



Impacts of a Cognitive Behavioral Approach Based Social Skills Training on the Social Skills of Freshman Students*

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Abstract

The present study aims to examine the impacts of CBT-based social skills training on the social skill levels of university freshmen. The sample of the study was comprised of 131 first year university students including experimental design with pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test with the control group. Social Skills Inventory (SSI) was applied to these 131 students and 20 students with scores below the standard deviation of the average were included in the study. The students were randomly assigned to the experiment and control groups in equal numbers. Mann-Whitney U Test, the Friedman test, and Wilcoxon Marked Rank Test was used. According to the results of this research, the SSI scores of the students in the CBT-based social skills group showed a significant increase after the social skills training and the effect of this increase continued in the follow-up study. An increase in the post-test scores of students in the control group received from SSI was also observed, and it was concluded that this increase was not statistically significant. As a result, it has been revealed that social skills training based on CBT is effective in increasing the social skill levels of first year university students.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout their life, each individual meets certain physiological, social, and affective needs in order to continue their development. People live together and interact with each other in order to meet the need for sociability, which occupies an important place among these requirements. In this way, they can convey their feelings and thoughts to other people and thus establish communication. Social skills play an important role in ensuring and maintaining this communication in a healthy manner.

Social skills are defined as behaviors that a person exhibits to perform a social task (Gresham, 2016). These behaviors, which include skills such as problem solving, decision making, assertiveness, and interaction, are acquired through learning (Cook et al., 2008; Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell, 2003). The process of acquiring social skills begins with learning basic social skills in childhood, and over time these skills are developed and social relationships are formed (Salavera et al., 2017). In his theory of social skills, Riggio (1986) addressed basic social skills in six dimensions: Emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, emotional control, social expressivity, social sensitivity, and social control. Emotional expressivity refers to the ability to send nonverbal messages; emotional sensitivity refers to the ability to receive these nonverbal messages and communicate without words; and emotional control is used to express the ability to adjust and control nonverbal communication. Social expressivity includes verbal communication and self-expression skills, while social sensitivity encompasses the ability to receive and listen to these verbal messages. Finally, social control refers to role-playing and self-expression skills. Riggio (1986) noted the importance of keeping all dimensions in balance, rather than developing one dimension in the display of social skills.

People of different age groups are accepted through social skills and can develop positive relationships. In this context, it can be said that social skills are vital in peer and family relations, business life, academic environment, and many other areas of life (Yüksel & Erzincanlı, 2020). It may sometimes be difficult to demonstrate social skills despite their critical importance in people's lives. As an example, factors such as the inability of an individual to learn behavior or generalize this acquired knowledge to different situations can prevent them from displaying social skills (Baker & Edelmann, 2002; Yüksel, 1999). As a result, people with low social skills may have difficulty initiating and maintaining social interaction, making friends, and effectively coping with the problems encountered in community life (Canpolat & Atıcı, 2019; Cartwright-Hatton et al., 2005). As a matter of fact, researches indicate that children and young people who lack social skills experience various problems. Studies illustrate that such people experience social isolation, are in a risky position in terms of bullying (Buhs et al., 2006), and have problems in their social relations and school life (Bracken & Fischel, 2007).

Such problems caused by the lack of social skills can further escalate if not intervened and can cause serious problems especially in the later years of children and young adults' lives (Craig et al., 2016). Social skills training programs have been developed by researchers in order to prevent these problems and improve the social adaptation of those who lack social skills. Social skills trainings are individual or group trainings aimed at eliminating problematic behaviors as well as teaching certain social skills. Although social skills training differs according to the approach taken as a basis, it is mostly based on (a) acquiring social skills, (b) demonstrating these skills, (c) eliminating problem behavior, and (d) maintaining social skills (Cook et al., 2008).

Cognitive behavioral approaches and techniques are often used in social skills training (Cook et al., 2008). Many findings have been obtained in previous studies indicating the effectiveness of this approach. It was reported in these studies that social skills training based on cognitive behavioral approach reduced social phobia in children (Donovan et al., 2015; Schleismann & Gillis, 2011; Spence et al., 2000), increased social cohesion in individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia (Rus-Calafell et al., 2013), and increased problem solving skills of individuals with disabilities (Khani & Moghaddam, 2019; Lecomte et al., 2012).

When the relevant literature is examined, it is seen that there are studies which show that various social skills trainings improve children and adolescents' social skill levels (Kılıç & Güngör-Aytar, 2017; La Greca & Santogrossi, 1980; Pekdoğan, 2016), their relationships with family and friends (Hon & Watkins, 1995), their social adjustment (Kabasakal & Çelik, 2010), and social problem-solving skills (Dereli, 2009). There seems to be a need for social skills training aimed at college freshmen when it is considered that social skills training programs are generally applied on children. When the studies conducted to improve the social skills of university students are examined, it has been observed that these programs are effective in increasing the social skills (Yüksel, 1999) and happiness (Shayan & AhmadiGatab, 2012) levels of university students, and in strengthening their social self-efficacy (Olaz et al., 2014), as in children and adolescents.

A cognitive behavioral therapy-based social skills training program has been developed in the present study to increase the social skills of university freshmen and the impact of the program on the social skill levels of students has been examined. Because students often find themselves in a new academic and social environment when starting their university education and need to improve their social skills to solve new social tasks (i.e. meeting someone or attending social events). Hence, it is considered that social skills training is necessary for helping students cope with the adaptation problems they experience during this period (Ioannidi & Gogaki, 2020). The aim of this study was to examine the impacts of social skills training program developed based on cognitive behavioral approach on social skill levels of first year university students. The research questions are as follows:

- 1- Is there a significant difference between the social skills pre-test mean scores of the participants in the experimental and control groups?
- 2- Is there a significant difference between the social skills pre-test, post-test and follow-up test mean scores of the participants in the experimental group?
- 3- Is there a significant difference between the social skills pre-test, post-test and follow-up test mean scores of the participants in the control group?

METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN

A pre-test, post-test, control group semi-experimental design was used in the present study aiming to test the impacts of a social skills training program based on CBT on the social skill levels of freshman students. The 2x3 split-plot included the first element with independent process groups of the experimental and control group, while the second element included the repeated measures related to the dependent variables (pre-test, post-test, follow-up) (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The research design is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Design

<i>Groups</i>	<i>Pre-test</i>	<i>Intervention</i>	<i>Post-test</i>	<i>Follow-up</i>
Experimental	M ₁	SSTP	M ₃	M ₅
Control	M ₂	-	M ₄	M ₆

Mi: Measurement, SSTP: Social skills training program

STUDY GROUP

The study group was comprised of 20 freshman students continuing their education during the 2016-2017 academic year at a state university located in Southern Turkey and who volunteered to participate in the study. Convenience sampling method was used in the study. The convenience sampling method is the method in which units that are close and easy to reach are selected as the sample (Büyüköztürk et al., 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). When assigning participants, a subject

pool was formed by implementing the Social Skills Inventory to 131 university students attending 1st year level education of primary school mathematics teaching and psychological counselling and guidance programs. A total of 20 students with scores below a standard deviation of the average were included in the study. The students were assigned randomly to the experiment and control groups in equal numbers. Three students from the experimental group and 2 students from the control group left the study due to their time constraints. While the gender distribution of the 7 students in the experimental group was 1 male and 6 female students; the control group was comprised of 3 male and 5 female students making up a total of 8 students.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM

The form contains the participant's personal information such as age, gender, grade level. This form also includes a section containing the informed consent of the participant for taking part in the CBT based Social Skills Training program.

SOCIAL SKILLS INVENTORY

The Social Skills Inventory was developed by Riggio (1986) and was revised in 1989 thus taking its current form (Riggio 2005). Social Skills Inventory is a 90-item self-report type measurement tool to measure basic social skills. Although on a small scale, it is a comprehensive measuring tool, SSI was originally developed for personality and social psychology research. SSI measures social skills in six different subscales. In addition, it calculates the global social skill level that includes all social competence or social skills in total.

The main subscales are:

1. Emotional Expressivity,
2. Emotional Sensitivity,
3. Emotional Control,
4. Social Expressivity,
5. Social Sensitivity,
6. Social Control.

Each of the subscales above consists of 15 items. Sample items of the scale are as follows: "I am able to liven up a dull party" for Emotional Expressivity; "I sometimes cry at sad movies" for Emotional Sensitivity; "I am easily able to make myself look happy one minute and sad the next" for Emotional Control; "I usually take the initiative to introduce myself to strangers" for Social Expressivity; "I'm generally concerned about the impression I'm making on others" for Social Sensitivity; and "I can easily adjust to being in just about any social situation" for Social Control subscale. A five-point Likert-type (1= Not at all like me, 2= A little like me, 3= Like me, 4= Very much like me, and 5= Exactly like me) answer key was prepared for the items in the inventory. The lowest score was 1 and the highest score was 5. An individual can get the lowest 90 points and the highest 450 points from the whole inventory. The minimum and maximum subscores that can be obtained from the inventory are 15 and 75 respectively. Social Skills Inventory was adapted to Turkish by Yüksel (1998), was used in the present study. The total number of items and the number of subscale items in Turkish version are the same as in the original form. Yüksel (1998) reported the internal consistency coefficient of the inventory as .85 and the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the subscales varied between .56 and .82. In addition, Canpolat and Atıcı (2019) found the internal consistency coefficient of the scale as .82 in their study. DiTommaso et al. (2003), on the other hand, concluded that the internal consistency coefficients of the subscales of the SSI ranged from .69 to .90. In this study, the Cronbach Alpha value was calculated as .82.

PROCEDURE

First, the necessary permissions were obtained for using the scale. Afterwards, 131 first year university students voluntarily completed the scale. The implementation of the scale was carried out with the permission of the lecturers and the application process was completed in a single course hour in March 2017. By analyzing the data obtained from the scale, 20 students with a standard deviation (SD: 25.40) below the mean ($X = 291.27$) were determined and randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. Interviews were conducted with the students assigned to the experimental group, their informed consent was obtained for their participation in the group, and preliminary information on the process was given. In addition, the participants in the experimental group were informed that the group process would be recorded with a camera, and their questions regarding privacy were answered. The students in the experimental group participated in the Social Skills Training Program once a week for a total of 6 sessions between April 5 and May 10, 2017. Each group session ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and was held in one of the university's group counseling rooms. For the Social Skills Training program, expert opinion was obtained from a faculty member who completed his doctorate in psychological counseling and guidance, and the program was revised accordingly. Moreover, the group leader (1st author) has an European Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (EABCT) accredited 450-hour CBT training. After each session, supervision was received from a PhD level psychological counselor specialized in the field of CBT.

No study was conducted with the students in the control group. In the last session of the Social Skills Training Program, the students in the experimental group were given a post-test, and the students in the control group were given a post-test in the same week. Follow-up measurement was applied on students in both the experimental and control groups six months after the post-test.

INTERVENTION

The Social Skills Training program was a psycho-educational group study based on Cognitive Behavior approach. The main purpose of the Social Skills Training Program is to enable individuals to increase their social skills levels. The goals of the process and sessions were determined first when developing the social skills training program, thus drawing up a general framework for the program. Later, content for these goals was created. Summarizing was requested at the beginning and end of each session, and the participants were asked to provide feedback on the process, the group leader and themselves at the end of each session. Thus, it was aimed to ensure that the acquired information on social skills is permanent. The sessions and aims in the program are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Social skills training program*

<i>Session</i>	<i>Aims</i>
Session 1: Meeting and Introduction to CBT	To meet group members and understand the group process To explain general goals of the program To form group rules To comprehend the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy approach and its basic philosophy, thought-emotion-behavior relationship
Session 2: Social skills and importance of thoughts	To learn social skill concept To recognize problems occur in social areas To recognize the effect of problems occur in social areas on their lives To understand the role of thinking in the problems they experience in their social life. To recognize negative automatic thoughts To realize their coping mechanisms
Session 3: Body language	To understand the importance of body language To comprehend the importance of expressing oneself in non-verbal ways.
Session 4: Nonverbal communication	To realize the nonverbal messages To perceive accurately the nonverbal messages from others

Session 5: Me language	To distinguish between “you language” and “me language” expressions To comprehend the importance of using “me language” in their conversations.
Session 6: General	To notice the skills gained in group To end the group relationship
Assessment and closure	To evaluate the sessions and the program To leave the group with positive emotions

DATA ANALYSIS

SPSS 23.0 software was used for data analysis. Significance level was selected as $p < .05$ for data analysis. Descriptive statistical techniques were used when calculating mean and standard deviation values for scores received by experimental and control groups from measurements. One of the conditions for parametric tests is the normal distribution of data. It was concluded as a result of the normality analysis that the data did not display normal distribution. Because the data is not normally distributed, Mann-Whitney U Test was performed to determine whether there is a difference in pre-test scores between experiment and control groups in terms of social skill level. Later, the Friedman test which is the non-parametric form of one-way analysis of variance for repeated measures was used. In addition, the Wilcoxon Marked Rank Test was used to determine the measurements with significant differences.

FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics were calculated related to scores received by the participants in the experimental and control groups. The values obtained are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Groups	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Follow-up test	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
SSI	Experimental	7	230.98	25.47	270.31	21.21	271.54	22.52
	Control	8	230.80	24.71	260.80	12.76	266.21	18.95
	Total	15	230.88	24.15	265.24	17.27	268.70	20.10

Social skill scores of the participants in the experimental group increased in post-test ($X = 270.31$) and follow-up ($X = 271.54$) measurements. In addition, an increase was observed in the social skill scores of the participants in the control group, in their post-test ($X = 260.80$) and follow-up (266.21) measurements.

Mann-Whitney U Test was performed to determine whether there is a difference in pre-test scores between experiment and control groups in terms of social skill level. According to these Mann-Whitney U test results a difference could not be observed between the pre-test scores of the experimental and control groups [$U(15) = 25, p > .05$].

Friedman test was used afterwards for identifying whether this increase was statistically significant or not. Analysis results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Friedman test results

Groups	Measures	N	\bar{X}_{Rank}	χ^2	df	p
Experimental	Pre-test	7	1.07	9.556	2	0,008*
	Post-test	7	2.36			
	Follow-up test	7	2.57			
Control	Pre-test	8	1,38	5.097	2	0,078
	Post-test	8	2,19			
	Follow-up test	8	2,44			

* $p < .05$

There was a statistically significant difference between the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test means of the experimental group [$\chi^2_{(2)} 9,556, p < .05$], but no statistically significant difference was found between the pre-test, post-test and follow-up test means of the control group [$\chi^2_{(2)} 5,097, p > .05$]. Table 5 presents the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test applied to determine the measurements with this difference.

Table 5. Wilcoxon signed ranks test results of the experimental group

	Negative ranks			Positive ranks			Test statistics		
	N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Ties	Z	p
(Pre-test)-(Post-test)	0	0	0	6	3.5	21	1	-2.201 ^a	.028*
(Pre-test)-(Follow-up)	0	0	0	7	4	28	0	-2.366 ^a	.018*
(Post-test)-(Follow-up)	3	4	12	4	4	16	0	-.338 ^a	.735

* $p < .05$

^a Based on negative ranks

It can be observed when Table 5 is examined that there is a significant difference between the experimental group's pre-test and post-test ($z = -2.201, p < .05$), pre-test and follow-up test ($z = -2.366, p < .05$) mean scores. There was no significant difference between the post-test and follow-up test mean scores ($z = -.338, p > .05$). It can be understood based on these findings that the mean scores of the post-test and follow-up test are significantly higher than pre-test mean scores. Based on these results, it can be put forth that the applied social skills training program has an impact on the social skills of freshmen.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to examine the impacts of a cognitive-behavioral approach-based social skills training program prepared to improve the social skill levels of new university students.

A significant difference was found between the pre-test and post-test mean scores of the students in the experimental group participating in the program, and no difference was observed between the post-test and follow-up test mean scores. Accordingly, the social skill levels of the students in the experimental group increased significantly compared to before the procedure and the effect of this increase continued in the monitoring study at the end of the intervening six-month period. On the other hand, an increase in the social skill levels of students in the control group was also observed, however it was concluded that this increase is not statistically significant. In other words, the social skill levels of the students in the control group increased after the procedure. It is thought that the increase in the social skill levels of students in both the experimental and control groups is related to the implementation time of the program. The application of this social skills training program was started during the first weeks of the spring semester which was completed towards the summer, when the weather got warmer and the students could spend more time outside thus engaging in more physical activity. In the study, which emphasizes the importance of physical activity for individuals, the Turkey Public Health Care Institution (2014) states that physical activity contributes significantly to the development of social relationships, communication skills and positive self-perception in individuals. Therefore, it is possible that the social skill levels of the students in the control group may have increased since the implementation process coincides with a season in which students spend more time outdoors.

The effectiveness of the training has been examined over various samples during other experimental studies utilizing social skills training based on cognitive behavioral approach. Laugeson and Park (2014) used cognitive behavioral methods to improve the social skills of adolescents diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and found an increase in the social skills, peer interactions, and social sensitivity of adolescents. Herbert et al. (2005) examined the effects of cognitive behavioral group therapy and social skills training on individuals with social anxiety. The study results illustrate that the intervention provided a decrease in the social anxiety and depression levels of the participants. In another study, Canpolat and Atıcı (2019) applied the cognitive behavioral social skills training program on university students and found that the social skills and psychological well-being levels of the students increased significantly. Rus-Calafell et al. (2013) applied cognitive behavioral social skills training to individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia. According to the results obtained, the social adaptation, interpersonal interaction and social cognition levels of the participants in the experimental group differed from the participants in the control group. Maddox et al. (2017) examined the effects of cognitive behavioral group therapy on social impairment in adolescents with autism spectrum disorder. According to results, adolescents' social impairment improved during treatment and continued to improve through the 3-month follow up. Granholm et al. (2013) applied cognitive behavioral social skills training to older with schizophrenia. The treatment showed significant improvements in motivation, depression, anxiety, positive self-esteem and life satisfaction.

These research findings in the literature and findings from the current study show that cognitive behavioral social skills training programs are effective in improving social skills.

CONCLUSION

The current study aims to examine the impacts of the cognitive behavioral social skills training program. The results of the study showed that the social skills training program is effective in improving the social skill levels of university freshmen which continued during the follow up study. In addition, a statistically insignificant increase was observed in the social skill level of the control group, who took part in the study and did not receive any intervention. For this reason, there was a need to make some suggestions in order to identify the reason for the increase in social skill levels of the students in the experimental group more clearly and to obtain more realistic results about the effectiveness of the applied program:

Social skills training based on CBT prepared within the scope of the research was applied in the spring term. During this period, students have experienced the first difficulties in the school adaptation process and have the opportunity to socialize more with the warming of the weather in Turkey at these times. It can be recommended to carry out the application during the fall period when first-year students encounter the new environment and have relatively less opportunities for socializing.

Only the social skill level of university students was considered as the dependent variable in the present study. Variables other than social skills can be included in the research in later studies and the effect of the program on these variables can be examined.

No intervention was made on the students in the control group participating in the study and only the pre-test and final tests were applied. More reliable results on the effectiveness of the program can be obtained by adding a second control group to the study (placebo control group in which activities that are not associated with social skills are applied).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The researchers contributed equally to the study.

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