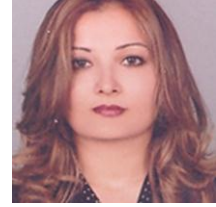




The Effect of Gratitude Training Program on the Gratitude Levels of University Students

Ayşe Eliüşük-bülbül¹ 

¹Konya Necmettin Erbakan University, Guidance and counseling department, Turkey
Email: ayseelusuk@gmail.com Tel: 05303060399



Abstract

In this research, the effect of gratitude training program on the gratitude levels of university students was examined. The sample group of the research consisted of 34 students studying at the Konya Necmettin Erbakan University Ereğli Faculty of Education Guidance and Psychological Counseling Department. The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ) developed by McCullough *et al.* (2002) and adapted to Turkish by Yüksel and Oğuz (2012) was used for gathering the data. The scale was applied 3 times; before and after the application and 2 months after the application. A 6-week gratitude training program was applied to the experimental group. Nothing was applied to the control group. The data was generated using the SPSS program. Mann-Whitney U test and Wilcoxon test were used in the analysis of the data. Significant differences were found in the level of gratitude of the individuals as a result of the practice.

Keywords: Gratitude, Gratitude training, Program, Gratitude education.

Citation | Ayşe Eliüşük-bülbül (2018). The Effect of Gratitude Training Program on the Gratitude Levels of University Students. *Journal of Education and e-Learning Research*, 5(2): 86-90.

History:

Received: 20 February 2018

Revised: 16 March 2018

Accepted: 19 March 2018

Published: 21 March 2018

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Publisher: Asian Online Journal Publishing Group

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

Transparency: The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study was reported; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained.

Ethical: This study follows all ethical practices during writing.

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1. Introduction

Gratitude has been viewed as a fundamental element of many faiths such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism for centuries (Armenta *et al.*, 2016). Although it is the basis for philosophy, the gratitude has not been on the agenda of psychology until recently. But the previous low knowledge base provided a rapid scientific advancement opportunity (McCullough *et al.*, 2002). Since psychological studies were carried out together with philosophy and theology prior to the modern psychology, the approach to the psychological events and situations was philosophical as well as religious. When we look at the philosophers and theologians who dealt with the psychological point of view of that time, it can be said that gratitude is a way of thanking people, God and nature (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). In psychology literature, gratitude is defined as a feeling or a personality trait. In the study conducted by McCullough *et al.* (2001) the gratitude is felt strongly and consistently by the person getting help without giving the person who has helped them nothing in return. According to McCullough *et al.* (2002) the gratitude is a positive, social, moral feeling that the person who has received help without giving nothing in return feels. McCullough *et al.* (2002) described gratitude as "the general tendency of responding with a sense of gratitude and appreciation to the positive results and experiences the provided by the person who helped."

There are two elements required for gratitude. They stated that a positive result at the acquired due to any kind of must be achieved and this result must be external (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). In addition, McCullough *et al.* (2001) addresses gratitude in three ways. Therefore, gratitude is a "moral feeling" that reflects the moral level of the individual rather than a mixture of feelings such as responsibility, and empathy. Secondly, the functionality of gratitude is defined as a "moral source of motivation" that produces a sense of welcoming. Thus, a person who has received help from another person is motivated to do a favor, be helpful or get a "thank you". In this respect, the feeling of gratitude and its value enable people to acquire and maintain positive social behaviors. Finally, gratitude affects the life of the individual as a "moral booster" in the decisions he or she makes for the future and in the life he or she chooses to live. This empowerment also influences the individual's success. According to Emmons (2009) there are three approaches in life that increase the experience of gratitude and the amount of gratitude. First one is valuing the kindness received from others. It is known for a fact that the amount of thankfulness in a person is directly correlated with the value of the gift or the support received from others. If a person perceives receiving a gift from someone as a kind gesture, he or she tends to preserve the gift. The second one is that the person helping the others is aware of the fact that the person he or she intends to do a favor actually wants his help. The fact that a person knows the other person actually wants a favor is a reason for him to feel thankful for the situation and the person in need. The third is the high level of human gratification in people in the event of receiving a favor or a gift unexpectedly or not doing something in return. Once we have made the definition of the development of gratitude in individuals, it will be useful to talk about the training process about how we can develop the individual's gratitude. However, the implementation of gratitude training is very difficult, since it contains many religious elements. Howells (2012). The duration of the gratitude training program may vary in terms of the value or the task lists. Studies conducted in positive psychology show that gratefulness has a significant effect on the well-being of students Froh *et al.* (2009); Froh *et al.* (2010); Seligman (2011); Seligman *et al.* (2009); Unsworth *et al.* (2010); Froh *et al.* (2007); Howells (2004). In the non-formal education, however, it is very rare for it to be included in a pedagogical curriculum. In addition, there are very few studies conducted regarding this subject in our country. According to Howells (2012) every student is inclined towards the area in which he or she feels comfortable. Educational environments such as schools or universities harbour various social and academic difficulties such as anger, victimization, and jealousy. Gratitude training facilitates coping with these challenging conditions. In addition to education, good teachers and leaders play an important role in dealing with these difficult circumstances.

In our country, there is no study on increasing the level of gratitude. However, studies conducted in positive psychology show that gratefulness has a significant effect on the well-being of students (Froh *et al.*, 2009) That's why it is believed that this study, which the patience training aiming to increase one's patience is applied, will contribute to this field.

The purpose of this study is to determine the influence of gratitude training on the level of gratitude of university students. Within the scope of this stated purpose, The fact that "individuals participating in gratitude education will have a significant increase in gratitude levels compared to those who do not participate in these sessions and this increase will continue in the monitoring measurements to be performed after 2 months" is accepted as the hypothesis of this study.

1.1. Research Model

The research was planned in accordance with the principles of the trial method with the pretest-posttest control group. The sample and experiment group of the research consists of the students studying at the Konya Necmettin Erbakan University Ereğli Faculty of Education Guidance and Psychological Counseling Department between 2017-2018 spring semester. Participation in the research is voluntary. Of the 80 students who wanted to participate in the research, 42 students were selected considering their scores earned from the gratitude scale and age, gender, and personal characteristics. The students are divided into control and experimental groups each consisting of 21 students. Six weeks of gratitude education was applied to the experiment group. The training program started with control and experimental groups each consisting of 21 students. At the end of the training, some of the students had left due to various reasons. The final test applications were performed to the remaining students in the experimental and control groups each consisting of 16 students.

1.2. Descriptive Statistics of Experimental and Control Groups

Table-1. Gender statistics of control and experimental groups

Control Group			Experimental Group		
Gender	N	%	Gender	N	%
Female	11	68.75	Female	10	62.5
Male	5	31.25	Male	6	37.5
Total	16	100	Total	16	100

Source: Büyükoztürk (2012) descriptive statistics.

As it is seen in Table 1, the experimental group and the control group each consists of 16 students. The necessary balance was established regarding the gender of the students. The control group consisted of (11, %68.75) female and (5,%31.25) male students. The experimental group consisted of (10,%62.5) female and (6,%37.5) male students.

Table-2. Age statistics of the control and experimental groups

Control Group			Experimental Group		
Age	N	%	Age	N	%
19	12	75	19	11	68.75
20	4	25	20	5	37.5
Total	16	100	Total	16	100

Source: Büyükoztürk (2012) descriptive statistics.

As it can be seen in Table 2, the age balance required was provided in the experimental and control groups. The control group: 19 years (12, 75%), 20 years (4, 25%) and the experimental group: 19 years (11, 68.75%); 20 years (6, 37.5%).

Table-3. Preliminary test comparison regarding the average score of the control and experimental groups

		n	Rank Avg.	Rank tot.	u	p
Gratitude	Control Group	16	16,10	254,50	85,50	34
	Experimental Group	16	14,90	252,50		

Source: Büyükoztürk (2012) Mann Whitney U test impressions

The gratitude scale scores and the Mann Witney U test results of the university students from the control and experimental groups who have participated in the gratitude training and of those who have never participated in such a program are given in Table 2. Thus, there was no significant difference between the control and experimental groups in the gratitude scores according to pre-test results. When the rank average of gratitude ($U = 85.50$, $p > 05$) is taken into account, it is seen that the difference between the average scores of the experimental and control groups is not significant. This result suggests that the two groups have similar characteristics.

1.3. Data Collection Tools

The Gratitude Questionnaire The Gratitude Questionnaire, GQ-6 is a six-item measure created by McCullough *et al.* (2002) to make the concept of gratitude operational and measurable. The items of the scale are designed in one dimension in the form of a seven-point Likert scale to measure the emotional intensity and frequency of gratitude. The standardization of this gratitude questionnaire has been applied to many cultures and studies and it is widely used in these kinds of studies. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the original scale ranges between (.76) -(0.80) (McCullough *et al.*, 2002). The scale is a one-dimensional structure consisting of five factors. The item below the alpha value of the scale, which was adapted to Turkish by Yüksel and Oğuz (2012) ranged from 76 to 84 for six items. Factor loads of the scale ranges between 38-89. The confirmatory factor analysis result was as follows: $\chi^2 = 76.25$, $df = 5$, $GFI = 0.97$, $CFI = 94$, $AGFI = 0.90$, $SRMR = 0.04$ and $RMSEA = 0.10$. As a result, the 5-item and one-dimensional measuring instrument was ready for researchers to use.

1.4. Data Analysis

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to examine the differences between the two groups because the number of samples was less than 30 ($n < 30$) in the analysis of the obtained data, and the Wilcoxon test was used to compare intra-group differences.

1.5. Findings

In the research, it is aimed to determine whether there is a relationship between the degree of gratitude and well-being among the university students participating in the gratitude training program and those who did not participate in the program. Statistical processing of the collected data was performed. The findings of these processes are shown in Table 3. Findings obtained at the end of the research are given below:

Table-4. Analysis of the Pre-test and post-test data obtained from the gratitude scale of the control and experimental groups using the Wilcoxon matched pairs rank test.

Gratitude	Control Group						Experimental Group				
	Control Group	N	Rank Avg.	Rank tot.	Z	p	N	Rank Avg.	Rank tot.	Z	p
Negative Rank		6	7.00	31.00	-28	.788	3	1.40	3.00	-2.71	.002
Positive Rank		7	6.00	35.00			11	8.50	77.00		
Equal		3					2				

Source: Büyükoztürk (2012) Wilcoxon matched pairs rank test impressions

In Table 4, as a result of the analysis, it can be seen that the difference between pre-test and post-test gratitude averages ($Z=-.28, p > .05$) of the control group is not significant. This result shows that the control group did not change in terms of these properties during the application time. It is seen that the difference between pre-test and post-test gratitude average scores ($Z=-2.71, p < .005$) of the experimental group is not significant. As a result, at the end of the training, the gratitude values changed positively.

Table-5. Analysis of the Final Test and Monitoring Test data obtained from the gratitude scale of the control and experimental groups using the Wilcoxon matched pairs rank test.

	Final Test					Monitoring Test				
		N	Rank Avg.	Rank tot.	U	P	Rank Avg.	Rank tot.	U	P
Gratitude	Control Group	16	9.52	147.00	38.72	.00	10.67	152.00	41.00	.00
	Experimental Group	16	20,48	318.00			20,33	313.00		

Source: Büyükoztürk (2012) Wilcoxon matched pairs rank test impressions

When the Man-Whitney U test was applied to the subscales of the gratitude scale, the difference between the gratitude measurement and the average of the final test scores of the experimental group and the control group was found to be significant. When Table 4 was examined, the difference between last test gratitude scores ($U=38.72, p < .001$) of the control and experimental groups was found to be significant. When the Man-Whitney U test was repeated for the gratitude scale, the difference between the averages obtained from the monitoring test measurements between the experimental and control groups was found to be significant. The difference between the final test and the gratitude scores ($U=41, p < .001$) of control and experimental groups was found to be significant.

2. Conclusion and Discussion

In the result of this research, it is observed that the gratitude levels of the subjects increased after the gratitude training. Therefore, the difference between the averages obtained from the final test between the Man-Whitney U test experimental and control groups was found to be significant. The same finding was obtained at the end of the monitoring test. The difference between gratitude scores was significant.

When we review the literature, we see that some of the experimental studies carried out on the university students have shown similar results to our study. In their study of gratitude, Bono *et al.* (2004) found that gratitude education positively affects well-being, life satisfaction, self-sacrifice, spirituality, and piety. Howells (2004) found that gratitude contributed positively to the academic thinking process. As a result of the gratitude training he provided, he revealed that university students had an improvement in their ability to cope with the challenges they face in academic and social life. Fang and Luo (2014) stated that strengthening gratitude training offered a necessary structure for everyone to form a harmonious society in which they live in peace. Moreover, they pointed out that gratitude is very effective for university students' independence, responsibility awareness, and cognitive development (Fang and Luo, 2014). Significant differences in the level of gratitude were found in our country and in other countries in studies that realized the gratitude training based on meditation (Al-Mabuk *et al.*, 1995; Enright, 1996; Bugay and Demir, 2010; Çardak, 2012; Arıcıoğlu, 2016). In some studies, it is aimed to find out how the well-being of people is affected if the gratitude levels are increased. It can be said that the results of these studies are in the same direction. Thus, it was observed that there is a significant increase in the level of well-being as the gratitude level of the individual increases (Sin *et al.*, 2009). In their study, Wood *et al.* (2010) used the letter writing method which is another method used to increase the gratitude level, based on the gratitude list principle. Significant differences were found in gratitude practices as a result of this approach. Another research on gratitude practices deals with who should take part in these practices and how it should be carried out. The result obtained is that individuals who believe that gratitude practices will be beneficial for them benefit more from this training (Bono *et al.*, 2004; Sheldon and Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sin *et al.*, 2009).

According to the findings of the research, it was observed that the gratitude training program implemented significantly increased the gratitude level of the individuals. It may be suggested that "the gratitude training program" implemented in this research by the researcher can be supported by additional sessions, new studies, and similar gratitude training programs or events.

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