A Qualitative Analysis on the Occurrence of Learned Helplessness among EFL Students

Liwei Hsu

Department of Applied English

National Kaohsiung University of Hospitality and Tourism

No.1, Songhe Rd., Xiaogang Dist., Kaohsiung, 81271, Taiwan

Tel: 886-7-806-0505   E-mail: liweihsu@mail.nkuht.edu.tw

Abstract

This study seeks to provide some comprehensive information on EFL students' learned helplessness when learning English, by exploring the causal relationship between three variables: failure to learn English, personality traits and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation. Eighteen students and two English teachers participated in this study with a gatekeeper's consent. This was done mainly through focus group interviews. The data was elicited from the NEO-FI Personality Trait Inventory with a cross analysis done on the in-depth interviews. The findings indicate that students with different personality traits do regard their failure to learn English in different ways. This in turn, leads to various influences that decrease their intrinsic motivation. The intrinsic motivation for all of the participants is inevitably affected by failure, but learners with a neuroticism trait are the most sensitive to failure. Therefore, these are the students who are most susceptible to experiencing learned helplessness when learning English, while students with traits of openness, extraversion and agreeableness can reactivate their extrinsic motivation when appealed to by external incentives. However, this study also discovered that there was a mismatch between a teacher's judgment on student amotivation and the student's self-assessment of his/her motivation to learn English.

Keywords: Big-five personality traits, EFL, Learned helplessness, Learning motivation, Self-Determination Theory

1. Introduction

English has become the international language (EIL) because most international functions use English as their medium for communication. Therefore, non-native speakers around the world have started to make the acquisition of English a priority; their educational goal is to become proficient in the language (Wong, 2007; Kim, 2010). Even though EFL students realize the importance of acquiring good English skills, some of them seem to lack motivation in the learning process. Their unwillingness to partake in classroom activities can be an example of demotivation. The issue of EFL students' motivation to learn English has been acknowledged as a popular topic in academia, particularly within the realm of second language acquisition. It is quite common for EFL teachers to face a group of students who lack motivation to pick up any kind of information on English, not to mention learning it. The *Short Oxford English Dictionary* defines motivation as: "that which moves or induces a person to act in a certain way; a desire, fear, reason, etc, which influences a person's volition, also often applied to a result or object which is desired." The aim of this paper is to extend the theoretical framework proposed by previous studies and explore the "what", "why" and "how" of the learned helplessness which occurs in EFL classes.

Based on the aforementioned situations, the investigation and discussions on the reasons which lead to EFL students' learned helplessness are crucial issues to program instructors. Before any detailed discussion begins, it is necessary to clarify the role that motivational issues play in second language acquisition. According to Gardner's assertion (1985), L2 motivation can be defined as "the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity" (p. 10). Motivation has been considered one of the most powerful factors in ESL/EFL students' acquisition of English

(Carreira, 2006; Wu, 2003; Noels *et al.* 2001; Gardner *et al.* 2004). Therefore, it is important that language educators or those who carry out applied linguistics have a better understanding of individual motivational differences and other relevant issues, so that instructional effectiveness will be maximized (Gao *et al.*, 2007; Dörnyei, 2005; Chang, 2010). In Taiwan, studies have shown that the number one challenge for English teachers is the students' lack of learning motivation (Author, 2007). Prior research has divided motivation into different categories based on orientation and origins. This paper investigates the origins of the students' motivation due to the culture-specific orientation of motivation, which can be seen as a possible threat to reliability. In a study conducted by Yu (2009), some typical instrumental motivations, i.e., motivation to study English to pass an examination, falls into the integrative category, but some integrative motivations are considered to be instrumental by the Chinese students studying English. Therefore, this study will specifically focus on the origin of motivation instead of the categories. Concerning the source, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are generally the two major ones taken into account in empirical analyses.

1.1 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

As stated above, students' motivation has attracted numerous scholarly papers researching the disciplines of educational psychology and second/foreign language education (Nakata, 2009). Among the wide spectrum of discussions on the motivation of EFL learners, Deci and Ryan's (1985) "self-determination theory" (SDT) has been acknowledged as the underpinning rationale for the past three decades (Noels *et al.*, 2000). Within the framework of the SDT, motivation is addressed as a dynamic and constantly changing drive toward learning subjects (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In a nutshell, the motivation continuum includes amotivation, extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Amotivation has a status identical to learned helplessness (McIntosh & Noels, 2004); hence, these two terms are interchangeably used in this study. Based on the SDT, it is assumed that extrinsic motivation can be internalized by students and changed into an intrinsic one. The relationships among these various types of motivation are depicted by the following figure:

Insert Figure 1

Although Ryan and Deci (2000) supported the theory that extrinsic motivation could be internalized into intrinsic motivation, it is still an open empirical question as to whether such internalization can also be applicable to students in both ESL and EFL contexts. Another unanswered question is: How can the internalization process be formulated, particularly by EFL learners? However, these two questions are beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on the influence of individual personality traits on the reverse progression from intrinsic motivation to extrinsic motivation, and ultimately to amotivation. According to Noels *et al*. (2001), three subcategories of extrinsic motivation can be observed in students, based on the internalization levels of motivation: external, introjected and identified regulations. Once the motivation is internalized, the transition is complete. Intrinsic motivation has proven to be a powerful predictor of EFL students' learning success, (Ehrman *et al*., 2003) even though Leaver and Atwell (2002) argued that their study showed only a small number of multilingual individuals were really interested in the target culture, per se.

Most prior studies focus on the effects that the students' various types of motivation and their levels of intensity have on academic achievement. Yet, there is a demand for comprehensive studies to investigate how EFL students' previous failure to learn English and their personality traits exert influence on their motivation. In order to help and better equip EFL program instructors in teaching students with learned helplessness, it is necessary to have an understanding of the relationships among these variables.

1.2 Personality Traits

A personality theory examines and rationalizes the effects that individual students' different personality traits have on their learning outcomes. This has been thoroughly discussed in regard to various educational disciplines (Sharp, 2008); such studies have assumed that personal variables could be regarded as the strongest indicators of a student's learning motivation and performance (Major *et al*., 2006). For example, O'connor & Paunonen's study (2007) adopted the "Big Five Personality Traits" to predict an individual's academic performance at the post-secondary level. Similar applications have gained tremendous popularity, both academically and practically (Farsides & Woodfield, 2006). Prior studies have also proposed that a student's personality traits may be crucial to the way he/she learns a second/foreign language (AlFallay, 2004). Among numerous personality scales, the NEO Personality Inventory is regarded as a reliable and valid way to measure the traits of examinees from various cultural backgrounds (Piedmont *et al*., 2002).The five factors contained in the NEO Personality Inventory include: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness. The meanings and typical characteristics of each factor are described in the following section (Previn *et al*., 2005).

1.2.1 Neuroticism (N factor)

The general attributes of neuroticism include: fear, sadness, anger, embarrassment and guilt. An individual with a low degree of neuroticism is indicative that he/she is emotionally stable and therefore able to handle pressure. A study conducted by Major et al. (2006) indicated that the neuroticism factor alone is a negative predictor of learning motivation. It is interesting to see how students with neuroticism handle failure, but this could be a topic for a future study.

1.2.2 Extraversion (E factor)

People with extraversion tend to be good at interpersonal skills and are better able to acquire a second/foreign language than their introverted counterparts (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). The essence of this personality is the ability to socialize and mingle; the higher the degree of extraversion, the more likely that the person will interact with other people. Interpersonal skill is just one of many characteristics. This type of person is also decisive, full of energy and talkative. They also love excitement and are optimistic about things. However, the effects of extraversion are rather ambivalent with regard to academic performance (Furnham et al., 2009). The ambiguity may come from the extrovert's drive for satisfaction and the individual's perceived worth (Ingledew et al., 2004).

1.2.3 Openness (O factor)

The fundamental attributes of persons having the O-Factor include: creativity, curiosity and sensitivity to aesthetics. To date, in terms of individual openness, the extent to which such a personality can affect learning outcomes is still unclear (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2004, 2005; Furnham & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2004). Schutte and Malouff (2004) used a sampling of 251 college students to investigate the reading preferences of people with various personality traits. The results confirmed that openness and conscientiousness were positive predictors of reading habits. However, empirical evidence that directly examines the relationship between the openness trait and EFL students learning English, including the way they handle failure and changes in intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, is rare.

1.2.4 Conscientiousness (C factor)

Conscientious individuals tend to work hard because of their motivated commitment and achievement-oriented personalities. As a result, surveys have shown that their academic performances in various subjects exceed those of their counterparts (Heaven *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, many scholars even ascertain that conscientiousness is the trait most consistent with academic performance (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003). However, the issue that remains unanswered is how an EFL student, with an achievement-oriented personality, is able to handle the failure to learn English, and how it can further affect his/her motivation towards learning English.

1.2.5 Agreeableness (A factor)

Individuals with agreeableness are the ones who are warm, reliable, trustworthy and decent to others (Pervin *et al.*, 2005). There is still a need for empirical evidence of any connection between agreeableness and academic performance (Zeidner & Matthews, 2000; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003), or if there is such a relationship between this particular trait and learning motivation (Major *et al.*, 2006).The author acknowledges that there is little relevant research to be found on the subject of second language acquisition having an effect on students' agreeableness and their unsuccessful English learning experiences.

1.3 Learned Helplessness

Seligman discovered, and put forward, the phenomenon of learned helplessness after experimenting on animals in 1975. Learned helplessness has been considered a form of meta-learning; it suggests that a learner's desire and/or confidence to learn is destroyed because of three deficits resulting from unpleasant and uncontrollable events (Atherton, 2009). These refer to motivational, cognitive and emotional deficits (Seligman, 1994; Perera, 2006). For motivational deficit, students with learned helplessness lack confidence in controlling their learning process after they experience failure and thus quit trying to learn. Learned helplessness caused by a cognitive deficit means that students fail to apply logical thinking and cognitive flexibilities to the learning process, which will subsequently lead to depression or inevitably, failure. Depression can also originate from an emotional deficit. Depressed students tend to consider that learning is futile, regardless of their efforts. All of these deficits primarily come from students' experiencing too many failures in the learning process (Feldman & Huang 2005).

According to a study by Diener & Dweck (1978), children with learned helplessness tend to attribute their poor performance, or failure to learn, to a lack of ability and uncontrollable circumstances (Gernigon, Fleurance & Reine, 2000). Thereby, they lose their self-esteem and motivation to learn. Most academic articles on learned helplessness focus on the drives that cause learner's amotivation, and do not tackle the topic of the restrictive

influence of amotivation; nor do they direct any attention towards EFL students.

On the basis of previous studies on learned helplessness, it is hypothesized that EFL students with learned helplessness might be intrinsically motivated toward English in the first place; however, such motivation can be exhausted after experiencing a series of failures. While intrinsic motivation cannot drive these students to increase their efforts to learn, extrinsic motivation may still function successfully for them (Stipek, 1988). However, the extent to which extrinsic motivation can compromise an individual's learned helplessness remains unexplored. Furthermore, it is hard to find any studies on learned helplessness associated with EFL learning, despite all the findings from numerous research papers in psychology. The scarcity of relevant studies on EFL students' learned helplessness was the catalyst for this study.

2. **Methodology**

2.1 Research Design

There has been little thought or consideration given to how students with various personality traits perceive their failure to learn English and how such perceptions affect their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This study attempts to investigate the association between these constructs. Based on the theoretical framework drawn from reviewed literatures (Seligman, 1994; Perera, 2006), this study proposes the following structure:

Insert Figure 2

2.2 Participants

The author selected hospitality college students in Taiwan who had been diagnosed by their teachers as having learned helplessness towards learning English as participants for this study. The selection of these participants followed the paradigm of information richness; therefore, purposeful sampling was chosen for the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The study was initiated in March 2010, after receiving consent from the gatekeepers. Interviewees included eighteen English students who had majored in Chinese Culinary Arts, and the two English teachers who had taught the two classes. It was the intent of the research, through an interviewing process, to elicit more in-depth information on their experiences of learning (or teaching) English. The eighteen students were divided into three mini-focus groups for self-disclosure. The data derived from these groups would then be processed in a cross-group analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

2.3 Instrumentation

The study processed the participants by using deep interviews. Focus group interviews were undertaken for the simple reason that they would fulfill the study's goal of understanding more about the participants' viewpoints (Chung & Huang, 2009). The interviews were conducted through a series of semi-structured questions and answers. During the interview process, some impromptu questions were improvised because of the conversations, and more comprehensive information was acquired on the topic (Pan, 2003). In order to justify the proposed research, the interview questions were designed and outlined on the basis of reviewed literatures, and categorized into four themes: failures that they had experienced, extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation and learned helplessness. All of these questions were organized in accordance with interview protocol. For the teachers, the questions were changed to inquire about typical behaviors of learned helplessness students in class. Throughout the interviewing process, the conversations were recorded in wmv files for future reference and analysis. Each group's set of questions was similar in meaning, but the wording or discussion was modified according to the actual on site interactions. Even though modern technology was used in this research project, key words and sentences were marked, which would be crucial when the data was being coded (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Creswell, 2003).

After the interviews were completed, the interviewees were asked to complete the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), which is a questionnaire with 60 items developed by Costa and McCrae in 1998 on the basis of five basic personality facets. The NEO-FFI is also a concise version of the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI), which selected 12 questions with maximum validity from each of the five dimensions. The NEO-FFI has been translated into various languages such as Arabic, Chinese, French and German (Costa and McCrae, 1992). Other than its global popularity, NEO-FFI is the only five-factor scale being employed by most professionals (McCrae and Costa, 2004).

2.4 Research Questions

Inspired by previous research and personal teaching experience, the attention and focus was directed towards three specific questions, to elicit answers not investigated in previous studies:

1) How do EFL students with various personality traits regard their failure to learn English?

2) What are the relationships among the students' failure to learn English, their personality traits and their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation?

3) What are the teacher's perspectives of EFL students' learned helplessness in learning English?

2.5 Data Analysis

The study adopted a re-confirmed transcript with triangulation to ensure the reliability and validity of the qualitative analysis of the data, and to acquire a comprehensive description of the research questions through the participants' perspectives. In order to assure this study's reliability and validity, the four criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were complied with for the data analyses.

2.5.1 Credibility

The data truly reflected real responses from the participants without including any subjective assumptions, judgments or statements. The interviewees understood the language (i.e., vocabulary and terminology) used in the discussions. Data was rechecked and re-examined for authenticity and objectivity after a time lapse. Moreover, the appropriateness of the data coding and decoding was taken from the perspective of outsiders to avoid tunnel vision.

2.5.2 Transferability

Transferability of data ensures the comparability and appropriateness of the coded and decoded data. With the help of notes taken in the interview, in addition to audio recordings, the oral data could be transferred into printed files. However, while the data are transferred from an oral format into a printed one, the researcher needs to maintain a neutral position.

2.5.3 Dependability

When the interview data are transferred into a print format, it is necessary to ensure that the information is interpreted correctly. After the draft was completed, interviewees were invited to check the contents of the printed version to make sure the data was interpreted and transferred accurately.

2.5.4 Conformability

Conformability of data refers to the objectivity and neutrality of a research project; it indicates the proper selection of the participants and constructs. If any possibly predetermined or prejudiced data are found, they would be removed from the database. Therefore, most presentations of the interviewee's opinions and viewpoints were quotations, which have been acknowledged as a reliable way to reflect real discussions.

After the printed version of data had been completed, member checking was administered to provide feedback to the interviewees. Meanwhile, they were asked to check the accuracy of their opinions in the transcripts as well as the validity of the interview contents. The study also recruited an external auditor to investigate the coding system's appropriateness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2003) and then applied data triangulation to perform a content analysis.

3. Results and Findings

3.1 Background of Participants

Interviews were conducted in Taiwan, between March and May 2010. Interview participants included eighteen EFL students and two English teachers. The twenty participants' demographics are summarized as follows in Table 1.

Insert Table 1

As previous publications had already discovered the causes for learned helplessness, the participants' individual experiences and perceptions toward such causes were analyzed through the implementation of focus group interviews. Afterwards, content analyses were cross-examined and summarized and the conceptions decoded from the data.

3.2 Personality Traits and Failure to Learn English

Individual participants' personality traits were categorized by the NEO-FI Personality Inventory. However, in order to avoid the interviewer generating a stereotype for each participant, the personality evaluation was administered at the end of the study. Each interviewee was assigned a code name based on the results of his/her personality trait analysis. For example, one interviewee received 5 points for openness, 3 points for conscientiousness, 2 points for extraversion, 4 points for agreeableness and 1 point for neuroticism, and was assigned the code name 5O3C2E4A1N. Using each participant's personality trait as a base, his/her responses to

the following questions were coded and examined further.

Question 1: Have you ever experienced any failure while you were learning English?

Generally speaking, all of the participants had experienced failures learning English. Some of them (students with higher levels of neuroticism and conscientiousness, e.g., 2O4C3E1A5N and 1O2C1E1A5N) took failure seriously. Learners with neuroticism were particularly anxious about their failures, which considerably affected their self-efficacy. Meanwhile, some (openness and extraversion learners) did not think their failure to learn English mattered that much. In other words, learners with neuroticism and conscientiousness characteristics are sensitive to these failures and such experiences can influence their learning, especially in the case of learning a second/foreign language. No consistencies could be found with the agreeableness students. This specific personality trait can be easily influenced by other people's opinions or experiences. While most members expressed their perception of failure as the pivotal drive to preserve their efforts to learn English, they tended to agree with their friends. However, the situation might possibly be different if they were in a group where most members did not take seriously the failure to learn.

Question 2: What was the source of these failures? Did they come from your parents, teachers, friends or other source?

The students' sources of failure varied. Students with neuroticism and their extroverted counterparts, as well as the openness students claimed that the source of their failure came mainly from their peers and the teacher's instructional method. On the other hand, the conscientious students were inclined to think carefully about their answers to this question. In the end, one conscientious student attributed his/her failure to the language environment. However, when they were asked about their thoughts on the teacher's instruction and their failure to learn, they responded conservatively by saying that the teacher's instructional method was a potential factor in their failure but not a significant one. For agreeableness learners, they said that although they paid close attention to the teacher's comments, they hardly considered this to be a source of failure. None of the participants claimed that parents or friends were the source of their failures. However, when participants were asked about their views on failure in general, they all agreed that the teacher's ineffective instruction played a decisive role in their failure to learn, even though it might not be the prime source.

Question 3: What are the major reasons that caused the failure to learn English?

Most students thought that not being able to satisfy their sense of accomplishment from learning English was a major reason. This statement was strongly supported by students having neuroticism, openness and agreeableness traits. In the meantime, the extroverted students argued that not being able to communicate with others in English was another major reason leading to their failure to learn. The conscientious students also regarded that "not studying hard enough" was the major cause of their failure.

Question 4: What kinds of failures depress you the most? Give some examples.

Participants had very diverse points of view in regard to this question. Negative remarks from teachers would be ranked number one, followed by "not being able to use English to talk to foreigners." Many participants also pointed out that their low performance on the English tests depressed them the most. After these three answers were cross-analyzed with the personality variables, neuroticism, conscientiousness and agreeableness learners by far outweighed the teacher's comments or peer feedback. On the other hand, extroverted and openness learners were enthusiastic about using English to communicate with foreigners. However, due to their limited proficiency in English, their attempts were restricted and they were upset by this situation.

Question 5: Do these failures demotivate you to learn English?

Almost all of the participants thought that their motivation to learn English was reduced by these failures. But two learners (4O2C5E2A1N and 5O3C4E2A1N) agreed that although they did feel depressed about these failures, they would not dramatically change their perceptions towards learning English. They were still pessimistic about their ability to learn English unless instructed by a good teacher or/and being immersed in an English-speaking environment.

3.3 Diminishment of Intrinsic Motivation

Question 1: After experiencing these failures, how do you feel about learning English?

In general, participants claimed that they held back on their effort to learn English after experiencing these failures. Most of them lost interest. However, they were unable to describe their decline or lack of intrinsic motivation to learn English very clearly. They just simply indicated that any continued effort to learn English would not help them become proficient in the language. One student (3O1C4E2A5N) made an interesting response by asking the interviewer the question: Instead of us learning English, why don't non-native Chinese start to learn Chinese?

Question 2: Do these failures hinder you from learning English?

The most common response from the participants was "more or less." Not one of the participants said that these failures did not affect their perception towards learning English. In other words, experiencing failure did change the participants' attitude toward learning English. Students with the highest neuroticism levels showed the strongest resistance to learning English.

Question 3: How do you think previous failures have affected your intrinsic motivation?

Students who had the highest intensity of neuroticism but were the lowest in the extravert levels (1O4C1E1A5N, 3O2C1E4A5N and 3O1C2E4A5N) possessed the strongest negativity towards learning English. However, participants of similar neuroticism and extravert levels but higher openness/low agreeableness were excluded. By the same token, there were two students (5O3C4E2A1N and 4O2C5E2A1N) who believed that such failures did not influence their motivation to a large extent. However, after experiencing failure, they also pointed out that they did not think that learning English was as much fun as they previously had thought.

3.4 Impairment of Extrinsic Motivation

Question 1: Do any external incentives encourage you to learn English?

At first, most of the participants responded with a negative answer to this question, but their attitudes changed radically during the interview. They started to ask about the kind of incentives they would receive if they wanted to put more effort into learning English. This was evidence of the fact that even though students lose intrinsic motivation, they could still be motivated by external incentives. Some students (2O1C5E3A4N, 4O2C5E2A1N and 5O3C4E2A1N) expressed the fact that their motivation might become greater if they were taught by a "good" English teacher. However, they failed to define or qualify what they meant by their definition of "good". Surprisingly, not many of these participants would try for a monetary reward.

Question 2: What would you do if you were informed that you would get a large sum of money for learning English?

As mentioned above, a monetary incentive was counterintuitive and not as appealing to the participants as people would presume. Most participants indicated that trying to learn English would be just a waste of time regardless of the amount of money they would receive. However, some students (4O2C5E2A1N, 2O3C5E3A1N and5O3C4E2A1N) would be more motivated than others to try for a monetary gain, but they still questioned their efforts because they lacked the confidence to learn English.

Question 3: Can you think of any extrinsic rewards that would activate your motivation to learn English?

Only a handful of the participants thought that nothing could ever actively motivate them again. Conversely, a large portion of participants (11 out of 17) argued that, if they could be placed in a good English environment or be taught again from a very basic level, they would be willing to try to learn English again. Among the six exceptions, four (1O4C1E1A5N, 3O2C1E4A5N, 1O3C2E3A5N and 3O1C2E4A5N) believed that their efforts would eventually be fruitless, so they could be counted as being amotivational or learned helplessness learners; the other two (4O1C2E4A5N and 3O2C1E4A5N) stated that they could be motivated to learn English for the sake of helping others

3.5 The Occurrence of Learned Helplessness

The two teachers who had instructed this group of participants for two semesters assessed the students' learned helplessness. Their judgments were based on their professional experience as English teachers within an EFL context. After the participants' interviews were analyzed, it was discovered that some of them should not be categorized as amotivational. Therefore, it was decided to triangulate their judgments with two more interview questions.

Question 1: Why do you think these students are classified as learned helplessness?

These students just simply did not participate in the activities or were absent-minded during lectures. When they were called upon to answer questions, they just smirked and looked at me without saying a word. Every time I gave the class quizzes or tests, they turned them in right after they filled out their names and student ID numbers. No question, even the easiest one, had been answered. I had encouraged them to try, but they just told me that they had tried already and failed. There was no point in trying to do something that was doomed to fail.

Question 2: What about their behavior and engagement during instructional activities?

They had some negative influence on their classmates. Some of these students were assertive leaders in class; thus, their attitude had a somewhat strong effect on the class. One good thing was the fact that they did not have

behavioral problems, which meant they did not challenge or defy the teachers. Even so, their ignorance or unwillingness to participate in the classroom activities always frustrated these two teachers. One teacher pointed out that she was so depressed that she had problems designing an effective syllabus for the class because of the students' learned helplessness.

4. Discussion

As a response to Kim's (2010) suggestion about the analysis of EFL learners' motivation with the qualitative methodology, this paper was designed to explore the occurrences of learned helplessness within the EFL context. Moreover, a large body of literature has confirmed the correlation between personality variables and student motivation and achievements. This paper tends to extend existing theoretical frameworks into a broader application.

Results from this study provide in-depth information about the reasons which result in EFL students' learned helplessness. Motivational issues are hypothetically linked to foreign language learning outcomes. It has been proven that they are influenced by many other socio-psychological variables. With the application of Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study investigated factors that lead to students' learned helplessness and loss of motivation. Based on the Big-Five Personality Traits, students were categorized according to their individual responses to the NEO-FI Personality Inventory. The findings, which respond to the first research question, indicate that EFL students with different personalities think of failure differently, which is in line with McIntosh & Noels' (2004) conclusions. However, this study complements the part that is lacking in their study, by explaining causal relationships among proposed variables by means of qualitative research.

The most salient causal relationship yielded by this study is the effect of failure to learn English on extrinsic/intrinsic motivation, involving the influence of personality traits. Despite the fact that students with differing personalities had diverse perceptions of failure, it was possible to garner some unified feedback on the subject. For example, quite a few participants argued that their sense of failure, in terms of learning English, came from negative experiences with their teachers. Bernaus and Gardner's (2008) study pointed out that failure in the EFL students' learning processes might be the result of a teacher's use of ineffective methods, such as the traditional instructional approach. Such results as these highlight the importance of the teacher motivating students, and backs up the statement proposed by McIntosh & Noels (2004) "…perceptions of the L2 instructors and the learning environment is generally regarded as 'controlling' and were negatively related to both IM and identified regulations but positively related to AM" (p. 3). The statement which ascertains the teacher's status in student motivation is also in alignment with Dörnyei's (2001 a, b) motivational "process model". This model further emphasizes that learning motivation is dynamic rather than static; hence, the interaction between motivation and personality may alter the way a student perceives English learning.

The final analyses results on the influence of personality traits in the process of students' experiencing failures and the formation of learned helplessness confirm that personality traits do influence the falling-off in motivation. Unsurprisingly, learners with neuroticism were anxious about their failure to learn English and thus their intrinsic motivation decreased along with the decline in self-efficacy. Perera (2006) proposed that neuroticism has the greatest tendency to be amotivational and can be attributable to emotionally unstable characteristics in participants with learned helplessness. This study's findings support and further reinforce Major's et al. (2006) statement by providing an answer to the question as to how learners with neuroticism handle learning failures. Conscientiousness was also a predictor for students' being sensitive towards failure. However, the conscientious students' transitions to learned helplessness are not as defined as their neuroticism peers, nor did they attribute their failures to external factors such as teachers and environment as much as other participants did. Therefore, even though conscientious learners are also sensitive to failure, their achievement-orientated personalities helped them to retain their self-efficacy more than the learners with neuroticism did. In terms of the extrovert and openness students' perceptions of their failure to learn, comparatively speaking, they were not impacted by the experience as much as their neuroticism peers, but were generally stronger than the agreeableness learners, who showed great diversity about the way they perceive failure. These are individuals who are people-oriented and influenced by other people's opinions.

For the relationship between personality traits and intrinsic motivation, neuroticism learners had a greater tendency to diminish intrinsic motivation, whereas extroverted participants were the ones most able to retain their intrinsic motivation. These findings indirectly support Allwright and Hanks' (2009) study by explicitly linking extra version with the retention of intrinsic motivation, even after experiencing failure. Moreover, openness students were also able to maintain their intrinsic motivation to learn English. The major reason for this was that the novelty of learning English, or English itself, in some ways satisfied their creativity and curiosity.

Agreeableness and conscientiousness students did show a wide variety of changes in their intrinsic motivation, which can be explained in two ways: their uncertain and sensitive attitude toward failure, which resulted in altering their intrinsic motivation, and other personality traits are stronger and/or had more stable variables in the intrinsic motivational changes.

Consequently, the study hypothesized that the students can still preserve their extrinsic motivation even when their intrinsic motivation declines, or their impaired extrinsic motivation can be reactivated again by external incentives. If a student's extrinsic motivation cannot be retained or reactivated, he/she can be considered to have learned helplessness or to be amotivational. Extroverted students' can most likely resurrect their extrinsic motivation by external incentives because of the perceived worth (Ingledew et al., 2004). However, external incentives should correspond to the students' personal values and not be the cause of any negative impact on their intrinsic motivation. This statement is supported by Keller and Suzuki's study (2004) on the ARCS model of motivation "…that extrinsic reinforcements, such as positive rewards and recognition, must be used in accordance with established principles of behavior management, and must not have a detrimental effect on intrinsic motivation" (p. 231).

Meanwhile, participants with neuroticism expressed the least interest towards these incentives, so the four students with learned helplessness had high levels of neuroticism in common. Agreeableness learners' motivation could eventually be retriggered by the chance to help others and this finding is empirically consistent with Naquin and Holton's (2004) study. Moreover, the associations among the students' experience of failure, personality traits and intrinsic/extrinsic motivations, were constructed and then verified by this study, and can be acknowledged as a further elaboration on Gardner's (1985) socioeducational model for second language acquisition. Within the framework of this model, Gardner (2004) claimed that "some affective variables influence achievement in learning a language and the level of language achievement and the experience of learning a language can influence some of them" (p. 3).

From the teacher's perspective, the students' amotivation is demonstrated by their behavior or engagement in class. Therefore, there was a discrepancy between the teacher's judgment and students' self-reflection. For example, the teachers had designated eighteen participants as having learned helplessness. However, after analyzing the in-depth interviews, only four of them were found to be entirely amotivational. It is probably this discrepancy that prevents regular in-class interaction between the teacher and students. Under such circumstances, students would be "demotivated" towards learning by these irregular interactions and learned helplessness would appear. If the teacher ignores the needs of these learning helplessness students, then their passive attitude in class activities may become disruptive. Furthermore, some students without learned helplessness will behave like those with it, just to be accepted by their peers. One of the teachers pointed out that one student would always come to him after class and ask questions about learning English although that student acted as a learned helplessness student in class. That student told him that he had to pretend to be amotivational in order to be accepted as a member of the class. Future research may elaborate on this situation, and the "teacher's demotivation" (Chambers, 1993; Oxford, 1998) when facing amotivational learners.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this study examined and analyzed the relationships among three important variables and how interactions among these variables formulated the EFL students' learned helplessness. The principal method employed by this study for obtaining in-depth qualitative information was group interviews. The results revealed that students with various personality traits do perceive learning failure differently. Learners with neuroticism are greatly affected by their failure to learn English, so their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation diminishes accordingly. Once their motivation intensity wanes, it is very difficult to regain. Students with conscientiousness are not as sensitive about failure as are learners with neuroticism and attribute their failure to a lack of effort. They tend to preserve their motivation because of their goal- achievement characteristics. For extroverted learners, failures do not significantly affect their extrinsic or intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, their motivation can be retained or reactivated by external incentives. Students with an openness trait are similar to extroverted participants in regard to their perceptions of failures and their causal relationship with motivation. Agreeableness learners tend to be influenced by the environment in which they are immersed, and by the people around them.

Another significant finding was the gap between the teacher's judgment on students' amotivation and the students' self-assessment. Among the eighteen participants considered as learned helplessness, only four of them were deemed to be amotivational after a series of interviews. Some of the students' behavior in class did not reflect their true motivation towards learning English. Their defiance simply mirrored the expectations of being recognized as part of a group. Within the EFL context, English teachers need to pay extra attention to this type of

situation because one misjudgment may be the start of a negative learning experience. In other words, the students' surplus motivation decreases with the teacher's demotivation toward teaching; this results in more learning failures for the student which then creates diminished motivation. However, the way to prevent such misjudgments depends on the teacher understanding the student's personality, as well as their teaching experience.

What this article tries to emphasize is that, although there are many articles proving that an EFL student's motivation is vital to successfully learning English, personality traits also influence academic performance. To the best of the author's knowledge contributory relationships among failure, personality traits and motivation have yet to be comprehensively investigated. This study can be a preliminary study for this topic. In the future, it is recommended that a quantitative study be done with a larger sampling of participants with more diverse backgrounds, by applying inferential statistical techniques such as Structural Equation Modeling or Hierarchical Linear Modeling, to systematically model and validate the causal relationships among these constructs.

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Table 1.Demographic data of participants

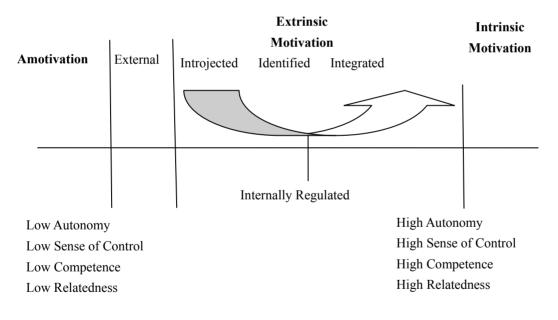| Case	Gender	Age	Personality Trait
A	M	37	
B	F	42	
C	F	20	3O1C4E2A5N
D	M	19	4O2C5E2A1N
E	M	19	4O1C2E3A4N
F	F	20	4O1C2E3A5N
G	F	19	2O1C5E3A4N
H	F	19	5O3C4E2A1N
I	M	19	4O1C2E4A5N
J	F	20	4O2C1E2A5N
K	F	19	1O3C2E3A5N
L	F	19	4O2C2E1A5N
M	M	19	4O1C3E2A5N
N	M	20	2O4C3E1A5N
O	M	20	1O4C1E1A5N
P	M	19	3O2C1E4A5N
Q	M	20	4O3C1E1A5N
R	M	19	3O2C1E4A5N
S	F	19	3O1C2E4A5N
T	F	19	2O3C5E3A1N

Figure 1. Motivation continuum

Source: Gillard, 2010, retrieved from

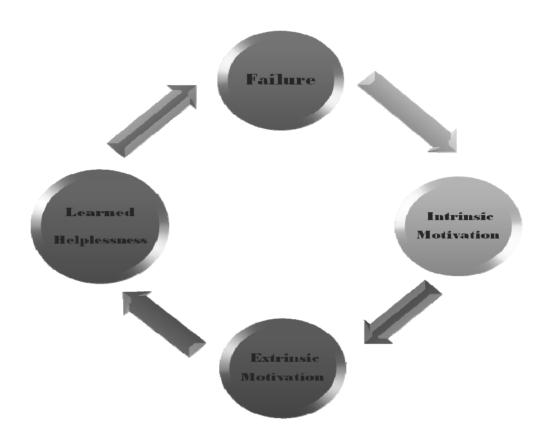http://www.acacamp.com/volunteers/care/documents/CARE_Self_Determination.pdf

Figure 2. Hypothesized procedure for the occurrence of EFL student's learned helplessness