
	Total	250	100%

Table 1 shows that the most frequent factors that promote success were external support followed by determination and persistence, then by ambition, next, hard work, after that, patience, self-confidence, hope, prayers, love of success and love what you study. The rest of factors were used least often.

Factors such as external support, persistence, ambition, hard work and patience were listed as the most essential for undergraduates to reach their goals at university. Various levels of social support from the family and friends had implications for undergraduates. This finding was supported by Brown-Haywood (2000) and by Kuh et al. (2006) which indicated that external support has a positive influence on success. The findings indicated that successful students reach their goals through persistence and determination. They keep trying. They never give up. They strive and face the challenges to reach their goals. This finding was in line with the findings of Dembo and Seli (2008) and by Stelnicki and Nordstokke (2015) which state that persistence is the most supportive to students' success. They have great ambitions and do their best to accomplish them. Students engage actively in the learning process and take responsibility for their learning. They exert effort and are restless until they reach their goals. When students experience a hurdle, they practice patience. They expect that their plans could fail and they try to work it out properly. They tolerate and face obstacles without losing control of their emotions until they achieve their goals. They know how to deal with frustration. Thus, success is the result of support, persistence and determination, ambition, hard work and patience.

Concerning the second research question, the study provides a description of the factors that hinder Saudi EFL undergraduates' success. There were 196 responses that were obtained from the students on the obstacles that kept them from reaching their goals. These responses were analysed and grouped into 26 categories. The frequency of words was then calculated for each category as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 - Frequency and percentages of factors related to failure in achieving goals

	Factor	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	Discouragement, comparison to others, negative comments, no encouragement, bad company	34	17. 3
2	Irresponsibility, laziness and no efforts exerted, not studying seriously, carelessness	31	15. 8
3	Poor time management	18	9. 2
4	Failure, disappointment, frustration	13	6. 6
5	Transportation problems, living far from university	12	6. 1
6	Depression	11	5. 6

7	Fear and anxiety	10	5. 1
8	Mobile addiction, internet and films	10	5. 1
9	Weakness in health and personality, fatigue, being shy	9	4. 6
10	Difficulty in studying	8	4. 1
11	Marriage and responsibilities	8	4. 1
12	Delay	5	2. 6
13	Boredom	3	1. 5
14	War	3	1. 5
15	Disliked subjects	3	1. 5
16	Language not spoken in public	3	1. 5
17	Poverty	3	1. 5
18	No helpful teacher	2	1. 0
19	No friends	2	1. 0
20	No experience	2	1. 0
21	Impatience	1	0. 5
22	Mother tongue	1	0. 5
23	Disrespect	1	0. 5
24	Distance learning	1	0. 5
25	No goals specified	1	0. 5
26	Hatred	1	0. 5
	Total	196	100%

Table 2 shows that the most frequent factors that hinder success among Saudi EFL undergraduates were discouragement from family, friends and society followed by irresponsibility, carelessness and laziness, then by poor time management, next by failure, disappointment and frustration, then by transportation problems and depression, finally fear and mobile addiction., the rest of the factors were used least frequently. Thus, discouragement from parents, friends and people in the society was the most salient factor for failure in achieving goals. Having bad company, negative comments, comparison of students to their peers are all discouraging factors that make one not wanting to do something. Preference of laziness and irresponsibility in carrying out an activity, despite having the ability to do so, is also another factor that hinders success. Besides, poor time management and falling behind with tasks and study, cause rushing and being under pressure to catch up. That drains one's energy and is stressful. The feeling of failure and frustration is also another factor that prevents students from achieving their goals. Some students feel hopeless and depressed when they fail. They lose trust in their abilities and become less confident. Students who have transportation problems have to exert more effort during their education to succeed, and so are those who feel alone.

Thus, from students' perspective, failure is the result of discouragement, irresponsibility and laziness, poor time management, failure and frustration, depression, transportation problems and being far from family and finally mobile addiction.

Conclusion

This study presents a better understanding how students reach their goals and succeed at university. The findings revealed that learners who get support from family, friends and society achieve better outcomes. Learners persist in learning, despite many hurdles hampering their continuation. Being ambitious is a great trait. People with great ambition are more inspired to succeed. Successful students work hard to be able to accomplish what they want. They are

patient enough because they know that patience is a vital component to success. Teachers could encourage their students through positive reinforcement and praise and by avoiding negative comments to boost their performance. Teachers could help students get rid of their laziness by motivating them to get engaged in pursuit of their goals and exert more effort to achieve them. Teachers could incite the interest of their students and make them want to learn by giving them activities of an adequate level of challenge. Teachers could help students make better decisions about how to manage their time. They could help students focus on doing the important things first. Finally, teachers could increase the confidence of less successful students' in their ability to succeed by giving them opportunities to taste success. This may trigger their interest and motivate them. Teacher also could help students learn from their failure rather than focusing on their failure.

Researchers and academic counselors, curriculum designers and policy makers could benefit from the findings of this study in supporting and assisting their students to be successful. This study can be replicated with a larger sample of students from different types of institutions. Future research should continue to explore other factors and their relationship to learning outcomes.

Acknowledgment

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