

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT IN FRENCH AT JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL: STUDY OF PERSONAL DETERMINANTS

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INTRODUCTION

Nobody can deny that academic achievement depends on a student's personality and personal features (e.g. Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003; Potvin & Paradis, 2000). However, most studies in this field have been related to simple associations between some personal features (distal factors) and academic achievement. This approach leads only to a superficial understanding of the phenomenon.

In this research study, by means of a theoretical model, we examined the effects of students' personal features and certain dynamic mechanisms of their personality on their academic achievement in French at junior high school. In this model, we assumed that personal features (distal variables) affect academic achievement in a direct way, but also indirectly through dynamic characteristics of personality (proximal variables).

METHOD

Participants : 501 French students (with 49.3 % of boys), aged from 11 to 17 years, from 51 classes in junior high schools (from 6th to 9th grades).

Measures

The students' academic achievement was estimated by both the teachers' grade and by a shortened form of the standard cloze test (De Landsheere, 1978; see Bennacer's validation, 2007, 2008). In this test, every 1st, 6th, 11th word, etc. was deleted.

The personal features in the study were: Gender (1 = boy, 2 = girl), Age (number of years), Socio-economic backgrounds (1 = privileged, 2 = middle, 3 = disadvantaged) and academic record (number of failures).

Dynamic personality mechanisms, relating to affective entry characteristics (Bloom, 1979), were represented by five attitudes towards school (see Bennacer, 2008). These attitudes were: Negative feelings; Lack of scholastic interest; Aspirations for future studies; "Scholastic anxiety, worry and stress"; and "Pleasant school, fun environment".

Procedures

We collected data, from 51 classes, via a questionnaire given individually to half of the students in each class, during the third term of the school year.

The theoretical model was tested and modified using the structural equation modeling technique, or causal path analysis using maximum likelihood estimates (e.g. Kuha & Goldthorpe, 2010).

RESULTS

Overall fit. The final model had a good fit to our data. The value of Chi-Square was nonsignificant at .05 ($p = .37$, $\chi^2/df = 1.07$), which confirms the estimate obtained using different values (GFI, AGFI, IFI, TLI, CFI > .90; RMSEA < .05).

Variances explained. The structural model accounted for 27 % of the students' cloze test score, and 29 % of their grade in French. It also explained a relatively important proportion, ranging from 6 % to 29 % in the dynamic personality mechanisms (proximal variables).

The influence mechanism. The personal features (distal variables) determined students' academic achievement directly, and also through the dynamic dimensions relating to affective entry characteristics (proximal variables).

$\chi^2 = 23.51 (22)$, $p = .37$, $\chi^2/df = 1.07$; GFI = .991, AGFI = .974, IFI = .998, TLI = .996, CFI = .998, RMSEA = .012

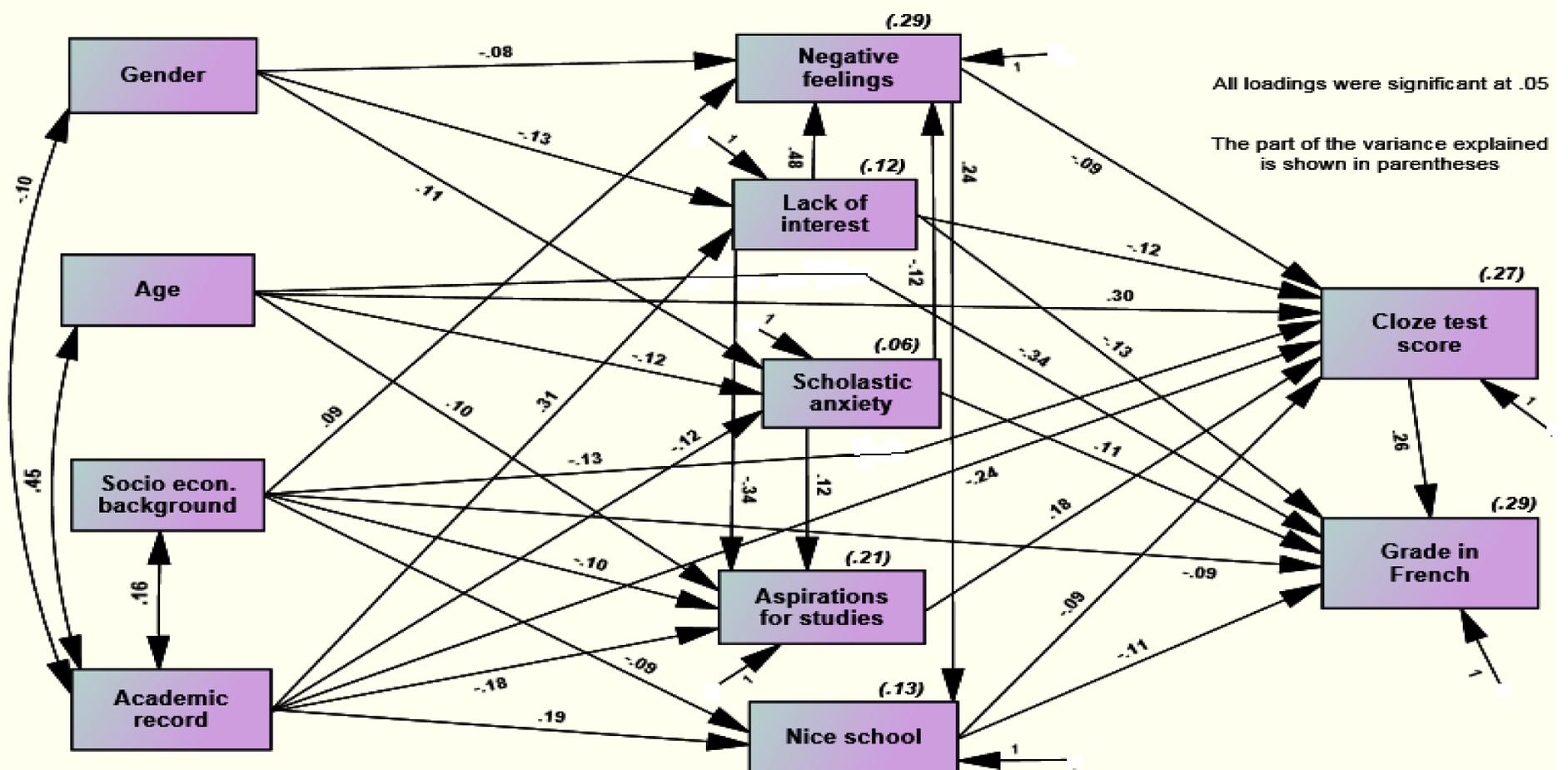


Fig. 1 - Final structural model (n = 501 students)

CONCLUSION

- The personal features (distal variables) have direct effects on academic achievement, or indirectly via dynamic dimensions of personality relating to affective entry characteristics (proximal variables).
- These characteristics play an important mediating role in the influence mechanism. This supports the findings of other studies (see Bennacer, 2005a,b), indicating that affective entry characteristics depend on personal features and affect the behaviour of students and their scholastic achievement (Guidetti, 2002; Potvin & Paradis, 2000).
- The lack of scholastic interest together with "the perception of school as a pleasant and fun environment" negatively determine both the grade in French and the cloze score.
- There is a clear difference between the two ways of assessing students, by teacher grading and by cloze testing. As other authors have noted (e.g. Huteau, 1998), teacher grading appears to be an unsatisfactory predictor of test results and does not permit a "good" diagnosis (lack of a significant effect). Achievement test scores, on the other hand, appear to be good predictors of grades given by teachers, with a loading of 0.26. This is in line with other studies (Bennacer, 2000; De Landsheere, 1974; Petri, 1974).
- This work allows us to identify the profile of those students who gets bad academic results in French.