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## Learned Helplessness During a High School English Lesson<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This contribution presents the results of a study of the degree of learned helplessness and its three deficits: motivational, emotional, and cognitive. The research sample consisted of 371 students attending high schools in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship in Poland. The study employed the School Helplessness Scale proposed by B. Ciżkowicz. The data analysis revealed the degree of learned helplessness during an English lesson, which was also compared with the results of another study investigating the extent of this phenomenon for other high school subjects. It was shown that the degree of learned helplessness in an English class is close to the degree of learned helplessness during Polish and math lessons. The study also found that learned helplessness is most strongly affected by the motivational deficit.

**KEYWORDS:** learned helplessness, youth, foreign language learning, didactics

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<sup>1</sup> The text contains fragments of an unpublished doctoral dissertation entitled "Foreign language strategies and learned helplessness in the secondary classroom", supervised by Prof. Ewa Filipiak.

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## INTRODUCTION

Learned helplessness is a psychological concept credited to the US researcher Martin Seligman, who defined it as a condition in which an individual has no control over the outcome of future events. Faced with an uncontrollable situation, a person realizes that there is no relationship between a behavior and its outcomes. As a result, an individual, when solving tasks, experiences failures which can be damaging to their self-esteem. Control deprivation triggers changes in behavior which include (Overmier & Seligman 1967, 1975, as cited in Sędek, 2001; Ciżkowicz, 2009):

- 1) the motivational deficit – refers to a decreased readiness to act;
- 2) the cognitive deficit – refers to the person's inability to recognize their impact on the outcomes of events;
- 3) the emotional deficit – refers to experiencing negative emotions, such as fears or depression.

Learned helplessness has received attention in psychological, sociological, and pedagogical research. In Poland, this problem was investigated by M. Kofta, G. Sędek, and T. Tyszka (Sędek, 1995) and in the following years by B. Ciżkowicz (2009). Extensive sociological research has been conducted by A. Kargulowa, M. Kwiecińska-Zdenke, M. Chodkowska, and Z. Szymanek (Ciżkowicz, 2009). The present contribution explores the degree of learned helplessness during a high school foreign language lesson. The author will focus on the pedagogical and psychological aspects and conditions of the learned helplessness syndrome.

## THE CAUSES OF LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

A 21<sup>st</sup>-century person has faced a wide range of new challenges: adaptation to the evolving market, intense competition, advances in information and communication technology, and the ability to live in a consumerism-driven world. The contemporary labor market is marked by changing conditions as well as competences and skills sought. Studies have confirmed that the wealth of a country depends on its citizens' education level (Kupczyk, 2008, p. 465). Hence, education, which is "a social institution geared towards deliberate learning," is becoming an important social capital resource (Illeris, 2006, p. 19). Unfortunately, for young people, school is becoming the first stage of "the game for success" (Świda-Zięba, 2000, p. 278). Not everyone

wins it. It is at school that some people may experience their first failures, alienation, and exclusion. This point is confirmed by the results of studies which show that the higher the level of education, the higher the degree of a student's learned helplessness (Ciżkowicz, 2009, p. 109–110; Mroczkowski, 2019, p. 108–109). Moreover, as the school years progress, students become less motivated to learn and develop less positive attitudes (Majerek, 2007). As the teaching content becomes increasingly difficult, students need to devote more and more time and effort to work. This leads to a situation where, on the one hand, there are students for whom learning a particular subject or content is rewarding. Still, on the other hand, some students are unable to meet the course's requirements, and their low self-efficacy causes frustration (Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska, 1994). Research by U. Dębska and B. Tomaszewska (2001) dwells upon young people's mental health. Over half of those surveyed (52%) say they have no belief in themselves and their abilities, 36% have no ambitions, 30% declare fairly decreased mood levels or emotional instability, while 15% give up and decide not to take action. All of these features indicate activation weakness, which prevents the subjects from embracing new challenges with enthusiasm. Developing self-efficacy, i.e., trust in one's own abilities (as the above data show, over half of the respondents are deprived of it), not only has an impact on attitudes and learning motivation, but it is also a remedy for overcoming passivity (Keplinger, 2008; Zakrzewski, 1987). Research on learned helplessness has confirmed that people with a high degree of self-empowerment are persistent, hardly ever suffer from depression and succeed in formalized learning (Gecas 1989; Maddux 1991; Scheier & Carver 1992, as cited in Myers, 2003, p. 65).

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The study was conducted via a diagnostic survey method in writing, i.e., the subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire form. The study employed the School Helplessness Scale by B. Ciżkowicz (2009). The tool is composed of 20 items (a-t) concerning the difficulties experienced during a lesson (Table 1).

*Table 1.* The School Helplessness Scale developed by B. Ciżkowicz (2009)

Item number	Statements
a	I feel ashamed when I do not understand something.
b	I am afraid of being called on.
c	I try to be active.
d	I lose confidence when I am learning.
e	I feel I waste time.
f	I work on my own.
g	I am terribly bored.
h	I am afraid of making a fool of myself.

Item number	Statements
i	I listen attentively to what the teacher is saying.
j	I am afraid to say anything.
k	I know the answers to the questions asked by the teacher.
l	I feel sad and embittered.
m	I follow all the teacher's instructions.
n	I understand what the teacher explains to me.
o	I feel as if I were about to visit the dentist.
p	I cannot wait for the bell.
q	I learn eagerly.
r	I daydream.
s	It is easy for me to do tasks.
t	I understand everything.

The survey's statements refer to three deficits: motivational (M), emotional (E), and cognitive (C), which all make up the learned helplessness syndrome. Nine items are reversed and marked with the minus (-). The responses to the statements are scored from 1 to 5 (never or almost never, usually not, sometimes yes, usually yes, always or almost always) and calculated as the mean approval rates for each item, including reverse scoring in the case of the reversed items (Table 2).

Table 2. Description School Helplessness Scale developed by B. Cizkowicz (2009)

Item number	Deficit	Item number	Deficit
a	E	k	P-
b	E	l	E
c	M-	m	M-
d	E	n	P-
e	M	o	E
f	P-	p	M
g	M	q	M-
h	E	r	M
i	M-	s	P-
j	E	t	P-

The group of subjects, or the random sample of students, were selected via a two-stage draw method. In the first stage, a high school was drawn from all schools of this type in Bydgoszcz and Inowrocław. In the second stage, students' sample was selected from the drawn schools. For the purpose of this study, three high schools in Bydgoszcz and three high schools in Inowrocław were drawn. The study was conducted among 371 students from the first, second, and third grades of these high schools.

**THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY AND THEIR INTERPRETATION**

The analysis of the empirical data found that the level of learned helplessness during a high school English lesson is 2.41 (Table 3).

*Table 3.* Descriptive statistics for the School Helplessness Scale and its subscales

	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation
Scale (20 items)	2.41	2	2	1.12
Motivational deficit (subscale)	2.59	3	3	1.12
Cognitve deficit (subscale)	2.47	2	2	0.99
Emotional deficit (subscale)	2.17	2	1	1.16

Source: own elaboration based on research

This figure matches the results of the study by B. Ciżkowicz (2009, p.110), who conducted her research on other school subjects.<sup>2</sup> The level of learned helplessness during a high school math lesson stood at 1.47 and during a Polish lesson at 1.27 (Ciżkowicz, 2009, p.110). The study also analyzed the values of emotional, cognitive, and motivational deficits. It turns out that these constituents of learned helplessness have a similar impact on the development of this phenomenon. As the values in Table 3 show, the growth of learned helplessness is most strongly affected by the motivational deficit (2.59) and, to the least extent, by the emotional deficit (2.17).

The statistics for the specific items are shown in Tables 4, 5, and 6.

*Table 4.* Descriptive statistics for the Scale of School Helplessness (emotional deficit)

Item number	Item	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation
a	I feel shamed when I do not understand something.	2.45	2	2	1.17
b	I am afraid of being called on.	2.78	3	3	1.23
d	I lose confidence when I am learning.	2.05	2	2	1.03
h	I am afraid of making a fool of myself.	2.30	2	1	1.17
j	I am afraid to say anything.	2.26	2	2	1.14
l	I feel sad and embittered.	1.77	2	1	0.95
o	I feel as if I were about to visit the dentist.	1.61	1	1	0.97

Source: own elaboration based on research

<sup>2</sup> Both studies employed the School Helplessness Scale. In B. Ciżkowicz’s study the answers were scored from 0 to 4.

*Table 5.* Descriptive statistics for the School Helplessness Scale (motivational deficit)

Item number	Item	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation
c	I try to be active.	2.02	2	1	1.11
e	I feel I waste time.	2.75	3	3	1.00
g	I am terribly bored.	2.54	2	3	1.15
i	I listen attentively to what the teacher is saying.	2.34	2	2	0.95
m	I follow all the teacher's instructions.	2.25	2	2	0.89
p	I cannot wait for the bell.	3.31	3	3	1.27
q	I learn eagerly.	2.84	3	3	0.97
r	I daydream.	2.64	3	3	1.05

Source: own elaboration based on research

*Table 6.* Descriptive statistics for the School Helplessness Scale (cognitive deficit)

Item number	Item	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation
f	I work on my own.	2.29	2	2	0.98
k	I know the answers to the questions asked by the teacher.	2.23	2	2	1.00
n	I understand what the teacher explains to me.	2.50	2	2	0.87
s	It is easy for me to do tasks.	2.64	3	3	0.98
t	I understand everything.	2.68	3	2	1.04

Source: own elaboration based on research

The impact of a given item on the strength of learned helplessness is reflected by the mean approval rate for this item. For reversed items, this value is calculated based on the formula: “6 – the mean approval rate for the item”. A high value means that a particular item strongly affects learned helplessness, while a low value shows that an item has a marginal impact on this phenomenon (cf. Ciżkowicz, 2009, p.78). The strongest contribution to learned helplessness has been found for statement *p*, which is related to the motivational deficit: “I cannot wait for the bell.” According to Ciżkowicz (2009, p.79), this feeling is experienced by a large proportion of students during Polish and math lessons. A careful analysis of the responses to this statement shows that only 9.2% of the respondents do not share this feeling, while 32.9% of the respondents say that they sometimes look forward to hearing the school bell.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The following is complete data pertaining to the responses to this statement: 9.2% of the respondents said never or almost never, 16% – usually not, 32% – sometimes yes, 15.8% – usually yes, 25.3% – always or almost always.

The weakest contribution to learned helplessness has been found for one of the statements pertaining to the emotional deficit: “During an English lesson, I feel as if I were about to visit the dentist” (statement *o*). In sum, for helpless young people at high school, it is the motivational deficit that has the strongest impact on their state of mind. Surprisingly, this behavior is exhibited by the cream of young people who study for their high school final exams and will enter domestic or foreign universities. Hence, there is a pressing need to initiate a discussion about the reasons for the lack of motivation to learn. It is also necessary to come up with a solution that would help students find themselves and live positive lives.

#### DISCUSSION

Motivation is primarily developed by cultural, social, and individual factors (Siekańska, 2010, p.16). Individualistic cultures prioritize attitudes based on independence, whereas collectivist cultures emphasize group membership. Family or class can be equivalent to cultural communities on a smaller scale. “Culture in this sense embraces a set of orders, prohibitions, assessments and judgments,” which provides a fertile ground for developing one of the motivational attitudes: either “to excel” or “to keep a low profile” (Siekańska, 2010, p. 16). Besides cultural factors, there are also individual factors that determine differences in students’ motivation to learn. One such variable is age, which, as it changes, influences motivation and attitudes to school and learning. As a result, curiosity and internal motivation disappear (Engelhard & Monsaas, 1988; Harter, 1992; Wigfield, 1994; as cited in Brophy, 2012, p. 225). Motivation is negatively affected by students’ deteriorating perception of their abilities, which progresses with age. When children start their school education, they believe that their strongest attribute is effort, which is central to their successful performance. Moreover, they view effort and ability as equivalent factors. They are convinced that students who work more are more able than students who work less. As a result of such thinking, a failure does not cause mental discomfort in young children.

A change in mindset resulting in decreased assessments of one’s competences occurs at age 11-12, when children develop the ability to make social comparisons and when their self-esteem depends on whether they perceive themselves as more successful than others (Covington 1984; as cited in Dembo, 1997, p. 150–151). This attitudinal change is influenced by several aspects of the education system at the middle and high school levels, such as increased discipline and control, a smaller number of opportunities to make independent choices and decisions as well as to manage one’s own work, and formal relationships at school. At these levels, students are more exposed to collective teaching; they are also assigned to different groups based on their foreign language capability. Moreover, their teachers assess their performance publicly and apply stricter grading criteria. These factors trigger social comparisons and prevent students from experiencing a sense of accomplishment. Particularly harmful is parental pressure, which is frequently viewed as a tool for providing development

opportunities, but in actuality for a young person it is a mental burden. Parents, who meticulously plan the future for their children, overload their schedules with after-school activities, such as language, sports, or artistic classes. They believe that by doing so, they will aid the learning and motivational processes. As a result, however, their children feel overwhelmed and discouraged (Siekańska, 2010, p. 17).

A remedy for the learned helplessness syndrome is to understand the social mechanisms of generating motivation. Given the presence of numerous stimuli in a school setting, the teacher can modify its conditions in such a way as to stimulate their students' internal motivation. M. Chomczyńska-Rubacha (2019, p. 835), who draws upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs, recommends adjusting learning conditions to the students' personal goals, preferences, and needs. Failure to satisfy these needs results in "frustration and, eventually, in the decline of activity geared towards the satisfaction of such needs." The teacher's task is to develop in their students a sense of motivation and a state of mind in which they would be willing to pursue set goals. M.H. Dembo mentions a number of factors related to the teaching process organization, which have an impact on the student's willingness to take action to achieve a goal. These include: the type of task, the level of tension and the assessment method. Extremely similar tasks or monotonous and unvaried activities (such as gap-filling grammar exercises) are not bound to stimulate students' cognitive curiosity. Moreover, students become more engaged in tasks that have been presented in a positive manner (Dembo, 1997, p. 155). Of importance is also the difficult level and the feelings generated by the task. A small amount of stress is beneficial as it aids students' concentration and mobilization. By contrast, a high degree of stress hinders spoken communication in a foreign language lesson (Komorowska, 2005, p. 128). In extreme cases, it causes some students to withdraw from school life.

A proper way of providing teacher feedback can have a stimulating effect on the student. Such constructive feedback includes several features. First of all, students need appropriate criteria for assessing the success level, which is why feedback needs to be precise and should refer to what the student already knows about their progress. Students need to be convinced that the objectives in the syllabus have been defined in such a way that success can be achieved. Sometimes, to acquire a specific skill, students need to do a series of repetitive and tedious exercises and wait for results.

Students who have endured multiple failures require well-designed therapeutic and cognitive treatment. The authors of pedagogical and psychological publications recommend cognition retraining programs. This kind of treatment entails teaching strategies which aim to explicate problem-solving methods and related self-talk. To effectively implement these strategies, the following prerequisites need to be included: propositional knowledge (what to do?), procedural knowledge (how to do it?), and situational knowledge (when and why to do it?). It is also necessary to verbalize the employed strategy, as this makes it possible to uncover hidden thought processes central to problem solving (Brophy, 2012, p. 95). Programs have also been designed to train students in learning strategies. Such programs involve teaching such strategies as rehearsal (repeating material to consolidate it), elaboration (putting material



into one's own words and relating it to previous knowledge), and affect monitoring (maintaining concentration on the task and reducing fear of failure) (Devine, 1987; Weinstein & Mayer, 1986, as cited in Brophy, 2012, p. 96; cf. Kolber, 2019).

An interesting educational tip has been offered by R. Dreikurs (as cited in Edwards, 2006, p. 147–148), who makes a distinction between *praise* and *encouragement*. The difference between praise and encouragement is shown in the following example: “Your pronunciation is perfect” vs. “I can see that work on improving pronunciation is important for you.” The example shows that encouragement focuses on efforts rather than achievements. It works with students who despite their efforts have achieved unsatisfactory results and motivates them to continue their efforts. As a result of encouragement, the student gains prestige in the group thanks to their learning efforts rather than performance. Praise, by contrast, focuses on the level of achievements and is reserved for high performers. It entails social comparisons and competition, supporting the view that test performance is paramount. Praise makes students work for grades, rewards, and honors rather than for sheer satisfaction with the tasks performed.

#### CONCLUSION

In order to successfully cope with learned helplessness, it is necessary to put forth a diagnosis based on the knowledge of the causes of this phenomenon and the feelings experienced by helpless people. It is not until the sources of difficulty are identified that it is possible to consider remedial action. Of importance is also a proper response to the question about which of the factors contributing to the student's helplessness are teacher-related. The teacher's role in this process involves several tasks: training students how to effectively plan study periods, setting realistic goals, generating questions which can stimulate interest in learning. Also essential is the method of providing feedback as well as focus on the student's effort. The teacher could also effectively support their students by training them on how to cope with fear and fatigue as well as how to respond appropriately to successes and failures.

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**WYUCZONA BEZRADNOŚĆ PODCZAS LEKCJI JĘZYKA ANGIELSKIEGO  
W SZKOŁACH ŚREDNICH**

**ABSTRAKT:** Przedmiotem tekstu jest prezentacja wyników badań dotyczących poziomu wyuczonej bezradności oraz jej deficytów: motywacyjnego, emocjonalnego i poznawczego. Próbę badawczą stanowiło 371 uczniów uczących się w liceach województwa kujawsko-pomorskiego. W badaniu zastosowano Skalę Bezradności Szkolnej (narzędzie autorstwa B. Ciżkowicz). Analiza danych pozwoliła określić poziom wyuczonej bezradności na lekcji języka obcego oraz porównać wyniki badań przeprowadzonych na innych przedmiotach nauczanych w liceum ogólnokształcącym. Wykazano, że poziom wyuczonej bezradności na lekcji języka obcego jest zbliżony do poziomu wyuczonej bezradności na języku polskim oraz matematyce. Ujawniono również, że deficyt motywacyjny jest na najwyższym poziomie.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** wyuczona bezradność, młodzież, nauka języka obcego, dydaktyka